Nexus between sustainable brand equity and behavioural outcomes: The moderating role of age

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Consumer-based brand equity, price premium payments, overall sustainable brand equity, sustainable brands, word-of-mouth recommendations.

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the influence of consumer-based brand equity of sustainable products on consumers' behavioural outcomes. Previous studies have primarily focused on the activities of the firm, consumer attitudes toward the environment, or consumer purchasing intentions regarding sustainable products. This paper takes a step further from the norm by examining specific actual behaviours of word-of-mouth recommendations and the willingness to pay for price premiums, with particular reference to the consumer-based brand equity of sustainable marketing offerings. The current study investigates how consumers value sustainable products in memory, which ultimately affects their actual behaviours, with Age as a moderator. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from a usable sample of 793 respondents. Descriptive data analysis, as well as confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling using IBM AMOS version 23.0, were performed. Results revealed that sustainable consumer-based brand equity positively predicts word-of-mouth recommendations and price premium payments by consumers. Age also served as a good moderator, according to the study's findings. These revelations serve as a valuable guide to practitioners and researchers in sustainable consumption literature. The study also made several unique managerial and theoretical contributions to the knowledge base.

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Introduction

The main motivational driver for the study is environmental sustainability. Unsustainable human activities which result in adverse consequences such as global warming, air and water pollution, as well as environmental degradation are major concerns that international bodies, business executives and nations seek for practical measures to deal with them. The United Nation's agenda on sustainable development goals, the enacting of environmental laws and policies (Gerba & Brusseau, 2019; Onyeje et al., 2022), the imposition of environmental taxes (Ulucak & Kassouri, 2020), eco-innovation and the circular economy (Hojnik et al., 2020), have been embarked upon, deliberately as possible measures to deal with those environmental issues. However, majority of these measures are targeted towards organizations, hence are industry-focused. This is not to suggest that nothing has been done with reference to the customer when is comes to sustainability issues.

Rahman and Luomala (2021) researched on green consumption in cross-cultural context by investigating the effect of horizontal individualism and vertical collectivism cultural values on consumers attitude towards sustainable products and buying intentions. Halan et al., (2025) researched on the antecedents of continuous purchase intentions of organic personal care products. Moon et al., (2019) suggest that prospective investigators should consider determining the real behaviour of consumers who regularly purchase green or sustainable products since a good number of studies are limited to just the purchasing intentions of eco-friendly goods (Chen & Chang, 2012; Suki, 2016; Tan et al., 2017). Gekonge et al., (2021) assessed how consumers' knowledge of green products, their sustainable practices and eco-

labels affect their buying decisions in Kenya. Amoako et al., (2020) examined the role of green knowledge and green attitude in green purchasing behaviour of the youth in Ghana.

The focus of this paper, however, was to gain a better understanding of how brand equity can be used to create sustainable brand value and predict consumers' behavioural outcomes. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB), for instance, assumes that intentions are the best predictors of planned behaviour. The antecedents of intentions, according to the TPB, are attitudes towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991). It is worth noting, however, that findings from empirical studies on these predictors of sustainable consumption are inconsistent (Judge et al., 2019; Vantamay, 2018; Kumar et al., 2017; Paul et al., 2016; Taufique & Vaithianathan, 2018). Hence, there is a need for an alternative theoretical framework to address the value of the sustainable brand.

The following research questions guided the paper: How does the overall sustainable brand equity affect consumers' actual behaviours of word-of-mouth recommendations and price premium payments? How does the demographic variable of Age moderate the influence of the overall sustainable brand equity and the actual behavioural outcomes of word-of-mouth recommendations and payments of price premiums for sustainable brands?

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate how sustainable brand equity influences consumers' actual behaviours of word-of-mouth recommendations and price premium payments, with Age as a moderating factor.

The Specific objectives of the study were given as follows:

- Determine the effect of overall sustainable brand equity on the willingness of consumers to pay premium prices for sustainable brands.
- Determine the impact of overall sustainable brand equity on word-of-mouth recommendations from consumers of sustainable brands.
- Find out how Age moderates the influence of overall sustainable brand equity on price premium payments (PPP).
- Find out how Age moderates the influence of overall sustainable brand equity on word-of-mouth recommendations (WOMR).

