



Green Values, Credible Brands: Investigating How Sustainability Enhances Consumer Trust in Startups- Sustainable Fashion Startups

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<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijst.v2i4.91>

Cite this Article: Reddy, M. L. (2026). Green Values, Credible Brands: Investigating How Sustainability Enhances Consumer Trust in Startups- Sustainable Fashion Startups. International Journal of Science, Strategic Management and Technology, 02(04). <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijst.v2i4.391>

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Abstract

The increasing awareness about environmental issues on the part of consumers has impacted the expectations they have from new businesses, especially in the fashion industry. In this research, titled "Green Values, Credible Brands: Studying the Impact of Sustainability on Consumer Trust in Sustainable Fashion Startups," the relationship between sustainable practices, the creation of credible brands, and the impact of these brands on consumer trust has been investigated. The study has analyzed the influence of eco-friendly materials, ethical sourcing, transparency, and responsibility on consumer perceptions. For the purpose of data collection, a structured survey method was employed, and consumers who had experience of buying sustainable fashion products participated in the study. It is evident from the findings that sustainability efforts have a major impact on trust, purchase intention, and even brand loyalty. Transparency and authenticity have turned out to be essential variables in the connection between green practices and consumer trust formation. The research offers significant implications for startup entrepreneurs and marketers interested in developing a sustainable business practice.

Keywords: *Sustainability Practices, Consumer Trust, Brand Credibility, Sustainable Fashion Startups, Purchase Intention*

Introduction

The fashion industry also faces heavy criticism for its environmental and social impacts, with sustainability being one of the most differentiating aspects of new fashion brands and start-ups. As consumers become more aware of the environmental and social impacts of the fashion industry, including overproduction, waste, labour concerns, and resource consumption, they increasingly expect the fashion industry to ensure the companies follow sustainable practices through their supply chains. As a result, sustainable fashion start-ups take advantage of their 'green values' not only as a means of taking a higher moral position on the issue but also as a marketing strategy aimed at establishing credibility and a connection between the start-up and consumers. Various studies have shown that sustainability-related practices play a major role in building strong consumer trust, which further impacts consumer attitudes towards the product and purchase intentions as well as loyalty. Both social and environmental perceptions have a considerable role in building brand trust and are capable of impacting consumer purchase intention in sustainable fashion products more than attitudes. It is especially crucial for start-ups and other kinds of new businesses since trust decreases perceived risks associated with unfamiliar brands and leads to repeat purchases as well as recommendations from loyal consumers. Trust in sustainable fashion relies heavily on consumers' belief that the brand truly embraces its environmental and social responsibilities and does not engage in greenwashing.

The sustainability factor plays an essential role in brand differentiation among start-ups in industries with significant negative consequences for the environment and society. Today's customers want to know whether their favorite brands are following sustainable principles in their manufacturing processes, communicate with customers honestly, and engage in responsible social practices. This is one of the most important factors contributing to consumers' trust and purchase intentions for sustainable product categories among start-ups due to their inherent lack of initial credibility. Thus, making a brand 'green' might prove to be a valuable option for creating trustful relationships between customers and the brand and outmaneuver established companies in sustainable product categories. The current research focuses on the role of sustainability and communication practices in the creation of brand trust within a sustainable fashion start-up. The use of sustainable practices and communications is known to improve brand trust, reputation, and purchase intention across industries. For the fashion industry, social responsibility and sustainability are directly correlated with customer perceptions, attitudes, and trust toward a particular brand.

It is noted that trust plays an important role, wherein consumers' understanding of the brand as being trustworthy and altruistic leads to trust, which enhances purchase intention and the intentions to spread word-of-mouth information.

