



## BRAND EQUITY AND PURCHASE INTENTION IN APPAREL: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF BRAND TRUST

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### ABSTRACT:

Brand equity helps apparel brands stand out in crowded markets, but strong brand names do not always translate into purchase intention—especially when consumers are concerned about fit, quality consistency, online authenticity, and post-purchase service. This article examines how brand trust works as a key psychological bridge between brand equity (brand awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty) and purchase intention in the apparel category. Drawing on customer-based brand equity logic and relationship marketing, we argue that brand equity shapes what consumers *know* and *feel* about a brand, while brand trust shapes whether they feel safe enough to *act* on those beliefs in a real purchase situation. In apparel, where trial and tactile evaluation are often limited (particularly online), trust reduces perceived risk, increases confidence in claims, and increases consumers' willingness to pay, repeat purchases, and recommend. Synthesizing prior empirical research across fashion, retail, and digital environments, the article proposes a conceptual explanation of the equity → trust → intention pathway, highlights the conditions under which trust becomes more important (e.g., online purchase context, sustainability/ethical claims, influencer marketing, and return experiences), and summarizes managerial actions that measurably build trust. The discussion also integrates recent market evidence that online shopping is rising among younger consumers, making trust-centric brand strategies increasingly decisive for apparel brands seeking long-term loyalty and sales growth.

### KEYWORDS:

BRAND EQUITY, BRAND TRUST, PURCHASE INTENTION, APPAREL BRANDS, CUSTOMER-BASED BRAND EQUITY (CBBE), CONSUMER BEHAVIOR, FASHION RETAIL.

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### INTRODUCTION:

Apparel brands compete in a space where consumers can switch quickly, compare instantly, and publicly review their experiences. In such markets, brand equity—the value added by a brand name to a product—becomes a practical advantage because it can make consumers notice, prefer, and repeatedly choose a brand even when alternatives look similar. Classic customer-based brand equity (CBBE) thinking explains this advantage by reference to what consumers store in memory: awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty-related responses (Keller, 1993; Oppong et al., 2022).

However, apparel is also a “high-uncertainty” category. Fit varies across brands, quality is difficult to judge from photographs, and claims (e.g., “premium cotton,” “sustainable,” “made to last”) are not always verifiable at the time of purchase. As a result, consumers often rely on trust—their confident expectation that the brand will

deliver what it promises and act in the consumer’s interest when problems arise (Mattathil et al., 2026; Sung et al., 2023).

This is why a brand can be well known (high awareness) yet still struggle to convert equity into purchase intention if consumers do not trust its sizing consistency, fabric durability, refund handling, or transparency. Relationship marketing research has long positioned trust as a central driver of loyalty and repeat purchase behaviors (Pitta et al., 2006; Rudzewicz & Strychalska-Rudzewicz, 2021).

At the same time, the decision context is shifting. Younger consumers are increasingly buying online; for example, PwC’s “Circular Fashion Survey on New Generations” reports that 54% of surveyed Millennials and Gen Z made at least half/most/all of their purchases online in the last 12 months, rising from 35% the year before—an

environment where trust becomes even more critical because physical inspection is limited (Achim et al., 2024; Lim et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present article focuses on a central question: How does brand trust mediate the relationship between brand equity and purchase intention in apparel? We synthesize prior studies and propose an integrative explanation: brand equity shapes perceived value and reduces cognitive effort, whereas brand trust reduces perceived risk and increases purchase confidence, together strengthening purchase intention (Civelek & Ertemel, 2019; Khan et al., 2014). We also discuss evidence-informed strategies for apparel brands to actively build trust so that their equity reliably converts into sales and loyalty.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Aaker's model positions brand equity as a set of assets (awareness, associations, perceived quality, loyalty) that add value for both consumers and firms. In apparel, these assets influence how quickly consumers recognize brands and how strongly they interpret signals like "premium," "trendy," or "reliable." (Aaker, 1991).

