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Morally transgressive companies and sustainable guidelines: seeking redemption or abusing trust?

Morally
transgressive
companies

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to evaluate the impact of a sustainable production action on consumer trust and purchase intention by a company involved in moral transgression and also analyze the effect on consumer trust and purchase intention if a company, after green marketing, is identified as greenwashing spreader.

Design/methodology/approach – This quantitative nature ($n = 121$) study uses scale's discriminant and convergent validity analyses, structural equation modeling and Student's t -test.

Findings – Even for previously morally transgressive brands, actions of social legitimation, such as embracing environmental causes, positively impact consumer trust and purchase intention. However, consumers drop brand trust and purchase intention when verifying that this action was greenwashing.

Research limitations/implications – Mediating or moderating variables of ecological awareness, such as religiosity or political view, were not tested.

Practical implications – This article combines the impact of positive, sustainable management actions for morally transgressive companies and the effects of new transgression on their sustainable management action. Thus, it aims to reduce the gap between organizational practice and management research.

Social implications – This article shows that embracing society's emerging causes and helping the world be a better place to live, moving toward the 2030 United Nations agenda, have practical repercussions for organizations.

Originality/value – This article contributes both to the literature and managerial implications by combining the impact of positive, sustainable management actions for morally transgressive companies and the effects of new transgression on their sustainable management action, thus reducing the gap between management research and organizational practice by unveiling the relations between sustainable actions and their perceived consequences.

Keywords Sustainable management, Branding, Greenwashing, Brand moral transgression, Institutional legitimation

Paper type Research paper

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1. Introduction

Research on sustainable consumption is an emerging, critical topic in the developed world (Zeithaml, Verleye, Hatak, Koller, & Zauner, 2020). In addition, ensuring sustainable production and consumption patterns is part of the goals established by the United Nations in its sustainable development agenda (Macht, Chapman, & Fitzgerald, 2020; United Nations, 2015).

The changes caused by nations' production processes, impacting the environment's degradation and increasing the risks to flora and fauna, have been debated in several spheres. In terms of environmental protection policies, the United Nations (UN) proposed in 2015 guidelines that countries should address in their production processes. Among them, the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 says: "Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss" (United Nations, 2015, p. 14). In the same document, SDG 12 says: "Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns" (United Nations, 2015, p. 14).

Society is more sensitive to information about companies' production means and sustainability, given the significant climate changes in recent years and the awareness that changes must be made (Macht et al., 2020; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; United Nations, 2015). Moreover, within corporations, such demands for responsibility in sustainable production presented great opportunities to increase the public's perception of the firm's credibility (Lee, Chang, & Chen, 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Reputation and credibility are essential elements through which corporations seek to build their institutional image and arouse stakeholders' trust (Basdeo, Smith, Grimm, Rindova, & Derfus, 2006; Chaoguang, Feicheng, Yifei, & Yuchao, 2018; Munaier, Rocha, & Portes, 2022; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Song, Wang, & Han, 2019). In addition, customers are impacted by the company's image, which should target relationship management tools, because clients look for reliable information and signals to perceive brand awareness and trust (Chen & Chang, 2018; Munaier et al., 2022; Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan, 2014).

In consumption, purchase intention can be linked directly to how the individuals see themselves reflected in the object of their desire (Munaier, 2021). Research on sustainability-committed consumption has supported that the more ecologically aware the individuals, the greater their decision for green purchases of environmentally correct products and companies (Braga Júnior, da Silva, Moretti, & Lopes, 2012; Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). Therefore, companies intending to offer products and services to customers with greater ecological awareness have focused on green marketing to attract them, gain trust and increase their competitive advantage (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Scholars and the press have registered more often the impact of unethical actions in global affairs, as it happens in the corruption of public officials (Lopes, Yunes, Bandeira de Lamônica Freire, Herrero, & Contreras Pinochet, 2020), like constructing a false sustainability image, known as *greenwashing* (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Szabo & Webster, 2021). In addition, moral deviations (global or specific) compromise companies' trust, as customers are increasingly more critical, well-informed and less tolerant of transgressive behaviors (Lopes et al., 2020), regardless of the motivations (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Sharma, 2020) or coping actions (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, & Regalia, 2001) behind them.

Every company whose image got tarnished by some ethical deviation, such as corruption, wishes to find strategies to increase trust in its brand (Silva, Almeida, Espejo,

Vendramin, & Espejo, 2021). Moreover, with environmental concerns arising in the priorities of governments and societies (Macht et al., 2020; Szabo & Webster, 2021), a strategy for transgressing companies is to adhere to and communicate sustainable actions in their production management.

Scholars have already established that moral transgressions such as corruption and greenwashing negatively impact customer trust and purchase intention (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2021). Morally transgressive behavior is defined as a number of behaviors that may be considered detrimental, immoral or even inhumane, and encompass, among other examples, abusing, attacking, cheating, destroying, lying and stealing (Bandura et al., 2001). Being focused on self-regulatory aspects, a company may have its moral transgression enhanced (or inhibited) by individuals' emotions, such as embarrassment, guilt, pride and shame (Tangney et al., 2007; Sharma, 2020). In addition, moral transgressions may be seen as more severe than other misbehaviors because of the harm or unfairness they imply, challenging social conventions, customs, expectations and norms (Thornberg & Jungert, 2013). Morally transgressive behavior is also explainable by moral disengagement, deactivating self-regulatory processes to avoid taking responsibility for negative behaviors (Sharma, 2020).

However, there is still no consensus if the customer gives a new chance to a company that, previously transgressive, takes on guidelines that are delicate to society, such as sustainable production. Thus, this work's first objective is to evaluate the impact of a sustainable production action on the customer's trust and purchase intention by a company previously involved in a global moral transgression, such as corruption.

Another literature gap relates to the consequence for the brand that, after a new vote of confidence, incurs another moral transgression. Therefore, the second objective of this article is to analyze the impact on customer trust and purchase intention if a company is involved in corruption after its green marketing activities are identified as a greenwashing spread.

