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Why Ethical Branding Does Not Always Lead to Loyalty in Sustainable Skincare Brands

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ABSTRACT

This study examines why ethical branding does not always lead to customer loyalty in sustainable skincare brands. In the skincare industry, ethical claims related to sustainability, ingredient safety, and transparency have become increasingly important, yet consumer skepticism and greenwashing issues continue to weaken long-term relationships between consumers and brands. Grounded in the Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing, this study explores the mediating roles of trust and satisfaction in explaining how perceived ethicality influences customer retention. The study adopts a systematic literature review approach using the PRISMA framework to synthesize previous studies related to perceived ethicality, brand trust, customer satisfaction, and customer retention. The findings indicate that perceived ethicality alone is insufficient to directly generate customer retention. Instead, ethical branding contributes to retention indirectly through the formation of trust and the enhancement of customer satisfaction. Trust functions as a central relational mechanism that reduces uncertainty and strengthens positive evaluations toward skincare brands. The study highlights the importance of authentic ethical branding strategies in building sustainable customer relationships in the digital era.

Keywords: *Brand Trust, Customer Retention, Perceived Ethicality, Sustainable Skincare Branding.*

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1. | INTRODUCTION

Claims related to sustainability, clean ingredients, and environmentally friendly products have increasingly dominated the skincare industry as a strategy to build emotional closeness and customer loyalty (Amoako et al., 2020; Hossain et al., 2025; Park et al., 2026). The rapid growth of sustainability-oriented consumer markets has encouraged skincare brands to integrate ethical values into their branding strategies, emphasizing environmental responsibility, transparency, and social commitment as important elements of brand differentiation. Consumers are becoming more aware of the environmental and social consequences of their purchasing decisions and increasingly expect brands to demonstrate responsible business practices that align with their personal values. As a result, sustainability communication has evolved from a supplementary marketing tool into a central component of competitive positioning within the skincare industry.

Consumers no longer evaluate products solely based on their functional benefits, but also begin to assess transparency, ethical responsibility, and value consistency demonstrated by brands because skincare belongs to a product category with high perceived risk regarding skin health and long-term usage (Piotrowski, 2022; Sansome et al., 2024; Haykal et al., 2025). Since skincare products are directly applied to the skin and are often used repeatedly over extended periods, consumers tend to seek reassurance regarding ingredient safety, product quality, sourcing practices, and corporate credibility. Ethical branding therefore serves as an important signal that helps consumers evaluate whether brands are trustworthy and capable of fulfilling both functional and ethical expectations. This growing emphasis on ethical responsibility reflects a broader shift in consumer behavior, where purchasing decisions are increasingly influenced by perceptions of authenticity, transparency, and long-term brand commitment rather than by product performance alone.

The increasing use of “green”, “natural”, and “eco-friendly” claims is not always followed by the consistent formation of customer loyalty because the widespread practice of greenwashing and overclaiming has made consumers increasingly skeptical about the credibility of ethical skincare brands (Sansome et al., 2024; Luthfiyani & Yani, 2025; Supryanita et al., 2026). In many cases, sustainability claims are perceived as exaggerated, inconsistent, or insufficiently supported by actual business practices, leading consumers to question the authenticity of ethical branding efforts. This condition makes trust increasingly important because consumers tend to maintain relationships with brands perceived as honest, credible, and capable of providing positive consumption experiences for skincare products used routinely and over the long term (Ngo et al., 2025; Yanti & Basmantra, 2026). Trust becomes a critical relational mechanism that reduces uncertainty and strengthens confidence in brand promises, particularly in markets characterized by information asymmetry and perceived consumption risk.

Several studies indicate that perceived ethicality, brand transparency, and green marketing can shape positive consumer perceptions toward brands while simultaneously strengthening relationship quality and customer loyalty (Amoako et al., 2020; Piotrowski, 2022). Other studies also found that trust has a significant influence on satisfaction, repurchase intention, and customer loyalty because trust helps consumers reduce uncertainty and build positive evaluations toward brands as well as product consumption experiences (Le et al., 2025; Scorita et al., 2026). Through repeated positive interactions, trust contributes to stronger emotional attachment and greater willingness to maintain long-term relationships with brands. Satisfaction further reinforces these relationships by encouraging consumers to continue purchasing products and recommending brands to others.

Most previous studies still discuss ethicality, trust, satisfaction, and loyalty separately, so the mechanism explaining how perceived ethicality shapes customer retention through trust and satisfaction in sustainable skincare brands remains insufficiently explained in an integrated manner, particularly in the digital era characterized by growing consumer skepticism toward ethical claims. This study therefore aims to analyze the roles of trust and satisfaction as relational mechanisms explaining the influence of perceived ethicality on customer retention in sustainable skincare brands through a systematic literature review approach using the PRISMA framework.

2. | LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust as a Central Mechanism in Ethical Branding

Consumers are increasingly less likely to choose brands solely based on price or product benefits. Trust toward brands has become an important consideration, especially when consumers perceive that companies are able to provide honest, consistent, and reliable information over the long term (Piotrowski, 2022; Connolly et al., 2023). This shift has positioned trust as an essential foundation in relationship marketing because long-term relationships are more likely to develop when consumers feel secure about the consumption decisions they make (Antwi, 2021; Rosário & Casaca, 2023). Increasingly open digital competition also allows consumers to compare information more easily, read other users' experiences, and evaluate whether brands genuinely practice the values they communicate to the public (Ahmad et al., 2025; Rosário & Casaca, 2023).

Sustainability issues and ethical branding have further strengthened the importance of trust because consumers increasingly question whether green claims and sustainability messages communicated by companies are truly reflected through actual business practices (Amoako et al., 2020; Chen, 2010). Ethical branding is therefore no longer sufficient when presented only through sustainability slogans or attractive marketing campaigns. Consumers increasingly seek evidence that ethical values are

genuinely reflected through company actions, relationship quality with consumers, and the experiences they directly encounter (Setiadi & Sari, 2026).

Skincare products are directly applied to the skin and are often used over a long period of time, making consumers more cautious before deciding to trust a particular brand (Larasati & Perkasa, 2026; Hossain et al., 2025). Skincare consumers not only pay attention to product outcomes, but also examine ingredients, product safety, brand credibility, and the experiences of other users shared through social media and digital platforms (Hossain et al., 2025). Trust often develops when consumers perceive that a brand is able to maintain consistent quality, provide realistic claims, and demonstrate concern for consumer needs and safety (Piotrowski, 2022; Larasati & Perkasa, 2026).

The influence of celebrity endorsement, digital storytelling, electronic word of mouth, and social media interactions has made the process of trust formation increasingly complex because consumers continuously receive recommendations, evaluations, and product opinions in real time from their digital environment (Leong et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2025). Trust eventually develops into a personal space where consumers decide whether a brand deserves to remain part of their daily routines, particularly when ethical claims begin to be compared with the actual experiences consumers personally encounter during product usage.

Perceived Ethicality & Trust

Claims regarding sustainability, clean ingredients, cruelty-free products, and ethical values can now be easily found across various skincare brands in the market. The growing presence of these claims has made the issue of ethicality increasingly sensitive because consumers have started questioning whether the sustainability values communicated by companies are genuinely implemented or merely used as marketing strategies (Supryanita et al., 2026). Information transparency, consistency in company behavior, and the alignment between ethical claims and actual consumption experiences have become important considerations before consumers decide to trust a brand (Sansome et al., 2024; Piotrowski, 2022). Attention toward these aspects subsequently shapes perceived ethicality, which refers to consumers' evaluations of whether a brand genuinely practices honest, responsible, and morally aligned business behavior based on values considered important by consumers themselves (Brunk, 2010; Payne et al., 2021). Trust is more likely to emerge when the ethical values communicated by brands do not merely function as marketing slogans, but are reflected through transparent information, company actions, and direct consumption experiences encountered by consumers.

The decision to use skincare products often involves concerns regarding ingredient safety, skin health, and long-term usage effects, making trust toward brands increasingly important. Information related to ingredients, production processes, and sustainability commitments has increasingly become a source of reassurance before products are routinely used by consumers (Haykal et al., 2025; Ngo et al., 2025). The

rapid flow of digital information through social media, online communities, electronic word of mouth, and digital marketing also allows ethical claims to be more easily compared with the real-time experiences of other users (Kumar et al., 2023; Ngo et al., 2025). The widespread practice of greenwashing and overclaiming among sustainable skincare brands has made "natural" and "eco-friendly" claims no longer easily trusted simply because they are packaged through attractive marketing campaigns (Supryanita et al., 2026). Trust ultimately allows the relationship between consumers and skincare brands to develop beyond temporary purchasing decisions because products used routinely are more likely to be chosen based on feelings of security and confidence that continue to be maintained over time.

Trust & Satisfaction

Trust toward a brand often makes consumers feel more secure when making purchasing decisions, particularly when the products being used involve certain risks or long-term usage. This sense of security helps reduce consumer uncertainty because consumers believe that brands are capable of providing quality, information, and experiences that match their expectations (Piotrowski, 2022; Chen, 2010). Trust also enables consumers to develop more positive evaluations toward products and companies because their relationship with brands is no longer dominated by suspicion or concerns regarding potential losses that may arise after product usage.

Consistently positive experiences subsequently encourage the formation of satisfaction, especially when consumers perceive that brands are capable of fulfilling not only functional needs but also the emotional and ethical values they expect (Japutra et al., 2021). The relationship between trust and satisfaction gradually develops as an important component in building relationship quality because consumers tend to feel more comfortable maintaining relationships with brands perceived as trustworthy and capable of providing satisfying experiences continuously over time (Setiadi & Sari, 2026).