Keller conceptualizes CBBE as the "differential effect" of brand knowledge on consumer responses to marketing. This is particularly relevant to apparel, where identical product attributes can be evaluated differently depending on whether the label is trusted and familiar (Keller, 1993).

Chaudhuri and Holbrook show that brand trust and brand affect work through loyalty mechanisms to influence market outcomes (e.g., market share and price premium). For apparel, trust can translate into a willingness to repurchase and tolerate minor price increases because perceived risk is lower (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).

Delgado-Ballester argues that trust is closely linked to brand value because trustworthy brands consistently honor their commitments. In apparel, promise-keeping includes fabric performance after washing, consistent sizing, and hassle-free returns (Delgado-Ballester, 2005).

Research on brand trust scales strengthens empirical studies of mediation by clarifying trust as multidimensional (e.g., reliability and intention). Such clarity of measurement is necessary when testing whether trust "explains" how equity becomes intention (Delgado-Ballester, 2004/2005).

Studies in consumer markets indicate that satisfaction supports trust, and trust supports loyalty and purchase-related outcomes. In apparel, satisfaction with fit and durability can quietly accumulate into trust, which then makes future purchases more likely (Erciş et al., 2012).

Work on brand perception components shows that favorable perceptions link to purchase intention and loyalty outcomes. For apparel, this suggests that equity signals are not just "awareness," but a complex configuration of meanings (style identity, status cues, quality beliefs) that can build trust indirectly (Foroudi et

al., 2018).

Research on store brands and private labels indicates that perceived quality influences perceived value and purchase intention. In apparel, perceived quality often functions as an equity dimension that fosters trust—especially for basics, where consumers seek reliability (e.g., tees, denim) (Diallo et al., 2017).

Evidence indicates that negative information about corporate reputation can reduce attitudes and purchase intentions, even when awareness is high. Apparel brands facing labor or sustainability controversies may therefore see equity weakened unless they rebuild trust through transparency and corrective action (e.g., Jung & Seock, 2016).

Empirical work in fashion clothing brands has directly tested brand equity → purchase intention relationships, often finding that awareness and perceived quality are strong predictors. The apparel context suggests that these effects are stronger when brand claims are perceived as credible (Uddin et al., 2016).

Some retail-based studies in India highlight that the brand equity of apparel retail formats can influence purchase intention. This supports the practical view that equity is not only about the brand label but also about the shopping experience that reinforces trust (e.g., retail service cues) (Kaur & Kaur, 2020).

Research on fast fashion indicates that awareness may influence purchase intention through mediators such as brand image and perceived quality, implying multi-step pathways rather than simple direct effects. Trust can function similarly as a mediator in apparel, especially when purchase risk is perceived (Chen & Chang, 2021).

A large open-access study in luxury contexts finds that brand equity and trust both contribute to purchase intention, alongside social media marketing activities and status consumption. In premium apparel, trust helps justify the price premium by reducing "regret risk" (Husain et al., 2022).

Evidence from online apparel settings supports the attitude–intention–behavior chain, showing that positive online shopping attitudes predict intention and actual purchase. In such contexts, trust is a plausible mechanism shaping attitudes toward purchasing without physical inspection (Patel et al., 2023).

Research on Gen Z apparel engagement indicates that interaction with brand content can strengthen intentions. Engagement often increases familiarity and positive associations—inputs to brand equity—which may, in turn, translate into trust when experiences match expectations (Pant et al., 2023).

Studies in digital settings show brand awareness contributes to purchase intention, sometimes through moderated mediation models. This supports the idea that brand knowledge alone is insufficient; intervening psychological variables (such as trust) shape the transition from awareness to intention (Hameed et al., 2023).

Multiple consumer-behavior studies across categories show that trust can mediate between brand image and purchase intention. The same logic extends to apparel: image and equity cues may create trust, which in turn triggers intention (e.g., Punyatoya, 2014; similar mediation evidence).

