

Beyond the hype: Deciphering brand trust amid sustainability skepticism

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Abstract

Positioning a brand as environment-friendly does not guarantee that customers will blindly accept it. While previous research has explored consumer responses to various green marketing claims, the search for the process under which consumers form positive or negative associations remains inconclusive. Based on the theoretical lens of signaling, this study examines the process of green brand trust where consumers form green brand associations after receiving the appropriate signal from the firms. In so doing we answer calls for more research on green brand trust and extend previous understanding by arguing for and confirming the mediating role of green brand associations. We further hypothesize that resultant mediation will be stronger for individuals with low green skepticism. Findings from 270 consumers indicate that green brand association mediates the relationship between green brand positioning and green brand trust. Further, green skepticism may weaken green brand association's effect on green brand trust. While firms tend to take extra effort to make their green offering trustworthy, they need to strengthen their signaling efforts that facilitate associating with a green brand to trust that brand.

KEYWORDS

green brand association, green brand positioning, green brand trust, sustainable consumption

1 | INTRODUCTION

As firms have realized that green branding may result in increased trust among consumers (Huang & Guo, 2021) and overall lead to business benefits (Khan et al., 2022) an increasing number of firms position green attributes such as renewable energy use, reducing carbon emissions, and minimizing waste in their branding strategy. However,

the claims of the firms in terms of their green brand positioning are often ambiguous and deceptive (Guo et al., 2018). Thus, when consumers choose green brands, they may consider many other factors along with firms' green messaging to form their "green brand trust" (Lee et al., 2022). Indeed, it is unlikely that consumers will blindly accept a green brand based on the firm's positioning strategy and will trust the brand (Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023). Further, while recent

Abbreviations: AMOS, analysis of moment structures; AVE, average variance extracted; CBBE, customer-based brand equity; CB-SEM, covariance based structural equation modeling; CFI, comparative fit index; CFA, confirmatory factor analysis; CMIN, minimum discrepancy function; CR, composite reliability; DF, degree of freedom; GFI, goodness of fit; HTMT, Heterotrait-Monotrait; PLS-SEM, partial least squares structural equation modeling; RMSEA, root-mean-squared error; SD, standard deviation; S-O-R, stimulus-organism-response; SPSS, Statistical Package for Social Sciences; SRMR, standardized root-mean-squared residual; TLI, Tucker-Lewis coefficient.

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studies explicate that consumers are now more skeptical about forming green brand trust than ever before (Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023) the process of consumers' green brand trust development remains unclear (Hue & Oanh, 2023) and calls have been made for attempts further to explore the link between green brand strategy and brand affects and brand trust (Huang & Guo, 2021).

Empirical investigation in the domain of sustainable consumption has long argued that green brand trust is an important factor in sustainable brand positioning (Leckie et al., 2021). As most consumers rely on the firms' given signal to infer the green quality of the brands, firms have started to invest heavily in green brand positioning (Liao et al., 2020). In addition, trust is the most popular measure of brand-consumer relationships and brand equity (Merz et al., 2018). Whereas consumers frequently choose green brands based on their underlying trust for green products/market offerings, the frequency of high-profile incidents where green brands are coming under the spotlight due to unethical behaviors is increasing (Guo et al., 2017). Nevertheless, green brand trust in sustainable consumption has gained significant attention, the path from green brand positioning is not always straightforward (Butt et al., 2017; Chen & Chang, 2013; Li & Sun, 2022). Further, Portal et al. (2019) discuss the impact of branding strategy on brand warmth and competence that indirectly affects brand trust.

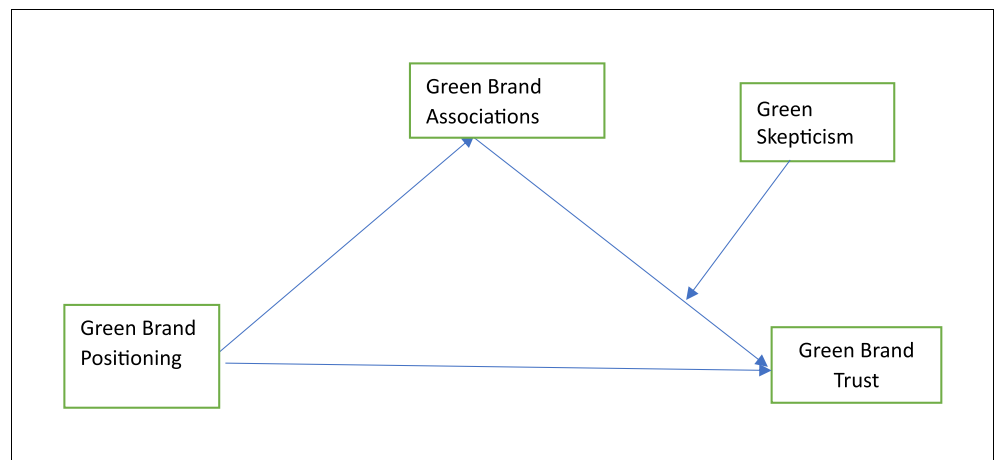
Given the prevalent gaps in the literature, the main contributions of the study are mentioned as follows. First, we propose and investigate an integrated framework of green brand positioning, green brand association, green skepticism, and green brand trust that calls attention without further delay (Gong et al., 2021; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Hence, the study aims to focus on certain issues to examine the direct link between green brand positioning and green brand trust that complements many more contemporary studies grounded on signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011; da Luz et al., 2020; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Secondly, to examine the mediating paths of green brand associations in the proposed relationship. With this study, we join a longstanding debate in the brand literature concerning the hierarchy of brand equity dimensions (Madadi et al., 2021). That is, consumers try to reduce uncertainty and anxiety by considering the overall green brand association to develop green brand trust that may make the green brand positioning a successful one (Huang & Guo, 2021; Lin et al., 2019). Further, green brand associations may be seen as an outcome of a successful green brand positioning strategy (Kim & Oh, 2020; Paul, 2019). Third, the study confirms the moderating role of green skepticism in the relationship between green brand associations and green brands. The last contribution of the study comes from the novel context in which these constructs are examined. There is controversy regarding branded product acceptance in the emerging economy context (Wang et al., 2017) whereas "emerging markets provide a better context to study consumer uncertainty and signaling theory" (Heinberg et al., 2018,p.2). Further, the green branding strategy from the perspective of sustainable consumption has been given scant attention (Kazmi et al., 2021; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023) and remains inconclusive.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical underpinning of the study is based on the synthetization of the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) model and signaling theory. Based on the signaling theory (Connelly et al., 2011) firms provide signals and consumers receive them to reduce the uncertainty of responses whereas the S-O-R model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) explicates different external stimuli affect consumers' organisms to respond differently afterward. Further, Wang et al. (2022), review the S-O-R model and posits that it is an overarching theoretical framework that is very helpful to include various variables in a research framework. Hence, we employ the S-O-R model and signaling theory as the foundation to explain how the firms' signals form afterward responses like trust through forming brand associations initially. Accordingly, we propose green brand positioning as a stimulus, green brand association as an organism, and green brand trust as a response. Signaling theory further complements the proposal by validating green brand positioning and green skepticism in the framework (Figure 1).