Considering the emergence of fast fashion trends, their negative impact on the environment and the widespread prevalence of greenwashing, it has become increasingly difficult but also important for brands to convince customers of their sustainability. It has been revealed that the use of certain types of sustainability information, traceability and storytelling contribute to establishing trust towards a sustainable fashion brand. Speaking about the importance of embedding sustainability in startups, the benefits include the possibility of achieving differentiation, loyalty and even attracting investors. At the same time, the challenges associated with using the idea of sustainability in business models and brand positioning should be mentioned. Within the scope of sustainable fashion and MSMEs, the level of consumers' awareness about sustainable fashion and the perception of sustainability may increase their level of trust and purchasing intentions. This provides grounds for exploring the issue of how a sustainable fashion startup may take advantage of "green values" to build trust. The growing concerns related to climate change, exploitation of workers, and overconsumption in general have turned the fashion industry into one of the spheres which are discussed in terms of sustainability. Fast fashion with its linear "take-make-waste" approach is frequently criticized due to its adverse effects on the planet and society. Against this background, the search for environmentally-friendly products is becoming especially urgent among consumers, particularly among young people. This makes sustainable fashion startups true challengers of incumbent brands.

Sustainability as a Driver of Consumer Trust

There is strong evidence from various industries and regions that true sustainability efforts create a positive impact on consumer perception, attitude, and trust beliefs. Increased efforts in sustainability lead to consumer trust by demonstrating innovation, future-mindedness, and value congruence between firms and consumers. Social responsibility perception and ESG performance contribute to building a good corporate image and word-of-mouth communication, thus leading to trust and purchase intentions.

In the field of fashion, for example, studies have indicated that trust can be affected by perceptions of social responsibility and sustainability. Studies have found that consumers who think that brands are socially responsible develop higher trust, better attitudes, and increased intention to engage in consumer effectiveness. Consumer effectiveness refers to the concept that individual actions of consumers can have an effect. This is the part where trust becomes relevant as a psychological link between perceptions of social responsibility and behavioral intentions.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore sustainability initiatives in sustainable fashion ventures.
2. To analyze consumer attitude toward sustainability within fashion brands.
3. To determine the effect of sustainability on consumer trust.
4. To analyze consumer trust in creating brand credibility.
5. To determine the effect of brand credibility on purchase intentions and customer loyalty.

Literature Review:

Martínez (2015) has examined customer loyalty from a green marketing perspective and has identified key antecedents that influence consumer commitment toward environmentally responsible firms. The study has emphasized that green practices, such as eco-friendly operations and transparent environmental communication, have strengthened customer satisfaction and trust. Furthermore, the research has demonstrated that when consumers perceive a company as genuinely committed to sustainability, they have shown higher levels of loyalty and long-term engagement. The findings have contributed significantly to understanding how green marketing strategies have enhanced brand credibility and customer retention.

Suki (2016) has investigated the impact of green brand confidence and green brand image on consumers purchase intentions. The study has revealed that consumers who have developed strong confidence in a brand's environmental claims have been more likely to intend to purchase green products. In addition, the research has indicated that a positive green brand image has positively influenced consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions. The findings have suggested that building trust and credibility in green branding has played a crucial role in encouraging sustainable consumption behavior.

Murali et al. (2016) have examined the relationship between after-sales service and sustainability-driven customer loyalty in the retail sector. Their study has proposed a structural model demonstrating that effective after-sales service has significantly influenced customer satisfaction, trust, and long-term loyalty. The researchers have emphasized that service quality provided after purchase has strengthened consumers' perception of a company's commitment to sustainability. The findings have indicated that firms integrating sustainability practices with strong after-sales support have enhanced customer retention and competitive advantage. Thus, the study has contributed to understanding how post-purchase services have reinforced sustainable loyalty behavior among consumers.

