Making a Brand Loved Rather Than Sustainable? Cosmopolitanism and Brand Love as Competing Communication Claims

Christoph Bey * and Dirk C. Moosmayer

Centre of Excellence for Sustainability, KEDGE Business School, 33405 Talence CEDEX, France; dirk.moosmayer@kedgebs.com
* Correspondence: christoph.bey@kedgebs.com; Tel.: +33-(0)5-56-84-5555

Abstract: Sustainability labels on products improve consumers’ product quality perceptions, suggests existing research. To understand this link in detail, the interaction of attitudes towards sustainability and attitudes towards the brand are explored. Theoretically, a branding view is contrasted with moral consumer cosmopolitanism: the view that people consider sustainability issues a planetary challenge that must be met by all of humanity. The theory is tested using the case of a global hazelnut spread brand and investigating the interaction between attitudes toward the brand (branding view) and attitude toward firm-NGO collaboration (cosmopolitanism) on consumers’ intention to purchase. Stepwise moderated regression analysis is applied to a sample of 109 French responses from an online consumer survey. Analyses show that for those who rated brand attitude in the highest category (brand lovers), the effect of NGO attitude on purchase intention was negative. By theoretically integrating branding and a cosmopolitan lens, the study contributes to the nascent debate around the potential negative effects of eco-labels. The negative moderation implies that sustainability researchers take a more nuanced approach to different levels of brand attitude and that brand managers consider withholding their sustainability performance from their brand lovers.

Keywords: consumer behaviour; sustainable consumption; consumer cosmopolitanism; brand love; moderated regression analysis

1. Introduction

This research started with a simple observation: A global brand complied with the sustainability requirements of the roundtable for sustainable palm oil (RSPO). Although certified, the RSPO label could not be found on the product packaging.

This seemed surprising, as that dominant research taking a brand management perspective suggests that sustainability considerations increasingly influence the objectives and behaviour of socio-economic actors, including governments (e.g., [1]), firms (e.g., [2–4]), and consumers, (e.g., [5–7]). Additionally, dominant research suggests that consumers respond to eco-labels, such as the RSPO logo, with improved attitudes and behaviours (e.g., [8–13]).

A closer look suggests that nascent research on possible negative effects of eco-labelling suggests that a product’s communication of sustainability issues might not always be positively related to a consumer’s perception of overall product quality or perception of value for money (e.g., cf. [14,15], for wood products in the UK, and [16], for Bordeaux wine). This suggests a more thorough exploration of the mechanisms by which eco-labels may influence consumers.

Non-governmental organisations are important players representing sustainability issues in their engagement with firms and in their communication with consumers directly through reports or indirectly by issuing eco-labels for certain products. Given the interest in eco-labels, this study explores consumers’ attitudes towards the collaboration of firms with...
NGOs. The influences of NGOs and other civil society players can be explained through the lens of cosmopolitan theory. Both civil societies influencing the business sector and consumers responding to production conditions on the other side of the world can be explained with the cosmopolitan logic that assumes connectedness of all humans through their being human and through the planetary challenges that concern us all.

To better understand the mechanisms by which brand attitude and NGO activities influence consumer behaviour, we consider their interaction. Existing research considered brand attitude as a mediator in the relationship between sustainability and purchase intention [17–21]. This study considers brand attitude as a moderator to allow a distinct understanding of the direct effects of brand attitude, sustainability, and their interaction. Existing research found the engagement of firms with NGOs around their sustainability engagement to be influential on purchase intention [22]. However, the specific direct path of firm-NGO attitude on purchase intention remained insignificant. By considering brand attitude as a moderator to this path, we make an important contribution: While we replicate the insignificant direct effect, a significant negative moderation suggests that a distinction is necessary between brand lovers [23,24] for whom the effect is significantly negative and all others who respond positively.