Green brand positioning is postulated as a stimulus state of the S-O-R model that is also consistent along with the proposition of signaling theory that explicates green brand positioning as a signal from the marketers. Green brand positioning consists of a set of branding tools to establish a strong footprint in the market. Green brand positioning activities aim to build consumers' perceptions about the product/market offering that may trigger the affective states of the consumers (Lavuri et al., 2022). So, based on the basic notion of S-O-R and signaling theory, green brand positioning as stimuli or signals drive consumers' green brand association. A green brand is represented as an organism state to develop an associative network model of received information or signal (Bae et al., 2020; Wang & Horng, 2016). Green brand association is an affective state where consumers form awareness and image about the brand that ultimately impacts the consumers' cognitive responses and afterward behavior like consumers' green brand trust. Green brand association is often triggered by the given signals of the firms, or any other stimuli taken from the external environment. Accordingly, the green brand association is positioned as the organism in the S-O-R model (Bae et al., 2020). Hence, it is likely that green brand positioning is a signal that acts as the external stimuli to ultimately affect the consumers' green brand association with eco-friendly products or market offerings (Wang & Horng, 2016).

In the S-O-R model, the green brand association is the organism block that is affected by the external signal given by the firms with varying breadth and depth. Furthermore, when consumers develop brand associations, they may realize the benefits of the green market offering and give a distinct place to that product in their minds. To reduce the uncertainty of their affective or cognitive state afterwards they form a sense of reliability with the brand that is brand trust. So, consumers tend to turn the association into a response to communicate that the stimuli/signal received from the external environment has been processed to form attitudinal or behavioral responses (Connelly et al., 2011; Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Alternatively, consumers are likely to form trust based on the processed stimuli when

FIGURE 1 Conceptual framework.

they find that the received stimuli either match or enhance the existing nod in the memory. So, green brand trust is positioned as the response block in the S-O-R model.

However environmental claims may create confusion in the consumers' minds and this confusion is more prevalent when consumers are skeptical about the green claims of the firms. Green brand association is subdued by the confusion that may break the associative network model created by green brand positioning (Baek et al., 2010). Moreover, based on signaling theory it is easy to postulate that green skepticism acts as the barrier to form the brand emotional attachment or brand credibility (Copeland & Bhaduri, 2020; Mandler et al., 2021) that increases the uncertainty or perceived risk.

3 | HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

3.1 | Green Brand Positioning and Green Brand Trust

A firm's green brand strategies are often directed toward customers to obtain a marketplace and to develop a strong brand presence in terms of brand loyalty and brand trust (Coelho et al., 2018; Dias & Cavaleiro, 2022). Green brand trust is defined as consumers' willingness to rely on green market offerings based on the expectation resulting from its benevolence, credibility, and ability to provide environmental performance (Chen, 2010). Green brand positioning has been acknowledged as having various forms from informing customers of the brand attributes to convincing customers to hold a differentiated place in the minds of the customers (Gilal et al., 2022; Han et al., 2015; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Brand positioning enables marketers to give meaning to their market offerings. Branded products based on authentic brand positioning encounter with the customer through firm-

customer relationships where brand feelings and love are activated (Sajtos et al., 2021). Although overall green brand evaluations and green brand purchase intentions are important, there are arguably more direct ways to gain insight into the customers' responses toward the green brand positioning (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Brand preference, brand trust, and brand desirability assessment are widely recognized indicators of customer-based brand equity that are derived from brand positioning (Zarantonello et al., 2020). A customer's positive interaction with a green brand message enables customers to think positively about the brand's greenness and makes them confident that the brand will meet their expectation (Gong et al., 2021).

Through the interaction with the brand positioning strategies, firms provide positive signals as a key element to reduce associated risks with the purchase and to make better decisions. Further, while consumers interact with green brand positioning, consumers get the opportunity to get reliable green brand messages that may reduce their uncertainty. Further, it facilitates the responses like green brand trust, engagement, and brand favorability (Waites et al., 2020). Research to date has alluded to the effect of green brand positioning in terms of delivering value to green brands and customers who prefer sustainable consumption (Lee et al., 2022). In the era of sustainable consumption, researchers also have increasingly emphasized the need to further understand the benefits of green brand positioning (D'Souza & Taghian, 2018; Park & Lin, 2020; Sun et al., 2021). Many suggest choosing an appropriate green brand strategy that develops green brand trust among consumers (Guo et al., 2017; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Green brand positioning as a significant predictor of green brand trust is motivated by the fact that authentic green brand positioning provides reliable and trustworthy information related to products' greenness as a strong signal that ultimately forms green brand trust. Based on the above rationale a hypothesis can be developed as follows:

H1. There is a positive relationship between green brand positioning and green brand trust.

