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Perceived Ethics Washing and Purchase Intention in the Skincare Market: The Roles of Customer Distrust and Environmental Awareness

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Abstract

Ethical and sustainability claims have become a central marketing tool in the skincare industry, yet many of these claims are not supported by actual business practices, a phenomenon known as ethics washing. Existing research remains dominated by studies of greenwashing in developed markets. This study examines the relationships between perceived ethics washing and customer distrust, environmental awareness, and purchase intention, as well as the relationships of customer distrust and environmental awareness with purchase intention, among Indonesian consumers of a selected skincare brand (A Skincare). Drawing on signalling theory, data were collected from 150 repeat buyers (more than three purchases) through an online questionnaire using purposive sampling and analysed with partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4. The results show that perceived ethics washing is positively associated with both customer distrust and environmental awareness but has no significant direct relationship with purchase intention. Customer distrust is negatively associated with purchase intention, whereas environmental awareness is positively associated with it. These findings suggest that unsubstantiated ethical claims act as weak signals: they draw consumers' attention to environmental issues but erode trust in the brand. Skincare firms should support ethical claims with verifiable evidence, such as third-party certification and transparent ingredient disclosure, while regulators should strengthen the oversight of ethical and environmental claims.

Keywords: Perceived ethics washing; customer distrust; environmental awareness;purchase intention; signalling theory.

INTRODUCTION

Ethics washing, a concept closely related to greenwashing, refers to the strategic presentation of an organization as ethically responsible without substantive or enforceable ethical practices (Schultz et al., 2024). Bietti (2021) observes that as global awareness of corporate responsibility rises, the phenomenon has become increasingly visible in industries that rely heavily on trust-based branding, including technology and skincare. Schultz et al. (2024) further argue that, rather than reflecting genuine commitment, ethics washing often functions as a reputational tool that allows firms to perform ethical conduct publicly while failing to implement meaningful ethical governance internally. Paradoxically, the growing demand for ethical accountability has also encouraged the spread of misleading ethical and environmental claims embedded in marketing strategies that lack factual grounding (Inês et al., 2023; Schultz et al., 2024).

In the skincare industry, ethics washing commonly manifests when claims of ethical and environmentally responsible production coexist with questionable practices. Wang et al. (2020) highlight the persistence of animal testing in the cosmetics industry, while Ajayi et al. (2024) point to ethical and environmental concerns in the sourcing of skincare ingredients. Such practices threaten ethical consumerism because brand trust is anchored in perceived integrity. As Wahyudi (2019) notes, once consumers detect inconsistencies between what a brand says and what it does, trust deteriorates rapidly, leading to disloyalty and reputational damage, a pattern also confirmed by Walter et al. (2024) in the context of inauthentic brand purpose.

A concrete illustration can be found in skincare brands that promote their products as natural and environmentally responsible while formulating them with sodium lauryl sulfate (SLS) and cyclopentasiloxane (D5) (Asio et al., 2023; Kumari et al., 2024). Asio et al. (2023) documented that SLS is toxic to aquatic organisms

and can reduce water quality, and both ingredients have drawn growing regulatory scrutiny (Kumari et al., 2024). The presence of an ingredient, however, is a chemical and environmental concern and does not by itself establish ethics washing, which lies in the gap between what a brand communicates and what it substantively does (Schultz et al., 2024). Whether such a gap damages the brand depends on whether consumers notice it, since trust erodes once they detect inconsistencies between a brand's words and actions (Wahyudi et al., 2022; Walter, 2024).

Research on misleading ethical claims has so far concentrated on greenwashing (Ibau et al., 2025; Szabo and Webster, 2021). Netto et al. (2020) systematically reviewed its concepts and forms, and Nguyen et al. (2019) showed its negative consequences for green purchase intention. In contrast, ethics washing, which covers a broader set of social and ethical claims, has received less empirical attention, particularly outside the technology sector (Schultz et al., 2024). This gap is more pronounced in developing countries such as Indonesia, where the skincare market is growing rapidly but regulatory oversight of ethical and environmental claims remains limited and public awareness of ethics washing is still emerging. Although Crane et al. (2019) and Vredenburg et al. (2020) have shown that inauthentic ethical claims erode institutional legitimacy and consumer evaluations of corporate reputation, few studies have examined, within a single model, how perceived ethics washing relates to two distinct consumer responses, distrust toward the brand and environmental awareness, and how each response relates to purchase intention.