The paper continues as follows: First, the theoretical approach is introduced and integrates a cosmopolitan lens with a branding view. Hypotheses are derived from this theory building and will be tested subsequently. Next, the empirical context is introduced: a consumer survey on consumers’ purchase intention of an eco-labelled branded hazelnut spread. Then, the analyses of the obtained data are presented using stepwise hierarchical regression analysis (e.g., [25]). The results are presented, and the discussion relates them to existing streams of research, especially in the fields of sustainable consumption and consumer behaviour with respect to sustainability issues. This highlights our contribution: By theoretically integrating a branding and a cosmopolitan lens, we contribute to the nascent debate around the potential negative effects of eco-labels: We discover that the sustainability response of consumers who love the brand is negative while it is positive for all others. The article closes with implications for research and business practice. In particular, results suggest that work that integrates branding and sustainability needs to take a more nuanced approach to different levels of brand attitude.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

2.1. Cosmopolitanism: A Cultural Orientation Underlying Sustainability Attitudes and Engagement

The increasing awareness worldwide of sustainability issues, with their environmental and social dimensions, can be explained with the help of the “cosmopolitanism” theory: humanity is regarded as sharing fundamental values, thereby transcending cultures and their differences [26]. As humanity is seen as interconnected, the fate and well-being of one of its parts, therefore, depend on the well-being of humanity in its entirety [27].

The theory lens of cosmopolitanism can be helpful for understanding the behaviours of economic and societal agents, such as consumers [28,29], firms [30], or NGOs [31]. With regard to products, cosmopolitanism has two different dimensions, an aesthetic and a moral one (e.g., [32]). The aesthetic aspect chiefly denotes a consumer’s interest in products from diverse origins. The second, moral, aspect of cosmopolitanism is of particular relevance for the study at hand, and it concerns the normative implications of consumption [33,34], i.e., a consumer’s awareness of and interest in the human relationships behind the production and exchange of products from diverse origins. Furthermore, moral cosmopolitanism suggests that every human has obligations to other humans, these obligations being independent of any personal ties [35]. They arise from a concern to ensure that people, anywhere in the world, would have access to certain basic standards, such as a clean environment, education, and economic security [36].
2.2. NGOs as Representatives of Sustainability Activities

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have an important role to play in representing social and environmental issues in their interaction with firms [22,37]. The first publication of the Edelman Trust Barometer in 2001 discussed the observation of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) being considered, by the participants of the study, the most trusted societal institution worldwide (“Rising influence of NGOs”, Edelman [38]). Their stated objectives can be understood as acting on behalf of the common good (e.g., [39]); it is thus NGOs as participants in civil society [40] who, in their activities, are representing the moral concerns of other societal actors, including consumers. In the words of then UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, NGOs are the “conscience of humanity” (e.g., [41]).

Consumers can become aware of NGO activities in two ways [42]: firstly, NGOs communicate by themselves, raising awareness for environmental and social problems [37]. In return, consumers, in their awareness of NGOs, display an attitude towards them. Secondly, NGOs are engaged in partnerships with firms, by, for example, creating or underwriting eco-labels on products [43–45]. These labels’ visibility allows them to be taken into account in a consumer’s decision-making process towards the purchase of a certain product. A product’s sustainability characteristics belong to the category of “credence attributes” [11], qualities that cannot be observed by the consumer. In order to perceive and assess these qualities, consumers have to rely instead on the firm’s product communication [46,47] or an NGO’s representation thereof. In line with cosmopolitan theorising, and the cosmopolitan underpinnings of attitude towards NGOs and of NGO-supported sustainability labels (e.g., [22]), a positive influence of consumers’ NGO attitude on their likelihood to purchase an eco-labelled product is assumed:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** The stronger the NGO attitude, the higher the purchase intention.

2.3. Brand Attitude

In addition to a consumer’s sustainability-related NGO attitude, their attitude toward the specific consumer brand, independent of cosmopolitan and sustainable considerations, is of interest, as we expect an interaction between the two. Brand attitude is understood as “a consumer’s overall evaluation of a brand” ([48], p. 62; cf. also [19]). Regarding a consumer’s purchase intention, extant research has confirmed that brand attitude exerts a direct influence (e.g., [49,50]). It is thus expected that brand attitude directly influences consumers’ intention to purchase an eco-labelled product (e.g., [51]):

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** The stronger the brand attitude, the higher the purchase intention.

