Brand Purpose Ethical Evaluation by the Customer Based on the Hunt-Vitell (HV) Theory of Ethics

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July 23, 2024

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Abstract

In this contemporary era, there is a significant increase in research interest in understanding brand purpose. Research on brand purpose has focused chiefly on firm-specific elements, frequently overlooking the customer perspective. This study fills a gap by investigating consumer ethical judgments of brand purpose using the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics. This theory explains how consumers make ethical decisions and makes it an excellent fit for our study. The findings reveal that consumers use various ethical frameworks to access the brand purpose of any brand, creating a new framework that organizations can utilize to align their brand purpose with consumer expectations more effectively. Companies can use the paradigm provided in this article to analyze and modify their brand purpose, making them more appealing to ethically conscious consumers. In summary, this study examines the concept of brand purpose from a new perspective, focusing on how customers view it morally. The findings are critical for academics and practitioners, making it a must-read for everyone interested in the future of ethical branding.

Keywords: Brand Purpose; Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics; Ethical Evaluation; Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

The Association of National Advertisers (ANA) has chosen brand purpose as the marketing word of the year in 2018. This recognition shows the growing consumer expectation for brands to move from traditional profit-driven motives and align with broader societal values (ANA, 2018). A transparent and authentic brand purpose influences purchasing behavior. It contributes to societal change, creating brands to develop and communicate their brand purpose effectively to reach young people and make a positive impact on the world (Sebastián-Morillas et al., 2023). Brands can create a compelling narrative by integrating their past, present, and future elements, emphasizing the importance of brand values, personality, and character in shaping consumer perceptions and building substantial brand equity (Keller, 2023). According to Sinek (2009), "People do not buy what you do; they buy why you do it." This term expresses the essence of brand purpose, which serves as an ethical and emotional guidepost for businesses and customers. Brand purpose is defined as a "long-term, central predominant component of its identity, meaning structure & strategy," emphasizing its role in surpassing mere profitability (Williams et al., 2022).

The brand purpose is a strategic orientation and a guiding principle that integrates a brand's core values and societal expectations into its operational framework (Narayan and Das, 2022). The brand purpose encompasses the inspirational and motivational reason for a brand's contributing higher-order value to society (Stengel, 2011). Such integration enhances the brand's authenticity and fosters more profound consumer connections (Hall & Mottau, 2021). Calder (2022) further categorizes brand purpose into two types: one focuses on life goals and ethics, and the other focuses on general societal objectives. These categories serve as a roadmap for companies to engage customers, whether core users or peripheral audiences (Kotler et al., 2019) ethically.

Despite the growing interest in brand purpose, Williams et al. (2022) identified a research investigation space in the literature in their future research directions about how consumers ethically evaluate a brand's purpose and its subsequent influence on their behavior. Given the growing desire for businesses to demonstrate an authentic dedication to social and

ethical concerns, this gap is critical to close. To fill the gap in the literature, this study applies the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics, a well-established paradigm in marketing ethics that describes how individuals make ethical judgments impacted by numerous environmental factors (Hunt & Vitell, 1986).

This article investigates how consumers ethically evaluate brand purpose using the Hunt-Vitell (HV) ethics framework. The HV theory provides a complete framework for understanding ethical decision-making, especially when assessing brand purpose. The HV theory, which focuses on both deontological and teleological ethical judgments, provides a solid conceptual framework for understanding the complex nature of consumer brand purpose decision-making. Deontological evaluations evaluate whether a brand's actions are consistent with ethical values like justice and fairness. On the other hand, teleological assessments examine these acts' effects on diverse stakeholders (Kant, 2012). Using this HV theory, this study intends to reveal consumers' ethical concerns while assessing a brand's purpose and how these ethical considerations impact their behavior towards the brand.

This study seeks to address this gap by concentrating on two important research questions: 1) What ethical concerns do customers have when assessing a brand's purpose? Furthermore, 2) How do these factors impact their behavior towards the brand? By incorporating HV theory into brand purpose research, this study attempts to establish a conceptual framework that bridges the gap between ethical theory and consumer behavior, providing significant insights for academics and practitioners. This research contributes to the knowledge of marketing ethics and customer behavior by combining the HV theory with the concept of brand purpose. It provides a theoretical framework for marketers to understand better and apply ethical considerations in brand management.

2. Methodology

This research aims to create a conceptual framework for understanding how consumers evaluate brand purpose by applying the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics. The technique takes a qualitative approach, with an emphasis on conceptual analysis and the application of HV theory to brand purpose evaluation. This framework is illustrated with two well-known marketing campaigns: Lifebuoy's "Help a Child Reach 5" and Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign.

This research usages an extensive review of current literature on brand purpose, consumer ethics, and HV theory to understand the consumer ethical evaluation process. This involved reading scholarly publications, novels, and industry reports to get different viewpoints on the essential issues. The article explains why the HV theory should be used to evaluate consumers' ethical evaluation of brand purpose. The study chose the Lifebuoy and Dove campaigns related to their brand purpose as case studies due to their strong alignment with the brand's goals and significant social impact. These campaigns demonstrate how consumers assess brand purposes using the HV theory framework. Secondary data sources, such as campaign documents, market research studies, customer comments, and internet reviews, were used better to understand the context and impact of the chosen campaigns.

This article develops a conceptual framework based on HV theory to understand the ethical analysis of brand purpose better. This method considers deontological (duty-based) and teleological (outcome-based) judgments. The study analyses the data thematically to identify significant factors influencing consumer ethical evaluations, such as personal values, cultural norms, brand authenticity, and transparency. The paper uses the conceptual framework to examine the Lifebuoy and Dove ads, demonstrating how consumers utilize the HV theory in assessing brand purpose. This involves assessing the campaign's congruence with its stated goals, transparency, and social effect.

The methodological approach of this study combines theoretical and practical aspects to give a complete picture of how consumers morally assess brand goals. Using the HV theory,

we provide a robust framework for analyzing the ethical elements of brand advertising. The inclusion of case studies not only demonstrates how to use the framework but also shows real-world examples of brand purpose evaluation. This technique emphasizes the necessity of considering internal moral principles and extrinsic consequences when assessing consumer behavior regarding brand ethics.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Brand Purpose

The concept of brand purpose has developed dramatically over the last few decades, mirroring more significant shifts in marketing approaches and customer behavior. To differentiate themselves, brands first concentrate on product qualities and consumption advantages. As competition grew and markets were saturated, it became clear that product attributes alone were insufficient to sustain distinctiveness (Iglesias & Ind, 2020).

