



GREEN MARKETING AND CONSUMER TRUST: THE NORMATIVE FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract:

This study argues that the relationship between green marketing and consumer trust must be understood not only through ethical discourse but also through legal oversight and verifiable environmental claims. As sustainability becomes increasingly central to brand positioning and competitive differentiation, consumers evaluate not only product attributes but also the credibility, consistency, and reliability of environmental claims. However, the growing prevalence of such claims has intensified concerns over greenwashing, leading to increased skepticism and weakening trust. This study uses an integrative conceptual approach, synthesizing marketing literature with global regulatory standards to develop a framework that aligns environmental brand claims with legal verifiability. Adopting a theoretical and conceptual approach, the study integrates an extensive literature review with a complementary regulatory perspective. It proposes that consumer trust in green marketing is shaped by three key dimensions: transparency, accountability, and normative alignment. Transparency refers to the clarity, comparability, and verifiability of environmental claims; accountability emphasizes monitoring, reporting, and third-party verification mechanisms; and normative alignment reflects the integration of sustainability principles into corporate strategies and decision-making processes. These dimensions are conceptualized as core drivers of trust formation, as they enhance the credibility of marketing communication and ensure consistency between corporate claims and actual practices. Although not treated as a primary focus, legal oversight provides an institutional framework that reinforces the credibility, comparability, and verifiability of environmental claims. Ultimately, the article argues that trust in green marketing is not merely a communicative promise but a multi-layered governance outcome that is legally supported and internalized at the organizational level.

Keywords:

Green marketing, greenwashing, consumer trust, environmental claims, legal oversight

1. Introduction

The discourse on sustainability has evolved from being a secondary theme in marketing communications to becoming a decisive factor in terms of corporate legitimacy, brand reputation, and consumer trust. Environmentally conscious consumers now scrutinize not only a product's functional features but also the verifiability of a brand's environmental claims, the consistency of its production processes, and the reliability of its corporate intentions. This transformation has shifted green marketing from being merely a communication technique to a management domain interwoven with ethical and legal responsibilities (Belz et al., 2025; Chekima et al., 2016).

However, the increase in environmental claims does not automatically lead to the generation of trust. On the contrary, misleading or exaggerated environmental rhetoric increases the risk of greenwashing; thus, the credibility of sustainability claims becomes contentious. Greenwashing is defined as the systematic mismatch between a company's environmental performance and its communication strategies, which misleads consumers regarding environmental benefits (Delmas and Burbano, 2011; Lyon and Montgomery, 2015). Therefore, green marketing theory must evolve to distinguish purely perception-based sincerity from verifiable substantiation.

Unlike prior models focusing primarily on perception-based trust formation, the Consumer Trust Model under Legal Oversight proposed in this study reconceptualizes trust as a governance outcome embedded within institutional and regulatory structures. Existing green trust frameworks largely emphasize psychological constructs such as perceived sincerity, environmental concern, or brand credibility, treating trust as an outcome of effective communication strategies. In contrast, this model introduces a structural shift by integrating legal oversight as a constitutive

dimension rather than an external constraint. Therefore, the model does not merely extend prior approaches by adding a legal component; it advances a normative transformation in which trust is co-produced through the interaction of transparency, accountability, and normative alignment under enforceable regulatory regimes. This perspective moves beyond firm-centric and perception-driven explanations, positioning consumer trust as a function of verifiability, standardization, and institutional control. Accordingly, the proposed framework contributes to the literature by bridging marketing theory with consumer protection law and by reframing green trust as a multi-layered construct grounded in both organizational practices and legal accountability mechanisms.

To analytically ground this framework, the article adopts an integrative conceptual approach, synthesizing marketing literature with a normative legal analysis. In this context, a search was conducted in the Scopus, Web of Science, TR Dizin, DergiPark, and Google Scholar databases using the keywords green marketing, greenwashing, green trust, consumer trust, environmental claims, and sustainability communication; Additionally, EUR-Lex, the European Commission, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (2012), the UK Competition and Markets Authority (2021), and the Turkish Ministry of Trade, along with relevant national legislation texts, were examined. The analysis suggests that consumer trust is built upon three fundamental dimensions: transparency, accountability, and normative compliance. Transparency refers to the presentation of environmental claims in a clear, comparable, and evidence-based manner; accountability pertains to third-party verification and reporting processes; and normative alignment denotes the integration of ethical principles into corporate decision-making processes. The study discusses the legal framework in Turkey, including Law No. 6502 on the Protection of Consumers, the Regulation on Commercial Advertising and Unfair Commercial Practices, and the Guidelines on Advertisements Containing Environmental Claims; and at the international level, particularly Directive 2005/29/EC, Directive (EU) 2024/825, the FTC Green Guides, and the CMA Green Claims Code (European Parliament and Council, 2005).

