



ROLE OF ETHICAL BRANDING ON CONSUMER BRAND RELATIONSHIPS AND BRAND LOYALTY

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra28888>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra28888

1. ABSTRACT

Corporate ethical branding as a key consumer-related driver in a global market has become a central player in consumer-brand relationship rather than an isolated corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach. This paper is an empirical research which investigates the effects of ethical branding on trust, brand attachment and long-term brand loyalty. Primary data was collected on a sample of three hundred and fifty diverse consumers using a descriptive research design and a questionnaire of five point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, Multiple Regression and Chi-square tests were employed to examine the brand practices and moderations of various demographic factors. It was found that there is a significant positive relation between ethical consciousness and brand reputation. The multiple regression analysis indicated that the combination of honesty, social responsibility and fair treatment accounts for percent of the re-purchase intentions.. In addition, the Chi-square test showed that income is a key moderator of the consumer's willingness to remain loyal to an ethical brand in a situation where the less expensive alternatives are available. The study concludes that the ethical branding is a strategic tool that builds emotional and brand loyalty as long as the brand is transparent and honest in its operations.

2. INTRODUCTION

This is a new evolution of the contemporary market, in which the idea of buying has evolved into the idea of value. The access to information in the digital world has given the consumers a power of demanding the brands that they follow to align with their beliefs, attitudes, and their social and environmental values. India is witnessing a dramatic rise in ethical consumerism, with roots in the cultural values of non-violence (ahimsa) and localism (swadeshi), and global trends of sustainability and fair trade. Consequently, ethical branding, which encompasses transparency, green and fair trade practices, has become a key distinctive feature of firms seeking to gain competitive advantages [;].

Ethical marketing not only helps to build the image of the company, but it also impacts the brand-consumer relationship. One study has demonstrated that the authenticity of ethical practices by a firm leads to trust, institutional loyalty, and brand loyalty (Tanveer et al., 2021; Yousaf, Mishra, and Bashir, 2020). This is important as it helps create a barrier against price competition, converting consumers into brand ambassadors (Garanti, 2019; Khan & Fatma, 2019). And recent studies suggest that the ethical power and transparency of ethical branding is particularly potent online, where consumer feedback and reviews can rapidly confirm or discredit claims of ethical branding (Shukla, Soni, and Rawat, 2025; Sameen, 2025).

While the benefits of ethical branding are well accepted, there are no uniform consumer responses. Age, gender and particularly income play a role in moderating the influence of practical factors like price sensitivity over ethical factors. The aim of this study is to empirically measure the association between specific ethical aspects (honesty, fair treatment, and environmental sustainability) and brand loyalty, and the moderating effects of demographic limitations in the contemporary Indian market.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the ever evolving digital era, ethical and transparent branding is crucial for businesses. With more information available, customers are not just focusing on price and quality, they also consider the ethical and transparent nature of a brand. Over the years, numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of these variables on consumer trust, behaviour and loyalty, leading to a solid foundation of knowledge in ethical marketing.

This research journey began around 2018 when it was found that ethical branding is a key factor in retaining customers, particularly in trust-based industries like banking. It was found that if companies practised ethical branding, customers became more trusting, and more loyal to the brand.

This concept was taken a step further in 2019. It was discovered that while CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives can enhance brand loyalty, it only occurs if the initiatives create trust. Trust was identified as a bridge between corporate ethical behaviour and customer loyalty. At the same time, research also discovered that when customers perceive a brand to be ethical, they form an emotional bond with it. This not only leads to greater loyalty but affects consumer behaviour. The other thing that was discovered was that it is not enough for a brand to simply have a good experience if the brand is not perceived as ethical, there may not be a strong bond.

In 2020, it was all about trust. It was evident that when brands are honest, consistent and accountable in their behaviour, they gain customers' trust. And this trust, in turn, results in repurchase and long term brand loyalty, so trust is an essential element of brand-consumer relationships.



In 2021, more sophisticated research techniques verified these notions. It was discovered that ethical marketing is used to build value for consumers, enhance perception of brand sustainability and longterm loyalty. Customers no longer just wished to gain functional benefits from brands; they wanted brands that matched their values and beliefs.

In 2022 and 2023, research began to focus on the emotional and cultural factors. They found that when brands align with consumers' values (such as religious or moral values) it produces a high emotional connection. This can even make a brand seem "special" or significant, which results in increased loyalty. The second point was that it isn't about being good once - brands need to maintain ethical practices in order to convert customer satisfaction into loyalty and advocacy.