3.1.1 Evolution and Strategic Orientation of Brand Purpose

Brand purpose has emerged as a significant notion in modern marketing, showing an organization's commitment to social and environmental reasons beyond profit. According to the American Marketing Association (2022), brand purpose is a declaration that outlines how brand management wants to accomplish social impact through brand-related actions, such as supporting some societal issues through day-to-day operations, special events, and advocacy campaigns. This concept emphasizes the proactive role that companies take in societal challenges. According to Simon Sinek (2009), a brand's purpose is basically about "why" it exists, and customers are more inclined to interact with firms that clearly define their justification.

The strategic direction of brand purpose is critical for directing a brand's efforts toward offering societal value while achieving financial rewards. Calder (2020) defines brand purpose as aligned with customer values and a commitment to more significant social concerns, making a brand an essential component of addressing community and global issues. Brand purpose is a strategic approach incorporating fundamental values and social expectations into a company's operational and strategic framework (Narayanan & Das, 2022). According to Joey Reiman (2012), the brand's purpose should match what the brand does best with what the world needs, implying that a brand's distinctive abilities must fulfill global demands. This synergy strengthens the brand's legitimacy and encourages stronger ties with consumers (Hall & Mottau, 2021).

3.1.2 Brand Purpose and Corporate Social Responsibility

While the brand purpose and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are similar, they are separate ideas. Companies witnessed that connecting their operations with social values might boost their reputation and increase consumer loyalty. This trend was caused by rising consumer knowledge and demand for corporate accountability (Islam et al., 2021). For example, companies such as Ben & Jerry's and The Body Shop pioneered social and environmental issues into their fundamental business strategies, paving the way for the brand purpose to become a significant component of marketing (Sinek, 2009; Stengel, 2011).

According to Bailey and Selle (2020), brand purpose represents the primary reason for an organization's existence beyond profit, acting as an inspiring and aspirational core that emotionally links the organization with its stakeholders. Mirzaei, Webster, and Siuki (2021) argue that brand purpose is the essence of a brand's identity, directing its vision, goals, and tactics. Non-profit organizations' brand purpose is inextricably linked to their social responsibilities, driving operations and communications to create participation and successfully support their causes.

3.1.3 Authenticity and Impact on Consumer Behavior

Researchers and practitioners have emphasized the significance of authenticity and congruence between a brand's behaviors and its declared purpose (Calder, 2020). Authentic brand purpose involves integrating these ideals into the business's DNA and daily activities and aiding societal concerns. Modern companies like Patagonia and TOMS, renowned for their sincere dedication to social impact and environmental sustainability, are prime examples of this progression (Reiman, 2012). Authenticity is one of the most critical components of a brand purpose's efficacy. To preserve credibility and trust, brands must ensure their activities align with their goals. Benson (2022) emphasizes that a brand's social media marketing should build a real relationship rather than merely engage followers or use sales techniques with the audience through purposeful storytelling. Brand purpose states that it goes beyond economic existence, encompassing societal value, ethical obligations, and stakeholder engagement (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). They argue that brand purpose should intertwine with creating societal value, fulfilling ethical commitments, and enhancing stakeholder engagement.

Integrating brand purpose into a company's operations substantially influences consumer behavior. Brands that effectively demonstrate their purpose and link their actions with social ideals can increase consumer loyalty and advocacy. For example, (Enslin et al., 2023) define brand purpose as the fundamental reason a brand exists beyond financial success, to give value to various stakeholders, including internal and external parties and society. Hajdas and Kłeczek (2021) use social practice theory to define brand purpose as a strategic approach to meeting customer wants and driving societal change. That involves empowering customers by directing their behavior towards more sustainable and socially responsible choices. It incorporates fundamental values and societal expectations into a brand's strategic framework to make an excellent social effect while meeting its business goals (Narayanan & Das, 2022). This dual focus on profit and purpose is increasingly viewed as a competitive advantage since it connects well with ethical customers (Benson, 2022). Brand purpose, defined by Feldman and Korn (2017) as a company's commitment to effectively and sustainably address social issues, is a crucial aspect of corporate strategy and consumer psychology.

3.2 Ethical Evaluation in Marketing

Understanding how customers perceive and ethically assess brand purpose has become increasingly important as marketing methods have become more crucial. Ethical evaluation in marketing entails determining if a brand's actions are consistent with ethical standards and social norms. This approach is critical because customers are better aware and have higher expectations of business behavior than ever (Mirzaei et al., 2021). As ethical consumption grows, businesses must define a compelling purpose and demonstrate a genuine commitment to ethical behaviors (Hajdas & Kłeczek, 2021). Consumers are increasingly looking for honest, consistent, and impactful companies. They search for evidence that businesses are not just "purpose-washing" but are dedicated to making a difference (Bailey & Selle, 2020).

According to the study, customers' ethical assessments majorly affect their purchase decisions and brand loyalty (Bharwani & Nerubay, 2022). Customers are more inclined to support, advocate for, and stay loyal to a company they believe is ethically aligned with their beliefs. Brands that do not satisfy ethical standards risk losing credibility and consumer trust (Lapierre, 2021). Marketing professionals must understand how customers morally judge brand purpose. It gives insights into the aspects influencing customer perceptions and behaviors, allowing companies to develop ethically sound strategies that appeal to their target audiences (Hall & Mottau, 2021).

Companies that include ethical concerns in their brand purpose may establish better, more meaningful connections with customers and achieve long-term success in today's value-driven economy (Feldman & Korn, 2017). As the idea of brand purpose has expanded, so has

the demand for solid frameworks to evaluate its ethical implications. With its complete approach to ethical decision-making, the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics provides an essential foundation for ethically understanding and assessing brand purpose. Integrating HV theory with brand purpose can help marketers better grasp consumer ethics and design tactics that are both effective and authentic (Calder, 2022).

