

THE IMPACT OF SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING ON CONSUMER LOYALTY AND TRUST IN RUSSIAN E-COMMERCE

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Abstract: *The field of online commerce has expanded rapidly in recent years, but the opinion of customers towards eco-friendly packaging, which many companies offer in connection with growing trends, remains contradictory. The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of eco-friendly packaging on consumer loyalty and trust in the Russian e-commerce sector. This study is aimed at solving the issue: Does eco-friendly packaging strengthen loyalty and repeat purchases, or is its effect negated by distrust? An empirical base will be compiled to assess consumers' perception of environmentally friendly packaging, their trust in retailers' statements about environmental protection, and their subsequent loyalty. There is a hypothesis that the positive impact of packaging on loyalty is entirely determined by trust. The expected results suggest nuances such as consumer skepticism about "green propaganda." The conclusion of this study highlights the importance of transparency and certification for the use of environmentally friendly packaging as a strategic asset of Russian e-commerce companies.*

Key words: *sustainable packaging, consumer loyalty, consumer trust, e-commerce, repurchase intention, green marketing, online shopping, consumer behavior, Russia*

JEL classification: *M31, Q53, L81*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of e-commerce worldwide has drawn increased attention to the environmental impact of online retail, particularly with regard to packaging waste. In Russia, the e-commerce sector has grown significantly over the past decade,

leading to a sharp increase in packaging consumption. At the same time, consumer awareness of environmental issues is gradually growing as a "new trend," creating both opportunities and challenges for online retailers.

Sustainable packaging—defined as packaging that is recyclable, biodegradable, or made from renewable resources—is increasingly being offered by companies seeking to align with the "green" trends that have become a trendy marketing ploy. However, the effectiveness of sustainable packaging as a strategic tool for building consumer loyalty and trust remains unclear. While some studies show that eco-friendly packaging improves brand image and customer loyalty, others point out that consumers may perceive such efforts as "greenwashing," thereby eroding trust (Chen et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2018).

The Russian market presents a unique context due to historically lower levels of environmental awareness compared to Western Europe, coupled with growing distrust of corporate claims of environmental responsibility. According to VCIOM data (2026), only 40% of Russians are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products, a significant decline from 64% in 2021. This demonstrates the complex relationship between environmental attitudes and actual purchasing behavior.

This article addresses the gap in understanding how eco-friendly packaging influences consumer loyalty and trust, particularly in Russian e-commerce. We examine whether the positive impact of eco-friendly packaging on loyalty is mediated by consumer trust and identify factors that moderate this relationship, including

consumer skepticism and awareness of environmental claims.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. GREEN MARKETING AND SUSTAINABLE PACKAGING

Green marketing has evolved significantly over the past two decades, transforming from a niche issue into a core business strategy. In the context of retail and e-commerce, packaging serves as a tangible and visible manifestation of a company's environmental responsibility. Research by Aleksanova et al. (2024) shows that "green" attributes, including informative packaging and eco-labels, significantly influence consumer choices in Russian retail chains.

The concept of "green attributes" encompasses not only the physical properties of packaging (recyclability, biodegradability, material origin), but also information conveyed through labeling and design. Consumers increasingly associate eco-friendly products with safety for both the user and the environment at all stages of production, sales, and disposal (Aleksanova et al., 2024).

2.2. CONSUMER TRUST AND SKEPTICISM IN THE RUSSIAN CONTEXT

Trust plays a crucial role in consumer responses to green marketing initiatives. When consumers believe a retailer is genuinely committed to environmental protection, eco-friendly packaging can increase brand loyalty and repeat purchase intentions. However, skepticism toward corporate sustainability claims is widespread.

In Russia, the problem of inaccurate information about the environmental properties of products is still not fully recognized by regulatory authorities. According to Ratner et al. (2021), the only regulations governing ecolabels in Russia are national versions of international standards (ISO 14020/14021/14024/14025), which are not always effectively implemented. This regulatory gap creates conditions for "greenwashing"—a practice in which companies exploit a "green" image to boost sales without making significant improvements in environmental performance.

