Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Studies
ISSN: 2663-7197
DOI: 10.32996/jhsss
Journal Homepage: www.al-kindipublisher.com/index.php/jhsss

JHSSS
AL-KINDI CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Contribution of Perceived Brand Ethics to the Development of Consumer Trust: A Qualitative Study of Moroccan Islamic Banks

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| ABSTRACT
The Moroccan banking sector is facing growing challenges to adhere to emerging standards of business ethics and corporate social and environmental responsibility. A marketing ethic based on good organizational conduct is now necessary to consolidate competitive advantage, strengthen market positioning and ensure the long-term sustainability of the corporate brand. This article primarily aims to delve into a relatively overlooked subject within marketing literature: the consumer-perceived ethics in the service sector, the brand equity of Islamic banks, and their consequential influence on brand trust development.

| KEYWORDS

Islamic banks, Brand ethics, Ethical brand equity, brand trust.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 12 December 2023 **PUBLISHED:** 01 January 2024 **DOI:** 10.32996/jhsss.2024.6.1.1

1. Introduction
The current economic context is under increasing pressure from socio-cultural divergences and the mediation of environmental and health crises. Consumer behavior in a post-modern society has become increasingly sensitive to ethical issues. Consumers aspire to see ethical attributes in the footprints of organizations. Marketing practices are at the heart of new demands for adaptation to an environment geared towards compliance with business ethics standards. Ethical marketing is now a strategic point of reference for building a strong competitive advantage. Nowadays, the survival of companies depends on reconciling ethical constraints, the expectations of social partners and economic profitability.

Islamic banking is seen as a response to the crises of conventional debt-based financing models promoted by Western financial institutions, an alternative financial system respectful of its Islamic principles, offering interest-free finance, promoting justice, and fostering social cohesion (Almahy et al., 2014).

Today, over 500 Islamic financial institutions operate worldwide, with assets in excess of one trillion dollars, testifying to the growing importance and widespread acceptance of Islamic finance on a global scale (Etzod G. et al., 2011). Some conventional banks in Western countries have also adopted the Islamic finance model, adding so-called "Islamic windows" to their existing banking operations (Ranzini,2007).

Within the framework of this study, our problematic attempts to answer the following question: What contribution does the perception of brand ethics make to the development of consumer trust?

The objectives of the study are as follows:

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- The first part proposes the conceptualization of consumer-perceived ethics in Islamic bank management in relation to brand equity and brand trust,
- The second part proposes an empirical analysis of the conceptual model in the context of a qualitative study of Moroccan Islamic banks,
- The third part looks at the results and discussions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand ethics

The field of brand ethics represents the intersection of business ethics and brand management. An ethical brand is one that avoids harming the public good, acts with integrity, honesty, responsibility, responsiveness and respect (Fan, 2005). Brunk (2012) argues that ethical brand behavior generates the application of deontological and consequentialist evaluation principles to determine whether or not the company, as an active player in its market, is acting responsibly.

The definition of an ethical brand remains a challenge to this day (Brunk, 2012; Fan, 2005; Singh et al.,2012). Our definition of ethical perception in the customer's relationship with the brand has therefore focused on the customer's interactions with the company, the staff in contact and the product itself. The ethical image of a brand depends not only on its social and environmental responsibility but also on the way in which its ethical practices as a whole are perceived by its social partners, which is why this perception of the corporate brand requires increasing attention (Mohr et al., 2001; Newholm & Shaw, 2007). While the dimensions and place of ethics in corporate responsibilities are disparate and give rise to several multidimensional conceptual models (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), two CSR frameworks have been provided, one by the European Ethics Commission in 2001 and the other by Perrini, Pogutz and Tancatti,(2006) (Brunk,2012). The ethical corporate brand, therefore, presents the overall promise of the corporate brand not only to its consumers but to all its stakeholders.