3.3 Hunt – Vitell (HV) Theory of Ethics

3.3.1 Background & Development:

Shelby Hunt and Scott Vitell established the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics in the mid-1980s, representing a significant step forward in understanding ethical decision-making in marketing and commercial environments. It tackles significant moral issues for marketers by combining deontological and teleological approaches. The dual-process framework, which includes rule-based regulations and outcome-based assessments, produces ethical judgments in practice while resolving the limits of contemporary ethical frameworks (Hunt & Vitell, 1986).

3.3.2 Core Principles and Components:

Numerous fundamental concepts and components drive ethical decision-making in HV theory. The idea holds that people recognize ethical difficulties when they see a possible conflict between distinct standards, beliefs, or interests. When an ethical dilemma is identified, the decision-making process consists of two significant evaluations: deontological and teleological.

Deontological evaluation is a moral judgment that determines whether an action is consistent with established rules, independent of the outcome. It assesses the fundamental rightness or immorality of specific behaviors. In contrast, teleological evaluation evaluates an activity's effects, considering prospective outcomes and potential advantages or damages. Both methods collaborate to promote ethical decision-making, enabling principled and practical decision-making in real-world scenarios while considering the many nuances and complexities of real-world settings.

The HV theory is a widely used concept in marketing, addressing ethical concerns such as advertising, product safety, and corporate social responsibility. Researchers use the HV theory to understand how marketers balance corporate goals with ethical considerations. For instance, Hunt and Chonko (1987) used the HV theory to examine ethical decision-making in advertising, where marketers must balance persuasive strategies, honesty, and fairness. The theory has also been applied to product development and safety, emphasizing how marketers balance innovation's benefits with customer safety risks. The HV theory has been used in business ethics to investigate corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, helping firms incorporate ethical concerns into their strategic decisions.

3.3.3 Why Brand Purpose Ethical Evaluation on HV?

When applied to brand purpose evaluation, the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics lays the groundwork for understanding how customers assess the ethicality of a brand's purpose. The HV theory's dual nature, which combines deontological (duty-based) and teleological (consequences-based) viewpoints, enables a thorough evaluation of fundamental ethical principles and the results associated with a brand's purpose. This integration guarantees that ethical decision-making is balanced and considers all relevant factors.

Brand purpose is a crucial aspect of a brand's identity, meaning structure, and strategy, leading to positive contact with the world. The deontological component of the HV theory emphasizes commitment to moral principles and obligations, ensuring that judgments are consistent with universal ethical standards. Brand purpose is defined as incorporating social

impact throughout regular business processes via operations, events, and lobbying (AMA, 2022). Understanding the fundamental "why" behind a brand's existence is essential to developing stronger relationships and loyalty (Sinek, 2009).

The teleological component investigates the outcomes of actions, assessing whether they maximize overall benefit or minimize harm. Consumers consider the true impact of a brand's actions and their contribution to societal well-being (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). A critical brand purpose should strike a balance between profitable operations and societal achievements (George et al., 2023). Brand purpose intersects a brand's unique abilities and social requirements, connecting a company's strengths with pressing societal challenges (Gray et al., 2024).

The HV theory offers a comprehensive approach to ethical judgment, recognizing the importance of personal and cultural values in ethical decision-making. It enables buyers to make informed judgments about the ethicality of a brand's purpose, considering both thought-provoking aims and practical implications. The HV hypothesis can potentially assist marketers in developing and communicating ethically sound brand purpose that resonates strongly with customers. Benson (2022) emphasizes the importance of genuine relationships with the audience, led by the brand's principles and the unique requirements of the community it serves, which is consistent with the teleological appraisal of results. Brand purpose is a long-term primary objective that aligns with the HV theory's method of assessing intentions and results. The dual-process technique of the HV theory allows for a fair and comprehensive analysis of ethical concerns, making it a vital tool for understanding how people assess the brand purpose and guiding firms toward ethically aligned efforts.

The HV theory is crucial for researchers studying brand purpose as it comprehensively examines ethical factors. It helps understand consumers' moral perception of brand purpose and its impact on brand-related behavior. With the HV theory, researchers may understand a complete framework combining deontological and teleological judgments, which is essential for a comprehensive understanding of ethical decision-making. Without the HV theory, research may lack the depth to understand how customers balance moral values and practical consequences when assessing a company's brand purpose.

4. Conceptual Framework

Integrating brand purpose with HV theory entails creating a theoretical model that drives ethical evaluations. This paradigm enables consumers and marketers to comprehend the ethical implications of brand purpose. The framework in Figure 1 below centers on two main viewpoints for evaluating brand purpose: the firms and other societal perspectives. HV theory shows that five essential environmental elements shape these viewpoints. Organizational environment, professional environment, and industry environment come under the firm perspective, and cultural environment and societal characteristics are significant attributes of societal perspective.

4.1 Firm Perspective and Societal Perspective: An Intersection with Hunt-Vitell's Environmental Factors
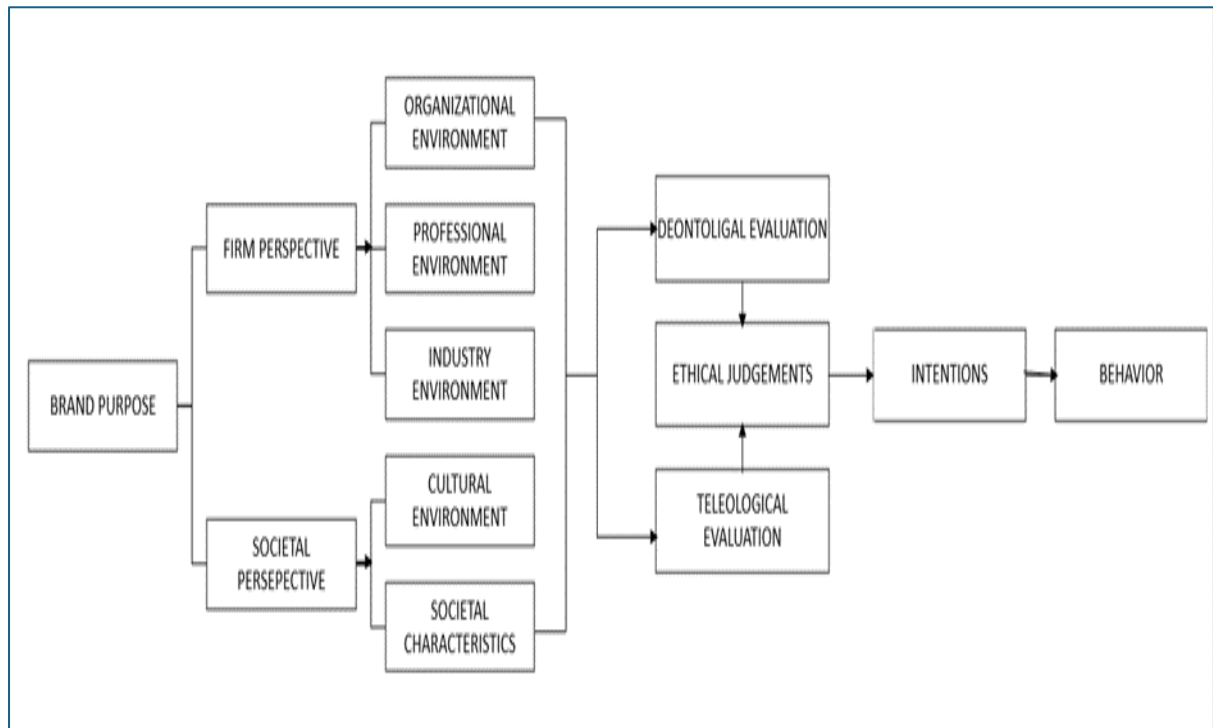
Figure 1: Brand purpose ethical evaluation based on The Hunt-Vitell (HV) Theory of Ethics

