

2025-11

What makes a brand "sustainable" in the eyes of young consumers?

Kabir, Barsat

School of Business and Entrepreneurship, Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)

<https://icebtm.iub.edu.bd>

Downloaded from IUB Academic Repository

What Makes a Brand "Sustainable" in the Eyes of Young Consumers?

Barsat Kabir

Marketing & Human Resource Management, BRAC Business School, BRAC University

barsat.kabir@g.bracu.ac.bd

Paper ID: ICEBTM-25-1093

Abstract- This study develops a conceptual framework to understand how young people perceive sustainability in branding from cultural, symbolic, and trust perspectives. This research demonstrates how cultural identification, emotional involvement, and authenticity impact young customers' perceptions of sustainable companies, in contrast to traditional financial and marketing studies that focus on behavioral or rational factors. Using qualitative observations, the study makes a series of theoretical proposals based on Consumer Culture Theory, Signaling Theory, Brand Authenticity, and Symbolic Interactionism. According to the paradigm, views of sustainability are influenced by cultural norms and symbolic meanings, while credibility and authenticity promote long-term involvement and trust. Both theoretical and practical contributions are made, broadening the body of knowledge on branding and consumer behavior beyond cognitive models and providing guidance for institutions, marketers, and legislators who want to create long-lasting tactics that appeal to young people.

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

I. INTRODUCTION

Climate crisis, social inequality, and ethical consumerism have contributed to a growing emphasis on sustainability in modern branding. Companies worldwide are repositioning their brand identities to appeal to a generation of consumers who prioritize ethical values. In Bangladesh, the Gen Z demographic (aged 18–25) represents an influential and value-driven consumer segment. Yet, sustainability remains a vague and contested term—especially in the marketing context.

This proposed study will investigate how young Bangladeshi consumers make sense of “sustainable brands.” Moving beyond the rational and utilitarian understanding of brand attributes, this research will highlight how youth construct sustainability through emotional, symbolic, and social interactions. The aim is to develop a theory-informed conceptual model that guides future branding efforts and deepens academic insight.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Four theoretical stances—Consumer Culture Theory, Signaling Theory, Brand Authenticity, and Symbolic Interactionism—are combined to organize 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 given in Table

1, which also emphasizes how relevant they are 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 symbolic meaning of sustainable brands

2.1 Theoretical Grounding

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): According to [2], CCT emphasizes that consumer behavior is socially constructed. Youth interpret branding messages through their identities, cultural narratives, and peer communities. As such, sustainable brands come to be about values and a way of life.

Signaling Theory: According to [9] signaling theory states that consumers are able to derive quality attributes of brands based on signals that can be traced. On sustainability grounds, this can be eco-labels, ethical approvals, or open sourcing. The young consumers tend to distrust these cues to see whether they are friendly or only pretending.

Brand Authenticity Theory: According [7] authentic brands allude to honesty, consistency, and congruency with consumer values. To young people, a sustainable brand has to exhibit a sense of continuity between environmental statements and activities.

[6]. According to him, a person generates meaning through social interactions. For Gen Z, sustainability may symbolize social consciousness, modernity, or ethical superiority—constructed through conversations, digital media, and peer validation.

2.2 Empirical Literature Insights: Youth–Brand Relationships in South Asia

[5] revealed that Bangladeshi youth consider sustainability to include not just environmental but also social justice concerns. [12] found that Indian youth define brand sustainability in terms of emotional resonance and perceived authenticity. [9] highlighted that UK students link sustainability to personal identity and community belonging.

These findings highlight a shift from functional to symbolic branding, emphasizing the need for cultural relevance and emotional depth in sustainability narratives.

III. METHODOLOGY

In an attempt to develop a framework, this paper uses a conceptual qualitative methodology, collating available theoretical and empirical knowledge. A scholarly review of the literature on consumer culture, signaling, authenticity, and symbolic interaction furnishes the grounds used in coming up with 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, as well as a 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.