The research presented here aims to describe in more detail the complex relationship between sustainability qualities and brand image [52,53] in their influence on purchase intentions of sustainable goods. Its starting point is not to assume, as is often done in the relevant literature (e.g., [54,55], but also, [56]), that sustainability attributes add positively to a perception of overall product quality (cf. also [8–13]). The foregoing discussion makes necessary the consideration of the possibility of a trade-off [21] or even an association of sustainability with a perception of reduced quality [57]. To explore the interaction between attitudes towards NGOs and towards the brand, brand attitude is not only considered as a variable directly influencing the purchase intention of an eco-labelled product (H2) but also as an indirect influence [58]. Brand attitude has already been considered a mediating influence on the relationship between sustainability attributes and purchase intention [17–20,59].

In this research, brand attitude is considered as a moderator [58] rather than a mediator: a mediating relationship has the mediator transforming the underlying relationship between two variables. For brand attitude, however, being able to exert both a direct and an indirect influence on the purchase intention of an eco-labelled product, it must be understood to exist independently of the relationship between sustainability attributes and purchase...
intention. Lastly, and importantly, when interpreting the data, brand attitude as a moderator might allow looking more deeply into the apparently, non-significant direct relationship that Moosmayer et al. [22] observed between NGO attitude and purchase intention of an eco-labelled product.

These cosmopolitan attributes co-exist with the search and experience attributes that a product commonly possesses. In other words, sustainability attributes, as credence qualities, cannot always be considered as adding to the overall impression, in the consumer’s mind, of a product’s value deriving from its other attributes.

It is thus expected that brand attitude exerts a negative moderating influence on the relationship between NGO attitude and purchase intention of eco-labelled products (e.g., [22]) in a way that for brand lovers, increased NGO attitudes reduce purchase intentions:

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** The stronger the brand attitude, the weaker the relationship between NGO attitude and purchase intention.

### 2.4. Sustainability Engagement and Further Context Factors

Resulting of the above discussion and reflecting relevant influences in existing research (e.g., [22]), a consumer’s stance towards moral cosmopolitanism is not only modelled by the help of NGO attitude but also by the consumer’s perception of a firm’s sustainability performance. This is supported by a large and growing body of research that has been devoted to finding and describing a link between a consumer’s perception of sustainability-related firm activities and those consumers’ likelihood to purchase products from firms engaging in such activities (e.g., [60–63]). Caruana [64] assumes a change in consumers’ norms and values is the reason for this trend. As a result, a consumer’s perception of a firm’s sustainability performance is expected to have a direct and positive influence on that consumer’s purchase intention of an eco-labelled product (e.g., [28]):

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** The stronger the sustainability performance, the stronger the purchase intention.

The resulting model is visualised in Figure 1. It includes the developed concepts and the hypothesised relationships between them. For empirically testing the model and to avoid omitting relevant influences, we further include socio-demographic control variables. In line with prior research [22], gender, age, professional status, and income are considered.

---

**Figure 1.** Model and hypotheses.
3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Approach

To test the model, we administered an online survey to a convenience sample of French consumers using a questionnaire instrument in the French language around the theme of sustainable consumption, firm-NGO engagement and labelling. The data collection took place in June 2021 and was led by one of the authors and administered by a research student as part of a degree program. The questionnaire was set up in google forms, and invitations, including the survey link, were circulated via email and social media in the wider personal and professional network of the research student.

The convenience sampling approach aims at testing a model in a sample of respondents who are accessible and interested in participating in a study and does not aim to produce results that represent a certain population or consumer segment. The approach prioritises the ethicality of free consent to participate and the feasibility of findings that reflect a specific population or segment. In this given case, this approach seems particularly suitable, as the focus of our interest is not on absolute values of mean scores, which require representativeness to be meaningful, but on identifying relations between concepts, which are meaningful even though they might only apply in a narrow subset of the population. Hence, this distribution approach did not aim at being representative of a particular consumer universe, such as all French consumers, but aimed at identifying a specific effect that could be generalised in future research. The underlying logic is similar to experimental work that aims at establishing a difference between two specific groups without claims about the prevalence of these groups in a specific population.

