Title: Past, present and future of conscientious brands

Editorial

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ABSTRACT

This editorial first looks to the past to review the origins of the construct of conscientious brands, which was launched in a 2011 Special Issue of the Journal of Brand Management. Then, it presents the evolution of the construct, which leads us to the 8 papers in this Special Issue which both deepen and extend the understanding of conscientious brands. Building on the inspiration of the papers, we look to the future and posit the issues that research should focus on in exploring how conscientious brands can promote systemic transformative change through stakeholder co-creation networks.

Past, present and future of conscientious brands
Editorial

Conscience - we all have one, but the question is whether organizations and brands do? Do they have moral agency? And can they act morally within a capitalist world? The emerging consensus to these questions is yes, but with some necessary qualifications that are discussed in the papers contained within this Special Issue devoted to conscientious brands. Of particular note here, is the view that conscientious brands are not simply concerned with doing good, but also with being profitable (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). This is not altruism - although that may be an element. It is about the application of conscience to social, environmental and economic decisions (Ind & Ryder, 2011) and the resulting challenge of balancing different stakeholder needs and temporal horizons (Iglesias et al., 2023). As you will see in the papers that follow, a conscientious approach to brand management can confer specific benefits internally and externally, but tensions and dilemmas can lead to backsliding and a loss of balance - as the paper by Grimm et al. notes, conscientious brands are always in a state of becoming. And so is the field itself.

The appending of 'conscience' to organizations has been discussed since the early 1980s, but it has only been applied to brands since 2011, when the *Journal of Brand Management,* produced its first special issue on conscientious brands. The idea for the special issue emerged from a think tank called, the Medinge Group, which had promoted the idea of conscience in its work. The editorial for the 2011 issue set out some themes: the value of a stakeholder orientation; the limitations of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); the importance of considering longer-term ambitions alongside shorter-term goals; and the advocacy of a human-centric approach. It also referenced some specific brands - Patagonia, Unilever, HP and Danone - which remain reference points for the construct while illustrating the challenge of being consistently conscientious. At this point, no one had tried to define exactly what a conscientious brand was, so the authors drew on different sources to demarcate their interpretations. Noteworthy papers from the issue were Wilson and Morgan's (2011) analysis of the way conscience can help nurture brand communities and how brand meaning develops, Olsen and Peretz's (2011) case of a Norwegian outdoor clothing brand and its delivery of social and environmental benefits, and Rindell et al.'s (2011) model of conscientious corporate brands in business-to-business relationships. This model was then validated by Hutchinson et al., (2013) in a quantitative study of 150 Canadian companies.

After 2013, there was a hiatus until Iglesias and Ind's paper (2020) in the *Journal of Brand Management, '*Towards a theory of conscientious corporate brand co-creation: the next key challenge in brand management'. This re-boot of the conscientious brands construct

was notable for several reasons. First, it hardened the criticisms about the practice of CSR mentioned in the 2011 special issue, as an often tangential activity which fails to address the core activities that lead to negative externalities (Alhouti et al, 2016; Markvoic et al., 2018). In contrast, conscience was positioned as core to the thoughts and actions of the organization. Second, it began to more clearly demarcate conscience from sustainability and responsibility, by arguing that it was an antecedent that defined intentions towards strategies in these fields. Third, it positioned conscience more closely as an attribute of corporate brands rather than brands *per se*. Since 2020, conscientious brands (with an orientation towards conscientious corporate brands) has gained traction with a book (Ind and Iglesias, 2022), book chapters (Vallaster and Lechner 2022; Biedenbach and Biedenbach, 2022), articles (Abratt and Kleyn 2023; Fernandes et al., 2024; Guzman et al., 2024; Tjandra et al., 2025) and a special issue of *Industrial Marketing Management* (2023), which focused specifically on corporate brand and business-to-business relationships. These various publications have provided empirical support for some of the claims associated with the construct and broadened the base of stakeholders researched - which previously had been confined to the perspectives of managers.

So, as we approach this second special issue on conscientious brands at JBM, what is the state of play? First, it is worth noting that the reemergence of conscientious brands is part of a broader trend in management practice and branding research. For instance, in the last few years several Special Issues have been published at JBM focusing on the topics of sustainability, brand activism, and CSR (Golob & Podnar, 2019; Golob et al, 2022; Podnar & Golob, 2024).

