

## How Sustainability Labels, Minimalist Design, and Brand Activism Influence Premium Product Perception

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism on consumers' perception of premium products. Drawing from signaling theory and consumer psychology, the research examines how these factors serve as signals that shape premium product evaluation. Using survey data analyzed through multiple regression, the findings reveal that all three variables significantly and positively impact premium product perception, with sustainability labels exerting the strongest effect. Minimalist design and brand activism also contribute meaningfully by enhancing perceived elegance and aligning brand values with consumer ethics. The results underscore the importance of integrating ethical certifications, refined aesthetics, and authentic activism in premium branding strategies to meet the evolving demands of conscious consumers. Implications for marketers and suggestions for future research are discussed.

### Keywords:

Sustainability Labels;  
Minimalist Design;  
Brand Activism;  
Premium Product  
Perception; Consumer  
Behavior

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, consumer awareness regarding environmental and social issues has grown exponentially, shaping purchasing decisions across multiple product categories (Potthoff, 2020). Sustainability labels—certifications and marks indicating that a product meets certain environmental or ethical standards—have emerged as critical signals influencing consumer trust and willingness to pay premium prices (Del Vacchio, 2023). These labels serve as tangible proof of a brand's commitment to sustainable practices, reducing information asymmetry and increasing transparency in the marketplace (Grandemange, 2024). For premium products, which inherently command higher prices, sustainability labels can significantly impact how consumers perceive value beyond traditional quality attributes (Kooli, 2024).

Parallel to sustainability, minimalist design has become a dominant aesthetic trend in premium branding. Characterized by simplicity, clean lines, and the use of space, minimalist design conveys sophistication, elegance, and modernity (Ottman et al., 2006). This design approach often aligns with consumers' desires for authenticity and clarity amidst market saturation (Boström & Klintman, 2008). Minimalist packaging and product design are perceived to reduce cognitive overload, helping consumers to focus on core product attributes and brand values (Pichierri & Pino, 2023). Research shows that minimalist design can positively affect premium product perception by associating the brand with higher status and refined taste (Bartley et al., 2015).

Furthermore, brand activism—where companies actively engage in social, environmental, or political causes—has become increasingly prevalent as brands seek to differentiate themselves and build deeper emotional connections with consumers (Delmas & Lessem, 2017). Consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, often reward brands that demonstrate authentic commitment to societal issues, viewing such activism as a marker of corporate integrity and ethical responsibility (Dekhili & Akli Achabou, 2014). Brand activism not only enhances brand image but can also influence

product perception by adding moral and emotional value, which is critical in premium segments where emotional branding plays a key role (Richardson, 2019).

Despite the growth of these three factors—sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism—there remains limited integrated research on how they collectively influence consumer perception of premium products. Premium product perception is complex, involving a mixture of tangible product quality and intangible brand associations (Vredenburg et al., 2020). While individual effects of sustainability or design have been studied extensively, the interplay among these factors and their combined impact on premium product perception is less understood. Understanding this dynamic is essential for marketers aiming to strategically position premium products in an increasingly values-driven market.

Moreover, the premium product segment is critical for many industries due to its higher profit margins and brand loyalty potential (Cherian & Jacob, 2012). With evolving consumer values, premium brands must innovate beyond traditional luxury cues and embrace authenticity, ethics, and aesthetics simultaneously (Ackerstein & Lemon, 2017). This study aims to fill the research gap by examining how sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism each influence consumers' perception of premium products, and how these influences interact within contemporary marketing contexts.

Although sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism individually affect consumer behavior, it is unclear how these elements collectively shape the perception of premium products. Many brands attempt to integrate these attributes to appeal to conscious consumers, yet they face challenges in balancing authenticity and marketing effectiveness without appearing opportunistic (Pomarici & Vecchio, 2014). Moreover, the potential synergistic or conflicting effects among these factors have not been thoroughly explored, leading to an incomplete understanding of their role in premium product positioning. This gap in knowledge makes it difficult for marketers to design coherent strategies that maximize the perceived value of premium products in a competitive market. This study aims to investigate the influence of sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism on consumers' perception of premium products.