Prior study, Zhuang et al. (2022), Hu et al. (2019), and Järvi et al. (2020) reinforce the importance of trust, emotion, and consumer expectations in shaping purchase intention. Environmental aspects, as discussed by Speckemeier and Tsivrikos (2022) and Netto et al. (2020), further influence consumer perceptions of authenticity. By bridging ethical claims, consumer trust, and environmental sustainability, this paper contributes to the ethics-washing literature in three ways. First, it integrates two lines of response to ethics washing within a single model, namely customer distrust as a negative brand response and environmental awareness as a positive issue-awareness response, and relates each to purchase intention. Second, it treats ethics washing as a construct distinct from greenwashing and examines it in a developing-country skincare market. Third, it offers practical insights for policymakers and marketers seeking to restore consumer trust through genuine ethical engagement.

Ethical and environmental claims function as signals that reduce information asymmetry between firms and consumers (2021), corporate brand communications act as signals intended to reduce information asymmetry between firms and consumers, and their effect depends on whether consumers perceive them as credible (Neves et al., 2023). Because credibility rests on consumers' judgement, this study examines perceived ethics washing, defined as consumers' subjective evaluation that a brand's ethical and environmental claims are not backed by substantive practice, adapted from the firm-side definition of Schultz et al. (2024). Accordingly, this study aims to examine (1) the relationships between perceived ethics washing and customer distrust, environmental awareness, and purchase intention, and (2) the relationships of customer distrust and environmental awareness with purchase intention among Indonesian consumers of a selected skincare brand. The brand studied, hereafter referred to as A Skincare, promotes itself with ethical and environmental claims, and this study makes no claim about its actual conduct.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Signaling Theory

Signaling theory explains how a better-informed party communicates information to reduce information asymmetry with less-informed parties (Santos et al., 2024). In consumer markets, firms use ethical and environmental claims as signals of product and corporate quality, particularly in categories such as skincare, where consumers cannot easily verify ingredients or production processes before purchase. Nyagadza et al. (2021) note that the effectiveness of such signals depends on their credibility. Firms with weak sustainability performance may nevertheless send exaggerated or unverifiable ethical signals to create favorable impressions (Choubey et al., 2025). When consumers detect inconsistencies between these signals and actual practices, skepticism and distrust emerge, which ultimately reduce purchase intention (Astira et al., 2025; Ha, 2022). From this perspective, ethics washing represents a false or weak signal that distorts market information and undermines the effectiveness of ethical communication.

Ethics Washing

Ethics washing refers to the practice whereby firms communicate ethical, social, or environmental commitments to enhance legitimacy and reputation without substantively implementing those commitments in organizational behavior (Schultz et al., 2024). Keymolen (2024) traces the concept to debates on deceptive corporate signaling, in which firms use ethical language to gain legitimacy without corresponding operational change. The concept is therefore related to, but broader than, greenwashing, which is confined to environmental claims (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020). In this study, ethics washing is conceptualized from the consumer's perspective, as the extent to which consumers perceive that a brand's ethical claims are not reflected in its actual practices. Keymolen (2024) shows that when ethical rhetoric is not backed by observable ethical behavior, stakeholders perceive corporate communication as ethically hollow and their trust diminishes. Research on misleading corporate social responsibility claims likewise indicates that consumers react negatively to inauthentic ethical messaging (Brugman et al., 2024). In this study, ethics washing is conceptualized from the consumer's perspective, as the extent to which consumers perceive that a brand's ethical claims are not reflected in its actual practices.

Customer Distrust

Customer distrust is characterized by skepticism, fear, and negative expectations regarding a seller's intentions or behavior (Jesse et al., 2025). It is conceptually distinct from low trust, because trust and distrust have different antecedents (Zhao et al., 2021). Zhao et al. (2021) show that trust and distrust have different antecedents, while Zhao et al. (2020) demonstrate that distrust directly lowers purchase intention. In online contexts, Lăzăroiu et al. (2020) and Lee et al. (2018) found that distrust increases perceived risk and discourages purchasing, underscoring its role as a psychological barrier in consumer decision-making.

Environmental Awareness

Environmental awareness refers to individuals' understanding of environmental issues and the extent to which these concerns inform their consumption decisions (Le et al., 2022). Prakash et al. (2024) and Simanjuntak et al. (2023) shows that environmental awareness, environmental knowledge, and pro-environmental beliefs positively shape consumer attitudes and intentions towards green products. Environmental awareness therefore functions as an important cognitive driver of sustainable purchase intention (Costa et al., 2021; Ogiemwonyi et al., 2023).

Purchase Intention

Purchase intention refers to consumers' willingness and planned effort to buy a specific product based on cognitive and motivational evaluations (Abeysekera et al., 2022). In sustainability-oriented consumption, purchase intention is shaped by perceived value, ethical judgements, and the credibility of brand claims (Costa et al., 2021; Joshi et al., 2021; Nekmahmud et al., 2022). Nevertheless, Ryoo and Kim (2023) caution that ethical considerations do not always dominate purchasing decisions, as factors such as price can weaken the influence of ethical perceptions on purchase intention.

