

Influence of Academic Inputs on Perceived Sustainability and Brand Equity

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Abstract

In recent times, sustainability has gained momentum as a pressing topic for academia and the corporate world, where plenty of research has been covered on consumer consciousness, corporate social responsibility, and green marketing perspectives. Every day, with a redefined focus, leading organizations across the globe are defining new sustainable goals for themselves, like the United Nations adopting Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, the concept of sustainability has gained widespread acceptance in both corporate and academic circles. Researchers have carried out extensive research on the relationship between sustainability, pre- and post-consumer waste, branding, and marketing as the global public begins to understand the complexities of unsustainable practices. There is also research available on the impact of academic inputs on students' abilities; however, there is a dearth of study in the Indian context on the impact of academic inputs on perceived sustainability and brand equity. The present study takes into account the indicated research gap, focusing on exploring the impact of academic inputs on a sustainable brand's perceived sustainability and brand equity.

This research is based on the cross-sectional study of students in postgraduate courses who are getting specific academic inputs on sustainability and another set of students in postgraduate courses who are not getting specific inputs on sustainability. This research embarks on an empirical journey, to examine how these two groups perceive sustainability and the brand equity of a sustainable brand. This study also examines the impact of perceived sustainability on brand equity in the given context.

Statistical analysis conducted using T-tests reveals that academic inputs on sustainability do impact the perception of sustainability and brand equity. Since the students are also future managers and consumers, this research provides valuable insights for both corporate and academic settings, concluding that academic inputs on sustainability enhance consumers' and future professionals' understanding of sustainability and sustainable brands.

Keywords: Academic inputs, sustainability, perceived sustainability, consumer, brand equity

Introduction

The United Nations Brundtland Commission first introduced sustainability as a concept of sustainable development in 1987, defining it as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Since the Brundtland Commission introduced the concept, sustainability has undergone significant evolution, particularly in the corporate sector. Until recently, Elkington (1997) popularized the “Triple Bottom Line” as the intersection of a company’s environmental, social, and economic objectives.

It is well understood that concepts discovered by humans start making sense only when they start understanding the concepts and their impact on their lives. Therefore, it is necessary to acquire and disseminate knowledge about these concepts to raise awareness about potential vulnerabilities or specific issues that could threaten humanity’s survival. Cognition plays a critical role in comprehending and devising solutions for these problems. As described by Onan (as cited in Özçakmak, et al., 2021), cognition may be referred to as the process of receiving information about the surrounding environment and using this information to understand the world and problems and further bring solutions to the problems. It is well acknowledged that there is no better alternative than providing academic input to make the general public aware of issues affecting mankind. Sustainability has been a lesser explored area in academics, as the major focus lies on its impact on corporate performance.

The United Nations adopted the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, which became a buzzword in academia, and later conceived the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 to secure the rights and well-being of everyone on a healthy and green planet. Over the recent years, sustainability has been on the list of highly cited and discussed concepts for everyone and has become one of the extensively referred topics in management journals, websites, and corporate documents. The public’s growing perception and consciousness towards the environment has led many academic institutions worldwide to incorporate sustainability into their course curriculum. Meanwhile, in the corporate world, companies are adopting sustainability as a new approach to business.

Many studies confirm that a company’s sustainability initiatives create value, ultimately impacting its brand equity in the consumer’s mind. Winit, Kantabutra and Kantabutra

(2023) confirm that brand scholars have increasingly associated brands with sustainability since late 2018, when words such as corporate social responsibility and green marketing started to appear frequently. Most recently, since mid-2020, brand equity has gained prominence, possibly due to the widespread perception in the sustainability literature that brands serve as a proxy for corporate sustainability.

Academic inputs shape students' perceptions, and several studies have already demonstrated their impact on students' achievements (Uyeri, 2017). As mentioned earlier, there has been limited exploration of the impact of academic inputs on sustainability in shaping the perception of sustainability, which underscores the relevance of researching this topic.

