

Exploring customer-based brand equity of social purpose-driven brands

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Abstract

Social purpose-driven branding is gaining relevance as consumers increasingly expect brands to engage with social and environmental issues. However, limited empirical research has examined how consumers assess the brand equity of social purpose-driven brands. This study explores consumer-based brand equity in the domain of social purpose-driven branding, using the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model as a theoretical lens. Twenty-one in-depth interviews were conducted with Italian Gen Z consumers. The findings, mapped onto the CBBE model, indicate that purpose-driven brand equity is assessed through distinctive characteristics of brand salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and, ultimately, brand resonance. This research extends the CBBE framework to social purpose-driven brands and offers actionable insights for brands aiming to build meaningful purpose-led equity.

Keywords: *social purpose-driven brand, customer-based brand equity (CBBE), qualitative research, in-depth interviews.*

Track: Consumer Behavior and Marketing Research

1. Introduction

In recent years, growing consumer engagement with issues such as social justice, environmental sustainability, and individual well-being has redefined the role expected of brands (Havas Group, 2024). No longer seen merely as commercial entities, brands are increasingly expected to take clear positions on societal challenges and actively contribute to positive social change—often beyond the confines of a purely profit-driven rationale (Gray et al., 2024; Havas Group, 2024). Within this evolving context, the notion of the social purpose-driven brand has gained prominence, referring to brands that not only communicate a set of values but also integrate those values into their identity, practices and offerings (Gray et al., 2024). While this shift often requires substantial investment, brands perceived as authentically social purpose-driven, such as Patagonia and Ikea, have been shown to outperform market averages by 33–38% (Havas Group, 2024). Despite the growing relevance for brands to act with social purpose, insights into social-purpose-driven branding remain scarce. To be perceived as genuinely purposeful by consumers, brands must understand how consumers assess the equity of a social purpose brand. In this regard, the literature is still emerging and remains largely conceptual, offering limited empirical insights into the components of consumer-based brand equity (Williams et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2024). To date, research has mainly concentrated on case-specific analyses based on secondary data, examining how social purpose branding is performed in practice (e.g., Hajdas and Kłeczek, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2021). In addition, an exploratory study from a managerial perspective proposed a preliminary classification of equity drivers in social purpose-driven branding—namely, activists, inspirational, differentiators, and identity creators (Gonçalves Filho et al., 2025). These initial contributions address specific dimensions of brand equity from a managerial perspective, such as brand performance, without, first, providing a comprehensive view of brand equity and, second, incorporating the consumer perspective. This underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how consumers assess the brand equity of social purpose-driven brands.

In this regard, Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model offers a theoretically grounded and widely adopted framework for examining how brand equity is perceived in the minds of consumers. CBBE is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to brand marketing activities. The model enables an analysis of brand equity as a multifaceted construct encompassing functional, symbolic, and emotional dimensions. It is particularly relevant to social purpose-driven branding, as it emphasizes consumers' perceptual associations with the brand—such as salience, performance, imagery, judgments, feelings, and ultimately, brand resonance. The CBBE model has been successfully applied in various adjacent domains, including luxury branding (Hwang, 2013; Liu et al., 2017), destination marketing (Pike, 2013; Yousaf et al., 2017), online retail (Zhu et al., 2010), and B2B contexts (Kuhn and Alpert, 2004). Applying the CBBE model to social purpose-driven brands provides a structured approach to investigate how consumers assess brand equity about social purpose-driven brands. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore consumer-based brand equity in the domain of social purpose-driven branding through the theoretical lens of the CBBE model.

2. Theoretical background and research question

2.1. Social purpose-driven brands

The social purpose of a brand is defined as “*a long-term central aim that is a predominant component of its identity, meaning structure and strategy, which leads to productive engagement with broader societal and environmental issues that transcend the brand's profits*” (Gray et al., 2024, p. 1209). In this view, purpose defines a brand's reason for being, guiding its contribution to societal betterment and its integration into business and marketing practices to achieve meaningful impact (Gray et al., 2024). Several branding approaches also involve engagement with societal issues, such as activist brands or brands undertaking corporate political activism or advocacy. However, these approaches differ from social purpose-driven brands (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Eilert et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Klostermann et al., 2022): activist and politically engaged brands typically focus on issue-specific stances or public advocacy, emphasizing ethical or responsible practices in their communication activities without necessarily integrating them into the brand's core identity. In contrast, social purpose-driven brands are guided by a long-term, identity-rooted purpose that informs their strategic decisions and everyday practices, extending beyond episodic activism or political positioning.