3.2. Measures

*Purchase intention of the eco-labelled product* (purchase intention) was measured with the items that Moosmayer et al. [22] derived from Baker & Churchill [65] and adapted to the specific product brand (e.g., “I would like to try this RSPO-certified product brand”) (See Table 1).

Table 1. Exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach’s alpha.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Purchase intention</th>
<th>Sustainability Performance</th>
<th>NGO Attitude</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1. I would buy this product brand if I happened to see it in a store.</td>
<td>0.876</td>
<td>0.140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2. I would actively seek out this product brand in the store.</td>
<td>0.927</td>
<td>0.105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3. I would patronize this product brand.</td>
<td>0.915</td>
<td>0.820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4. The firm offers sufficiently responsible products</td>
<td>0.019</td>
<td>0.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>5. The firm is responding well to claims from non-governmental organizations (NGOs)</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>6. The firm adopts a proactive CSR positioning</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>7. Companies should respond to non-governmental organizations.</td>
<td>-0.056</td>
<td>-0.133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>8. Companies have a responsibility to react to claims from non-governmental organizations.</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>-0.190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>9. When non-governmental organizations discover environmental violations by companies, these companies should collaborate with the NGOs to resolve them.</td>
<td>-0.019</td>
<td>-0.179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Principal component analysis applying varimax rotation, converging after 5 iterations. Using Eigenvalue = 1 as a cut-off criterion.

In order to ensure that consumers have a fundamental understanding of the RSPO label, we provided the following introduction prior to the related question: “The Roundtable
on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) was established in 2004 with the objective of promoting the growth and use of sustainable oil palm products through credible global standards and multistakeholder governance. The RSPO Trademark is a globally recognised eco-label that signals the use of RSPO-certified sustainable palm oil”.

The three items were then introduced as follows: “If brand name did offer an RSPO-certified product that has the same taste, quality and price as its other products, how likely would you be to buy this product?” Following the suggestion by Rossiter and Bergkvist [66,67], the used single item “I like product brand” was used as a measure of brand attitude as a doubly concrete construct: both the concept of liking as well as the branded product is manifest to consumers.

For attitude towards firm-NGO collaboration (firm-NGO attitude), we adopted the measure established by Moosmayer et al. [22], which consists of three items and reflects consumers’ expectations of companies’ engagement with NGOs, was used. Similarly, the sustainability performance of the firm (sustainability performance) was measured by adapting three items that Moosmayer et al. [22] adopted from the CSR associations measure by Hair et al. [68].

All latent items are measured with 7-point Likert scales; an exception is the sustainability performance measure, for which we transformed the data to a 1 to 7-point scale level prior to analyses to ensure comparable statistical properties. The survey instrument was translated into French, applying back-translation focusing on functional equivalence [69].

3.3. Assessment of the Measurement Model

To assess our measurement model, we first applied exploratory factor analysis (EFA). EFA with Varimax rotation produced the three expected factors explaining 73.4% of the variance in the data (see Table 1 above). The means, standard deviations and correlations for all measures are displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct Name</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Purchase Intention</th>
<th>Brand ATTITUDE</th>
<th>Sust. Perf.</th>
<th>NGO Attitude</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Prof Stat.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase intention</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Attitude</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.464 ***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability Performance</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>0.355 ***</td>
<td>0.220 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Attitude</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>−0.055</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>−0.224 *</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>0.205 *</td>
<td>−0.020</td>
<td>0.124</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>0.161 *</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.235 *</td>
<td>−0.066</td>
<td>−0.252 **</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional status</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>−0.087</td>
<td>0.187 *</td>
<td>−0.001</td>
<td>−0.297 **</td>
<td>0.502 ***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income level</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0.216 *</td>
<td>−0.178 *</td>
<td>0.040</td>
<td>−0.238 *</td>
<td>−0.047</td>
<td>0.284 **</td>
<td>0.148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Sust. Perf.: Sustainability Performance. Prof stat: Professional status. 1 Measure scaled 1 to 7 with higher values indicating increased affirmation. 2 Measured 0 = male; 1 = female; 0.5 = other/ pref not to tell. 3 Quantified as category number as displayed in Table 3. ***: highly significant at $p < 0.001$. **: significant at 0.001 < $p < 0.01$. *: significant at 0.01 < $p < 0.05$. +: marginally significant at 0.05 < $p < 0.1$.