In this context, the aim of this article is to explain under what conditions consumer trust in green marketing acquires a sustainable and verifiable quality, and to analytically ground the “Consumer Trust Model Under Legal Oversight” for this purpose. The central claim of this study is that consumer trust can only become enduring through the combined operation of three elements: transparency based on verifiable environmental claims, accountability that ensures the traceability of corporate behaviour, and normative compliance that integrates ethical principles into organizational decision-making processes.

2. Type, Scope, and Method of the Study

This article is a theoretical/conceptual study. The research design consists of two components: (i) an integrative literature review and (ii) a normative legal analysis. The reason for choosing an integrative review is that the subject is not limited to marketing literature alone; it requires the joint evaluation of literature on law, consumer behaviour, sustainability management, and ethical communication. This approach provides a suitable foundation for the development of a conceptual model by bringing together different types of sources (Torraco, 2005; Snyder, 2019). Within this framework, discussions shaped by the axes of ethics, law, and marketing were analyzed at the conceptual level; a consumer trust model was developed based on the components of transparency, accountability, and normative compliance. The Turkish context was incorporated into the study through examples illustrating the regulatory and institutional aspects of the proposed model.

Table 1. Research Design and Methodological Framework

Component	Description
Research type	Theoretical/conceptual study; comprehensive literature review and normative legal analysis
Databases	Scopus, Web of Science, TR Index, DergiPark, Google Scholar
Official sources	EUR-Lex, the European Commission, the FTC, the CMA, the Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Türkiye, and national legislation

Keywords	green marketing, greenwashing, green trust, environmental claims, consumer trust, environmental claims
Inclusion criteria	Direct relevance to the research topic, academic/institutional credibility, conceptual or regulatory contribution
Exclusion criteria	Repetitive, unverifiable, or weakly related sources

A structured literature review was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, TR Index, DergiPark, and Google Scholar. The search strategy employed the keywords “green marketing,” “greenwashing,” “green trust,” “environmental claims,” “consumer trust,” “sustainable marketing,” “yeşil pazarlama,” “yeşil aklama,” “çevresel beyanlar,” and “tüketici güveni,” both individually and in various combinations. Source selection was guided by three main criteria: direct relevance to the research topic, academic or institutional credibility, and the degree of conceptual contribution. Repetitive, unverifiable, or weakly related sources were excluded from the review.

As part of the legal analysis, the study examined the Turkish Consumer Protection Law No. 6502, the Regulation on Commercial Advertising and Unfair Commercial Practices, the Guideline on Advertisements Containing Environmental Claims, and the Environmental Label Regulation in the context of Türkiye. At the international level, the analysis focused on the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive (2005/29/EC), Directive (EU) 2024/825, the FTC Green Guides, and the CMA Green Claims Code. These sources were intentionally selected because they directly reflect the current regulatory logic and oversight mechanisms governing environmental claims (European Parliament and Council, 2005).

3. Conceptual Framework: Green Marketing, Greenwashing, and Consumer Trust

Green marketing carries a much broader meaning than a narrow definition limited to incorporating environmental sensitivity into the marketing mix. In the current literature, the concept is addressed as the restructuring of the value proposition, corporate identity, and stakeholder relations in line with the principles of environmental sustainability (Belz et al., 2025). In this sense, green marketing encompasses not only the promotion of environmentally friendly products, but also the consistency among production processes, supply chains, reporting standards, and communication practices.

From the perspective of consumer behaviour, the effect of environmental sensitivity on purchase intention has long been documented. However, this relationship is not linear; environmental awareness translates into purchasing behaviour only when it is supported by credible environmental claims, perceived sincerity, and verifiable performance (Chekima et al., 2016; Yadav and Pathak, 2017). For this reason, the concept of trust has become a central variable in the green marketing literature.