Furthermore, there is a wealth of academic work and research available that measures the influence of brand image, brand attitude, and other factors on brand equity, as well as the impact of sustainability initiatives on this equity. Ample research is also available on perceived sustainability and its impact on consumer engagement and trust; for example, Khan and Fatma (2023) indicate that customers may develop trust towards the brand by engaging with the perceived sustainability; similarly, a study is also available on academics and sustainability; for example, Žalėnienė and Pereira (2021) did research on students' perceptions of the SDGs and concluded that institutes of higher education are key agents for the education of the future leaders who shall be the change agents in the successful implementation of the SDGs. There is also research available that focus on graduate students' perception and knowledge of the SDGs (Aleixo, Leal, and Azeiteiro, 2021; Ho et al., 2022; Zhou, Abedin, and Sheela, 2022); however, the impact of academic inputs on perceived sustainability and brand equity of a sustainable brand in an Indian context remains less explored. The academic input in this context refers to faculty members formally teaching or delivering sustainability as a concept and its impact on business, environment, and society to students through lectures, discussions, instructions, audio-visual and live demonstrations, and collaborative research.

The current research fills the gap, considering perceived sustainability and consumer-based brand equity to be two distinct variables under study. It also attempts to find the impact of perceived sustainability on brand equity in the given context. While measuring perceived sustainability, the study takes into consideration all three dimensions of sustainability, namely economic, environmental, and social. Keller (1993) examines consumer-based brand equity, which evaluates a brand's value based on customers' perceptions of it. Since our perceptions, understandings, and social context shape our attitudes, it is known that viewpoints result from "socially constructed realities" as

perceived by the individual (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978). Perception of sustainability is going to impact the attitude towards sustainable and unsustainable brands as well.

As already indicated regarding the recent inclusion of sustainability in the curriculum of students, the importance of academic inputs in impacting the ability of students, and the fact that students are future consumers and future managers, a study undertaking the understanding of perceived sustainability and brand equity of the students who are getting academic inputs on sustainability vis-à-vis who are not getting specific inputs is not only an interesting plot to see the impact of academic inputs on sustainability but is also an important aspect to study the impact on raising awareness, improving perception towards sustainability and the sustainable brand which is going to ultimately impact the choice made by students as a consumer and manager in a positive manner. Further, sustainability is related to morals; thus, its understanding, perception, and practice require moral reasoning as well. Some studies, although not conducted in an Indian context, have presented varying perspectives on related aspects. For instance, Doyle and O'Flaherty (2013) suggest that undergraduate-level education enhances moral reasoning, while postgraduate education appears to have little further impact. Conversely, Venezia et al. (2011) conclude that age, formal education, and "ethics" education have no significant impact on ethics and morality. Thus, it would be intriguing to see how postgraduate inputs in India affect this concept.

Objectives

The study aims to explore the influence of providing academic inputs on sustainability, specifically on perceived sustainability. The study also examines how providing academic inputs on sustainability impacts sustainable brand equity. Furthermore, it investigates the influence of perceived sustainability on the brand equity of a sustainable brand.

Review of Literature

Perceived sustainability

Existing studies refer to perceived sustainability as social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Kumar, Park, and Kim (as cited in Khan and Fatma, 2023) confirm that perceived sustainability is a vital concept in differentiating brands, and its examination from consumers' perspectives assists in developing sustainable practices in strategic brand management. Hanss and Böhm (2012) examine the concept of general sustainability and how consumers' understanding of sustainability impacts their consumption decisions. According to them, the social, environmental, and developmental dimensions of

sustainability are the core elements of people's understanding of sustainability, while the economic and temporal dimensions are at the periphery and relatively unconnected.

Brand equity

Renowned Brand Expert Professor Aaker (1991) has defined brand equity in his book *Managing Brand Equity* as a set of assets or liabilities in the form of brand visibility, brand associations, and customer loyalty that add or subtract from the value of a current or potential product or service driven by the brand. In simplest terms, brand equity represents the value of a brand, and many branding experts also opine it to be the perceived value of a brand in the consumer's mind, which is also popularly referred to as consumer-based brand equity.

Brand equity is the commercial value, which is derived from the consumer's perception of the brand name of a particular product or service rather than from the product or service itself. Heartland, n.d., also refers to it as the "social value" associated with a well-known brand name. According to Hsu (2012), brand equity is defined as the overall value added to a core product or the additional utility generated by its brand name. Sustainability practices can develop and maintain brand equity (ibid.).

