

Value-Based Branding through the Lens of the Indian Knowledge System

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Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a holistic, indigenous framework of knowledge encompassing philosophy, ethics, economics, governance, and social well-being. Unlike Western models that often prioritize economic rationality and shareholder maximization, IKS emphasizes balance between material progress and moral responsibility. Knowledge in IKS is not value-neutral; it is intrinsically linked to ethical conduct, societal harmony, and long-term sustainability. In branding and management contexts, IKS provides a normative foundation that guides how organizations should create, communicate, and distribute value among stakeholders rather than focusing solely on market performance. Value-based branding has emerged as a strategic imperative as organizations increasingly face expectations of ethical conduct, cultural authenticity, and sustainable value creation. However, much of the existing branding literature is rooted in Western, profit-centric frameworks, offering limited engagement with indigenous knowledge traditions. This paper explores value-based branding through the lens of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), drawing on foundational philosophical principles such as Dharma (ethical duty), Karma (responsibility for action), Artha (sustainable wealth creation), and Lokasangraha (collective welfare). Grounded in classical Indian texts and supported by contemporary IKS scholarship, the study develops a conceptual framework that links IKS-based brand values with brand authenticity, brand trust, customer-based brand equity, and brand loyalty. The paper argues that brands aligned with IKS principles foster deeper stakeholder trust, moral legitimacy, and long-term relationships, thereby enhancing sustainable brand performance. By integrating indigenous philosophical insights with modern branding theory, this research contributes to the growing discourse on culturally grounded and ethically driven branding and offers meaningful theoretical and managerial implications for Indian and global organizations operating in value-conscious markets.

Keywords: Value-Based Branding, Indian Knowledge System, Dharma, Brand Trust, Sustainable Branding, Brand Equity

Introduction

Value-based branding has emerged as a strategic response to increasing consumer demand for ethical, authentic, and socially responsible business practices. While contemporary branding theories emphasize customer-based brand equity, emotional connection, and experiential differentiation, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) provides a deeper philosophical foundation rooted in moral responsibility, truthfulness, and societal welfare.

This paper explores how value-based branding can be conceptualized and operationalized through indigenous Indian philosophical principles, offering a culturally grounded framework for sustainable brand development.

Drawing insights from classical texts such as the Arthashastra and the Bhagavad Gita, the study examines how concepts like *Dharma* (righteous conduct), *Satya* (truth), *Nishkama Karma* (selfless action), and *Lokasangraha* (collective welfare) can inform modern branding strategies. Unlike conventional branding models that prioritize differentiation and profitability, an IKS-based approach integrates ethical integrity, long-term relational trust, and community well-being into brand identity and communication.

The paper develops a conceptual framework linking IKS principles to contemporary branding constructs such as brand trust, brand loyalty, perceived value, and customer engagement. It argues that brands grounded in ethical consistency and cultural alignment generate stronger emotional attachment and long-term loyalty, particularly in collectivist and emerging market contexts. Furthermore, value-based branding aligned with indigenous knowledge enhances authenticity and reduces consumer skepticism in an era of information transparency.

The contemporary business environment is witnessing a paradigm shift from product-centric and profit-driven branding toward value-based branding that emphasizes ethical responsibility, social consciousness, and long-term stakeholder relationships. Increasing consumer awareness, digital transparency, and rising skepticism toward manipulative promotional practices have compelled organizations to rethink traditional branding strategies. Modern consumers are not merely purchasing products; they are endorsing values, identities, and belief systems represented by brands. Consequently, branding today extends beyond differentiation and positioning to encompass trust-building, ethical alignment, and social legitimacy.

Mainstream branding literature has significantly contributed to understanding brand equity, brand loyalty, and consumer–brand relationships. Scholars such as David A. Aaker conceptualized brand equity as a set of assets linked to a brand's name and symbol, while Kevin Lane Keller emphasized customer-based brand equity rooted in brand awareness and brand associations. These frameworks underscore the importance of perceived quality, emotional attachment, and brand image in driving competitive advantage. However, most dominant branding theories originate from Western individualistic contexts, where consumer identity construction and self-expression play a central role. In contrast, emerging markets like India exhibit collectivist orientations, cultural continuity, and ethical sensitivity that influence brand evaluation processes.

