International Journal of Economics, Business and Innovation Research
https://e-journal.citakonsultindo.or.id/index.php/IJEBIR
E-ISSN : 2964-0865
IJEBIR

ESG as a Determinant of Brand Trust and Participant Loyalty: Implications for the Sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) as a determinant of brand trust and participant loyalty, as well as its implications for the sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies in East Java. The study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design and utilizes Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as the analytical method. Data were collected from 120 certification participants using a purposive sampling technique. The results indicate that ESG has a strong and significant effect on brand trust, as well as a moderate direct effect on participant loyalty and organizational sustainability. Brand trust is proven to significantly enhance participant loyalty and serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between ESG and loyalty, suggesting that trust is a key mechanism in translating ESG values into participant behavior. Furthermore, participant loyalty emerges as the most dominant factor influencing organizational sustainability, making it a critical element in ensuring the long-term viability of Professional Certification Bodies. This study contributes to the development of sustainability-oriented marketing literature by providing empirical evidence of the integrated relationships among ESG, brand trust, loyalty, and sustainability within a trust-based service context. Practically, the findings suggest that managers of Professional Certification Bodies should optimize ESG implementation to

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strengthen trust and enhance participant loyalty as primary drivers of organizational sustainability.

Keywords: ESG, Brand Trust, Participant Loyalty, Sustainability, Professional Certification Bodies

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has evolved into a strategic framework for promoting organizational sustainability and creating long-term value. ESG not only functions as a non-financial performance indicator but also serves as a critical determinant in shaping stakeholder perceptions and behaviors, particularly those of customers. The growing awareness of environmental and social issues has encouraged consumers to become more selective in choosing services that reflect sustainability values (Fatma & Rahman, 2021; Khan et al., 2021).

From a marketing perspective, ESG acts as a value signal that can enhance brand image and strengthen customer trust. Trust (brand trust) becomes a key factor in the service sector due to the intangible nature of services, which are often difficult to evaluate prior to consumption. Empirical studies indicate that perceptions of ESG practices positively influence the formation of customer trust, which subsequently drives loyalty (Saeidi et al., 2021; Fatma et al., 2022). Thus, ESG functions not only as a sustainability strategy but also as an effective marketing instrument.

Furthermore, the relationship between ESG and customer loyalty is often indirect. ESG tends to influence loyalty through mediating variables such as trust and customer satisfaction. This suggests that trust is the primary psychological mechanism that bridges sustainability practices and customer behavior (Confente & Vigolo, 2021). In this context, organizations must ensure that ESG implementation is not only substantive but also effectively communicated to build positive perceptions among customers.

Customer loyalty itself is a key determinant of organizational sustainability. Loyalty not only reflects repurchase intentions but also encompasses customer advocacy and emotional attachment to the organization. Prior research demonstrates that loyalty contributes significantly to long-term performance and organizational stability (Rather et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding the factors that influence loyalty is crucial in sustainability-oriented marketing strategies.

Although the relationships among ESG, trust, and loyalty have been widely examined, most studies focus on corporate and consumer product sectors. Research

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within trust-based service contexts, such as Professional Certification Bodies, remains relatively limited. These institutions possess unique characteristics, as they rely heavily on legitimacy and credibility in delivering competency certification services. In this context, trust becomes a dominant factor influencing participants' decisions.

Moreover, studies that integrate ESG, brand trust, loyalty, and sustainability into a single empirical model are still scarce. Previous research tends to examine these relationships in a partial manner, thus failing to provide a comprehensive explanation of the underlying mechanisms (Fatma et al., 2022; Rather et al., 2022). This indicates a research gap that necessitates a more integrative approach.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of ESG as a determinant of brand trust and participant loyalty, as well as its implications for the sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies in East Java. By employing a quantitative approach and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), this study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of sustainability-oriented marketing literature, as well as practical insights for managers of Professional Certification Bodies in designing effective marketing strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG)

The concept of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) represents a multidimensional approach used to evaluate organizational sustainability performance across three primary dimensions: environmental, social, and governance aspects. ESG has evolved into a strategic framework that not only emphasizes social responsibility but also focuses on long-term value creation for both organizations and stakeholders (Khan et al., 2021). In the marketing context, ESG functions as a value signal that can influence customer perceptions regarding the integrity and credibility of an organization.