Green trust is defined as the confidence consumers have in a brand’s environmental performance and its capacity to fulfill its environmental commitments (Chen, 2010). When green trust weakens, claims about environmentally friendly products generate suspicion rather than value. Indeed, Chen and Chang (2013) demonstrated that an increase in perceived greenwashing significantly weakens green trust, green satisfaction, and green purchase intention. Therefore, trust is not a secondary element of green marketing, but a fundamental condition for its functioning.

The literature in Türkiye follows a similar trajectory. While Atrek and Madran (2017) emphasize the need to examine sustainable consumption systematically from the consumer perspective, Demiral Hekin (2022) draws attention to the importance of establishing conceptual clarity around the notion of greenwashing in the national literature. The bibliometric findings of Özbıngöl and Uğurlu (2024) likewise show that studies on greenwashing in Türkiye have increased markedly in recent years and that the concept is increasingly being discussed at the intersection of marketing and regulation.

4. The Theoretical and Regulatory Dimension of Greenwashing

The concept of greenwashing refers to the creation of a misleading impression that companies possess environmental qualities or that their products cause less harm to the environment. Delmas and Burbano (2011) define greenwashing as the practice of misleading stakeholders regarding firms' environmental performance, while Lyon and Montgomery (2015) demonstrate that the concept extends beyond outright falsehoods to include selective disclosures, decontextualized environmental narratives, and unverifiable positive implications. In their systematic review, de Freitas Netto et al. (2020) conceptually classify the forms of greenwashing and highlight the interdisciplinary nature of the concept.

Within this framework, greenwashing is not merely an ethical issue; it is also a problem of information asymmetry that undermines consumer decision-making autonomy. Parguel et al. (2011) argue that sustainability ratings and independent verification mechanisms can reduce the risk of greenwashing, and therefore corporate claims alone cannot be regarded as sufficient. From this perspective, the value of an environmental claim should be sought not in the intention of the brand making the claim, but in the verifiability of that claim.

At this point, the academic discussion must necessarily intersect with the legal framework. The impact of greenwashing on consumer trust is not merely perceptual; it also concerns distorted consumer choice, unfair competition, and violations of market integrity. For this reason, ethical principles and legal oversight mechanisms in the field of environmental claims should be understood not as alternatives, but as complementary components.

5. The Legal Oversight Framework in Green Marketing

In the case of Türkiye, the legal framework is centered on the Consumer Protection Law No. 6502. The purpose of the Law is to protect consumers' health and safety as well as their economic interests, compensate for damages, protect them from environmental hazards, and inform consumers. This emphasis shows that environmental claims should be understood not outside the consumer protection regime, but directly within it. The obligation that advertisements and commercial practices must not mislead consumers should also be assessed within this framework.

This general framework is concretized through the Regulation on Commercial Advertising and Unfair Commercial Practices, while the Guideline on Advertisements Containing Environmental Claims issued by the Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Türkiye is of particular importance with regard to environmental claims. The Guideline explicitly states that advertisements containing environmental claims and unfair commercial practices must be evaluated in line with Law No. 6502 and the related regulatory provisions. In this way, a concrete oversight rationale is established against the undocumented and decontextualized use of expressions such as environmentally friendly, sustainable, carbon neutral, or recyclable.

Another important regulation in Türkiye is the Environmental Label Regulation. This regulation aims to encourage products with reduced environmental impact throughout their life cycle and to provide consumers with accurate, scientifically grounded, and comparable information. Thus, environmental claims are intended to be tested not only in the language of marketing, but also within standardized labeling systems.

At the international level, the European Union's Unfair Commercial Practices Directive 2005/29/EC constitutes the main regulatory foundation for environmental claims (European Parliament and Council, 2005). This regime has been updated particularly through Directive (EU) 2024/825, in which concepts such as generic environmental claim, sustainability label, and certification scheme are defined in detail (European Parliament and Council, 2024). The new regulation imposes stricter limitations on sustainability labels that are not based on an independent certification scheme, on general environmental claims that are not based on recognized excellent environmental performance, on creating the impression of overall environmental superiority for an entire product based on only one characteristic, and on the use of claims such as climate neutral when based on greenhouse gas offsetting.

In the United States, the Green Guides issued by the Federal Trade Commission (2012) constitute the principal guidance text for assessing whether environmental marketing claims are deceptive. The Guides apply to labeling, advertising, promotional materials, and environmental claims across all media, and provide criteria for deceptive environmental representations under Section 5 of the FTC Act. In the United Kingdom, the Green Claims Code developed by the Competition and Markets Authority (2021) states that environmental claims must be clear, accurate, complete, comparable, and substantiated; it also recognizes that environmental claims may be misleading through words, visuals, colours, symbols, and even brand names.

