Chapter 4
Mapping Ethical Branding for Sustainability:
A Systematic Bibliometric Review of Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This systematic bibliometric literature review investigates the intersection of ethical branding and sustainability by analyzing 30 scholarly contributions spanning diverse contexts, including corporate, city, and product branding. Using bibliometric techniques and thematic analysis, this review identifies the evolution of sustainability-driven ethical branding, the role of green marketing, and the growing significance of digital transparency tools. The findings reveal an expanding emphasis on authenticity, stakeholder engagement, and accountability as central tenets of ethical brand value. This review also highlights challenges such as greenwashing, misaligned brand narratives, and gaps in measurable impact assessment. By outlining theoretical contributions, practical strategies, and a forward-looking research agenda, this study offers a foundational map for academics and practitioners seeking to align branding with sustainability and ethical imperatives in the 21st century

INTRODUCTION

Branding is a strategic tool for differentiating a brand, building customer loyalty, and gaining a competitive advantage. Zulfikar (2022) explains that building a strong

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brand helps create a positive brand image, associations, and experiences among customers. In addition, the scholar explains that promoting brand values that align with customer values through branding leads to higher brand equity, which includes aspects like brand assets, preferences, associations, and loyalty. Companies establish this by employing communication strategies emphasizing product features or emotional associations to attract and retain customers. Bilgin (2018) reinforces this perspective, stating that "the greater the power of communication between the brand and the consumer, the higher the consumer's brand preference and brand loyalty" (p.129). As a result, brands are transitioning from one-dimensional communication and branding strategies to multi-dimensional perspectives that incorporate values, corporate purpose, and stakeholder engagement.

Sustainability has become a crucial element of today's branding efforts. Increasing evidence of climate change, resource depletion, and social inequality has increased consumer awareness of the need for sustainable practices. This has influenced their expectations of brands, compelling them to integrate sustainable practices into their operations and brand identities. Lüdeke-Freund et al. (2018) explain that companies need more than new products, organizational processes, and practices today. Instead, they must embrace business models supporting sustainable development by contributing to the economy, society, and environment. Similarly, Breuer et al. (2018) indicate that purely profit-oriented business models are no longer enough, arguing that businesses must adopt sustainability-oriented business models (SBMs). Brands that align themselves with sustainable values can differentiate in ways that go beyond traditional markers such as quality or price. They can prioritize building deeper relationships with consumers who seek authenticity and shared responsibility. This shift highlights the role of branding in driving sustainable consumption patterns, promoting responsible production, and contributing to broader social good.

Ethical branding is the intersection between branding and sustainability. Ethical branding emphasizes transparency, integrity, and accountability. It aims to embed moral values into brand identity and communication. While conventional branding focused on how consumers perceive the brand, ethical branding seeks to bridge a company's stated values and its actual behaviors. Kingsley (2024) indicates that it goes beyond stating an organization's corporate social responsibility to integrating its core values, decision-making, and engagement with stakeholders. Chowdhury (2024) further suggests that brands that practice ethical branding showcase their commitment to society and the environment through transparent communication, including verifiable proof of their sustainability initiatives. This systematic bibliometric review offers insights into how businesses can reconcile profitability with accountability.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study adopted a systematic bibliometric review approach guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework. This methodology ensures rigor, transparency, and replicability in the review process. Donthu et al. (2021) identify systematic bibliometric analysis as an effective tool for mapping and analyzing objective data and evolutionary nuances of a specific target field. The PRISMA framework provides guidelines for reporting systematic reviews and reducing bias (Haddaway et al., 2022). Page et al. (2021) further add that PRISMA enhances a study's completeness, accuracy, and transparency by allowing scholars to explain what they did and what they found. Thus, combining a systematic bibliometric review and the PRISMA framework in this study helped improve the quality and accuracy of the presented findings.

The selection of relevant literature was primarily anchored in a comprehensive academic database known for its rigorous standards and carefully curated content. The search and identification process drew on methodological approaches previously outlined by Rosário and Raimundo (2024), Rosário (2024), and Rosário et al. (2021). This database maintains its quality through the oversight of an independent advisory board, which applies strict selection criteria and conducts continuous reviews to safeguard reliability and consistency.

Unlike traditional forms of literature synthesis, the LRSB framework provides a more systematic and detailed examination of a specific research domain. As highlighted by Rosário et al. (2021), the method emphasises the intentional inclusion of sources that directly correspond to the research objectives, thereby strengthening methodological transparency. Such transparency is crucial, as it allows the review's procedures and analyses to be critically appraised by external readers.

The LRSB approach operates under a structured protocol that regulates how studies are filtered and selected (Table 1). Widely recognised for enhancing both relevance and reliability, this process unfolds through a three-stage sequence comprising six procedural steps, each thoroughly described in the aforementioned works.

Table 1. Process of systematic LRSB.

Fase	Step	Description
Exploration	Step 1	formulating the research problem
	Step 2	searching for appropriate literature
	Step 3	critical appraisal of the selected studies
	Step 4	data synthesis from individual sources
Interpretation	Step 5	reporting findings and recommendations
Communication	Step 6	Presentation of the LRSB report

Source: adapted Rosário e Raimundo (2024), Rosário (2024), Rosário et al. (2021).

This study relied on the Scopus indexing database to identify and compile the relevant body of literature. Scopus is recognised for both the breadth of its coverage and the reliability of its peer-reviewed content, which explains its frequent use in academic research. Nonetheless, an important limitation stems from the decision to use this single source, as it inevitably excludes contributions that might have been retrieved from other databases. In addition, the review was confined to works published up to September 2025. To preserve the robustness and validity of the findings, only studies that had undergone formal peer-review were considered in the final selection.Parte superior do formulário

The literature search was conducted using the Scopus database, selected for its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals across disciplines relevant to branding, business ethics, and sustainability. The search strategy applied a step-by-step process beginning with the broad keyword TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Ethical"), which yielded 335,525 documents. To narrow the focus, the researcher refined the search to TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Ethical") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("branding"). This reduced the document results to 492 documents. This was followed by a final filter, limiting results to the exact keyword "Sustainability," resulting in a more focused set of 30 sources (N=30). These were then anlyzed and synthesized in the literature review section using thematic analysis.

To preserve both analytical rigour and thematic relevance, clear criteria were defined to determine which sources would be included or excluded, as shown in Table 2. The review retained only peer-reviewed articles that specifically examined the relationship between brand evolution and marketing strategies. Studies outside the fields of business, ethical, branding, sustainability were intentionally omitted in order to sustain conceptual coherence.

This selective approach ensured that the final body of literature met the necessary standards of quality while also aligning with the study's research objectives. A detailed outline of the selection procedure is provided in Table 2.

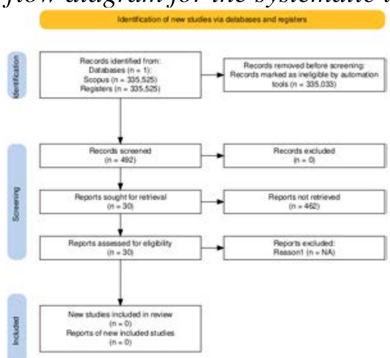
Table 2. Screening Methodology.

Database Scopus	Screening	Publications
Meta-search	Keyword: Ethical	335,525
First Inclusion Criterion	Keyword: Ethical, branding	492
Second Inclusion Criteria	Keyword: Ethical, branding, Sustainability	30
Screening	Keyword: Ethical, branding, Sustainability Until September 2025	

Source: own elaboration

The process of evaluating and synthesising the chosen materials drew on both thematic and content analysis, guided by the methodological principles outlined in Rosário and Raimundo (2024), Rosário (2024) and Rosário, et al. (2021). To maintain scholarly rigour, the review applied a strict screening procedure that admitted only studies of clear relevance and demonstrable academic quality. Inclusion was contingent on three main factors: the extent to which each work addressed the central research questions, the robustness of its methodological design, and its publication in peer-reviewed outlets. A summary of the procedure is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for the systematic literature search.