This article seeks to contribute both to the literature and managerial implications by combining the impact of positive, sustainable management actions for morally transgressive companies and the effects of new transgression on their sustainable management action. Thus, it aims to reduce the gap between organizational practice and management research (Macht et al., 2020).

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical foundation and hypotheses. Next, we show methods (Section 3) and results (Section 4) of the scales applied to 138 respondents, 121 of whom met the requirements. Then, by analyzing the results from the remaining questionnaires, we conclude that:

- the higher an individual's ecological awareness, the lower their trust in a company involved in moral deviations;
- sustainability actions increase the trust and purchase intention of that same individual to the brand previously involved in moral transgression; and
- in a situation of greenwashing of previously transgressing companies, the purchase intention becomes lower than before the sustainability action.

Finally, Section 5 concludes this study by presenting its considerations and limitations, proposing recommendations for further research to be carried out on the topic.

2. Theoretical foundation and hypotheses

This article starts with the social exchange theory (SET) as a competent theoretical lens for the proposed analyses. The concept of social exchanges, such as approval, credibility, trust

and prestige, can be defined as a human behavior similar to market exchanges, where individuals seek to obtain a mutually rewarding result (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Homans, 1958; Lai, Chuang, Zhang, & Nepal, 2020). During social interactions, the various social behaviors of individuals are types of commodity exchanges; if the individual's return is greater than the cost of the interaction, the interaction continues; otherwise, the individual ceases the interaction (Zhao, Chen, der, Wang, & Chen, 2017).

2.1 Perceived quality, brand awareness and trust in the purchase intention

Trust is one of the most researched attributes in marketing, both in commercial exchanges between companies and business relationships between companies and end customers, being a key component for lasting relationships and purchase intentions, whether present or future (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Song et al., 2019; Vivek et al., 2014).

Trust is the intention or attitude of being vulnerable to the actions of another party after concluding that it has principles, values, competencies or skills and expresses a desire to benefit on behalf of those trusted (Barreto, Crescitelli, & Figueiredo, 2015). This trust, a characteristic of relationships observed by SET, has been tested in the light of theories that analyze behaviors, beliefs and prejudices considered important social characteristics to understand why people trust firms and the brands that represent them (Munaier et al., 2022; Shulga, Busser, Bai, & Kim, 2021).

According to SET, fair and desirable exchanges result in trust and mutual commitment (Lai et al., 2020). However, this trust also depends on social characteristics and cultural and regional impacts (Munaier et al., 2022). In addition, previous research has supported the direct effect of trust on purchase and repurchase intention (Han, Yu, Chua, Lee, & Kim, 2019; Vivek et al., 2014).

Different scales attempted to measure trust, identifying the dimensions that compose the feeling of confidence or trust. Hernandez and Mazzon (2005) proposed a scale formed by five dimensions to measure e-commerce purchases: dispositional, calculative-based, institutional-based, characteristics-based and knowledge-based. Delgado-Ballester (2004) tested and validated a scale with eight items to measure customer trust in a Spanish brand, which has been lately applied to the Brazilian context, analyzing trust in products (Bastos, Moura, & Christino, 2015) and services (Munaier et al., 2022).

Trust is measured and studied because the more significant the customer's confidence, the lower their perception of risk in consumption (Hernandez & Mazzon, 2005) and the greater the perception of customer benefits in light of SET (Shulga et al., 2021). Thus, the following hypothesis emerges:

H1a. Trust impacts directly and positively the purchase intention.

Perceived quality is the overall excellence of a product or service perceived by the customer according to its expectations and perceptions, evaluating the quality of what it received, impacting the perceived value and satisfaction (Fagundes, Munaier, & Crescitelli, 2022; Szabo & Webster, 2021). Therefore, two new hypotheses are proposed:

H1b. The perceived quality impacts directly and positively the brand trust.

H1c. The perceived quality impacts directly and positively the purchase intention.

On the other hand, *brand awareness* is the recognition of a brand, its products or services, generating a learning advantage and affecting purchase decision-making (Chan, Petrovici, & Lowe, 2016; Fagundes et al., 2022). It leads to a new hypothesis:

H1d. Brand awareness impacts directly and positively the purchase intention.

2.2 Sustainable consumption

Sharing responsibility for sustainable production and consumption is a holistic challenge wherein companies, governments, civil society and consumers can drive change (Zu, 2013). However, the concept of sustainable consumption still seems to lack a consensus, as it is sometimes discussed in the macro aspect, with the main focus on general economic and social issues, and sometimes debated through issues related to the individual, with a specific look at the people's consumption (Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020). This lack of consensus reflects the research's scope. After all, because of organizations' and individuals' interest in sustainability-related issues, it seems logical to identify a different focus for each (Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020).

From the individual's point of view, there are three dimensions of sustainable consumption to observe:

- (1) *the environmental dimension* relates to the impact of consumption on environmental well-being, that is, health and human well-being consequences of environmental change ensuing from consumption;
- (2) *the social dimension* relates to the impact of personal consumption of well-being and quality of life (individual and family), and the community's welfare; and
- (3) *the economic dimension* relates to the impact of consumption on the economic consumers' well-being associated with financial aspects such as debt-burden, earning pressures and work-life balance (Sheth, Sethia, & Srinivas, 2011).

Also, consumers may feel a moral responsibility to live sustainably, but they cannot do so without the adequate support of governments, NGOs and companies with which they interact (Zu, 2013).

Thus, it is possible to define sustainable consumption as the cognitive, affective and conative traits of an individual regarding the avoidance of extravagant consumption and the rational use of goods and services to satisfy basic needs, being aware of environmental and social problems, and attentive to needs of present and future generations (Quoquab & Mohammad, 2020; Sheth et al., 2011; United Nations, 2015; Zeithaml et al., 2020).

Complementary concepts to sustainable consumption are *green consumption* and *environmentally correct consumption*. Green consumption is considered less harmful to health and the environment and includes organic, pesticide-free and non-GMO products (Braga Júnior et al., 2012) and can increase by encouraging demand. However, it also may negatively impact consumption if there is relevant negative environmental information in communications related to a firm's activities or an attempt to hide negative characteristics and impacts through greenwashing (Nishitani & Kokubu, 2020). On the other hand, environmentally correct consumption is related to the perception of companies' efforts to adopt an environmental approach in their products and the reward received from the consumer for honoring such an initiative (Garcia et al., 2008).

