

Consumer Perception of Socially Responsible Marketing: A Study of the Food Industry in India

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Abstract

With lots of changes and uncertainties, when it cannot be foreseen how pandemics like COVID-19 may affect our lives, responsible behaviour, socially responsible marketing strategies, and consumer perception towards them become more prominent to face these difficulties, particularly in the food sector. Being socially responsible, companies can create a position in consumers' minds and positively affect the behaviour of all participants, from individuals to business entities, towards themselves and others to enhance their well-being and enrich our society. This research is descriptive and survey-based, and a questionnaire is used as a research instrument to collect data. The research findings conclude that Ethical packaging, promotion, and price positively impact consumer perception towards socially responsible marketing and its influence on buying behaviour.

Keywords: *socially responsible marketing, social responsibility, food products, consumer perception, environment*

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1. Introduction

In the early days, marketing was concerned with functions and activities related to the efficient distribution of goods and services and different institutions that played essential roles in the process. As everything changed, the world evolved, and marketing grew much more different from what it was. According to Bagozzi (1975), marketing is not only the exchange of physical goods or services but also the exchange of psychological and social aspects. The focus of marketing shifted from exchange between entities to interaction between them. New perspectives formed a new dominant logic, stating that service is more important than goods during the exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Now, the consumer is central to marketing activities; understanding them is more necessary for the successful running of an organisation.

Marketing then emerged with the concept of society's welfare. With its new products and services, the marketing system promotes development and improvement, improving society's quality of life and providing long-term benefits (Wilkie & Moore, 1999). According to G. R. Laczniak & Murphy (2006), marketers should consider ethics and understand the need to improve them within their organisation and society. This welfare of society and consumers came as a concept in marketing management.

Consumers are most important in the business, and learning about their perceptions gives companies an edge in formulating strategies compatible with consumers' needs. Consumers are now more protective of their health and their surroundings. They care about their buying behaviour for the products they consume and prefer those that help save their Mother Nature (Bhaskar, 2013). This induces a firm to think creatively, uniquely and differently and integrate strategies that benefit consumers and the firm itself. Currently, socially responsible marketing is analysed as one of the core concepts of any business. Many consumers expect companies to act responsibly towards their employees and the society in which they operate.

In recent years, the judgments about buying or not buying are based on the producer's accountability (Gorokhova, 2020). According to (*Millennial Survey*

2015 | Deloitte | *Social Impact, Innovation*, n.d.), employees choose to work in an organisation that values social responsibility.

Many firms understand that they are members of a significant community and must act environmentally responsibly (Garg & Sharma, n.d.). Firms should not only care about financial returns but should take social initiatives while taking care of ethics and following them to the road of goodwill and competitiveness (Abbas et al., 2019). In recent years, we have seen many examples of organisations following sustainable development approaches and reducing harmful environmental impacts. Being socially and environmentally responsible, Amazon is trying to power its operations with cent per cent renewable energy by 2025, reducing waste and inventing packaging that eliminates waste while simultaneously living up to consumer satisfaction (*Our Planet*, n.d.). The same is the case of IKEA, which is focused on designing products using recycled materials; they provide plant-based food choices that positively impact the climate (*More Plant-Based Goodness*, n.d.). It has become crucial that companies integrate responsibility towards society and the environment in their operations, such as finance, marketing, and other branches, considering that it will help sustain competitive advantage (Arseculeratne & Yazdanifard, 2013).

Looking at these examples, integrating socially responsible marketing practices will not only help in sustainability and develop a long-term relationship with the natural and social environment but also help achieve customer loyalty and competitive advantage for the firm. This paper helps understand how consumers perceive socially responsible marketing through different constructs. Recently, studies have analysed a change in the consumer decision process related to food consumption and how various factors lead consumers to purchase food (Magnier et al., 2016; Vermeir & Verbeke, 2008). Consumers are willing to spend more on health and wellness-related products, health consciousness being the key psychological factor, and firms' packaging, price, and ethical behaviour influence consumer buying behaviour (Ali & Ali, 2020). (*Your Customers Prefer Sustainable Products - Businessnewsdaily.com*, n.d.) reveal that consumers form relationships with brands

that are attentive towards their environmental impact.

Scholars in the previous studies have examined various issues related to green marketing (Devi Juwaheer et al., 2012; Jaiswal & Kant, 2018), cause-related marketing (Sisodia et al., 2013), sustainable marketing (Chao & Uhagile, 2022; Hota, 2024), etc. These studies provided a general view with no attention to specific products. Many other studies have focused on factors affecting consumer behaviour and decision-making (Gandhi & Kaushik, 2016; Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). While all these studies have provided significant results and knowledge in their field, little insight is offered regarding socially responsible marketing of food products and consumer behaviour. Also, several types of research have been conducted on responsible consumer behaviour, and many models have been used to explain its factors, but the environmental dimension is more researched than the social dimension (Antil, 1984; Webster, 1975). Thus, Green consumerism is researched chiefly as a part of socially responsible consumer behaviour rather than social issues (Hosta & Zabkar, 2021). This unequal representation of social and environmental issues narrowed the view of consumer social responsibility.

The recent development has catalysed enhanced academic engagement and examines socially responsible marketing, integrating customers with reference to the food industry. The study will also help answer questions regarding consumer values affecting their perception and, thus, buying behaviour. The study's implications will help marketers understand consumer points of view and formulate strategies for the betterment of the organisation and nature.