The role of trust in shaping satisfaction becomes increasingly important in sustainability-based and skincare products because consumption decisions are often influenced by concerns regarding product safety, ingredient quality, and the consistency of company claims. Brands perceived as having strong commitments to ethicality, service quality, and corporate responsibility are generally more capable of building satisfaction because consumers feel that their needs are understood and valued through safer and more convincing consumption experiences (Irshad et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2023). Green trust and green satisfaction often develop simultaneously because consumers who trust a brand's sustainability commitment are more likely to provide positive evaluations toward their product usage experiences (Chen, 2010).

The use of digital media, e-commerce, and social commerce further strengthens this relationship because interaction experiences, information transparency, and perceived value in use can directly influence consumers' satisfaction and loyalty toward brands (Japutra et al., 2021; Scorita et al., 2026). Satisfaction does not emerge solely

because products function effectively, but also because consumers feel confident that the brands they choose are capable of fulfilling expectations, maintaining a sense of security, and providing experiences worth sustaining in everyday use.

Satisfaction & Retention

Customer satisfaction is often viewed as an emotional evaluation that emerges after consumers compare their initial expectations with the actual experiences they receive while using a product or service (Park et al., 2026). Consistent positive experiences make consumers more comfortable maintaining long-term relationships with a brand because satisfaction helps create a sense of security and confidence in the quality of products used repeatedly (Rather et al., 2019; Antwi, 2021). Skincare consumers not only evaluate product effectiveness, but also pay attention to ingredient safety, sensory experience, and the credibility of sustainability claims communicated by brands (Park et al., 2026;).

Park et al. (2026) found that sustainability attributes can enhance post-purchase satisfaction when product performance is able to meet consumer expectations regarding the quality and safety of the skincare products they use. Satisfaction derived from consumption experiences subsequently strengthens consumers' emotional attachment to brands and encourages the emergence of repurchase intention and long-term loyalty (Rather et al., 2019; Antwi, 2021; Japutra et al., 2021). The continuously developing emotional relationship makes customer satisfaction an essential component in maintaining consumer-brand relationships in industries characterized by high perceived risk, such as skincare and green products (Hashish et al., 2022; Román-Augusto et al., 2022).

Customer retention is closely associated with a company's ability to maintain longterm relationships through consistent and satisfying consumption experiences for customers (Zhengmeng et al., 2024). Bolton explained that cumulative satisfaction has a strong influence on relationship duration because previous positive experiences become the basis for consumers when evaluating future interactions with a brand (Otto et al., 2020). Other studies also demonstrate that trust and satisfaction simultaneously contribute to increasing repurchase intention, loyalty, and consumers' willingness to continue using products despite the availability of numerous competing alternatives in the market (Antwi, 2021; Román-Augusto et al., 2022;).

The skincare industry presents a more sensitive dynamic because high perceived risk encourages consumers to remain loyal only to brands considered safe, credible, and capable of delivering results that match their expectations (Luthfiyani & Yani, 2025). Amoako et al. (2020) further emphasized that ethicality and green marketing can strengthen brand loyalty when consumers perceive consistency between the ethical claims communicated by companies and the actual experiences gained after product usage. Customer retention is ultimately shaped not only by the ethical image communicated by companies, but also by the ability of brands to provide consistent,

satisfying, and trustworthy consumption experiences amid increasing consumer skepticism toward ethical branding (Piotrowski, 2022; Zhengmeng et al., 2024).