4.1.1 Firm Perspective

The Firm Perspective of brand purpose primarily focuses on how the brand understands and communicates its reason for existing. Three key environmental factors influence this perspective:

Organizational Environment: An organization's internal culture and values shape its brand purpose (Schen, 2010). A brand purpose statement provides the ethical foundation for all organizational decisions. The American Marketing Association (AMA,2022) defines brand purpose as integrating social impact into business practices, emphasizing the importance of genuine commitment. A Brand purpose is a strong statement that provides the foundation for every decision anyone will ever make as a company; as such, it must be acknowledged by all stakeholders and comprehensively adequate to direct the company organization's external ambitions and realize them (Bailey & Selle, 2020). For example, Bentley's brand purpose statement, "To create extraordinary cars for extraordinary customers," also shows how innovative the organization environment is in creating extraordinary. The organizational climate is crucial for nurturing a brand purpose, ensuring all stakeholders understand and adhere to these foundational values.

Professional Environment: These attributes are an organization's ethical norms and practices that guide how a brand crafts its purpose. For example, Simon Sinek (2009) emphasizes understanding the core "why" behind existence, which inspires deeper connections and loyalty. Whatever any company decides on its Brand purpose statement, they have to make sure that all those ethics they have used in practice in its professional environment. "corporate brand management from an organization-centric view based on control to one rooted in a participative cocreated perspective where multiple stakeholders help to build and enrich the brand (Iglesias et al., 2023)". So how professional the purpose statement shows the environment, and how different stakeholder are giving their best to create the brand. "Companies that acknowledge

and prioritize these factors are the ones that leave a lasting imprint on various aspects of our lives—be it our personal health, family well-being, pet care, financial stability, or even the planet's future. Such material is invaluable and demands meticulous handling," asserts Matt Mee, Chief Strategy Officer at MediaCom. This statement shows how professional stakeholders want to create the brand. If we talk about the instance of Max Burgers, a burger joint started in Sweden in 1968, speaking about the concern of climate change through their brand purpose. In initiating its Climate-Positive Burgers, Max Burgers ensures that transparency about its sourcing shows its professional environment and the impression of its offerings on customers and the environment, which should help it become a trusted brand status (Kuuluvainen et al., 2022).

Industry Environment: This factor encompasses the competitive landscape and market dynamics shaping a brand's purpose. Brand purpose is an inspirational and motivational reason for being, contributing higher value to the world, and driving consumer engagement (Jim Stengel, 2011). Firms contribute to the industry's positive change in business ethics through brand purpose. Business owners and employees can promote ethics issues by designing appropriate brand-purpose content. Again, a well-crafted brand purpose can help create a solid foundation for establishing a long-term, company-wide business ethics plan.

4.1.2 Societal Perspective

The Societal Perspective of brand purpose concerns how society perceives and evaluates a brand's purpose. Two key environmental factors influence this perspective:

Cultural Environment: Cultural norms and values influence societal perceptions of a brand's purpose. Brand purpose is conceptualized as the intersection of a brand's unique talents and social needs, suggesting that aligning a brand's strengths with pressing societal issues maximizes positive impact (Reiman, 2012). Brands emphasizing community and social welfare in collectivism are often more favorably received (Triandis, 2001). Brand purpose is an aspirational reason that inspires actions benefiting both shareholders and global societies, suggesting a dual focus on economic and social impact (Mayer, 2021). Brands embed themselves in the cultural fabric to build trust and loyalty, essential for understanding cultural relevance, harnessing big data, adopting omnichannel strategies, leveraging influencer marketing, and redefining partnerships to enhance brand positioning and campaigns (Jahns, 2023). The cultural environment influences marketing's religious, family, educational, and social systems.

Societal Characteristics: Demographic and psychographic factors, such as age, gender, and social class, can affect societal perceptions of a brand's purpose. For instance, younger generations may be more inclined to support brands with a strong focus on sustainability (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Firms that intend to market their products in society need to design their brand purpose message to be compatible with global culture without hampering anyone's norms by putting their view on societal issues. Campaigns like Ariel Matic's #Share the Load address societal issues, demonstrating that consumers act on brands that reflect their values. Unilever's sustainability-focused brands, such as Knorr, Dove, and Lipton, are expanding significantly faster than other products, showcasing the impact of aligning brand purpose with societal values (Unilever, 2019).

4.2 Deontological Evaluations:

Deontological evaluations focus on adherence to ethical principles and duties. When consumers employ a deontological lens, they assess whether a brand's purpose and actions align with moral standards such as honesty, fairness, and justice.

Transparency and Honesty: Consumers want companies to be open and honest about their operations and communications, which stems from an increasing awareness and need for authenticity in brand actions (Williams et al., 2022). Transparency involves freely offering information about business methods, sourcing, and the effectiveness of the brand's objectives. Patagonia, for example, maintains its brand purpose of sustainability through transparency regarding its supplier chain and environmental effects (Narayanan and Das, 2022). Honesty in marketing and communication fosters trust and minimizes distrust among consumers, who utilize this knowledge to validate the brand's promises (Benson, 2022). Consumers evaluate a brand's transparency by examining its practices and honesty in communications.