Taken together, these regulations show that environmental claims are no longer treated as good-faith corporate statements, but as legally reviewable public claims. In this way, legal oversight does not merely impose an external limitation on marketing theory; rather, it provides an institutional framework that determines the minimum conditions under which trust generation becomes possible.

6. The Consumer Trust Model under Legal Oversight

The Consumer Trust under Legal Oversight Model proposed in this study conceptualizes consumer trust in green marketing as a governance outcome shaped by the interaction of three structural dimensions: transparency, accountability, and normative alignment. Transparency refers to the extent to which corporate environmental claims are clear, comparable, and supported by verifiable evidence. Accountability captures the presence of independent verification, auditing, certification, and monitoring mechanisms that ensure the traceability and reliability of corporate environmental performance over time. Normative alignment reflects the degree to which ethical principles are internalized within organizational decision-making processes and embedded in corporate strategy beyond mere regulatory compliance. These three dimensions are modeled as direct antecedents of consumer trust.

However, the explanatory power of these relationships is conditioned by legal oversight, which functions as a boundary-setting governance structure rather than a simple external constraint or standalone variable. Legal oversight standardizes the criteria for environmental claims, enforces verification requirements, and institutionalizes transparency and accountability mechanisms within regulatory frameworks. In this sense, it does not directly generate consumer trust but strengthens the reliability and effectiveness of the relationships between transparency, accountability, normative alignment, and trust formation. Accordingly, consumer trust emerges as a structurally conditioned outcome of these interrelated dimensions operating within a legally governed institutional environment.

In the proposed framework, legal oversight should be understood as a boundary condition and moderating institutional structure rather than a direct antecedent of consumer trust. While transparency, accountability, and normative alignment operate as direct structural determinants of trust formation, legal oversight does not independently generate trust. Instead, it defines the institutional environment within which these three dimensions become credible, verifiable, and enforceable. Accordingly, legal oversight shapes the strength and reliability of the relationships between the structural dimensions and consumer trust by standardizing environmental claims, ensuring compliance mechanisms, and reinforcing verification systems. This clarification positions the model as a three-dimensional structural framework embedded within a higher-order governance layer.

The first dimension of the model is transparency. Transparency includes the clear definition of the environmental claim, the specification of its criteria, the support of the claim with data and documentation, and its comparability from the consumer's perspective. This dimension strengthens the informational value of environmental communication and enables the consumer's initial trust assessment. In the absence of transparency, consumers are deprived of the opportunity to verify corporate claims, thereby increasing the risk of greenwashing.

The second dimension is accountability. Accountability operates through independent auditing, third-party verification, certification, regular reporting, and monitoring mechanisms. This dimension makes visible whether an environmental claim is sustainable not only at the moment it is made, but also over time. Through accountability, the relationship between corporate discourse and corporate conduct becomes traceable.

The third dimension is normative alignment. Normative alignment means that ethical principles should not remain merely at the level of technical compliance with legislation, but should become embedded in corporate strategy, supply chain management, product design, and communication decisions. In terms of Victor and Cullen's (1988) Ethical Climate Theory, this dimension corresponds to a shift from an Instrumental climate—where behaviour is driven by self-interest—towards Principle or Benevolence based climates. In other words, the firm assumes environmental responsibility not merely to avoid sanctions, but because it recognizes sustainability obligations as part of its corporate identity. By fostering a Principled ethical climate, the organization ensures that environmental decisions are guided by universal moral standards rather than external pressures. It is at this point that long-term consumer trust is built.

The central area of "control" in the model represents the point at which these three dimensions are linked to the regime of legal oversight. Control here does not simply mean sanctions in the narrow sense. Rather, it includes the functions of testing the accuracy of claims, setting standards of evidence, encouraging independent verification

mechanisms, and preventing consumer deception. For this reason, legal oversight is not an external intervention in the model; it is a constitutive component of the architecture of trust.