Empirical evidence suggests that effective ESG implementation enhances brand image and organizational reputation, which in turn affects customer behavior (Fatma & Rahman, 2021). Furthermore, ESG plays a role in reducing customer uncertainty, particularly in the service sector where offerings are intangible. Through transparent and accountable ESG practices, customers are more likely to develop positive perceptions of the organization (Confente & Vigolo, 2021). From the perspective of signaling theory, ESG is viewed as information communicated by organizations to the market to reduce information asymmetry and increase stakeholder trust. Therefore, ESG serves not only

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as a sustainability tool but also as a strategic instrument for building long-term customer relationships.

Brand Trust

Brand trust is a fundamental construct in marketing that reflects customers' confidence in a brand's ability to fulfill its promises and deliver consistent value. In the service sector, trust becomes a critical factor because customers are unable to evaluate service quality prior to consumption. According to Khan et al. (2021), brand trust is formed through perceptions of organizational integrity, competence, and consistency. ESG plays a significant role in building such trust, as it reflects an organization's commitment to social responsibility and sound governance. Empirical studies indicate that perceptions of ESG practices positively influence customer trust in a brand (Fatma et al., 2022).

Moreover, brand trust acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between ESG and customer behavior. This suggests that trust serves as a psychological mechanism linking sustainability perceptions to customer actions, such as loyalty and recommendations (Confente & Vigolo, 2021).

Participant Loyalty

Customer loyalty refers to the commitment to repurchase and to recommend products or services to others. In the service context, loyalty is influenced not only by satisfaction but also by trust and emotional attachment to the brand. Research indicates that customer loyalty is a key factor in long-term organizational success, as it contributes to revenue stability and business growth (Rather et al., 2022). Within the ESG context, loyalty is influenced by customers' perceptions of the sustainability values adopted by the organization. Furthermore, ESG can enhance customer loyalty through increased trust and customer identification with the brand. When customers perceive alignment between organizational values and their personal values, stronger emotional bonds are formed, which in turn foster long-term loyalty (Khan et al., 2021).

Organizational Sustainability

Organizational sustainability refers to the ability of an organization to maintain its performance and existence over the long term while considering economic, social, and environmental aspects. In the marketing context, sustainability is influenced not only by internal factors but also by relationships with customers. Customer loyalty is one of the primary determinants of organizational sustainability, as it contributes to demand stability

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and long-term reputation. Studies show that organizations with high levels of customer loyalty tend to exhibit more stable and sustainable performance (Rather et al., 2022). In the context of Professional Certification Bodies, sustainability heavily depends on participant trust and loyalty as service users. Therefore, integrating ESG into marketing strategies can serve as an effective approach to enhancing organizational sustainability.

State of the Art

A number of studies have examined the relationships among ESG, trust, and customer loyalty. Khan et al. (2021) found that ESG has a significant effect on brand trust and word of mouth, highlighting its importance in building customer relationships. Similarly, Fatma et al. (2022) demonstrated that ESG practices contribute to enhancing positive organizational perceptions and strengthening customer trust. Meanwhile, Confente and Vigolo (2021) emphasized that trust serves as a crucial mediating variable in the relationship between sustainability perceptions and customer behavior. In addition, Rather et al. (2022) found that customer loyalty is influenced by value congruence between customers and organizations, which can be reinforced through ESG implementation.

On the other hand, recent studies have begun to explore the sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies through ESG and intellectual capital approaches. Rosi et al. (2026) indicate that the integration of ESG based on intellectual capital plays a role in improving the effectiveness and sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies. However, this study primarily focuses on internal organizational aspects and does not yet examine the role of participant behavioral factors.

Although numerous studies have investigated ESG, trust, and loyalty, most have been conducted in the retail, tourism, and manufacturing sectors. Research within trust-based service contexts, such as Professional Certification Bodies, remains very limited. Moreover, studies that integrate ESG, brand trust, participant loyalty, and sustainability into a single comprehensive empirical model are still relatively scarce.

Conseptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is developed to explain the relationships among ESG, brand trust, participant loyalty, and organizational sustainability within the context of Professional Certification Bodies. ESG is positioned as the primary determinant influencing participants' perceptions of the institution's credibility and integrity. These

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perceptions subsequently shape brand trust, which functions as a psychological mechanism in fostering long-term relationships between participants and the institution.

Furthermore, brand trust drives the formation of participant loyalty, as reflected in the intention to reuse the services and to recommend them to others. This loyalty becomes a key factor in supporting organizational sustainability. In addition, ESG is also assumed to have a direct effect on both loyalty and sustainability, thereby allowing the model to simultaneously capture both direct and indirect relationships.

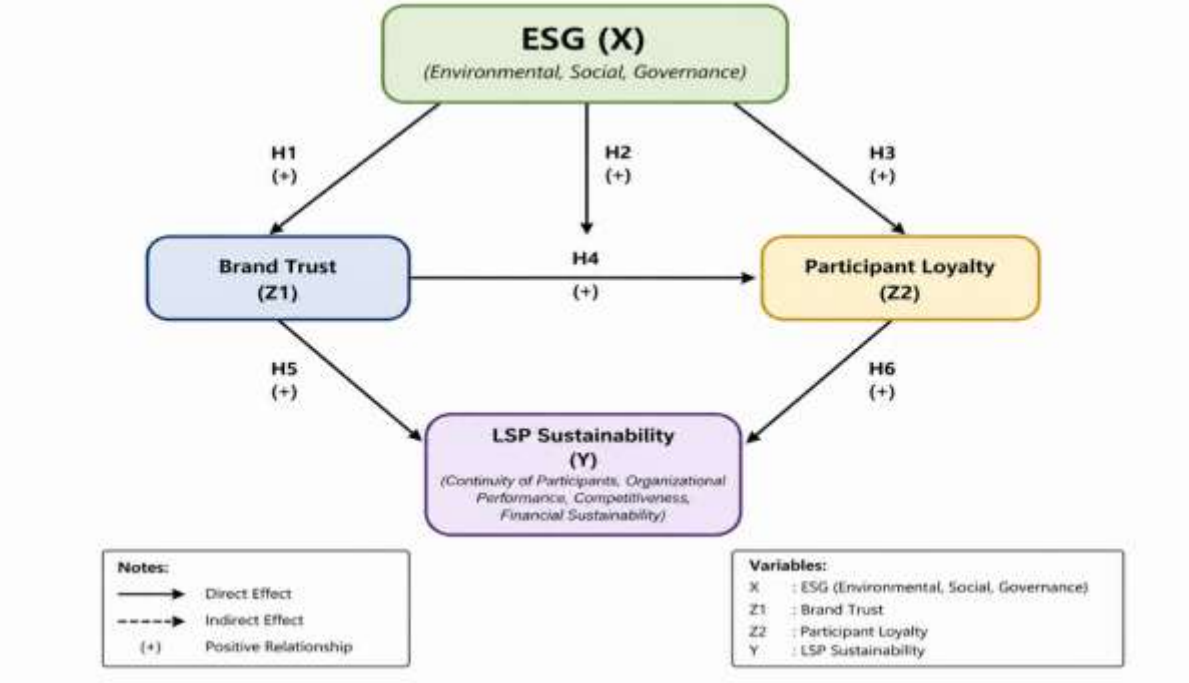


Figure 1. Conseptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design aimed at examining the causal relationships among Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), brand trust, participant loyalty, and the sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies. This approach is selected as it enables the empirical testing of hypotheses using numerical data. Data analysis is conducted using Structural Equation Modeling based on Partial Least Squares (PLS-SEM), which is considered appropriate

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for analyzing structural models involving latent variables and relatively moderate sample sizes (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	68	56,7
	Female	52	43,3
Age	< 25 years	34	28,3
	25–34 years	51	42,5
	35–44 years	23	19,2
	> 44 years	12	10
Education	Senior High School	29	24,2
	Diploma	31	25,8
	Bachelor Degree	48	40
	Master Degree	12	10
Certification Experience	1 time	57	47,5
	2–3 time	43	35,8
	> 3 time	20	16,7

Based on Table 1, the majority of respondents in this study are male (56.7%), while female respondents account for 43.3%. In terms of age, respondents are predominantly within the 25–34 years group (42.5%), indicating that certification participants are generally in their productive years and actively engaged in competency development. In terms of educational background, most respondents hold a bachelor's degree (40.0%), followed by diploma holders (25.8%) and senior high school/vocational school graduates (24.2%). This suggests that participants of Professional Certification Bodies come from diverse educational backgrounds, although they are predominantly university graduates.