The present study holds great significance for academia, sustainable marketing practitioners, investors, consumers, policymakers, and the sustainable marketing industry as a whole, particularly in Ghana and the broader sub-Saharan African region.

With the worldwide concern on the destruction of the natural environment and the need for natural resource preservation measures (Hojnik et al., 2020), and the fact that sustainable consumption is seen as a potential strategic measure to employ in this global fight against the destruction of the natural environment (Joshi & Rahman, 2015), both academia and practitioners stand to benefit from the findings of this paper.

Literature review

Sustainable branding

In marketing, the essence of green, sustainable, or eco-labelling is to provide unblemished evidence to customers regarding the sustainability of a brand or marketing offering. In reality, however, a good number of consumers become overwhelmed and confused (Borin et al., 2013; Chen, 2010). It, therefore, suggests that consumers have subjective perceptions of sustainable or green branding, which seems to decrease their belief in sustainable consumption (Barclay & Barker, 2020; Zhu & Sarkis, 2016). Similarly, some consumers have both favourable and unfavourable notions of sustainable marketing assertions (Cheung et al., 2019; Wang & Chen, 2019). For instance, marketing practitioners may highlight specific potential capabilities of sustainable products through packaging or advertising, which may not accurately reflect the actual capabilities. When such products are not as effective as they are touted, consumers will be unlikely to get involved in sustainable consumption or green consumerism due to the dishonest labelling of the product as eco-friendly. Such a tendency is what we term in marketing "greenwashing" (Lim et al., 2013).

Aaker's brand equity theory

Aaker (1992) described brand equity as a set of brand assets or challenges related to a brand, including its brand name and brand marks, that contribute to a company's customer base. The occurrence of brand equity requires brand assets or liabilities to influence the brand mark, trademark, and/or the brand name. The dimensions that provide value to a brand include brand awareness, perceptions of brand quality, brand loyalty, brand association, and other proprietary brand elements such as channel relationships, trademarks, and patents. This is shown in Fig. 1. The authors' opinion was that individual dimensions of brand equity generate value for both the firm and its customers.

The perception of product quality held in consumers' minds goes a long way in determining the behavioural action to take. For instance, a person may have a very good or positive perception of a given product, but may not be able to afford the prevailing market price; hence, they may not be able to make a purchase. However, such an individual may say good things about the product, even though they are unable to afford it.

Generally, the theory of brand equity creates value for both firms and consumers. For the consumer, it enables them to make a holistic evaluation of the product, upon which informed decisions are made based on what has been perceived in memory. On the part of the firm, the value of the product, determined by brand equity, enables managers to make strategic decisions and roll out effective and efficient marketing programs to ensure increased sales. Pricing strategies, promotional drives and product improvements or brand extensions are determined by the value created by the brand equity. As depicted in Fig. 1 The dimensions of consumer-based brand equity, according to Aaker (1991), are perceptions held in the minds of consumers about the brand in the form of associations, perceived quality, awareness and loyalty. The fifth dimension is directly related to the firm and, as such, was not highlighted in this study, which primarily examined the effect of consumer-based brand equity on consumers' behavioural outcomes.

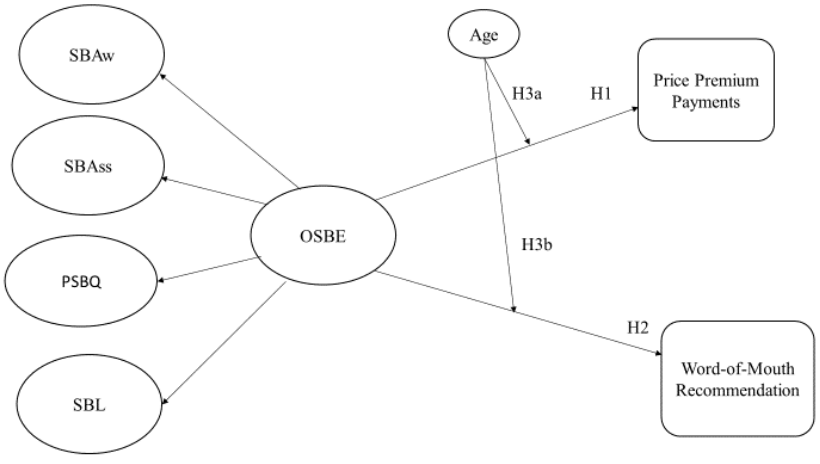


Fig 1 Conceptual model

Relationships between conceptual model variables

This segment of the research aimed to investigate the relationships between overall sustainable brand equity and the behavioural outcomes of price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations. In the conceptual model, the researchers conceptualised the dimensions of CBBE as given by Aaker (1991), namely brand awareness, brand associations, perceived brand quality, and brand loyalty, as second-order