Braga Júnior et al. (2012) linked ecological awareness and green consumption by measuring the association between these factors in customer perception based on the ecological awareness of individuals that, being more involved with a sustainable way of life, reward companies that adopt more sustainable and less harmful environmental approaches through consumption. Thus, it is possible to propose two new hypotheses:

- H2a.* Ecological awareness directly and positively impacts environmentally correct consumption.
- H2b.* Ecological awareness directly and positively impacts sustainable (green) consumption.

2.3 Reputation and trust in offending companies: institutional legitimization and greenwashing

A company's reputation goes beyond its image, encompassing other elements that are not always easy to measure or build quickly (Basdeo et al., 2006; Munaier et al., 2022). In addition to hinting capabilities, behaviors and values to stakeholders, reputation can enable or ease access to specific resources, allow image and financial gains and protect the organization during a crisis (Basdeo et al., 2006).

Reputation may drive consuming sustainable products and can be a differential in competition for selling a sustainable product or service if customers value sustainability as a necessary attribute (Carter, Jayachandran, & Murdock, 2021). It is possible to notice a more significant skepticism in populations with greater ecological awareness of the perceived environmental benefits, especially when there is little interactivity with the potential customer (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017; Szabo & Webster, 2021).

Scholars have focused on the issue of a company's reputation as a central element of the trust it arouses in its stakeholders, as seen above. Brand trust is as important as credibility, perceived quality and experiences by the target audience interacting with the firm, in its past attitudes and the prospects for future action (Fagundes et al., 2022; Lopes et al., 2020; Munaier et al., 2022).

Even though organizations aim to achieve and maintain an unblemished reputation (Basdeo et al., 2006) to deserve the stakeholders' trust (Chaoguang et al., 2018; Munaier et al., 2022; Song et al., 2019), both academia and the press have registered the impact of unethical actions by companies, such as corruption and money laundering (FGV DAPP, 2017; Lopes et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021).

One of the direct effects of unethical conduct by companies is the breakdown of customers' trust and their desire to repeat consumption of the offending brand (Lopes et al., 2020). Hence, as previously stated, the lower the confidence, the lower the impulse to buy. That may be the case for JBS, a food industry giant in Brazil. Involved in corruption scandals with political and economic repercussions (FGV DAPP, 2017), JBS, owner of the Friboi brand, was also accused of product adulteration by using sorbic acid in processed meats to extend their expiry date, or injecting water into meat, or even replacing it with soy (Silva et al., 2021).

Given the increasing sensitivity of consumers to environmental and social issues (United Nations, 2015; Zeithaml et al., 2020), it is viable that the greater the individual's ecological awareness, the lower the trust and purchase intention of products from morally transgressive companies. Furthermore, at their core, product attributes are reliability ones, meaning they cannot be checked by the consumer, which further increases the importance of brand trust to supplier reputation (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017). These aspects allowed us to propose the following hypotheses:

- H3a.* Greater ecological awareness leads to less trust in morally offending companies.
- H3b.* Greater commitment to environmentally correct purchases leads to less trust in morally offending companies.

A strategy by corporations with reputations harmed by ethical scandals is institutional legitimation, characterized by the search for social approval (Silva et al., 2021). Institutional legitimacy results from identifying the organization's actions, services and products as desirable or appropriate within a system of values, beliefs and current norms (Silva et al., 2021).

Morally transgressive companies can also adopt sustainable actions in production and sales (Szabo & Webster, 2021). For example, according to its website, JBS linked its production process to the best sustainability practices (JBS, 2021). The company also claims to have made robust investments in concrete socio-environmental actions to fight global warming and preserve current and future generations (JBS, 2021).

Based on how institutional legitimation deals with damaged reputations, it is possible to assume that customer trust may increase after socially appropriate attitudes, even if shaken by previous transgressions. As trust increases, purchase intention also rises. Therefore:

H3c. Although being a transgressor once, a brand that commits to sustainability will increase customer trust.

H3d. Although being a transgressor once, a brand that commits to sustainability will increase purchase intention.

However, it is not enough to advertise actions to win a new vote of confidence from customers; a company needs to be worthy of it (Munaier et al., 2022). Delmas and Burbano (2011) define greenwashing as an intersection between positive communication and an unsatisfying environmental performance. Szabo and Webster (2021) make two associations: greenwashing with misleading advertising; and consumption with the perception of consuming as a risk because of the potential harm to the image or reputation of environmental care. Delmas and Burbano (2011) mention the greenwashing exposure by activists, NGOs and the media as a risk factor for its practitioners. Furthermore, without other legal consequences, the impact of this exposure as an inhibitor of greenwashing is limited, especially for larger companies with greater capacity to overcome possible reputational damage resulting from practices eventually perceived (and exposed) as greenwashing.

Christen (2021) revealed that large companies in the food sector seek to position themselves as committed to the climate crisis, advertising promises to reduce carbon emissions to zero, but without revealing that the most significant part of the sector's climate footprint lies in its chain's methane emissions. A new transgression may be underway (Christen, 2021). Still, for this article, only the impact of the apparent moral misconduct of the brand under analysis matters, which, once confirmed, would be a recurrence. How would a customer trust the recurrent transgressive brand? Would the individuals maintain their relationship of vulnerability toward the brand (Barreto et al., 2015), which, once again, was not worthy of their vote of confidence (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Munaier et al., 2022)?

Supported by all the literature revisited here, it is logical to assume that customer trust and purchase intention to the once-offending brand that now was caught greenwashing will fall to similar or even lower levels than without the (possibly false or misleading) sustainability campaign. Therefore:

H3e. Customer's trust is lower in brands that were once morally transgressive when they appear in a greenwashing case.

H3f. Customer's purchase intention is lower of brands that were once morally transgressive when they appear in a greenwashing case.