2.2 Brand ethics in Islamic marketing

Ethics encompass moral issues (right/wrong) rules of conduct; the Islamic view of ethics is based on three main pillars: Adl (justice), Amanah (Trust) and Ihssan (benevolence) (Beekun & Badaoui,2005), which revolve around Tawhid which means man's acceptance of the oneness and sovereignty of God (Mansour et al., 2015). The concept of Tawhid is the basis of all marketing strategies, including brand ethics in Islam (Maulour et al., 2016). Brand building in Islamic marketing is a social process that enables groups of individuals to sell, exchange and create value (Abbas et al., 2019). Brand management is at the heart of Sharia marketing, where products and services must be Halal, humanistic, realistic and transparent. In addition to product quality, performance, compliance, sustainability, aesthetics and the rest of the attributes and characteristics of a product/service, the ethical nature of halal can, therefore, be a distinctive advantage over conventional competition (Arnika et al., 2022).

2.3 Brand ethics in Islamic banking

It's important to bear in mind that there is a difference between conventional ethics and the Islamic ethics of a corporate brand. Islamic ethics are based on the Muslim sharia as a foundation, using religion as the basis for structuring all economic and financial systems. Conventional ethical banking focuses more on intuition, human faculties and individual moral reasoning (Mansour et al., 2015) Whereas Islamic banking is closely linked to Muslim law and, therefore, to Maslaha, which means that any investment/financing decision must take into account the impact on the general welfare of society (Mansour et al.2015Virtues such as honesty, benevolence and transparency are at the heart of Islamic finance (muala et al.2016). Projects whose activities are contrary to Islamic morality are not financed (gambling, alcohol trading, nightclub trading, etc.), and riba (bank interest) is forbidden, as is speculation (Ahmad, 2000). Investment is more ethical in Islamic banking than in conventional banking, leading to increasingly secure and rapid economic growth (Alserhan, 2010). One line of research reinforces the latter position, pointing out in a study that unethical investments can be detrimental to the economy, as unethical corporate behavior has a negative effect on brand image, sales and investments.

In summary, Brand ethics in Islamic bank marketing revolves around 7 essential points of the Islamic marketing mix that enable the creation of and influence a brand and its sales in a target market (Firdaous,2015). The seven elements are as follows:

First: Islamic banking products are based on Sharia law and are, therefore, contracts for the purchase, sale, rental or sharing of profits. These include Musharakah (joint capital), ija'rah (lease), ijarah Muntahia Bittamlik (hire-purchase), Istinsna'a (purchase paid in euros), Rahn(pledge), Qard(rescue fund), Hawalah (factoring), Wadiah (savings), Kafallah (guarantee), Mudharabah sight deposit etc (Abdul hassan et al., 2008).

Second: prices in Islamic banking are linked to Sharia principles and therefore based on profit-sharing. Each Islamic banking service includes a profit margin (Ujrah) and a sales commission (J'ualah) for financing and fund-raising services. The profit-sharing percentage granted by the Islamic bank is, therefore, built directly on the customer's financial performance history rather than on

a predefined, unilaterally adjusted ratio. Preferential profit-sharing rates may be granted to customers with the best financial performance or to customers who repay before the end of the term to encourage bill anticipation (Abdul Hassan et al., 2008).

Third: Promotion in Islamic banking is all about effective branding to make the most positive impression on the consumer's mind. To achieve this, advertising must first and foremost comply with Sharia law. Information on services must be provided in full transparency, and even product features that customers find lacking must be mentioned. Without any negative propaganda, Islamic banking makes itself known through benefit/result testimonials in order to penetrate new target markets (Aravik et al., 2022).

Fourth: Distribution in Islamic banking respects the objective of strategic location and the principle of Allah's Caliph for the optimization of resources. The Islamic bank must choose optimal points of sale to facilitate encounters with customers and investors (points of sale in industrial zones/frequented areas, linked by means of transport, easy and clear information on location, etc.) (Abdul Hassan et al., 2008).

Fifth: People in Islamic banking represent an essential point as they have a direct impact on consumer perception; the staff, the customer and their customers are the people (Zeithaml et al., 2013). Employees have a duty to provide customers with the necessary information about a product or service because access to fair and equitable commercial information is a virtue of Islamic law (Chan et al., 2017).