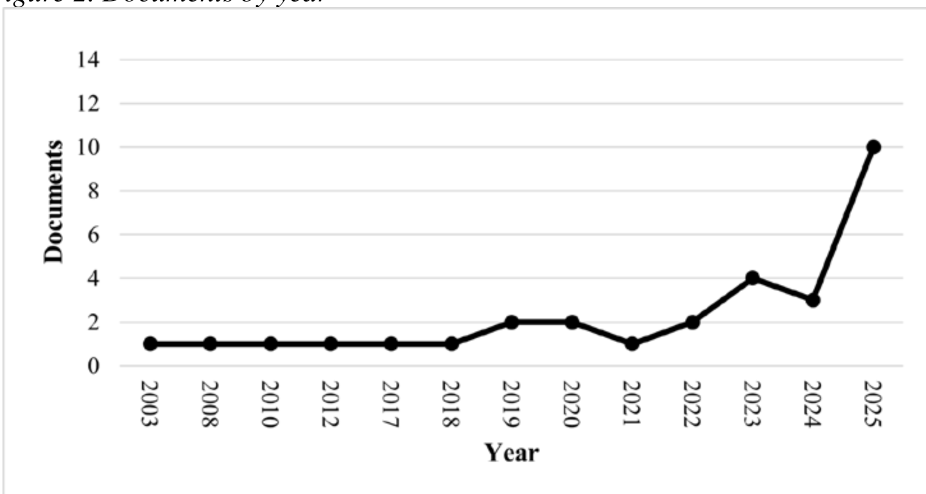
A total of 30 academic publications indexed in a recognised scholarly database were examined using a dual-method strategy that combined narrative analysis with bibliometric techniques. The approach was informed by the methodological contributions of Rosário and Raimundo (2024), Rosário (2024), and Rosário et al. (2021). By integrating these two modes of analysis, the study was able to explore the literature in depth and to trace thematic patterns directly connected to the core research questions. Of the 30 documents selected, 23 were articles, 5 were book chapters, and 2 were conference papers.

PUBLICATION DISTRIBUTION

A total of 30 sources published between 2015 and 2025 were identified and analyzed. The annual distribution shows a gradual increase in scholarly interest over the decade. For example, by September 2025, 10 publications had been identified as sources (Figure 2). However, this trend began to increase in 2023, with a total of 4. The year 2025 had the highest number of publications (10), followed by 2023

(4). This growth likely reflects the intensification of research activity in response to the rapidly growing concern about ethical and sustainable brands.

Figure 2. Documents by year



The publications were sorted as follows: 2 publications (Sustainability Switzerland, Journal of Product and Brand Management, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, International Journal of Environmental Sciences, and Green Marketing Perspectives: Effective Messaging for Sustainable Practices), and the remaining publications had 1 document each.

Figure 3 displays the countries with the highest levels of scientific output in specific research areas, with a particular emphasis on India, Brazil, the USA, and the UK, which collectively boast the most significant number of publications.

Figure 3. Scientific production by country.

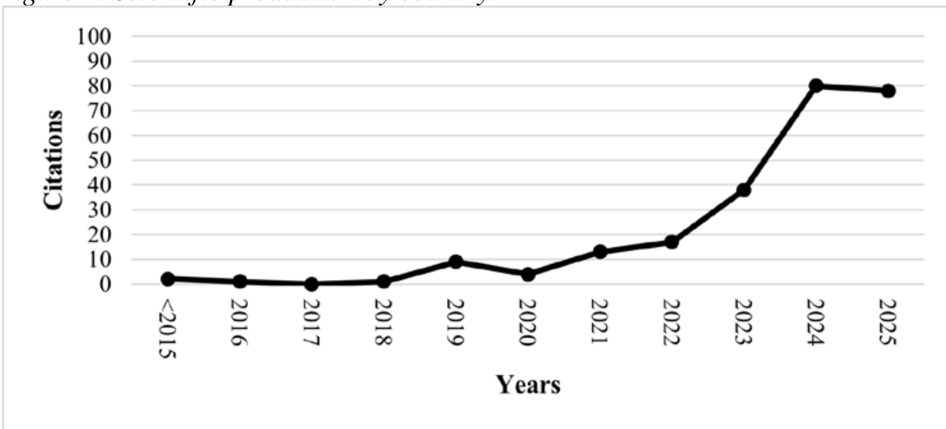


Table 5 and Figure 3 provide a visual representation of the ten countries most active in advancing research within the domains under review. Beyond simply ranking contributions, this analysis sheds light on the geographical distribution of scientific interest, revealing which nations placed particular emphasis on ethical branding and sustainability. Such patterns offer insight into how different academic communities prioritized this field and may reflect broader economic and cultural contexts that shape research agendas.

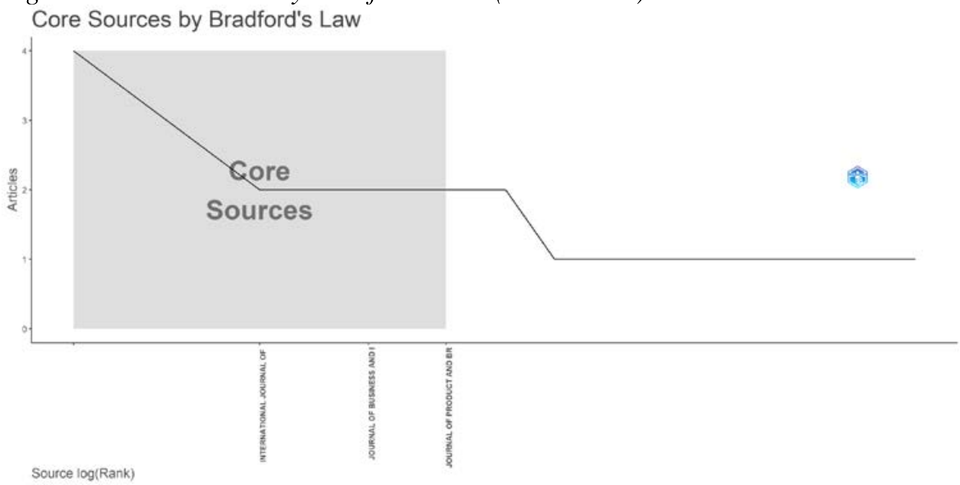
Table 5. Top 10 countries by number of publications.

Country	Number of Publications
INDIA	18
BRAZIL	13
USA	11
UK	9
PORTUGAL	6
CHILE	3
KUWAIT	3
EGYPT	2
MALAYSIA	2
SWEDEN	2

Source: own elaboration

In line with bibliometric patterns similar to Bradford's Law, the analysis reveals that a small cluster of three journals—illustrated in Figure 4—accounts for a substantial share of publications in this research area. Together, they represent roughly 10% of the total output on the topic. This concentration is characteristic of developing academic fields, where a limited number of outlets often assume a central role in disseminating influential studies. By doing so, these journals become key platforms for advancing discussion, introducing new perspectives, and shaping the trajectory of scholarly debate as the field matures.

Figure 4. Core sources by Bradford's law (2015–2025).



As scholarly attention to the topic increases, a select group of journals often emerges as the dominant outlets for publication. While these venues provide valuable perspectives and contribute to consolidating the field, their growing prominence also risks narrowing the scope of debate. Over-reliance on a limited set of platforms may privilege particular methodological or theoretical approaches, potentially constraining diversity in scholarly dialogue. This concentration of influence, while helping to legitimise the topic within academia, can simultaneously limit the breadth of perspectives recognised across the wider research community (Rosário & Raimundo, 2024).