All constructs showed sufficient reliabilities, with Cronbach’s alpha scoring 0.90 for Purchase Intention, 0.66 for NGO attitude, and 0.74 for Sustainability performance. It is noteworthy that the 0.66 score for NGO attitude is between the 0.6 and 0.7 thresholds discussed in the literature. While dropping the third item (“When non-governmental organisations discover environmental violations by companies, these companies should collaborate with the NGOs to resolve them”) would result in an improved 0.75 Cronbach’s alpha value, we decided to keep the original scale to allow cross-study comparability of the measure. Confirmatory factor analysis using Amos 29 further supported this choice with a Cmin/df of 1.3 and common goodness measures above the 0.9 thresholds. Specifically, CFI = 0.99, NFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.95 and AGFI = 0.90 and RMSEA = 0.05 below the 0.08 threshold, suggesting a good fit of the measurement model [68].
3.4. Sample

One hundred nine valid responses that were collected in an online survey as described above resulted in 109 valid responses from a convenience sample of French consumers in a higher education institution context. The sample is skewed towards young female respondents: 34% of respondents stated that they were male, 64% female and 2% preferred not to say. Age distribution was skewed towards the youngest category (18 to 27 years), accounting for 59% of the sample. Attributing the average category age to respondents (e.g., 22 years to all respondents in the 18 to 27 category) would result in an average age of 32.2 years (when attributing the average category age to each respondent) and almost two-thirds of women. The detailed social and demographic portrait of the respondents is presented in Table 3. These demographic variables were also used as controls.

Table 3. A social and demographic portrait of the respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female 64.2%</th>
<th>Male 33.9%</th>
<th>Prefer Not to Say 1.8%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>(1): 18–27 years 58.7%</td>
<td>(2): 28–37 years 16.5%</td>
<td>(3): 38–47 years 4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5): 58–67 years 7.3%</td>
<td>(6): 68–77 years 2.8%</td>
<td>(4): 48–57 years 9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Status</td>
<td>(1): Student 40.4%</td>
<td>(2): Employee 38.5%</td>
<td>(3): Self-Employed 9.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>(1): &lt;10 k€ 21.1%</td>
<td>(2): 10 k€ to &lt;20 k€ 14.7%</td>
<td>(3): 20 k€ to &lt;30 k€ 11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5): 50 k€ to &lt;60 k€ 6.4%</td>
<td>(6): 50 k€ to &lt;70 k€ 6.4%</td>
<td>(4): 30 k€ to &lt;40 k€ 11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(8): 70 k€ to &lt;80 k€ 5.5%</td>
<td>(9): 80 k€ to &lt;90 k€ 5.5%</td>
<td>(5): 40 k€ to &lt;50 k€ 13.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(10): 90 k€ and above 5.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5. Analyses

We tested the moderated regression model developed above using SPSS 29. We integrated moderations as interaction terms, i.e., as the product of the independent variable and moderator variable. To avoid distortions resulting from scale levels, we used the standardised values to calculate interaction terms and to run the moderated regressions. The results are displayed in Table 4: the core model includes only the hypothesised relationships, followed by a model that considers control variables. To better understand the moderating effect (H3), we further calculated the model for two segments; one called “partial model 1” with respondents reporting a brand attitude ranging between 1 and 6, and the other, called “partial model 2”, with respondents reporting a brand attitude of 7.