3. | RESEARCH METHOD

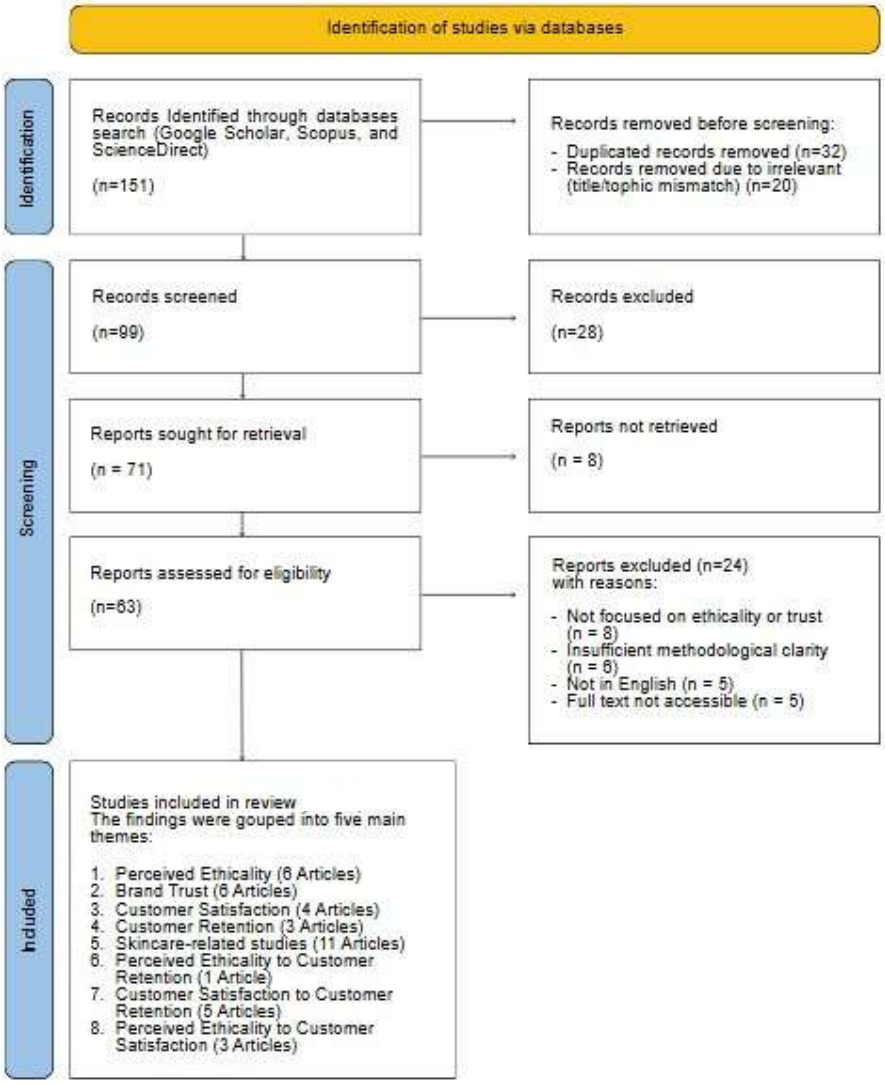
This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) approach following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework developed. The PRISMA framework was adopted to ensure transparency, consistency, and reproducibility throughout the literature review process. The systematic literature review method was initially introduced by Cynthia D. Mulrow and later further developed in management research by David Tranfield, David Denyer, and Palminder Smart to improve methodological rigor in organizational and business studies (Skalli et al., 2025)

The PRISMA framework consists of four main stages, namely identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. These stages were applied systematically to identify relevant studies discussing perceived ethicality, ethical branding, trust, customer satisfaction, and customer retention within sustainable skincare and related consumer industries. This study also adopted a thematic synthesis approach to identify conceptual patterns, relational mechanisms, and research gaps emerging from previous studies. The analysis specifically focused on understanding how perceived ethicality influences customer retention through trust and satisfaction within sustainable skincare branding.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using three international academic databases, namely Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. These databases were selected because they provide extensive coverage of peer-reviewed publications related to marketing, sustainability, consumer behavior, relationship marketing, and ethical branding research. The search strategy employed combinations of keywords and Boolean operators, including “perceived ethicality”, “ethical branding”, “brand trust”, “customer satisfaction”, “customer retention”, “customer loyalty”, “green marketing”, “sustainable skincare”, “greenwashing”, and “consumer skepticism”. Several search string combinations included “perceived ethicality” AND “brand trust”, “ethical branding” AND “customer retention”, “green marketing” AND “customer satisfaction”, “sustainable skincare” AND “consumer trust”, and “greenwashing” AND “customer loyalty”.

The search process was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2026 and written in English. All retrieved articles were exported and organized for further screening and categorization. A total of 151 articles were initially identified through database searching. After removing 32 duplicate records and excluding 20 irrelevant articles, 99 articles proceeded to the screening stage. Following abstract and relevance screening, 28 articles were excluded. During the eligibility assessment, 63 full-text articles were evaluated, and 24 articles were excluded due to insufficient relevance, methodological limitations, language inconsistency, or inaccessible full-text versions.

The inclusion criteria required articles to originate from peer-reviewed journals, discuss variables related to ethicality, trust, satisfaction, loyalty, or retention, and maintain relevance to sustainability or skincare-related industries. Only English-language articles published between 2020 and 2026 with accessible full-text versions were included. After completing the entire selection process, 25-30 articles fulfilled all inclusion criteria and were included in the final systematic literature review. The selected articles were categorized into major themes, namely perceived ethicality, brand trust, customer satisfaction, customer retention, and skincare-related studies to facilitate thematic synthesis and variable relationship mapping.



Source: Page et al., (2021)

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Systematic Reviews

Only English-language articles published between 2020 and 2026 with accessible full-text versions were included in the review process. Studies focusing on unrelated industries or lacking sufficient conceptual relevance to ethical branding and consumer

relationship outcomes were excluded. After completing the entire selection process, 25-30 articles fulfilled all inclusion criteria and were included in the final systematic literature review. The selected articles were categorized into several major themes, namely perceived ethicality, brand trust, customer satisfaction, customer retention, and skincare-related studies to facilitate thematic synthesis and variable relationship mapping.

4. | RESULTS

Publication Trends, Research Context, and Study Characteristics

The selected studies were analyzed to identify publication trends, geographical distribution, research contexts, and theoretical perspectives related to ethical branding, sustainability, consumer trust, customer satisfaction, and customer retention. The final corpus consisted of 39 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2026. The reviewed literature covered sustainable skincare branding, ethical marketing, green marketing, customer-brand relationships, consumer skepticism, and relational mechanisms influencing customer loyalty and retention.