In the emerging literature on social purpose-driven branding, recent contributions have emphasized the strategic and ethical imperative for brands to address social issues to meet evolving consumer expectations and, consequently, foster positive brand outcomes (Swaminathan et al., 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2021; Caven, 2022; Gray et al., 2024). However, previous research remains largely conceptual (Williams et al., 2022; Gray et al., 2024); existing studies have explored the strategic functions of a social purpose-driven brands and its potential implications for consumer behavior and well-being (Williams et al., 2022), as well as the importance of aligning purpose with consumer values and needs, ensuring consistency between brand messaging, actions, and outcomes (Hsu et al., 2017). Empirical research to date has primarily focused on identifying best practices and performance through case studies of social purpose-driven brands (e.g., Hajdas and Kłęczek, 2021). Gonçalves Filho et al. (2025) classified four categories of brand equity of social purpose-driven brands from a managerial perspective—activists, inspirational, differentiators, and identity creators—suggesting that brand equity of these brands is a multidimensional construct. Despite these advances, there remains limited understanding of how consumers assess the value embedded in social purpose-driven brands, leaving a significant gap in knowledge regarding how the social purpose of brands translates into meaningful equity from the consumer's perspective.

2.2. Customer-based brand equity

Keller (1993) defined Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (p.2). In this formulation, brand knowledge encompasses the full spectrum of brand associations stored in consumers’ long-term memory. Building on this foundation, Keller (1993, 2001, 2008) introduced the CBBE pyramid model, which conceptualizes brand equity as a hierarchical process unfolding across *brand salience*, ensuring awareness and linking the brand to a specific product category or consumer need (brand identity – “who are you?”); *brand performance* and *brand imagery*, developing strong, favorable, and unique associations through functional/experiential attributes and symbolic/emotional meanings (brand meaning – “what are you?”); *brand judgments* and *brand feelings*, capturing consumers’ evaluations (e.g., quality, credibility) and affective reactions (e.g., warmth, excitement) (brand response – “what do I think or feel about you?”); and *brand resonance*, reflecting the depth of the psychological bond and the level of active engagement with the brand (brand resonance – “what is the relationship between you and me?”). Each stage builds upon the successful development of the previous one, reinforcing the model’s cumulative logic. Central to this framework is the idea that the strength of a brand resides in the minds of consumers, shaped over time by their experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses.

The CBBE model has proven to be a robust and adaptable framework for understanding the composition and sources of consumer-perceived brand equity in diverse domains (Kuhn and Alpert, 2004; Zhu et al., 2010; Hwang, 2013; Pike, 2013; Liu et al., 2017; Yousaf et al., 2017). Given the model’s emphasis on consumer perceptions, meanings, and relationships, it offers a particularly valuable lens for investigating how a social purpose-driven brand is interpreted, internalized, and evaluated by consumers.

Accordingly, this study aims to extend the CBBE framework to the context of social purpose-driven branding, with the aim of exploring how consumers assess the brand equity of a social purpose-driven brand.

3. Methodology

Considering the aim of this study, we employed an abductive qualitative methodology (Blaikie, 2009). Abduction, as a methodological orientation, is characterized by an ongoing and iterative interaction between theoretical reasoning, empirical inquiry, and analytical interpretation (Van Maanen et al., 2007), that enables the re-examination of existing phenomena from a novel perspective.

In line with this research logic, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with members of Gen Z—a cohort selected due to its stronger expectations for brands to engage in socially and environmentally responsible practices, making them particularly relevant for the investigation of purpose-driven branding (Kantar, 2022). Participants were initially identified through the key informant technique and subsequently recruited via snowball sampling, continuing until data saturation was reached (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). A total of 21 interviews were conducted with Italian Generation Z individuals. The final sample was gender-balanced (eleven females, ten males), with participants ranging in age from 19 to 27 years. Consistent with the abductive logic, a semi-structured interview guide was designed with reference to the extant literature, ensuring a robust theoretical foundation while allowing for the emergence of spontaneous and context-rich responses. The open-ended questions aimed to explore participants’ perceptions of customer-based brand equity dimensions (Keller, 1993), particularly in relation to brands perceived as social purpose-driven. All interviews were conducted with prior informed consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim, yielding a corpus of 78 pages (formatted with 1.5 line spacing and 12-point font). Data analysis followed an abductive, iterative, and multi-phase coding process informed by thematic content analysis, which considers themes as the primary units of meaning (King and Horrocks, 2010). The first phase involved repeated readings of each transcript, followed by a line-by-line open coding process (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017) through which descriptive codes

were inductively generated. In the subsequent theory-matching phase (Van Maanen et al., 2007), these emerging categories were interpreted in relation to existing theoretical constructs (CBBE dimensions), enabling a deeper integration of empirical evidence and conceptual understanding.