Recent work emphasizes that transparency strengthens trust, which in turn supports purchase intention. For apparel brands facing skepticism about quality and ethics, transparency (materials, sourcing, care guidance) is a direct lever for building trust (2024 evidence).

Evidence focusing on young consumers in branded fashion clothing highlights the relevance of brand image, uniqueness motives, and word-of-mouth as purchase drivers. Such motives become more actionable when trust reduces the perceived risk of trying a new brand or paying more (Singh, 2024).

Across sectors, there is a growing pattern of models where brand equity or marketing actions influence intention through relational variables—trust, attachment, satisfaction, or engagement. This trend supports the article's core proposition that brand trust is not optional in apparel; it is a conversion mechanism that turns equity into intention (e.g., Husain et al., 2022; Patel et al., 2023).

## DISCUSSION:

The literature converges on a simple practical insight: brand equity helps consumers narrow choices, but brand trust helps them commit. In apparel, commitment is fragile because the consumer's "risk list" is long—fit uncertainty, fabric performance after washing, authenticity concerns online, fear of complicated returns, and skepticism about sustainability claims. Brand equity addresses the front end of the funnel: awareness makes a brand salient; associations create meaning (e.g., "minimal," "premium," "youthful"); perceived quality reduces cognitive load; and loyalty makes repeat purchase easier (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Brand trust, however, operates more deeply in the decision-making process. Trust is the consumer's belief that the brand will reliably deliver and will not exploit them in uncertain situations (Delgado-Ballester, 2005). That belief reduces perceived risk and increases perceived control—both of which are strongly associated with purchase intention in mediated models reported in many branding studies (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Husain et al., 2022).

Recent market evidence makes this mediation logic even more relevant. McKinsey's *State of Fashion 2024* notes that global fashion growth expectations for 2024 were modest (about 2–4%), implying brands cannot rely on market expansion alone and must improve conversion and loyalty efficiency. Meanwhile, PwC's *Circular Fashion Survey on New Generations* reports that 54% of Millennials and Gen Z made at least half/most/all of their purchases online in the last 12 months, up from 35% in 2023. More online buying means more "trust-heavy" decision-making; consumers

can't touch fabric, try size, or judge stitching easily, so they substitute trust signals—brand reputation, reliable sizing guidance, transparent descriptions, and credible reviews.

In practical terms, this suggests a mediation chain that apparel managers can act on:

1. **Build equity cues** (consistent identity, distinctive associations, quality signals), then,
2. **Convert cues into trust** (promise-keeping, transparent policies, responsive service), which then,
3. **Converts into intention and purchase** (reduced hesitation, higher willingness to pay, repeat intent).

This also helps explain why apparel brands sometimes experience high social buzz (awareness) but low conversion: awareness without trust may increase browsing rather than buying. The reverse can also happen: some niche brands with limited awareness achieve strong conversion because high trust is created through authenticity, clear product information, and dependable fulfillment. Overall, the evidence supports treating brand trust as the key bridge variable that makes brand equity financially "real" in apparel.

## CONCLUSION:

This article examines why brand equity does not automatically translate into purchase intention in apparel and why brand trust is often the missing link. Drawing from customer-based brand equity theory, we can view equity as the consumer's stored brand knowledge and favorable responses—awareness, associations, perceived quality, and loyalty tendencies (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). These elements help consumers quickly recognize brands, interpret meanings, and efficiently shortlist options.

Yet apparel decisions typically involve substantial uncertainty. Even when consumers admire a brand, they may hesitate because they fear poor fit, inconsistent sizing, color mismatch, fabric deterioration, delayed delivery, or difficult returns. Here, brand trust is decisive because it reduces perceived risk and increases confidence that the brand will deliver on its value promise and treat consumers fairly if something goes wrong (Delgado-Ballester, 2005). Trust, therefore, transforms "liking" into "willingness to buy."