3. Methods

This study used a cross-sectional survey (Malhotra, Lopes, & Veiga, 2014) based on the responses of Brazilian customers. The sample is not-probabilistic, i.e. it was collected by convenience (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014).

3.1 Measures

The data-collecting instrument development used validated and known scales in the literature. Three items measured perceived quality, while four were responsible for brand awareness (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). This study used the scales proposed by Braga Júnior et al. (2012) to measure ecological awareness and green purchases, whereas, for measuring trust, the chosen scale was Delgado-Ballester (2004). We applied three items from Chandran and Morwitz (2005) for purchase intention. All measured scale items used a seven-point Likert scale, where “1” means a strong disagreement, “7” means a firm agreement and the in-between advances progressively from a substantial disagreement to a significant agreement. The scale is available in the article’s data repository.

3.2 Collection procedures

Data collection was done between September 19th and 25th, 2021, using an electronic survey developed through the Google Forms platform. Access to questionnaire links was available through the social networks of this article’s authors, with the desired “snowball” effect.

Convenience sampling studies usually do not have strict inclusion criteria. Still, in this case, only people without restrictions on meat consumption (whether medical or personal) could continue to the final sample. The “how do you identify yourself” filter allowed the exclusion of people who self-identified as “vegan” or “vegetarian but not vegan”.

Considering that this study involves the purchase intention of animal protein, using a meat-consuming filter allowed a better definition of the target audience. Of the 138 initial respondents, 121 questionnaires advanced (meaning that 17 exclusions happened at this point because of inclusion criteria).

In the first stage, the individuals answered the scales on ecological awareness, green consumption, trust in the JBS-Friboi brand, brand awareness, perceived quality and purchase intention. Next, to measure the impact on the respondent’s trust and purchase intention regarding the company’s sustainability action, a screen with the following information was presented:

JBS began, more than a decade ago, a journey of robust investments in concrete socio-environmental actions. With the recently announced global public commitment to become Net-Zero by 2040, these actions will have an even more paved path for the company. The strategy is to continue fighting global warming and feeding people with the best, preserving natural resources for this generation and future ones (JBS, 2021).

Respondents were then presented with the scales of trust in the JBS-Friboi brand and its product purchase intention. To measure the impact on the respondent’s trust and purchase intention in the face of the company’s greenwashing, the platform presented a screen with the following information:

A survey analyzed official documents and statements from companies and trade associations for five months to unravel climate denialism in the meat sector. The research revealed that big companies in the sector – such as JBS, Tyson Foods, Vion, and Danish Crown – seek to place themselves as ‘leaders’ in the fight against the climate crisis, minimizing the impact of meat production on the climate and exaggerating the potential for agriculture innovations to reduce the ecological impact of livestock. This industry has struggled with publicity efforts to highlight the

sector's 'climate commitments,' such as pledges to reduce carbon emissions to zero in the coming decades (while ignoring the fact that most of the sector's climate footprint is in the methane emissions from its chain). The English newspaper *The Independent* also passed on the news (Source: [ClimaInfo, 2021](#)).

Once again, the platform presented scales of trust in the JBS-Friboi brand and the purchase intention of its products.

3.3 Data analysis procedures

For a better understanding and analysis of the collected data, the authors proceeded with the following procedures:

- descriptive data analysis for descriptive statistics;
- the scale's discriminant analysis using the [Fornell and Larcker \(1981\)](#) criterion; and
- explanatory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for convergent validity.

The procedures to analyze collected data seek to determine Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.7$), the average variance extracted ($AVE \geq 0.5$) and the composite reliability ($CR \geq 0.7$) as the minimum premises for its acceptability ([Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014](#)).

The EFA used the principal components analysis method with Varimax rotation, observing the items' behavior of each construct using Bartlett's test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$) and the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) test. Also, data analysis performed structural equation modeling and Student's *t*-test for independent means, using the IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares.

To determine the minimum sample size suitable for the intended analysis in view of the hypotheses, we considered the number of predictor constructs as a determinant of the estimate ([Ringle, da Silva, & Bido, 2014](#)). Supported by G*Power 3.1.7 software, based on the specifications of [Cohen \(2013\)](#) for Social and Behavioral Sciences (average effect size of 0.15, test power of 0.80 and $\alpha = 0.05$), we had the recommendation of 98 responses.

4. Results

This section presents the results of data collection and processing. As pointed out before, 18 respondents who self-identified as vegans or vegetarians did not fulfill the inclusion criteria of no restrictions to consuming animal protein and therefore had their results excluded. This exclusion happened because the scale dealt with brand trust, perceived brand quality, brand awareness and intention to purchase animal protein products.

Thus, the study's final sample was 121 respondents, exceeding the minimum assumptions provided by G*Power, 50.4% of whom were women, mean age of 40.4 years ($SD = 15.5$) and almost 80% had at least higher education (tertiary/college) in progress. In addition, there was at least a respondent from five Brazilian states, with a predominance of respondents from São Paulo (approximately 90%).

Of the total number of respondents, approximately 37% claimed an income of up to R\$4,400.00; 31% claimed an income between R\$4,401.00 and R\$11,000.00 and about 32% of respondents declared an income over R\$11,001.00 (as of Jan. 28, 2022, US\$1 \cong BRL 5.39, and EUR 1 \cong BRL 6.02).

The scale had convergent and discriminant validity confirmed by the procedures described in the Methods section. [Table 1](#) shows the discriminant validity of the proposed scale through the correlation matrix between the constructs of the tested model, using the

Table 1.
Correlation matrix
between constructs
from the tested model

Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion. Discriminant validity is verifiable when the AVE exceeds the shared variance between constructs (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2014).

The IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares were used to analyze *H1a*, *H1b*, *H1c* and *H1d*. With $KMO_{\text{AWARENESS}}=0.778$ ($p < 0.001$), the four variables for brand awareness had 65.5% of all variance explained in a single main component. The three variables of perceived quality had $KMO_{\text{P.QUALITY}}=0.779$ ($p < 0.001$), explaining 92.1% of all variance in a single main component.