The reviewed studies originated predominantly from Asian countries, particularly Indonesia, China, South Korea, and Malaysia, reflecting the rapid growth of sustainability-oriented beauty markets and increasing consumer awareness regarding ethical skincare consumption. Studies from Europe and North America similarly emphasized the importance of sustainability communication, ethical transparency, and customer relationship quality within environmentally conscious consumer markets. The literature consistently identified trust as the most frequently discussed construct, highlighting its central role in explaining consumer relationships in sustainability-oriented branding environments. Perceived ethicality, transparency, and sustainability claims were repeatedly positioned as antecedents of trust formation, while customer satisfaction and customer retention emerged as key relational outcomes.

The findings further revealed a substantial increase in publications after 2021. Research attention shifted from traditional discussions of green marketing and environmental responsibility toward consumer skepticism, greenwashing, digital transparency, and relational trust. This transition reflects the growing complexity of consumer evaluations toward ethical claims communicated through digital channels, particularly within high-risk industries such as skincare and beauty products. Furthermore, studies published after 2022 increasingly adopted relationship marketing perspectives, emphasizing how ethical values influence emotional attachment, trust formation, customer satisfaction, and long-term customer relationships.

The reviewed literature also demonstrated that sustainable skincare and beauty products constituted one of the dominant research contexts. Consumers in these markets evaluate brands not only based on product effectiveness but also according to ingredient safety, ethical sourcing, sustainability practices, transparency, and corporate credibility. Broader sustainability-oriented industries, including green products, environmentally

friendly retail brands, organic products, sustainable fashion, and ethical consumer goods, provided additional theoretical insights into the relationships among perceived ethicality, trust, satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. Collectively, these studies strengthened the conceptual understanding of how ethical branding operates across sustainability-oriented consumer environments and contributes to long-term customer retention

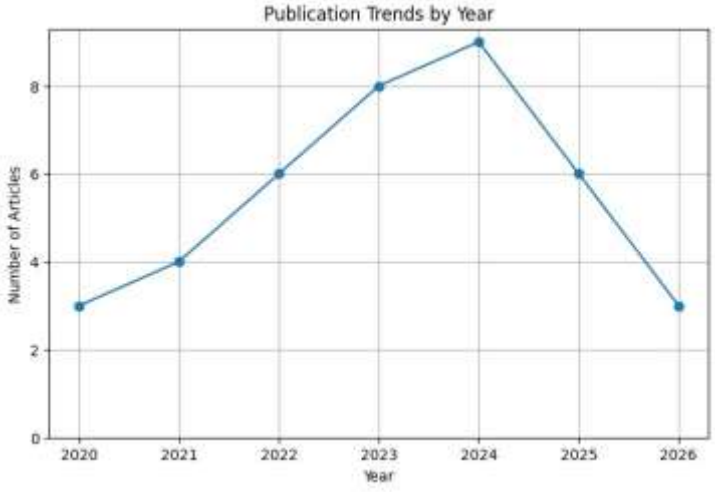


Figure 2. Publication of Articles per Year

Research Methods and Representation of Main Variables

The reviewed literature was dominated by quantitative approaches, particularly Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Most studies examined direct and indirect relationships among perceived ethicality, green trust, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, repurchase intention, and customer retention. Survey-based research designs were the most frequently employed because they enabled researchers to assess consumer perceptions, attitudes, emotional responses, and behavioral intentions toward sustainability-oriented brands. Several studies further incorporated mediation and moderation models to investigate the roles of trust, skepticism, authenticity, and satisfaction within ethical branding relationships.

Although quantitative methods predominated, a smaller number of qualitative and conceptual studies explored sustainability communication, greenwashing, ethical consumption behavior, and digital transparency. These studies provided important conceptual explanations regarding why ethical branding does not always produce positive relational outcomes despite growing sustainability awareness among consumers. The methodological dominance of cross-sectional designs also revealed a significant limitation within the literature, as most studies focused on short-term consumer perceptions and behavioral intentions. Comparatively few studies examined the long-term development of trust, satisfaction, and retention through longitudinal

approaches, indicating an important research gap in understanding customer retention from a long-term relational perspective.

The analysis of the reviewed studies further demonstrated that brand trust emerged as the most frequently discussed construct. Trust was consistently positioned as the primary relational mechanism through which consumers evaluate ethical claims and maintain long-term relationships with sustainability-oriented brands. Perceived ethicality was also widely discussed, particularly in relation to transparency, sustainability communication, ingredient disclosure, environmental responsibility, and corporate credibility. Ethicality was commonly viewed as a signal that helps consumers assess whether brands genuinely engage in responsible and transparent business practices. Customer satisfaction likewise represented a dominant construct, reflecting consumers' evaluations of product quality, safety, ethical consistency, and overall consumption experiences.