Based on certification experience, the majority of respondents have participated in certification only once (47.5%), while the rest have more than one certification experience. This finding indicates that most participants are still at an early stage in utilizing the services of Professional Certification Bodies.

Operational Definition of Variable

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This study involves four latent variables, defined as follows:

1. **ESG (X)**

Participants' perceptions of environmental, social, and governance practices implemented by Professional Certification Bodies.

a. ESG1: Operational transparency
b. ESG2: Social responsibility
c. ESG3: Environmental concern
d. ESG4: Good governance

2. **Brand Trust (Z1)**

The level of participants' trust in the credibility of Professional Certification Bodies.

a. BT1: Trust in service quality
b. BT2: Service consistency
c. BT3: Certification reliability

3. **Participant Loyalty (Z2)**

Participants' commitment to continue using the services of Professional Certification Bodies.

a. PL1: Intention to retake certification
b. PL2: Willingness to recommend
c. PL3: Preference for the certification body

4. **LSP Sustainability (Y)**

The ability of Professional Certification Bodies to sustain their long-term operations.

a. LS1: Operational continuity
b. LS2: Long-term reputation
c. LS3: Participant growth

Table 2. Operational Definition

Variable	Indicator	Code
ESG (X)	Operational transparency	ESG1
	Social responsibility	ESG2
	Environmental concern	ESG3
	Good governance	ESG4
Brand Trust (Z1)	Trust in service quality	BT1
	Service consistency	BT2
	Certification reliability	BT3

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Participant Loyalty (Z2)	Intention to retake certification	PL1
	Willingness to recommend	PL2
	Preference for the certification body	PL3
LSP Sustainability (Y)	Operational continuity	LS1
	Long-term reputation	LS2
	Participant growth	LS3

Measurement

All variables in this study were measured using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to capture respondents' perceptions of each proposed indicator. All constructs were treated as reflective constructs, where the indicators represent manifestations of the underlying latent variables. The research instrument was developed by adapting and refining indicators from prior studies related to ESG, brand trust, and customer loyalty, and was further adjusted to fit the context of Professional Certification Bodies to ensure adequate contextual validity.

Measurement Model

The evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) was conducted to ensure the validity and reliability of the constructs. Convergent validity was assessed based on factor loadings, which were expected to exceed 0.70, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which should be greater than 0.50. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, which should be below 0.90. In addition, construct reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability, both of which were required to exceed 0.70. Constructs meeting all these criteria were considered valid and reliable for further structural model analysis (Hair et al., 2022).

Analysis Procedure

Data analysis was performed using the PLS-SEM approach, which involves two main stages: evaluation of the measurement model and evaluation of the structural model. The first stage involved assessing the outer model to ensure construct validity and reliability through tests of convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability. The second stage involved evaluating the inner model to examine the relationships among

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variables using the coefficient of determination (R^2), path coefficients, and significance testing through bootstrapping, with criteria of t-statistic > 1.96 and p-value < 0.05. Furthermore, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the role of brand trust in the relationship between ESG and participant loyalty, using indirect effect analysis and the Variance Accounted For (VAF) approach. All analyses were conducted using SmartPLS software.

RESULT

Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

Convergent Validity

Convergent validity was assessed based on factor loadings and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results indicate that all indicators have factor loadings above 0.70, thereby meeting the criteria for convergent validity.analysis was conducted using multiple linear regression to examine the effects of entrepreneurial leadership and entrepreneurial character on intrapreneurial behavior in Private Higher Education Institutions in Surabaya.