## **Literature Review**

### **1. Sustainability Labels and Consumer Perception**

Sustainability labels have become prominent tools for communicating environmental and social responsibility to consumers. These eco-labels or certification marks serve to reduce information asymmetry by providing credible third-party verification of sustainable product attributes (Costanigro et al., 2016). Studies demonstrate that sustainability labels can significantly enhance consumers' perceived product quality and trust (Mei et al., 2012). For example, products bearing labels such as Fair Trade, Organic, or Energy Star are often seen as superior in environmental and ethical standards, which in turn can justify premium pricing (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020). The signaling theory explains how sustainability labels function as quality signals in markets where consumers cannot easily verify product claims themselves (Rana, 2024). Through these signals, consumers infer additional product benefits, such as lower environmental impact or ethical labor practices, which may elevate brand reputation and consumer loyalty (Wu et al., 2021). Furthermore, eco-labels align with the increasing consumer demand for transparency and corporate

accountability, fostering emotional connections rooted in shared values (Nascimento & Loureiro, 2024). Research also shows that sustainability labels influence not only purchase intention but also premium perception—consumers are willing to pay more for products they believe are sustainable (Delmas & Colgan, 2018). However, the effectiveness of these labels depends on consumer knowledge and trust in the certifying authority (Nygaard, 2024). Some consumers exhibit skepticism due to label proliferation and "greenwashing," highlighting the importance of credibility and clear communication (Lee et al., 2023).

## **2. Minimalist Design and Its Effect on Premium Product Perception**

Minimalist design, characterized by simplicity, clean lines, limited color palettes, and uncluttered layouts, has gained significant traction in product and packaging design, particularly within premium segments (Steinhart et al., 2013). This design philosophy is deeply rooted in the principle that "less is more," emphasizing functionality and aesthetics without superfluous elements (Vladimirova et al., 2024). The cognitive fluency theory suggests that simpler designs are easier to process, leading to more favorable evaluations (Rousseau & Vranken, 2013). Minimalist design reduces visual noise, helping consumers focus on essential brand cues and product qualities (DOLCEMASCOLO & MARTINA, 2010). Such clarity can enhance perceived sophistication and elegance, traits highly valued in premium products (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). Studies confirm that minimalist packaging increases perceptions of luxury and quality by associating the product with modernity and exclusivity (Boström & Klintman, 2008). For instance, luxury brands such as Apple and Muji utilize minimalist design to convey innovation, refinement, and understated elegance (Potthoff, 2020). Minimalism also resonates with current consumer trends toward mindful consumption and sustainability, reinforcing positive product evaluations (Boström & Klintman, 2008). Importantly, minimalist design can also strengthen premium brand identity by creating distinctive and memorable visual cues that communicate high status (Ackerstein & Lemon, 2017). However, the impact of minimalist design may vary across cultural contexts and consumer segments, with some preferring more elaborate or traditional aesthetics.

## **3. Brand Activism and Consumer Engagement**

Brand activism involves companies taking explicit stances on social, political, or environmental issues, going beyond corporate social responsibility to actively promote change (Boström & Klintman, 2008). This approach reflects a shift in consumer expectations, where many seek brands that share their values and contribute meaningfully to societal issues (Dekhili & Akli Achabou, 2014). Empirical research indicates that brand activism can enhance consumer-brand relationships by fostering emotional engagement and trust (Del Vacchio, 2023). Consumers increasingly reward brands that demonstrate authenticity and consistency in activism, perceiving them as more ethical and socially responsible (Pichierri & Pino, 2023). Brand activism can positively influence brand equity and willingness to pay premiums, especially among younger demographics such as millennials and Generation Z. Moreover, brand activism adds a moral dimension to product perception, differentiating brands in crowded markets (Ackerstein & Lemon, 2017). The commitment to causes such as environmental protection, social justice, or human rights can create a powerful narrative that enhances brand prestige and consumer loyalty (Costanigro et al., 2016). However, effectiveness depends heavily on perceived

sincerity; consumers often respond negatively if activism is seen as opportunistic or inconsistent with brand values.