Within this core of developing literature, 3 journals stand out for their notable influence, which have played a pivotal role in shaping both the conceptual frameworks of research and the scientific community. These journals serve as vital forums for scholarly interaction, enabling researchers to build upon previous contributions, cite important findings, and support the continued advancement of the discipline's understanding.

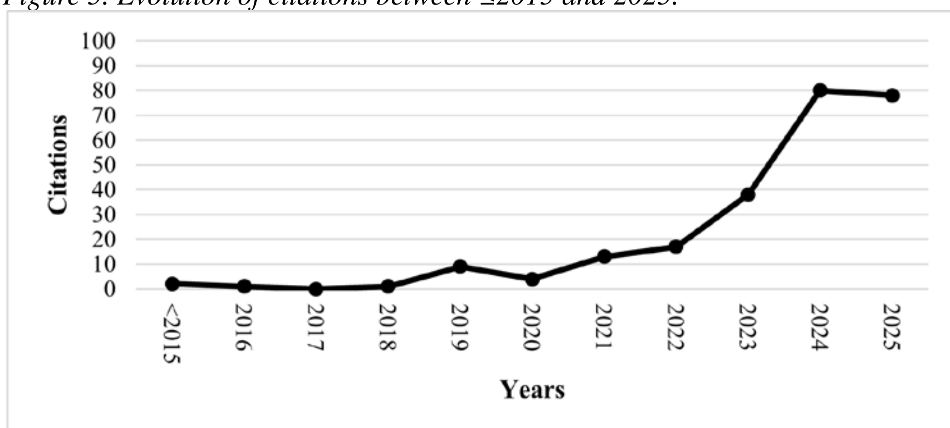
The subject areas covered by the 30 scientific and/or academic documents were: Business, Management and Accounting (17); Social Sciences (12); Environmental

Science (11); Economics, Econometrics and Finance (10); Agricultural and Biological Sciences (4); Energy (3); Earth and Planetary Sciences (3); Computer Science (3); Engineering (2); Materials Science (1); Decision Sciences (1); and Arts and Humanities (1).

The most quoted article was "Conceptualising slow tourism: a perspective from Latvia" by Serdane et al. (2020), with 38 quotes published in Tourism Recreation Research 1.04 (SJR), the best quartile (Q1), and with H index (68). This article re-examines the phenomenon of slow tourism to address a gap in the literature. The focus of the study is on Latvia, where slowness was previously adopted in tourism branding.

In Figure 5, we can analyze the changes in citations of documents published until September 2025. The period ≤2015-2025 shows a positive net growth in citations with an R2 of 71%, reaching 243.

Figure 5. Evolution of citations between ≤2015 and 2025.

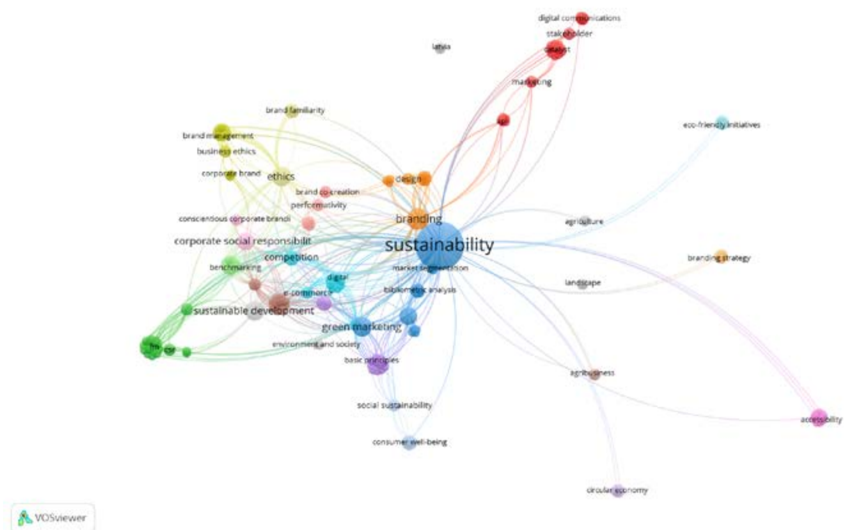


The h-index serves as an indicator of both productivity and scholarly influence, capturing the highest number of publications that have each accumulated at least an equivalent number of citations. In this review, 10 documents reached that benchmark, with each cited at least ten times. This outcome suggests that a substantial portion of the literature has achieved notable visibility, reflecting not only consistent research activity but also a degree of influence within the academic community.

Citations of all scientific and academic documents from the period ≤2015 to September 2025, with a total of 243 citations; of the 30 documents, 11 were not cited. Using the main keywords "ethical", "branding", and "sustainability" between 2015 and September 2025, the bibliometric analysis revealed key indicators of the evolution of the scientific and academic information landscape in the documents, as shown in Figure 5.

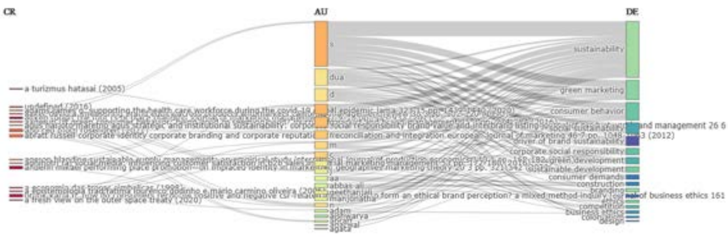
The analysis was conducted with the support of VOSviewer software, which enabled the researchers to generate insights by concentrating on the core search terms: “Ethical,” “Branding,” and “Sustainability.”

Figure 6. Network of all keywords



This study is based on a review of academic publications addressing Ethical Brand Mapping for Sustainability. In the three-field visualization, the central axis highlights “AU,” which represents the author and signals the main contributor under analysis. This dimension is linked to “CR” (cited references) and “DE” (keywords provided by the author). To illustrate how these terms and contributors intersect in the literature, a mapping was produced using Bibliometrix software, shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Three fields plot analysis (AU=authors, CR=references, DE=authors keywords)

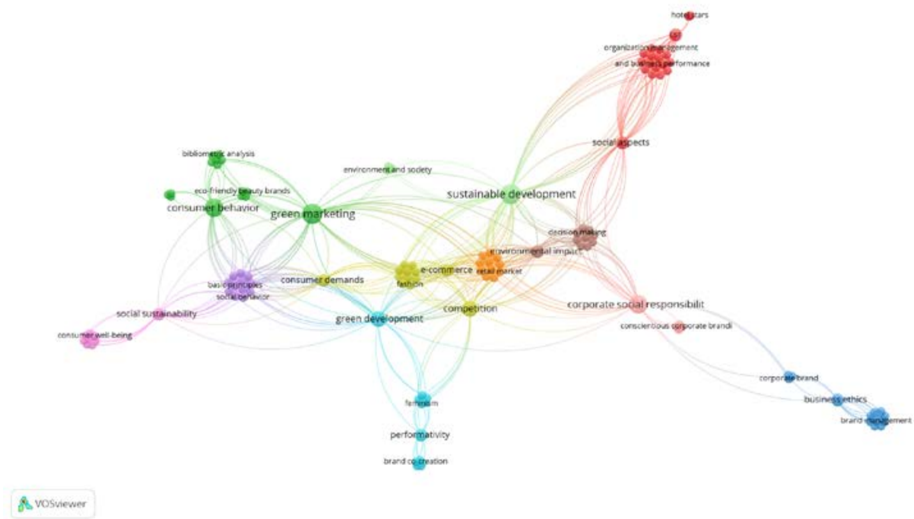


In the Sankey diagram, the dimensions of each box correspond to how often a particular theme appears, while the connecting streams trace the ways in which these themes develop over time. The width of each link indicates the relative strength of the relationship between paired themes, providing a visual representation of how closely they are associated (Rosário & Dias, 2024).