constructs of an overall sustainable brand equity construct. This model adopts a macro-relationship perspective, examining the holistic relationship between overall sustainable brand equity (OSBE) and the behavioural outcomes of word-of-mouth recommendations and price premium payments, with Age as the moderator.

A conceptual model was sought to understand how sustainable brand equity could predict consumers' behavioural outcomes from a holistic viewpoint. Essentially, this model hypothesised the value of the sustainable brand in terms of the behavioural outcomes of price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations; thus, it employed a single construct labelled overall sustainable brand equity (OSBE) to explain the outcome variables of price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations. Nonetheless, it is interesting to know that, overall, sustainable brand equity (OSBE) reflects the main dimensions of sustainable consumer-based brand equity depicted as sustainable brand awareness (SBAw), sustainable brand associations (SBAs), sustainable brand loyalty (SBL), and perceived quality of the sustainable brand (PQSB). Age is viewed in the conceptual model as a moderating variable intended to address research question 2.

Research question 1: *How does the overall sustainable brand equity (OSBE) affect the behavioural outcomes of consumers' payment of premium prices (PPP) and word-of-mouth recommendations (WOMR)?*

The following set of hypotheses, H1 and H2, aimed to answer the first research question: How does the overall sustainable brand equity affect the behavioural outcomes of consumers' payment of premium prices and word-of-mouth recommendations? It essentially sought to test the predictive potential of brand equity on green behavioural outcomes.

Brand Equity and Price Premium Payments

Technically speaking, superior brands, such as those offering green products, are viewed as more intricate and modern when compared with lesser-known brands. The desire to pay more for strong brands is a key point of contention in marketing, given the importance of pricing and the benefits it offers. Clients' eagerness to address cost premiums suggests a willingness to pay extra for an item based on the brand's uniqueness. Clients are expected to pay more when they anticipate equivalent or more benefits; consequently, the more benefits they receive from utilisation, the more likely they will accept higher prices. Hence, the ability to incur greater expenses for brands largely depends on the benefits that shift from apparent quality to a brand's reputation for advancement within a product classification (Steenkamp et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, not all strong brands are associated with higher prices, and the argument for building even more impressive brands to yield higher margins is losing momentum (Anselmsson et al., 2014). Consumers' confidence to make purchasing decisions is dependent on the strength of brands (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003). Strong brands reduce consumption and financial risk, and instil mental and emotional confidence in their choices. In this regard, strong brands convey messages of greater validity and offer a high level of resistance to value contests. In this manner, brands based on uniqueness, such as green brands, create a separate space that encourages buyers to pay more, even at premium prices. The uniqueness of the green brand was believed to be similar. This anticipation was caught in the following hypothesis:

H1: Overall, sustainable brand equity positively influences price premium payments

Brand Equity and Word-of-Mouth Recommendations

Harrison-Walker (2001) considered word-of-mouth recommendation as individual-to-individual communication between a non-business correspondent and the beneficiary of brand information. It describes submissions and individual words to friends, partners, and customer meetings. An individual's familiarity with a brand tends to influence the purchasing decisions of their significant others. Informally, word-of-mouth recommendation affects the perception of customers than financially supported means such as print media, personal selling, and electronic media choices (Brown & Reingen, 1987) The role of word-of-mouth recommendation is deteriorating in services given that they are intangible, heterogeneous, and experiential in character (Bansal & Voyer, 2000; De Matos & Rossi, 2008). Researchers have also established a significant link between brand equity and word-of-mouth (Brown et al., 2005; De Matos and

Rossi, 2008). Based on the concern and passionate bond formed through encounters, it is reasonable to expect that customers will be more likely to inform family and friends about their preferred sustainable brands and provide positive recommendations to them. This assumption is reflected in the accompanying hypothesis:

H2: Overall sustainable brand equity positively influences word-of-mouth recommendations.