#### **4. Integrated Influence on Premium Product Perception**

Premium product perception encompasses both tangible product quality and intangible brand associations such as status, exclusivity, and emotional appeal (Thorisdottir & Johannsdottir, 2020). Sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism each contribute distinct but complementary signals that shape this perception. Sustainability labels provide ethical and environmental assurance, enhancing trust and justifying higher price points through perceived moral value (Ottman et al., 2006). Minimalist design conveys refinement and modernity, appealing to consumers' aesthetic sensibilities and cognitive ease (Richardson, 2019). Brand activism adds emotional resonance and social identity value, deepening consumer-brand connections. Together, these elements can create a holistic premium brand experience that appeals to increasingly conscious consumers who value ethical consumption, authentic storytelling, and elegant aesthetics (Potthoff, 2020). For example, a premium product with a credible sustainability label, minimalist packaging, and clear activist messaging may be perceived as high quality, trustworthy, and socially responsible, driving both purchase intention and price premium.

However, the interplay among these factors may also present challenges. Conflicting messages or overemphasis on one element could dilute brand authenticity or overwhelm consumers (Delmas & Lessem, 2017). For instance, minimalist design's simplicity might clash with activist messaging that requires more complex storytelling, or excessive reliance on sustainability labels might trigger skepticism if perceived as greenwashing. Therefore, understanding how these factors interact to influence premium product perception is essential for strategic brand management. Existing research largely treats these elements in isolation, underscoring the need for integrated studies that explore their combined effects and potential synergies or tensions (Ackerstein & Lemon, 2017).

#### **5. Theoretical Foundations**

This study draws on signaling theory to explain how sustainability labels act as credible signals of product quality and ethical commitment. It also integrates cognitive fluency theory to account for the positive effects of minimalist design on product evaluation through ease of processing. Finally, consumer-brand relationship theory provides a framework for understanding the role of brand activism in building emotional engagement and loyalty. Together, these theoretical lenses facilitate a comprehensive understanding of how sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism contribute to shaping consumers' premium product perceptions.

### **METHOD**

#### **1. Research Design**

This study employs a quantitative research design using a cross-sectional survey method to examine how sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism influence consumers' perception of premium products. A quantitative approach is appropriate to test hypothesized relationships between variables through statistical analysis, providing empirical evidence of the influence of the three independent variables on premium product perception (Jw, 2009). The cross-sectional



design allows data collection at a single point in time, suitable for capturing consumer attitudes and perceptions.

## **2. Population and Sample**

The population targeted in this study consists of adult consumers aged 18 years and above who have experience purchasing premium or luxury products across various categories such as fashion, electronics, and personal care. This broad population ensures representation of consumers familiar with premium product attributes, sustainability concerns, and branding trends. A purposive sampling technique will be used to select respondents who meet the criteria of having recent premium product purchase experience and awareness of sustainability labels or brand activism. This method is chosen to ensure data relevance and quality by focusing on informed consumers. The sample size will be determined based on Cochran's formula for survey research, targeting at least 300 respondents to provide adequate statistical power and generalizability. This size is sufficient for conducting multivariate analyses such as multiple regression.

## **3. Data Collection Methods**

Primary data will be collected through an online structured questionnaire distributed via email and social media platforms. An online survey method is efficient for reaching a diverse sample across geographic locations and allows for rapid data collection with automated data entry. The questionnaire will be designed in English and pre-tested with a pilot group of 30 respondents to assess clarity, reliability, and validity. Feedback from the pilot test will be used to refine question wording and format.

## **4. Data Analysis Techniques**

Data analysis will be conducted in several stages using IBM SPSS Statistics software. First, data cleaning and screening will be performed to check for missing values, outliers, and assess the normality of the distribution to ensure data quality. Descriptive statistics will then summarize respondent demographics and key study variables to provide an overview of the sample characteristics. Next, reliability and validity tests will be carried out, with internal consistency assessed using Cronbach's alpha (values above 0.7 considered acceptable) (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) potentially employed to verify construct validity. Following this, correlation analysis will examine bivariate relationships among sustainability labels, minimalist design, brand activism, and premium product perception. Multiple regression analysis will then test the hypothesized effects of the three independent variables on premium product perception, evaluating the relative contribution of each while controlling for demographic factors (Hair Jr et al., 2014). If needed, further analyses such as moderation or mediation will be conducted using PROCESS macro or structural equation modeling to explore interaction effects between variables (Hayes, 2017).