Customer retention and loyalty were frequently examined as relational outcomes. However, the findings suggested that ethical branding rarely influences retention directly. Instead, retention is generally explained through indirect pathways involving trust, satisfaction, emotional attachment, and perceived relationship quality. The literature also highlighted the increasing influence of greenwashing and consumer skepticism, which weaken the effectiveness of ethical branding when sustainability claims are perceived as exaggerated, inconsistent, or lacking authenticity.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of The Main Variables

Variable	Frequency of Discussion
Brand Trust	27
Customer Satisfaction	21
Customer Retention/Loyalty	19
Perceived Ethicality	18
Greenwashing/Skepticism	12
Digital Transparency/e-WOM	10

Thematic Synthesis, Conceptual Framework, and Research Gaps

The thematic synthesis was conducted to identify conceptual patterns, relational mechanisms, and recurring findings related to perceived ethicality, brand trust, customer satisfaction, and customer retention within sustainable skincare branding and related consumer contexts. Although the reviewed studies were initially categorized into several thematic groups during the PRISMA process, the findings were synthesized to explain how ethical branding influences long-term customer relationships through trust and satisfaction mechanisms. The synthesis also highlighted the growing influence of consumer skepticism, greenwashing, and digital transparency in shaping the effectiveness of ethical branding strategies.

Table 2. Presents The Thematic Synthesis Derived from The Reviewed Studies

Theme	Main Finding	Key Supporting Studies
Perceived Ethicality on Brand Trust	Ethical transparency, sustainability consistency, and honest communication strengthen consumer trust.	Chen (2010); Amoako et al. (2020); Piotrowski (2022)
Brand Trust on Customer Satisfaction	Trust reduces uncertainty and strengthens positive consumption evaluations.	Japutra et al. (2021); Antwi (2021)
Customer Satisfaction on Customer Retention	Satisfaction encourages repurchase intention, emotional attachment, and long-term retention.	Otto et al. (2020); Rather et al. (2019)
Greenwashing and Consumer Skepticism	Greenwashing weakens trust and reduces the effectiveness of ethical branding strategies.	Sansome et al. (2024); Kumar et al. (2023); Supryanita et al. (2026)
Digital Transparency and e-WOM	Social media transparency and electronic word of mouth significantly shape trust formation.	Ngo et al. (2025); Ahmad et al. (2025)

The reviewed literature consistently indicated that perceived ethicality positively contributes to brand trust, particularly when consumers perceive alignment between sustainability claims and actual business practices. Ethical branding practices such as ingredient transparency, cruelty-free commitments, environmentally friendly packaging, sustainability disclosure, and honest marketing communication strengthen consumer trust toward brands (Chen, 2010; Amoako et al., 2020; Payne et al., 2021; Piotrowski, 2022). Consumers increasingly evaluate skincare brands not only according to functional performance but also according to responsibility, honesty, and ethical consistency. As skincare products involve direct physical use and long-term application, consumers perceive greater risk regarding product safety and ingredient credibility, making trust a critical relational mechanism (Hossain et al., 2025; Haykal et al., 2025; Larasati & Perkasa, 2026).

Ethicality reduces uncertainty because consumers tend to trust brands perceived as transparent and morally responsible (Chen, 2010; Connolly et al., 2023). However, ethicality alone is insufficient to generate strong relationships when consumers perceive inconsistencies between sustainability communication and actual corporate practices (Sansome et al., 2024; Supryanita et al., 2026). Increasing exposure to digital information, reviews, and electronic word of mouth has made consumers more capable of critically evaluating ethical claims (Kumar et al., 2023; Ngo et al., 2025). Consequently, trust formation increasingly depends on authenticity, product quality, transparent communication, realistic claims, and positive consumption experiences (Amoako et al., 2020; Rosário & Casaca, 2023; Ahmad et al., 2025).

The literature further demonstrated that trust positively influences customer satisfaction by reducing uncertainty regarding product quality, ingredient safety, and the credibility of ethical claims (Chen, 2010; Japutra et al., 2021; Román-Augusto et al., 2022). Trust strengthens confidence in purchasing decisions and contributes to more positive product evaluations and emotional comfort during consumption (Piotrowski, 2022; Irshad et al., 2024; Ulya & Masreviastuti, 2024). Satisfaction emerges not only from product effectiveness but also from ethical consistency, transparent communication, responsiveness to consumer concerns, and sustainability commitment (Rather et al., 2019; Antwi, 2021). Sustainability-oriented consumers frequently evaluate satisfaction through broader relational experiences that reflect their environmental and ethical values (Chen, 2010; Román-Augusto et al., 2022). Digital interactions, including social media communication, online reviews, electronic word of mouth, and influencer recommendations, further strengthen trust and satisfaction by enhancing transparency and relational engagement (Ngo et al., 2025; Ahmad et al., 2025).

