From Awareness to Action: Reframing Value Consciousness in Ethical and Sustainable Fashion Marketing

Ryan Hasan Kurniawan[1], Ratih Hurriyati[2], Bambang Widjajanta[3]

[1,2,3] Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Bandung, Indonesia
ryanhasan@upi.edu

Abstract. This study addresses the growing tension between sustainability values and consumption practices in Indonesia's fashion industry, particularly among Generation Z. Despite increasing awareness of ethical branding and green fashion, a persistent attitude–behavior gap remains, where stated ethical concerns do not consistently translate into actual purchasing decisions. This paper develops a conceptual framework that positions value consciousness as a central mediating construct linking ethical branding and green fashion to purchase decisions. In addition, brand trust and digital literacy are introduced as moderating variables that shape how sustainability signals are interpreted and acted upon by consumers. The study adopts a structured conceptual synthesis approach to integrate relevant theories and constructs into a coherent explanatory model. The findings suggest that value consciousness functions as a key cognitive mechanism that transforms ethical awareness into behavioral intention, while trust and digital capability strengthen or weaken this process. This study contributes to the literature by reframing value consciousness as a multidimensional construct that integrates ethical, functional, and symbolic evaluations within consumer decision-making. From a practical perspective, the framework provides strategic insights for firms to design more credible and effective sustainability communication. The paper concludes by proposing directions for future empirical research to validate and extend the model in different contexts.

Keywords: Brand Trust; Digital Literacy; Generation Z; Green Fashion; Sustainable Marketing; Value Consciousness

1 Introduction

The global fashion industry is increasingly shaped by sustainability concerns and ethical expectations. In emerging econo-mies such as Indonesia, rapid consumption growth coexists with environmental degradation and ethical production chal-lenges, particularly driven by the expansion of fast fashion and short product life cycles

© The Author(s) 2026
R. Hurriyati et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 10th Global Conference on Business, Management, and Entrepreneurship (GCBME 2025)*, Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research 407,
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-94-6239-819-1_36

[1].This creates a paradox in which market growth accelerates while socio-environmental pressures intensify.

Generation Z represents a pivotal consumer segment in this transformation. As digital natives, they demonstrate strong awareness of environmental and ethical issues and expect higher levels of transparency and accountability from brands [2]. However, prior research consistently identifies a persistent gap between ethical awareness and actual purchasing behavior, where stated values do not necessarily translate into real consumption decisions [3]. This discrepancy indicates that awareness alone is insufficient to explain sustainable consumption behavior.

Existing studies largely assume a direct relationship between ethical awareness and behavioral outcomes, yet they provide limited explanation of the cognitive mechanisms that bridge this gap. In practice, consumer decision-making involves com-plex evaluative processes in which individuals assess not only functional benefits, but also ethical alignment and identity expression. This suggests the need for a more integrative framework that explains how ethical signals are internalized and translated into purchase decisions.

To address this limitation, this study proposes a conceptual framework that positions value consciousness as a central mediating construct linking ethical branding and green fashion to purchase decisions. Ethical branding and green fashion are conceptualized as key antecedents that provide sustainability signals to consumers, while value consciousness repre-sents the internal evaluation process that integrates ethical, functional, and symbolic [4]. In addition, digital literacy and brand trust are introduced as moderating variables that shape how these signals are interpreted and acted upon in digital consumption environments [5].

This study draws on the Theory of Planned Behavior to explain how cognitive evaluation influences behavioral intention [6], and signaling theory to explain how brands communicate ethical attributes through observable cues [7,8]. By integrating these perspectives, the proposed framework provides a more comprehensive explanation of sustainable consumption behavior among Generation Z.

Ethical branding reflects a firm's commitment to moral values and social responsibility beyond functional product at-tributes [9]. In contemporary markets characterized by information overload and consumer skepticism, ethical branding functions as a signaling mechanism that communicates credibility and authenticity to consumers [10].

For Generation Z, ethical considerations are increasingly embedded within consumption decisions, as they tend to evalu-ate brands not only based on product performance but also on ethical alignment and social impact. This suggests that ethical branding does not merely influence perception, but actively shapes how consumers evaluate value. As a result, ethical branding is expected to enhance value consciousness by reinforcing the alignment between brand attributes and consumer values.