Keller (1993) defines brand equity as the marketing effects uniquely attributable to the brand, which means when the marketing of a product or service generates certain outcomes because of its brand name that would not occur if the same product or service did not have that name. Consumer-based brand equity is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand from a consumer's perspective (ibid.). Kapferer (2012) asserts that one of the approaches to evaluating brand equity is customer-based, which focuses exclusively on the relationship customers have with the brand.

Brand equity of a sustainable brand

Hartmann and Ibanez (2006) define "sustainable brand" as a brand that offers products or services manufactured using recycled or biodegradable ingredients, opposes animal testing, supports charitable donations, and guarantees fair trade conditions. Ha (2021) suggests that attitudes toward green products with environmental concerns impact consumers' associations with green brands, which influences green brand equity further. Zein, Consolacion-Segura and Huertas-Garcia (2019) identify a positive

relationship between environmental and social governance scores and brand equity value. According to Lash and Wellington (2007), consumers consider a company's environmental record when making purchasing decisions, and demand for eco-friendly sustainable products and services is increasing from the consumer's end. However, Willersdorf and Mitchell (2020) argue that consumers' mixed signals on sustainability pose tough but surmountable obstacles for fashion brands. Hence, assessing how students who are consumers as well as future managers perceive sustainable brands in terms of sustainability and brand equity becomes an interesting ground to explore.

Hypotheses

The researcher formulated the following hypotheses to achieve the objectives:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): There is a significant difference between the levels of perceived sustainability as grasped by the postgraduate students getting academic inputs on sustainability and those who do not get specific inputs.

It is hypothesized that students who receive academic inputs on sustainability will perceive the sustainability of an organization with more clarity.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): There is a significant difference between the perception of consumer-based brand equity by the postgraduate students receiving academic inputs on sustainability and those who do not receive specific inputs.

It is hypothesized that students receiving academic inputs on sustainability will have an enhanced understanding of the brand equity of a sustainable brand.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): There is a significant influence of perceived sustainability on brand equity.

Research Methodology

A cross-sectional study was conducted to compare postgraduate students who receive specific academic inputs on sustainability within their curriculum with postgraduate students who do not receive such inputs. A structured questionnaire was administered to assess the perceived sustainability and brand equity of a selected sustainability brand. Students belonging to the age group of 20 to 25 years were considered by slightly adapting the age group indicated for higher education by the Indian Government report titled 'Educational Statistics at a Glance' (Department of School Education & Literacy, 2018).

Selection of sustainable brand for the study

The expert opinion of four professionals, belonging to middle-level management from Indian fashion brands, was taken to select a sustainable fashion brand for study. Due to ethical considerations, the names of the experts and the brand are not being disclosed in the research.

Sample frame and size

The researcher employed the purposive sampling method. The study considered two distinct groups: postgraduate students from NIFT Delhi who had received inputs on sustainability during their course, and other postgraduates residing and studying in Delhi NCR who had not received any academic inputs on sustainability. A total of 103 responses were collected; however, finally, a total of 69 responses, which were complete in all aspects, were filtered out for final analysis. Only students who had the opportunity to purchase and use the sustainable brand considered for the point of reference within the past year were considered in the final analysis.

Instrument

A questionnaire was distributed to the sample considered for the study to measure the perceived sustainability and gauge the respondent's perception of the brand equity of a sustainable brand. A 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree was employed, and a summative score of all items was finally considered for the analysis.

Scales for measurement

For measuring the perception towards sustainability, the "Measures of Perceived Sustainability" scale (MPS) given by Kim, et al. (2015) was adapted. The scale consists of ten items spread across three dimensions, namely environment, social, and economic (Table 1). Since the scale covers all the dimensions of sustainability, it encapsulates a comprehensive view of perception.

For gauging the consumer-based brand equity, the consumer-based brand equity scale (MBE), which is multidimensional and given by Yoo and Donthu (2001) was adapted. The scale covers eleven items spread across four dimensions (Table 2).

The summative scores for both variables were calculated based on the scores assigned by the two groups of respondents. The final scores were further analyzed using a t-test to understand the difference in the two variables under study within the two groups.