3.2 | Green Brand Positioning and Green Brand Association

While positioning is at the core of strategic marketing, green brand positioning is likely to enhance the brand-related performance of green products (Iyer et al., 2019). Brand positioning decisions to achieve success in terms of differentiation and association in the marketplace are recognized in the branding literature (Iyer et al., 2019). Two phases in the positioning process have been discussed in the literature. The extent to which the phase will be derived is largely dependent on the brand consideration continuum where the brand is positioned (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017). Abstraction-based positioning is successful for the more generic level of product category whereas exemplar-based positioning strategy is successful for the advanced level of product category (Halkias, 2015). Further, many argue that when a product category is in its introductory or early phase it should be positioned on the generic level. Zhang et al. (2021), explicates that environmental issues are at the introductory stage in the emerging economies of Asia and Africa. (Dawar & Lei, 2009; Gurzki et al., 2019; Punj & Moon, 2002). Hence, we argue that green products in the emerging economy should be positioned on the abstraction of product attributes that is more generic level.

Nevertheless, the green brand–customer relationship domain is extremely complex based on several psychological and behavioral outcomes. Abstraction-based positioning enhances information search from the customers (Nalca et al., 2018; Punj & Moon, 2002) and may reduce information asymmetry (Napoli et al., 2016). Information search and processing develop consumer knowledge that reinforces the development of positive and unique brand associations. Further, signaling theory posits that signals are extrinsic to the physical product like price, advertising, brand name, or brand origin that drive consumers to classify brands into different cognitive categories to enable their information processing and complete understanding (Gurzki et al., 2019; Sichtmann & Diamantopoulos, 2013). Consumers develop cognitive structures of diverse brands based on prior knowledge. After receiving a signal about the green brand through a green positioning strategy, the customers may have diverse emotional feelings with varying intensities (Heinberg et al., 2018; Mandler et al., 2021; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023) that may be guided by prior experience with specific instances and may further facilitate information processing to form an association. Diverse feelings about the brand facilitate the development of brand identity. The brand identity reflects the contribution of all brand-related signals to the brand association and image (Qu et al., 2011). So, the signal being processed into the customers' organism may lead to the rise of diverse emotional feelings to form a brand association (Qiu et al., 2023; Shams et al., 2015). Based on the above rationale we formulate the below hypothesis:

H2. There is a positive relationship between green brand positioning and green brand association.

3.3 | Green Brand Association and Green Brand Trust

A considerable amount of research is directed toward brand trust to understand customer-based brand equity (CBBE) for establishing a common basis for further study. Brand equity literature is rich enough to have insight into the widely accepted four dimensions of brand equity namely brand awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty (Han et al., 2015). Brand associations serve to differentiate and create meaning for brands (Till et al., 2011). The brand association also has a positive impact on consumers' brand preferences (Gupta et al., 2020). When consumers are associated with a brand, they start to trust the brand from a sense of familiarity. Brand trust is defined as the willingness of a consumer to rely on a brand because of expectations that it will perform its function or will cause positive outcomes (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Brand trust literature always emphasizes the importance of the brand equity dimension as a source of building favorable attitudes and preferences toward the brands (Madadi et al., 2021). The firm's commitment to social responsibility has a significant impact on consumers' evaluation of that brand. Nevertheless, due to the unique characteristics of green marketing, green brand equity dimensions require further study without delay (Butt et al., 2017). The authors extend previous studies (Butt et al., 2017; Chen, 2010; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022) by investigating green brand association and green trust links that may provide a clearer picture of branding strategy for a green product/market offering. To encourage trust in a green brand, marketers present different signals that need interpretation from the consumers. The interpretation of the signals is guided by the associations that the consumers have with the brand. When consumers connect the signals with the memory, it facilitates forming favorable attitudes toward the brand and trusting the green brand (Shams et al., 2015). More accurately, consumers must interpret the signal presented with a green brand that corresponds to their association with green products. The absence of a good quality signal may make the difficult for the consumers to be associated with a brand (Pappu & Quester, 2016). Further, signaling theory also suggests that consumers make their judgment and form trust about the brand's greenness based on the complex interaction of their associative network in the memory and firms given signals in the marketplace (Waites et al., 2020). Further, (Atilgan et al., 2005; Cho & Hwang, 2020; James, 2005) also explicate that effective brand associations boost brand equity which also leads to higher brand loyalty. So, a hypothesis can be proposed as follows:

H3. There is a positive relationship between green brand association and green brand trust.

3.4 | Green Skepticism, Green Brand Association, and Green Brand Trust

Consumers are not always likely to develop green brand trust from green brand associations due to negative green skepticism (Huang &

Guo, 2021; Li et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). We aimed to examine the contingencies of green skepticism on the link between green brand association and green brand trust in line with the S-O-R framework where stimuli promote particular human actions or beliefs that are further contingent upon consumers' processing of relevant features and psychological states to behave (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The effect of brand association is contingent upon contextual factors (e.g., Karjaluoto et al., 2016). Moreover, it can also be inferred from the signaling theory that the environment of the signal along with the individual characteristics of the receiver may result in diverse complexities to the behavior of the consumers. Consumers with positive attitudes toward the products may behave differently depending upon the context (Connelly et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2022). Further, "irresponsible environmental behaviors of enterprises are the key reason for people's increasing uncertainty and doubt about the environmental performance and benefits of green products" (Li et al., 2022, p.3). The doubt about the green claims is more prominent at the later stage of brand trust development (Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021; Khan et al., 2022). So, the extent of green skepticism consumers hold will act as the contingency factor that initiates diverse cognitive procedures among consumers even after forming a green brand association and resulting as a deterrent to green brand trust.