Moderation effects of consumers' demographic variables of Age

The consumer demographic variable of Age was carefully selected based on the theory of socioemotional selectivity (Carstensen et al., 1999).

The effects of hypotheses H1 and H2 were moderated by Age to determine if this demographic variable significantly influences the overall sustainable brand equity on the outcome variables. The moderating effects on this set of hypotheses constituted the second research question of the study, which was addressed by hypotheses H3a and H3b.

Research question 2: How does the demographic variable of Age moderate the influence of the overall sustainable brand equity on the outcome variables of price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations?

The moderating influence of Age on brand equity and behavioural outcomes of price premium payments and positive word of mouth was centred on the discernment of time by diverse age clusters. Explanation of time will influence a person's communal objective setting, and consequently, on how the individual's conduct agrees with the objective. The socio-emotional selectivity theory hypothesises that the perception of time will impact the search for a communal objective, resulting in behavioural variation in a chronological order. The element of time, in the context of this theory, refers to the Age of an individual, which is thought of as either constrained or open-ended (Carstensen et al., 1999). Those described as having open-ended time at their disposal are said to be the youth, while the aged are said to have constrained periods. The youth in society, according to the theory, recognise that they have a comparatively longer open-ended time at their disposal to understand the atmospheric dynamics better if the current ecological problems persist.

The youth are, therefore, inspired and willing to indulge in future-related knowledge and practices such as green consumerism. Given this, the youth broaden their horizons and take advantage of social networking to positively impact their future (Wiernik et al., 2013). The aged, on the other hand, see time as inadequate on their side. Time, in their minds, is constrained; as such, it has affected their general outlook on the ecology and related behaviour and practices towards its preservation and protection. Their preoccupation is primarily driven by emotional motives, which are usually intensified, selected, and sought after. According to the theory, adults in society are motivated to seek emotional satisfaction, which leads them to continue with business as usual and lack interest in environmental preservation. Hence, if preservation and eco-friendly choices are not their usual norm of activity, important changes in behaviours that tend to be more environmentally responsive will not be noted unless other external influences are present (Wiernik et al., 2013). Therefore, the study hypothesised the moderating effect of Age on brand equity and behavioural outcomes of price premium payments and positive word of mouth relations as follows:

H3a: Age moderates the relationship between sustainable brand equity and price premium payments such that the influence is stronger for younger consumers than for older ones.

H3b: Age moderates the relationship between sustainable brand equity and word-of-mouth recommendations such that the influence is stronger for younger consumers than for older ones.

Methodology

A quantitative investigation approach was considered appropriate to produce data that can be analysed mathematically and to employ numerical processes to examine the assumptions developed to achieve the main objectives of the study. In this research, since the investigators are grounded in the post-positivist paradigm and have chosen a quantitative research approach, the survey research design was deemed more suitable for use. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of 793 respondents, selected through a systematic random sampling technique. Participants were asked to

complete a consent form to obtain their consent to participate in the study ethically. It demonstrated their willingness to participate in the study without coercion or duress.

Descriptive data analysis, as well as confirmatory factor analysis, were performed to ensure the reliability of the data. Thereafter, the structural equation modelling using IBM AMOS version 23.0 was employed to test the hypotheses of the study.

Findings/results

This section presents the various research questions, which were based on the testing of the corresponding hypotheses accompanying them. Structural equation modelling (SEM) is noted in social sciences and other disciplines as a flexible tool for data analysis. It can perform various tasks, such as correlation, regression, and factor analysis, simultaneously. Hence, the researchers considered it appropriate for testing the various hypotheses of the study.

Research question 1

The first research question was guided by two main hypotheses of the study, H1 and H2. The hypotheses developed to address the first research question of the paper were hypothesised as follows:

H1: Overall sustainable brand equity positively influences price premium payments, and

H2: Overall sustainable brand equity positively influences word-of-mouth recommendations.