Sixth: The Islamic banking process must respect the way in which the service is created and distributed to the end customer, which is essential for consumer satisfaction and credibility (Abdul Hassan et al., 2008). The service must be delivered in a way that respects the fairness and kindness of Sharia law in commercial exchanges. Maintaining the same level of service is essential to consumer appreciation. Each Islamic bank has a predefined service level requirement.

Seventh: Physical evidence in Islamic banking is the set of methods and forms of service provided to customers that constitute tangible proof of the quality of the service. The method and form of service are often used to bring positive testimonials to the general public. Testimonials are linked to the material requirements of the points of sale and contact personnel. Positive testimonials accelerate the development of the Islamic bank's brand image (Aravik et al., 2022).

Today, all companies aspiring to create strong brands want to offer an exceptional experience, especially in the service sector, where they need to integrate ethics at the heart of their brand strategies (Balmer, 2001; Rindell et al.,2011). Ethical branding is, therefore, essential for companies to elicit a stronger emotional response and improve business performance and brand equity in general (Brunk, 2012).

- H1: Marketing ethics influences the development of the Islamic bank brand

2.4 Perception of brand ethics and ethical brand equity

A recent study has focused on the ethical conception of consumers, identifying six main areas reflecting the way in which companies/brands can be ethical (Rindell et al.,2011; Shea & Brunk, 2010). Literature suggests that ethical behaviour is in the best interests of brands (Maxfield,2008) as stakeholders, notably consumers, become more demanding and expect brands to reflect their ethical concerns (Bhattacharya,2004). Brands need to be perceived as honest, responsible and accountable to their various stakeholders (brunk 2010). Several studies have attempted to examine branding from a spiritual point of view (El Amir, 2010), some of them approaching the spiritual aspect of the Islamic brand (Mourad et al., 2010). Mourad et al.(2010) have attempted to determine the spiritual attributes of an Islamic brand and distinguish between Islamic and conventional banks, based on Osman's (2010) two dimensions, CSR and God-consciousness, to represent the institutional image of an Islamic bank. Muala et al. (2012) consider that the brand image in Islamic banking ethics is linked to three inseparable dimensions: CSR, God-consciousness and Sharia compliance. Aroun and Tourois (2015), in their definition of Islamic banking brand image, point out that ethics, CSR and beliefs strongly connect business activity and target customers (Muala et al., 2012). Beliefs in the sense of connection with the creator represent an important spiritual attribute of branding (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012).

- H2 a. Perception of brand ethics influences the development of brand image in Moroccan Islamic banking.

Ethical branding encompasses both the values of the product, the company, and the image it also communicates (Balmer,2011). To shape a positive corporate image, it is then important to see the product/service identity, corporate citizenship and social responsibility program (Abratt & Kleyn,2012). Perceived identity is crucial in shaping corporate awareness and represents one of the most important characteristics of marketing strategy results (Brown, 2010). Notoriety in Islamic banking marketing ethics is a complex field of study that integrates Islamic ethical principles into the communication and marketing strategies of financial

institutions (Afrida & Lubis, 2021). Founded on Sharia principles, Islamic finance is distinguished by its ethical values, where transparency, justice and fairness prevail in all financial transactions (Arnika,2022). Trust and reputation are fundamental pillars of reputation in Islamic finance. Financial institutions in this sector attach great importance to how they are perceived by customers and the community. This reputation is based on strict compliance with Islamic ethical principles, such as the prohibition of interest (riba) and haram (Islamically forbidden) activities (ElSahn, 2016).

Transparency in operations is crucial, as customers need to have a clear and complete picture of financial transactions, avoiding any opacity or ambiguity. Moreover, fairness in the treatment of customers is essential, emphasizing equality and justice in all aspects of Islamic banking (Abdul Hassan,2008). Communication plays a crucial role in building brand awareness. Islamic banks use specific communication channels to inform customers about their Sharia-compliant products and services. Marketing campaigns aim to educate and raise awareness, emphasizing the ethical difference between Islamic finance and conventional models. However, it is imperative to stress that notoriety in Islamic banking is fragile and sensitive. Any deviation from Islamic ethical principles can compromise the institution's reputation (AlMahy et al., 2014).