As shown in Figure 7, the most frequently used keywords include “consumer behavior” (incoming flow count: 10; outgoing flow count: 0), “green marketing” (incoming flow count: 11; outgoing flow count: 0), and “sustainability” (incoming flow count: 20; outgoing flow count: 0). These keywords are primarily associated with the most frequently cited references.

Figure 8 presents an integrated map of the keywords, highlighting how central terms identified in the academic literature are interconnected. By visualising these connections, the analysis reveals the thematic focus of the studies reviewed and points to areas where future research could be further developed.

Figure 8. Network of Linked Keywords



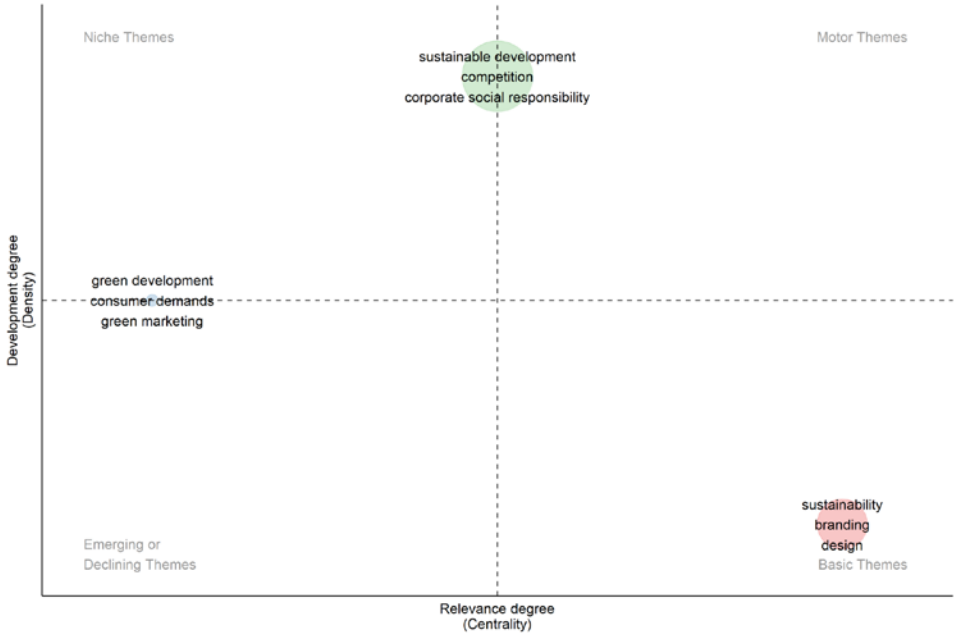
The thematic map was constructed using defined parameters: a minimum cluster frequency of 50 per thousand documents, five labels per cluster, three label terms, and a label size factor of 0.3. The map also incorporates two key dimensions—centrality, which reflects the thematic relevance, and density, which indicates the degree of development—allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the relationships among

Of particular importance is the quadrant on the right, which highlights the dominant or "driving" themes. This area encompasses central topics such as commerce, artificial intelligence, and marketing, identified as strong candidates for guiding future research trends. These themes are interpreted in relation to others, providing a broader perspective on potential avenues for scholarly inquiry. Within this framework, foundational areas such as decision-making and machine learning play a pivotal role in shaping what the analysis refers to as the emerging "shadow" theme.

When we examine Figure 9, which encompasses 30 documents, the thematic map reveals that research in this field is primarily anchored in sustainability, branding, and design, which serve as fundamental yet underdeveloped themes. More specialised topics, such as green development, consumer demands, and green marketing, appear as niche areas, offering structured insights but with limited integration into the broader field.

At the same time, themes like sustainable development, competition, and corporate social responsibility demonstrate strong internal development and are positioned to become future motor themes. Their prominence suggests that they could soon play a decisive role in shaping the direction of scholarly debate.

Figure 9. Thematic map analysis



Overall, the absence of fully established motor themes reflects a field still in consolidation. While central concepts are widely recognised, they require further refinement and integration, and niche topics must connect more strongly with the broader research agenda to achieve greater impact. Furthermore, Figure 10 illustrates a substantial number of co-citations and units, enhancing the analysis of the cited references and supporting the overall findings.

Figure 10. Network of co-citation

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The integration of ethical considerations into branding has become a critical response to evolving consumer expectations and global sustainability challenges. Ethical branding differs from traditional marketing strategies by embedding moral values into brand identity and operations. This creates an alignment between what firms communicate and what they practice. Ethical branding entails the principles of transparency, integrity, corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, and authenticity, which serve as its key pillars (Kingsley, 2024). These pillars provide a framework for organizations to build trust, differentiate in competitive markets, and build long-term relationships with stakeholders. For instance, transparency ensures that companies communicate openly about their processes, while integrity emphasizes consistency between ethical commitments and actual practices. CSR initiatives reflect a firm's responsibility to society, whereas sustainability shows its long-term environmental and social obligations. On the other hand, authenticity ensures that ethical branding efforts are genuine and not merely symbolic, preventing accusations of "greenwashing."Table 6 Pillars of Ethical Branding for Sustainability.

Table 6. Pillars of Ethical Branding for Sustainability.

Pillar	Description
Transparency	Involves clear communication about products, pricing, and supply chains, signaling that the brand operates openly and has nothing to conceal. This openness strengthens consumer trust and accountability.
Integrity	Reflects a brand's commitment to ethical decision-making, even when such choices may not yield immediate financial gain. Integrity creates credibility and fosters long-term stakeholder confidence.
CSR	Demonstrates a brand's active participation in social and environmental initiatives that extend beyond profit-making. CSR reflects a company's willingness to contribute to broader societal well-being.
Sustainability	Encompasses practices such as responsible sourcing, eco-friendly production, and waste reduction. Brands that prioritize sustainability respond to consumer demand for reduced environmental impact.
Authenticity	Ensures alignment between a brand's stated values and its actual practices. Authentic brands avoid contradictions that could erode consumer trust and instead build loyalty through consistency.

Source: own elaboration

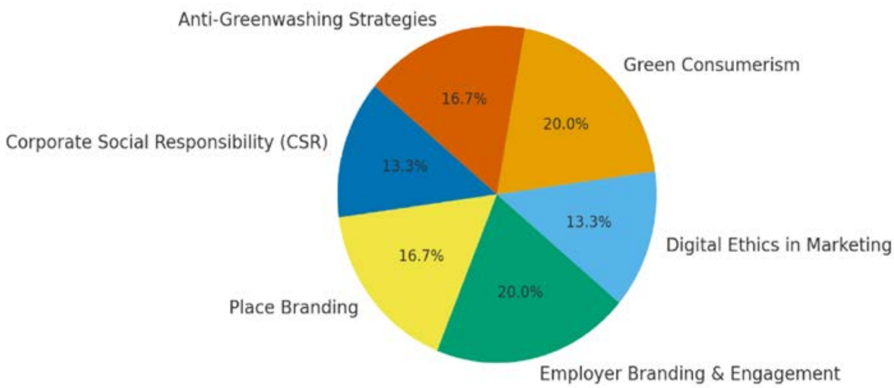
The relevance of ethical branding for sustainability lies in its ability to reshape the relationship between businesses and stakeholders in an era marked by growing scrutiny of corporate behavior. As consumers become more informed and socially conscious, they increasingly demand that brands demonstrate genuine commitments to environmental and social responsibility rather than relying on superficial marketing claims. Ethical branding helps companies mitigate reputational risks and create long-term value by aligning with global sustainability agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment positions ethical branding as both a moral and strategic imperative. In this case, consumers and other stakeholders expect brands to play an active role in advancing sustainable consumption, equitable labor practices, and environmental stewardship.