Customer satisfaction subsequently contributes to customer retention by encouraging repurchase behavior, emotional attachment, and long-term relational commitment (Rather et al., 2019; Park et al., 2026). Retention develops through accumulated relationship quality involving trust, satisfaction, emotional comfort, authenticity, and positive consumption experiences rather than through ethical claims alone (Antwi, 2021; Japutra et al., 2021; Zhengmeng et al., 2024). Nevertheless, retention remains vulnerable to skepticism and competitive alternatives when ethical claims are perceived as exaggerated, inconsistent, or commercially manipulative (Sansome et al., 2024; Supryanita et al., 2026). The literature therefore suggests that ethical branding influences retention indirectly through trust and satisfaction rather than through direct effects.

Furthermore, increasing consumer skepticism and greenwashing concerns have intensified the need for authenticity, transparency, and consistency in sustainability communication. Consumers increasingly evaluate brands through social media interactions, online reviews, influencer communication, and digital transparency mechanisms, creating both opportunities and risks for sustainability-oriented brands. As a result, ethical branding alone is insufficient to guarantee long-term customer retention. Instead, sustainable customer relationships emerge when ethical perceptions are successfully transformed into trust, satisfaction, and authentic relational experiences maintained consistently over time.

This conclusion underpins the proposed conceptual framework in which perceived ethicality influences customer retention through sequential pathways involving brand trust and customer satisfaction while being moderated by skepticism and greenwashing concerns. Based on the reviewed literature, this study proposes that perceived ethicality indirectly influences customer retention through sequential relational mechanisms involving brand trust and customer satisfaction. Ethical branding practices contribute

to trust formation by reducing uncertainty and strengthening perceptions of transparency, honesty, and corporate responsibility.

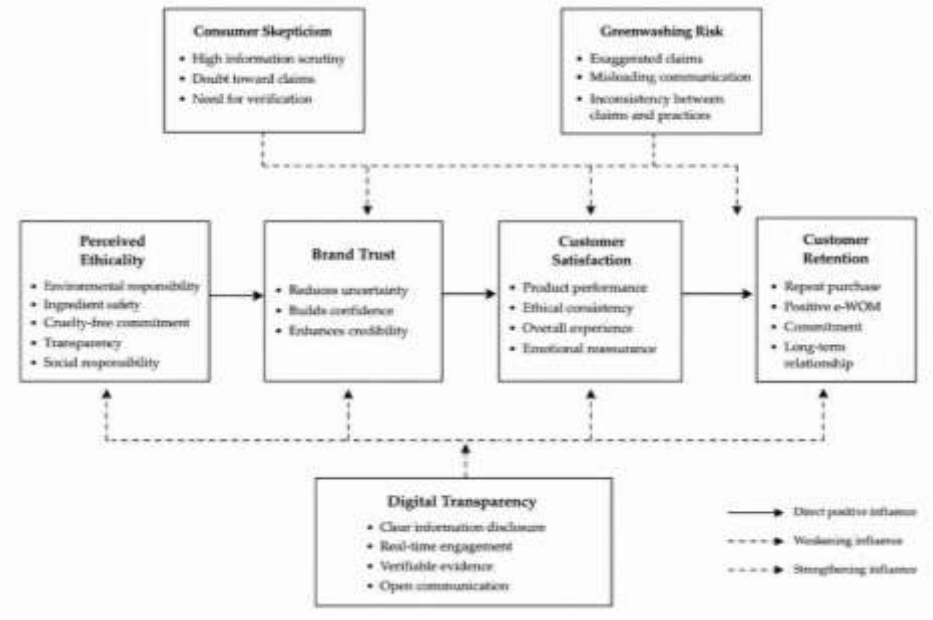


Figure 3. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The review also identifies important research gaps, including the limited use of integrated models, the lack of skincare-specific investigations, the dominance of cross-sectional research designs, and insufficient exploration of digital skepticism and moderating variables affecting ethical branding outcomes.

Trust subsequently enhances customer satisfaction because consumers feel more confident regarding product quality, ingredient safety, and the reliability of sustainability claims communicated by brands. Satisfaction then strengthens long-term customer retention by encouraging emotional attachment, repeated purchasing behavior, and relational commitment toward brands.

The reviewed studies further suggest that consumer skepticism and greenwashing perceptions weaken the effectiveness of ethical branding strategies. Ethical communication therefore requires authenticity, transparency, and consistency to effectively generate long-term relational outcomes.

The proposed conceptual pathway can therefore be summarized as follows:

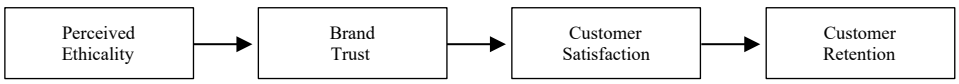


Figure 4. Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework supports the Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing by emphasizing trust as a central relational mechanism

explaining how ethical branding influences long-term consumer relationships within sustainabilityoriented skincare industries.