Fairness and Equality: Consumers evaluate the Brands on their commitment to fairness and equality, which includes equitable treatment of employees, fair trade practices, and non-discriminatory policies. Consumers consider if a brand's purpose includes actions promoting social justice and equity (Porter & Kramer, 2014). For example, companies such as Dove and Ben & Jerry's are commended for their social activism and dedication to equality, making them look more ethical and trustworthy (Mirzaei et al., 2021). Such assessments make on the concept that brands should contribute positively to social well-being while treating all stakeholders equitably.

Integrity and Accountability: Consumers look for brands that demonstrate integrity and accountability. That involves taking responsibility for any ethical missteps and actively working to rectify them (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985). For example, Nike faced significant backlash over labor practices but has since improved working conditions and transparency, which has helped regain consumer trust (Kant, 2012). Accountability is essential as it shows that a brand is committed to maintaining high ethical standards and is willing to address and correct its mistakes. Demonstrating clear brand purpose and authenticity to inspire trust among stakeholders, emphasizing that actions must match words to maintain credibility and trust (Caven, 2022). Brands must align their purpose with authentic values and understand their role in social issues, ensuring their involvement is meaningful and not seen as opportunistic (Kitchin, 2003).

4.3 Teleological Evaluations:

Teleological evaluations focus on the consequences of a brand's actions and their impact on various stakeholders. Consumers assess whether the outcomes of a brand's purpose benefit society, the environment, and the community.

Social Impact: Consumers evaluate the positive social consequences of a brand's purpose, including programs that assist community development, education, health, and other social issues. Ethically concerned consumers favor brands that invest in social programs and provide tangible societal benefits (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). For example, firms like TOMS Shoes, which distribute one pair of shoes for every pair sold, are seen positively owing to their direct social effect (Bosse et al., 2023). Consumers like businesses that contribute to social welfare because it resonates with their ethical convictions and desires to see good change (Love et al., 2022).

Environment Sustainability: Many consumers care deeply about the environmental effect of a brand's purpose. They want firms to use sustainable practices, limit carbon impact, and support environmental protection (Elkington, 1994). Brands prioritizing sustainability and demonstrating their environmental initiatives are more likely to be seen positively. Patagonia, for example, is popular among environmentally aware consumers due to its dedication to environmental activism and sustainable practices (Allal-Cherif et al., 2023). This emphasis on

sustainability reflects customers' growing awareness of environmental challenges and willingness to support companies contributing to the solution (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021).

Economic Responsibility: Consumers evaluate how a brand's purpose contributes to economic responsibility, which includes fair pricing, ethical sourcing, and support for local economies. Brands that promote local businesses, employ ethically sourced goods, and practice fair trade are seen positively (Porter & Kramer, 2014). Starbucks, for example, demonstrates its economic responsibility by committing to ethical coffee procurement through its CAFE Practices program—consumers like brands prioritizing profit while benefiting larger economic ecosystems (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021).

4.4 Ethical Judgements:

To make compelling interest among ethically conscious consumers, brands must integrate deontological and teleological considerations into their purpose. That involves:

Authenticity and Consistency: Ensure the brand's purpose is accurate and consistent across all activities and messages. Consumers are adept at identifying insincerity, and any discrepancy between the claimed goal and actual behavior may damage brand credibility (Benson, 2022). Brands like Ben & Jerry's rely on authenticity to ensure their activism and business operations mirror their social objective (O'Donnell et al., 2023).

Stakeholder Engagement: Actively interacting with stakeholders, including customers, workers, suppliers, and the community, to better understand their issues and expectations. This involvement harmonizes the brand's purpose with larger social values and ethical standards (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). Engagement with stakeholders may assist firms like Unilever in aligning their sustainability objectives with customer expectations (Iglesias et al., 2023).

Transparent Reporting: Providing honest and frequent updates on the brand's ethical initiatives and results. This transparency fosters confidence and enables consumers to make educated decisions about the brand's purpose (Narayanan & Das, 2022). Transparent reporting strategies have helped firms like Patagonia and Nike preserve their reputations and consumer confidence (Achabou, 2020).

5. Theoretical Applications

5.1 Consumer ethical evaluation process of brand purpose

The consumer ethical evaluation procedure consists of various processes in which customers evaluate the ethical qualities of a brand's purpose. This method, influenced by one's values, cultural norms, and the ethical framework utilized, such as the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory, assists customers in determining if a brand's actions are consistent with their ethical standards. The ethical components of brand purpose encompass inherent principles and the more significant influence of a brand's actions on society. Assessing these aspects entails examining the brand's adherence to concepts such as fairness, justice, and accountability, as well as the actual results of its actions.

The HV theory helps assess brand purpose by highlighting ethical issues via a systematic procedure of deontological and teleological evaluations. This method guarantees a balanced and thorough understanding of ethical decision-making, allowing companies to create authentic and meaningful strategies. By incorporating the dual-process ethical evaluation framework into assessing a brand's purpose and activities, consumers may successfully evaluate the ethical dimensions of brand purpose, resulting in a more complete and ethical approach to branding.

➢ **Recognition of Ethical Issues:** Consumers initially notice an ethical issue relating to a business's purpose, which may be prompted by brand messages, media reporting, or personal experiences. For example, a consumer may notice a brand that claims to promote environmental sustainability. The Brand Purpose Firm's and societal perspectives contribute to customers' recognition of ethical principles. According to the theoretical framework, customers examine a variety of variables. Organizational, professional, and industrial contexts come under the firm's perspective, whereas the societal perspective includes cultural and societal features.

➢ **Deontological Evaluation:** Consumers analyze if the brand's actions are consistent with moral principles and ethical standards. For example, they may assess if the brand's sustainability activities represent a dedication to environmental preservation or are simply a marketing trick (Vitell & Hunt, 1986). This criterion looks at the sincerity and consistency of the brand's purpose. Is the brand's social responsibility reflected in its everyday operations and long-term strategy (Calder, 2020)? This criterion examines if the brand's purpose is consistent with global ethical standards.