Table 1: Items of measurement of perceived sustainability

Factor	Items
Environment	I take the brand to be sustainable if its products are made of organic and recycled materials.
	It is a sustainable brand if it utilizes green technology that helps in efficiently utilizing natural resources and energy.
	It is a sustainable brand if it achieves environmental innovativeness, i.e., is consistently working towards curbing the use of polluting chemicals in the production of goods.
	A brand qualifies to be called sustainable if it sponsors pro-environmental programmes.
Social	I perceive a brand as sustainable if it respects human rights of workers.
	I believe a brand is sustainable if it encourages freedom of expression, diversity and equal opportunities.
	A brand involved in social causes like women empowerment, sponsoring educational programmes, etc. qualifies to be a sustainable brand.
Economic	A brand is sustainable if it is transparent about managing its business.
	If corporate governance is appropriate, it is a sustainable brand.
	Corporate accountability is necessary for a brand to be called sustainable.

Table 2: Items of measurement for consumer-based brand equity

Factor	Items
Brand Awareness	I can recognize XYZ among other competing brands.
	I can quickly recall the logo of XYZ.
	When I think of handcrafted Indian merchandise, XYZ is one of the brands that comes to my mind.
Brand Association	Some product attributes of the XYZ brand come to my mind quickly.
	I believe the XYZ products are worth the money.
	I find XYZ as a more inclusive, craft oriented, Indian ethnic brand than the others.
Brand Loyalty	I consider myself to be loyal to XYZ.
	Even if another brand has the same features as XYZ, I would prefer to buy from XYZ.
	XYZ is usually my first choice while purchasing handcrafted fashion merchandise.
Perceived Quality	I believe that the offerings of XYZ are of excellent quality.
	The likelihood that XYZ products would be functional is very high.

Data analysis

The data was collected from both groups of students, and a t-test was used to estimate whether there was a significant difference in the perceived sustainability of the different groups of students. Similarly, a t-test was employed to explore any significant differences in consumers' perceptions of the sustainable brand they are familiar with and have been using. The t-test is the most widely used statistical test to compare the means of two groups, thus making it relevant for understanding the differences in this study.

Results

Initially, the scale's reliability was confirmed by using Cronbach's alpha, which is indicated in Table 3. The results confirm that the Cronbach's alpha values of both scales were above 0.8, which confirms the aptness of the scale to measure the concept.

Table 3: Cronbach's alpha values

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Measurement of Perceived Sustainability	0.824	10
Measurement of Consumer-based Brand Equity	0.889	11

Analysis of influence of academic inputs (sustainability) on perceived sustainability

The Q-Q plot analysis revealed a normal distribution of perceived sustainability across both student groups. Levene's test further pointed towards homogeneity of variance, leading to consideration of an independent t-test run on the data at a 95 percent confidence interval for the mean difference.

The t-test statistics in Table 4 and group statistics indicate a significant difference in perceived sustainability between students who receive academic inputs (36.649 ± 3.5995) and those who do not receive any sustainability inputs (32.156 ± 5.036) ($t(67)=4.304$, $p<.001$) with a mean difference of 4.5 (95 percent CI, 2.4–6.57).

Hence, in the absence of enough evidence to accept the null hypothesis, the alternate hypothesis was accepted. This confirmed that the students who receive academic inputs in the domain of sustainability exhibit higher levels of perceived sustainability as compared to the group of students who do not receive such specific inputs on sustainability.

Table 4: T-test results for perceived sustainability

	Levene's test for equality of variances		T-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	3.784	.056	4.304	67	.000	4.4924	1.0438	2.4089	6.5759
Equal variances not assumed			4.202	55.171	.000	4.4924	1.0690	2.3502	6.6345

Analysis of influence of academic inputs (sustainability) on perceived brand equity

The Q-Q plot analysis displayed a normal distribution of perceived brand equity for a sustainable brand across both student groups. Further, Levene’s test revealed homogeneity of variance, necessitating an independent t-test run on the data at a 95 percent confidence interval for the mean difference.

The t-test statistics in Table 5 and group statistics infer that the perceived brand equity of a sustainable brand among students who receive academic inputs (35.676 ± 5.68) was significantly higher among students who do not get any sustainability inputs (30.938 ± 6.92) ($t(67)=3.121, p=.003$) with a mean difference of 4.7 (95 percent CI, 1.7 – 7.76).

Due to a lack of evidence to support the null hypothesis, the alternate hypothesis was accepted, confirming that the students who receive academic inputs exhibit higher levels of brand equity for a sustainable brand as compared to the group of students who do not receive such specific inputs on sustainability.