Moreover, ethical branding bridges the gap between theory and practice by offering a framework for companies to operationalize sustainability principles while maintaining market competitiveness. In doing so, it transforms branding from a promotional exercise into a driver for systemic change. This reinforces the idea that sustainable futures depend on how brands embed ethical values into their strategies and practices.

THEMES IN ETHICAL BRANDING FOR SUSTAINABILITY

As sustainability becomes a central concern in business and society, ethical branding has evolved into a diverse field addressing multiple challenges and opportunities. From the 30 sources identified in this review, six dominant thematic clusters emerge: green consumerism (6 articles, 20%), digital ethics in marketing (4 articles, 13.3%), employer branding and engagement (6 articles, 20%), place branding (5 articles, 16.7%), corporate social responsibility (4 articles, 13.3%), and anti-greenwashing strategies (5 articles, 16.7%). This distribution highlights the areas where scholarly attention has been most concentrated, with green consumerism and employer branding leading the discourse. In contrast, place branding and CSR remain less frequently explored yet are still significant in shaping the field.

Figure 11. Distribution of thematic clusters in ethical branding for sustainability



These themes illustrate the approaches that organizations and scholars have taken to connect ethical values with sustainable practices. They highlight how branding operates across consumer behavior, organizational culture, digital environments, and market accountability. Table 7 summarizes the main ideas from different sources.

Table 7. Summary of the key thematic clusters.

Thematic cluster	Author(s)	Description and key focus area(s)
Green consumerism	Geethanjali et al. (2025)	More people are increasingly aware of environmental impacts and the need for sustainability Educational institutions are using the idea of “green campus” to attract students, especially those who care about sustainability and the environment. It’s a way of building positive brand image, which is important in today's competitive business environment.
	Riva et al. (2022)	Green perceived quality provides internal and external cues that shape consumer judgments of product quality and value. Green consumerism and green perceived value both positively influence customers’ intention to revisit a business.
	Torres-Mancera, 2025	Female leaders, especially sport players, use online communication communities and social responsibility practices to build their personal brands. Their green initiatives shape and manage their public image towards the community
	Thomas et al. (2025)	The green concept in retail emphasizes sustainability, ethical consumerism, and corporate social responsibility. Consumers prefer companies that act as responsible corporate citizens, gaining competitive advantages and cost savings. Highlights two key green strategies: Green Branding: building strong consumer associations with environmental responsibility, enhancing brand loyalty. Eco-labeling: using certified labels as visible proof of environmental benefits, boosting credibility.
	Agarwal et al. (2025)	Green consumerism refers to the “growing trend of consumers who prefer environmentally sustainable products” (p.3). The concept examines factors that influence consumer attitudes and preferences, and how brands can leverage that
	Lucchese-Cheung et al. (2021)	Consumers are willing to consume and pay for products from brands that prioritize sustainability and environmental production principles. Exaggeration of ethical or sustainability claims leads to rejection and indifference.

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Table 7. Continued

Thematic cluster	Author(s)	Description and key focus area(s)
Digital ethics in marketing	Hanlon (2020)	Ethics in digital marketing: Is it ethical for businesses to collect and use online users' data for marketing purposes? Online users share large volumes of data, including personal identifiers, opinions, feelings, and connections. Brands must comply with the ethics of data protection and privacy.
	James et al. (2017)	Organizations have societal moral obligations that increase as they grow, as well as changes in public policies.
	Bowman (2021)	The focus on ethics extends beyond moral norms, social practices, and virtues/vices, to also include compliance, basic rights, and legal precedent.
	Kumar and Dua (2025)	Sustainable branding is a key strategic imperative for businesses aiming to build a strong identity and thrive long-term. Environmental awareness, ethical concerns, and the desire for a sustainable future drive rising consumer demand for sustainability. An effective green marketing strategy requires: Clear communication of sustainability efforts. Avoidance of greenwashing by backing claims with real actions.

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Table 7. Continued

Thematic cluster	Author(s)	Description and key focus area(s)
Employer branding and engagement	Ta'Amnha et al. (2025)	A strong employer brand contributes to workforce engagement. Employer branding reflects "the quality of an employee's working experiences, centered around the Employee Value Proposition (EVP), which comprises the various values organizations offer their employees" (p.2) Constitutes three main pillars: regulative, professional, and cultural–cognitive aspects
	Abratt & Kleyn (2023)	Business leaders are adding environmental and social effects to their strategies, as part of corporate branding. Customers, employees, and executives want businesses to build environmentally conscious cultures that adapt to change and actively shape environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices.
	Chopra et al. (2024)	Employer branding (EB) is "an essential human resource (HR) intervention to promote the organisation as a brand that can be promoted to the employees" (p.703) EB helps reduce employee turnover by showcasing what makes a firm desirable and different to employees. Helps retain current employees, attract talent, and improve organizational and employee outcomes
	Staniec and Kalińska-Kula, 2021	Human resources are a great asset for organizations. Employer branding relates to the relationship between organizational management and employees Employer branding perceives employees as internal clients and focuses on caring about them and building their commitment.
	Davies et al., 2018	Employer branding grew from corporate branding theory by applying customer influence strategies to human resource management, shaping how organizations attract and retain employees. Employer branding leads to positive outcomes: Enhanced recruitment and retention Employee engagement and commitment
	App and Büttgen, 2016	Employer branding contributes to how businesses create value for their existing and potential employees. It involves investing in their long-term availability through measures like: Maintaining employee health and safety Supporting their work-life balance Managing aging workforces Developing their work-related skills Promoting a culture of lifelong learning

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Table 7. Continued

Thematic cluster	Author(s)	Description and key focus area(s)
Place branding	Cassinger and Porzionato, (2025)	City branding to support sustainable development based on the principles of vulnerability: Performativity – how actions shape social and urban realities. Interdependence – recognition of mutual reliance among communities. Relationality – focus on connections and relationships in city branding. Obligation to care for the vulnerable as a guiding ethical principle.
	Vuignier, 2017	Public bodies are spending billions of dollars each year in place marketing and place branding strategies. Place branding used across multiple areas like land planning, urban planning and regional development
	Kavaratzis et al. (2015)	Place branding is a "useful tool that places use as they compete with each other for limited, hypermobile financial, human or cultural resources" (p.4). Improves a place's competitiveness in the global arena, thus attracting a flow of people and capital. Helps solve functional problems, such as: How to attract investment for a planned development/ regeneration project How to capitalize on tourist resources How to encourage people to use a recently redeveloped area
	Chrysaki, 2020	Defines sustainability as "successful initiatives that demonstrate a tangible impact on enhancing quality of life and socially, culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable" (p.3) Changes related to investments, technological developments, institutional changes, and the use of resources to support sustainability
	Narloch et al., 2019	The musealization and protection of parks shape perceptions much like place branding, often imposing homogenized narratives rather than reflecting diverse or original contexts. Branding of natural heritage carries cultural values, myths, and sustainability discourses that influence how places are represented and understood.