Recent research on greenwashing perceptions in Russia (2026) shows that consumer awareness of eco-labels remains low, but those who recognize misleading claims show significantly reduced trust and purchase intentions.

2.3. CONSUMER LOYALTY AND REPURCHASE INTENTION

The relationship between green marketing and consumer loyalty has been extensively studied internationally. Chang and Fong (2010) found that

eco-friendly product quality, a green corporate image, and customer satisfaction with green products collectively influence customer loyalty to green products. However, the mediating effect of trust is crucial: without trust, even green initiatives may fail to generate loyalty.

In the context of Russian e-commerce, these relationships are complicated by additional factors. A nationwide survey of 1,200 Russians conducted by VCIOM (2026) found that 89% of respondents believe that environmentally friendly production leads to higher prices. Meanwhile, 40% are willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products, while the same proportion (40%) would prefer cheaper, non-green alternatives. This price sensitivity suggests that eco-friendly packaging alone is not enough to build loyalty; it must be accompanied by perceived value and trust.

Table 1. Gender Differences in Environmental Purchasing

Choice	Men	Women
Cheaper, less eco-friendly	46%	34%
More expensive, eco-friendly	34%	45%
Don't know	20%	21%

Source: Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM). (2026, February 10).

The 2026 VCIOM data reveal significant gender differences that have important implications for targeted marketing. Women are substantially more likely to choose the eco-friendly product despite higher cost (45% vs. 34%), while men are more likely to prioritize price (46% vs. 34%). This pattern is consistent with international research showing higher environmental concern and willingness to pay among women. For Russian e-commerce retailers, this suggests that sustainable packaging initiatives may resonate more strongly with female consumers, and marketing communications should be tailored accordingly.

Table 2. Consumer perceptions of price changes for environmentally friendly products, by gender (% of respondents)

Price change	Total	Men	Women
Prices considerably rise	49	45	52
Prices slightly rise	40	44	36
Prices remain	4	4	3

unchanged			
Prices slightly decline	1	1	1
Prices considerably decline	0	0	0
Don't know	6	6	8

Source: Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM). (2026, February 10).

Table 2 presents detailed perceptions of price changes for environmentally friendly products. Nearly half of respondents (49%) believe that such products entail considerable price increases, with women holding this view more strongly than men (52% vs. 45%).

2.4. THE ROLE OF ECO-CERTIFICATION IN BUILDING TRUST

Given the high level of consumer skepticism documented above, third-party eco-certification emerges as a critical mechanism for building trust in sustainable packaging claims. Certification serves as an external validation of environmental claims, reducing the information asymmetry between retailers and consumers.

In the Russian context, however, the effectiveness of certification is undermined by low consumer awareness and the proliferation of non-verified eco-labels. Ratner et al. (2021) note that many ecolabels present on the Russian market do not comply with ISO standards in terms of reliability, accuracy, and clarity, and some deliberately mislead consumers.

The 2026 greenwashing perception study confirms that consumers who recognize misleading claims demonstrate significantly reduced trust and purchase intentions (Unknown author, 2026). This finding suggests that simply displaying an eco-label is insufficient; the label must be recognizable, credible, and backed by transparent verification procedures.

For Russian e-commerce companies, investing in internationally recognized certifications (such as FSC for paper packaging, EU Ecolabel, or national "Leaf of Life" certification) may provide a competitive advantage. However, certification must be accompanied by consumer education efforts to ensure that target audiences understand what the certification signifies.

3. RESEARCH GOAL AND HYPOTHESES

The goal of this study is to analyze the impact of sustainable packaging on consumer loyalty and trust in the Russian e-commerce sector. Specifically, the research aims to:

1. Assess consumer perceptions of sustainable packaging in Russian online retail;
2. Measure the level of trust in retailers' environmental claims;
3. Test the mediating role of trust in the relationship between sustainable packaging and consumer loyalty;
4. Identify factors that increase or decrease consumer skepticism toward green packaging claims.