Ene Izan (2016) has examined the effects of green marketing strategy on firm performance in the context of contemporary business practices. The study has analysed how the adoption of environmentally friendly marketing initiatives has influenced organizational outcomes such as profitability, competitive advantage, and brand reputation. The findings have indicated that firms implementing green marketing strategies have experienced improved financial performance and enhanced corporate image

Guo, R., et al. (2017) have examined the influence of green energy initiatives on brand trust and organizational legitimacy in the context of sustainable business practices. The study has highlighted that companies adopting green energy strategies have strengthened their brand image and have enhanced consumer trust by demonstrating environmental responsibility. The authors have found that the use of renewable and eco-friendly energy sources has positively influenced consumers' perceptions of corporate credibility and legitimacy. Furthermore, the research has indicated that organizations integrating green energy into their operations have improved their reputation among environmentally conscious consumers, thereby have contributed to stronger brand trust and long-term customer relationships.

Ng, P. F., et al. (2017) have investigated the factors influencing consumers' decisions to purchase green products by developing a model of consumption values related to sustainable consumption behavior. The study has examined how different consumption values such as functional value, social value, emotional value, and environmental value have influenced consumers' intentions to adopt green purchasing behavior. The authors have found that environmental concern and perceived benefits of green products have significantly affected consumers' willingness to buy environmentally friendly products. Furthermore, the research has emphasized that consumers who have perceived higher environmental and social value in green products have shown stronger sustainable consumption behavior. The study has contributed to understanding how consumption values have shaped consumer attitudes and decisions toward green purchasing.

Mohammed, A., and Rashid, B. (2018) have developed a conceptual model to examine the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) dimensions and brand equity. The study has explored how different CSR activities, such as economic, social, and environmental responsibilities, have contributed to strengthening brand equity. The authors have suggested that organizations implementing effective CSR strategies have enhanced their brand image, customer

loyalty, and overall brand value. Furthermore, the research has indicated that responsible corporate behavior has positively influenced consumers' perceptions and has built stronger trust toward brands. The study has concluded that integrating CSR practices into business strategies has played an important role in improving brand reputation and long-term customer relationships.

Research Design and Sampling

For this study, a descriptive research design is applied to investigate the effect of sustainability practices on consumer trust and credibility among sustainable fashion startups. The overall aim of the study is to analyze consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral responses to eco-friendly and socially conscious fashion brands. The research method is quantitative in nature and primary data will be collected using a structured questionnaire. The major variables that will be considered during the process include sustainability awareness, green values, brand trust, and purchasing behavior. Individual consumers who are either knowledgeable about or interested in sustainable fashion products will be the units of analysis in this research. The area where the research is conducted will be Tirupati, which is an emerging urban area and has high sustainability consciousness and online presence. A sample size of around 100 will be chosen for the study based on the standard calculation method for proportions at 95% confidence level and 10% margin of error.

Statistical tools

The study implies a set of statistical tools to analyze and interpret the collected data effectively. Descriptive statistics formulas such as,

$$\text{Mean: } \bar{x} = \frac{\sum x}{n}$$

$$\text{Standard Deviation: } \sigma = \frac{n \sum \sqrt{(x - \bar{x})^2}}{n}$$

Ranking: Based on descending mean values

3.5 Research Instruments

The most important tool for research in this paper is the structured questionnaire using Google forms. It allows for quick delivery, easy collection of responses, and helps maintain accurate and reliable information.

The survey questions have been crafted to address various factors that are connected to sustainability and consumers' confidence in sustainable fashion startups.

- Section A: Demographic Profile of Respondents
- Section B: Awareness of Sustainability and Green Values
- Section C: Consumer Trust towards Sustainable Fashion Startups.
- Section D: Brand Credibility and Purchase Behavior.

Question Format

- The questionnaire includes a mix of:
- **Likert scale questions** (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree)
- **Multiple-choice questions**
- **Ranking-based questions**

These formats help in capturing both **consumer perceptions and behavioral responses** effectively.

Development of the Instrument

The questionnaire will be drafted using the current literature review on sustainability, consumer behavior, and brand trust. To maintain consistency in the logic of the questions, the draft will be tested on a few individuals before finalizing it.