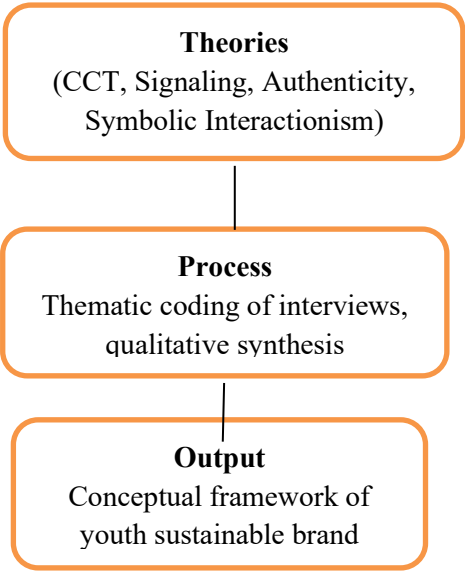


Figure 1: Conceptual Research Design

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITIONS

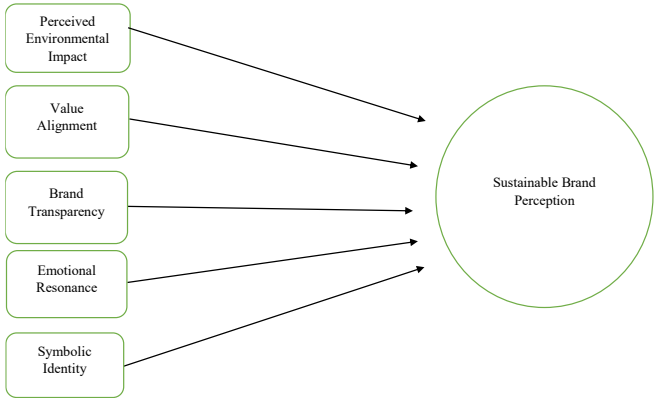


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Brand Perception among Youth

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:** Brands become identity tools, symbolizing moral positioning or social status.

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.

4.1 Proposition Development and Theoretical Justification
Consumer Culture Theory [9], Signaling Theory [8] Brand Authenticity Theory [10], and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) provide a solid theoretical basis for the suggested paradigm. These viewpoints highlight how young customers interpret sustainability in branding via social, psychological, and symbolic processes. Meanings in consumer culture are co-created via peer validation, identity expression, and cultural standards rather than being innate to items.

Communication about sustainability, such as eco-labels or CSR disclosures, serves as a signal of legitimacy, according to signaling theory. However, signals are only effective if they are congruent with brand behavior and values, as the Brand Authenticity Theory emphasizes. If not, customers could think they're greenwashing. From a symbolic standpoint, adolescents support sustainability claims by relying on shared meanings among social networks and peer groups.

Therefore, it is envisaged that young consumers would evaluate businesses not only on ecological results but also on symbolic fit with their cultural values and identity. According to consumer culture theory, sustainability is more than simply a practical quality; it is a cultural and emotional construct. This perception is often influenced by family values, peer pressure, and group affiliation in collectivist countries like Bangladesh [29].

Perceptions of sustainability are therefore incorporated into larger emotional and cultural systems. If a clothing brand communicates ethical sourcing in a credible manner, 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 the youth's 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 improves perceived authenticity and lessens mistrust about 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.
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.

Propositions	Theoretical Validations
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.

V. CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY AND PRACTICE

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study suggests a qualitative method that incorporates symbolic, emotional, and cultural elements to comprehend how young customers see sustainability in branding. This research emphasizes the subjective, experience-driven character of teenage brand perceptions, while the majority of branding and sustainability literature has concentrated on quantitative surveys or consumer attitude scales [20].

Conventional branding theories, particularly those based on utilitarian value frameworks or rational choice, imply that consumers evaluate sustainability claims by cognitively evaluating eco-performance or corporate social responsibility disclosures [21]. These viewpoints could be relevant for official marketing messages, but they don't account for the identity-driven, symbolic, and peer-validated processes that young consumers use to give sustainable brands significance.

The paradigm proves the Consumer Culture Theory [23] since, according to the researchers, the brand preferences of young people cannot be separated as one of their individual choices but as an element of social identities and cultural stories, and peer culture. It extends the notion of Brand Authenticity Theory [25],[28] by suggesting that authenticity can be achieved when sustainability initiatives by a brand do not contradict individual and collective values among the youth.

Furthermore, by presenting sustainable brands as symbolic identity markers that are approved by peer networks, this study enhances Symbolic Interactionism [5]. Young consumers negotiate and co-create these meanings socially rather than just evaluating sustainability claims on an individual basis. Lastly, the Signaling Theory [7] is expanded upon by highlighting the fact that sustainability signals are only successful when backed by open, reliable procedures that lessen suspicion of greenwashing.