The reviewed studies consistently suggest that relational variables such as trust and satisfaction play a central role in shaping loyalty and purchase behavior (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Erciş et al., 2012). This supports the mediating explanation: brand equity influences purchase intention partly because it builds brand trust, and trust in turn strengthens intention.

The managerial relevance increases as shopping shifts online. PwC's survey evidence indicates a growing share of Millennials and Gen Z are buying a large portion of their fashion online, where tactile evaluation is absent, and trust signals are more important. At the same time,

macroeconomic conditions indicate modest overall growth in 2024, making conversion efficiency and repeat purchases critical performance goals rather than optional improvements.

In conclusion, the apparel brand that consistently wins is not merely the most visible, but the one that turns visibility into credibility. The strategic implication is clear: apparel firms should treat brand trust as a measurable asset and deliberately manage it through promise-keeping, transparency, and customer-centered recovery systems. When trust is strengthened, brand equity becomes easier to monetize through higher purchase intention, reduced switching, and deeper loyalty—creating a more resilient brand in competitive, digitally influenced apparel markets.

### SUGGESTIONS:

1. **Treat trust as a “conversion KPI,” not a soft concept.** Along with awareness and engagement, track trust-related indicators: perceived reliability, fairness of returns, confidence in sizing guidance, and belief in quality consistency. Trust scales used in branding research can be adapted for use in survey dashboards and linked to conversion/repurchase outcomes (Delgado-Ballester, 2005).
2. **Make “promise-keeping” visible in product communication.** Apparel trust rises when consumers can clearly predict outcomes. Provide fabric specifications, care impact (shrinkage expectations), transparency on blends, and fit notes (stretch level, model measurements, garment measurements). The goal is to reduce ambiguity that drives hesitation in apparel purchases.
3. **Standardize sizing guidance and reduce fit-risk.** In apparel, a major source of trust breakdowns is inconsistency. Establish brand-wide fit standards, provide measurement-based size recommendation tools, and present real customer fit feedback. Even small improvements here reduce perceived risk and strengthen intention—especially online, where uncertainty is highest (Patel et al., 2023).
4. **Design return and exchange policies as trust-building mechanisms.** Returns are not only a logistics function; they are a trust event. Make return steps simple, timelines clear, and refunds predictable. A consumer who experiences a smooth return is more likely to purchase again because perceived risk declines after the first “test” of fairness.
5. **Strengthen authenticity and transparency cues in digital channels.** With the rise of online purchases among younger shoppers, brands must build credibility at the screen level. Use verified reviews, detailed imagery, and transparent disclosures (materials, sourcing, sustainability

claims). Trust grows when brand messages are consistent across the website, marketplace listings, and social channels.

6. **Invest in customer service as a trust engine, not a cost center.** Prompt responses, clear resolution paths, and proactive updates (e.g., delivery delays, stock issues) protect trust. Research consistently identifies trust as a driver of loyalty and purchase outcomes; service quality is one of the most controllable antecedents of trust (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001).
7. **Use social media to build equity and trust.** Social media often builds awareness quickly, but the missing step is credibility. Encourage content that demonstrates product performance—wash tests, fit comparisons, styling versatility—and collaborate with creators who provide honest fit notes. This aligns with evidence that both brand equity and trust are important for purchase intention in fashion-related categories (Husain et al., 2022).
8. **Strengthen perceived quality through consistent product performance.** In apparel, perceived quality is not just premium fabric; it is stitching durability, colorfastness, shrinkage control, and comfort over time. Consistency is what transforms a single positive purchase into trust that supports future purchases.
9. **Build trust through ethical clarity (without over-claiming).** If sustainability or ethical sourcing is part of the brand promise, use verifiable statements and avoid vague claims. Over-claiming can damage trust more than saying less. Transparency-based trust benefits purchase intention by reducing skepticism (2024 evidence).

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