Hypotheses Development

Ethics washing creates a credibility gap between what a brand claims and what it actually does (Crane et al., 2019). Wang and Walker (2023) show that misleading environmental claims damage consumer trust, and Walter et al. (2024) found that inauthentic brand purpose erodes brand credibility, particularly among skeptical consumers. Keymolen (2024) showed in the context of technology companies that when ethical rhetoric is not backed by observable ethical behavior, stakeholders perceive corporate communication as ethically hollow and their trust diminishes, and Brugman et al. (2024) likewise found that consumers react negatively to inauthentic ethical messaging. Experimental evidence reinforces this pattern: Koch and Denner (2025) demonstrated that even small discrepancies between a company's environmental claims and its actual practices significantly reduced its perceived credibility, with larger discrepancies producing stronger negative effects. Survey evidence from Pakistan likewise indicates that deceptive environmental claims diminish green brand trust (Isac et al., 2025). In the

cosmetics sector specifically, Suphasomboon and Vassanadumrongdee (2026) found that consumers who perceived greenwashing became highly skeptical of unverified claims and believed that firms were concealing information. In signalling terms, once consumers recognize an ethical claim as a false signal, they infer that the firm is willing to mislead them, which fosters negative expectations about its future behavior. This mechanism is likely to be pronounced in skincare, where products are applied directly to the body and consumers depend on brand claims about safety and ingredients. Empirical evidence on this relationship in the skincare sector of developing countries, however, remains limited. Therefore:

H1: Perceived ethics washing is positively associated with customer distrust.

Purchase intention reflects consumers' willingness to buy a product based on perceived value, which includes ethical considerations as well as functional attributes such as quality, price, and convenience (Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021). Nguyen et al. (2019) found that greenwash reduces green purchase intention by increasing green skepticism, and Collange et al. (2025) showed that ethical cues influence purchase intention through perceived product social responsibility. More recent studies confirm this negative relationship. Isac et al. (2025) reported that greenwashing has an adverse effect on purchase intention, while Khandai et al. (2025), surveying 430 consumers in India, found that greenwashing triggers skepticism, brand embarrassment, and brand hate, which in turn suppress purchase intention. In the cosmetics industry, most consumers interviewed by Suphasomboon and Vassanadumrongdee (2026) acknowledged that perceived greenwashing lowered their intention to buy, and many reported switching brands or avoiding the product altogether. At the same time, Robichaud and Yu (2022) note that consumers may continue to purchase products they regard as effective, affordable, or appealing despite ethical concerns, suggesting that this effect may be modest. Following the dominant evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Perceived ethics washing is negatively associated with purchase intention.

Ethical and environmental claims, whether substantive or not, repeatedly direct consumers' attention to environmental issues. Suryani et al. (2022) show from a signalling perspective that brand signals raise consumers' awareness of the attributes they communicate, and Szabo and Webster (2021) found that green marketing claims shape consumers' environmental perceptions of products. Consistently, Li (2025), in a study of 512 Chinese consumers, found that exposure to green advertising increased consumers' environmental knowledge. Importantly, skepticism toward specific claims does not necessarily reduce environmental concern; Kreczmańska-Gigol and Gigol (2022) show that consumers can remain receptive to environmental issues while doubting particular green claims. Moreover, when the gap between ethical claims and actual practices becomes visible, consumers learn about the environmental consequences of the products they use, and Murniawaty (2019) emphasizes that such ethical knowledge contributes positively to environmental awareness. Consumers who perceive ethics washing are therefore likely to become more attentive to the environmental aspects of their consumption:

H3: Perceived ethics washing is positively associated with environmental awareness.

Trust has long been recognized as a central determinant of consumer behavior and purchase intention (Lee et al., 2018), and Wahyudi (2019) highlights its role in fostering loyalty and long-term consumer–brand relationships. Distrust, in contrast, reflects negative expectations regarding a seller's conduct. Milan et al. (2015) describe it as a cognitive–emotional state marked by skepticism, fear, and heightened caution in response to perceived relational risk. For *A Skincare*, distrust may emerge when discrepancies between ethical messaging and actual business practices become evident. Ajayi et al. (2024) argue that such inconsistencies undermine perceived authenticity, while Singh et al. (2020) observed that distrust weakens consumers' emotional bonds with a brand. Empirical studies consistently associate distrust with lower purchase intention (Zhao et al., 2020), and this negative relationship is well documented in online commerce (Lăzăroiu et al., 2020). Rahimah et al. (2025) similarly link skepticism and distrust toward unsubstantiated signals to lower purchase intention. Evidence from sustainable consumption points in the same direction: Isac et al. (2025) found that reduced green brand trust lowers purchase intention, and Kifaya (2024), analysing 2,171 consumers in Tunisia, Italy, and France, showed that green skepticism strongly inhibits the purchase of organic cosmetic products. Hence:

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H4: Customer distrust is negatively associated with purchase intention.