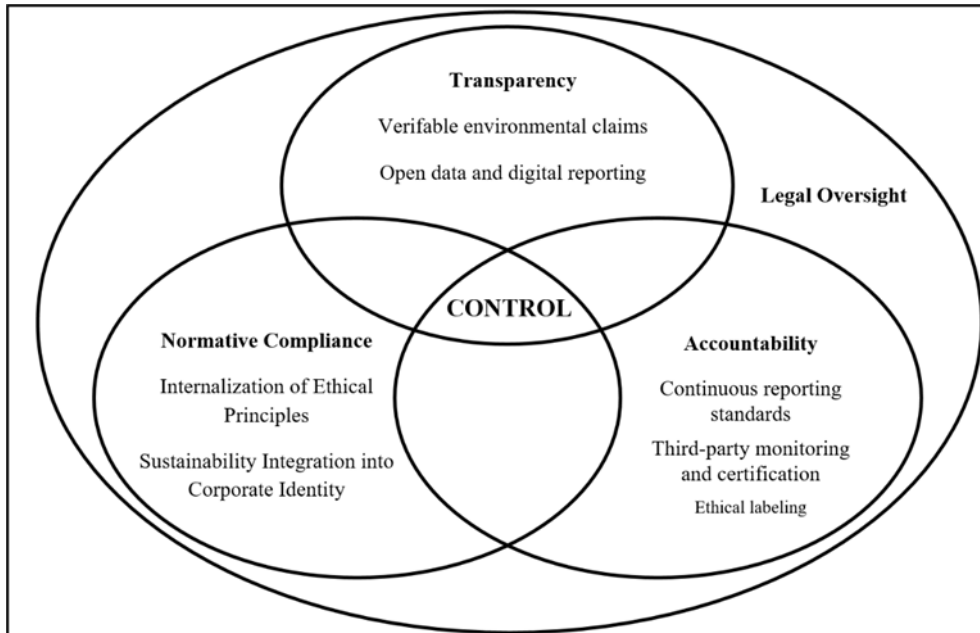


Figure 1. The Multilayered Structure of Normative Trust

Figure 1 illustrates the multilayered structure of normative trust, in which transparency, accountability, and normative alignment operate respectively as informational, behavioral, and identity-based layers. Consumer trust emerges at the intersection of these three structural dimensions, which collectively generate partial trust effects when considered in isolation but produce a more stable and durable trust outcome when operating in conjunction. This integrative structure is embedded within a higher-order governance environment defined by legal oversight.

In this framework, legal oversight is represented as an outer boundary layer encompassing the entire model. This representation does not imply that legal oversight directly generates consumer trust. Rather, it indicates that legal frameworks function as a systemic institutional context that conditions the operation of all structural dimensions. By defining standards for environmental claims, ensuring enforceability, and institutionalizing verification mechanisms, legal oversight enhances the reliability, comparability, and credibility of the trust formation process. Accordingly, it should be conceptualized as a boundary condition that shapes the effectiveness of the model rather than as an independent antecedent of trust.

By doing so, the proposed model addresses a critical gap in the green marketing literature by moving beyond the dominant perception-based explanations of trust formation and introducing a structurally grounded framework. Existing green trust models predominantly conceptualize trust as a function of consumer perceptions such as perceived credibility, environmental concern, and brand sincerity while largely overlooking the institutional conditions under which such perceptions become reliable or misleading. Although these models have significantly contributed to understanding the psychological drivers of green purchasing behavior, they tend to treat environmental claims as communicative inputs rather than as verifiable and regulated assertions. The present model departs from this tradition by embedding trust formation within the triadic structure of transparency, accountability, and normative alignment under legal oversight. In this regard, the framework does not merely append a legal dimension to existing literature; rather, it introduces a theoretical shift from perception-centric to governance-oriented trust formation. This shift is particularly vital in contexts characterized by widespread concerns over greenwashing, where trust can no longer be sustained through persuasive communication alone. By explicitly linking

marketing claims to verification mechanisms and enforceable legal norms, the model fills a conceptual void and offers a more robust explanation of how durable consumer trust is institutionally produced and maintained.

6.1. Empirically Testable Research Questions

The “Consumer Trust Model under Legal Oversight” developed in this study provides a conceptual framework for understanding how consumer trust in green marketing is structured through the interaction of transparency, accountability, and normative alignment under legal oversight. Within this theoretical context, the following research questions are formulated to further clarify the mechanisms through which these dimensions contribute to trust formation. These questions focus on how transparency, accountability, and normative alignment collectively shape consumer trust, and how legal oversight functions as an overarching governance framework that structures these relationships.