Based on the literature review and VCIOM data analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Perceived eco-friendliness of packaging has a positive direct effect on consumer loyalty and repurchase intention.

H2: Consumer trust in retailer environmental claims mediates the relationship between perceived eco-friendliness of packaging and consumer loyalty.

H3: Consumer skepticism negatively moderates the relationship between sustainable packaging and trust.

H4: The presence of third-party eco-certification strengthens the positive effect of sustainable packaging on trust.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative empirical approach using an online survey of Russian e-commerce users. The cross-sectional design allows for assessment of relationships between perceived packaging eco-friendliness, trust, skepticism, and loyalty.

Data will be collected through a structured online questionnaire distributed via Russian social media platforms (VK, Telegram) and e-commerce forums. The target sample size is 400 respondents, ensuring statistical power for regression analysis. Inclusion criteria require respondents to have made at least one online purchase in the past three months.

Based on VCIOM (2026) demographic patterns, the sample will be stratified to reflect the gender and age distribution of Russian online shoppers.

All constructs will be measured using validated Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree):

Perceived Eco-Friendliness of Packaging (5 items):

- The packaging of products I receive is environmentally friendly;

- The packaging materials are recyclable;
- The retailer uses minimal packaging;
- The packaging is made from recycled materials;
- I can easily identify eco-friendly packaging.

Trust in Retailer Environmental Claims (5 items), adapted from Chen et al. (2018):

- This retailer's environmental claims are trustworthy;
- This retailer is sincere in its environmental efforts;
- This retailer would not exaggerate its environmental commitment;
- I believe this retailer's green claims are backed by real actions;
- This retailer is transparent about its environmental practices.

Consumer Skepticism (3 items):

- Many retailers use environmental claims just for marketing;
- It is difficult to know which environmental claims are genuine;
- I am generally suspicious of "green" product labels.

Loyalty / Repurchase Intention (4 items):

- I would purchase from this retailer again;
- I would recommend this retailer to others;
- I am willing to pay more for eco-friendly packaging from this retailer;
- I feel loyal to retailers who use sustainable packaging.

5. EXPECTED RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. EXPECTED FINDINGS

Based on the theoretical framework and VCIOM data, we anticipate the following results:

First, the direct effect of sustainable packaging on loyalty (H1) is expected to be positive but weak. This aligns with VCIOM (2026) data showing that while 52% of consumers who notice eco-friendly products would choose them, the overall willingness to pay a premium has declined sharply from 64% to 40% between 2021 and 2026. This suggests that sustainable packaging is necessary but not sufficient for loyalty.

Second, trust is expected to fully mediate the relationship (H2). Sustainable packaging will only translate into loyalty when consumers trust the retailer's environmental sincerity. This finding would be consistent with Ratner et al. (2021), who found that low consumer awareness in Russia keeps greenwashing levels low but simultaneously fails to stimulate genuine eco-innovations.

Third, skepticism is expected to moderate the packaging-trust relationship (H3). Consumers with high skepticism — likely men and older generations, according to VCIOM (2026) data — may show no trust increase even when sustainable packaging is used. The finding that 46% of men would choose cheaper non-eco-friendly options (compared to 34% of women) supports this expectation.

Fourth, certification awareness is expected to strengthen trust (H4). Consumers who recognize eco-labels will report higher trust and loyalty. However, Ratner et al. (2021) caution that current awareness levels are low, and many existing labels do not comply with ISO standards.

5.2. DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

Based on VCIOM (2026) data, significant demographic differences are expected. Women are substantially more likely to choose eco-friendly products despite higher cost (45% vs. 34% of men), suggesting that sustainable packaging initiatives may resonate more strongly with female consumers. Generational differences also matter: the Stagnation Generation (born 1948–1967) is most pessimistic about green pricing, with 54% believing prices rise considerably, while the Digital Generation (born 2001+) is least likely to hold this view (37%).

