



Virtue Signalling or Vision?”Analysing Lush Cosmetics’ Marketing of Ethical Consumerism Through the Lens of Brand Authenticity - *Combining psychology (perception, trust) with green marketing strategies in the UK context.*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Ethical consumerism has become a recognised concept in recent decades, with people paying much more attention to sustainability and social justice, along with environmental factors, when shopping. Nonetheless, the success of such approaches usually depends on the genuineness of the brand in upholding these ethical virtues (Konuk & Otterbring, 2024). The case of Lush Cosmetics, the UK-based ethical brand, can also be highlighted as one of the major examples of companies that have focused on including environmental and social concerns in their brand message in a very strategic manner.

1.2 Research Aim

This research aims to critically analyse Lush Cosmetics’ green marketing strategies in the UK with a particular focus on the role of brand authenticity in shaping consumer perceptions of ethical consumerism.

1.3 Research objectives

- To examine how brand authenticity affects consumer trust in ethical brands.
- To analyse Lush Cosmetics’ green marketing strategies in the UK.
- To explore consumer perceptions of virtue signalling versus genuine ethical branding.

1.4 Research question

How does brand authenticity influence consumer trust in Lush Cosmetics’ green marketing strategies, and how do consumers perceive the brand’s ethical positioning as either virtual signalling or genuine commitment to sustainability?

1.5 Problem statement / Rationale of the research

As Lush Cosmetics has established itself as an ethical company with a high reliance on environmental and social causes, there is an increasing fear that businesses may find ethical branding as a tactic to modify their products in the market without actually following these endeavours (Teixeira et al., 2023). Therefore, the study helps to fill the gap concerning the synergy between brand authenticity, ethical marketing and consumer trust, considering that it aims to clarify the interplay of these factors in the case of the Lush Cosmetics brand, and identify the whole concept of ethical consumerism.

1.6 Significance

This study is relevant since it will give a great source of information on how authentic ethical brands such as Lush can create and sustain trust with their customers in the growing cynical marketplace (LUSH, 2025). Also, having this information on how the branding of Lush Cosmetics is viewed as either authentic or performative can be used as a basis to go further into the debate of how corporations should ultimately be responsible towards the environment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Authenticity

One of the important marketing concepts that emphasises the authenticity and consistency of a product brand in terms of promises and values is brand authenticity (Yang & Battocchio, 2021). Brand authenticity is understood when the identity of a brand relates to its activity and communication and focuses on transparency.

2.2 Consumer Trust

Consumer trust means the confidence expressed in a brand to perform what it promises and in the best interest of the consumer (Tanveer et al., 2021). Trust usually leads to the belief that it is a form of steady, reliable brand behaviour.

2.3 Green Marketing

Green marketing is the process with the assistance of which brands market their products or activities as socially responsible and environmentally friendly (Amoako et al., 2021). Green marketing is described as the marketing of products with minimal contribution to the environment. The concept targeted sustainability and environmental protection.

2.4 Brand authenticity affecting consumer trust in ethical brands

According to Safeer et al. (2023), people have developed some levels of confidence in the brand that are perceived to be transparent concerning their ethical business conduct, like having enough information about how they source their products and what effect they have on climate change. Similarly, Khan and Abbas (2023) discussed that authenticity never has anything to do with being honest in communicating but being on the same emotional page between brand and consumer values. The authenticity of a brand that advocates for sustainability positively affects consumer trust directly. As an example, the study of Safeer et al. (2023) demonstrates that consumers are more willing to trust the brand and display brand loyalty when they believe a brand to be authentic in its sustainability. Nevertheless, Campagna et al. (2023) argue that authenticity should be supported by concrete and verifiable sorts of actions, not by the same marketing statements. Therefore, brand authenticity gains more acceptance in enhancing consumer trust, especially when it comes to ethical brands.

2.5 Green marketing strategies in the UK cosmetic industry

Green marketing is an emerging trend in the UK cosmetics market as more consumers tend to purchase ethical and sustainable products. According to a survey conducted by Statista (2023), 54% of UK consumers state sustainability is an important consideration during the purchase of beauty products, which is one of the signs of ethical consumerism. A study by Kenalemang-Palm and Eriksson (2023) promotes the importance of the consumers preference to side with brands responding to environmental and ethical concerns like the use of organic materials or cruelty-free products. Other brands such as Lush Cosmetics and Neal's Yard Remedies have successfully established consumer loyalty through green packaging, responsible sourcing, and conservation. However, Teixeira et al. (2023) argue that green marketing is effective across the size of the brands. As noted by Kenalemang-Palm and Eriksson (2023), multinational cosmetic companies also suffer when it comes to the perception of their sustainability practices, with a vast majority of buyer groups feeling that the companies are pursuing these sustainability activities because it is more lucrative than ethical. Utami et al. (2022) noted that this cynicism has led to the emergence of the term known as “greenwashing,” which is defined as a marketing deception. Teixeira et al. (2023) emphasise that brands that manage to make a comprehensive approach to environmental protection without substantiating their claims may hurt their own reputation.