Alignment with Research Objectives

The research instrument is developed for the purpose of achieving the main objective of the research, which is the investigation of the effect of green values and practices on consumer trust and the role played by consumer trust in contributing towards brand credibility and purchase intentions.

Data Analysis

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In this chapter, a detailed analysis and interpretation of the gathered information from the structured questionnaire are provided. It aims to translate numbers into valuable findings that will explain the impact of sustainability on consumer trust in sustainable fashion startup ventures. It will also look at how consumers' minds have been changed about their consumption behavior regarding conventional fashion consumption towards a more environmentally responsible and ethically driven consumption behavior. By employing frequency and percentage analysis of the gathered information from the survey, this chapter will analyze the following: demographic information, knowledge of sustainable fashion, and consumers' attitude towards eco-friendly practices. Furthermore, it will analyze other important elements that make up consumer perception, such as the utilization of eco-friendly materials, ethical sourcing, fair labor practices, waste management, and transparency. Moreover, it will examine the connection between sustainability programs and consumer trust and discuss how they contribute to brand reputation, purchase intentions, and customer loyalty.

Demographic Details of the Respondents

Gender Distribution

Table 4.1: Distribution of the Respondents by Their Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	95	95%
Female	5	5%
Total	100	100%

Source: Primary data

4.3 Ranking Analysis of Environmental Attitudes

Table 4.3: Ranking Analysis of Environmental Attitudes

Sl. No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
8	Climate change influences my purchasing decisions	1	33	44	14	7	3.08	0.88	5
9	I prefer brands that promote eco-friendly practices	5	44	34	12	7	3.32	0.95	4
10	I feel responsible for reducing environmental damage	14	31	29	13	7	3.36	1.06	3
11	I actively look for sustainable alternatives while shopping	8	49	28	11	6	3.43	0.99	1
12	I avoid brands that harm the environment	14	31	27	15	4	3.36	1.03	3
13	I believe fashion industry significantly impacts the environment	12	40	26	13	5	3.38	1.05	2
14	I am willing to pay more for sustainable products	9	40	30	12	7	3.32	1.03	4

Source: Primary data

Table 4.3 above reveals the views of respondents towards sustainability and environmental responsibility in their purchasing behavior. It ranges between 3.08 and 3.43, implying a moderate to a positive view towards sustainable practices.

For instance, "climate change affects my purchasing decisions" was found to have the lowest mean of 3.08 out of all. This shows that although climate change does affect some people, it is not a determining factor when making purchases for everyone.

Conversely, "I am always on the lookout for eco-friendly options when shopping" had the highest mean of 3.43, as seen in **Table 4.3** above. This means that the majority of respondents are actively seeking environmentally friendly options while shopping.

Moreover, statements such as "I am personally responsible for minimizing environmental degradation" (Mean = 3.36), "I do not buy brands that pollute the environment" (Mean = 3.36), and "I think the fashion industry is one of the leading causes of environmental degradation" (Mean = 3.38), as shown in **Table 4.3** above, reveal that respondents have high environmental awareness and ethics.

Also, the statement, "I favor brands that embrace environmentally friendly activities," as shown in **Table 4.3** above, shows that brand image and sustainability initiatives play an influential role in customer preferences.

Notably, although "I would be willing to pay extra for sustainable products," as indicated in **Table 4.3** above, revealed a moderate response, it implies that the respondents are moderately willing to incur additional costs.