Table 3. Loading Factor and AVE

Variable	Indicator	Loading
ESG	ESG1	0,812
	ESG2	0,845
	ESG3	0,801
	ESG4	0,833
Brand Trust	BT1	0,872
	BT2	0,854
	BT3	0,821
Participant Loyalty	LP1	0,865
	LP2	0,842
	LP3	0,817
LSP Sustainability	KS1	0,836
	KS2	0,854
	KS3	0,829

Table 4. AVE and Composite Reliability

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Variable	AVE	CR
ESG	0,677	0,893
Brand Trust	0,712	0,881
Participant Loyalty	0,701	0,876
LSP Sustainability	0,702	0,879

Discriminant Validity

The results of the Fornell–Larcker criterion indicate that the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than the correlations between constructs, confirming that the model satisfies discriminant validity.

Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

R-Square (R^2)

Table 5. R-Square

Variable	R^2
ESG	0,677
Brand Trust	0,712
Participant Loyalty	0,701
LSP Sustainability	0,702

Path Coefficient dan Uji Hipotesis

Table 6. Hypothesis Test Result

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient	t-stat	p-value	Result
H1	ESG → Brand Trust	0,722	9,845	0	Diterima
H2	ESG → Participant Loyalty	0,318	3,214	0,001	Diterima
H3	Brand Trust → Participant Loyalty	0,471	5,102	0	Diterima
H4	Participant Loyalty → LSP Sustainability	0,529	6,233	0	Diterima

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H5	ESG → LSP Sustainability	0,214	2,145	0,032	Diterima

Mediation Test

Table 7. Indirect Effect

Path	coefficient	Result
ESG → Brand Trust → Participant Loyalty	0,34	Signifikan

Brand trust is confirmed to act as a partial mediator.

RESULT

The Effect of ESG on Brand Trust

The results indicate that ESG has a significant effect on brand trust. This finding confirms that ESG practices play an essential role in shaping participants' perceptions of organizational credibility and integrity. In trust-based service sectors such as Professional Certification Bodies, ESG serves as a strategic signal that strengthens participants' confidence in the institution. This result is consistent with Rather et al. (2022), who emphasize that trust is a key factor in establishing long-term relationships with customers.

The Effect of Participant Loyalty on the Sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies

Participant loyalty is found to have the strongest influence on the sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies. This suggests that organizational sustainability largely depends on the institution's ability to retain participants and build long-term relationships. Loyalty contributes through repeated participation, positive word-of-mouth, and enhanced institutional reputation.

The Effect of ESG on LSP Sustainability

ESG also demonstrates a direct effect on lsp sustainability, although its impact is not as strong as the indirect effect through participant loyalty. This finding implies that ESG contributes not only at the operational level but also through shaping stakeholder perceptions, which in turn support organizational sustainability.

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The Mediating Role of Brand Trust

The mediation analysis reveals that brand trust acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between ESG and participant loyalty. This indicates that ESG does not directly translate into loyalty without the presence of trust. The finding reinforces the notion that trust is a key mechanism in transforming sustainability values into actual customer behavior.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the role of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) as a determinant of brand trust and participant loyalty, as well as its implications for the sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies in East Java. Based on the results of the SEM-PLS analysis, it can be concluded that ESG has a positive and significant effect on brand trust, participant loyalty, and the sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies. These findings indicate that the effective implementation of ESG practices enhances participants' positive perceptions of the institution's credibility and integrity. Furthermore, brand trust is found to have a significant effect on participant loyalty, suggesting that trust is a key factor in establishing long-term relationships between participants and Professional Certification Bodies. Participant loyalty is also identified as the most dominant factor influencing organizational sustainability, confirming that sustainability largely depends on the institution's ability to retain participants and foster strong relational bonds. The results also reveal that brand trust acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between ESG and participant loyalty. This indicates that ESG does not directly lead to loyalty without the presence of trust as an intervening mechanism. In this regard, ESG serves as an initial stimulus that shapes perceptions, while brand trust functions as the psychological mechanism that transforms these perceptions into loyal behavior. Overall, this study underscores that the integration of ESG into organizational strategies not only contributes to sustainability but also plays a strategic role in building trust and participant loyalty as key drivers of the long-term sustainability of Professional Certification Bodies.

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