Table 1

Structural paths showing hypotheses test results

Hypothesis		Structural path	Beta	t-value	p	Hypothesis results
H1	⟶	Overall sustainable brand equity Price premium payments	0.156	3.950	0.000***	Supported
H2	⟶	Overall sustainable brand equity WOM recommendations	0.612	14.755	0.000***	Supported

**** p<0.001 (two-tail test)*

Source: Field Data

The results of the study, as depicted in Table 1, confirm **H1** and concur with previous findings (Buil et al., 2013), which suggested that consumers' behavioural outcomes are positively influenced by overall brand equity. Hypothesis H1 was, therefore, supported by the empirical data collected for the study. Based on the results of the data analysis, a positive and significant relationship exists between overall sustainable brand equity and price premium payments ($\beta = 0.156$, $t = 3.95$, $p < 0.001$). This result implies that overall sustainable brand equity positively drives price premium payments.

The testing of the second hypothesis, **H2**, under the first research question revealed a progressive and noteworthy relationship between overall brand equity and word-of-mouth recommendations ($\beta = 0.612$, $t = 14.76$, $p < 0.001$). This outcome suggests that overall sustainable brand equity is a positive driver of word-of-mouth recommendations. Therefore, hypothesis **H2** was supported.The noteworthy influence of overall sustainable brand equity on customer word-of-mouth recommendations suggests that consumers with high equity towards a specific sustainable brand are motivated to share information (Burnham & Leary, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017).

Research question 2

The second research question of the paper is: how does the demographic variable of age moderate the influence of the overall sustainable brand equity on price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations?

The hypotheses developed to address this research question are as follows:

H3a: *Age moderates the influence of overall sustainable brand equity on price premium payments such that the influence is stronger for younger consumers than for older ones.*

H3b: *Age moderates the influence of overall sustainable brand equity on word-of-mouth recommendations such that the influence is stronger for younger consumers than for older ones.*

Table 2: Moderating Effects of demographic variable Age on OSBE-behaviour relationships

Age group	PPP	WOMR
17 or younger	0.644**	**0.711
18-20	0.219*	0.628***
21-29	0.219**	0.508**
30-39	0.104	0.671***
40-49	0.148	0.628***
50 and above	-0.39*	0.622***
$\chi 2$ -unconstrained model	$\chi 2$=174.69, df=54	
$\chi 2$ -fully constrained model	$\chi 2$=220.94, df=79	
Chi-square difference	$\Delta\chi 2$=46.25, df=25 p=0.006	
$\chi 2$ -partially constrained (Path-by-path analysis) df=59	197.38***	176.47

The moderating role of age

Concerning Table 2, an examination of the partially constrained model (path-by-path analysis) of age on the relationship between OSBE and price premium payments yielded a significant Chi-square value of 197.38 ($\chi 2$ = 197.38, df = 59, p < 0.000). This finding indicates that age group moderates the relationship between OSBE and price premium payments. The relationship is more substantial (more significant) among younger consumers than older ones. Therefore, hypothesis **H3a** was supported in the present context. By implication, the study has revealed that sustainable marketing is a promising venture in Ghana (Amoako et al., 2020), as the younger age group of consumers significantly moderates the relationship between overall sustainable brand equity and price premium payments.

Examining the partially constrained model (path-by-path analysis) of age on the relationship between OSBE and word-of-mouth recommendations, a non-significant Chi-square value of 176.5 was obtained ($\chi 2$ = 176.5, df = 59, p = n.s.), which indicates that age does not moderate the relationship between OSBE and word-of-mouth recommendations. That is, the relationship is significant across age groups without any important variability. Therefore, hypothesis H3b was not supported in the present context.

Discussions and conclusions

The study's findings revealed that overall sustainable brand equity has a positive and significant influence on the behavioural outcomes of price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations. This outcome demonstrates that consumers will act favourably towards brands with high equity, thereby echoing the psychological connection between the consumer and the product (Rambocas et al., 2018), and by extension, the sustainable brand. The results of the data analysis in this regard, support the relationship existing between overall sustainable brand equity and desirable consumer behavioural outcomes. Precisely, consumers are more likely to behave favourably towards paying price premiums and receiving word-of-mouth recommendations. According to the literature on consumer behaviour, this finding aligns with existing research (Datta et al., 2017; Lovett et al., 2013; Stahl et al., 2012).