With $KMO_{\text{TRUST}}=0.930$ ($p < 0.001$), the eight variables for brand awareness had 75.7% of all variance explained in a single main component. Finally, the three purchase intention variables had $KMO_{\text{PURCHASE}}=0.775$ ($p < 0.001$) and 93.3% of all variance explained in a single main component. Table 2 presents the CFA and the loads extracted from the EFA and the R^2 measured in each construct.

The results from the CFA and EFA allowed for testing the hypotheses *H1a*, *H1b*, *H1c*, and *H1d*. Table 3 presents the paths analyzed in Structural Equation Modeling and the

Construct	AVE	√AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) Ecological awareness	0.643	0.802	0.802						
(2) Environmentally correct consumption	0.638	0.799	0.744	0.799					
(3) Green consumption	0.745	0.863	0.681	0.572	0.863				
(4) Brand trust	0.757	0.870	−0.071	0.032	0.071	0.870			
(5) Brand awareness	0.652	0.808	0.064	0.026	0.108	0.538	0.808		
(6) Purchase intention	0.933	0.966	−0.096	−0.061	0.012	0.849	0.567	0.966	
(7) Perceived quality	0.921	0.960	−0.022	−0.003	0.038	0.829	0.628	0.781	0.960

Note: The highlighted diagonal presents the square root of the construct's AVE
Source: The authors, from collected data

Table 2.
CFA and EFA from
the brand awareness,
brand trust,
perceived quality and
purchase intention
constructs

Items	Brand trust	Brand awareness	Purchase intention	Perceived quality	CR	Cronbach's α	R^2
AW1		0.794			0.88	0.82	
AW2		0.867					
AW3		0.841					
AW4		0.721					
CM_C_1	0.902				0.96	0.95	0.70
CM_C_2	0.804						
CM_C_3	0.915						
CM_C_4	0.926						
CM_C_5	0.925						
CM_C_6	0.869						
CM_C_7	0.788						
CM_C_8	0.817						
IC_C_1			0.963		0.98	0.96	0.75
IC_C_2			0.962				
IC_C_3			0.972				
QP1				0.961	0.97	0.96	
QP2				0.962			
QP3				0.956			

Source: The authors, from collected data, using the IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares

structural path of each hypothesis, its load (β), and the T-Statistics error test ($|O/STERR| \geq 1.96$), as well as the result of each hypothesis.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that brand trust, perceived quality and brand awareness are fundamental attributes of purchase intention. Still, trust is the most substantial element for purchase intention ($\beta = 0.64$) among those listed in this research, proving to be a unique element for customer decision-making. It is worth noticing the results obtained when combining constructs to measure brand trust ($R^2 = 0.7$) and purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.75$), demonstrating the solidity of the proposed model.

To analyze *H2a* and *H2b*, we used IBM SPSS and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares. The five variables of environmentally correct consumption had $KMO_{E.CORRECT} = 0.819$ ($p < 0.001$) and 64% of all variance explained in a single main component. After removing one item from the ecological awareness scale (CEC9), the seven remaining variables had $KMO_{ECOLOGICAL} = 0.877$ ($p < 0.001$) and 64.3% of all variance explained in a single main component. Furthermore, after removing one item from the Green Purchase scale (CVE16), the four remaining variables had $KMO_{G.CONSUMPTION} = 0.788$ ($p < 0.001$) and 74.6% of all variance explained in a single main component. It is possible to verify the CFA, the loads extracted from the EFA and the R^2 in Table 4.

Table 3.
Hypotheses testing
(*H1a*, *H1b*, *H1c* and
H1d)

Structural path (hypotheses)	Hypothesis	β	$ O/STERR $	Sig.	Result
Brand trust \rightarrow Purchase intention	<i>H1a</i>	0.64	10.05	***	Supported
Perceived quality \rightarrow Brand trust	<i>H1b</i>	0.83	30.43	***	Supported
Perceived quality \rightarrow Purchase intention	<i>H1c</i>	0.18	2.34	**	Supported
Brand awareness \rightarrow Purchase intention	<i>H1d</i>	0.11	2.31	**	Supported

Notes: * ≥ 1.65 (sig 10%), ** ≥ 1.96 (sig. 5%), and *** ≥ 2.58 (sig. 1%) (Hair *et al.*, 2017)

Source: The authors, from collected data, using the IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares

Table 4.
CFA and EFA from
the ecological
awareness,
environmentally
correct consumption
and green
consumption
constructs

Items	Ecological awareness	Environmentally correct consumption	Green consumption	CR	Cronbach's α	R^2
CAC4		0.752		0.90	0.86	0.55
CAC5		0.808				
CAC6		0.805				
CAC7		0.773				
CAC8		0.854				
CEC12	0.785			0.93	0.91	
CEC14	0.816					
CEC15	0.790					
CEC19	0.806					
CEC20	0.809					
CEC21	0.894					
CEC22	0.701					
CVE10			0.765	0.92	0.88	0.46
CVE11			0.893			
CVE17			0.872			
CVE18			0.916			

Source: The authors, from collected data, using the IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares

As previously seen, the results of the CFA and EFA allowed for the testing of *H2a* and *H2b*. Table 5 shows the structural path of each hypothesis, its load (β) and the *t*-statistics error test ($|O/STERR| \geq 1.96$), as well as the result of each hypothesis. It is worth noting that the results for environmentally correct purchases ($R^2=0.55$) and green purchases ($R^2=0.46$) were higher than in the original study (Braga Júnior et al., 2012).

The results shown in Table 5 are in line with the results found by Braga Júnior et al. (2012); however, items CEC9 and CVE16 are out of the final model. Even so, the paths validated in the previous hypotheses support subsequent analyses.

After validating the constructs and supporting their relationships, it was possible to analyze the paths related to *H3a* and *H3b*. Table 6 shows the structural path of these hypotheses, their load (β) and the *t*-statistics error test ($|O/STERR| \geq 1.96$), as well as the final result of each hypothesis.