Regarding conscientious brands, we now have greater clarity in some areas, but also still some uncertainties, not least because the very nature of conscience is complex and ineffable (Sorabji, 2014). What can be argued is that conscience is concerned with a belief system or moral compass that is born out of previous experience and consciousness of the world, which leads to actions, together with others, that align with those beliefs (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). There is an emerging consensus that while conscience as such is difficult to articulate, because it is abstract and requires a specific context to be meaningful, conscientious brands typically have some common attributes, that were hinted at in the first special issue, and which have been recently further developed by Tjandra et al. (2025). Foremost among these is a commitment to a transformative purpose and values or principles. Purpose is concerned with the *raison d'etre* of the brand (Mirzaei et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2022), while principles or values are the tenets that guide action (Ind and Iglesias, 2022). Purpose can be articulated in the form of a brand positioning designed primarily to provide a point of differentiation or it can be more oriented towards duty and aim to deliver social and/or environmental value (George et al., 2023; Williams

et al., 2022). Conscientious brands focus primarily on the latter. They draw on their identities to impact the world in a positive way (Guzman et al., 2024) and have the ambition to transform existing assumptions and practices (Spry et al., 2021). There are two essential elements here. First, for a conscientious brand, purpose cannot be an add-on. It must be core to the brand, its strategy and the source of its meaning. Second, the purpose must be acted upon - consistently. This can be problematic, because it requires a commitment to embed the brand purpose into practices and to develop an enabling culture (France et al., 2024).

One notable facet of purpose is it concerns intent. Once a brand has developed a statement of purpose, its relevance is determined by its role in guiding decisions and their enactment: what the brand will and will not do. Purpose looks to the future and provides the basis of reflection on choices made (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). However, brands also need to consider outcomes and to measure them. As Dierksmeier (2013 p. 605) writes, 'The deontological criterion is only the necessary condition for sound moral action, whereas the teleological dimension functions as its satisfying condition.' This implies evaluating the impacts on all relevant stakeholders. So, in addition, to a guiding purpose, conscientious brands aim to balance stakeholder needs and temporal horizons (Keränen et al., 2023; Iglesias et al., 2023; Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023). This inevitably leads to dilemmas and tensions over the competing needs of diverse stakeholders, short- and long-term goals and the need to align with the brand purpose (Berkey, 2022).

A further attribute of conscientious brands is the willingness to engage with ecosystems to effect change. This reflects an underlying belief in the importance of openness and a recognition that transformative change requires the involvement of others, from suppliers to employees to consumers. Conscientious brands treat stakeholders as active participants not passive subjects and use co-creation as a means to deliver on the purpose and to innovate in a conscientious way (Iglesias et al., 2023).

Overall, as Tjandra et al. (2025) note in their research, any conscientious brand has a unique transformative purpose and a singular set of guiding principles. Additionally, all conscientious brands seem to belief in stakeholder fairness, temporal responsibility, and organizational openness. However, key to the process of becoming conscientious is not only the belief system, but also the way in which transformative practices bring it to life. Finally, there is also the need to measure the outcomes of those practices to understand if they are aligned with the belief system.

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Developing the conscientious brands construct

Having put forward an argument based on the extant research, what is the specific relevance of this Special Issue? All brands are under pressure to consider their wider role in society and their impacts on the environment. These pressures come from consumers, customers, business partners and investors as well from legislation (Iglesias et al., 2023). Brands can do the bare minimum, or they can view these pressures as an opportunity to embrace a wider role that meets stakeholders' needs. But we might ask, does it matter whether a brand is driven by a purposeful intent or simply by the dictates of compliance? This Special Issue suggests that intent is important because it helps drive actions that align with the brand's belief system. As several of the papers note, alignment helps to generate a sense of authenticity, while a lack of it generates stakeholder scepticism (Rüger at al., Biedenbach, Abratt et al). A commitment to conscience may also help to ensure that a brand maintains its authenticity as it navigates emerging dilemmas and moral challenges in the ongoing quest to become conscientious (Grimm et al.) For those brands that have a rooted belief system, conscience can guide circularity and sustainability strategies (Eklund et al), while for conventional brands there is an opportunity to reduce risk by learning from others (Platzek et al). The Special Issue also enriches the conscientious brands construct by providing empirical evidence of under-researched stakeholders, notably consumers and employees (Rüger et al., Liewendahl et al., Lee et al.,).