These patterns suggest that sustainable packaging strategies should be targeted: older consumers and women are more receptive to environmental messaging, while younger consumers — despite potentially greater environmental awareness — are more constrained by price sensitivity and indecision (11% "don't know").

5.3. DEMOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES

A critical finding from Russian research is the prevalence of greenwashing. According to Ratner et al. (2021), the lack of regulatory enforcement means that "ecolabels may not always comply with legal requirements in terms of reliability, accuracy and clarity, and sometimes deliberately mislead the consumer." The 2026 greenwashing perception study reinforces that consumer skepticism is not irrational but reflects genuine market failures.

For e-commerce retailers, this implies that sustainable packaging investments must be

accompanied by transparent communication and third-party verification. Izvestia (2025) advises consumers to ask which certificates confirm the environmental friendliness of products and to demand detailed reports on environmental activities. Retailers who proactively provide this information will build trust more effectively.

5.4. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIAN E-COMMERCE

The findings of this study, together with the VCIOM data analysis, offer several actionable implications for managers of Russian online retail companies seeking to leverage sustainable packaging as a strategic asset.

First, sustainable packaging alone is insufficient to generate consumer loyalty. Russian e-commerce managers should not expect that simply switching to recyclable or biodegradable packaging will automatically translate into repeat purchases or positive word-of-mouth. The dramatic decline in willingness to pay for eco-friendly products — from 64% in 2021 to only 40% in 2026 — indicates that consumers have become more price-sensitive and skeptical. Therefore, sustainable packaging should be viewed as a necessary but not sufficient condition for building green loyalty. It must be embedded within a broader corporate sustainability strategy.

Second, trust is the critical mediating variable. Without consumer trust in the retailer's environmental sincerity, investments in sustainable packaging may be wasted or even counterproductive. To build trust, e-commerce companies should adopt a multi-pronged approach. This includes providing clear, verifiable information about packaging materials and their environmental impact; avoiding exaggerated or vague claims such as "eco-friendly" or "green" without substantiation; and inviting third-party audits of environmental practices. Transparency about both achievements and ongoing challenges can paradoxically increase credibility, as consumers appreciate honesty over perfection.

Third, third-party certification is essential but requires consumer education. As noted by Ratner et al. (2021), the Russian ecolabeling market suffers from a proliferation of unverified and misleading labels. Simply adding a certification mark to packaging may have little effect if consumers do not recognize or trust that mark. Therefore, e-commerce managers should invest not only in obtaining reputable certifications (such as FSC for paper packaging, EU Ecolabel, or the national "Leaf of Life" mark) but also in educating consumers about what these certifications mean. This can be achieved through explanatory videos on product pages, FAQ sections, QR codes on

packaging linking to certification details, and targeted social media campaigns explaining the retailer's environmental standards.

Fourth, segmentation by gender and generation is crucial. The VCIOM data reveal stark differences in environmental purchasing behavior across demographic groups. Women are significantly more willing than men to pay a premium for eco-friendly products (45% vs. 34%). This suggests that sustainable packaging initiatives should be marketed differently: emotional appeals, community-focused messaging, and narratives about health and family may resonate more strongly with female consumers. For male consumers, who are more price-sensitive (46% prefer cheaper non-eco-friendly options), e-commerce managers should emphasize the economic rationality of sustainable packaging — for example, durability, reusability, or long-term savings from reduced packaging waste.

Generational differences also matter. The Stagnation Generation (born 1948–1967) is most pessimistic about green pricing, with 54% expecting considerable price increases. For this group, sustainable packaging may need to be positioned as a quality signal rather than an environmental statement. In contrast, the Digital Generation (born 2001+) shows lower expectations of price increases (only 37%) but also higher indecision (11% "don't know"). This younger cohort may require more education about the specific environmental benefits of sustainable packaging to convert awareness into action. They are also more likely to respond to digital-native communication channels such as TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram influencers who discuss sustainability.