Table 4. Regression models explaining consumers’ purchase intention of eco-labelled products.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Core Model (n = 109)</th>
<th>Model with Controls (n = 109)</th>
<th>Partial Model I: ABrand &lt; 7 (n = 69)</th>
<th>Partial Model II: ABrand ≥ 7 (n = 40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Constant)</td>
<td>0.000 n.s.</td>
<td>0.079</td>
<td>0.031 n.s.</td>
<td>0.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Influences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Attitude (H1)</td>
<td>−0.037 n.s.</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.023 n.s.</td>
<td>0.080</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand Attitude (H2)</td>
<td>0.378 ***</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.412 ***</td>
<td>0.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO Attitude × Brand Attitude (H3)</td>
<td>−0.200 *</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>−0.268 **</td>
<td>0.079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability Performance (H4)</td>
<td>0.284 ***</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>0.272 **</td>
<td>0.081</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Model (n = 109)</th>
<th>Model with Controls (n = 109)</th>
<th>Partial Model I: ABrand &lt; 7 (n = 69)</th>
<th>Partial Model II: ABrand = 7 (n = 40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B &amp; S.E.</td>
<td>B &amp; S.E.</td>
<td>B &amp; S.E.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability Performance × Brand Attitude</td>
<td>−0.131 n.s.</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>0.046 n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.008 n.s.</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.143 n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.005 n.s.</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.139 n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Status</td>
<td>0.030 n.s.</td>
<td>0.091</td>
<td>−0.016 n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.340 ***</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>0.349 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modell Assessment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>8.90</td>
<td>4.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.341</td>
<td>0.447</td>
<td>0.311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²adj</td>
<td>0.315</td>
<td>0.397</td>
<td>0.245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: B: regression weight. S.E.: standard error. ***: highly significant at \( p < 0.001 \). **: significant at 0.001 < \( p < 0.01 \). *: significant at 0.01 < \( p < 0.05 \). +: marginally significant at 0.05 < \( p < 0.1 \). n.s.: not significant.

4. Results

A negative but not significant association between NGO attitude and purchase intention of an eco-labelled product (−0.04) was found, suggesting no support for hypothesis 1 (direct effect of NGO attitude on purchase intention of an eco-labelled product). The result of +0.38 indicates a highly significant relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention of eco-labelled products, therefore supporting hypothesis 2. In support of hypothesis 3, we observe a significant negative effect (−0.20) of the product term of brand attitude and NGO attitude. This suggests that a higher brand attitude is associated with a weaker relationship between NGO attitude and purchase intention. In other words, brand attitude negatively moderates the relationship between NGO attitude and purchase intention of an eco-labelled product. We observe a highly significant effect (+0.28) of sustainability performance on purchase intention (eco-labelled), supporting hypothesis 4. These results have been found to be independent of the integration of control variables. Household income, as would be expected, has a positive influence on purchase intention but not gender, age, or professional status.

5. Discussion

We started from existing work that explored sustainability and NGO variables influencing purchase intention, and we suggested considering brand attitude in this context. It is, therefore, not a surprise that the introduction of the construct of brand attitude leads to the observation of its strong association with the purchase intention of an eco-labelled product. Products that benefit from a strong brand image and strong brand attractiveness will indeed see consumers displaying a favourable attitude towards them, which is highly correlated with an intention to procure such a product in general terms [48]. The question remaining is: what might be the role and importance of the eco-label on the product that is being purchased? Could it be possible that such a purchase might result just from the product eliciting a strong brand attitude and that the influence of the perception of a product’s eco-label might be negligible, even when the purchase intention concerns an eco-labelled product?

This research was motivated by the personal discovery that a branded product’s packaging did not communicate (e.g., through the display of the appropriate eco-label) the fact that some of its ingredients were eco-certified, as mentioned on the firm’s website. A first overview of research on eco-labelling and its effect on consumer perception made us aware of the possibility that a product’s communication of sustainability issues might not always be positively correlated with a consumer’s perception of overall product quality or
perception of value for money (e.g., cf. [14,15], for wood products in the UK, and [16], for Bordeaux wine).

5.1. Sustainability Issues vs. Brand Love

We were intrigued by the finding of only a weak (non-significant) direct effect of NGO attitude on purchase intention (eco-labelled), in conjunction with a highly significant moderating effect of brand attitude on the aforementioned relationship.