4. Findings

Thematic content analysis enabled the identification of several integrative themes, drawn from consumers' interviews, within overarching themes aligned with Keller's CBBE model – *salience* (i.e., identity); *performance* and *imagery* (i.e., meaning); *judgments* and *feelings* (i.e., responses); and *resonance* (i.e., relationship) – as applied to social purpose-driven brands. These categories help to understand how consumers attribute value to such brands in their everyday experiences.

Starting with *salience*, interviewees described the characteristics that make a social purpose-driven brand mentally accessible, easily recalled, and enduring over time. Chief among these was the *consistent societal commitment*, encompassing consumers, the environment, and society. Participants emphasized that brands with a social purpose sustain credible adherence to specific values over time, avoiding opportunistic behaviors and a narrow focus on consumers. As one participant explained: *“I understand it has a social purpose because they continue to support certain causes over time, not just when it becomes trendy—toward consumers, the environment, and society. They always talk about respect for the environment, equality, support for disabled athletes, and the creation of accessible products. It doesn't seem like they're doing it just for publicity or simply to soften their image and appeal to consumers, but rather to carry forward a broader vision for society that is pursued over time”* (Interviewee 5). Another crucial aspect of brand salience was *accountability in communication*. When actions are clearly explained and supported with factual evidence, consumers are more likely to recognize the brand's social purpose. As one interviewee noted: *“I understand that a brand has a social purpose when it actually explains what it is doing. For example: ‘We used this recycled material,’ and they provide reports, data, and concrete evidence of this process and of the impact it generates. That's honest communication to me, because they show what's behind it, and in that way, I recognize that it has a social purpose”* (Interviewee 1).

Moving to *performance*, in the context of social purpose-driven brands, this dimension goes beyond traditional performance—such as product quality or price (Keller, 1993)—and reflects the brand's ability to translate declared values into concrete, tangible, and verifiable practices, in consumers' mind, across several aspects. First, *product sustainability*, which is interpreted not only through the use of ecological materials within the product and packaging, but also in terms of accessibility and durability. One participant observed: *“A brand that cares about the environment should use not only recycled or recyclable materials, but could also create functional packaging, such as boxes that turn into useful objects, further reducing waste. For example, the packaging could be easily reusable as a container or transformed into something practical. Moreover, brands should design products that are accessible to consumer minorities, such as people with disabilities or particular physical traits, who often struggle to find or properly use specific products. Finally, I also believe a product is sustainable if it lasts over time. For this reason, I expect a social purpose-driven brand to create durable products that help reduce waste”* (Interviewee 8). A second element of performance involves *responsible marketing communication*. Participants valued when brands communicated in an honest and non-manipulative way, aiming to raise awareness both about the production process and about consumers' actual needs, rather than merely persuading them to buy. As one participant stated: *“A brand that markets honestly truly informs and raises consciousness about the product, about consumers' real needs, and about the production process, instead of just trying to convince you to purchase”* (Interviewee 6). Performance also encompasses *commitment to the local community*, with expectations for concrete actions that have a direct social impact. One participant suggested: *“I expect the brand to do something concrete in the territory where it operates. It could support people with disabilities through initiatives that improve accessibility,*

from transport to workplaces. A brand could offer psychological counseling services in schools, universities, and communities, to help people talk and deal with mental health issues. Also, promoting local entrepreneurship by supporting small businesses" (Interviewee 9). Finally, performance is expressed through *inclusivity within the organization*, understood as equal opportunities and mutual respect among colleagues. As one participant affirmed: "*By inclusiveness among employees, I mean offering equal opportunities to everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, or ability. Having a respectful work environment where people aren't afraid to express their opinions or ask for help without being judged or discriminated against*" (Interviewee 2).