Sustainability was a new focus in 2024. Research demonstrated that it wasn't enough for brands to simply be sustainable. It's important how they are reflected in the brand's image. Having a positive brand image converts sustainability into brand loyalty.

Finally, in 2025, research combined all these concepts in the digital age. It emphasised that honesty and integrity in marketing are key for success. People want to buy from ethical brands. Social media is also important as it can easily amplify both good and bad news about a brand. So brands have to be clear and precise with their messaging. It was also observed that transparency may mean different things to different consumers (depending on age or culture), so brands need to consider this in their communication.

4. RESEARCH GAP

Although the current literature is strongly validating that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and sustainability favorably impact brand image (Sharma and Jain 2019; Rastogi et al., 2024), there is a gap in exact empirical modeling to separate the notion of the so-called ethical branding into discrete functional areas, including the transparency of communication and the fair treatment of employees, to understand In addition, although research recognizes that demographics are involved, quantitative confirmation of the role of income as a moderator of a consumer financial sacrifice is a little explored aspect of the Indian context beyond 2024.

5. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the extent to which consumers perceive ethical branding practices among brands they associate with.
2. To analyze the influence of ethical branding on the quality of consumer-brand relationships (trust, commitment, and identification).
3. To assess the impact of ethical branding on consumer brand loyalty (repeat purchase, advocacy, and resistance to switching).
4. To determine the role of demographic factors (age, gender, income, and occupation) in moderating the relationship between ethical branding and brand loyalty.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is founded on the Descriptive Research research design and the approach is well suited to describe the nature of the consumer base and their understanding of ethical branding and statistically analyse the relationship between brand ethics and consumer loyalty without any moderating factors.

This study has adopted primary and secondary data sources to understand the phenomenon of ethical marketing and its influence on consumer behaviour and The primary data was gathered through a wellstructured questionnaire from a sample of 350 consumers. This helped in gauging their attitude, feelings and loyalty towards preferred brands. Further to this, secondary data was obtained from journals, trade magazines and industry reports which provided a strong foundation for the study and a better understanding of ethical marketing..

In order to ensure that the information was relevant and representative, a sampling plan was developed. The sample unit which was selected were active consumers who use branded products and services. The research used 350 responses as sample size and Convenience sampling as the technique which helped the researcher to gather data from sample respondents from a variety of demographic backgrounds, such as age, income and occupation. This enabled the researcher to gain a wider perspective of consumers' attitudes and behaviour

To gather information, a questionnaire survey was conducted. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) to assess consumer attitudes. It covered important areas like knowledge of ethical practices, brand transparency, emotional appeal and purchase intentions. This approach ensured that the data was systematic and analysable.

The collected data was then systematically organised and analysed using software such as IBM SPSS and MS Excel and a range of statistical methods were used to draw conclusions.. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the data, Pearson correlation to establish relationships between variables, multiple regression analysis to examine the effects of the independent variables on consumer loyalty and the Chi-square test of independence to test the hypotheses in an effective and reliable way.

The conceptual framework of the research articulates the relationship between the variables and the dependent variables are consumer brand loyalty, measured in terms of repeat purchase intentions, word-of-mouth recommendations, and switching resistance and the quality of the relationship, which indicates the level of trust and emotional attachment a consumer has towards a brand and the independent variables are ethical branding practices, which involves transparency, social and environmental responsibility and fair dealing with stakeholders, and the ethical reputation of the brand and further, the

Hypothesis of the study

- **H0 1** There is no significant correlation between awareness of ethical values and perceived overall ethical standing of the preferred brand.



- **H1₁** There is a significant correlation between awareness of ethical values and perceived overall ethical standing of the preferred brand.
- **H0₂** Honesty and transparency, social/environmental responsibility, fair ethical treatment, and overall ethical standing do not significantly predict continued purchasing of an ethical brand.
- **H1₂** Honesty and transparency, social/environmental responsibility, fair ethical treatment, and overall ethical standing significantly predict continued purchasing of an ethical brand.
- **H0₃** There is no significant association between monthly income and loyalty toward ethical brands even when cheaper alternatives are available.
- **H1₃** There is a significant association between monthly income and loyalty toward ethical brands even when cheaper alternatives are available.

The study used a survey approach to gather data, which involved designing a questionnaire with a five point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). This questionnaire was applied to assess key aspects, including consumers' knowledge of ethical practices, their perceptions of brand transparency, their emotional brand loyalty and their propensity to re-purchase.

For the analysis, the data was initially tabulated. The results were then statistically analysed using IBM SPSS and MS Excel. Some of the statistical tools used were descriptive statistics to describe the data, Pearson correlation to measure the association between variables, multiple regression to determine the influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable and finally Chi-square test of independence to test the hypotheses in a systematic and valid manner.

7. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULT

1. Descriptive statistics Interpretation

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender_Code	350	1	3	1.45	0.532
AgeGroup_Code	350	1	4	2.20	0.921
Occupation_Code	350	1	5	2.61	1.234
MonthlyIncome_Code	350	1	4	2.32	1.010
EthicalPracticesImportance_Code	350	1	5	3.79	0.784
EthicalValuesAwareness_Code	350	1	5	3.35	1.004
HonestTransparentComm_Code	350	1	5	3.82	0.913
SocEnvResponsibility_Code	350	1	5	3.71	0.963
FairEthicalTreatment_Code	350	1	5	3.84	0.862
OverallEthicalStanding_Code	350	1	5	3.91	0.796
TrustBecauseEthical_Code	350	1	5	4.32	0.896
PersonalConnectionEthicalBrand_Code	350	1	5	3.80	0.927
EthicalBehaviorEmotionalAttachment_Code	350	1	5	4.29	0.926
CommittedEthicalBehaviorTime_Code	350	1	5	3.89	0.879
EthicalConductRelQuality_Code	350	1	5	3.79	0.833
SatisfiedActionsValuesAlign_Code	350	1	5	3.95	0.852
ChooseBecauseEthicalReputation_Code	350	1	5	3.66	0.996
ContinuePurchasingEthicalBrand_Code	350	1	5	4.02	0.677
RecommendEthicalBrand_Code	350	1	5	4.34	0.860
LoyalEvenIfCheaperEthical_Code	350	1	5	3.33	1.051
SwitchIfUnethical_Code	350	1	5	3.81	0.827
IncomeInfluencesEthicsPriority_Code	350	1	5	3.07	1.036
IncomeIncreaseEthicsConscious_Code	350	1	5	3.10	0.991
OccupationInfluencesEthicsImportance_Code	350	1	5	3.14	0.997
EthicalBrandingBuildsLoyalty_Code	350	1	5	4.34	0.833
Valid N (listwise)	350				

The descriptive results indicate that 350 responses were used in the analysis, and there were no missing data in the variables. The average of trust because ethical behavior (4.32), ethical behavior developing emotional attachment (4.29), recommend ethical brand (4.34), and ethical branding develops loyalty (4.34) are high revealing that the respondents agree that ethical branding has positive influence on the consumer attitudes and loyalty. The average of ethical standing (3.91) and ethical awareness (3.35) suggests that the respondents perceive brands as moderately to highly ethical, but awareness level is a little bit lower than the loyalty results. Overall, the findings from the descriptive study suggests that ethical branding has a positive impact on the consumers, particularly in terms of trust, emotional attachment, recommendation and support.



2. Correlation Analysis Interpretation

To understand the consumer's perception of ethical branding, a correlation test was carried out with the responses of two questions: knowledge of ethical values of brands they buy regularly and the overall ethical rating of the most favoured brand. The two variables included were EthicalValuesAwareness_Score and OverallEthicalStanding_Score. The aim was to determine whether there is an association between these two aspects. Thus, the null hypothesis (H0) was that there is no significant correlation between awareness and perceived ethical standing; and the alternative hypothesis (H1) was that there is a significant correlation between them.

Correlations			
		EthicalValuesAwareness_Score	OverallEthicalStanding_Score
EthicalValuesAwareness_Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.589
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	350	350
OverallEthicalStanding_Score	Pearson Correlation	.589	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	350	350

The Pearson correlation test shows there is a strong positive link between awareness of ethical values and attitudes towards the all-round ethical status of the preferred brand that is statistically significant. This correlation is significant because the p-value is less than 0.05: 0.000. Hence the null hypothesis (H0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H1) is accepted. This means that, the more ethical consumers are of ethical values and practices, the more likely they will categorise their preferred brand in a favourable manner, with respect to the brand's overall ethical image.