Therefore, we decided to isolate the data with brand attitude = 7 (40 observations and 69 observations of brand attitude = 1–6). We posit that the relationship between brand attitude and other variables might not always be linear but, in this case, discrete. Subsequently, we find that the moderating effect of brand attitude with brand attitude = 7 leads to a marginally significant negative direct effect (−0.26) of NGO attitude on purchase intention (eco-labelled). Conversely, isolating the data with brand attitude 1–6 reveals the moderating effect of brand attitude leading to a marginally significant positive direct effect (+0.22) of NGO attitude on purchase intention (eco-labelled). On the strength of these values observed, we decide that there is a qualitative difference in the relationships between constructs for datasets with the highest brand attitude compared to all the others.

Extant research on a very high degree of affection for brands and their associated products centres around a concept called “brand love” (e.g., [20,70,71]). Brand love can be defined as “the degree of passionate emotional attachment a satisfied consumer has for a particular trade name” [70] (p. 81), and this emotional attachment for an object can be understood as having important similarities with the one for a loved person (e.g., [72]). Palusuk et al. [73] emphasise the absence of a consideration of alternatives as an illustration for such an emotional attachment.

Brand love can be considered an extreme form of affection towards a particular brand [70]. The idea of effect is of particular interest for the research at hand in that effect may cause negative emotions to arise, especially those that are associated with changes to key aspects of the brand, including brand image [74].

The observation of extreme effect leading to negative emotions [74], linked with the exclusivity feeling towards the loved brand, might be a possible explanation of how, as discovered in this research, in the case of a consumer’s highest brand attitude, NGO attitude can even have a negative influence on purchase intention of an eco-labelled product: in the case of an iconic brand (e.g., [29]), competing communication claims, such as sustainability issues (communicated via eco-labels) can only diminish or dilute the loved brand image, and have a negative effect on purchase intention.

Love for the brand, according to our interpretation of the data in the present research, meaning an affection for a brand image that exclusively centres on product characteristics, could be the primary explanation for the drowning out of other possible perceptions of the brand (e.g., to be sustainable).

5.2. Limitations of the Study and Implications for Further Research

The study’s limitations open up several avenues for future research projects: the generalisability of the present project’s insights (observing the different influence of very high levels of brand attitude compared with lower ones) might be tested by carrying out similar projects in different contexts. First of all, it would be the country context where different attitudes towards sustainability issues, and brands, could be observed, together with their effect on purchase intention. Secondly, we could postulate that the specific eco-label in question (here, the RSPO label) might be responsible for part of the effect. This could be tested with the use of different eco-labels. Lastly, the product group in question could also play an important role: what is the nature of the product’s benefits to the consumer? The product observed in our research (hazelnut spread) is purchased, consumed and loved because it provides pleasure. Even more so, this pleasure may stimulate guilt, an emotion that was shown to be important in sustainable consumption [75]. In the case of cosmetics or beauty products, for example, we might expect a different relationship between
brand love, perception of sustainability issues and purchase intention. A sustainability communication initiative on social media might also yield new insights [76] compared to product communication. The sample size might also need to be increased in subsequent studies to make the data more robust.

5.3. Practical Implications for Brand Managers

Our observation that a very high brand attitude might make sustainability considerations pale into insignificance could provide brand managers with an alternative vision for available brand strategies.

Depending on the strength of the brand image and a brand’s loyal following, a brand has these two strategic choices when faced with sustainability issues:

Should a firm, as seems to be established practice, incorporate these issues by making products appear “more responsible”? Or should the brand, on the contrary, not consider sustainability issues in its product communication, as it is regarded as, or may become a love brand?

Author Contributions: Conceptualisation, C.B. and D.C.M.; methodology, D.C.M.; formal analysis, D.C.M.; writing—original draft preparation, C.B.; writing—review and editing, C.B. and D.C.M.; visualisation, C.B. and D.C.M.; supervision, C.B.; project administration, C.B. and D.C.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is available on request from the authors.