Regarding *imagery*—which, in the CBBE model, reflects the brand's extrinsic meaning—a social purpose-driven brand is perceived as such when it exhibits a distinctive visual identity designed to appear "purposeful", and a tone of voice expected to be respectful. "Purposeful" visual identity plays a distinctive role in conveying values: "*When I think of brands committed to mental well-being, the environment, or inclusivity, I think of images and colors that evoke feelings of calm, positivity, and warmth. For the environment, green comes to mind, it represents nature; I picture plants, trees, and natural landscapes. For mental well-being, blue is the color that best represents calm. I imagine symbols like the sky and water. For inclusivity, bright colors make me think of openness*" (Interviewee 3). Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on a *respectful tone of voice*: "*I think you can tell from the tone and the way they communicate. A sincere brand doesn't push you to buy with urgency or pressure, like 'only today' or 'last chance'—those messages create anxiety. A brand shouldn't make you feel guilty for not buying, nor should it make people feel weird or excluded when offering products for different needs*" (Interviewee 5).

Within the *judgments block*, which captures personal opinions and evaluations of the brand, interviewees indicated that a brand's social purpose reinforces their *perception of its quality*. As one participant noted: "*I have several of their items and I've always liked the focus on quality. I remember a campaign they did a while ago, where they talked about making more conscious and sustainable choices. What struck me was that they didn't just say it—you could see it in the products: the use of sustainable materials or the idea of creating clothes that last over time*" (Interviewee 1). Positive judgments also extended to the *rational evaluation of the brand's purpose as a decision-making criterion*. As another interviewee stated: "*Social value really makes a difference in my choices. If I have to choose between two products similar in quality and price, I'd much rather go with the one from a brand that's committed to important causes*" (Interviewee 10). Social purpose further strengthens the *brand's credibility*, including on a functional point of view: "*Seeing a brand that genuinely strives for social improvement, and delivers real results, boosts my confidence in the brand from every angle, including its functional performance. Investing in social causes implies that the brand operates with the careful management and quality standards necessary to maintain healthy margins and produce high-quality products*" (Interviewee 8).

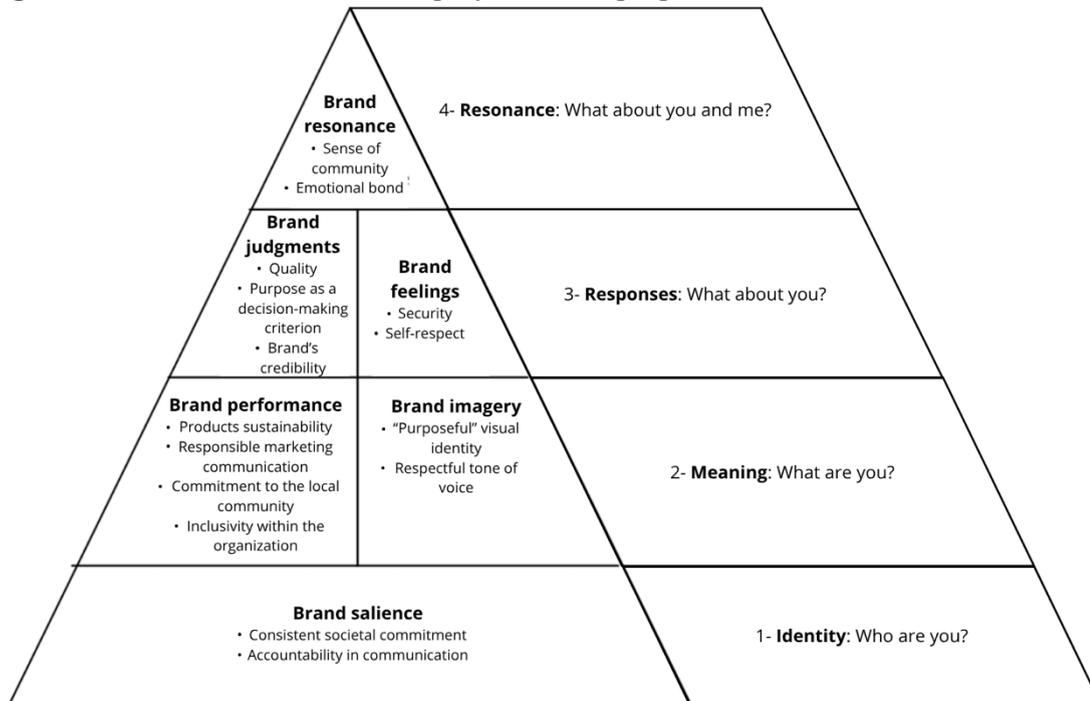
Under the theme of *feelings*, social purpose-driven brands evoke — as described by participants — affective responses that go beyond simple likability. A strong feeling of security emerges when consumers perceive a brand as respectful, inclusive, and genuinely committed to doing good. As one participant explained: "*When a brand reflects values I believe in, it makes me feel safe and confident in my choice. Knowing that the brand is respectful and inclusive reassures me, and whenever possible, I prefer to choose that brand*" (Interviewee 7). For some consumers, engaging with a brand that aligns with their values fosters a strong sense of self-respect. As one participant shared: "*I feel proud to support them. It's no longer just a purchase; it becomes a deeper choice, connected to who I am and what I believe in*" (Interviewee 11).