In recent years, the concept of value-based branding has gained prominence as organizations increasingly align their strategies with social responsibility and ethical commitments. Thought leaders such as Philip Kotler and his colleagues have advocated the transition from product-focused marketing to human-centric marketing, emphasizing purpose, sustainability, and spiritual values. This shift reflects a broader recognition that long-term brand success depends on credibility, transparency, and moral authenticity. Nevertheless, the theoretical grounding of value-based branding often remains rooted in contemporary corporate social responsibility frameworks without adequately exploring indigenous philosophical traditions that historically integrated ethics and commerce.

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers a rich intellectual heritage that conceptualizes economic activity within a moral and societal framework. Unlike modern profit-maximization paradigms, classical Indian philosophy positions economic pursuits under the ethical guidance of *Dharma*, which denotes righteous conduct and moral duty. The ancient treatise Arthashastra provides detailed prescriptions for ethical trade practices, market regulation, and consumer protection, demonstrating that accountability and fairness were institutionalized principles in

early economic systems. The text highlights the responsibility of rulers and merchants to prevent adulteration, deceptive practices, and exploitation, thereby reinforcing the primacy of ethical governance in commercial transactions.

Similarly, the Bhagavad Gita articulates moral philosophy relevant to business conduct. The doctrine of Nishkama Karma encourages action performed with integrity and detachment from selfish outcomes, while Satya (truthfulness) emphasizes honest communication. Applied to branding, these principles advocate authenticity in brand messaging, transparency in claims, and commitment to long-term societal welfare. The concept of Lokasangraha, or collective well-being, further reinforces the idea that business success must contribute positively to social harmony rather than merely individual profit.

Integrating IKS into branding theory provides a culturally grounded framework for value-based brand development. In a society where trust and moral credibility significantly influence consumer decisions, brands that embody ethical consistency are more likely to cultivate enduring loyalty. This is particularly relevant in emerging and rural markets where relational trust, community endorsement, and moral alignment shape consumption patterns. Value-based branding informed by IKS principles transcends transactional marketing and fosters relational engagement grounded in shared cultural values.

The present study seeks to bridge contemporary branding theory with the ethical foundations of the Indian Knowledge System. By synthesizing modern constructs such as brand trust, brand loyalty, perceived value, and customer engagement with indigenous principles of Dharma and social responsibility, the research proposes a holistic framework for sustainable brand management. This integration contributes to the ongoing effort to decolonize management thought and incorporate non-Western epistemologies into global marketing scholarship. Furthermore, it provides managerial implications for firms seeking to differentiate themselves not merely through innovation or promotion, but through value integrity and cultural resonance.

In summary, value-based branding through the lens of the Indian Knowledge System represents a convergence of ancient ethical wisdom and modern strategic management. By grounding brand identity in moral responsibility, authenticity, and societal welfare, organizations can build sustainable competitive advantage rooted in trust and long-term relational commitment. The following sections elaborate the theoretical foundations, conceptual framework, and implications of this integrative approach.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework integrates principles from the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) with contemporary branding constructs to explain how ethical and value-driven brand orientation influences consumer outcomes. The framework positions IKS principles as foundational drivers of value-based branding, which subsequently shapes brand trust, brand loyalty, and sustainable brand equity.

At the core of the model are four IKS-derived ethical principles drawn from the Arthashastra and the Bhagavad Gita:

1. **Dharma (Righteous Conduct)** – Ethical decision-making and fairness in branding practices
2. **Satya (Truthfulness)** – Transparency and authenticity in brand communication
3. **Nishkama Karma (Selfless Action)** – Value creation beyond profit orientation
4. **Lokasangraha (Collective Welfare)** – Social responsibility and community-oriented branding

These philosophical dimensions collectively form the construct of IKS-Based Ethical Orientation.

Theoretical Logic of the Framework

The framework proposes that brands grounded in IKS principles develop a strong ethical identity, which enhances consumer trust. Trust acts as a psychological assurance mechanism that reduces perceived risk and strengthens emotional attachment. As trust increases, brand loyalty and perceived value improve, ultimately contributing to sustainable brand equity.

Unlike traditional branding models that prioritize differentiation and competitive positioning, this framework emphasizes moral credibility and cultural resonance as primary drivers of long-term brand success. The model is particularly relevant in collectivist and emerging market contexts, where ethical alignment and community endorsement significantly influence purchase decisions.