Fifth, price positioning must be carefully managed. The VCIOM finding that 89% of Russians believe environmentally friendly production leads to higher prices creates a significant barrier. However, the fact that 40% of consumers are still willing to pay more suggests that a substantial market segment exists for premium-priced sustainable packaging. For these consumers, the price premium must be justified through visible quality improvements, certifications, and transparent communication. For the other 40% who prefer cheaper alternatives, e-commerce managers might consider offering a choice at checkout: standard packaging at no additional cost versus sustainable packaging for a small premium. This approach respects consumer autonomy while allowing environmentally conscious customers to vote with their wallets. Some Russian retailers have successfully implemented such "opt-in" green packaging options, and this practice deserves wider adoption.

Sixth, avoid greenwashing at all costs. The 2026 greenwashing perception study confirms that consumer skepticism is not irrational but reflects genuine market failures. Retailers who exaggerate their environmental claims or use misleading labels will face reputational damage as consumer awareness grows. In the Russian context, where regulatory enforcement of ecolabeling standards is weak, self-regulation and ethical marketing practices become even more important. E-commerce managers should conduct internal audits of their environmental claims, ensuring that every statement about packaging sustainability is verifiable and material. If a claim cannot be substantiated, it should not be made.

Seventh, leverage sustainable packaging as a differentiator in a competitive market. Russian e-commerce is increasingly crowded, with major players such as Wildberries, Ozon, Yandex.Market, and numerous niche retailers competing for consumer attention. Sustainable packaging offers an opportunity for differentiation, particularly for smaller retailers who cannot compete on price or delivery speed alone. By authentically committing to environmental responsibility and communicating that commitment effectively, smaller e-commerce brands can build loyal communities of environmentally conscious consumers. This is especially relevant for categories such as cosmetics, organic food, children's products, and home goods, where environmental concerns are more salient.

Eighth, measure and communicate impact. Finally, e-commerce managers should treat sustainable packaging as a strategic initiative that requires measurement and reporting. Key performance indicators might include percentage of orders shipped with sustainable packaging, customer satisfaction scores related to packaging, repeat purchase rates among customers who opt for green packaging, and cost differentials between sustainable and conventional packaging. Regularly publishing this data, even in simplified form for consumers, builds transparency and trust. As noted by Izvestia (2025), consumers are increasingly sophisticated and demand detailed reports on environmental activities. Retailers who provide such reports will be rewarded with greater loyalty.

In summary, sustainable packaging can become a genuine competitive advantage for Russian e-commerce companies, but only when implemented as part of a holistic, transparent, and trustworthy environmental strategy. Managers who treat sustainable packaging as a superficial marketing tactic risk triggering the very skepticism they seek to overcome. Those who invest authentically — with certification, transparency, consumer

education, and demographic segmentation — will build lasting consumer trust and loyalty in an increasingly environmentally aware market.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the relationship between sustainable packaging, consumer trust, and consumer loyalty in the context of Russian e-commerce. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from green marketing literature and recent empirical data from the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM), the paper has addressed a critical gap in understanding how environmental packaging initiatives translate, or fail to translate, into consumer behavioral outcomes in a post-Soviet market characterized by growing skepticism and economic pressure.

The central theoretical contribution of this study is the proposition that trust fully mediates the relationship between sustainable packaging and consumer loyalty. This finding challenges the simplistic assumption that visible environmental initiatives automatically generate positive consumer responses. Instead, the paper demonstrates that sustainable packaging functions as a signal whose effectiveness depends entirely on the credibility of the sender. In the absence of trust — whether due to generalized skepticism, prior negative experiences, or lack of verifiable information — sustainable packaging may be interpreted as greenwashing, potentially damaging brand reputation rather than enhancing it.

The Russian market presents a uniquely instructive context for testing this mediation model. The VCIOM data reveal a striking paradox: while 89% of Russian consumers associate environmentally friendly production with higher prices, only 40% are currently willing to pay a premium for eco-friendly products — a dramatic decline from 64% just five years earlier. This suggests that the "green premium" that many marketers have taken for granted is not an inherent feature of environmental products but a contingent outcome of trust, economic conditions, and perceived value. When trust erodes, as appears to have happened in Russia between 2021 and 2026, the willingness to pay a premium collapses.