Finally, the overarching theme of *resonance*, representing the highest level of the consumer-brand relationship, was articulated by interviewees through two main aspects: a sense of community and attitudinal attachment. The *sense of community* emerged when participants perceived that a brand shared their values and positioned them within a broader collective that included the brand. As one interviewee explained: "*I think that when a brand truly represents a value I believe in, it creates a kind of shared space between me, society, and the brand. I feel like we're on the same side — of the*

brand and of the world I want to be part of. It makes me feel a sense of belonging, like it speaks a bit about me and the world I belong to” (Interviewee 6). In some cases, this relationship evolved into a deeper *emotional bond*, whereby the brand became part of daily life and a source of emotional connection: “When a brand manages to create a real bond with people, it’s no longer just a label. It becomes part of everyday life, something you grow fond of. And I think that’s the highest point a purpose-driven brand can reach” (Interviewee 7).

A visual representation of the qualitative findings is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Customer-based brand equity of social purpose-driven brands.



Source: Authors' own work.

5. Conclusion

This study is situated within the branding literature, at the intersection of social purpose-driven branding and Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE). By exploring how consumers perceive brand equity concerning social purpose-driven branding, it reveals how consumers articulate the CBBE of social purpose-driven brands through integrative themes that emerged directly from their narratives and align with Keller's model. Specifically, *salience* is constructed through the integrative themes of consistent societal commitment and clarity in communication. *Performance* in this domain is not perceived merely in terms of product and price, as Keller (1993) suggests, but rather in a broader sense that encompasses product sustainability, responsible marketing communication, support for local communities, and inclusivity within the organization. *Imagery* is shaped by themes such as a "purposeful" visual identity and a respectful tone of voice. *Judgments* are influenced both by perceived quality and by the rational evaluation of a brand's purpose as a decision-making criterion. *Feelings* primarily emerge in the form of security and self-respect. Finally, *resonance* is achieved through a sense of community and emotional bond.

This research extends the CBBE model to a novel domain by empirically demonstrating how its dimensions manifest in social purpose-driven branding. While prior studies on social purpose-driven brands have been largely conceptual or based on managerial perspectives and secondary data (Hajdas and Klęczek, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2021; Gonçalves Filho et al., 2025), this

study provides deeper insight into how consumers construct brand equity when social purpose is central to a brand's identity.

The findings also offer several strategic implications for brand managers. First, communicate social purpose with consistent societal commitment and clarity, aligning messages with long-term values and avoiding opportunism. Second, translate brand values into tangible performance, such as offering sustainable products, supporting local communities, conveying responsible marketing communication and fostering inclusivity within the company. Third, invest in a "purposeful" visual identity (e.g., using appropriate colors) and a respectful tone of voice. These actions can enhance consumer judgments (e.g., perceived quality) and feelings (e.g., self-respect), strengthening both the sense of community and emotional bond with the brand.

This study also presents some limitations, which offer avenues for future research. As a qualitative investigation, it does not allow for causal inferences between branding activities and consumer responses. Future research could adopt quantitative methods to test these relationships. Moreover, the study focused exclusively on Gen Z consumers; examining other generational cohorts and cultural contexts could provide valuable comparative insights. Finally, building on these findings, future research could develop and validate a dedicated measurement scale for the CBBE of social purpose-driven brands, advancing both theoretical and practical understanding of this growing phenomenon.

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