H3a, as proposed, predicted negative β , indicating that the greater the individual's ecological awareness, the lower the trust they place in a morally transgressive brand ($\beta = -0.18$). Likewise, *H3b* assumed that the resulting β would have a negative value: The greater the attitude toward environmentally responsible purchases, the lower the individual's trust in the offending brand. However, the resulting interaction proposed in *H3b* was statistically valid but positive. In the Discussion section of this article, we go on to this result.

Previous validation of *H1a* and *H3a* allowed the test of *H3c*, *H3d*, *H3e* and *H3f*. This test aimed to analyze whether the individual's brand trust and purchase intention changed positively in the face of the company's institutional legitimacy action (*H3c* and *H3d*). Also, the testing sought to determine whether the individual's brand trust and purchase intention changed negatively in the face of the finding that the company's institutional legitimacy action was greenwashing (*H3e* and *H3f*).

Data analysis in Table 7 used Student's *t*-test to compare means of brand trust and purchase intention in two possible situations:

- (1) The initial phase (no conditions) compared to after an institutional legitimation action.
- (2) Institutional legitimation action compared to acknowledging that this particular legitimation action was, indeed, greenwashing.

Table 5.
Hypotheses testing
(*H2a* and *H2b*)

Structural path (hypotheses)	Hypothesis	β	$ O/STERR $	Sig.	Result
Ecological awareness → Environmentally correct consumption	<i>H2a</i>	0.74	24.98	***	Supported
Ecological awareness → Green consumption	<i>H2b</i>	0.68	15.3	***	Supported

Notes: * $\geq 1,65$ (sig 10%), ** $\geq 1,96$ (sig. 5%), and *** $\geq 2,58$ (sig. 1%) (Hair et al., 2017)
Source: The authors, from collected data, using the IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares

Table 6.
Hypotheses testing
(*H3a* and *H3b*)

Structural path (hypotheses)	Hypothesis	β	$ O/STERR $	Sig.	Result
Ecological awareness → Brand trust	<i>H3a</i>	-0.18	2.65	***	Supported
Environmentally correct consumption → Brand trust	<i>H3b</i>	0.16	2.71	***	Not supported

Notes: * $\geq 1,65$ (sig 10%), ** $\geq 1,96$ (sig. 5%), and *** $\geq 2,58$ (sig. 1%) (Hair et al., 2017)
Source: The authors, from collected data, using the IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares

Thus, the compared means demonstrate statistical differences between the individual's brand trust and purchase intention in both situations. Both are positive for the condition before the legitimization action. On the other hand, both means (brand trust and purchase intention) drop when realizing that the institutional legitimization action was greenwashing. In the face of the greenwashing situation, it is noticeable that the means regarding brand trust and purchase intention are lower than those in the initial phase.

There is a statistical difference ($\text{Sig} < 0.10$) in the means for purchase intention; however, there is no difference for brand trust between the initial phase of the research and after identifying the greenwashing. $M_{\text{Brand Trust}}^{\text{FIRST PHASE}} = 3.37$ vs $M_{\text{Brand Trust}}^{\text{GREENWASHING}} = 3.25$ [$t(120) = 1.33$; $p = 0.188$]; $M_{\text{Purchase Intention}}^{\text{FIRST PHASE}} = 3.68$ vs $M_{\text{Purchase Intention}}^{\text{GREENWASHING}} = 3.51$ [$t(120) = 1.77$; $p = 0.079$].

5. Conclusion

The impact of human evolution on the ecosystem demands attention from governments, corporations and organized society as a whole. As the [United Nations \(2015\)](#) warned, it is necessary to fulfill an agenda that guides everyone in searching for a sustainable coexistence between progress and life. Moreover, management plays a role in finding the best practices for sustainable production ([Macht et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, identifying sensitive issues has been crucial in formulating strategies to increase companies' credibility with the public ([Silva et al., 2021](#)). This article proposes to bring research closer to the daily needs of management, a demand identified by [Macht et al. \(2020\)](#), which is the SDGs 12 and 15 explained by the UN proposed agenda ([United Nations, 2015](#), p. 14).

By employing a scale adapted from reviewed literature, as seen in [Table 8](#), this article contributes to the literature with social and managerial implications by using institutional legitimization to investigate how brands caught in moral transgressions can make amends to assess negative outcomes from these acts ([Tangney et al., 2007](#)) and try to recover brand trust and purchase intention. It may happen by assuming agendas aligned with the contemporary demands of society. Likewise, this work advances the understanding of the impact of greenwashing on customer trust and purchase intention in brands previously caught in moral transgressions.

Trust is a fundamental attribute for sustaining relationships within the SET. This article demonstrated the importance of brand trust for purchase intention. Furthermore, the results allow advancement in the understanding that the greater the individual's ecological awareness, the lower their trust in morally transgressive brands. In our case study, the transgression happened during the production process of commercialized animal protein, as

Variables	Status	Hypothesis	Mean	Df	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Sig.	Result
Brand trust	First phase	<i>H3c</i>	3.37	120	-4.5	0.000	***	Supported
	Institutional legitimization		3.69					
Purchase intention	First phase	<i>H3d</i>	3.68	120	-2.97	0.004	***	Supported
	Institutional legitimization		3.87					
Brand trust	Institutional legitimization	<i>H3e</i>	3.69	120	5.14	0.000	***	Supported
	Greenwashing		3.25					
Purchase intention	Institutional legitimization	<i>H3f</i>	3.87	120	3.76	0.000	***	Supported
	Greenwashing		3.51					

Notes: ***Sig. ≤ 0.00 ; **sig. ≤ 0.05 ; *sig. < 0.10

Source: The authors, from collected data, using the IBM SPSS 22 and SmartPLS 2.0 softwares

Table 7.
Hypotheses testing
(*H3c*, *H3d*, *H3e* and
H3f)