5. | DISCUSSION

The findings of this systematic literature review provide important implications for managerial practice, sustainability communication, public policy, and future academic research. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrated that ethical branding alone is insufficient to directly generate long-term customer retention within sustainable skincare industries. Instead, customer retention is more likely to emerge through relational mechanisms involving trust formation, customer satisfaction, authenticity, and consistent consumption experiences. These findings highlight the growing importance of relationship quality and ethical consistency in sustainability-oriented consumer markets.

The findings suggest that skincare brands should move beyond symbolic sustainability communication and prioritize authentic relational experiences capable of strengthening consumer trust and satisfaction. Sustainability slogans, environmentally friendly imagery, and "natural" product positioning are increasingly insufficient because consumers have become more critical toward ethical claims communicated through digital media environments. Managers should therefore emphasize transparency, consistency, and credibility throughout the consumer experience. Ethical values need to be reflected not only in marketing communication but also through ingredient disclosure, product safety, packaging consistency, customer service responsiveness, and long-term sustainability commitments. Trust functions as a central relational mechanism that reduces consumer uncertainty regarding skincare product usage, while customer satisfaction emerges not only from functional product performance but also from emotional reassurance and perceived ethical consistency. Sustainable skincare brands should therefore focus on creating holistic customer experiences integrating product effectiveness, ethical credibility, and emotional relationship quality simultaneously.

The review also highlights the growing influence of consumer skepticism and greenwashing concerns within sustainability-oriented branding environments. Consumers increasingly seek verifiable information regarding ingredients, sourcing practices, sustainability commitments, and corporate responsibility before developing trust toward brands. Sustainability communication strategies should therefore emphasize authenticity and evidence-based transparency rather than exaggerated environmental narratives. Digital communication channels, including electronic word of mouth, influencer communication, online reviews, and social media interactions, play a significant role in shaping trust and satisfaction, requiring brands to maintain transparent digital engagement and actively manage consumer relationships across online platforms.

The findings further indicate important policy implications, particularly regarding the need for stronger guidelines on sustainability communication, ethical advertising

practices, ingredient transparency, ethical labeling, and sustainability reporting. Regulatory institutions may help improve consumer confidence by strengthening monitoring mechanisms and supporting transparent sustainability standards and consumer education initiatives.

Academically, the findings contribute to relationship marketing and sustainability branding literature by demonstrating that perceived ethicality influences customer retention indirectly through trust and customer satisfaction. Future studies may benefit from examining integrated relational frameworks, sequential mediation mechanisms, and the moderating roles of consumer skepticism, perceived authenticity, environmental involvement, digital trust, and social media engagement. Longitudinal approaches may also provide deeper insights into how trust and retention develop over time within highly competitive skincare and beauty industries.

6. | CONCLUSION

This study systematically reviews approximately 25-30 studies examining the relationship between perceived ethics, brand trust, customer satisfaction, and customer retention in the context of sustainable skincare branding and related consumer-brand relationships. The findings indicate that perceived ethicality positively contributes to brand trust when consumers perceive consistency between sustainability claims and actual brand behavior. Ethical branding practices such as transparency, responsible communication, and sustainability commitments help strengthen consumer confidence in brands. However, the review also revealed that ethical branding alone is insufficient to directly generate long-term customer retention.

The literature consistently demonstrated that customer retention develops through indirect relational mechanisms involving trust and customer satisfaction. Brand trust reduces consumer uncertainty regarding product quality, safety, and ethical credibility, while customer satisfaction enhances emotional attachment, repurchase intention, and long-term commitment toward brands. The findings further showed that growing consumer skepticism and concerns about greenwashing weaken the direct influence of ethical branding on customer retention, particularly in digital environments where consumers can easily access information, compare brands, and evaluate the authenticity of sustainability claims.

Based on the thematic synthesis, this study proposes a conceptual framework suggesting that perceived ethicality influences customer retention indirectly through brand trust and customer satisfaction. This relationship is further shaped by contextual factors such as consumer skepticism, greenwashing risk, and digital transparency. The findings emphasize that sustainable skincare brands should prioritize authentic relational experiences, transparent communication, and trustworthy behavior rather than relying solely on symbolic sustainability positioning.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The reviewed studies were primarily limited to sustainability-oriented branding and skincare-related contexts, and the

analysis relied on publications from selected databases between 2020 and 2026. Furthermore, most studies employed quantitative cross-sectional approaches, limiting understanding of how trust, satisfaction, and retention evolve over time. Future research should therefore adopt longitudinal designs to capture changes in consumer-brand relationships. Additional studies may also investigate the moderating roles of consumer skepticism, perceived authenticity, environmental involvement, and digital trust. Comparative cross-cultural studies, experimental approaches, and investigations into emerging issues such as greenwashing, AI-generated marketing communication, algorithmic recommendation systems, and digital sustainability disclosure may further enhance understanding of consumer trust and long-term customer retention within sustainability-oriented markets.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Originality Statement

Ethical approval was obtained for this study. The manuscript represents original work and has not been previously published, nor is it under consideration by another journal.

Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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