- H2 b: Perception of brand ethics influences the development of brand awareness in Moroccan Islamic banking.

In recent years, a great deal of research has focused on the links between ethical reputation, companies social and environmental responsibility and consumer reactions, illustrating more concretely the repercussions of ethical perceptions in the customer's relationship with the brand (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Cow and Williams, 2000; Mohr et al., 2001; Lichenstein et al., 2004; Berens et al., 2005; De pelsmaker et al., 2005; Mohr & Webb, 2005; Biehal & Sheinin, 2007; Madrigal & Boush, 2008).

Interest in purchasing behaviour is growing, as it shows the essential role of the customer as a stakeholder in the diffusion of the reputation of a brand or a company in general (Dawkins, 2005), hence the significant influence of ethical reputation on the brand's financial performance (Brunk, 2010). Attitudes and perceptions become a cognitive set of beliefs, evaluations, feelings (affects) and intentions that predispose an individual to react in a certain way towards a given brand (Brunk, 2010). Islamic banking corporate reputation is the set of "perceptions", "knowledge", "evaluations", and "feelings" that stakeholders hold about this organization (Almahy et al., 2014). For their part, Afrida &Lubis (2021) have developed an index to measure the net value of the Islamic bank's brand reputation on a number of Internet features such as social media and Google Play applications (Afrida & lubis,2021). Establishing and maintaining a reputation is based on a number of principles; strict Shariah compliance is not only an ethical requirement but also a necessity to preserve customer trust and the institution's reputation (Khan et al.,2008).

- H2 c: Perception of brand ethics influences the development of brand reputation in Moroccan Islamic banking.

Unethical brand behavior will have a negative effect on brand equity. Societal and environmental marketing programs, credibility, fairness and commitment to the brand community can enhance brand equity development through strong market awareness (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Jones, 2005). Jones (2005) proposed a brand equity model for developing brand equity strength through socially responsible corporate behaviour, while Brickley et al. support the same view, emphasizing that socially responsible brand behaviour is a key success factor for developing a good brand image. Lai et al., 2013, within the ethical marketing framework, proved in an empirical study that a brand's social and environmental responsibility increases its credibility on the one hand and its consumers' expectations on the other (Wang, 2010), so that a company develops greater brand equity. Sigh et al. (2012) then studied the positive relationship between consumer-perceived ethics in the service sector and brand equity and argued that to better understand whether an investment in brand ethics is profitable.

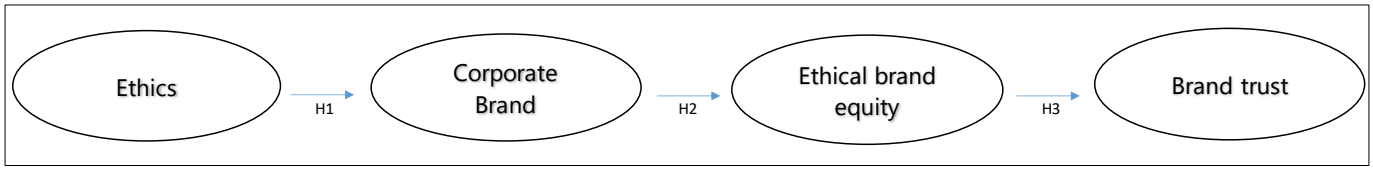
2.5 Ethical brand equity and brand trust