Table 8.
Scale used in the
research

Scale adapted from	Item	In Portuguese	In English
Braga Júnior <i>et al.</i> (2012)	CAC4	Eu já convenci amigo(a)s ou parentes a não comprar produtos que prejudicam o meio ambiente	I have already convinced friends or relatives not to buy products harmful to the environment
	CAC5	Eu sempre faço um esforço para reduzir o uso de produtos feitos de recursos naturais escassos	I always make an effort to reduce the usage of products from scarce natural resources
	CAC6	Quando possível, eu sempre escolho produtos que causam menor poluição	Whenever possible, I always choose less polluting products
	CAC7	Eu procuro comprar produtos com menos embalagem possível	I try to buy products with the least possible packaging
	CAC8	Eu evito comprar produtos com embalagens que não são biodegradáveis	I avoid buying products with non-biodegradable packaging
	CEC9	Eu compro produtos orgânicos porque são mais saudáveis	I buy organic products because they are healthier
	CVE10	Eu prefiro alimentos sem agrotóxicos porque eles respeitam o meio ambiente	I prefer foods with no pesticides because they are environmentally friendly
	CVE11	Eu estou disposto a pagar um pouco mais por produtos e alimentos que estão livres de elementos químicos e que prejudicam o meio ambiente	I'm willing to pay a little extra for chemical-free and environmentally friendly products and foods
	CEC12	Quando eu compro produtos e alimentos, as preocupações com o meio ambiente interferem na minha decisão de compra	When I buy products and food, environmental concerns interfere with my purchase decision
	CEC14	Eu compro produtos com certificação ambiental porque são ambientalmente corretos	I buy products with environmental certification because they are environmentally friendly
	CEC15	Eu já troquei ou deixei de usar produtos por razões ecológicas	I have already switched or stopped using products for ecological reasons
	CVE16	A diferença de preço nem sempre é suficiente para privilegiar a empresa ecologicamente correta	The difference in price is not always enough to favor the environmentally correct company
	CVE17	Pagaria mais para comprar produtos que promovam a proteção ambiental	I would pay more to purchase products that promote environmental protection
	CVE18	Pagaria mais para comprar produtos orgânicos	I would pay more to buy organic products
	CEC19	Ando mais para comprar produtos que tenham uma certificação ambiental	I walk more to buy products that have environmental certification
	CEC20	Busco sempre procurar informações sobre as certificações ambientais dos fabricantes de produtos que eu compro	I always look for information about environmental certifications from the manufacturers of the products I buy
	CEC21	Presto atenção nos produtos destacados nas gôndolas como ambientalmente corretos	I pay attention to products that are highlighted on the shelves as environmentally friendly

(continued)

Scale adapted from	Item	In Portuguese	In English
Yoo and Donthu (2001)	CEC22	As seções de produtos orgânicos e ambientalmente corretos são facilmente identificadas por mim	The organic and environmentally friendly product sections are easily identified by me
	QP1	Eu confio na qualidade dos produtos Friboi da JBS	I trust the quality of JBS' Friboi products
	QP2	Os produtos Friboi da JBS devem ser de muito boa qualidade	JBS' Friboi products must be of very good quality
	QP3	Os produtos Friboi da JBS apresentam excelentes características	JBS' Friboi products have excellent features
Yoo and Donthu (2001)	AW1	Algumas características da marca Friboi da JBS me vêm rapidamente à mente	Some characteristics of JBS's Friboi come to my mind quickly
	AW2	Eu posso reconhecer essa marca rapidamente entre outras marcas concorrentes	I can quickly recall the logo of this brand among other competing brands
	AW3	Eu tenho familiaridade com esta marca	
	AW4	Eu reconheço o logotipo desta marca dentre as marcas concorrentes	I can recognize JBS's Friboi among other competing brands
Delgado-Ballester (2004)	CM_C_1	A JBS é uma marca que atende minhas expectativas	JBS is a brand that meets my expectations
	CM_C_2	A JBS é uma marca que nunca me decepciona	JBS is a brand that never disappoints me
	CM_C_3	Eu sinto confiança na marca JBS	I feel confidence in JBS brand
	CM_C_4	A JBS é uma garantia de satisfação	JBS brand guarantees satisfaction
	CM_C_5	A marca JBS é honesta e sincera quando se refere aos meus interesses	JBS brand would be honest and sincere in addressing my concerns
	CM_C_6	Eu poderia contar com a marca JBS para resolver os meus problemas relacionados aos alimentos comercializados por ela	I could rely on JBS brand to solve the problem related to the food they sell
	CM_C_7	A JBS faria qualquer esforço para me satisfazer como consumidor de seus alimentos	JBS brand would make any effort to satisfy me as a consumer of their food
	CM_C_8	A JBS me compensaria de alguma forma por qualquer problema com o seu produto comercializado	JBS brand would compensate me in some way for the problem with its product
Chandran and Morwitz (2005)	IC_C_1	Havendo produtos Friboi da JBS na gôndola do supermercado, qual a possibilidade de você comprá-los?	If there are JBS Friboi products on the supermarket shelf, how likely are you to buy the product?
	IC_C_2	Havendo produtos Friboi da JBS na gôndola do supermercado, quão certo(a) você está de que compraria estes produtos?	If there are JBS Friboi products on the supermarket shelf, how certain is it that you will purchase this product?
	IC_C_3	Havendo produtos Friboi da JBS na gôndola do supermercado, qual a chance de você comprá-los?	If there are JBS Friboi products on the supermarket shelf, what chance there is that you will buy this product?

Source: The authors, from the consulted literature

Table 8.

disclosed by “Operação Carne Fraca” (“Operation Weak Meat”), an investigation by the Brazilian Federal Police over malpractices in meat processing companies (Silva et al., 2021).

Intertwining SET and institutional legitimacy aimed to identify whether the consumer would give a once transgressive brand a new chance but now imbued with the desire to embrace causes aligned with the community’s aspirations. What would be the response in customer trust and purchase intention to institutional legitimization actions? In this study, the response regarded environmental responsibility and sustainable production actions. These findings allowed the quantitative advance of the previous qualitative research by Silva et al. (2021), who analyzed the speech of the case study company in its actions after the act of corruption. In addition, this article identified that customer trust and purchase intention increase when the brand aligns with sustainable production processes and communicates it to stakeholders once caught in morally transgressive actions as a resolve to improve future behavior (Tangney et al., 2007).