Environmental awareness has become an increasingly important driver of consumer behaviour in industries where sustainability is central to brand identity. Simanjuntak et al. (2023) show that environmentally knowledgeable consumers hold more favorable attitudes and stronger intentions toward green products, and Li and Lin (2024) found that transparent communication of sustainability initiatives strengthens the brand image of personal care products. Prakash et al. (2024) report that environmental awareness, environmental knowledge, and pro-environmental beliefs positively shape attitudes and intentions toward green products, and Costa et al. (2021) and Ogiemwonyi et al. (2023) identify awareness as a cognitive driver of sustainable purchase intention. Research on corporate social responsibility likewise indicates that perceived environmental responsibility positively influences trust, brand attitudes, and purchasing behavior (Palihawadana et al., 2016; Pino et al., 2016; Su et al., 2017). More directly, Okada et al. (2019) confirmed a positive effect of environmental awareness on purchase intention for electric vehicles in Japan, and Abeysekera et al. (2022) reported similar results among consumers in the Philippines. In the Indonesian cosmetics market, Andika et al. (2023) found that environmental consciousness significantly increased the intention to purchase green cosmetics, particularly among female consumers, while Li (2025) showed that environmental knowledge strengthens consumers' intention to buy green products. The findings are not entirely consistent, however. Khaleeli and Jawabri (2021) found that the effect became insignificant once consumer attitudes were taken into account, indicating the need to re-examine this relationship in specific industries and cultural settings. Therefore:

H5: Environmental awareness is positively associated with purchase intention.

Based on the proposed hypotheses, this study develops a conceptual model of the relationships among ethics washing, customer distrust, environmental awareness, and purchase intention, as presented in Figure 1.

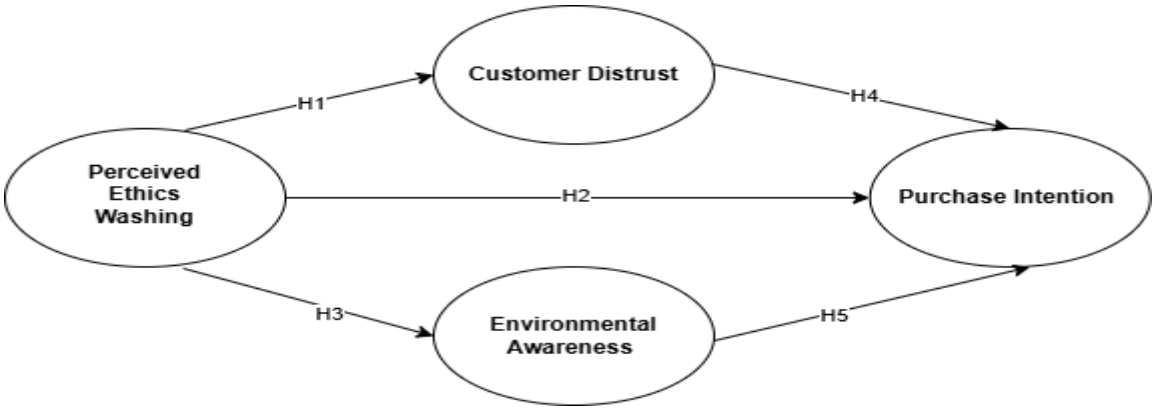


Figure 1. Hypothesis Model
Source: Authors' own work

METHOD

Data Collection and Sampling Method

The population comprised Indonesian consumers of *A Skincare* products. Because no sampling frame of these consumers was available, purposive sampling was employed with three criteria: respondents had to be (1) at least 18 years old, (2) Indonesian residents, and (3) consumers who had purchased *A Skincare* products, including its skincare and haircare lines, more than three times. The last criterion ensured that respondents had sufficient experience with the brand to evaluate its ethical and environmental claims. However, this criterion restricts the sample to repeat buyers, who may be more familiar with, more satisfied with, or more loyal to the brand than the average potential consumer. This may introduce selection bias, which is taken into account when interpreting the results.