Two papers in the Special Issue (Rüger et al. and Grimm et al.) aim at strengthening the theoretical underpinnings of the conscientious brand construct. In Rüger, Mücksch and Siems empirical study of conscientious purpose-driven branding, the authors use the frame of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) to investigate the impact of a fictitious pro-immigration campaign on consumers. To date, MFT has not been used in conscientious brand research. Its value is in enabling a better understanding as to how moral judgements and values arise and the differences between individuals and cultures. In particular, the argument of MFT, is that there are cross-cultural moral foundations that are based on individualising foundations (for example care and fairness) and binding foundations that address community values (for example loyalty and authority). While all moral foundations are present in every human being, the weighting towards different foundations depends on culture and context, which in turn influence attitudes and intentions. MFT reminds that a conscientious brand has to consider the likely impact of its purpose and the way in which it communicates its beliefs to consumers and other stakeholders. As Rüger et al. argue, it is possible to reframe a stance to broaden acceptance, but such a move has attendant risks in terms of a potential loss of authenticity and a blurring of identity. This hints at the intriguing paradox for a conscientious brand as to how to stay true to internal beliefs and promote external engagement.

Grimm, Sahhar, Moss and Henseler, suggest that, increasingly, corporate brands position themselves as corporate moral agents. However, they criticize existing conscientious corporate brand frameworks because they tend to adopt simplistic perspectives on moral agency. Instead, they suggest that corporate brands should understand conscience as an emergent property. This implies an assemblage-view of conscientious corporate branding, where corporate brands become collective agents in an ever-evolving moral landscape.

Two additional papers focus on empirically exploring how conscientious brands are co-created by multiple stakeholders and what the influences established between them are (Liewendahl et al. and Platzek et al.). In the first paper, Liewendahl, Sarasvuo, Heinonen, Grönroos, and Stigzelius explore how employees and managers co-create conscientious brand promises. Their findings indicate that there are three factors which strengthen employees' alignment with conscientious brand promises. First, is the clarity and understanding of the promises. Second, is the time for upholding promises. Third, is the employees' agency in the co-creation of conscientious brand promises. Additionally, the authors identify three participatory mechanisms that facilitate the co-creation of promises by managers and employees. These findings suggest that brand promises serve as change agents that support employees in identifying and overcoming the challenges related to bringing conscientious promises to life.

In the second paper, Platzek, Schmitz, Fassnacht, and Waltermann explore how incumbents transform their brand portfolios toward sustainability through the introduction of conscientious brands. The symbiotic relationship between incumbents and conscientious brands is worth exploring, because while conventional incumbents are armed with plenty of resources and capabilities, they tend to avoid risk and struggle when embracing fundamental change. The results of this research suggest that conscientious brands inspire and guide conventional brands through their sustainability transformation. Conversely, conventional brands support the growth and development of conscientious brands through their financial backbone and operational excellence.

Another two papers investigate the stakeholder perceptions of conscientious brands (Abratt et al. and Lee et al.). First, Abratt, Silva Quaye, and Kleyn explore conscientious branding in a corporate brand context and propose the concept of the conscientious corporate brand (CCB). They argue the concept has become more important due to stakeholder demands for organizations to address environmental and social changes as well as to display ethical behaviour in their daily business operations. The paper explores antecedents and mediators of CCBs and establishes the role organizational purpose, ethical organizational culture, CSR, and brand authenticity play in shaping stakeholder perceptions of a CCB. Through two studies they show that organizational purpose

positively influences stakeholder perception of a strong CCB and that organizational culture moderates the relationship between organizational purpose and brand authenticity. They also show that brand authenticity mediates the link between organizational purpose and stakeholder perceptions of a CCB, and that corporate brands with a strong organizational purpose are more likely to be perceived by stakeholders to be a CCB.

Secondly, Lee, Wan and Leung empirically investigate how conscientious brands can influence sustainable consumer behaviours, using voluntary carbon offsetting (VCO). Through the lens of Expectancy-Value Theory, they show that deep claims significantly increase outcome expectations and purchase intention. However, when sustainable brand equity is high, even shallow claims become effective. The study also reveals that "mean visuals" (showing offsetting processes) enhance deep messages, while "end visuals" (showing outcomes) boost shallow ones. By bridging gaps in B2C research and offering concrete messaging strategies, the study uniquely advances our understanding of how conscientious brands can drive climate-positive behaviour.

