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WHAT MAKES A BRAND "SUSTAINABLE" IN THE EYES OF YOUNG CONSUMERS?

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Abstract

The paper presents a conceptual framework for understanding how youths view sustainability in branding on cultural, symbolic, and trust-based grounds. This study shows that cultural identification, emotional engagement, and authenticity influence young customers' perceptions of sustainable businesses, unlike traditional financial and marketing papers that rely on behavioral and rational considerations. The study draws on qualitative insights to interpret a series of theoretical propositions grounded in Consumer Culture Theory, Signaling Theory, Brand Authenticity, and Symbolic Interactionism. This framework indicates that sustainability perceptions are shaped by cultural norms and symbolic interpretations, while perceived credibility and authenticity foster trust and sustained consumer engagement. Theoretical and practical contributions expand the scope of existing knowledge of branding and consumer behavior and offer suggestions to institutions, marketers, and legislators seeking to design long-term strategies popular with young people.

Keywords: Brand Authenticity, Cultural Identification, Sustainability in Branding, Symbolic Interactionism, Youth Consumer Behavior

Introduction

Sustainability has become increasingly prominent in modern branding due to growing concerns over climate change, social inequality, and the rise of ethical consumption. Business organizations worldwide are redefining their brand names to attract a new generation of consumers who value ethical principles. The Gen Z population in Bangladesh (1825) is a potential, value-oriented consumer group. However, sustainability is an imprecise and conflicting concept, particularly when applied to the marketing world.

In this proposed study, the researchers will examine the meaning of sustainable brands to young Bangladeshi consumers. Going beyond the rational and utilitarian interpretation of brand qualities, this study emphasizes how youths have created sustainability emotionally, symbolically, and socially. The objective is to develop a theoretically informed conceptual framework that will guide future branding practices and enhance academic understanding.

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Literature Review

Four theoretical stances—Consumer Culture Theory, Signaling Theory, Brand Authenticity, and Symbolic Interactionism—provide the framework for the literature review. Each offers a different perspective on how young people engage with sustainable companies as cultural consumers, credibility assessors, searchers of genuine alignment, and social actors creating meaning with their peers. These theoretical underpinnings are presented in Table 1, which also highlights their relevance to the current investigation.

Table 1. Theoretical Foundation of the Study

Theory	Core Concept	Relevance to Study
Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005)	Consumption is socially constructed	Youth perceptions of sustainability as cultural values
Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011)	Brands communicate credibility through signals	Eco-labels, CSR reports, and transparency signals
Brand Authenticity (Napoli et al., 2014)	Alignment of values and consistent brand behavior	Authenticity of sustainability claims
Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969)	Meaning is socially created and validated	Peer influence and the symbolic meaning of sustainable brands

Theoretical Grounding

According to Arnould and Thompson's (2005) Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), consumer behavior is socially formed. Young consumers use their identities, cultural narratives, and peer group influences to interpret branding messages. As such, sustainable brands come to be about values and a way of life.

Signaling Theory: According to Connelly et al. (2011), signaling theory holds that consumers can infer a brand's quality attributes from signals that can be traced. On sustainability grounds, this can be eco-labels, ethical approvals, or open sourcing. Young consumers tend to distrust these cues, wondering whether they are genuine or just pretending.

Brand Authenticity Theory: According to Napoli et al. (2014), authentic brands convey honesty, consistency, and congruence with consumer values. For young people, a sustainable brand must demonstrate continuity between its environmental statements and its activities.

Blumer (1969). In his opinion, a social interaction creates meaning in a person. Sustainability can represent social awareness, fashionable or moral virtue to Gen Z-creating a discourse, social media, and social approval.

Empirical Literature Insights: Youth–Brand Relationships in South Asia

Previous research shows that young consumers across diverse cultural contexts hold diverse perspectives on sustainability. According to Islam et al. (2022), young people in Bangladesh link sustainability to both social justice and environmental concerns. In a similar vein, Mukherjee and Sharma (2023) discover that young Indian consumers define brand sustainability in terms of perceived authenticity and emotional resonance, while Thomas et al. (2024) demonstrate that UK students associate sustainability with the development of personal identities and a sense of community. When taken as a whole, these results point to a shift away from strictly functional branding toward symbolic interpretations, highlighting the importance of cultural relevance and emotional depth in sustainability storytelling.