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Table 7. Continued

Thematic cluster	Author(s)	Description and key focus area(s)
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	Elmualim, 2017	CSR refers to voluntary activities businesses implement to show their commitment to addressing social and environmental issues. Can include community engagement, investing in outreach projects, employees' relations, and environmental stewardship
	Kovács, 2019	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) involves actions that support employees, local residents, disadvantaged groups, and other stakeholders. Eco-friendly practices and environmental awareness and protection are not just marketing strategies; they are a requirement and an expectation.
	Maon and Lindgreen, 2024	Ethical branding at the corporate level involves moral conduct, social and environmental responsibility, accountability, and value creation for stakeholders. Building an ethical brand can enhance trust, satisfaction, and loyalty among customers and stakeholders.
	Doane, 2005	Describes it as "a voluntary form of self-regulation that aims to tackle everything from human rights and labour standards to limiting carbon dioxide emissions that lead to climate change" (p.215). Socially responsible companies balance the need to make profits with making decisions that protect communities and the environment.
Anti-greenwashing strategies	Mendes et al. 2024	Greenwashing undermines genuine sustainability efforts, eroding consumer trust; it is present across sectors, including agriculture.
	Reynolds et al., 2023	Positioning a brand around sustainability creates tensions in brand co-creation across brand meanings, extraordinary versus mundane brand performances, and empowerment versus disempowerment in branding governance.
	Guo et al., 2023	Blockchain provides customers access to transparent product data, such as production, suppliers, and other third parties. This removes customers' greenwashing skepticism.
	Hakim & Vinothkumar, 2024	Anti-greenwashing initiatives: Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulations (SFDR) Mandatory disclosure of environmental and social initiatives Promotion of sustainability investments by asset management companies
	Dempere et al., 2024	Greenwashing entails "disseminating misleading information to create an overly optimistic image of the company's environmental practices or products" (p.1) Occurs in various forms, such as vague language, irrelevant claims, false labels, and a lack of transparency Deceptive greenwashing practices undermine the integrity of sustainability initiatives, divert resources away from genuine projects, and mislead stakeholders.

Source: own elaboration

1) Green Consumerism

Green consumerism represents a significant shift in how individuals and institutions make choices, as sustainability increasingly defines consumer behavior and organizational strategy. The concept broadly refers to the practice of aligning purchasing decisions with environmental and social responsibility considerations. This is evidenced in Agarwal et al. (2025) definition of green consumerism as "the growing trend of consumers who prefer environmentally sustainable products" (p.3). This perspective highlights the role of values and ethics in shaping markets, where consumers actively seek products that demonstrate eco-friendly production, reduced waste, and ethical sourcing. For example, consumer demand reflects a willingness to pay more for products and services that adhere to sustainable production principles (Lucchese-Cheung et al., 2021). Responding to this demand has become a crucial means of differentiation for businesses (Geethanjali et al., 2025). Sustainability is no longer a niche concern but a mainstream expectation influencing reputation, competitiveness, and consumer loyalty.

Brand and institutions respond to these expectations by embedding sustainability into their identities and operations. For instance, educational institutions have adopted "green campus" initiatives to attract environmentally conscious students, positioning sustainability as both a marketing strategy and a value-driven practice (Geethanjali et al., 2025). In retail, companies leverage strategies such as green branding and eco-labeling, which provide visible markers of environmental responsibility and reinforce consumer trust (Thomas et al., 2025). These practices build on the idea that green perceived quality and value serve as cues shaping judgments of product quality and purchase intentions (Riva et al., 2022). Such strategies extend beyond simple compliance, allowing organizations to establish themselves as responsible corporate citizens while also generating competitive advantage and cost savings.

Green consumerism is also evident at personal levels, where leaders and influencers integrate sustainability into their branding. For example, female sports leaders use online communities and green initiatives to cultivate a socially responsible image, demonstrating how consumer values extend into broader social and cultural contexts (Torres-Mancera, 2025). However, this demand is highly sensitive to perceived authenticity. For example, exaggerated or misleading sustainability claims often lead to skepticism or outright rejection (Lucchese-Cheung et al., 2021). Thus, while green consumerism offers opportunities for brand loyalty and trust, it also requires companies to act with genuine commitment. These dynamics illustrate how green consumerism reshapes relationships between consumers, institutions, and brands, positioning sustainability as both a moral obligation and a driver of long-term value creation.

2) Digital Ethics In Marketing

Digital marketing ethics addresses the principles governing how organizations use digital technologies to influence consumer behavior while safeguarding individual rights. The rapid growth of online platforms has enabled businesses to collect vast amounts of personal data, including identifiers, preferences, emotions, and connections, raising critical concerns about privacy, consent, and fairness (Hanlon, 2020). Beyond moral considerations, Bowman (2021) highlights that ethical responsibility must also extend to compliance with legal frameworks and the protection of fundamental rights, emphasizing that firms cannot rely on self-regulation alone. At the same time, as organizations expand in scale, their moral and social obligations also intensify, requiring closer alignment with shifting public policies and societal expectations (James et al., 2017). These dynamics reveal that digital ethics is not simply about avoiding harm but about establishing trust, accountability, and credibility in increasingly data-driven markets. In this way, ethical marketing becomes both a compliance necessity and a strategic imperative that sustains consumer confidence over the long term.

Moreover, companies must proactively engage stakeholders through feedback mechanisms, participatory decision-making, and continuous monitoring of digital practices. Incorporating consumer input enhances transparency and strengthens the legitimacy of ethical claims, ensuring that digital marketing aligns with evolving societal values and expectations (Bowman, 2021; Hanlon, 2020). Firms that embed these participatory approaches demonstrate adaptability and responsiveness, which are critical for sustaining long-term relationships in dynamic digital ecosystems. In addition, the engagement helps uncover potential ethical blind spots and anticipate emerging concerns before they escalate into reputational risks.

Operationalizing digital ethics requires brands to move from abstract principles to concrete, transparent practices that strengthen relationships with their audiences. For instance, clear communication of sustainability commitments and avoidance of greenwashing are essential conditions for credible green marketing strategies (Kumar & Dua, 2025). When firms exaggerate or obscure their actions, they risk undermining consumer trust, reputational standing, and regulatory compliance. Hanlon (2020) stresses that responsible digital practices also include limiting the scope of data collection and ensuring that consumers understand how their information is used, which helps safeguard brand legitimacy. Effective digital ethics ultimately combines respect for individual privacy, regulatory adherence, and the genuine delivery of sustainability initiatives (James et al., 2017; Hanlon, 2020). This allows organizations to position themselves as socially responsible and competitively resilient. This integration of transparency, accountability, and sustainability ensures that digital ethics functions as a protective mechanism and a driver of enduring brand value.

3) Employer Branding and Engagement

Employer branding frames how organizations define and communicate the employment experience to current and prospective staff. Chopra et al. (2024) describe it as "an essential human resource (HR) intervention to promote the organisation as a brand that can be promoted to the employees" (p.703). Similarly, Ta'Amnha et al. (2025) state that it reflects "the quality of an employee's working experiences, centered around the Employee Value Proposition (EVP), which comprises the various values organizations offer their employees" (p.2). These definitions position employer branding as an intentional construct that spans regulative, professional, and cultural–cognitive pillars. Staniec and Kalińska-Kula (2021) also add that employer branding treats employees as internal clients whose perceptions matter for organisational legitimacy. By foregrounding the EVP, organisations explicitly make promises about culture, progression, and workplace conditions. This, in turn, shapes employee expectations and initial attraction. Therefore, employer branding articulates what working for an organisation feels like and anchors the relationship between management and workforce.

Employer branding translates into measurable human-resource outcomes. The concept developed from corporate branding theory, borrowing customer-facing influence strategies to enhance recruitment, retention, and engagement (Davies et al., 2018). As a result, empirical and conceptual work shows that employer branding reduces turnover and improves organisational outcomes by signalling what makes a firm desirable and different (Chopra et al., 2024). For example, App and Büttgen (2016) indicate that firms invest in long-term employee value through strategies like maintaining health and safety, implementing structures that offer work-life balance, taking care of the ageing workforces, offering professional growth opportunities, and promoting lifelong learning. These practical measures improve employee well-being and build institutional resilience and continuity. Thus, employer branding is both a promotional and a substantive HR intervention that yields tangible returns in workforce stability and performance.