Green fashion represents a systemic shift toward environmentally responsible production and consumption practices [11]. It encompasses sustainable sourcing, reduced environmental impact, and circular design principles. Be-yond its functional dimension, green fashion also serves as a symbolic medium through which consumers express identity, social responsibility, and environmental awareness [1].

This perspective aligns with prior studies that define sustainable fashion as a multidimensional concept involving envi-ronmental, social, and economic considerations [12].

For Generation Z, green fashion is not only a product category but also a form of value expression. This implies that sustainability attributes are integrated into consumer evaluation processes. Consequently, green fashion is expected to influence value consciousness by strengthening the perceived alignment between product attributes and personal values.

Value consciousness has traditionally been defined as a trade-off between quality and price [4]. However, in the context of sustainable consumption, this construct has evolved into a multidimensional evaluation mechanism that incorporates ethical, functional, and symbolic considerations.

This shift suggests that value consciousness is no longer purely economic, but rather a hybrid construct integrating moral judgment, functional assessment, and identity signaling. As such, it plays a central role in bridging the gap between ethical awareness and actual consumption behavior. Consumers who exhibit higher value consciousness are more likely to translate ethical considerations into concrete purchasing decisions, making it a critical mediating mechanism in sustaina-ble consumption models.

Digital literacy refers to consumers' ability to access, evaluate, and interpret information in digital environments [13]. In the context of sustainability marketing, digital literacy is particularly important in enabling consumers to identi-fy misleading claims and detect greenwashing practices [10]This suggests that consumers with higher digital literacy are more capable of critically evaluating ethical signals provided by brands.

Brand trust, on the other hand, reduces uncertainty and simplifies decision-making by serving as a heuristic for evaluat-ing product credibility [5]. In situations where consumers face complex ethical claims, trust becomes a key factor that determines whether value-based evaluations translate into actual behavior. Brand trust has also been widely conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing reliability and intentionality, which strengthens consumer confidence in brand-related claims [14].

Together, these constructs function as moderating variables that shape how consumers interpret and act upon sustainabil-ity signals, particularly in digital consumption environments.

Based on the theoretical arguments presented above, the following hypotheses are proposed

H1: Ethical branding positively influences value consciousness.

H2: Green fashion positively influences value consciousness.

H3: Value consciousness positively influences purchase decision.

H4: Value consciousness mediates the relationship between ethical branding and purchase decision. H5: Value consciousness mediates the relationship between green fashion and purchase decision.

H6: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between ethical branding and value consciousness.

H7: Digital literacy moderates the relationship between green fashion and value consciousness.
H8: Brand trust moderates the relationship between value consciousness and purchase decision.

This study contributes in two main ways. First, it advances theoretical understanding by reframing value consciousness as a multidimensional cognitive mechanism that bridges ethical awareness and behavioral outcomes. Second, it offers practical insights for firms seeking to design more credible and effective sustainability com-munication strategies in increasingly complex digital environments. The framework also provides a foundation for future empirical research to validate and extend the proposed relationships across different contexts

2 Methods

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual research design aimed at developing a theoretically grounded framework to explain sustainable consumption behavior among Generation Z. Rather than conducting empirical testing, the study focuses on theory building by integrating key constructs relevant to ethical consumption, including ethical branding, green fashion, value consciousness, digital literacy, and brand trust.

This approach is appropriate given the emerging nature of sustainability-oriented consumption in developing markets, where theoretical integration remains limited. By emphasizing conceptual development, the study seeks to provide a structured explanation of how ethical awareness is translated into purchase behavior through cognitive evaluation processes.

2.2 Proposed Empirical Approach

To validate the proposed framework, future research may adopt a quantitative approach using Structural Equation Modeling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS), which is suitable for analyzing complex relationships involving mediation and moderation (Hair, 2014).

The target population consists of Indonesian Generation Z consumers, typically aged between 18 and 27 years, who are actively engaged in digital consumption environments. A purposive sampling technique may be employed to ensure respondents possess relevant experience in fashion-related purchasing behavior.