In order to bridge symbolic, cultural, and emotional viewpoints into sustainability and branding theory, this study suggests 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	Consistency between values & brand behavior	Demonstrates how authenticity in sustainability depends on

Theory (Napoli et al., 2014)		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.

Future Researchers	Extend sustainability branding research with qualitative depth	• Conduct cross-cultural studies on how young consumers in different societies interpret sustainability claims. • Explore the emotional and symbolic meanings young consumers attach to sustainable brands. • Use ethnographic and ethnographic methods to capture youth online communities in shaping sustainability perceptions.
--------------------	--	--

5.1 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite its noteworthy achievements, this study has many drawbacks. A conceptual and qualitative investigation of young consumers' definitions and interpretations of sustainable branding is provided by the suggested framework. 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 as well as in different socioeconomic and cross-cultural contexts [13].

The second weakness has to do with the focus of young viewers. Whereas this is particularly noteworthy today as the Millennials and Generation Z take up an increasingly disproportionate share of the commercial and cultural sphere, it does not imply the views held by other age groups, who may feel quite differently about the concept of sustainability. Sustainability is connected to identity, activism, or symbolic meaning more often than to cost, utility, or institutional trust in younger consumers, but it can also be more important to older customers [15]. 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 those young consumers are culturally homogenous, whereas, in reality, the opinions on sustainability depend on numerous cultural traditions, social expectations, and the degree to which the institutions can be credibly [12]. Sustainable businesses can be socially endorsed through the influence of peers and institutional affiliations among collectivist communities, but individual ethical conviction can be more effective when doing so in individualist countries [4].

Therefore, a comparative cross-cultural study will provide important insights into how sustainability beliefs are culturally unique versus universal.

Another drawback is the possibility of symbolic sustainability, which is the term used to describe the practice of businesses presenting sustainability narratives without actual sustainability activities [17]. While this study highlights the importance of authenticity, it does not yet empirically assess how young consumers detect and respond to symbolic versus authentic sustainability efforts. Therefore, future studies may look more closely at teenage skepticism and how it can both encourage and hinder genuine marketing practices.

Table 4. Practical Implications

Stakeholder	Key Implication	Strategic Action
Marketers	Build authenticity and credibility in sustainable brand communication	• Use transparent campaigns showing measurable environmental/social impact. • Avoid “greenwashing” by aligning actions with claims. • Develop emotionally resonant storytelling around sustainability achievements. • Build long-term youth engagement through interactive campaigns and digital communities.
Policymakers	Strengthen regulatory and institutional trust in sustainability	• Standardize eco-labeling to reduce confusion among young consumers. • Regulate misleading environmental claims to counter greenwashing. • Support youth-focused sustainability awareness campaigns. • Create incentives for businesses to adopt transparent, verifiable sustainability practices.
NGOs & Educators	Enhance youth literacy on sustainability and empower critical consumption	• Integrate sustainability evaluation skills into school/university curricula. • Partner with student organizations to promote peer-to-peer awareness campaigns. • Develop workshops that highlight authentic vs. symbolic sustainability practices. • Encourage youth-led sustainability initiatives to strengthen ownership and advocacy.
Businesses	Embed sustainability as a core brand identity rather than a peripheral feature	• Integrate sustainability into supply chains, sourcing, and production transparency. • Position sustainability as part of brand purpose, not as an add-on CSR activity. • Highlight how sustainable products connect with cultural and generational values (e.g., fairness, inclusivity, activism). • Collaborate with youth influencers and communities to co-create sustainability narratives.

Lastly, although the framework emphasizes the significance of cultural narratives and symbolic meaning, future research might broaden the model by embracing technology impacts, including influencer culture, digital transparency platforms, and social media activism. Tracing how online communities mold young sustainability narratives and transform individual perspectives into collective cultural movements may be especially beneficial for ethnographic and ethnographic research [10].

To sum up, further studies are supposed to test these results, extend the cultural coverage, and incorporate a technical and intergenerational level, although the current work has contributed to a conceptual framework to comprehend sustainable branding as viewed through the lenses of young customers. These initiatives can not only raise theoretical rigor but also provide practical knowledge of how to establish authentic brand practices that can be made sustainable over the long term.