Within the framework of marketing ethics, the literature on trust for some authors affirms that the notions of benevolence and honesty are strongly linked despite their conceptual distinction and are, therefore, inseparable. (Geyskens and Steenkamp, 1995; Scheer and Steenkamp, 1995; Larzelere and Huston, 1980). In the context of our study, we have chosen to adopt the third stream, as defined by Moorman et al., (1992), "the willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence". According to them, confidence is first and foremost an expectation, a belief, a feeling, but also a behavioral intention that implies the consumer's vulnerability and uncertainty (Guibert, 2016): (1) credibility the ability to respect the term of exchange and meet the consumer's technical expectations (Swaen & Champitaz,2008), (2) perceived integrity to maintain commitments to the consumer credibly and continuously (Kaabachi, 2018), (3) benevolence the company's ability to preserve the consumer's interests while refraining from taking advantage of the situation when the latter is vulnerable (Ball coleho and Machas, 2004). In an empirical study, Lai et al. (2013) emphasize that a brand's social and environmental responsibility increases its credibility, trust and consumer expectations, which in turn drives a company to develop greater brand equity (Wang,2010). In Islamic marketing ethics, customer trust is the result of interaction with the institution's employees. It depends on the quality and reliability of the services offered by the institution (Naser et al., 1999). This conceptualization of trust is strongly linked to the principles of Mua'malat based on Islamic

ethics, where benevolent employees confirm the relationship and, if not, damage the reputation (Abdul Hassan et al., 2008). The practice of Islamic ethics in commercial exchange, as perceived by the customer, reinforces customer trust (Naser & Mountinho,1997).

- H4a: Consumer trust in Moroccan Islamic banking is influenced by ethical brand equity

Figure 1- Conceptual model for the contribution of the perceived ethics in the development of consumer trust



Source: personal elaboration based on the literature review

3. Methodology

Qualitative research methods were the most appropriate choice, given the nature of the subject, which was largely unexplored, and the nature of the variables in our research model. We wanted to gather as much information as possible through an open-interview exploration of how the ethical behavior of Islamic banks is perceived by their consumers. And what drives a company to develop greater brand equity (Sigh et al., 2012; Wang, 2010). We conducted 8 long semi-structured interviews with consumers of four Moroccan alternative banks. The data analysis is guided by the above research objectives and the literature review that served as our conceptual framework. The results come directly from a faithful analysis of the raw data from our survey responses. The qualitative analysis method used is horizontal and vertical analysis (GIANNELLONI et al. de marché, Vuibert, Paris, 1994). It is a crossover between intra-interview analysis and analysis that highlights how each item in the grid was addressed by all interviewees.

3.1 Data collection

The information needed to study our problem was gathered through 8 semi-structured interviews, each lasting an average of 45 minutes. The analysis was carried out on the basis of a convenience sample, noting that after 8 interviews, we were no longer gathering any new information, our harvest having been completed in accordance with the principle of theoretical saturation (Glaser &others,1986). We introduced a number of themes using our interview grid as a guide. We did not impose any specific procedure and chose to intervene as little as possible. The respondents' silences were respected, and the interviews were recorded using a smartphone tape recorder and faithfully transcribed verbatim by hand. We chose to develop the interviews around our previously developed interview grid, with an introductory phase, a phase focusing on the subject, an in-depth phase, and a concluding phase.

3.2 Analysis of interviews and construction categories

This is the phase of manually transcribing the interviewees' audio recordings onto paper: we have remained faithful to each of the respondents' speeches. Every silence, repetition or a slip of the tongue is carefully noted. After a floating reading of the first 2-3 interviews, we proceeded to identify themes, sub-themes and key words. These are phrases and words with a high frequency of appearance and constitute our analysis categories and sub-categories.

3.3 Building a synthesis grid and coding textual data

We constructed an analysis grid for data analysis and coding. The synthesis grid is thus applicable to all the interviews, with the aim of iteratively and successively identifying the various headings (categories). Each selection is based on a floating reading of each interviewee's answers while adhering to the interview grid laid down in advance so as not to stray from the study's objective. Each heading (category) is identified by a code to facilitate the grouping and processing of lexical data.

The lexical data are analyzed in two stages. On the one hand, the vertical analysis is first used for intrainterview processing to shed light on the way in which each respondent approached the different categories in the interview grid. The latter traces the order and number of appearances of the categories to create a summary sheet specific to each interview. On the other hand, the horizontal analysis traces the appearance of the categories in all the interviews. This forms the basis of the qualitative data analysis summary report.