Measurement instruments can be adapted from established scales in prior studies, with all constructs assessed using Likert-type scales. Data collection is recommended to be conducted online to align with the digital characteristics of the target population.

2.3 Conceptual Development Approach

This study employs a theory-driven conceptual development approach to construct the proposed framework. The process involves three analytical stages. First, key constructs are identified based on their relevance to sustainable consumption and ethical marketing literature. Second, theoretical relationships among constructs are established

through systematic integration of perspectives from consumer behavior, the Theory of Planned Behavior, and signaling theory. Third, moderating mechanisms are incorporated to capture contextual factors that influence how consumers interpret and act upon sustainability signals.

Unlike traditional narrative reviews, this structured approach explicitly maps the relationships between constructs to generate a coherent explanatory model. This ensures both transparency and methodological rigor in the development of the conceptual framework.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Conceptual Model Outcome

The conceptual model developed in this study provides a structured explanation of how ethical and sustainability-related signals are processed by consumers and translated into behavioral outcomes. The model highlights the central role of value consciousness as a cognitive mechanism that integrates multiple dimensions of evaluation, including ethical alignment, functional benefits, and symbolic meaning.

The framework suggests that ethical branding and green fashion serve as primary antecedents that generate sustainability signals, which are subsequently evaluated through value consciousness. This evaluation process determines whether ethical awareness is transformed into actual purchasing decisions. Furthermore, digital literacy and brand trust function as contextual moderators that shape how consumers interpret and respond to these signals in digital consumption environments.

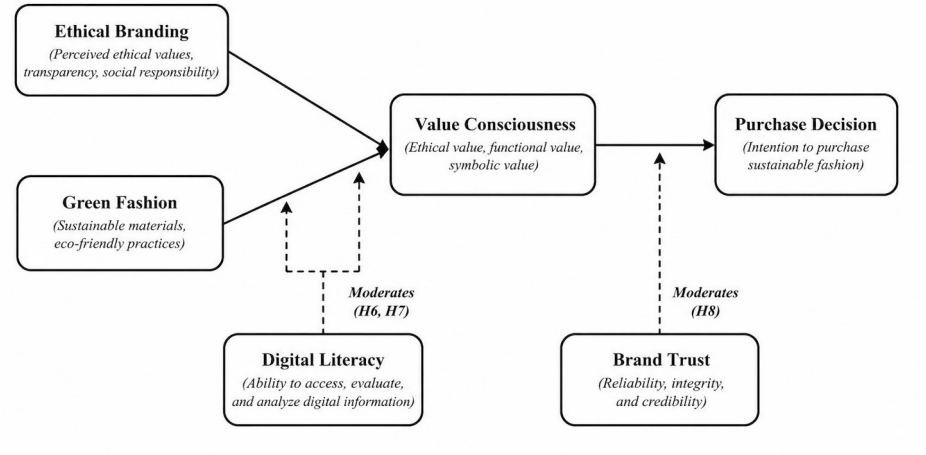

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework of Value-Driven Purchase Behavior

3.2 Hypotheses Discussion

The proposed hypotheses provide a theoretical explanation of how ethical signals are cognitively processed and behaviorally enacted within sustainable consumption contexts.

H1 and H2 suggest that ethical branding and green fashion positively influence value consciousness. Drawing on signaling theory, brands communicate ethical and environmental values through observable cues that consumers interpret as indicators of value alignment [7,8]. These signals enhance consumers' perception that a product reflects their personal values, thereby strengthening value-based evaluation.

H3 posits that value consciousness influences purchase decisions. This relationship is consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which emphasizes the role of cognitive evaluation in shaping behavioral intention [6]. In this context, value consciousness functions as a key mechanism that translates ethical awareness into actionable decisions.

H4 and H5 highlight the mediating role of value consciousness. These hypotheses suggest that ethical branding and green fashion do not directly lead to purchase decisions, but rather influence behavior through internal evaluative processes. This provides a theoretical explanation for the attitude–behavior gap, where ethical awareness alone is insufficient to drive action without cognitive value alignment.

H6 and H7 propose that digital literacy moderates the relationship between ethical signals and value consciousness. Consumers with higher digital literacy are better equipped to critically evaluate sustainability claims and detect greenwashing practices, resulting in more refined and selective value assessments [10].