The required sample size was determined through a power analysis following Hair et al. (2022). The maximum number of structural paths pointing at a construct is three (purchase intention). To detect a minimum R^2 of 0.10 ($f^2 = 0.111$) at a 5% significance level with 80% statistical power, at least 103 observations are required. The final sample of 150 respondents exceeds this threshold and provides 8. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire created in Google Forms. The opening section explained the purpose of the study, stated that participation was voluntary and anonymous, and asked respondents to give their informed consent before proceeding. Screening questions at the beginning of the questionnaire ensured that only respondents who met the sampling criteria could continue.

Measurement

All constructs were measured with multi-item scales adapted from relevant prior studies to ensure content validity and alignment with the research context. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Ethics washing was measured with five items capturing the extent to which respondents perceived that *A Skincare*'s ethical claims were not reflected in its actual practices. Customer distrust was measured with three items, environmental awareness with six items, and purchase intention with nine items.

Common Method Bias

Because all data were self-reported and collected from a single source at one point in time, common method bias was addressed both procedurally and statistically. Procedurally, respondents' anonymity was guaranteed, and they were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, which reduces social desirability biasStatistically, a full collinearity assessment was conducted following Kock et al. (2021). All variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.148 to 1.634, below the threshold of 3.3, so the results did not indicate severe common method bias according to the full-collinearity criterion. Nevertheless, because all data were self-reported from a single source, common method variance cannot be entirely ruled out.

Data Analysis

Data The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM was chosen because it is suited to prediction-oriented research, does not require multivariate normality, and performs well with small to medium sample sizes (Hair & Brunsveld, 2019). The analysis followed the two-stage approach recommended by Hair and Abdullah (2022). In the first stage, the measurement model was evaluated. Indicator reliability was assessed using outer loadings (≥ 0.70), internal consistency reliability using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (≥ 0.70), and convergent validity using the average variance extracted (AVE ≥ 0.50). Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT < 0.85). In the second stage, the structural model was evaluated by assessing collinearity among predictor constructs (VIF < 3), the coefficient of determination (R^2), and effect sizes (f^2). The significance of the path coefficients was tested using the bootstrapping procedure. Because all hypotheses specify the direction of the relationships, one-tailed tests were applied at a 5% significance level; a hypothesis was supported when the t-statistic exceeded 1.645 ($p < 0.05$) and the path coefficient had the hypothesized sign.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Respondent Overview

Table 1 summarizes the profile of the 150 respondents. Most respondents were male (60.67%), while 39.33% were female. In terms of domicile, the largest groups lived in Malang (20.67%), Banyuwangi (18.67%), Jakarta (14.67%), and Surabaya (10.00%), while the remaining 36.00% lived in other cities, indicating a geographically diverse sample. The majority of respondents used *A Skincare*'s skincare products (86.00%), and the rest used its haircare products (14.00%). Regarding length of use, 38.00% had used the products for less than one year, 30.67% for one to two years, 16.00% for three to five years, and 15.33% for more than five years.

Table 1. Respondents Overview

Demographic	Description	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	91	60.67
	Female	59	39.33
Domicile	Malang	31	20.67
	Banyuwangi	28	18.67
	Jakarta	22	14.67
	Surabaya	15	10.00
	Others	54	36.00
Products Used	Skincare	129	86.00
	Haircare	21	14.00
Length of Product Usage	< 1 year	57	38.00
	1 - 2 years	46	30.67
	3 - 5 years	24	16.00
	> 5 years	23	15.33

Source: Authors' own work

Evaluation of Reflective Measurement Models (Outer Model)

As seen in the outer model assesses validity and reliability (Hair et al., 2022). Validity ensures the instrument measures what it should (Purba, 2021) and includes convergent validity, with outer loadings >0.7 and AVE >0.5, and discriminant validity, where a latent variable's correlation with itself exceeds its correlation with other variables (Hair et al., 2022). Reliability evaluates response consistency, tested using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, both requiring values >0.7, confirming the instrument's accuracy and consistency in measuring latent variables (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 2. Loading Factor

	PEW	EA	CD	PI	Explanation
X.1	0.734				VALID
X.2	0.875				
X.3	0.767				
X.4	0.842				
X.5	0.814				
Z1.1		0.811			
Z1.2		0.838			
Z1.3		0.721			
Z2.1		0.835			
Z2.2		0.868			
Z2.3		0.832			
Z2.4			0.919		
Z2.5			0.891		
Z2.6			0.821		
Y.1				0.805	
Y.2				0.841	
Y.3				0.759	
Y.4				0.887	
Y.5				0.787	
Y.6				0.726	
Y.7				0.889	
Y.8				0.905	
Y.9				0.828	

Source: Authors' own work

Convergent Validity Test Results

The results indicate that all loading factor values exceeded 0.70 and all AVE values were above 0.50, confirming convergent validity in accordance with Hair et al. (2022). In addition, the reliability test showed that all Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating that all constructs and indicators used in this study were reliable and valid for measuring the latent variables.