➢ **Teleological Evaluation:** Consumers assess the consequences of a brand's actions by considering the whole influence on stakeholders. They may, for example, evaluate the efficiency of the brand's sustainability measures in terms of decreasing environmental impact (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). This criterion assesses the implications of a brand's actions. This criterion evaluates the more enormous societal ramifications of the brand's purpose. How does the brand emphasize educational efforts to enhance community well-being (Bharwani & Nerubay, 2022)?

➢ **Ethical Judgement and Decisions:** Based on these evaluations, customers create an ethical judgment about the brand, which influences their choice to support or boycott it (Hunt & Chonko, 1987).

5.2 Key factors influencing consumer decisions regarding brand purpose

Several significant aspects impact consumers' ethical perceptions of brand purpose. Personal values, cultural standards, brand authenticity, transparency, and communication are all part of this. Each variable significantly impacts how customers perceive and respond to a brand's ethical endeavors.

1. Personal Values: Personal values are crucial to how customers assess the ethical standards of a brand's purpose. Individual ethical beliefs have a substantial influence on decision-making processes. For example, a consumer who values environmental protection will severely evaluate a brand's ecological activities. This is consistent with Hunt and Vitell's (1986) approach, which emphasizes how personal beliefs influence ethical decision-making. Researchers believe understanding a brand's "why" can inspire employees and consumers, fostering deeper connections and loyalty (Sinek, 2009). Brand purpose is an idealistic cause that motivates activities that benefit shareholders, stakeholders, and global societies (Hollensbe et al., 2014). This integrated focus on economic and social effects emphasizes connecting brand objectives with consumer values and society's expectations.

2. Cultural Norms: Various studies add to our understanding of cultural norms and how they influence consumer views of ethical concerns. In societies where sustainability and environmental responsibility are strongly valued, brands with significant dedication to these issues are perceived more positively (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). This cultural viewpoint is critical for understanding how various communities interpret brand aims. For example, in Scandinavian nations where environmental sustainability is a substantial cultural value, companies such as IKEA and H&M that prioritize sustainability in their operations are particularly well-received (Ocsai & Ocsai, 2021). Brand purpose, the junction between a

brand's unique capabilities and the world's needs, emphasizes authenticity (Reiman, 2012). Brand purpose is a strategic orientation that guides a brand's activities toward creating societal value while ensuring financial returns, emphasizing broader societal issues, and resonates well with cultures that value social responsibility (Calder, 2020).

3. Brand Authenticity: Authenticity is when a brand's actions and communications match its declared beliefs rather than exploiting them as superficial marketing tools. Consumers are becoming more sophisticated and can tell whether a business is devoted to its purpose versus "purpose-washing" (Blocker et al., 2024). Patagonia's long-standing environmental efforts, including its "Worn Wear" program and continuous environmental action, demonstrate its genuineness. This authenticity builds customer trust and loyalty by showing the brand's ideals via actual activities (Yik, 2022). Joey Reiman (2012) defines brand purpose as the junction of a company's unique capabilities with the world's needs. This shows that authenticity in brand purpose occurs when what the company does best corresponds with what the world requires urgently, resulting in a genuine connection with customers. Integrating core values and social expectations into a brand's strategic framework improves its authenticity, which in turn serves to improve societal well-being and solve major societal concerns (Werther & Chandler, 2005).

4. Transparency and Communication: Transparency and effective interaction are critical factors in how consumers ethically assess a brand's purpose. Brands that express their purposes clearly, honestly, and consistently earn more customer trust (Iglesias & Ind, 2020). This openness promotes favorable ethical judgments. Brand purpose is the essence of a brand's existence, guiding its behaviors and ensuring congruence with company goals and customer values (Hall & Mottau, 2021). This covers the social issues that the company supports and how they genuinely reflect what the brand stands for. Effective communication ensures that customers correctly understand these beliefs and commitments. Narayanan and Das (2022) emphasize that incorporating fundamental values and social expectations into a brand's strategy framework improves authenticity and transparency. This integration positively influences society's well-being and addresses vital societal concerns. Transparent communication about brand initiatives, issues, and progress is critical to authenticity. Brands that freely discuss their processes, accomplishments, and areas for development get more confidence from customers. Everlane, for example, has gained tremendous consumer confidence and loyalty via its dedication to "radical transparency" in supply chain procedures. The brand gives thorough information regarding the costs of materials, labor, transportation, and the facilities that manufacture their items (Everlane, 2022).

6. Understanding Ethical Evaluation of Brand Purpose using HV theory: Unilever Lifebuoy & Dove brand purpose campaigns

Lifebuoy and Dove campaigns by Unilever are two famous brand purpose initiatives in India. Both Brands have launched effective campaigns consistent with their overall brand purpose, exhibiting strong dedication to societal well-being. These examples explore how consumers ethically evaluate the brand purpose of Lifebuoy and Dove using the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics. This study details firm perspective, societal perspective, ethical judgment, intentions, and behavior shown in the comprehensive framework influenced by their brand purpose campaigns. This study examines how Lifebuoy's "Help a Child Reach 5," and Dove's "Real Beauty" campaigns align with their brand purposes and impact consumer behavior.

6.1 Lifebuoy's "Help a Child Reach 5" Campaign

The "Help a Child Reach 5" campaign aims to minimize child mortality by encouraging soap-based handwashing. The campaign's goal is to educate communities about proper hygiene habits, consequently lowering the occurrence of avoidable illnesses. Lifebuoy aims to

incorporate fundamental hygiene habits into everyday routines, lowering child mortality and increasing general public health. This is consistent with the brand purpose of Lifebuoy, which is to guarantee that no child dies from avoidable illnesses.

Brand Purpose Statement:

"To ensure that no child dies from preventable diseases, Lifebuoy is committed to promoting health and hygiene practices globally, improving hygiene standards through education, and providing accessible hygiene products to communities in need (Unilever, 2022)."

Campaign Timelines:

2013: Launch of the "Help a Child Reach 5" Campaign. This campaign initially focused on raising awareness about the importance of handwashing to prevent children's deaths due to diarrhea and pneumonia (Unilever, 2013).

2015: The campaign will be expanded to include school programs and community outreach to educate parents and children about hygiene practices (Unilever, 2015).

2018: Introduction of digital tools and mobile apps to spread hygiene education more widely (Unilever, 2018).