The noteworthy influence on word-of-mouth recommendations suggests that consumers with high equity towards a specific sustainable brand are motivated to share information (Burnham & Leary, 2018; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2017). Concerning the payment of a price premium, Hoeffler and Keller (2003) clarified that strong brands suggest cogent calls through indications of higher quality, trustworthiness, and decreased consumption risks.

Hence, the patronage and readiness to compensate for the premium price of pro-environmental products, which are relatively higher than their conventional counterparts, are encouraging signals for sustainable marketing in an emerging marketplace like Ghana, a sub-Saharan African country.

A significant effect of Age on the overall sustainable brand equity-price premium link was recorded. Specifically, the result is similar to that of existing works, which suggest that younger people are more

likely to purchase services from alternative banks than older people (Rambocas et al., 2018). Concerning the current study, the likelihood of younger people patronising sustainable products more than older ones is similar to that of the younger people in the other study, who were more willing to purchase services from alternative banks than their older counterparts. This outcome is similar to existing works that suggest adult clients may not be sufficiently motivated to risk their lives and attempt different service providers (Carstensen et al., 1999).

The outcome of the present study supported the socioemotional selectivity theory put forward by Carstensen et al. (1999). This is because the data analysis revealed that the younger participants, specifically the millennials, moderated the relationship between brand equity and price premium payments significantly.

It is worth noting, however, that age did not moderate the overall nexus between sustainable brand equity and word-of-mouth recommendations. It was predicted that the youth would be more likely to transfer information about sustainable products than older consumers, but the data collected did not support this assertion. This revelation is an interesting finding that warrants further investigation.

Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the study contributes to knowledge in sustainable consumption by introducing a conceptual framework that portrays sustainable consumer-based brand equity as an antecedent of consumers' behavioural outcomes. In a nutshell, the study linked the brand equity theory to the behavioural outcomes of sustainable consumers.

Again, this study contributes to sustainable consumption literature as a unique study intentionally attempted to measure the value of sustainable products or brands, from the consumers' viewpoint, with a theory which according to evidence from the literature (Groening et al., 2018), was not so common for that purpose in sustainable or green marketing literature

Also, unlike most preceding studies in the sustainable marketing literature, behavioural outcomes, as opposed to intentions (Moon et al., 2019), were measured within the two sub-dimensions of price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations. Therefore, empirically, the study adds to the sustainable marketing and sustainable consumption literature on the effect of consumer-based brand equity on price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Theoretically, too, the study contributed to the sustainable marketing and sustainable consumption literature by employing a demographic variable, Age, to moderate the nexus between overall sustainable brand equity and the behavioural outcomes of price premium payments and word-of-mouth recommendations.

Managerial implications

The demographic variable of age, used as a moderator, was found to moderate the relationship between overall sustainable brand equity and the behavioural outcomes of word-of-mouth recommendations and price premium payments. The younger consumers were recorded as having moderated significantly in the study. Therefore, it is recommended that brand managers utilise more interactive communication channels to reach the youth by promoting their sustainable brand on various social media platforms, websites, and other online channels. In other words, strategic, integrated promotional drives should be undertaken by sustainable brand managers in sustainable marketing to enhance the extensive sustainable marketing potentials globally, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and Ghana.

In addition to promoting sustainable brands in the sub-region, practitioners must also encourage actual purchases by offering multiple and straightforward payment options. Sustainable brands should be available at designated trusted shops and provide easy-to-understand usage instruction manuals as needed.

Limitations and direction for future studies

The selected green or sustainable products for the study were limited to four sustainable options: energy-saving electric bulbs, energy-saving refrigerators, organic foods, and natural health products.

Future studies may consider other sustainable products, such as fast-moving consumer goods, green vehicles, and environmentally friendly domestic cleaning products.

The study was also limited to respondents from Ghana only. Other areas within sub-Saharan African countries, such as The Gambia, Liberia, and Nigeria, could be considered in future studies. A comparative study between urban and rural settings of a given country may also be considered in the future, as the present study primarily selected respondents from urban or cosmopolitan areas, which centred around popular shopping malls in the country.

The moderating variable of Age could be modified to include some biographical data of respondents, such as gender, educational background, or level of income.

Methodologically, this study employed a quantitative research approach. Therefore, a mixed or qualitative research method could be used for future studies.

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