VI. CONCLUSION

With an emphasis on cultural, emotional, and symbolic aspects rather than just logical or financial considerations, this study presents a conceptual framework for understanding how young people see sustainability in branding. The research emphasizes how young consumers understand sustainability via collective values, symbolic meaning, and the authenticity of brand behavior by combining Consumer Culture Theory, Signaling Theory, Brand Authenticity, and Symbolic Interactionism. The following five claims are put forward to explain how cultural norms promote trust, trust strengthens emotional resilience, resilience influences preferences for non-traditional or informal systems, and 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 supposed to test these results, extend the cultural coverage, and incorporate a technical and intergenerational level, although the current work has contributed to a conceptual framework to comprehend sustainable branding as viewed through the lenses of young customers. These initiatives can not only raise theoretical rigor but also provide practical knowledge of how to establish authentic brand practices that can be made sustainable over the long term.

REFERENCES

- [1] Appadurai, A. (2007). *The right to research*. Globalisation, Societies and Education, 4(2), 167–177. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720600750696>
- [2] Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868–882. <https://doi.org/10.1086/426626>
- [3] Baker, T., & Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50(3), 329–366. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2005.50.3.329>
- [4] Banerjee, A. V., & Duflo, E. (2011). *Poor economics: A radical rethinking of the way to fight global poverty*. Public Affairs.
- [5] Blau, P. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. John Wiley & Sons.
- [6] Blustein, D. L., & Flores, L. Y. (2023). A new model of financial resilience: Integrating psychology and economics. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 139, 103849. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103849>
- [7] Collins, D., Morduch, J., Rutherford, S., & Ruthven, O. (2009). *Portfolios of the poor: How the world's poor live on \$2 a day*. Princeton University Press.
- [8] Cropanzano, R., & Mitchell, M. S. (2005). Social exchange theory: An interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31(6), 874–900. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206305279602>
- [9] Douglas, M., & Isherwood, B. (1979). *The world of goods: Towards an anthropology of consumption*. Routledge.
- [10] Fafchamps, M., & Lund, S. (2003). Risk-sharing networks in rural Philippines. *Journal of Development Economics*, 71(2), 261–287. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-3878\(03\)00029-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0304-3878(03)00029-4)
- [11] Fang, H., & Zhang, J. (2024). Building consumer trust in sustainable finance: The role of transparency and regulation. *Journal of Sustainable Finance & Investment*, 14(1), 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20430795.2023.2205479>
- [12] Geertz, C. (1962). The rotating credit association: A “middle rung” in development. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 10(3), 241–263. <https://doi.org/10.1086/449960>
- [13] Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3), 481–510. <https://doi.org/10.1086/228311>
- [14] Gul, F., Hussain, A., & Rauf, A. (2028). Emotional resilience and financial coping strategies: A longitudinal study of vulnerable households. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 97, 102627. (forthcoming).
- [15] Hofstede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values* (Vol. 5). Sage.
- [16] Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decision under risk. *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263–291. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1914185>
- [17] Kahneman, D., & Tversky, A. (2013). *Choices, values, and frames*. Cambridge University Press.
- [18] Lučić, D., & Uzelac, O. (2024). Cross-cultural differences in financial inclusion: The role of trust and norms. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 48(2), 189–205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijcs.12886>
- [19] McDonald, S. (2024). Storytelling sustainability: Marketing strategies for Generation Z consumers. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 40(1–2), 76–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2023.2265987>
- [20] Morduch, J., & Schneider, R. (2017). *The financial diaries: How American families cope in a world of uncertainty*. Princeton University Press.

- [21] Mullainathan, S., & Shafir, E. (2013). *Scarcity: Why having too little means so much*. Times Books.
- [22] North, D. C. (1990). *Institutions, institutional change and economic performance*. Cambridge University Press.
- [23] Ozili, P. K. (2021). Financial inclusion and informal financial systems. *Heliyon*, 7(6), e07255. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07255>
- [24] Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- [25] Thaler, R. (1985). Mental accounting and consumer choice. *Marketing Science*, 4(3), 199–214. <https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.4.3.199>
- [26] Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Yale University Press.
- [27] Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness* (rev. ed.). Penguin.
- [28] Xu, L., Bian, Y., & Chen, H. (2024). Testing institutional trust and financial inclusion in developing economies. *World Development*, 169, 106239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106239>
- [29] Xiao, J. J., & Porto, N. (2022). Financial education and financial literacy in the United States: A conceptual framework and future research agenda. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 43(4), 736–754. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-021-09809-4>