Table 3. AVE

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	Average variance extracted (AVE)
CD	0.851	0.862	0.771
EA	0.901	0.909	0.671
PEW	0.867	0.890	0.653
PI	0.942	0.958	0.685

Source: Authors' own work

Discriminant Validity Test

Discriminant validity is assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion in Table 4, where a variable's correlation with itself must exceed its correlation with other variables, indicating that indicators better explain their own latent variable. Another method, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) in Table 4, is considered more reliable in variance-based SEM. HTMT values below 0.90 (or 0.85 for stricter criteria) confirm that constructs are empirically distinct, while values above the threshold indicate potential conceptual overlap. HTMT thus complements the Fornell-Larcker approach to ensure each latent construct is conceptually unique.

Table 4. Fornell Larcker Criterion

	CD	EA	EW	PI
CD	**0.878**			
EA	0.335	**0.819**		
PEW	0.582	0.363	**0.808**	
PI	-0.161	0.248	-0.049	**0.827**

Source: Authors' own work

Table 5. HTMT Value

	CD	EA	PEW	PI
CD				
EA	0.383			
PEW	0.660	0.385		
PI	0.175	0.262	0.090	

Source: Authors' own work

Evaluation of the Structural Models (Inner Model)

Coefficient of Determination

Before the path coefficients were examined, collinearity among the predictor constructs was assessed. The inner VIF values for the predictors of purchase intention were 1.589 (PEW), 1.554 (CD), and 1.183 (EA), and the VIF for the single predictor of customer distrust and of environmental awareness was 1.000. All values were well below 3, indicating that collinearity does not bias the structural estimates (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 6 presents the coefficients of determination. Perceived ethics washing explained 33.9% of the variance in customer distrust ($R^2 = 0.339$) and 13.2% of the variance in environmental awareness ($R^2 = 0.132$).

Together, perceived ethics washing, customer distrust, and environmental awareness explained 12.8% of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.128$). These values indicate relatively weak explanatory power (Hair et al., 2022). This does not invalidate the model, but it shows that the model has limited ability to explain purchase intention, and other factors not included in it, such as price, product quality, and brand loyalty, may account for much of the remaining variance. Moreover, the aim of this study is to test the hypothesized relationships between perceived ethics washing, customer distrust, environmental awareness, and purchase intention, and not to explain all variance in purchase intention. Other factors not included in the model, such as price, product quality, and brand loyalty, may account for much of the remaining variance (Robichaud & Yu, 2022).

Table 6. R-Square Model

	R-square	R-square adjusted
CD	0.339	0.335
EA	0.132	0.126
PI	0.128	0.110

Source: Authors' own work

The R-Square analysis provides an overview of how much variance in the dependent variables is explained by the independent variables. For Customer Distrust (CD), the R-Square value of 0.339 indicates that 33.9% of the variance in customer distrust is accounted for by the independent variables included in the model. Similarly, for Environmental Awareness (EA), the R-Square value of 0.132 shows that the independent variables explain 13.2% of the variance in environmental perception. Lastly, the R-Square value for Purchase Intention (PI) is 0.128, meaning that 12.8% of the variance in purchase intention is influenced by customer distrust and environmental perception. These findings suggest that while the independent variables have some explanatory power, a significant portion of the variance in these dependent variables is influenced by other factors not included in this study.

Structural Model Results

The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table . Effect sizes (f^2) were interpreted following the thresholds of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 for small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

Table 7. Structural Model Results

	Path	β	Sample mean	Standard Deviation	t-statistic	p-value	f^2	Decision
H1	EW → CD	0.582	0.588	0.063	9.246	0.001	0.513	Supported
H2	**EW → PI**	**−0.020**	**−0.020**	**0.115**	**0.171**	**0.432**	**0.000**	**Not supported**
H3	EW → EA	0.363	0.369	0.096	3.779	0.001	0.152	Supported
H4	CD → PI	−0.264	−0.273	0.099	2.675	0.004	0.052	Supported
H5	EA → PI	0.343	0.353	0.104	3.299	0.001	0.115	Supported