Employer branding now also intersects closely with sustainability and ESG expectations. Abratt and Kleyn (2023) note that business leaders increasingly incorporate environmental and social considerations into corporate and employer identities. This helps respond to demands from customers, employees, and executives for environmentally conscious cultures. When an organisation integrates ESG into its EVP, it links its purpose, workplace practices, and opportunities for employees to contribute to sustainability. This helps strengthen its internal commitment and external credibility (Ta'Amnha et al., 2025; Abratt & Kleyn, 2023). This alignment makes employer branding a vehicle for embedding values-driven behaviour across daily work practices and career development. It enables employees to see how their roles connect to broader social and environmental goals. Consequently, employer branding operates at the nexus of talent management and corporate sustainability, aligning employee values with organisational purpose.

4) Place Branding

Place branding is a strategic tool for cities and regions aiming to achieve sustainable development while enhancing their visibility and competitiveness. Kavaratzis et al. (2025) define it as a "useful tool that places use as they compete with each other for limited, hypermobile financial, human or cultural resources" (p.4). This highlights its role in attracting investment, tourism, and human capital. According to Cassinger and Porzionato (2025), city branding grounded in ethical principles emphasizes performativity, interdependence, relationality, and the obligation to care for vulnerable populations. These reflect how actions shape social and urban realities, the recognition of mutual reliance among communities, and the importance of building meaningful connections. This approach aligns with broader definitions of sustainability, which Chrysaki (2020) describes as "successful initiatives that demonstrate a tangible impact on enhancing quality of life and socially, culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable" (p.3). Integrating ethical and strategic considerations into place branding enables cities to boost their economic and cultural appeal. It also ensures that development initiatives contribute positively to the well-being of residents and the environment.

From an economic and functional viewpoint, place branding also serves as a mechanism through which regions compete for scarce financial, human, and cultural resources. Kavaratzis et al. (2025) note that branding enables places to attract investment, capitalize on tourism, and encourage public engagement with regenerated areas. This effectively positions the city within global networks of mobility and capital. Vuignier (2017) highlights that public bodies invest billions of dollars annually in place marketing and branding strategies, which are applied across land planning, urban development, and regional growth initiatives. These investments recognize that the symbolic and material representation of places can influence perceptions and decisions at multiple levels, from local residents to international investors. Strategic branding empowers cities to address functional challenges while promoting sustainability-oriented projects (Chrysaki, 2020). This leads to infrastructural development, supports technological innovations, and stimulates socio-economic development.

However, the cultural and social dimensions of place branding introduce complexities that require careful ethical consideration. For example, Narloch et al. (2019) caution that the musealization and protection of parks can impose homogenized narratives that obscure local diversity and original contexts. This demonstrates how branding can shape perceptions in ways that may not fully reflect a community's heritage or identity. This is particularly relevant when branding natural heritage, which often carries embedded cultural values, myths, and sustainability discourses that influence how places are represented and understood. This aligns with Cassinger and Porzionato's (2025) emphasis on relationality and care for the vulnerable populations, suggesting that effective place branding should balance economic, social, and cultural objectives while remaining ethically attuned to the communities it represents. When done thoughtfully, place branding can turn marketing into a tool for cultivating resilient, inclusive, and sustainable urban environments that engage both residents and visitors in meaningful ways.

5) Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a business approach in which organizations integrate social, environmental, and ethical considerations into their operations. Doane (2005) describes CSR as a "voluntary form of self-regulation that aims to tackle everything from human rights and labour standards to limiting carbon dioxide emissions that lead to climate change" (p.215). This emphasizes the proactive role companies can play in addressing pressing societal and environmental issues. Elmualim (2017) highlights that CSR activities can include community engagement, investment in outreach projects, fostering positive employee relations, and environmental stewardship. Businesses that adopt such practices demonstrate accountability and ethical commitment by ensuring that their strategies contribute meaningfully to the well-being of communities and the environment.

The scope of CSR extends beyond compliance or reputational benefits to encompass responsibilities toward various stakeholders. For instance, Kovács (2019) notes that CSR involves actions that support employees, local residents, disadvantaged groups, and other stakeholders. This reflects a comprehensive understanding of a company's social and environmental footprint. Moreover, CSR initiatives indicate that eco-friendly practices and environmental awareness are no longer just marketing strategies; they have become both a requirement and an expectation for businesses to achieve ethical and sustainability goals. For example, CSR initiatives often target tangible outcomes such as reducing environmental impact, promoting inclusivity, or fair labor practices, reinforcing a company's ethical brand image (Doane, 2005). Organizations that consistently demonstrate these commitments establish trust and credibility among stakeholders. This can translate into long-term loyalty and strengthened relationships with the communities in which they operate.

Business leaders often intertwine CSR with ethical branding at the corporate level. This approach emphasizes moral conduct, accountability, and value creation. Maon and Lindgreen (2024) argue that ethical branding integrates social and environmental responsibility as core components of corporate identity, enhancing stakeholder trust, customer satisfaction, and loyalty. Thus, embedding CSR into brand strategy allows organizations to show their commitment to broader societal goals. This positions them as conscientious actors in an increasingly sustainability-focused marketplace. The adoption of CSR practices thus serves a dual function: it fulfills moral and social obligations while simultaneously supporting strategic brand differentiation.

6) Anti-Greenwashing Strategies

Greenwashing is the practice of disseminating misleading information to create an overly optimistic image of a company's environmental practices or product. Dempere et al. (2024) explain that companies engage in greenwashing through actions, such as using vague language, delivering inaccurate claims, adding false labels to products, or a lack of transparency. These practices can mislead stakeholders and divert resources away from genuine sustainability initiatives. A case example is the JP Morgan Chase funding for fossil fuels despite its claim to support sustainability and climate change mitigation. Dempere et al. (2024) state that the bank has spent over US$268 billion to fund fossil fuel companies since the Paris Agreement. This contrast showcases how companies greenwash their practices by creating a sustainable brand image that doesn’t match with their actual business practices. Consequently, Mendes et al. (2024) further emphasize that greenwashing undermines authentic sustainability efforts across sectors, including agriculture, and erodes consumer trust. In response, organizations are increasingly recognizing the ethical and strategic necessity of combating greenwashing to protect brand credibility and reinforce stakeholder confidence. Addressing misleading sustainability claims enables companies to safeguard their reputation and contribute to a broader culture of accountability and transparency in the marketplace.

The challenges of greenwashing extend beyond ethics into brand governance and co-creation. Reynolds et al. (2023) note that positioning a brand around sustainability introduces tensions in three key areas: i) brand meanings, ii) extraordinary versus mundane brand performances, and iii) the empowerment or disempowerment of stakeholders in branding governance. Brand meanings refer to how companies communicate their branding messages and how consumers interpret them. Extraordinary versus mundane performances contrast between standout sustainability efforts and everyday practices. For example, a company might heavily advertise basic waste reduction measures or routine recycling programs as groundbreaking sustainability initiatives, even though these actions are part of standard operational practices. Finally, sustainability efforts can either empower or disempower people depending on whether the initiatives are inclusive and participatory. These dynamics illustrate how superficial or misleading sustainability messaging can compromise the authenticity of a brand, weakening trust among customers and other stakeholders. Implementing anti-greenwashing strategies requires companies to reconcile these tensions by ensuring that brand communications accurately reflect real sustainability initiatives.