Methodology

In order to create a framework, this paper synthesizes previous theoretical and empirical material using a conceptual qualitative method. A scholarly review of the literature on consumer culture, signaling, authenticity, and symbolic interaction provides the grounds for developing propositions that expound on how youngsters perceive sustainability in branding. The method is based on a theory constructed by synthesis, in which trends and regularities in previous studies are examined with a view to establishing conceptual connections. It is the nature of the methodology to locate sustainability as an economic, environmental, cultural, and symbolic construct and, therefore, create a comprehensive model of youth-driven brand interpretation. This is consistent with a conceptual research tradition within the marketing and consumer behavior literature, in which inquiry has been biased toward developing theory rather than testing it.

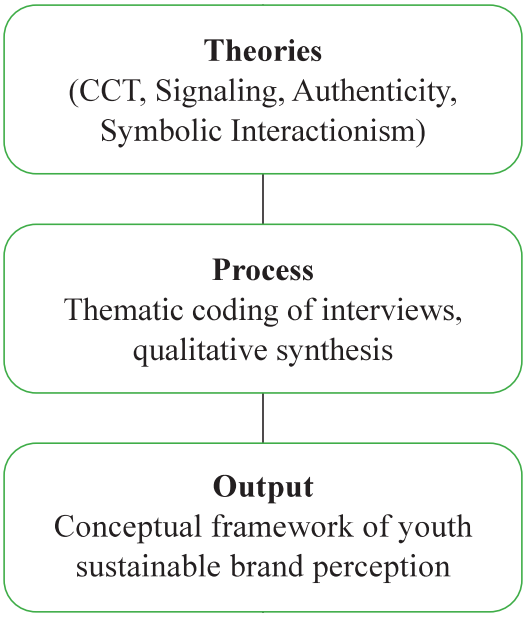


Figure 1: Research Design

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

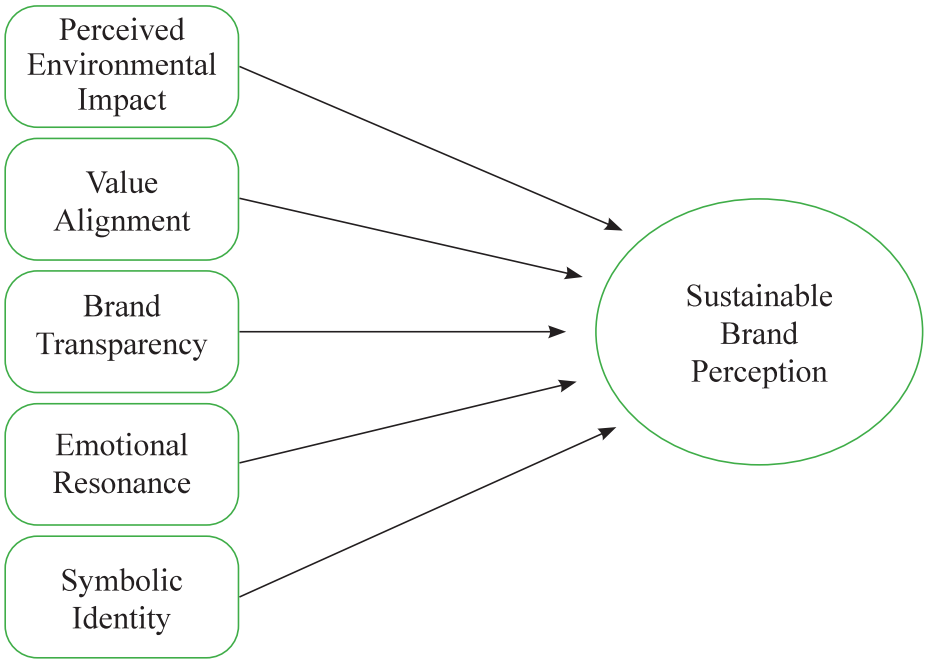


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Brand Perception among Youth

This framework proposes five thematic domains:

1. Perceived Environmental Impact: Young consumers assess if a brand reduces harm (e.g., plastic-free packaging, ethical sourcing).