H8 suggests that brand trust strengthens the relationship between value consciousness and purchase decisions. Trust reduces uncertainty and enhances the credibility of ethical claims, increasing the likelihood that value-based evaluations are translated into actual purchasing behavior [5].

Overall, these hypotheses collectively demonstrate that sustainable consumption behavior is not solely driven by ethical awareness, but by a structured cognitive process influenced by contextual factors such as trust and digital capability.

3.3 Theoritical Contribution

This study contributes to the literature by repositioning value consciousness as a central cognitive mechanism that bridges ethical awareness and behavioral outcomes. Unlike prior studies that treat sustainability as an external attribute, this framework embeds ethical evaluation within the consumer decision-making process.

Furthermore, the integration of signaling theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior provides a more comprehensive explanation of how ethical cues are interpreted, evaluated, and translated into action. The inclusion of digital literacy and brand trust as moderating variables also extends existing models by incorporating contextual factors relevant to contemporary digital consumption environments.

This contribution is particularly important in emerging markets, where information asymmetry and trust dynamics play a significant role in shaping consumer behavior.

3.4 Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that ethical branding strategies must be supported by credible and transparent communication. Firms should not only emphasize sustainability claims but also ensure that these claims are verifiable and consistent with actual practices. Additionally, strengthening brand trust and enhancing

consumer digital literacy are essential to improving the effectiveness of sustainability messaging, particularly among Generation Z consumers

4 Conclusion

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that ethical branding strategies must be supported by credible and transparent communication. Firms should not only emphasize sustainability claims but also ensure that these claims are verifiable and consistent with actual practices.

In addition, companies should invest in building brand trust as a strategic asset that reduces consumer uncertainty and enhances the effectiveness of ethical messaging. Given the increasing role of digital platforms, improving the clarity and authenticity of digital communication is essential to ensure that sustainability signals are accurately interpreted.

Finally, marketers should recognize that consumers differ in their level of digital literacy, which affects how they process ethical information. Tailoring communication strategies to different levels of consumer capability may enhance the impact of sustainability initiatives, particularly among Generation Z.

References

1. Joy, A., et al.: Fast fashion, sustainability, and the ethical appeal of luxury brands. Fashion Theory 16(3), 273–295 (2012)
2. NielsenIQ: How Gen Z consumer behavior is reshaping retail (2024), https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/analysis/2024/how-gen-z-consumer-behavior-is-reshaping-retail/, last accessed 2026/08/03
3. Carrigan, M., Attalla, A.: The myth of the ethical consumer – do ethics matter in purchase behaviour? Journal of Consumer Marketing 18(7), 560–578 (2001)
4. Lichtenstein, D.R., Netemeyer, R.G., Burton, S.: Distinguishing coupon proneness from value consciousness: an acquisition-transaction utility theory perspective. Journal of Marketing (1990)
5. Chaudhuri, A., Holbrook, M.B.: The chain of effects from brand trust and brand affect to brand performance: the role of brand loyalty. Journal of Marketing (2001)
6. Ajzen, I.: The theory of planned behavior. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 50(2), 179–211 (1991)
7. Spence, M.: Job market signaling. Quarterly Journal of Economics 87(3), 355–374 (1973)
8. Connelly, B.L., et al.: Signaling theory: A review and assessment. Journal of Management 37, 39–67 (2011)
9. Fan, Y.: Ethical branding and corporate reputation. Corporate Communications 10(4), 341–350 (2005)
10. Parguel, B., Benoît-Moreau, F., Larceneux, F.: How sustainability ratings might deter 'greenwashing': a closer look at ethical corporate communication. Journal of Business Ethics 102(1), 15–28 (2011)
11. Fletcher, K.: Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys. Earthscan, London (2008)
12. Henninger, C.E., Alevizou, P.J., Oates, C.J.: What is sustainable fashion? Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management 20(4), 400–416 (2016)

13. Ng, W.: Can we teach digital natives digital literacy? Computers & Education 59(3), 1065–1078 (2012)
14. Yague-Guillen, M.J., Munuera-Aleman, J.L., Delgado-Ballester, E.: Development and validation of a brand trust scale International Journal of Market Research (2003)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