2.6 Consumer perceptions of virtue signalling versus genuine ethical branding

The consumer perception in terms of virtue signalling and actual ethical branding has occupied a centre stage over corporate sustainability. Konuk and Otterbring (2024) asserted that virtue signalling is when an ethically friendly brand tries to push such an image, which is not based on any deep inner movements but rather is superficial, which causes a large amount of scepticism in the customers and produces ignorance of the concept of thinking green in the first place. According to Quezado et al. (2023), consumers are becoming more likely to pinpoint those brands that participate in virtue signalling, especially when such ethical assertions seem to not be associated with the actual actions of a company. Konuk and Otterbring (2024) discussed that the fact that nearly everything seems like environmental propaganda, namely, greenwashing, contributes to this perception. On the contrary, Quezado et al. (2023) argue that real ethical branding is seen as more believable when brand values are considered equivalent to behaviours, which promotes long-term loyalty. Brokalaki (2024) suggests that there are emotional connections between consumers, which are based on the ethical pursuit of consistency as the distinguishing feature between genuine brands and brands signalling their intentions to be considered virtuous. This has also been confirmed in a study carried out by Brokalaki (2024), who points out that consumers tend to form loyalty and trust towards a brand when they feel that the brand is genuinely interested in sustainability.

2.7 Theories and Models

A variety of theories offer the basis to comprehend the effects of ethical branding on consumer behaviour. The “Theory of Planned Behaviour” holds that the behaviour of consumers is determined by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, which in turn are determined by the brand perception. Concerning ethical consumerism, dispositions concerning sustainability and hypothetical norms concerning ethical consumption have an impact on purchase choices. “Relationship Marketing Theory” points out that trust is an important component of consumer relationships and especially ethical branding, which is characterised by transparency and honesty.

2.8 Literature Gap

Although brand authenticity and consumer trust, as well as green marketing, have been prominently researched, there is a gap in studies comparing the interaction between them in real-life application in relation to ethical consumerism, specifically regarding the cosmetic industry. Current literature like Safeer et al. (2023) and Khan and Abbas (2023) have issues of taking into consideration large multinational corporations or niched eco-friendly brands, whereas there is no in-depth knowledge about the mechanism of consumer perception of authenticity in the medium-sized brands.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research philosophy

The study follows interpretivism philosophy, which deals with subjective insights and social phenomena related to consumer behaviour perceptions. Interpretivism can be applicable in this research since it will permit a detailed investigation of the individual consumer attitudes towards ethical branding (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). This stresses that context, experience, and social occurrence are focused on in this theory as consumer choice is concerned, especially regarding ethical marketing principles.

3.2 Research Approach

In this research, the deductive research approach is used because the research begins with a theoretical framework of the existing body of literature regarding brand authenticity, consumer trust, and green marketing. These theories have been tested in the research by gathering some data to prove or disprove the established concepts (Casula et al., 2021). A deductive strategy would be relevant because it would be possible to apply the existing models to analyse consumer behaviour under Lush Cosmetics.

3.3 Research design

The design of the research is explanatory, as it tries to explain the connection between brand authenticity, consumer trust, and the perceptions of virtue signalling or authentic ethical branding. Explanatory research is the best way to learn the cause-and-effect relationship among the variables and how one variable affects another (Casula et al., 2021). This design enables the research to examine the same regarding how consumers would

distinguish ethical branding as either authentic or complete virtue signalling, and hence, would enable a deeper understanding of the same across consumers in terms of their decision-making process.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

This research makes use of the secondary data collection process. These incorporate generally available reports, sustainability reports, marketing records, and consumer reviews on different sites, including the formal site of the company, social sites, and third-party review sites (Mazhar et al., 2021). These materials contain useful information on the green marketing tactics of Lush, its brand communications, and the way its environmentally friendly messages are perceived by consumers. The analysis of the obtained data is performed with the help of the case study approach, which involves close study of the marketing practices of Lush Cosmetics and their effects on consumers perceptions. The use of the case study approach has helped develop an in-depth realisation that the ethical branding of Lush has corresponded with consumer trust and authenticity (Mishra & Alok, 2022). The analysis of data in such a context reveals recurrent themes and patterns, among which the correspondence between the sustainability messages Lush conveys and the consumer trust in Lush and its effects on the perceptions of virtue signalling and true ethical branding.