Acknowledgments: The authors are grateful to the Sustainability review team for their constructive comments during the review process. The authors would like to express their thanks to everyone who contributed in one way or the other in writing this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

3. Hussain, I.; Mu, S.; Mohiuddin, M.; Danish, R.Q.; Sair, S.A. Effects of sustainable brand equity and marketing innovation on market performance in hospitality industry: Mediating effects of sustainable competitive advantage. Sustainability 2020, 12, 2939. [CrossRef]
4. Lee, H.J.; Rhee, T. How does corporate ESG management affect consumers’ brand choice? Sustainability 2023, 15, 6795. [CrossRef]
6. Zeynalova, Z.; Namazova, N. Revealing consumer behavior toward green consumption. Sustainability 2022, 14, 5806. [CrossRef]
7. Furukawa, H.; Lee, K.T. Environmentally friendly materialism: How it is generated and how luxury apparel addresses environmental problems. Sustainability 2023, 15, 6703. [CrossRef]
12. Vitale, S.; Biondo, F.; Giosuè, C.; Bono, G.; Okpala, C.O.R.; Piazza, I.; Sprovieri, M.; Pipitone, V. Consumers’ perception and willingness to pay for eco-labeled seafood in Italian hypermarkets. Sustainability 2020, 12, 1434. [CrossRef]


21. Luchs, M.G.; Kumar, M. “Yes, but this other one looks better/works better”: How do consumers respond to trade-offs between sustainability and other valued attributes? *J. Bus. Ethics* 2017, 140, 567–584. [CrossRef]


24. Joshi, R.; Garg, P. Role of brand experience in shaping brand love. *Sustainability* 2017, 9, 654. [CrossRef]


41. Ratner, S.; Gomonov, K.; Revino, S.; Lazanyuk, I. Ecolabeling as a policy instrument for more sustainable development: The evidence of supply and demand interactions from Russia. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 9581. [CrossRef]

45. Gröfke, N.; Duplat, V.; Wickert, C.; Tjemkes, B. Multi-stakeholder perspective on food labelling for environmental sustainability: Attitudes, perceived barriers, and solution approaches towards the “traffic light index”. Sustainability 2021, 13, 933. [CrossRef]

46. Pimonenko, T.; Bilan, Y.; Horák, J.; Starchenko, L.; Gajda, W. Green brand of companies and greenwashing under Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainability 2020, 12, 1679. [CrossRef]


48. Faircloth, J.B.; Capella, L.M.; Alford, B.L. The effect of brand attitude and brand image on brand equity. J. Mark. Theory Pract. 2001, 9, 61–75. [CrossRef]


52. Kuchinka, D.G.J.; Balazs, S.; Gavriletea, M.D.; Djokic, B.B. Consumer attitudes toward sustainable development and risk to brand loyalty. Sustainability 2018, 10, 997. [CrossRef]


57. Van Doorn, J.; Verhoef, P.C.; Risselada, H. Sustainability claims and perceived product quality: The moderating role of brand CSR. Sustainability 2020, 12, 3711. [CrossRef]

58. Majeed, M.U.; Aslam, S.; Murtaza, S.A.; Attilla, S.; Molnár, E. Green marketing approaches and their impact on green purchase intentions: Mediating role of green brand image and consumer beliefs towards the environment. Sustainability 2022, 14, 11703. [CrossRef]


60. Khan, I.; Fatma, M. Does perceived sustainability affect the customer responses toward the brands? Role of customer engagement as a mediator. Sustainability 2023, 15, 8259. [CrossRef]


63. Caruana, R. A sociological perspective of consumption morality. J. Consum. Behav. 2007, 6, 287–304. [CrossRef]


68. Carroll, B.A.; Ahuvia, A.C. Some antecedents and outcomes of brand love. Market. Lett. 2006, 17, 79–89. [CrossRef]


76. Us, Y.; Pimonenko, T.; Lyulyov, O.; Chen, Y.; Tambovceva, T. Promoting green brand of university in social media: Text mining and sentiment analysis. *Virt. Econ.* **2022**, *5*, 24–42. [CrossRef]

**Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.