Table 1: Summary grid of consumers' ethical perceptions towards Moroccan Islamic banks

Topic Catégories	Interview n°1	Interview n°2	Interview n°3	Interview N	Summary
1 Perception of brand ethics Summary: Perception of brand ethics					
1.1 Honesty					
1.2 Fairness					
1.3 Fairness					
1.4. Transparency					
1.5 Respect for moral values					
1.6 Social/environmental responsibility					
1.7 Keeping promises					
2.ethical brand equity Summary: Ethical brand equity					
2.1 Brand image					
2.2. Brand awareness					
2.3 Reputation					
3. trust in the ethical brand Summary: Trust in the ethical brand					
3.1 Credibility					
3.2 Integrity					
3.3. Benevolence					
vertical"Synthesis "					General "Synthesis "

Source: qualitative analysis results

3.4 Quantification

Table 2: Summary of the analysis grid of consumers' ethical perceptions towards Moroccan alternative banks

Topic catégories	**Interviewee n°1**	**Interviewee n°2**	**Interviewee n°3**	**Interviewee n°4**	**Interviewee n°5**	**Interviewee n°6**	**Interviewee n°7**	**Interviewee n°8**	**Cumulative frequencies**		
									Absolutes	**Relatives**	**Weight**
1 Perception of brand ethics Summary: Perception of brand ethics	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			**8/8=100%**
1.1 Honesty	1	0	0	2(1)	0	1	3	0	6	12%(3)	**2/8=25%**
1.2 Fairness	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	4,00%	**2/8=25%**
1.3 Fairness	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	3	6,00%	4/8=50%
1.4. Transparency	2	0	1	1	1	1	2	0	9	19,00%	7/8=87,5%
1.5 Respect for moral values	1	0	0	3	1	2	3	2	12	26,00%	7/8=87,5%
1.6 Social/environmental responsibility	1	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	12	26,00%	8/8=100%
1.7 Keeping promises	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	4	15,00%	3/8=37,5%
	60%(2)	**36%**	**26%**	**64%**	**41%**	**45%**	**54%**	**57%**	**47**		
2. ethical brand equity Summary: Ethical brand equity	Yes (4)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			**8/8=100%**
2.1 Brand image	1	1	1	1	2	2	0	1	9	33,33%	7/8=87,5%
2.2. Brand awareness	0	2	3	1	0	0	3	0	9	33%	5/8=62,5%
2.3 Reputation	1	1	3	2	1	0	1	0	9	33%	6/8=75%
	20%	**36%**	**46%**	**28%**	**25%**	**20%**	**18%**	**14%**	**27**		
3. trust in the ethical brand Summary: Trust in the ethical brand	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			**8/8=100%**

3.1 Credibility	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	12	42%	**8/8=100%**
3.2 Integrity	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	3	12%	3/8=37,5%
3.3. Benevolence	1	0	2	1	2	2	3	2	13	46,00 %	7/8=87,5%
	20%	**28%**	**28%**	**8%**	**34%**	**35%**	**28%**	**29%**	**34**	**29%**	
	12	**11**	**15**	**14**	**12**	**11**	**22**	**7**			
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%		

Source: qualitative analysis results

(1) 3 means that this category was mentioned three times by the interviewee.
(2) 60% = (2+1+1)/10.
(3) 12% = 5/45.
(4) Yes = the category was mentioned at least once by the individual.

In this part of the study, we focus mainly on calculating the frequencies of occurrence f(x) of different categories (headings). This is the number of times a category X (or sub-category XY) has been cited by the same interviewee (vertical analysis) and by all interviewees (horizontal analysis).

The following formula illustrates the calculation of occurrence frequencies.

$$F(x) = \frac{F(x) = \text{Number of times an X category is mentioned}}{F(x)\ \text{Total number of evocations}}$$

Vertical analysis

$$F(x) = \frac{\text{Number of times category x is mentioned by individual i}}{F(x)\ \text{Total number of evocations produced by i}}$$

For interviewer n°1, expectations of the brand's perceived ethics are a priority, accounting for more than half (60%) of the various categories listed during his interview. Conversely, interviewee n°3 is concerned with brand equity alone (46% of categories). As for individual n°2, his expectations are very numerous (13 categories mentioned) and are more or less equally divided between 2 categories (perceived brand ethics and ethical brand equity).