Source: Authors' own work

Ethics washing had a strong positive and significant effect on customer distrust ($\beta = 0.582$, $t = 9.246$, $p < 0.001$), with a large effect size ($f^2 = 0.513$); thus, H1 is supported. By contrast, the effect of ethics washing on purchase intention was negative but not significant ($\beta = -0.020$, $t = 0.171$, $p = 0.432$), and its effect size was negligible ($f^2 = 0.000$); therefore, H2 is not supported. Ethics washing had a positive and significant effect on environmental awareness ($\beta = 0.363$, $t = 3.779$, $p < 0.001$), with a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.152$), supporting H3. Customer distrust had a negative and significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = -0.264$, $t = 2.675$, $p = 0.004$), with a small effect size ($f^2 = 0.052$), supporting H4. Finally, environmental awareness had a positive and significant effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.343$, $t = 3.299$, $p < 0.001$), with a small-to-medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.115$); thus, H5 is supported.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that ethics washing has a positive and significant effect on customer distrust, thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. When a brand's ethical narrative does not match its actual practices, consumers tend to interpret the message as manipulative, which triggers suspicion, cynicism, and heightened caution (Ajayi et al., 2024; Milan et al., 2015). From the perspective of signalling theory, ethical branding functions as a signal intended to reduce information asymmetry between firms and consumers (Nyagadza et al., 2021), but when such signals are perceived as misleading or unsubstantiated, they result in signal failure, leading to increased distrust (Jesse et al., 2025). Ethics washing thus represents a form of false signalling, in which firms attempt to capture the reputational benefits of ethical commitment while avoiding the costs of genuinely implementing it. The result reinforces the argument of Crane et al. (2019) that insincere ethical claims create a credibility gap, and it is consistent with Walter et al. (2024), who found that inauthentic brand purpose erodes brand credibility, and with Koch and Denner (2025), who demonstrated experimentally that even small discrepancies between claims and practices damage corporate credibility. In the cosmetics sector, Suphasomboon and Vassanadumrongdee (2026) similarly observed that consumers who perceived greenwashing became highly skeptical and suspected brands of concealing information. The present study extends this evidence to perceived ethics washing among consumers of an Indonesian skincare brand, and it may indicate a heightened reputational risk in beauty-related products, where perceived authenticity is central to consumer evaluation.

Contrary to expectations, Hypothesis 2, which proposed that ethics washing has a negative effect on purchase intention, is not supported. Although the coefficient was negative as hypothesized, it was very small and statistically insignificant, and its effect size was negligible. This result differs from the findings of Isac et al. (2025) and Khandai et al. (2025), who reported that greenwashing directly reduces purchase intention. One possible explanation is that purchase decisions for skincare are driven mainly by utilitarian considerations such as effectiveness, price, and convenience, which may outweigh ethical concerns (Guerreiro & Pacheco, 2021; Robichaud & Yu, 2022), and price-related considerations can weaken the influence of ethical perceptions on purchasing decisions (Ryoo & Kim, 2023). Because the sample consisted of repeat buyers, habit and satisfaction with product performance may also have weakened the association, but this possibility was not tested and should be examined in future research. Ethical cues are also often filtered through other psychological factors rather than acting directly on purchase intention (Khaleeli & Jawabri, 2021) In this study, perceived ethics washing was positively associated with both customer distrust, which is negatively associated with purchase intention, and environmental awareness, which is positively associated with it. It is possible that these opposing responses offset each other, but because indirect effects were not tested, this remains a conjecture for future research. Viewed through signalling theory, the result suggests that ethical signals perceived as symbolic rather than substantive may be disregarded in the final purchase decision (Nyagadza et al., 2021). For the literature on misleading ethical claims, this implies that the negative consequences reported for greenwashing may not transfer directly to purchase intention among repeat buyers of a single brand.

The analysis also supports Hypothesis 3, revealing a positive and significant relationship between ethics washing and environmental awareness. This suggests that even when ethical claims are employed primarily for reputational purposes, they can still draw consumers' attention to environmental issues. From a signalling standpoint, weak or performative signals may still raise the salience of environmental themes (Suryani et al., 2022), although they do not necessarily translate into favorable attitudes toward the brand that sends them. In addition, when consumers notice a gap between a brand's ethical claims and its practices, they may learn more about the environmental consequences of the ingredients and products they use, and Murniawaty (2019) emphasizes that such ethical knowledge contributes positively to environmental awareness. The result aligns with Li (2025), who found that exposure to green advertising increases consumers' environmental knowledge, and with Szabo and Webster (2021) who showed that green marketing claims shape consumers' environmental perceptions of products. It also supports the argument of Kreczmańska-Gigol and Gigol (2022). that consumers can separate their skepticism toward specific claims from their broader concern for the environment. In this sense, ethics washing may unintentionally stimulate consumers' engagement with sustainability issues even when the brand's motives are questioned.