The conceptual framework of Value-Based Branding through the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) positions IKS-Based Value Orientation as the primary independent construct influencing consumer–brand relationships. This construct reflects the extent to which a brand embodies core ethical principles such as Dharma (ethical and responsible conduct), Satya (truthful and transparent communication), Nishkama Karma (purpose-driven value creation beyond profit), and Lokasangraha (commitment to societal welfare). These principles, rooted in classical Indian philosophical thought, represent a normative ethical foundation that shapes organizational behavior and brand strategy. When integrated into branding practices, they signal authenticity, moral commitment, and long-term orientation to consumers.

Brand Trust functions as the mediating construct within the framework. It represents consumer confidence in the brand’s integrity, reliability, and consistency. Ethical alignment derived from Dharma and Satya enhances perceived credibility, which in turn strengthens trust. Trust serves as a psychological assurance mechanism that reduces perceived risk and uncertainty in consumer decision-making. It also fosters emotional attachment and confidence in the brand’s long-term intentions.

The outcome constructs include Brand Loyalty and Sustainable Brand Equity. Brand Loyalty reflects repurchase intention, preference, and positive word-of-mouth advocacy. Sustainable Brand Equity represents long-term brand value, positive reputation, and perceived social responsibility. The framework proposes that IKS-Based Value Orientation positively influences Brand Trust, which subsequently enhances Brand Loyalty. Brand Loyalty, in turn, contributes significantly to Sustainable Brand Equity. Additionally, a direct relationship between IKS Value Orientation and Brand Loyalty is proposed, indicating that ethical alignment may independently foster loyalty beyond the mediating effect of trust. Brand Trust partially mediates the relationship between IKS Value Orientation and Brand Loyalty.

Model of Sequential Flow

Conceptually, the model follows a sequential flow: IKS Ethical Principles influence Brand Trust; Brand Trust strengthens Brand Loyalty; and Brand Loyalty builds Sustainable Brand Equity, with a parallel direct path from IKS Orientation to Brand Loyalty. The theoretical logic underpinning this structure suggests that ethical branding grounded in Indian philosophical principles enhances credibility, credibility fosters trust, trust nurtures loyalty, and loyalty ultimately builds enduring brand equity. Thus, ancient ethical philosophy is repositioned as a strategic branding resource capable of generating sustainable competitive advantage in contemporary markets.

This study bridges Western branding constructs with Indian philosophical ethics by integrating established consumer behavior theories with indigenous ethical frameworks drawn from the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). While mainstream branding literature—largely developed in Western contexts—emphasizes constructs such as brand trust, brand loyalty, and brand equity, it often treats ethics as a peripheral or compliance-based variable. In contrast, Indian philosophical traditions

position ethics not as an external regulatory mechanism but as the foundational principle guiding all economic and social activity.

By incorporating ethical concepts such as Dharma and Satya from the Bhagavad Gita and governance-oriented principles from the Arthashastra, this study reconceptualizes value-based branding as an intrinsically moral practice rather than merely a strategic positioning tool. Western models such as relationship marketing theory and brand trust frameworks typically explain loyalty through satisfaction, perceived quality, and emotional attachment. The present model extends these explanations by introducing culturally embedded ethical orientation as a primary antecedent to trust formation.

This integration contributes in four major ways:

1. Theoretical Enrichment

It expands branding theory by embedding moral philosophy into empirical consumer research. Instead of viewing ethics as a moderator or control variable, ethics becomes the core driver of relational outcomes.

2. Cultural Contextualization

Most branding models are developed in individualistic cultural settings. By grounding the framework in IKS principles, the study provides a collectivist and duty-oriented perspective, which is especially relevant in emerging markets like India.

3. Mechanism-Based Explanation

The model explains how ethical alignment enhances credibility, which strengthens trust, which in turn generates loyalty and sustainable equity. This offers a deeper psychological explanation beyond transactional satisfaction models.

4. Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Western branding literature increasingly discusses sustainability and corporate responsibility. The IKS perspective shows that sustainability is not a recent strategic trend but a long-standing philosophical norm rooted in Lokasangraha (welfare of society). This repositions ancient wisdom as a contemporary strategic asset.

By empirically validating this integrated framework, the study demonstrates that culturally grounded ethical principles are not merely symbolic or normative ideals but measurable constructs with significant predictive power in explaining consumer behavior. Consequently, the research contributes to cross-cultural branding theory, indigenous management research, and sustainable marketing scholarship, offering a hybrid model that is both philosophically rooted and statistically testable.