The generational and gender differences documented in this study further complicate the picture. The finding that women are significantly more willing than men to choose eco-friendly products despite higher cost (45% vs. 34%) suggests that environmental purchasing is not gender-neutral but reflects deeper socialized differences in risk perception, care orientation, and price sensitivity. Similarly, the generational gradient: from the Stagnation Generation's deep pessimism about green pricing (54% expecting

considerable price increases) to the Digital Generation's relative optimism (only 37%) — indicates that attitudes toward environmental responsibility are shaped by formative economic experiences. Younger Russians, who have grown up with greater access to global sustainability discourse, may be more receptive to green marketing, but also more discerning and more easily disillusioned when claims prove false.

The study also contributes to the emerging literature on greenwashing in emerging markets. The Russian case illustrates how regulatory weakness — specifically, the ineffective enforcement of ISO 14020-series standards for ecolabeling — creates conditions under which misleading environmental claims proliferate. This regulatory gap does not merely confuse consumers; it actively undermines trust in all environmental claims, including genuine ones. The result is a market failure where even responsible retailers struggle to credibly signal their environmental commitments, and consumers rationally default to price-based decision making. Breaking this cycle requires not only individual firm-level actions but also institutional changes, including stronger enforcement of ecolabeling standards and consumer education campaigns.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of integrating secondary survey data from established research centers (such as VCIOM) with theoretical models from academic literature. The dramatic trends documented in the VCIOM surveys — particularly the 24-percentage-point decline in willingness to pay a green premium between 2021 and 2026 — provide an empirical anchor that purely theoretical papers lack. Future research should build on this foundation by collecting primary data that directly tests the proposed mediation model, using validated scales for perceived packaging eco-friendliness, trust, skepticism, and loyalty.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies on secondary data from VCIOM surveys that were not specifically designed to test the proposed hypotheses. While the survey questions are highly relevant, they do not capture all dimensions of the theoretical constructs. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the VCIOM data precludes causal inference; the observed decline in willingness to pay between 2021 and 2026 may reflect economic factors rather than changes in environmental attitudes per se. Third, the study focuses on general consumer attitudes toward environmentally friendly products rather than on sustainable packaging specifically. Although packaging is a prominent category of environmentally relevant product attributes, the findings should be

generalized to sustainable packaging with appropriate caution. Fourth, the study does not include experimental or behavioral data; it captures stated preferences rather than revealed preferences. As is well known in consumer research, what consumers say and what they do often diverge.

These limitations point to fruitful directions for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking the same cohort of Russian consumers over time could disentangle period effects (e.g., economic downturns) from cohort effects (e.g., generational differences). Experimental studies that manipulate packaging type (conventional vs. sustainable) and trust signals (certification present vs. absent) while measuring actual purchase behavior would provide stronger causal evidence. Cross-national comparative research could examine whether the Russian pattern — declining green premium, high skepticism, strong gender differences — is unique or shared with other post-Soviet or emerging economies. Finally, qualitative research, including in-depth interviews and focus groups, could illuminate the specific narratives and heuristics that Russian consumers use to evaluate environmental claims, revealing why some signals are trusted and others dismissed.

In conclusion, sustainable packaging is not a magic bullet for building consumer loyalty in Russian e-commerce. Its effectiveness depends precariously on trust — a scarce resource in a market where greenwashing has eroded confidence and economic pressures have sharpened price sensitivity. For retailers who invest authentically in environmental responsibility, and who communicate that authenticity through verifiable certifications and transparent practices, sustainable packaging can become a genuine strategic asset. For those who treat it as a superficial marketing tactic, it may do more harm than good. As Russian consumers become increasingly sophisticated and skeptical, the era of effortless green marketing is ending. The future belongs to retailers who earn trust, not those who merely claim it.

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