Customer distrust was negatively associated with purchase intention, supporting H4, although the effect size was small. This is consistent with earlier studies showing that consumers who distrust a brand's ethical or environmental claims are less likely to purchase its products (Isac et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2018). From a signalling perspective, deceptive signals can generate adverse behavioral responses, particularly when consumers perceive the cost of a wrong decision to be high (Liu et al., 2018).The finding is in line with Kifaya (2024) who showed that skepticism strongly inhibits the purchase of organic cosmetic products, and extends this evidence to the Indonesian skincare setting.

Finally, Hypothesis 5 is supported, confirming a positive and significant relationship between environmental awareness and purchase intention. Consumers with higher environmental awareness are more inclined to support brands they perceive as environmentally responsible, so consistent and credible environmental signals are likely to resonate with them and strengthen their purchase intention. The result corroborates prior research by Palihawadana et al. (2016), Okada et al. (2019), and Abeysekera et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of environmental concern in shaping purchasing behavior, and Andika et al. (2023), who found that environmental consciousness significantly increases the intention to purchase green cosmetics in Indonesia. Although Khaleeli and Jawabri (2021) suggest that this relationship may weaken once consumer attitudes are taken into account, the present findings show that environmental awareness remains positively associated with purchase intention in the skincare context. Andika et al. (2023) also observed a stronger association among female consumers, whereas the present sample was predominantly male, which suggests that future studies with more female respondents may find a stronger association.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study extends signalling theory by showing that weak ethical signals have two simultaneous consequences: they raise consumers' environmental awareness while eroding their trust in the brand that sends them. The outcome of an ethical signal thus depends not only on whether it is received but also on whether it is perceived as credible. In addition, by examining ethics washing as a construct distinct from greenwashing in an emerging skincare market, this study broadens a literature that has so far focused largely on the technology sector (Schultz et al., 2024) and provides empirical evidence from a developing-country context, where research on misleading ethical claims remains scarce.

Practically, the findings offer several insights for skincare firms and policymakers. Because ethics washing has its strongest effect on customer distrust, firms should avoid ethical claims they cannot substantiate and should support their ethical and environmental messaging with verifiable evidence, such as third-party certification, full ingredient disclosure, and transparent reporting of sourcing and production practices. At the same time, the positive effect of environmental awareness on purchase intent suggests that sustainability initiatives, if communicated transparently, can be a source of competitive advantage. For policymakers, the need for clear standards for ethical and environmental claims in cosmetic products.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relationships between perceived ethics washing and customer distrust, environmental awareness, and purchase intention, as well as the relationships of customer distrust and environmental awareness with purchase intention, among Indonesian consumers of a selected skincare brand. The findings show that perceived ethics washing was positively and significantly associated with customer distrust and environmental awareness. Customer distrust was negatively and significantly associated with purchase intention, whereas environmental awareness was positively and significantly associated with purchase intention. However, the direct relationship between perceived ethics washing and purchase intention was not statistically significant. These findings suggest that unsubstantiated ethical claims may function as weak signals that are associated with greater consumer awareness of environmental issues while also being associated with greater distrust toward the brand. Genuine and verifiable sustainability practices, rather than superficial ethical claims, remain important considerations for building consumer trust, maintaining long-term relationships, and supporting sustainable consumption in line with Sustainable Development Goal 12 on responsible consumption and production.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that open avenues for future research. First, the use of purposive sampling and a sample of 150 respondents, most of whom were male and concentrated in several Indonesian cities, limits the generalizability of the findings to the wider skincare market. Future studies should use larger and more representative samples, particularly including more female consumers, who form the core market for skincare products. The criterion of more than three purchases limits the sample to repeat buyers, whose familiarity, satisfaction, or loyalty may be higher than that of potential consumers. This selection may partly explain why perceived ethics washing showed no significant direct relationship with purchase intention, and future studies should include first-time buyers and non-buyers. Comparative analyses across these consumer groups could clarify whether prior purchasing experience moderates the relationship between perceived ethics washing and purchase intention.

Second, the study focused on a single brand, so further research could compare several brands or extend the model to other product categories and countries. Such comparisons would help determine whether consumer responses to ethics washing vary according to brand reputation, market characteristics, and cultural contexts. Third, the cross-sectional design and self-reported data do not allow for strong causal inferences; longitudinal or experimental designs would provide more robust evidence of how ethics washing shapes consumer responses over time. Finally, the model explained a relatively small proportion of the variance in purchase intention, suggesting that future research should incorporate other relevant factors, such as price sensitivity, perceived product quality, brand loyalty, and environmental knowledge, and examine the mechanisms through which ethics washing indirectly affects purchase intention. In particular, examining the mediating roles of consumer skepticism, brand trust, and perceived authenticity could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these relationships.

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