RQ1: How does the transparency and verifiability of corporate environmental claims influence consumers’ green trust formation?

RQ2: How do corporate accountability mechanisms affect perceived greenwashing and consumer trust?

RQ3: How does the integration of ethical principles into corporate identity and decision-making processes shape the durability and continuity of consumer trust in green marketing?

6.2. Empirically Testable Research Propositions

Building upon the research questions outlined above, the following propositions are developed to operationalize the causal relationships within the "Consumer Trust Model under Legal Oversight." These propositions translate the theoretical assumptions of the model into testable links, aiming to measure the direct and indirect impacts of transparency, accountability, and ethical alignment on consumer behavior. By framing these relationships within a governance structure of legal oversight, these propositions provide an empirical roadmap for validating how corporate integrity can effectively mitigate skepticism and cultivate enduring green trust.

- Proposition 1: Higher levels of transparency in corporate environmental disclosures are positively associated with consumer green trust.
- Proposition 2: Strong corporate accountability mechanisms are negatively associated with consumers’ perceived greenwashing and positively associated with green trust.
- Proposition 3: Greater integration of ethical principles into corporate decision-making processes is positively associated with the continuity and durability of consumer trust.

7. Discussion

This theoretical framework deepens the discussion on green marketing in two important respects. First, the study positions trust not merely as a perceptual or communicative variable, but as a governance outcome that depends on institutional and legal infrastructures. Second, it conceptualizes greenwashing not simply as an ethical deficiency, but as a multilayered problem that undermines consumers’ right to make informed choices and disrupts market integrity.

This perspective moves beyond two reductionist tendencies commonly found in the marketing literature. The first tendency interprets environmental communication solely in terms of brand image and intention. However, contemporary regulations focus on the evidentiary standards, certification structures, and comparability of environmental claims. The second tendency views law merely as an external pressure mechanism producing sanctions. In this study, law is understood as a framework that institutionalizes ethical standards and enables the production of trust.

For Türkiye, advancing the debate along these lines is particularly important. Although interest in the concept of greenwashing has increased in the national literature, studies that integrate marketing theory with consumer protection law within a single analytical model remain limited. By combining a regulatory perspective with the relationship between environmental advertising claims and consumer trust, this article contributes to addressing this gap.

Nevertheless, the study does not conduct empirical testing. The proposed model should be examined through quantitative or mixed-method research designs incorporating variables such as purchase intention, green brand loyalty, regulatory trust, and perceived environmental risk. Such empirical validation would further strengthen the explanatory power of the model.

8. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study demonstrates that consumer trust in green marketing does not emerge spontaneously from ethical discourse alone; rather, it depends on processes that are legally verifiable, reportable, and institutionally internalized. The theoretical framework clarifies the nature of the study as a theoretical/conceptual work, explicates the criteria guiding literature selection and the use of legal sources, and specifies the analytical foundations from which the proposed model is derived.

The main conclusion of the study is that green marketing claims remain fragile in environments where transparency, accountability, and normative alignment do not operate simultaneously. Transparency ensures the informational value of environmental claims; accountability guarantees the traceability of corporate conduct; and normative alignment secures the institutional continuity of ethical responsibility. Legal oversight emerges as the fundamental mechanism connecting these three domains.

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the literature by bringing together green trust research and consumer protection law within a single explanatory framework, thereby offering an interdisciplinary contribution. This integration advances existing models by shifting the analytical focus from perception-based explanations of trust to institutionally grounded governance structures that shape trust formation.

Although the proposed model emphasizes the structural foundations of trust, it does not disregard the role of consumer psychology. Rather than excluding perceptual variables such as perceived sincerity and green brand image identified in the existing literature, the framework reconceptualizes them as outcomes of institutional conditions. In this sense, transparency, accountability, and normative alignment operate as structural and institutional triggers that shape these consumer perceptions. By embedding environmental claims within a legally supported and verifiable system, the model reduces perceived risk and skepticism, thereby strengthening the formation of green trust. Accordingly, the proposed framework bridges organizational governance mechanisms with consumer-level psychological processes, offering an integrated perspective on trust formation in green marketing.

The primary limitation of the study is the absence of empirical validation. Future research may test the proposed model through experimental designs, survey-based structural equation models, content analysis, and analyses of regulatory decisions. In particular, sectoral comparisons of environmental advertising claims in Türkiye and empirical measurement of their effects on consumer trust would significantly advance this field of research.

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