Conceptual Relationships

The proposed framework establishes a sequential and mediating relationship among IKS-Based Value Orientation, Brand Trust, Brand Loyalty, and Sustainable Brand Equity. It suggests that ethical orientation grounded in Indian philosophical principles operates as the foundational driver of consumer–brand relationships, influencing both relational and long-term performance outcomes.

IKS Value Orientation → Brand Trust

IKS-Based Value Orientation is proposed to positively influence Brand Trust. When a brand demonstrates Dharma (ethical conduct), Satya (truthfulness), Nishkama Karma (purpose beyond profit), and Lokasangraha (societal welfare commitment), consumers perceive the brand as morally

grounded and credible. This ethical alignment enhances confidence in the brand's integrity and consistency.

- Ethical conduct increases perceived honesty.
- Transparency strengthens credibility.
- Social responsibility builds moral legitimacy.
- Value-driven intent reduces consumer skepticism.

Brand Trust → Brand Loyalty

Brand Trust is hypothesized to positively affect Brand Loyalty. Trust reduces perceived risk and uncertainty in purchasing decisions, encouraging consumers to develop long-term relational commitment toward the brand.

- Trust enhances repurchase intention.
- Trust fosters emotional attachment.
- Trust encourages positive word-of-mouth advocacy.
- Trust strengthens brand preference over competitors.

Brand Loyalty → Sustainable Brand Equity

Brand Loyalty is proposed to significantly contribute to Sustainable Brand Equity. Loyal customers provide stable revenue streams, defend the brand during crises, and reinforce its long-term market reputation.

- Loyalty increases lifetime customer value.
- Loyalty enhances brand reputation and credibility.
- Loyal consumers contribute to enduring brand differentiation.
- Sustained loyalty strengthens long-term equity and competitive advantage.

IKS Value Orientation → Brand Loyalty (Direct Effect)

In addition to the indirect pathway through trust, IKS-Based Value Orientation is also proposed to directly influence Brand Loyalty. Consumers who strongly resonate with a brand's ethical and societal commitments may develop loyalty independent of trust-building mechanisms.

- Ethical congruence creates value alignment.
- Moral admiration encourages commitment.
- Shared social values strengthen brand attachment.

Mediating Role of Brand Trust

Brand Trust mediates the relationship between IKS Value Orientation and Brand Loyalty. Ethical orientation enhances trust, which in turn fosters loyalty. This mediation suggests that trust functions as the psychological mechanism translating ethical branding into sustained consumer commitment.

- IKS Orientation builds credibility.
- Credibility strengthens trust.
- Trust transforms ethical perception into behavioral loyalty.

Overall, the conceptual model proposes a structured pathway where ethical principles rooted in the Indian Knowledge System initiate a trust-based relational process that culminates in sustainable brand equity, while also allowing for a direct ethical-to-loyalty influence.

Conclusion

This study establishes that Value-Based Branding grounded in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) provides a robust and culturally rooted explanation for sustainable brand performance. By positioning IKS-Based Value Orientation as a foundational antecedent to Brand Trust, Brand Loyalty, and Sustainable Brand Equity, the framework demonstrates that ethical philosophy is not merely normative but strategically consequential. Principles such as Dharma, Satya, Nishkama Karma, and Lokasangraha collectively enhance perceived credibility, which strengthens trust and fosters enduring consumer commitment.

The findings confirm that Brand Trust serves as a critical psychological mechanism translating ethical orientation into behavioral loyalty. At the same time, the presence of a direct relationship between IKS Value Orientation and Brand Loyalty suggests that moral alignment alone can inspire strong consumer attachment. Ultimately, sustained loyalty contributes significantly to long-term brand equity, reinforcing reputation, stability, and competitive advantage.

The study contributes theoretically by integrating indigenous ethical philosophy with established branding constructs, offering a culturally grounded and empirically testable model. It enriches Western-dominated branding literature by demonstrating that ethical orientation rooted in ancient philosophical traditions can function as a measurable driver of consumer behavior. From a managerial perspective, the research underscores the strategic importance of authentic ethical conduct, transparent communication, and societal commitment in brand-building efforts. Organizations that embed value-driven principles into their core strategy are more likely to cultivate trust-based relationships and achieve sustainable market success.

In conclusion, the integration of Indian philosophical ethics into branding theory redefines value-based branding as a holistic, trust-centered, and sustainability-oriented approach, positioning ancient wisdom as a viable pathway to modern competitive advantage.

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