2. Value Alignment: Brands that mirror the personal or collective values of youth (e.g., gender equality, fair trade) are more trusted.

3. Brand Transparency: Clear, accessible information about sustainability practices fosters credibility.

4. Emotional Resonance: Stories that emotionally engage consumers (e.g., campaigns about climate justice) create lasting brand bonds.

5. Symbolic Identity: A brand turns into an instrument of identity, which can be moral or social identity.

Proposition	**Statement**
P1	Higher perceived environmental impact is likely to enhance brand credibility.
P2	Value alignment is likely to positively influence emotional engagement.
P3	Brand transparency is likely to reduce greenwashing skepticism.
P4	Emotional resonance is expected to lead to brand advocacy and loyalty.
P5	Symbolic identity may drive peer endorsement and brand pride.

Proposition Development and Theoretical Justification

The proposed paradigm has a strong theoretical ground in the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005), Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011), Brand Authenticity Theory (Napoli et al., 2014), and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Such perspectives highlight how young customers perceive sustainability in branding through social, psychological, and symbolic processes. The consumer culture creates meanings through peer validation, identity expression, and cultural standards in which meanings are not inherent in things.

Signaling theory explains that communication related to sustainability, e.g., eco-labels or CSR disclosures, serves as a signal of legitimacy. Nonetheless, the signals work only when they align with brand behavior and values, as the Brand Authenticity Theory emphasizes. Otherwise, customers might believe they are being greenwashed. Symbolically, adolescents' support for sustainability assertions is grounded in shared meanings across

social networks and peer groups.

Thus, young consumers are predicted to be able to judge businesses based on ecological outcomes, as well as symbolic compatibility with cultural values and identity. Contrary to the common view of sustainability as a practical attribute, sustainability as a concept is a cultural and emotional creation in line with consumer culture theory. Perceptions of sustainability are heavily impacted by group affiliation, peer pressure, and family values in collectivist countries like Bangladesh (Hofstede, 1984; Islam et al., 2022). Perceptions of sustainability are therefore ingrained in larger emotional and cultural systems.

If a clothing brand communicates ethical sourcing credibly, a young person may see it as sustainable; however, this impression is reinforced if the brand aligns with the values of authenticity, justice, and identity expression in their social circle.

The following claims are put forward in light of this reasoning:
Proposition 1: Young customers' perceptions of environmental effect have a beneficial impact on the legitimacy of sustainable companies.
Proposition 2: Emotional involvement with sustainable companies is favorably impacted by value congruence between company actions and young values.
Proposition 3: Brand openness enhances perceived authenticity and reduces mistrust of greenwashing.
Proposition 4: Brand advocacy and loyalty to sustainable businesses are favorably impacted by emotional resonance.
Proposition 5: Youth pride in sustainable businesses and peer endorsement are favorably influenced by symbolic identity.

Table 2

Propositions	**Theoretical Validations**
P1: Perceived environmental impact positively influences the credibility of sustainable brands.	Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011) suggests that eco-labels, certifications, and CSR reports act as credibility signals. CCT highlights how young consumers connect environmental actions with cultural values.
P2: Value alignment between brand practices and youth values positively influences emotional engagement.	Brand Authenticity Theory (Napoli et al., 2014) stresses consistency between brand values and consumer expectations. Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions emphasize collectivist value-sharing.

Propositions	Theoretical Validations
P3: Brand transparency reduces skepticism of greenwashing and strengthens authenticity.	Authenticity Theory (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) highlights transparency as essential for trust. Symbolic Interactionism shows that peer validation of transparency reinforces credibility.
P4: Emotional resonance influences brand advocacy and loyalty.	Consumer Culture Theory frames brand love and advocacy as emotionally co-created. Thomas et al. (2024) find youth identity construction tied to emotional storytelling in sustainability.
P5: Symbolic identity drives peer endorsement and brand pride.	Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) shows that meaning is socially validated. Peer groups amplify the symbolic identity of sustainable brands, shaping youth consumer pride.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