Green skepticism acts as the enabler of activating negative attitudes of consumers toward the green brand. A study explicates that green skepticism of the organic level deters the purchase intention of consumers (Hou & Sarigöllü, 2022). The effect of green brand association may depend on the situational characteristics of individual consumers (Jin et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2019), such that green brand association will not always result in high green brand trust (Chen, 2010; Sasmita & Suki, 2015). We define green skepticism as the doubt a consumer may have about the green product or environmental claims of any firm (Luo et al., 2020). Green skepticism creates hindrances to processing contextual cues that may deactivate the effect of green brand association on green brand trust. Green skepticism significantly decreases green brand trust (Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021). Several studies argue that a high level of green skepticism affects perceived consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Copeland & Bhaduri, 2020). Existing literature on brand-customer relationships explicates the relationship between green brand associations and green skepticism (Zhang et al., 2021). Consumers must process positive brand signals so strongly that green brand association outweighs the green skepticism to form green brand trust (Matthes & Wonneberger, 2014), green skepticism if it is related to any particular brand may weaken the consumers' feelings and positive attitudes to the green market offering (Kahraman & Kazançoğlu, 2019). Due to green skepticism, consumers may feel that firms are giving misleading information and brands' environmental attachment becomes weaker (Luo et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Based on the above rationale a hypothesis is developed as follows:

H4. Green skepticism weakens the positive relationship between green brand association and green brand trust.

3.5 | Green Brand Association as a Mediator

An authentic green brand positioning strategy can lead to more favorable support from consumers in terms of having more mental attachment and giving wholehearted support to the green marketing offerings (da Luz et al., 2020). Some researchers argue that green brand positioning based on functional green attributes of the product builds brand associations to a greater extent by delivering environmentally sound product attribute information (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). The green brand association creates an associative network based on communicated green attributes that further arouse the emotional or behavioral intention of the consumers (Jin et al., 2019; Ishaq & Di Maria, 2020; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). "Green brand association is a critical form of green brand equity that creates significant value to a green brand by helping process and retrieves information, providing a basis for brand differentiation, creating positive attitudes and feelings, and offering a reason to buy" (Wang & Horng, 2016, p. 22). Further, consumers associations with a green brand are constructed like a network with different nodes, and these nodes are activated to a certain depth and breadth based on external stimulus or signals (Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022; Swaminathan et al., 2020; Wang & Horng, 2016). Hence, in conjunction with the previous discussion of green brand positioning, green brand association, and green brand trust, the mediating effect of green brand association is postulated as follows:

H5. Green brand association mediates the relationship between green brand positioning and green brand trust.

4 | METHODOLOGY

The developed conceptual model was tested in Bangladesh, a middle-income country with a significant increase of green brand providers along with an increasing trend among consumers to search for green products to have sustainable consumption (Riva et al., 2022). Moreover, focusing on emerging economies is also important "as emerging markets evolve from the periphery to the core of marketing practice" (Sheth, 2011, p. 166). Further, due to the recent wave of green consumerism in emerging economies, consumers are trying to be more responsible about sustainable consumption (Riva et al., 2022). A greater number of marketers are also thinking of redesigning their marketing practices to incorporate sustainability into their business operations in an emerging economy (Karmaker et al., 2021). Heavy polluting companies in emerging economies like Bangladesh are working relentlessly to understand the sustainable consumption pattern to devise their future marketing and branding strategy (Chowdhury et al., 2023).

The study was cross-sectional and data was collected from April 2023 to June 2023. A cross-sectional study is appropriate when single-time data collection can enumerate the situation best. Further cross-sectional study is suitable when the structured questionnaire is used to reach a large number of the population (Brace, 2018; Wang &

Cheng, 2020). A structured questionnaire was used to collect the data. The shopping center intercept survey design was used to administer the questionnaire among the consumers who purchased branded products during the visit. The questionnaire was administered in the two biggest shopping malls of Bangladesh, Bashundhara City, and Jamuna Future Park during major festivals of the country (Eid). These two shopping centers were selected based on a marketing investigation and the choice criteria was whether some of the renowned brands of the country were available in those shopping centers. Based on the criteria, these two shopping centers were qualified for the survey administration. Respondents were selected randomly by asking whether they were interested in participating and whether they purchased any branded products listed by the researchers. Participation was completely voluntary, and no incentive was given to the respondents. Random selection of the respondents and voluntary participation from the respondents enhance the generalizability of research findings (Gobo, 2004). Further, given the Bangladeshi research context, the questionnaire was translated into Bengali to administer to the consumers. A professional translator was used to translate and back-translate the questionnaire so that the respondent understood the questionnaire properly. Two academicians, two marketing experts, and one doctoral level student were requested to give their feedback on the questionnaire concerning the clarity, wording, and structure of the questionnaire. 10 random consumers were asked to give their responses before going for the final survey. From the pretest and pilot survey, it was obvious that the questions on the questionnaire were straightforward to answer.

The author approached 800 consumers and 530 respondents were qualified to participate in the survey. The 470 were interested in participating and gave responses while we found 270 questionnaires to use in data analysis as the rest of the questionnaires either was incomplete or faulty. The data collection process was completely anonymous. The data collection process and sampling techniques were appropriate in the context of the research taken (Riva et al., 2022). Further, previous research on sustainable consumption also reported findings based on less than 300 responses in the same research context. For any structural equation modeling, a sample size equal to or greater than 200 is considered adequate (Hoe, 2008). In the context of Bangladesh, (Riva et al., 2021, 2022) worked with less than a 40% response rate and the result was quite satisfactory. Before proceeding to analyze the collected data, data were checked for missing values and prepared properly for analysis by using SPSS version 28.

4.1 | Measures

A structured questionnaire was used to collect responses through shopping mall intercepts of consumers. A 5-point Likert scale adapted from the previous studies was used in the study to measure the construct. Green brand positioning was measured by using 6 adapted items (Gong et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2014; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022) with a reliability value of .92. Green brand association was measured

by using an adapted scale of 6-scale items from a previous study (Chen et al., 2020; Cho & Hwang, 2020; Wang & Horng, 2016) with a reliability value of .865. Green brand trust was measured with 5 items adapted from a previous study (Chen & Chang, 2013; Martinez, 2015; Tran & Chang, 2023) with a reliability value of .879. Green skepticism was measured by using 5 items adapted from the study (Goh & Balaji, 2016; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2019). Though the data was collected by using the same number of scale points for all the constructs and at a single time, there is the possibility of having a common method bias (CMB). To assess the common method bias, the Harman single-factor test was carried out. Based on the un-rotated factor result, it is easy to infer that there is no common method bias as the first factor explains only 27.89% of variances within total variances of 60% which is explained by three factors of the study (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986).