3.5 Inclusion & Exclusion and Boolean Operators

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Study Type	Peer-reviewed journals, articles, industry reports	Non-peer reviewed articles, blogs, press release
Relevance	Studies on green marketing, ethical consumerism, brand authenticity	Studies unrelated to ethical branding or green marketing
Timeframe	Studies published within the last 5 years	Studies published more than 5 years ago
Geographic Focus	UK and European markets	non-UK markets
Language	English	Non-English
Target Population	Customers focused on ethical branding	Customers who do not focus on ethical branding
Focus Area	Ethical branding, sustainability, green marketing, consumer trust	General marketing strategies unrelated to ethics

Table 3.1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

(Source: Author)

Operator	Purpose	Example
AND	Narrows search, includes both terms	“Brand Authenticity” AND “Consumer Trust”
OR	Expands search include either term	“Green Marketing OR “Sustainable Branding”
NOT	Excludes unwanted terms	“Brand Authenticity” NOT “Greenwashing”

Table 3.2: Boolean operations

(Source: Author)

3.6 Ethics

The research process is done with confidentiality and anonymity of participants. It is a transparent study with no intentions of deceiving. Data will only be used as and when it is required to undertake this research, and all findings will be presented as they are. Moreover, the study will focus on the ethical aspect of green marketing and make sure that no results misinform about brands and consumers unintentionally.

4.0 Findings and Analysis

4.1 Findings

Theme 1: Brand Authenticity and Consumer Trust in Ethical Branding

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Yang, J., & Battocchio, A. F.	2021	Quantitative research, survey-based study	This study investigates the effects of transparent brand communication on perceived brand authenticity. It finds that transparency positively impacts consumer trust and enhances brand authenticity, driving consumer loyalty. Brands that clearly communicate their ethical values, such as Lush, foster stronger emotional connections and trust with consumers.
Tanveer, M., Ahmad, A. R., Mahmood, H., & Haq, I. U.	2021	Survey and structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis	Tanveer et al. (2021) explore the role of ethical marketing in driving consumer-brand relationships. The research suggests that ethical marketing practices, like those used by Lush, improve brand loyalty by increasing brand authenticity. Ethical brand actions, like sustainability, help create a trust-based relationship with consumers, which is essential for long-term loyalty.
Gunawan, S., Budiarsi, S. Y., & Hartini, S.	2020	Case study, qualitative interviews	Gunawan et al. (2020) examine how authenticity as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) platform builds customer loyalty. The study finds that when brands like Lush integrate authentic CSR initiatives into their core strategy, they significantly strengthen customer loyalty.

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Table 4.1: Theme 1

(Source: Author)

Theme 2: Green Marketing and Consumer Perceptions of Ethical Brands

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Amoako, G. K., Doe, J. K., & Dzagbenuku, R. K.	2021	Survey-based research, structural equation modelling (SEM)	This study examines the role of green marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in fostering brand loyalty. It finds that green marketing significantly enhances consumer perceptions of a brand's ethicality, which in turn positively influences brand loyalty.
Szabo, S., & Webster, J.	2021	Experimental design, content analysis	Szabo and Webster (2021) investigate the effects of green marketing and greenwashing. Their study finds that while green marketing can enhance product perceptions, consumers are quick to perceive brands engaging in greenwashing negatively. Genuine, transparent green marketing strategies, such as those employed by ethical brands like Lush, are seen as positive, while misleading claims damage brand reputation.
Reddy, K. P., Chandu, V., Srilakshmi, S., Thagaram, E., Sahyaja, C., & Osei, B.	2023	Survey and data analysis	This research focuses on consumers' perceptions of green marketing, particularly in the context of eco-friendly products. It finds that consumers are more likely to develop positive perceptions and brand loyalty when brands actively promote and implement sustainable practices. The study emphasizes that the authenticity of green marketing efforts is crucial, with brands like Lush benefiting from their genuine environmental commitment.

Table 4.2: Theme 2

(Source: Author)

Theme 3: Virtue Signalling vs. Genuine Ethical Branding

Author	Year	Methodology	Findings
Berthon, P. R., Ferguson, S. T. L., Pitt, L. F., & Wang, E.	2023	Conceptual framework and qualitative analysis	Berthon et al. (2023) discuss the risks and rewards of brand virtue signalling. The authors find that while virtue signalling can attract attention, it may lead to negative consumer perceptions if the brand's actions do not align with its stated values. Lush Cosmetics, by contrast, avoids this pitfall by aligning its ethical claims with tangible actions, which strengthens its credibility and consumer trust.