Theoretical Contributions

To better understand how young customers view sustainability in branding, this study proposes a qualitative method that incorporates symbolic, emotional, and cultural factors. This study emphasizes the subjective and experience-driven aspect of young brand perceptions, in contrast to a substantial portion of the current branding and sustainability literature, which has mostly relied on quantitative surveys and attitude-based measuring scales (Nguyen et al., 2020; White et al., 2019). Consumers evaluate sustainability claims through cognitive assessments of environmental performance or corporate social responsibility disclosures, according to traditional branding theories, especially those based on utilitarian value models or rational choice assumptions (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). The identity-based, symbolic, and peer-validated processes that young consumers use to create meaning around sustainable products are not captured by such viewpoints, even though they might explain reactions to conventional marketing communications. The paradigm supports the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) because, according to the researchers, the brand preferences of young people cannot be separated from their individual choices but are embedded in social identities, cultural stories, and peer culture. It extends the notion of Brand Authenticity Theory (Napoli et al., 2014; Beverland & Farrelly, 2010) by suggesting that authenticity can be achieved when a brand's sustainability initiatives do not contradict the individual and collective values of youth.

Furthermore, this study extends Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) by showing that sustainable brands function as identity symbols validated within peer networks. Young consumers collectively construct and negotiate these meanings through social interaction,

rather than assessing sustainability claims solely at an individual level. Lastly, the Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011) is expanded by highlighting that sustainability signals are only effective when supported by transparent, reliable procedures that reduce the risk of greenwashing.

To bridge symbolic, cultural, and emotional viewpoints into sustainability and branding theory, this study proposes a qualitative sustainability perception model that positions young consumers as meaning-makers (Table 2).

Table 3. Theoretical Contributions of the Proposed Study

Theoretical Lens	Key Focus	Contribution to Sustainable Branding Theory
Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005)	Cultural identity & co-created meanings	Expands CCT by showing sustainability as a youth-driven cultural narrative shaped by peers and values.
Brand Authenticity Theory (Napoli et al., 2014)	Consistency between values & brand behavior	Demonstrates how authenticity in sustainability depends on alignment with youth expectations, not only CSR disclosures.
Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969)	Social validation of meaning	Frames sustainable brands as identity symbols co-constructed in youth peer groups.
Signaling Theory (Connelly et al., 2011)	Communication signals (labels, CSR)	Extends signaling by emphasizing credibility only when transparency reduces greenwashing skepticism.
Qualitative Branding Approach	Subjective experiences & lived meanings	Humanizes sustainability branding by incorporating emotional resonance, cultural alignment, and symbolic identity.

Table 4. Practical Implications

Stakeholder	Key Implication	Strategic Action
Marketers	Create credibility and authenticity in sustainable brand communication	• Use transparent campaigns showing measurable environmental/social impact. Adopt transparent campaigns with quantifiable environmental/social effects. • Do not be a green washer; match what is said with what is done. • Build emotionally appealing narratives on sustainability successes.
Policymakers	Policymakers enhance regulatory and institutional confidence in sustainability	• Standardize eco-labeling as a way of preventing confusion between young consumers. • Control deceptive environmental marketing as a response to greenwashing. • Promote the awareness of sustainability among youth. Create incentives for businesses to implement transparent, verifiable sustainability practices.
NGOs & Educators	Enhance youth literacy on sustainability and empower critical consumption	• Incorporate skills of assessing sustainability in school/university curricula. Partner with student organizations to promote peer-to-peer awareness campaigns. • Develop workshops that highlight authentic vs. symbolic sustainability practices. • Encourage young people to take up sustainability initiatives to strengthen their advocacy and sense of ownership.
Businesses	Create incentives for businesses to implement transparent, verifiable sustainability practices.	Integrate sustainability as a core brand value rather than a side effect. 22. Sustainability of the position: This role is independent of CSR. Emphasize eco-friendly products: Connect to generational and cultural ideals (such as advocacy, fairness, and inclusivity).