4.2 | Analytical Procedure

Covariance-based structural equation modeling was used to assess the hypothetical relationship along with examining the reliability and validity of the scales. Before considering the CB-SEM for analyzing the data, PLS-SEM was considered as an alternative for analysis. Inherent advantages of using CB-SEM like global iteration, and availability of established goodness of fit matrices like GFI, CFI, TLI, and RMSEA motivated highly to use CB-SEM. CB-SEM is helpful in any confirmatory analyses to have a relative stance of the constructs and to assess the causal relationships among the latent variables (Dash & Paul, 2021). AMOS-28 was used to analyze the data. To validate the constructs, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted. Once the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is done, the final structural model between the four latent variables was tested by using empirical data.

5 | RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

5.1 | Demographic Profile

Most of the participants had purchased green-branded products within the last three months (52%) and 86% of them were female. Of the respondents, about 64% were 30–40 years age, and 40% were above 40 years old. The most prevalent monthly income group was BDT above 50,000 with 64% followed by BDT30000-50000.

5.2 | Measurement Model

To assess the measurement model, AMOS-28 was used to conduct a confirmatory factor analysis. Factor loadings for each item were assessed (Table 1) as a part of the confirmatory factor analysis. Two items from green skepticism were removed due to low factor loadings (<.50). To assess the overall goodness of fit of the model, different

TABLE 1 Loadings.

Construct	Items	Estimate	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE		
Green Brand Positioning	GBP_1: I get to know about green branding through advertisement	.866	.929				
	GBP_2: Green products offered by different brands match my personal needs and preferences	.842				.921	
	GBP_3: I prefer to purchase environment-friendly branded products	.841					.66
	GBP_4: Quality is important for green-branded products	.798					
	GBP_5: Green-branded products are overpriced	.772					
	GBP_6: Green-branded products worth the overprice	.754					
Green Brand Trust	GBT_1: Green products' environmental claims are trustworthy	.803	.879				
	GBT_2: The environmental image of green-branded products is reliable	.756				.879	
	GBT_3: The environmental functionality of green-branded products is dependable	.762					.59
	GBT_4: Usually, the environmental performance of green-branded products meets my expectation	.779					
	GBT_5: Green-branded products keep promises for environmental improvement	.748					
Green Brand Association	GBA_2: Green-branded products help me protect the environment	.707	.865				
	GBA_3: Green-branded products make me feel closer to nature	.763				.856	
	GBA_4: The purchase of green-branded products resembles my respect for nature	.694					.54
	GBA_5: Usually, green-branded products come with a uniqueness	.766					
	GBA_6: I feel a strong emotional attachment to green-branded products	.501					
Green Skepticism	GS3: Doubt about green products' environmental friendliness	.521	.737				
	GS5: Certainty about green products' functionality	.644				.745	
	GS6: Belief about green products and environmental standards	.672					.49
	GS4: Belief concerning that green products is a better product	.654					

TABLE 2 Model fit indices.

Fit Indices	Recommended value	Obtained value
CMIN/df	3–5	1.903
GFI	>0.90	0.89
IFI	>0.90	0.95
CFI	>0.90	0.94
TLI	>0.90	0.95
RMSEA	<0.80	0.05
SRMR	<0.80	0.03

model fit measures (e.g., CMIN/df, GFI, CFI, TLI, RMSEA) were assessed (Bentler, 1990; Hu & Bentler, 1998; Ullman & Bentler, 2012). All values were within their respective acceptable levels. The four factors (green brand positioning, green brand associations, green brand trust, green skepticism) model yielded a good fit (Table 2) for the data.

In addition, to assess the reliability of the construct, cronbach alpha and composite reliability were assessed. Cronbach alpha for each construct of the study was above the required limit of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Composite reliabilities also range from .74 to .94 and above the .70 cut-off value (Hair et al., 2010). The convergent validity of the construct was assessed by using the average variance extracted and the values were in the acceptable range except for green skepticism (.48). Since the composite reliability was well over the required value, we can conclude that green skepticism is also valid (Hair et al., 2010). Further, the correlation matrix and descriptive statistics of the construct are presented in Table 3.

Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio was used to assess the discriminant validity. We initially tried to establish the discriminant validity by using Fornell and Larcker Criteria but recently the method has been criticized and the HTMT ratio is widely used. Based on the HTMT ratio (Table 4) the discriminant validity is at an acceptable level (Henseler et al., 2015).

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

N = 270	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Green brand positioning	3.64	1.15	1						
2. Green Brand Association	3.77	0.88	0.732*	1					
3. Green Trust	3.79	1.01	0.863*	0.803*	1				
4. Green Skepticism	2.02	1.27	0.655**	0.659**	0.706*	1			
5. Age	2.16	0.733	0.01	0.07	-0.03	-0.13*	1		
6. Gender	1.86	0.347	-0.13*	-0.03	-0.06	0.11**	0.03	1	
7. Income	2.59	0.594	-0.01	0.117*	0.07	-0.01	0.06	0.01	1

**Significance at the 1% level.

*Significance at the 5% level.

TABLE 4 HTMT ratio.

Construct	Green brand positioning	Green brand association	Green brand trust	Green skepticism
Green brand positioning				
Green brand association	0.78			
Green brand trust	0.88	0.84		
Green skepticism	0.76	0.71	0.83	

TABLE 5 Model fit indices.

Fit indices	Recommended value	Obtained value
CMIN/df	3–5	2.13
GFI	>0.90	0.87
IFI	>0.90	0.92
CFI	>0.90	0.91
TLI	>0.90	0.92
RMSEA	<0.80	0.06
SRMR	<0.80	0.05

5.3 | Structural Model

AMOS-28 was used to test the hypothetical relationship by generating a structural equation model. The fit indices for the model are presented in Table 5 and all the values are within the acceptable range that communicates the model fit.