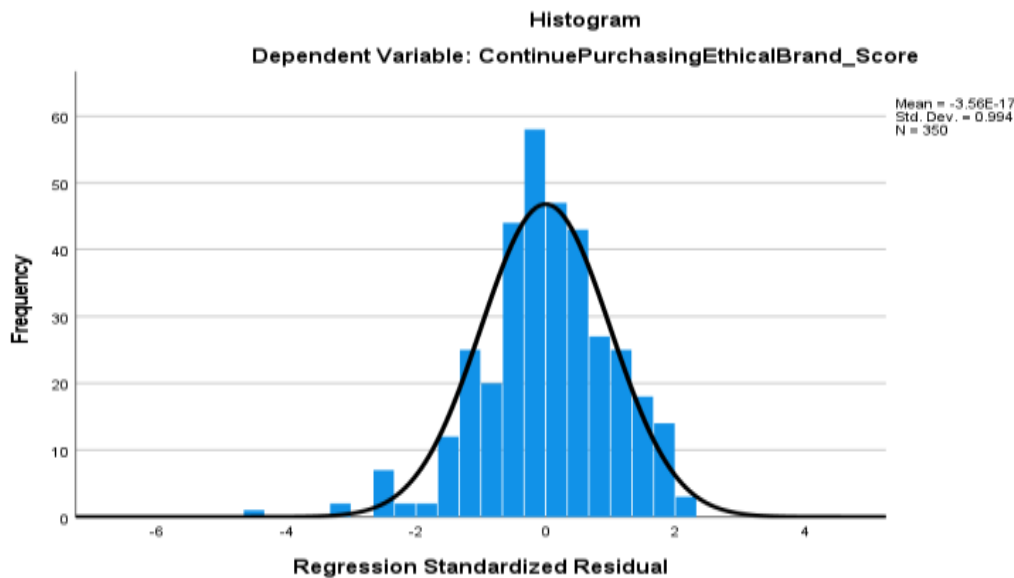
3. Multiple Regression Interpretation

To investigate how ethical branding influences brand loyalty of consumers in relation to repeat purchasing, a regression model was run. The outcome variable of interest was the repeated purchase intention for an ethically responsible brand, and the predictor variables included honest and transparent communication, social and environmental responsibility, ethical and fair treatment of stakeholders, and the ethical brand positioning. These were captured by the respective variables in the dataset (such as ContinuePurchasingEthicalBrand_Score and the four ethical practice scores). The null hypothesis (H0) was that these ethical values and practices do not affect continue purchasing, while the alternative hypothesis (H1) was that they do affect the consumers' likelihood to continue purchasing from an ethical brand.

Model Summary ^b				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.705 ^a	.497	.491	.483

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	79.431	4	19.858	85.225	.000 ^b
	Residual	80.386	345	.233		
	Total	159.817	349			

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.595	.138		11.571	.000
	HonestTransparentComm_Score	.104	.040	.140	2.570	.011
	SocEnvResponsibility_Score	.161	.040	.228	4.010	.000
	FairEthicalTreatment_Score	.175	.044	.223	4.002	.000
	OverallEthicalStanding_Score	.195	.050	.229	3.876	.000

**Charts**

The multiple regression results indicate that ethical and honest communication, social and environmental responsibility, ethical and fair treatment and overall ethical standing are significant in predicting repeated purchase of an ethical brand. Not only is the model statistically significant with $R = 0.705$, and $R^2 = 0.497$, $F = 85.225$, $p = 0.000$ but it also means that these factors will account for 49.7 percent of the variance of the repeated buying intention. All four predictors have a positive and significant effect, with the overall ethical standing, social and environmental responsibility and fair ethical treatment being the most important. So the null hypothesis (H_0) is rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) is accepted and the conclusion that ethical branding practices are important in generating brand loyalty is drawn. 2. Chi-square Interpretation:-

4. Chi-square Interpretation

To establish the impact of demographic variables in the relationship between ethical branding and brand loyalty, the study looked at the relationship between consumers' monthly income and consumers' brand loyalty with ethical branding even if the brands are expensive. The variables for this test were MonthlyIncome and LoyalEvenIfCheaperEthical. This aimed to determine if consumers' income influences their brand loyalty to ethical brands regardless of price differences. The null hypothesis (H_0) was that there is no association between monthly income and this type of loyalty, the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was that there is a significant association between them.

MonthlyIncome LoyalEvenIfCheaperEthical Crosstabulation								
			LoyalEvenIfCheaperEthical					Total
			Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree	
MonthlyIncome	₹20,001 – ₹40,000	Count	34	18	40	10	12	114
		Expected Count	41.7	15.6	36.5	13.0	7.2	114.0
		% of Total	9.7%	5.1%	11.4%	2.9%	3.4%	32.6%
	₹40,001 – ₹70,000	Count	47	8	26	14	1	96
		Expected Count	35.1	13.2	30.7	11.0	6.0	96.0
		% of Total	13.4%	2.3%	7.4%	4.0%	0.3%	27.4%
	Above ₹70,000	Count	23	3	19	7	0	52
		Expected Count	19.0	7.1	16.6	5.9	3.3	52.0
		% of Total	6.6%	0.9%	5.4%	2.0%	0.0%	14.9%
	Below ₹20,000	Count	24	19	27	9	9	88
		Expected Count	32.2	12.1	28.2	10.1	5.5	88.0
		% of Total	6.9%	5.4%	7.7%	2.6%	2.6%	25.1%
Total		Count	128	48	112	40	22	350
		Expected Count	128.0	48.0	112.0	40.0	22.0	350.0
		% of Total	36.6%	13.7%	32.0%	11.4%	6.3%	100.0%



Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	33.312 ^a	12	.001
Likelihood Ratio	38.201	12	.000
N of Valid Cases	350		

Symmetric Measures			
		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Contingency Coefficient	.295	.001
N of Valid Cases		350	

The Chi-square test results show that the association between monthly income and loyalty to ethical brands is statistically significant despite the presence of lower priced substitutes. The p-value is less than 0.05 which means that the result is statistically significant. So the null (H₀) hypothesis is rejected and alternative hypothesis (H₁) is accepted. This suggests that different income groups have different level of loyalty for ethical brands even in the presence of cheaper substitutes, meaning that income is an important demographic variable for ethical brand loyalty.

8. DISCUSSIONS

The descriptive statistics of the 350 respondents point to the fact that ethical branding becomes a strong force of relationship quality. The best mean scores were obtained under the sub-headings Trust because ethical (Mean = 4.32) and Recommend ethical brand (Mean = 4.34), which lines up with the fact that consumers are the ones who promote ethical brands in which they believe to be doing what is right.

Although there is a high level of agreement that ethical branding develops emotional attachment (Mean = 4.29), the overall awareness of particular ethical values is relatively lower (Mean = 3.35). This implies that consumers respond positively to the notion of an ethical brand, despite being unaware of the finer details of its CSR policies.

In Correlation there is statistically significant positive correlation () between the awareness of ethical values and the perceived overall ethical status of the brand. This is a confirmation that as brands engage in active educations of their consumers on their ethical practices, the overall moral standing of the brand would increase in a proportional manner.

The Regression that is multiple regression equation was effective in demonstrating that the combination of honest communication, environmental responsibility, and fair treatment can explain the continued purchasing intentions in almost 50% of the variance. It is worth noting that the strongest predictors were a brand overall ethical standing (Beta = 0.229) and social/environmental responsibility (Beta = 0.228). This confirms that ethical marketing is not a PR instrument, but statistically significant in generating repeat revenue.

The Chi-Square significant test value proved the strong association between monthly income and loyalty to ethical brands in the presence of cheaper alternatives. The middle-income (or higher) group (above ₹40,001) exhibited a considerably high tendency of not paying attention to less expensive options in order to contribute to an ethical brand. It is evidence that although ethical intent cuts across all demographics, financial implementation of ethical allegiance is strongly regulated by earnings.

9. CONCLUSION

The present study has revealed that ethical branding is an important element in building superior consumer-brand relationships and brand loyalty. The statistical rejection of all null hypotheses supports the theory that specific ethical practices like truthful advertising, environmental sustainability, and fair labour practices translate into consumer trust, emotional bonding and repurchase intentions (explaining 49.7% of its variance). However, another significant economic finding that is also highlighted in this paper is that the conversion of ethical preference to buying behavior is stringently moderated by consumer's income. Brands that would like to nurture advocacy-induced loyalty in their consumers cannot only just operate with uncompromised integrity but also take care of their pricing strategies so as to make their ethically sound products affordable to all, across all strata of the society.

10. IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The findings obtained from this study have important implication for the for businesses and marketers in understanding how ethical branding influences consumer behavior.

Improve Value Communication due to the difference in general ethical perception and particular value awareness (Mean = 3.35), the brands will need to focus on transparent and narrative-based marketing campaigns that will clearly describe their supply chain, labor policies, and environmental implication to inform consumer knowledge.

Use Emotional Attachment to Advocate because the level of recommendation of an ethical brand was highest (Mean = 4.34), companies should develop formal programs of referral and brand-ambassadors that would reward existing customers who promote the ethical mission of the company to their friends.



Use Tiered Ethical Pricing to overcome the income moderation observed in the Chi-square test, brands need to build product lines of different levels. A readily available, ethically-manufactured level of basic will enable lower-income consumers to follow their moral preferences without necessarily having to make the shift to cheaper and unethical competitors.

Emphasis on Tangible Responsibility with the regression model confirmed that social and environmental responsibility is one of the main factors in encouragement of repeat purchases (Beta = 0.228). To reinforce trust in the brand, brands need to go beyond the generic green statements and demonstrate these real, quantifiable benefits, which can be expressed as specific carbon reduction targets or fair-trade wages.

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