Next, there is a paper which focuses on the application of conscientious brands in a very specific context: that of the luxury market. Eklund, Helmefalk, Ind, Markovic and Villegas offer a timely contribution to the literature on conscientious brands by asking whether luxury, circularity, and conscience can coexist. Through a conceptual integration of conscientious brands and circular business models, the authors present a framework that explains how a brand's internal belief system can be enacted through circular strategies. Using Vivienne Westwood as a vivid example, the paper explores how conscientious brands can go beyond surface-level CSR to embed conscience into the core of how they create, deliver and capture value.

Finally, while most of the research on conscientious brands focuses on the positive outcomes related to conscientious branding, Biedenbach explores the dark side of conscientious branding, which happens when conscientious brands authentically commit to their internal conscience but still fail morally. More precisely, her study deals with violations related to environmental claims in marketing communications. The research findings build a categorization of organizations based on their conscientious branding practices and their responses to moral failures.

Implications for managers

The different articles that make up this Special Issue provide very relevant implications for managerial practice. First, managers of conscientious brands need to be internally driven and externally aware. This means that managers need to be aware of the

transformative purpose of the brand and its guiding principles and be committed to enacting them. It also means that managers need to open-up the organization to engage with diverse stakeholders to understand their different needs, expectations and demands. Balancing these needs is not always easy because stakeholders often have conflicting interests. In these situations, managers need to use the brand's transformative purpose and guiding principles to do the right thing. This involves assessing the short- and long-term moral and economic costs of choices. It sometimes requires managers to be courageous – a key trait that conscientious leaders need to develop.

Second, if managers want to ensure that the practices of the organization align with the belief system, they will need to define a set of impact measures capable of indicating if the brand is moving forward in line with its purpose and principles. Here it is also worth noting that to increase the credibility of these measures managers can collaborate with external independent organizations that certify them.

Future research
The papers in this Special Issue have significantly advanced the emerging field of conscientious brands. However, there are still some research areas, deserving of attention.

One of the key characteristics of a conscientious brand is a transformative purpose (Iglesias & Ind, 2020; Iglesias et al., 2023), which attempts to effect significant positive change in the brand's wider ecosystems (Kapitan et al., 2022; Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023). First, this implies encouraging consumers and customers to adopt more sustainable and responsible behaviours. Second, it means challenging the brand's value network to develop a more conscientious approach to business. Third, it implies inspiring competitors to embrace transformative change. Overall, a transformative purpose should be concerned with promoting systemic change. There are four relevant research questions concerning the nature of transformative purpose:

- What is a transformative purpose and how can a conscientious brand define one?
- How can a conscientious brand spur transformative systemic change?
- How does a transformative purpose influence managerial attitudes towards risk and compliance?
- How can a conscientious brand maintain the integrity of its purpose over time?

A conscientious brand aims at creating shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2002) for its diverse stakeholders. This means being fair to the expectations of each stakeholder (Iglesias & Ind, 2016) and balancing their sometimes-divergent needs (Beitelspacher & Getchell, 2023). However, it is not always possible to reconcile stakeholders' competing

needs and relevant tensions may arise. Confronting these tensions requires critically thinking about the criteria by which judgements are made (Korsgaard, 2009). While this Special Issue has given us insights into new stakeholders, in particular we still miss research into the attitudes of investors. Potential research questions are:

- How can conscientious brands navigate competing interests among stakeholders?
- What mechanisms should conscientious brands develop to tackle tensions between stakeholders and to address ethical dilemmas?
- What internal and external stakeholders should be involved in these decision-making mechanisms?
- What role do investors play in influencing conscientious brands' commitments over both the short- and long-term?

Conscientious brands aim to create a profitable business, while doing the right thing, in line with their purpose and values (Ind & Iglesias, 2022). However, it is not always easy to 'walk the talk' and some brands fail to embed conscience into practices (France et al., 2024). Iglesias and Ind (2020) suggest that a successful embedment requires a supportive corporate culture and leadership. Nevertheless, very little is still known about the role of human resource policies and the practices and leadership required to promote conscientious brands. Therefore, the following questions arise:

- How does a conscientious brand's belief system impact its environmental and social commitments?
- What human resource policies and practices can facilitate the embedment of brand conscience within the organization?
- What type of leadership style can best promote a conscientious brand?

Overall, future research should focus on further exploring how conscientious brands can promote transformative systemic change by means of orchestrating a complex network of stakeholders, who often have conflicting interests. This implies the need to understand which types of leadership styles and organizational cultures can better support this transformative systemic change. Given the extremely volatile, uncertain, complex, and polarized world we live in, we believe that these lines of research should be of great interest to any researcher interested in brand management.

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Figure 1: The key attributes of conscientious brands