The squared multiple correlations were .97 for green brand trust and .70 for green brand association so 97% and 70% variance of green brand trust and green brand associations respectively is explained by green brand positioning. The study assessed the impact of green brand positioning on green brand association, green brand association impact on green brand trust, green brand positioning impact on green brand trust, the interaction impact of green skepticism*green brand association on green brand trust, and the indirect impact of green brand association between the relationship of green brand positioning and green brand trust. The impact of green brand positioning on green brand trust was positive and significant ($b = 0.384, t = 5.104, p < .001$) which supports H1. The impact of green brand positioning on green brand association was positive and

significant ($b = 0.687, t = 13.346, p < .001$) supporting H2. The impact of green brand association on green brand trust was positive and significant ($b = 0.305, t = 4.704, p < .001$) which supports H3. Moreover, as brand trust and brand evaluation are all subjective evaluations, individual differences can influence brand trust. Further, many demographic factors like gender, age, income, ethnicity, and education level are well investigated for brand trust having a significant impact either as a predictor or moderator (Ahn et al., 2018). In the current research, customers' age, income, and gender were controlled to reduce the bias of endogeneity and to enhance the generalizability. Table 6 represents the relationships.

The study assessed the moderating role of green skepticism on the relationship between green brand association and green brand trust. The results revealed a negative but insignificant moderating impact of green skepticism ($b = -0.30, t = -0.591, p = .555$) and failed to support H4. Table 7 represents the moderation impact of green skepticism.

Further, the indirect effect of grand brand association between green brand positioning and green brand trust was assessed through 5,000 bootstrapping with a 95% confidence interval that was significant ($b = 0.209, t = 2.82, p = .003$) supporting H5. Table 8 represents the mediation result.

6 | DISCUSSION

The study aimed to investigate the effect of green brand positioning on green brand trust through the mediation of green brand association. Further, the moderating effect of the green skepticism on the green brand association-green brand trust link has been examined. This study summarizes the literature on green brand equity in the

TABLE 6 Direct relationships.

Hypothesized relationship	Estimates	t-value	P-value	Decision
Green brand positioning > Green brand trust	0.384	5.104	<.001	Supported
Green brand positioning > Green brand association	0.687	13.346	<.001	Supported
Green brand association > Green brand trust	0.305	4.704	<.001	Supported
Age > Green brand trust	0.033	0.817	.417	Not significant
Gender > Green brand trust	0.083	0.833	.405	Not significant
Income > Green brand trust	0.010	0.190	.849	Not significant

TABLE 7 Mediation effect.

Hypothesized Relationship	Estimates	t-value	Confidence Interval		Decision
			Lower bound	Upper bound	
Green brand positioning > Green brand association > Green brand trust	0.209	2.82 (0.003)	0.078	0.376	Supported

TABLE 8 Moderation of green skepticism.

Hypothesized relationship	Estimates	t-value	P-value	Decision
Green brand association*Green skepticism > Green brand trust	-0.30	-0.591	.555	Not supported

context of an emerging economy that also challenges the argument that emerging economies do not aspire to have branded products (Sheth, 2011). Further, the study suggested a new green brand management framework as the results of the empirical study show that green brand association has an indirect effect on the link between green brand positioning- and green brand trust (Figure 2). Although numerous previous studies focused on the antecedents of brand equity, there has been very little research in the context of green marketing (Huaman-Ramirez & Merunka, 2019; Lin et al., 2019; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Investment in the green brand positioning strategies therefore is likely to strengthen the green brand equity.

Brand positioning with green elements may act as the primary source of information and positive signals of product green attributes. Consumers are unlikely to trust or purchase any product with which they are not familiar or associated in any way. So, based on the stimulus-organism-response model and signaling theory, the study empirically validates that green brand positioning strategy acts as the predictor of green brand trust (Lin et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2022; Tran & Chang, 2023; Sun et al., 2021).

However, some previous studies that examine the effect of green brand positioning strategies on branding success were inconclusive (Reinders & Bartels, 2017). But our study confirms the significant positive effect of green brand positioning on green brand association. Green brand positioning strategy focuses on communication efforts to provide information on products' green attributes that result in green brand awareness and green brand image that are fundamentals to form a brand association (González-Mansilla et al., 2019). The S-O-R model through the lens of signaling theory facilitates to

explanation of the positive and significant link between green brand positioning and green brand association. Advertisements and communication focused on green attributes may create a favorable image in the minds of the consumers (Vesal et al., 2021). In the scenario individual activities of brand positioning strategy act as the positive signal that consumers process to form an affective attachment or association with the brand. Previous research demonstrated that brand positioning may work as a viable signal. However, the specified theoretical argument is still limited in the green marketing literature due to a lack of empirical validation (Lee et al., 2022; Sun, Luo, et al., 2021). The present study validates the theoretical argument that a positive signal provided by marketers is processed by the consumers to form positive attitudes about the brand or the firms.

The study also confirms the positive relationship between green brand association and green brand trust. Many argue that green brand associations act as the information collecting and processing tool to execute brand differentiation and brand extension (Gupta et al., 2020; Han et al., 2015; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Principally any information related to product greenness that comes across the consumers' association with the green brand is connected to the green brand image in the consumers' memory that is reflected through consumers' recall, reliability, and trustworthiness toward the brand (Butt et al., 2017; Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Previous research also signifies the positive relationship between brand association and diverse brand equity indicators like brand loyalty, brand image, and so on. The study reinforces the previous findings based on the synergies of S-O-R model and signaling theory (Davies et al., 2018; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Based on the S-O-R model and signaling theory, brand association as an