Horizontal analysis

$$F(x) = \frac{\text{Number of interviews in which category x (or sub-category xy)}}{\text{Total number of respondents}}$$

(1) Interviewee n°1 mentioned the "honesty" category twice, (2) The "honest" sub-category accounts for 12% of the total weight of the Moroccan alternative bank's ethical brand perception, (3) And so on (60%) is the importance of the perception of the ethics of alternative banking in the total weight of the frequency of appearance of the three main themes of the interview grid, (4) "Yes" refers to the existence of the three main themes of the interview grid in the same respondent,

3.5 Synthesis analysis

All three categories were cited by 100% of respondents. If we agree not to give the same weight to each respondent, we can deduce that expectations in terms of "perception of brand ethics" are the strongest for all individuals, representing "47%" of the number of categories mentioned, compared with 27% for the brand equity of the ethical company. The "Trust in the ethical brand" category is influential for all respondents (34%). This is due to the importance of the "Credibility" and "Benevolence" sub-categories, which make up over 70% of related evocations in this same category.

However, the following two sub-categories are important in the eyes of all interviewees: "Social/environmental responsibility" 8/8 = 100%, with "26%" frequency of occurrence among all interviewees. "Benevolence" 8/8=100%, with "46%" frequency of occurrence among all respondents. Followed by the sub-categories "Transparency", "Respect for moral values", "Brand image", and "Credibility", which are present in 80% of individuals.

4. Results and Discussion

The table summarizing the analysis highlighted three main themes among all the interviewees. First of all, the ethics of Islamic banking are perceived by all respondents and are quite often associated with the image of an ethical brand. The most cited ethical attributes are honesty, transparency, social and environmental responsibility and moral values. These, then, are the most important categories in the perception of brand ethics by consumers of Morocco's alternative bank. Benevolence and credibility are the basis for building trust in the ethical corporate brand in the alternative finance sector.

Finally, consumers' perception of brand ethics in Moroccan Islamic banking depends mainly on the sub-categories "Transparency", "Respect for moral values", "Brand image", and "Credibility", which are present in 80% of individuals.

Moral values and transparency are two crucial strategic elements in the definition, promotion and communication of Islamic banking institutions in Morocco. This makes it imperative for these organizations to invest in ethical practices in order to continuously improve their brand image, thereby establishing a solid competitive advantage and maintaining a high level of credibility.

For Moroccan Islamic banking customers, credibility is a fundamental element in building trust in an ethical brand. Trust between a brand and its customer is based, above all, on the perception of fairness, the absence of opportunistic behavior, and the recognition of the brand's fair, responsible and accountable commitment to its general public.

5. Conclusion

Based on this exploratory study of 8 interviewees from 4 Moroccan Islamic banks, we have identified the main categories of consumer perception of ethics. In the face of this perception of corporate brand ethics, the interviewees highlight the importance of ethics perceived through social and environmental responsibility, respect for moral values, transparency and the brand image of the ethical organization. Consumers unanimously agree that credibility and benevolence are the most critical elements in building trust in the ethical organization's brand. These elements constitute a company's ethical brand equity and are, therefore, the cornerstone of the development of a strong competitive advantage for service companies.

Even if opinions on the perception of brand ethics remain subjective, this concept encompasses several dimensions whose most cited attributes are quite often linked to the service, the brand, communication or marketing in general.

Ultimately, the association of ethics with the brand image of Islamic banking is inseparable from religion. This research underscores the role of perceived ethics in fostering trust among consumers of alternative banks in Morocco. We find this aspect intriguing, and we plan to conduct a quantitative study in the future to ascertain the generalizability of the observed phenomena.

Funding: This research received no external funding.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

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