There are multiple anti-greenwashing practices that companies can embrace. For example, technological solutions, such as blockchain, provide practical tools to address these challenges. For instance, Guo et al. (2023) indicate that blockchain offers customers transparent access to product data, including production methods, suppliers, and third-party validations. This reduces skepticism and enhances accountability. Hakim & Vinothkumar (2024) highlight regulatory and institutional initiatives such as the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulations (SFDR), mandatory disclosure of environmental and social initiatives, and the promotion of sustainability investments by asset management companies. These measures compel organizations to report their sustainability-related activities comprehensively, creating incentives for transparency and discouraging deceptive practices. Together with technological solutions and careful brand governance, these frameworks help companies cultivate credibility while supporting meaningful environmental and social impact. This ensures that sustainability claims are trustworthy and resources are directed toward authentic, positive change.

CONCLUSION

The global marketplace today is interconnected and environmentally conscious. Consumers, investors, and government agencies are aware of ongoing environmental crises like climate change. As a result, branding extends beyond mere recognition or differentiation to encompass the values and responsibilities that organizations embody. Sustainability has also become a defining dimension of modern brand identity, reflecting a commitment to ecological stewardship, social responsibility, and long-term value creation. As organizations navigate the complexities of global competition and stakeholder expectations, ethical branding has become a central framework that integrates sustainability principles with moral accountability, transparency, and inclusive practices. Ethical branding thus represents the convergence of strategy, values, and societal impact. It ensures that brands convey a positive image and demonstrate genuine contributions to the communities and environments they serve.

The insights from the thematic clusters illustrate how ethical branding operates across multiple levels and domains. For instance, green consumerism highlights the critical influence of consumer perceptions, showing that authentic sustainability efforts shape loyalty, trust, and engagement, while misleading claims risk eroding credibility. Digital ethics emphasizes the importance of responsible data practices and transparent communication. This safeguardes stakeholder trust in an era dominated by online interactions and digital marketing. Employer branding and engagement reveal how internal stakeholders, particularly employees, are integral to sustaining organizational values, maintaining commitment, and linking human resource strategies with environmental, social, and governance objectives. Place branding extends these principles to urban and regional contexts, demonstrating that ethical and sustainable strategies can guide development, enhance social cohesion, and support vulnerable populations. Meanwhile, corporate social responsibility underscores the role of voluntary initiatives in promoting social and environmental welfare, reinforcing stakeholder trust and long-term value creation. Finally, anti-greenwashing strategies provide the structural, technological, and regulatory mechanisms that ensure sustainability claims are credible, accurate, and aligned with real-world impact.

These findings illustrate that ethical branding for sustainability is neither linear nor singular; it is a dynamic and integrative process that requires coherence between messaging, actions, and stakeholder engagement. Successful brands must align consumer expectations, employee experiences, organizational practices, and societal outcomes with transparent and accountable sustainability initiatives. They must embed ethical considerations into every facet of branding, from marketing communications to internal culture and city-level engagement. This helps them establish trust, loyalty, and social legitimacy while contributing meaningfully to environmental and societal well-being. Ultimately, ethical branding transforms sustainability from a peripheral consideration into a core strategic asset, positioning organizations to thrive competitively while advancing a shared commitment to responsible and equitable development.

The study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, it brings together branding, ethics, and sustainability, positioning ethical branding as a field that goes beyond image management to embody principles such as transparency, integrity, corporate social responsibility, authenticity, and accountability. Building on this, it develops a clear conceptual framework around these five pillars, offering a way to understand how ethical values can be embedded within brand identity and communication. Another theoretical advance lies in linking branding with sustainability-oriented business models, showing that branding is no longer just a matter of consumer perception but part of the systemic integration of sustainability into organizational structures and strategies. Through its bibliometric approach, the study also maps the existing literature into six thematic clusters—green consumerism, digital ethics, employer branding, place branding, CSR, and anti-greenwashing. This mapping not only organizes current scholarship but also identifies gaps that can guide future inquiry. Taken together, these insights position ethical branding as a bridge between normative theory and practical application, demonstrating its role as both a moral commitment and a strategic necessity.

On the practical side, the research provides organizations with a set of actionable strategies to strengthen their credibility and resilience in the sustainability space. It highlights approaches such as green branding, eco-labeling, the use of blockchain for supply chain transparency, and anti-greenwashing measures as concrete tools businesses can implement. The study also emphasizes the importance of aligning employer branding with environmental, social, and governance priorities, helping firms attract and retain talent by integrating sustainability into the Employee Value Proposition. Beyond the corporate level, it offers insights for policymakers by pointing to regulatory frameworks—such as the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulations—that can promote transparency and accountability across industries. For cities and regions, the research provides ethical guidelines that place emphasis on interdependence, relationality, and responsibility for vulnerable populations, helping ensure that place branding supports inclusive and sustainable development. Finally, it underscores the importance of consumer-facing authenticity, demonstrating that genuine commitments to sustainability are rewarded with trust, loyalty, and even a willingness among consumers to pay mor.

Future studies on ethical branding and sustainability can build on this review in several important ways. First, there is room to refine the theoretical foundations by examining how the core pillars of ethical branding—transparency, integrity, CSR, authenticity, and sustainability—interact with one another across different industries and cultural contexts. While these elements provide a useful framework, their application is likely to differ depending on sectoral challenges, regulatory environments, and consumer expectations, which calls for comparative and cross-cultural analyses.

A second area of interest lies in the measurement of outcomes. Although existing work highlights the links between ethical branding and factors such as trust, loyalty, and reputation, systematic tools for evaluating these effects remain limited. Developing stronger indicators and assessment methods would allow researchers and practitioners alike to determine more clearly how ethical branding contributes to financial performance and long-term sustainability goals.

The rapid evolution of digital technologies also raises important questions. Issues surrounding data privacy, algorithmic decision-making, and digital transparency suggest that the ethics of online marketing will become increasingly central to the field. Future research might investigate not only the risks but also the opportunities presented by emerging tools such as blockchain and artificial intelligence in strengthening or undermining ethical branding.

At the organizational level, more attention should be given to employer branding and its integration with environmental, social, and governance commitments. Exploring how sustainability shapes internal culture, employee engagement, and talent retention could offer valuable insights into the long-term benefits of aligning values with workplace practices. Likewise, place branding has received comparatively little attention. Further studies could analyze how ethical approaches to branding influence urban development, tourism, and community resilience, particularly in contexts where inclusivity and social equity are pressing concerns.

Finally, consumer behavior remains a critical area for inquiry. While green consumerism is widely acknowledged, there is still much to learn about the thresholds of consumer trust—specifically, when sustainability efforts are seen as authentic and when they are dismissed as superficial or misleading. Cross-national studies would be especially useful in capturing variations in consumer expectations and responses to ethical branding across different markets

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Branding: or brand management refers to the management of a company's brand, such as its name, the images or ideas associated with it, including slogans, symbols, logos and other visual identity elements that represent it or its products and services.

Corporate Social Responsibility: is a business self-regulation model where companies integrate social, environmental, and ethical concerns into their operations and interactions with stakeholders to contribute to sustainable development and societal well-being.

Employee Value Proposition: is the unique set of benefits, rewards, and experiences an organization offers to its employees in exchange for their skills, commitment, and contributions.

Employer Branding: is a strategic approach to shape an organization's reputation as a desirable place to work, attracting and retaining top talent by highlighting its unique culture, values, and the overall employee experience.

Ethical: is the philosophical study of moral phenomena.

Green Consumerism: is a purchasing approach where consumers prioritize the environmental impact of products and services, opting for those produced sustainably and ethically, thereby contributing to a healthier planet for future generations.

Social and Governance: refer to an organization's or society's responsible management of social impacts, stakeholder relationships, and ethical conduct.

Sustainability: is a characteristic or condition of a process or system that allows it to remain, at a certain level, for a certain period of time.

Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulations: is an EU framework requiring financial market participants to disclose how they integrate sustainability risks and impacts into their investment processes, increasing transparency and preventing greenwashing for investors.