2020: The campaign adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic by emphasizing the importance of hand hygiene in preventing the spread of the virus (Unilever, 2020).

Firm Perspective:

Organizational Environment: Lifebuoy's brand's purpose is influenced by its organizational culture, which values public health and hygiene. The campaign reflects this commitment by emphasizing minimizing child mortality via simple yet effective hygiene habits, highlighting Lifebuoy's dedication to hygiene promotion.

Professional Environment: Lifebuoy's promotion is influenced by the ethical standards of the healthcare and hygiene industries. The company's actions align with industry objectives for public health promotion and illness prevention (Sidibe, 2021).

Industry Environment: Lifebuoy distinguishes itself by emphasizing health and cleanliness in a competitive market. By tackling major public health concerns, Lifebuoy establishes a distinct identity that encourages consumer loyalty and improves brand reputation (Narayanan & Das, 2022).

Societal Perspective:

Cultural Environment: India's cultural emphasis on family health and child welfare influences how people perceive Lifebuoy's brand purpose. The campaign connects with Indian values, prioritizing children's health and safety (Mitra et al., 2021).

Societal Characteristics: Demographic variables such as high child mortality rates and limited access to hygiene products in rural regions influence society's perceptions of Lifebuoy's brand purpose. The campaign focuses on teaching rural populations and giving them access to hygienic items that meet these socioeconomic demands (Sidibe, 2021).

Ethical Judgements:

Deontological Evaluation: Consumers evaluate Lifebuoy's "Help a Child Reach 5" campaign based on its adherence to ethical health and safety norms. They assess whether Lifebuoy's activities are consistent with the moral obligation to protect children's lives.

The campaign is centered on ethical health and safety principles. Lifebuoy fulfills these moral obligations by encouraging handwashing to avoid child fatalities (Narayanan & Das, 2022). The campaign's long-term commitment to child health strengthens its ethical consistency, increasing customer confidence and credibility (Kusuma et al., 2024). The campaign's aims are seen to be genuine, motivated by a desire to improve public health rather than profit.

Teleological Evaluations: Consumers evaluate the social impact of the "Help a Child Reach 5" campaign. They examine outcomes such as lower child mortality rates and better hygienic habits. The initiative has resulted in considerable beneficial effects, including higher handwashing rates and lower child mortality in target areas (Curtis et al., 2014). The campaign maximizes social benefits by tackling essential health conditions (Gupta & Pirsch, 2008). The campaign aims to reduce harm by preventing disease and enhancing public health (UNICEF, 2015).

Intentions and Behavior: Deontological and teleological evaluations provide ethical judgments that impact consumer intentions and behavior (Smith et al., 2023). Customers who believe the "Help a Child Reach 5" campaign is morally sound and practical are more inclined to support, advocate for, and remain loyal to the company. Consumers are more likely to purchase Lifebuoy items because they believe the brand is consistent with their beliefs. The campaign's ethical evaluation recognizes this support. Consumers who believe in the company's brand purpose are more inclined to suggest Lifebuoy to others and advocate for it. Ethical alignment promotes long-term loyalty since customers want to remain with businesses that match their values (Kuokkanen & Sun, 2020).

Impact:

Reduction in Child Mortality

- ➢ The London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine study found that the campaign led to a 25% reduction in diarrhea-related child deaths in target areas (Curtis et al., 2014).
- ➢ According to the UNICEF report (2015), handwashing with soap can reduce the incidence of diarrhea by 50%, highlighting the effectiveness of Lifebuoy's campaign.

Increasing Handwashing Rates

- ➢ The campaign increases handwashing rates by 50% in participating communities (UNICEF, 2015).
- ➢ Lifebuoy's initiatives reach over 200 million people across India, resulting in significant improvement in hygiene practices in rural areas (Unilever, 2020)

Consumer Trust and Brand Loyalty

- ➢ As per the survey, 80% of consumers trust Lifebuoy more due to its commitment to public health through the campaign (Kantar, 2020).
- ➢ Also, 65% of consumers are more likely to purchase Lifebuoy products because of the company's commitment to reducing child mortality (Kantar, 2020).

6.2 Dove's "Real Beauty" Campaign

Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign is an effective tool for encouraging body positivity and self-acceptance. It portrays women from various backgrounds, challenging society's pressure to adhere to strict beauty standards. The brand is dedicated to questioning traditional beauty standards while encouraging body acceptance, diversity, and self-confidence. The campaign

strives to make beauty a source of confidence rather than fear and praises natural beauty. Dove's brand purpose is to disrupt established beauty standards and create a world in which beauty inspires confidence rather than anxiety. This commercial demonstrates Dove's dedication to encouraging people to be confident in their inherent beauty.

Brand Purpose Statement

"We believe beauty should be a source of confidence and not anxiety. That is why we are here to help women everywhere develop a positive relationship with their appearance, helping them raise their self-esteem and realize their full potential (Unilever, 2024)."

Campaign Timeline:

2004: Launch of the "Real Beauty" campaign. The initial focus was advertisements featuring real women of various shapes, sizes, and ethnicities (Dove, 2004).

2010: Introduction of the Dove Self-Esteem Project, providing educational resources to help young people build body confidence (Dove, 2010).

2017: Expansion of the campaign to include digital and social media platforms, engaging a broader audience in conversations about beauty and self-esteem (Dove, 2017).

2022: Launch of new initiatives to address beauty standards in the digital age, including campaigns against digital alteration of images (Dove, 2022).

Firm Perspective:

Organizational Environment: Dove's brand purpose is to promote self-esteem and body positivity, as demonstrated by its "Real Beauty" campaign, which attempts to build a positive self-image for all individuals, showcasing the company's dedication to fostering an optimistic mindset. Dove's internal culture prioritizes self-esteem and body acceptance, which shapes its brand purpose. The "Real Beauty" campaign illustrates Dove's dedication to encouraging a positive self-image for all people.

Professional Environment: Dove's initiatives align with industry expectations, promoting realistic beauty standards and supporting mental health. These ethical norms are crucial in the beauty and personal care industry, ensuring that the company adheres to the highest standards in the industry.