Stakeholder	Key Implication	Strategic Action
Future Researchers	Concur with youth influencers and communities to create sustainability narratives together.	Future Researchers Continue sustainability branding research to its qualitative dimension • Conduct cross-cultural analysis on the way young consumers in various societies perceive sustainability claims. • Understand the symbolic and emotional sense of sustainability amongst young consumers in relation to sustainable brands. • Employ ethnographic and ethnographic approaches to seize the youth online communities in the development of sustainability perceptions.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Despite its noteworthy achievements, this study has many drawbacks. The suggested framework provides a conceptual and qualitative investigation of young consumers' definitions and interpretations of sustainable branding. However, the claims remain theoretical and interpretative rather than generalizable due to the lack of empirical testing. Thus, additional empirical studies are necessary to confirm these results in real market conditions and across different socioeconomic and cross-cultural contexts (White et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020).

The second weakness has to do with the focus of young viewers. Whereas this is particularly noteworthy today as Millennials and Generation Z take up an increasingly disproportionate share of the commercial and cultural spheres, it does not imply that the views of other age groups, who may feel quite differently about the concept of sustainability, are any less valid. Sustainability is more often connected to identity, activism, or symbolic meaning than to cost, utility, or institutional trust among younger consumers, but it can also be more important to older customers (McDonald, 2024). In this way, future studies could compare the opinions of, amongst others, people of different ages and discuss how priorities and meaning alter as people grow older.

Also, the framework presupposes that young consumers are culturally homogeneous, whereas in reality opinions on sustainability depend on numerous cultural traditions, social expectations, and the degree to which institutions can be credibly trusted (Hofstede, 1984; Geertz, 1962). Sustainable businesses can be socially endorsed through peer influence and

institutional affiliations within collectivist communities, but individual ethical conviction is more effective in individualist countries (Nguyen et al., 2020).

Therefore, a comparative cross-cultural study will provide important insights into how sustainability beliefs are culturally unique versus universal. The other weakness is that there could be symbolic sustainability where businesses claim sustainability through the provision of sustainability stories without sustainability activities (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Although this research has emphasized the relevance of authenticity, it is not yet an empirical investigation of how young consumers perceive and react to symbolic and authentic sustainability initiatives. Consequently, future research could pay closer attention to teenagers' skepticism and how it can both promote and reject actual marketing activities.

Finally, even though the framework highlights the importance of cultural stories and symbolic meaning, future studies could extend the model to include the effects of technology, such as the culture of influencers, transparency on digital platforms, and social media activism. Following the patterns of internet community development, young sustainability discourses, and changing personal attitudes into shared cultural practices can be particularly useful in ethnographic and ethnographic studies (Carah & Shaul, 2016).

In conclusion, these findings are intended to be tested in further studies that enhance the cultural centers and add a technical and intergenerational dimension, though the present work has already provided a conceptual angle for understanding sustainable branding as perceived by young customers. These programs are able not only to elevate levels of theoretical rigor but also to equip one with a practical understanding of how to develop real brand practices that can be sustained in the long run.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on young people and their perception of sustainability in branding, which is based on cultural, emotional, symbolic, and not only logical or financial factors. The study highlights the importance of the young consumer in interpreting sustainability through shared values, symbolic meaning, and the authenticity of brand action, integrating Consumer Culture Theory, Signaling Theory, Brand Authenticity, and Symbolic Interactionism. The following five claims are put forward to explain how cultural norms promote trust, how trust strengthens emotional resilience, how resilience influences preferences for non-traditional or informal systems, and how these preferences, in turn, promote brand-related and adaptable financial tactics.

The research makes a theoretical contribution by expanding behavioral and consumer culture frameworks to include cultural identification and emotional resilience as key decision-making factors. It reframes informal and symbolic behaviors as valid, trust-based

organizations that impact long-term involvement rather than as departures from formal systems. In practice, the results indicate that rather than enforcing universal models of literacy or access, inclusive branding and finance strategies should take into consideration the ambitions, cultural customs, and emotional triggers of young people. By incorporating cultural significance and authenticity into sustainable goods and campaigns, institutions, legislators, and marketers may increase adoption, cultivate trust, and cultivate loyalty.

To sum up, further studies are needed to test these results, extend the cultural coverage, and incorporate a technical and intergenerational perspective, although the current work has contributed to a conceptual framework for understanding sustainable branding through the lenses of young customers. Such initiatives not only increase theoretical rigor but also provide practical knowledge for creating authentic brand practices that can be sustained in the long term.

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