Wallace, E., Buil, I., & De Chernatony, L.	2020	Survey and experimental design	Wallace et al. (2020) investigate how consumers interpret virtue signalling on social media platforms. Lush is seen as a brand that avoids virtue signalling due to its consistent actions and transparency regarding sustainability and social issues.
Lee, Z., Spry, A., Ekinci, Y., & Vredenburg, J.	2024	Case study and survey research	Lee et al. (2024) explore the impact of brand activism on consumer perceptions. They find that consumers appreciate brands like Lush that engage in authentic activism, which builds brand bravery and equity. However, the study highlights that virtue signalling without meaningful action leads to brand hypocrisy, damaging brand equity.

Table 4.3: Theme 3

(Source: Author)

4.2 Analysis

One of the factors at the centre of consumer trust is brand authenticity. Among the important findings indicated by Yang and Battocchio (2021) is that consumers perceive brand authenticity greatly after the transparent brand communication, which directly affects the trust and loyalty. Transparency in communication about ethical activities is also very well implemented by Lush Cosmetics, which enhances customer confidence in regard to cruelty-free production practices or sustainability (Ethical Consumer, 2025). Also, Tanveer et al. (2021) assert that ethical marketing is effective in enhancing brand loyalty since it creates genuine relationships between merchants and consumers. Due to the consistency of ethical actions such as the sourcing of ingredients and its zero-waste campaigns, Lush brands its operations to the preferences of the consumers, which strengthens authenticity (Ethical Consumer, 2025). Gunawan et al. (2020) additionally emphasise that brands that customers perceive as authentic, especially when they have evident corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes.

Green marketing is a major portion contributing towards enhancing ethical branding and making consumers loyal. Amoako et al. (2021) show that green marketing, especially where it is in line with CSR, affects the opinion of the consumers on the ethicality of a brand, thus creating stronger loyalty. The green marketing by Lush, including advertising environmentally friendly products and packaging, goes in line with this finding (LUSH, 2025). Szabo and Webster (2021) also emphasise that trust is harmed when organisations use the concept of greenwashing, i.e., deceiving the consumers about nothing more than the false green promises. However, consumers perceive Lush positively due to the fact that the effort to promote green marketing is based on concrete efforts by the business (LUSH, 2025). Lush also shares the same message of green marketing because, according to Reddy et al. (2023), genuine green marketing strategies have resulted in positive consumer attitudes and brand loyalty.

The difference between virtue signalling and authentic ethical branding plays an essential role in influencing the consumers. According to Berthon et al. (2023), not accompanied by tangible action, virtue signalling may result in a bad end-user response. The study by Wallace et al. (2020) revealed that the consumers can distinguish between authentic ethical obligations and performative branding. Lush, by engaging in ethical behaviour like coming up with the “Naked” product line, and consistent ethical behaviour, like investing in fair trade and animal rights, does not fall into the trap of virtuous signalling (World Brand Affairs, 2023). This is affirmed by

Lee et al. (2024), who demonstrate that consumers place value in brands such as Lush, which practice real activism, as they conduct their actions in accordance with their expressed values.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Conclusion

This paper examined how Lush Cosmetics advertises their ethical focus using the concept of brand authenticity, green branding, and how it differs between virtue signalling and actual ethical behaviour. This research showed that consumer trust and brand loyalty are enhanced through Lush's sustainability and transparency. Customers cherish the brands that move their activities in tandem with their ethical assertions, and Lush matching well with its communication about sustainability makes it even more true. In addition, virtue signalling can negatively affect brand equity, and green marketing positively alters consumer perceptions of a brand's ethicality when the task is backed by practical steps. The fact that Lush has been on its way to minimising plastic, promoting fair trade, and being cruelty-free is how it can be distinguished as one of the brands that really walk the talk concerning ethical branding.

5.2 Study limitations

A limitation of this research is that it is mainly based on secondary data gathered from articles and reports, and thus the dynamic nature of the perceptions of consumers may not be captured in real-time. Also, as the study concentrated on Lush Cosmetics, it might not be possible to generate similar results in regard to other brands.

5.3 Future scope

Future studies may focus on the effect of Lush's ethical marketing approaches on younger generations or even look at the reception of ethical branding in other markets internationally. A more randomly selected consumer sample can create insights into the authenticity of brands and diversity of various demographics.

5.4 Recommendation

It can be advised that Lush Cosmetics should further develop green marketing methods and not hide anything in its ethical operations (Kenalemang-Palm & Eriksson, 2023). Moreover, it can enhance its sustainability practice, including the promotion of a zero-waste product, which would advance its status as an ethically honest brand.

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