Ranking Analysis on Brand Credibility

Table 4.5 Ranking Analysis on Brand Credibility

Sl. No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank
23	Sustainable fashion startups appear honest in their communication	18	42	30	12	9	3.35	1.09	6
24	I trust sustainability claims made by these brands	15	38	34	14	10	3.23	1.14	10
25	These brands provide accurate product information	17	40	29	15	10	3.28	1.13	8
26	I believe sustainable startups are committed to long-term environmental goals	20	41	27	13	10	3.38	1.15	4
27	Brand transparency increases my perception of credibility	22	39	26	13	11	3.41	1.17	2

28	I feel that sustainable brands keep their promises	16	37	32	15	11	3.20	1.16	11
29	Social media presence improves credibility of sustainable brands	14	36	33	17	11	3.16	1.15	12
30	Third-party certifications enhance brand credibility	21	42	25	12	11	3.40	1.16	3
31	I trust sustainable fashion startups	18	40	30	13	10	3.32	1.14	7
32	I feel confident purchasing from sustainable brands	19	41	28	13	10	3.36	1.15	5
33	I would recommend sustainable fashion startups to others	20	43	26	12	10	3.42	1.16	1

Source: Primary data

The above **Table 4.5** shows the ranking analysis of the perceptions of the respondents on trust and credibility in sustainable fashion startups. The average scores for these questions ranged from 3.16 to 3.42, demonstrating a high level of agreement between the respondents.

The statement "I would recommend sustainable fashion startups to others" (Mean = 3.42, Rank 1), as depicted in Table 4.5, achieved the highest score ranking, which means that the respondents not only trusted but also advocated for sustainable fashion startups. In addition, the statements "Brand transparency increases my perception of credibility" (Mean = 3.41, Rank 2) and "Third-party certifications increase brand credibility" (Mean = 3.40, Rank 3), as depicted in **Table 4.5**, imply that the respondents found openness and verification critical when it comes to brand credibility.

Moreover, the respondents showed that they had faith in sustainable fashion startups' environmental commitment (Mean = 3.38, Rank 4) and their products (Mean = 3.36, Rank 5), as illustrated in **Table 4.5**. It can be inferred that sustainability measures are recognized and highly appreciated by consumers.

However, relatively low average scores were recorded for the statements "Social media presence enhances the credibility of sustainable brands" (Mean = 3.16, Rank 12) and "I feel that sustainable brands keep their promises" (Mean = 3.20, Rank 11), as depicted in **Table 4.5**. This suggests that although the respondents have a positive attitude toward sustainable brands, there is still an element of distrust in their consistency.

In summary, the results provided in Table 4.5 show that the respondents perceive sustainable fashion startups' brands positively due to openness, certification, and environmental commitment; however, these brands should also improve their consistency and reliability of communication.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation Analysis on Trust and Consumer Behavior

Hypothesis

Null Hypothesis (H₀):

No correlation exists between **trust in sustainable fashion startups and consumer behavior**.

Alternative Hypothesis (H₁):

There is **correlation** between **trust in sustainable fashion startups and consumer behavior**.

Table: 4.6 Correlation Analysis between Trust and Consumer Behavior

Variables	Trust	Consumer Behavior
Trust	1.000	0.860
Consumer Behavior	-	1.000

Source: Primary data

denotes significant at 1% level

The correlation coefficient for the association between trust in sustainable fashion companies and consumer behaviors is found to be 0.860, indicating that there is a 86.0% positive association between the two.

Therefore, H₀ (null hypothesis) can be rejected at 1% level of significance and accept H₁ (alternative hypothesis).

It means that there is a strong association between trust and consumer behavior. Higher the trust, higher would be the purchase intentions, brand loyalty, and recommendations by consumers towards such companies. Correlation Matrix shows the association between Trust and Consumer Behavior.

- Correlation value for Trust vs. Consumer Behavior is 0.860.
- It shows that there exists a strong positive correlation between these two variables.
- If trust in the sustainable fashion business startups increases, consumers' behavior like their intentions, loyalty, and engagement will increase as well.
- A correlation coefficient of 0.860 is close to +1, meaning the relationship is highly positive and strong.
- The consumers are more likely to trust those brands that they believe in, and trust them.
- Because of this strong positive correlation, we see that trust plays an important role in determining consumers' behavior.
- Hence, the null hypothesis (H₀) is rejected, while the alternative hypothesis (H₁) is accepted.



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