Analysis of influence of perceived sustainability on brand equity

A simple regression test was conducted to measure if perceived sustainability significantly influences brand equity. It was inferred that the conducted regression was statistically significant, with $p<.05$, and perceived sustainability significantly influencing brand equity, $F(1,67) = 7.922, p = .006, R^2 = .10$. Thus, the alternate hypothesis was accepted.

Table 5: T-Test results for brand equity

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	2.592	.112	3.121	67	.003	4.7382	1.5182	1.7078	7.7685
Equal variances not assumed			3.077	60.108	.003	4.7382	1.5401	1.6577	7.8187

Discussion and Conclusion

Academic inputs have been known to augment cognition, even in later life (ANI, 2023). Systematically imparting academic inputs not only raises awareness, but also sensitizes people to specific issues of concern. The same is applicable to the concern of sustainability. The current research endeavors to add to the existing research by demonstrating that academic inputs on sustainability have a positive impact on both the perceived sustainability and brand equity of a sustainable brand. Since students are consumers themselves, the inclusion of sustainability in the course curriculum in the Indian context will positively influence the perceived sustainability of sustainable brands, thus pushing the growth of sustainable brands in the future.

Integrating the essence highlighted by researchers such as Gupta (2015), who recommends that sustainability initiatives can enhance brand value for consumers and ultimately drive brand equity, is a key focus. Building on previous research by Chen, et al. (2020), which suggests that perceived sustainability positively influences customer engagement, this current research aims to investigate the impact of perceived sustainability on brand equity. Although the indicated results might not seem profound, as other relevant factors may impact brand equity, the significant positive influence based on the same highlights one of the managerial implications of the current research. This implies that students, who are also consumers, on receiving sustainability inputs, can perceive the various components of a sustainable brand more clearly than the ones who have not been given educational inputs on sustainability. This fact, vis-à-vis the study's findings that perceived sustainability significantly influences brand

equity, reflects that it is also imperative for a sustainable brand to educate consumers on sustainability. This, in turn, will lead to a higher perceived level of sustainability, ultimately positively influencing the brand equity. In simple terms, the research findings convey that the success of a brand in sustainability initiatives is determined by the customer's perception of its sustainability features. It is also considered that perception shapes the formation of attitudes, and a positive attitude may result in actual buying behavior. This makes the study valuable from a managerial point of view.

According to Keller (1993), brand knowledge serves as a crucial antecedent of consumer-based brand equity, conceptualized as a brand node in memory, to which a variety of associations are linked. Brand knowledge is decomposed into two distinct constructs, brand awareness and brand image (associations). The brand awareness created and associated with sustainability is going to impact the brand knowledge in a positive sense. This aligns with the study's findings, which suggest that an informed and educated individual well-versed in sustainability is more likely to develop a higher perception of sustainability, also known as perceived sustainability, and increase brand equity. Therefore, it would be beneficial for corporates to engage directly with academic institutions in order to impart general knowledge about sustainability and the sustainable practices of their brand, particularly in their marketing efforts and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives, which are now mandatory in India for certain companies. In addition, brands should communicate these aspects to consumers through different marketing channels, or they may like to keep an eye on academic inputs to improve their communication and products accordingly.

This research conducted in an academic context signifies the importance of academic inputs in creating awareness and facilitating conscious choices for sustainable brands or products, thus bringing about a positive outcome in society. Since no brand or business, no matter how 'unclean', such as coal, steel, or chemicals, can afford to ignore sustainability today (Khalap, 2022), a more aware general public will be able to make conscious and better choices of sustainable products and brands, ultimately impacting the overall sustainability of Mother Earth. Therefore, educators should collaborate with sustainable organizations or brands to conceive classroom projects and interact frequently, as the social context in which the individual is placed shapes his perceptions of the situation and hence his attitudes (Salancik and Pfeffer, 1978).

Since the current research focuses on postgraduate students, it is imperative to evaluate the impact of elementary, primary, or secondary education on a concept that shapes individuals' choices as consumers and impacts the future of mankind. This can further

guide the decision to impart such inputs at a stage that has the maximum impact. Further research on attitude-gap behavior theory could be carried out in the Indian context to gauge how understanding and a positive attitude influence the consumer's purchasing behavior toward sustainable brands.

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