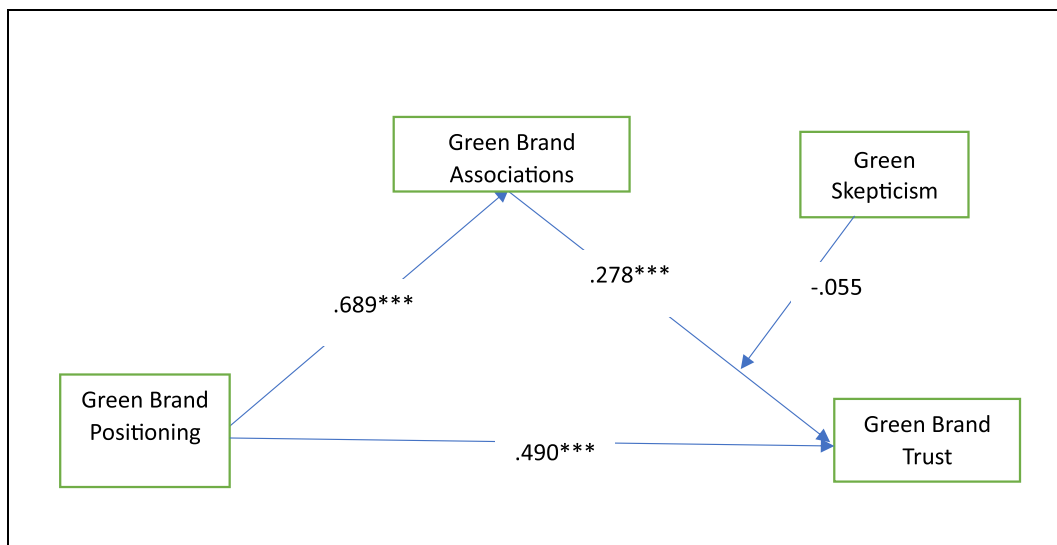


FIGURE 2 Structural model.

information processing tool strengthens the relationship with the brand resulting in enhanced trust or reliability on the brand.

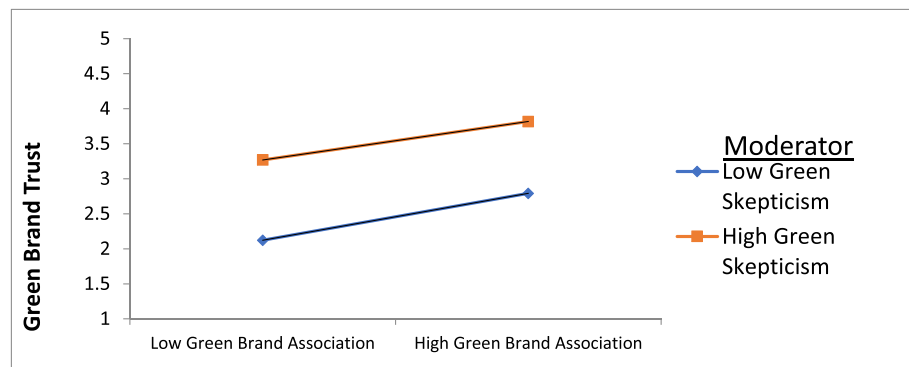
Furthermore, green brand association mediates the relationship between green brand positioning and green brand trust reinforcing the mediating role of green brand association in other links (Chen et al., 2020; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). The incorporation of green brand association based on signaling theory, the study provides a new perspective in the green marketing literature (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Lee et al., 2022). Maintaining the green branding and positioning strategy to form a good bond with customers through green brand association is crucial for the success of marketers who are struggling hard to balance the profit motives and environmental performance of the firms (Panda et al., 2020). However, few previous studies have explored the relationship among green brand positioning, green brand trust, and green brand association (Chen, 2010; Jin et al., 2019; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). Our study contemplates the previous studies by demonstrating the mediation role of green brand association in the link of green brand positioning and green brand trust. The findings of the study indicate that marketers should be more careful in forming brand associations with consumers by providing authentic brand information about green claims of their market offerings that serve as the basis for strong brand equity (Cowan & Guzman, 2020; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022). The formed association guides the consumers in the way of brand preferences and trustworthiness (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). So, to control the strategic direction of green brand positioning, green brand association formation should be nurtured carefully, that is the prerequisite of green trust formation. Hence, bypassing the green brand association may hamper the consumer-brand relationship and this can be more vulnerable in the era of greenwashing where consumers seem to be more skeptical toward the greenness or green claims of the marketers (Li & Sun, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Generally, green skepticism negatively impacts green brand equity as high green skepticism guides the consumers to think that the firms' green claims are not promising and that green brand equity will reduce (Khan et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2019). For example, restaurants' non-green practices like using plastic bags for food delivery, can negatively affect customers regarding a brand's perception and overall attitude toward the restaurant. In this scenario, the green brand positioning strategy, and different green claims of a restaurant like energy-efficient lighting, recycling waste, and recyclable takeout containers may not be so promising that may further weaken the impact of green association on the green trust or image of that restaurant. The conscious consumers would be more skeptical about forming a bond with that brand.

However, our findings (Figure 3) also suggest that green skepticism acts as the insignificant moderator for the relationship between green brand association and green brand trust, and the study contradicts previous findings (Goh & Balaji, 2016; Khan et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2019). One possible explanation for the insignificant moderating effect in the context might be that consumers are less skeptical of branded products (Kim et al., 2023; Figure 3). Whenever consumers interact with any brand, brand perception may outweigh the negative perception of the environmental claims of the market offering. Effective green branding strategies may reduce the noise of the signals in the market and may promote environmental practices in an authentic way to the consumers (Kim et al., 2023; Park, 2022).

6.1 | Theoretical Implications

Introducing green brand association as the mediator between green brand positioning and green brand trust link is the main theoretical contribution of the study. Green brand association is crucial for developing green brand trust and we developed based on the means of

FIGURE 3 Moderating effect.

signaling theory grounded on the stimulus–organism–response model of the consumers. The study enriches the signaling theory and stimulus–organism–response model for green brand strategy. The study results suggest that the green brand positioning strategy acts as a signal to strengthen the brand association with green products. In the context of sustainability marketing, customers face difficulties accessing true information. As a result, firms may use diverse signals to reduce information asymmetry (Lourenço et al., 2014; McDonald & Oates, 2006).