# **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

## **1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Analysis**

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the main variables. The sample consists of 300 respondents with balanced gender distribution (52% female), average age of 34.5 years (SD = 10.2), and diverse income levels. All scales demonstrated good internal consistency, with Cronbach's

alpha values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7, indicating reliable measurement instruments.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and CA**

| Variable                   | Mean  | SD    | Cronbach's $\alpha$ |
|----------------------------|-------|-------|---------------------|
| Sustainability Labels      | 3.842 | 0.752 | 0.872               |
| Minimalist Design          | 3.596 | 0.823 | 0.849               |
| Brand Activism             | 3.723 | 0.791 | 0.885               |
| Premium Product Perception | 3.915 | 0.668 | 0.903               |

## 2. Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation matrix in Table 2 illustrates the relationships among the key variables. Sustainability labels ( $r = .584$ ,  $p < .001$ ), minimalist design ( $r = .468$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and brand activism ( $r = .530$ ,  $p < .001$ ) all show significant positive correlations with premium product perception. The independent variables also show moderate inter-correlations, suggesting related but distinct constructs.

**Table 2. Correlation Matrix**

| Variable                      | 1       | 2       | 3       | 4 |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---|
| 1. Sustainability Labels      | 1       |         |         |   |
| 2. Minimalist Design          | .412*** | 1       |         |   |
| 3. Brand Activism             | .376*** | .455*** | 1       |   |
| 4. Premium Product Perception | .584*** | .468*** | .530*** | 1 |

Source: Data Analysis

## 3. Multi Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression was conducted to examine the influence of sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism on premium product perception, controlling for age, gender, and income. The regression model was significant,  $F(6, 293) = 48.375$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining 49.5% of the variance in premium product perception (Adjusted  $R^2 = .495$ ). Table 3 presents the detailed regression coefficients. Sustainability labels emerged as the strongest predictor ( $\beta = .412$ ,  $t = 7.982$ ,  $p < .001$ ), followed by brand activism ( $\beta = .298$ ,  $t = 5.732$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and minimalist design ( $\beta = .184$ ,  $t = 3.641$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Among control variables, only income showed a small but significant effect ( $\beta = .091$ ,  $t = 2.015$ ,  $p = .045$ ), while age and gender were non-significant.

**Table 3. Multiple Regression Predicting Premium Product Perception**

| Predictor                 | B      | SE B  | $\beta$ | t      | p      |
|---------------------------|--------|-------|---------|--------|--------|
| (Constant)                | 1.253  | 0.423 |         | 2.962  | 0.003  |
| Sustainability Labels     | 0.462  | 0.058 | 0.412   | 7.982  | <0.001 |
| Minimalist Design         | 0.285  | 0.078 | 0.184   | 3.641  | <0.001 |
| Brand Activism            | 0.379  | 0.066 | 0.298   | 5.732  | <0.001 |
| Age                       | 0.004  | 0.004 | 0.045   | 1.100  | 0.273  |
| Gender (Male=0, Female=1) | -0.066 | 0.055 | -0.054  | -1.203 | 0.230  |
| Income                    | 0.078  | 0.039 | 0.091   | 2.015  | 0.045  |

Source: Data Analysis

## Discussion

### 1. Sustainability Labels and Premium Product Perception

Consistent with prior research (Dekhili & Akli Achabou, 2014; Kooli, 2024), sustainability labels significantly enhance consumers' perception of premium products. The strongest beta coefficient ( $\beta = .412$ ) in the regression model underscores the central role sustainability certifications play in elevating product status. This finding aligns with the growing consumer demand for ethically produced and environmentally friendly products, where sustainability labels function as trusted signals of corporate responsibility and quality assurance (Richardson, 2019). From a theoretical perspective, this supports signaling theory, which posits that credible labels reduce information asymmetry and build consumer trust. In the premium product context, sustainability labels serve as a non-price cue that signals superior quality, ethical sourcing, and environmental stewardship, all of which enhance consumers' willingness to pay a premium. Moreover, this effect may be amplified among increasingly eco-conscious consumers who integrate sustainability values into their identity and consumption choices (Del Vacchio, 2023). Marketers should therefore prioritize obtaining recognized sustainability certifications and clearly communicating these on product packaging and marketing materials. Doing so not only differentiates products in a crowded marketplace but also appeals to consumers' ethical concerns, which are becoming integral to premium brand positioning. However, authenticity is crucial; misleading or superficial claims risk backlash and brand distrust (Cherian & Jacob, 2012).