The existing literature already mentioned the harmful effects of greenwashing on brand reputation (Christen, 2021; Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Szabo & Webster, 2021). However, this article explored the customer’s response to greenwashing actions of a company, previously caught in a moral transgression, that tried questionable sustainability actions (Christen, 2021; ClimaInfo, 2021) of institutional legitimacy.

While greenwashing was not discovered, trust and purchase intention increased compared to the initial state. However, when facing another transgression, customers’ brand trust and purchase intention fell to levels equal to or even lower than before institutional legitimization. Purchase intention has reduced even more than the initial state. Brand trust also decreased, but there was no statistical difference between the initial phase and after greenwashing was exposed.

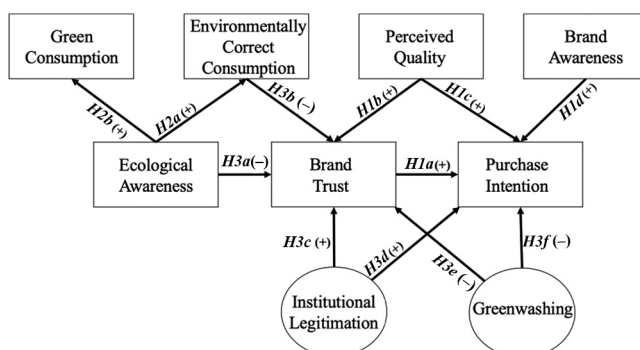
Embracing social agendas in institutional legitimization may effectively rebuild stakeholders’ credibility for brands once caught in moral transgressions, but they must be legitimate. Otherwise, the fix may be worse than the problem. Braga Júnior et al. (2012) identified that individuals’ ecological awareness impacts environmentally responsible purchases. This research found similar results, demonstrating the quality of the scale proposed by the authors. However, current data did not allow to empirically confirm hypothesis *H3b*, “greater commitment to environmentally correct purchases leads to less trust in morally offending companies”. The reason may lie in the scale: out of its four items, two measured how people pay attention to the product packaging. Identifying differences in animal protein packages regarding commitment to the environment may not be possible.

5.1 Social implications

As stated before, a possible social implication involving a theoretical contribution is advancing on how morally transgressive brands may recover from reputational and commercial losses by assuming more socially responsible and sustainable agendas, as hinted by this article’s theoretical model (contained in Figure 1) Institutional legitimization seeks social acceptance to repair a damaged reputation (Silva et al., 2021), but actions toward this legitimization must be perceivable as sincere to avoid further damage.

Obtained data hinted that, as proposed by *H3c–H3f*, while institutional legitimization may help recover brand trust (*H3c*) and purchase intention (*H3d*) after a transgression, perceiving those legitimization actions as greenwashing not only cancels previously obtained benefits but also lowers, even more, the customer brand trust (*H3e*) and purchase intention (*H3f*) concerning the transgressive brand.

The positive, albeit potentially risky effect of institutional legitimization sends a clear message to brands: repeated failures on the customer, especially when a half-hearted or



Source: The authors, using SmartPLS 2.0

Figure 1.
Theoretical model

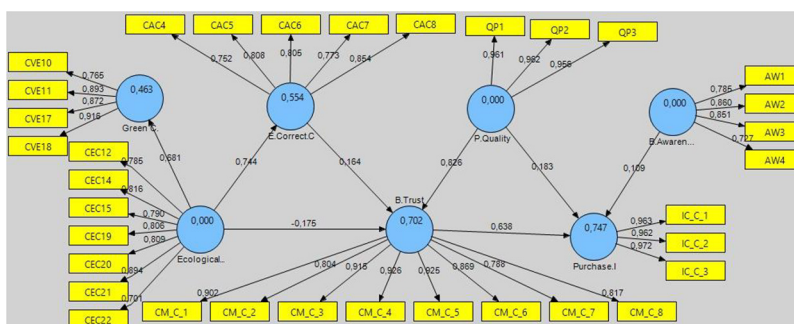
misleading try to make amends is perceived, will only make things worse (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Munaier et al., 2022), adding a pinch of salt on wounds that are still open.

5.2 Managerial implications

The results can provide viable guidelines for decision-makers in brand and crisis management. It is crucial not to link a company's brand to moral transgressions because of the harm to the brand's attributes (Carter et al., 2021; Lopes et al., 2020) and for the disservice to the community (FGV DAPP, 2017). We all lose to unethical behavior.

This study contributes to attest to the potential that institutional legitimization actions have for the attributes of companies. Here, it is possible to identify positive brand trust and purchase intention results, even for companies already caught in moral transgressions. Therefore, doing good pays off. Embracing society's emerging causes and helping the world be a better place to live, moving toward the agenda proposed by the United Nations for 2030 (United Nations, 2015), particularly SDG 12, have practical repercussions for organizations.

Helping the community helps the business. While managing a credibility crisis, institutional legitimization seems to be an effective solution for brand management decision-makers. Here, environmental causes were tested and proved adequate to deal with consumer trust and purchase intent. However, these actions must be honest, not just



Source: The authors, using SmartPLS 2.0

Figure 2.
Theoretical model
analyzed by
structural equations
model, the paths and
hypotheses

a “makeup.” When a firm identifies causes with which its brand has conditions to impact society, it positively delivers concrete and measurable results.

As exposed in [Figure 2](#), this article demonstrate that academic research can approach contemporary issues to organizational needs, as recommended by [Macht et al. \(2020\)](#), and shows that sustainable management communication actions devoid of veracity reduce the customer’s purchase intention to even lower levels than before. In this article, at least greenwashing has a very negative effect on the analyzed brand.

5.3 Suggestions and limitations

Suggestions for further studies include analyzing the impact that an apology made by the institution repeating a moral transgression would bring to consumer confidence. For example, would the consumer be able to give a third chance? Another suggestion, still in the impact of the apology, could be in the analysis of *endorsers*, i.e. whether they would lend credibility to the company that relapses into its moral transgression. Mediating or moderating variables of ecological awareness, such as religiosity or political view, were not tested here, and these limitations of this article are recommendations for future research.

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