Our research incorporates customers' green brand association into the theory to investigate the mediating role of customer association in the relationship between green brand positioning and green brand trust. In this way, this study enriches our knowledge of how the impact occurs by reducing information asymmetry due to enhanced association with the green brand. This paper contributes to the signaling theory it draws from; it establishes green brand positioning and green brand association as credible signals from which consumers may infer brand quality aspects while forming green brand trust. The presented studies are among the first to investigate green brand association in an emerging sustainability context. Thus, the study also advances sustainability marketing literature by offering empirical evidence based on signaling theory. Synthesizing signaling theory streams to stimulus–organism–response paradigm, we support the core idea that external and marketers given signal (green brand positioning) as a stimulus can be processed to form favorable responses—initially green brand association toward the firm/products and finally green brand trust (response) (Su et al., 2020). The study contemplates the previous studies on green brand positioning (Butt et al., 2017) and further extends the studies on green brand association (Wang & Horng, 2016) that enhance the marketing strategy literature for branding.

Second, the study also enhances the literature on trust building and trust repair literature for green market offerings (Guo et al., 2018). Through the study the green brand trust literature has been extended as green brand association has been validated as a predictor of green brand trust. The results validate that consumers may have varying trust levels in green products (Huang & Guo, 2021) based on the strength of the association consumers hold for the brand's greenness. The study provides a theoretical basis for revealing the internal mechanism between green brand positioning and green brand trust. Consumers' trust in green brands can be improved by

enhancing the level of association consumers form through the guidance of signals provided by marketers (Jin et al., 2019; Mehraj & Qureshi, 2022).

Lastly, green brands in the emerging economy face several distinct challenges (Goh & Balaji, 2016). The challenges are stricter to overcome in the era of greenwashing (Akturan, 2018). Green skepticism is growing worldwide due to improper management of the signals provided by firms that are not processed properly. So, consumers become skeptical which may weaken the impact of brand association on brand trust. Interestingly, green skepticism is found to negatively moderate the link between green brand association and green brand trust, while its moderating effect in the context is insignificant. Thus, our findings on the moderating roles of green skepticism are inconsistent with signaling theory, which suggests that customer skepticism may weaken the influence of association on brand trust and loyalty (Hur et al., 2014). One possible explanation for the insignificant moderating effect of green skepticism is that signals of being a brand regardless of green and customer trust are substitutive for each other (Portal et al., 2019). As suggested by signaling theory, various signals may substitute for each other (Connelly et al., 2011). If customers trust a brand, this implies that the offerings provided by this brand are trustworthy regardless of its environmental claims. From this perspective, customer skepticism for green claims of the branded products can be weekend and branded products can be deemed another kind of signal. Thus, the importance of green skepticism is likely to be lowered when the level of brand signal is higher. Future studies could consider investigating the moderating roles of green skepticism to compare branded and unbranded products. So, the insignificant moderation of green skepticism unfolds interesting future research avenues.

6.2 | Practical Implications

Green brand association is an important consideration for firms wishing to achieve green brand trust. These firms should attempt to enhance green brand association first before achieving payback green brand trust. This suggests that cultivating green brand association is a critical intermediate step in transforming green brand positioning into green brand trust. So, marketers should adopt adequate strategies to form a green brand associations as much as possible. Since consumers

are less skeptical of the branded products, the marketing managers should capitalize on making a sustainable green brand that serves as the primary signal in the market (Baek et al., 2010).

If marketers want to increase the brand trust of their consumers, they should work carefully on green brand positioning. Strong green brand positioning strategies would enhance the consumers' trust and ultimately purchase intention of the consumers as green brand trust acts as a strong predictor of consumers' behavioral intention (Chae et al., 2020). In designing green brand positioning strategies, the brand management team should provide more detailed information about the intended signals concerning the functionality and greenness of the product to strengthen the brand association of the consumers. The results of our work also provide guidelines suggesting that green brand association may lead to green brand trust regardless of the greenwashing prevalent as branding acts as the strongest signal.

Finally, in confirming the mediating role of green brand associations and the moderating role of green skepticism in forming brand trust we offer implications for policymakers interested in implementing regulations that facilitate green strategies. Regulators should also take steps to reduce consumers' skepticism, either by enforcing transparent messages, raising industry green standards, or implementing educational initiatives.

7 | CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we examined how firms should manage their portfolio of signals in the disguised form of brand positioning strategies and how different signals overcome the negative attitudes of the consumers to have trust in green-branded products. Much in the way music has not only individual notes to have listener preference but the noise that should be overcome with the strength of melodies where the consumers also examine motifs and sequence of the music. Green brand positioning may have success in terms of the obtainment of stronger brand association, but it does not guarantee the success of the brands. The success of the brands is much dependent on the inner positive and negative attitudes consumers hold toward the brand. Along with the strong brand association, marketers should work on mitigating the negative attitudes consumers hold toward a particular product category. It was quite easy for traditional marketers to have brand support in terms of brand equity, brand loyalty, brand trust, and brand association through positioning strategies with the use of proper promotional messages or advertisement (Keller & Lehmann, 2006) but nowadays marketers must work hard to break the clutter amid greenwashing (Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023). So, green brand positioning strategies should be reinvigorated to strengthen the association with the brand which ultimately results in green trust if it does not have any skeptical views from the consumers. The study validates the postulated relationships that coincide with the logic given by the S-O-R model and signaling theory.

Nevertheless, the study has some limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, green skepticism is an insignificant moderator for the study that opens an interesting research avenue for

future researchers in the same context. Second, the study was focused on green brands of an emerging economy of South Asia. Future studies could overcome the cultural differences for branded products by conducting the study in different cultural contexts to provide more insights for emerging economies to manage green brand positioning strategies. Further, comparative studies from different consumer groups in diverse nations may strengthen brand positioning strategies in varying cultural contexts. Third, the study was cross-sectional. Future research could employ experimental or longitudinal research design to validate the cause-effect relationship postulated in the current study. Lastly, the study was solely based on the consumers who purchase branded products which may limit the generalizations of the findings to all the product categories. Future research could have comparative studies between green branded and green unbranded products.

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