Industry Environment: Dove distinguishes itself by questioning conventional beauty standards in a competitive market. Dove establishes a distinct identity by encouraging body positivity and self-esteem, which develops customer loyalty and boosts brand reputation (Narayanan & Das, 2022). This strategy increases customer loyalty and brand repute, showcasing Dove's ability to establish a distinct and compelling brand in the market.

Societal Perspective:

Cultural Environment: The campaign aligns with cultural trends that promote diversity and inclusivity in beauty standards, reflecting global and Indian ideals towards beauty and self-esteem. The campaign fits in with cultural trends that encourage diversity and inclusivity in beauty standards.

Societal Characteristics: Age, gender, and social media all impact how people perceive Dove's brand purpose. The campaign's emphasis on young people and digital platforms reflects these cultural traits, ensuring that it fulfills the unique demands of many demographic groups.

Ethical Judgements:

Deontological Evaluation: Consumers evaluate Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign based on its adherence to these ethical principles, ensuring its activities are consistent with the moral obligation to promote a good self-image. The campaign's continuous adherence to realistic beauty standards strengthens its ethical integrity. The campaign's aims are regarded to be genuine, motivated by a desire to improve self-esteem and mental health rather than only for profit. The campaign's ethical consistency and genuine intentions help to build the brand's reputation and customer confidence.

Teleological Evaluations: Consumers evaluate the "Real Beauty" campaign's social impact. They examine outcomes such as increased self-esteem and body confidence among participants. The program has had a substantial beneficial impact, including higher self-esteem and body confidence among women and young people (Centre for Appearance Research, 2021). By tackling detrimental beauty standards, the campaign contributes to general societal benefit. The campaign aims to reduce harm by encouraging realistic and inclusive beauty standards (Dove, 2021).

Intentions and Behavior:

Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign is a vast ethical endeavor that customers have well-received. The campaign's ethical evaluation strengthens customer support, urging people to continue supporting and engaging for the company's success. This harmony with consumers' beliefs, frequently mirrored in their purchase habits, helps the brand retain long-term loyalty and motivates customers to praise and advocate for Dove on social media.

Impact

Improved Self-Esteem and Body Confidence

➢ Research by the Centre for Appearance Research found that 70% of women participating in Dove's workshops reported improved self-esteem and body confidence (Dove, 2021).
➢ The Dove Self-Esteem Project has reached over 20 million young people worldwide, providing resources and support to build body confidence (Dove, 2022).

Positive Social Media Engagement

➢ The campaign generated over 1.5 million positive mentions on social media, highlighting its impact on public discourse about beauty standards (Sprout Social, 2021).
➢ The #RealBeauty hashtag has been used millions of times, fostering a global conversation about realistic and inclusive beauty standards (Dove, 2022).

Consumer Loyalty and Advocacy

➢ A 2019 study by Edelman found that 68% of consumers are more likely to remain loyal to Dove due to its commitment to promoting realistic beauty standards.
➢ According to the same study, 55% of consumers are willing to recommend Dove products to others, citing the Real Beauty campaign as a significant factor influencing their advocacy (Edelman, 2019).

The study usages the Hunt-Vitell theory to conduct a full ethical review of Lifebuoy's "Help a Child Reach 5" and Dove's "Real Beauty" campaigns, which includes an examination of both deontological and teleological components. Lifebuoy and Dove have reached out to ethically conscious customers by promoting ethical principles such as health, safety, authenticity, and self-respect while delivering significant social consequences. These examples underscore the

significance of a comprehensive framework demonstrating how people ethically evaluate the brand's purpose. The transparent and authentic brand's purpose influences purchasing behavior and contributes to societal transformation.

7. Theoretical & Managerial Contribution

The study contributes to the literature on marketing ethics and brand purpose by broadening the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory of ethics, which combines deontological and teleological approaches. This theory provides a complete framework for understanding consumers' ethical judgments about brands, offering a noble approach to investigating the ethical dimensions of marketing tactics. The study also creates a new conceptual framework that blends HV theory with brand purpose analysis, carefully examining the distinct character of consumer ethical evaluations, considering personal values, cultural norms, brand authenticity, and transparency. This theoretical model contributes to our knowledge of consumer behavior in the context of ethical branding and offers a structured strategy for future study. The article also gives empirical examples by analyzing the Lifebuoy and Dove ads, bridging the gap between theoretical constructs and actual implementations, and increasing the practical usefulness of HV theory in analyzing modern marketing strategies.

This study offers marketers and brand managers significant insights into designing and conveying practical brand purposes. It emphasizes the significance of authenticity in brand purposes, as customers are more inclined to trust and support businesses whose activities consistently reflect their stated principles. Brands should ensure that their ethical beliefs are genuine and reflected in their business processes, as demonstrated by Patagonia's environmental activities and Dove's dedication to actual beauty standards. Transparency is also essential in establishing consumer trust, as evidenced by businesses like Everlane. Open communication about brand initiatives, problems, and accomplishments may boost consumer trust and loyalty. Brands should consider the societal effect of their activities since campaigns that target key societal concerns and illustrate real-world benefits are more likely to appeal to customers, resulting in better ethical appraisal and support. The report offers practical advice for strategically taking advantage of brand purpose, improving brand reputation, and increasing consumer loyalty. The findings of this study can assist managers in developing and implementing brand objectives that are not only morally good but resonate profoundly with customers, resulting in long-term brand success.

8. Future research direction & Conclusion

Future studies should investigate the applicability of the Hunt-Vitell (HV) theory in various cultural contexts to understand better how cultural variations impact consumer ethical judgments of brand goals. In addition, quantitative research might be undertaken to validate the conceptual framework presented in this study. Researchers may also look at the long-term influence of brand purpose on consumer loyalty and brand equity to grasp its commercial consequences better. The study's limitations include its qualitative methodology and case studies, which may restrict its generalizability. Its concentration on two campaigns, Lifebuoy and Dove, may only address some marketing objectives across sectors. Furthermore, the research is based on secondary data and internet comments, which may not accurately reflect the customer community. Future research should use mixed approaches and more significant sample sizes.

The study proposes a framework based on the HV theory for understanding consumer ethical appraisal of brand goals. It combines deontological and teleological viewpoints to examine the ethical elements of marketing promotions thoroughly. Case studies like Lifebuoy and Dove show how customers use this approach. The findings emphasize the importance of authenticity,

transparency, and societal effect in molding customer views and ethical assessments, which will be valuable to marketers.

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