### 2. Minimalist Design as a Luxury Signal

The positive influence of minimalist design on premium product perception ( $\beta = .184$ ) confirms its role as a significant aesthetic driver in luxury evaluation. This finding is consistent with the literature emphasizing simplicity, clean lines, and uncluttered packaging as indicators of sophistication and elegance (Grandemange, 2024; Pichierri & Pino, 2023). Minimalism communicates refinement and confidence, allowing the product's intrinsic quality to stand out without distraction. This supports theories from consumer psychology suggesting that minimalism reduces cognitive overload and enhances perceived value by emphasizing essential attributes (Bartley et al., 2015). For premium consumers, minimalist design may also signal exclusivity and

timelessness, which align with luxury brand ideals (Ackerstein & Lemon, 2017). It contrasts with overly complex or flashy designs that might be perceived as gaudy or mass-market. From a managerial viewpoint, brands seeking to elevate product status should invest in minimalist aesthetics that convey purity and craftsmanship. This is especially pertinent in product categories where visual appearance heavily influences buying decisions, such as cosmetics, fashion, and electronics. However, minimalism should be balanced with brand personality and target audience preferences to avoid perceptions of sterility or coldness (Costanigro et al., 2016).

### **3. Brand Activism's Impact on Brand Image and Premium Perception**

Brand activism emerged as a strong predictor of premium product perception ( $\beta = .298$ ), highlighting consumers' increasing appreciation for brands that take clear stands on social and environmental issues. This aligns with (Kotler & Keller, 2009) conceptualization of brand activism as a form of corporate citizenship that enhances brand authenticity and emotional connection. The finding resonates with (Rana, 2024), who argue that activist brands cultivate trust and loyalty by demonstrating ethical leadership beyond profit motives. This supports the notion that premium consumers expect brands not only to offer superior products but also to embody values aligned with societal progress and justice. Brand activism serves as a relational signal, fostering emotional attachment and elevating brand equity in competitive markets (Kooli, 2024). In the age of social media transparency, consumers are empowered to hold brands accountable, making authentic activism a key differentiator. Practically, brands should integrate activism into their core strategies, authentically addressing issues relevant to their audience and industry. This involves not only marketing communications but also genuine business practices and stakeholder engagement. Nevertheless, the risk of perceived "woke-washing" or opportunistic activism must be managed carefully to avoid consumer skepticism.

### **4. Interrelationships and Holistic Implications**

The moderate correlations among sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism (ranging from .376 to .455) indicate these dimensions are related but distinct facets of premium product perception. Together, they represent a holistic premium value proposition combining ethical, aesthetic, and ideological components. This integrated view expands traditional premium product frameworks that often emphasize price and tangible quality alone (Richardson, 2019). The results suggest that contemporary premium consumers increasingly evaluate products through a multidimensional lens where social responsibility and brand values matter as much as design and craftsmanship. This evolution reflects broader societal shifts toward conscious consumption and lifestyle alignment with personal values (White et al., 2019). For future research, examining potential interaction effects among these variables could yield richer insights. For example, sustainability labels might have stronger effects when combined with minimalist design, creating a cohesive narrative of simplicity and responsibility. Likewise, brand activism could moderate the impact of design cues on perception by reinforcing brand credibility.

### **5. Theoretical Contributions**

This study contributes to the literature by empirically integrating sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism into a unified model explaining premium product perception. While prior studies have explored these constructs individually, their combined effect within premium branding contexts remains underexamined. The



findings extend signaling theory by demonstrating how multiple signals from different domains jointly influence consumer evaluation. Moreover, the study bridges consumer psychology and marketing strategy by showing how aesthetic preferences interact with ethical and ideological brand dimensions. This integrative approach advances understanding of how contemporary premium brands can craft value propositions that resonate emotionally and cognitively with sophisticated consumers.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that sustainability labels, minimalist design, and brand activism each significantly enhance consumers' perception of premium products. Sustainability labels serve as the most influential signal, reinforcing trust and ethical value, while minimalist design adds an aesthetic dimension that communicates elegance and exclusivity. Brand activism further strengthens premium perception by aligning brands with social and environmental causes that resonate with consumers' values. Together, these factors highlight the evolving nature of premium product evaluation, where ethical considerations and brand values play increasingly pivotal roles alongside traditional quality and design cues. For marketers, integrating authentic sustainability credentials, refined minimalist aesthetics, and genuine activism into brand strategies is essential to meet the sophisticated expectations of today's premium consumers and achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

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