After the introduction, section 2 discusses socially responsible marketing with the existing studies and hypothesis formulation. Section 3 contains the sample and sampling design, the survey method, and its analysis. Further sections include discussions, implications, conclusions, and the scope for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Socially Responsible Marketing

"Marketing is not a final step in itself; It is not the exclusive province of business management. It must serve not only business but also the goals of society" (Lazer, 1969). Today's consumers and marketers are aware of the need to switch to socially responsible goods and services. Marketers should believe that ethics and social responsibility are essential to corporate efficiency and effectiveness before changing their behaviours and actions to reflect social responsibility (Singhapakdi et al., 2001). Marketing harnesses desirable social causes, such as the environment and consumerism, to advance the interests of a commercial organisation (Kotler, 1999). This is where socially responsible marketing comes into play. Marketers can use this strategy to build consumer loyalty and earn trust.

Socially responsible marketing is a marketing philosophy that states that a business should consider the best for society in the present and long term by keeping in mind the environmental, ethical, social, legal, public and cultural values and concerns of the community and the targeted market (Dahlin & DeWitt, 2009) as cited by (Turker, 2018). (Gorokhova, 2020) "socially responsible marketing (SRM) is a practice companies use to recognise their products and services' social and environmental impact on stakeholders. It shows consumers that the company is responsible for its activities and intends to reduce the unfavourable outcomes of its activities".

An organisation demonstrates social responsibility by being concerned about individual well-being, the environment, and society. It is about incorporating ethical practices and inspiring a positive impact on all its stakeholders and shareholders (Labbai, 2007; Mokha, n.d.). Marketers have the responsibility to package and communicate these ethical practices that impact various communities.

To summarise, "Socially Responsible Marketing (SRM) consists of practices and perspectives mandated by an implicit social contract (SC), which requires marketing policies, actions and outcomes to stick to a corporate ["good"] citizenship (CC) that is proactive and non-discretionary (G. Lacznia & Shultz, 2021).

It is informed by a stakeholder orientation (SO) that recognises an authentic consideration of stakeholder claims, especially those of the customer/consumer and vulnerable stakeholders. Further, SRM seeks social and environmental sustainability (SES) in all its actions" (G. Laczniak & Shultz, 2021).

2.2. Consumer Perception of Socially Responsible Marketing

Consumers are pivotal in driving the demand for socially responsible products and services. They expect businesses to reflect specific societal values and positively contribute to the community (Handelman & Arnold, 1999). Consumers can evaluate a business based on its commitment to the welfare of the community and society (Swaen, n.d.). A company that engages in responsible production and marketing practices can improve its brand reputation, nurture customer loyalty, and appeal to socially conscious consumers.

Consumers are an integral part of the marketing process regardless of whether they use a product or service (Patino et al., 2014). Consumer beliefs shape his attitude, further directing them to consider marketers' fairness or ethics while purchasing (Kumar & Mokhtar, 2016). A study demonstrates that customers' purchasing decisions are becoming more and more influenced by sustainability, and they are willing to pay more for environment-friendly alternatives and increasingly regard themselves as the key agents of change alongside for-profit businesses (*Business Wire*, 2021). Their conscious decisions are based on the environment and sustainability in mind, but still, there is a need to make them aware of their choices (*Sustainability & Consumer Behaviour* 2022, n.d.). Increasing consumer awareness has a significant potential to influence their perceptions and encourage the support of socially responsible products.

There is a significant role in marketing communications that affects consumer purchase behaviour. For the market economy to function appropriately, marketing communications must be used responsibly, providing consumers with accurate and non-misleading product information (International Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). Consumers' beliefs link their perceptions of marketing practices and purchasing decisions

(Cheung & To, 2021). Additionally, ethical concerns can impact individuals' decision-making abilities aligned with their beliefs, responsibilities, and concerns (Altinbasak-Farina & Burnaz, 2019; Shaw & Shiu, 2003). Furthermore, consumers' environmental behaviour is influenced by psychological factors such as values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms, all of which shape their perceptions and purchasing behaviour (Vržina & Pepur, 2021; Zhang & Dong, 2020).

The study of consumer perception is closely linked to marketing, focusing on demographic, lifestyle, and loyalty factors that influence purchasing behaviours and how firms' strategies impact these factors (Oliveira & Sousa, 2019). According to (Gielissen, 2011), Consumers consider buying socially responsible products a moral duty. Consumer perception of responsible products is significant for environmental and societal reasons, and firms need to consider the various factors that influence this perception to enhance consumer empowerment.

2.3. Consumer Perception Towards Socially Responsible Marketing in The Food Sector

Increasing health and environmental sustainability awareness and higher disposable incomes have increased consumer interest in socially responsible food products (Khan et al., 2022). This behavioural shift in consumers has prompted marketers to adopt strategies that cater to the demand for ethically produced and environmentally friendly food items. Key factors influencing consumer buying behaviour in the food sector include changes in lifestyle, product attributes, health awareness, and environmental concerns (Boztepe, n.d.). These factors significantly impact consumer preferences and willingness to pay more for sustainable or "green" food products.

Research indicates that consumers are increasingly inclined towards making purchasing choices that align with their values of health and environmental responsibility (Hoek et al., 2017). Eco-labelling adoption by food organisations has emerged as a prominent practice to communicate responsible consumer behaviour (M. Loureiro & McCluskey, 2003; Nayga, 1999). This labelling informs consumers about the environmental impact and ethical considerations of the products they intend to purchase.

Furthermore, the packaging of food products plays a crucial role in influencing consumer perception and purchasing decisions. Recyclable, reusable, and eco-friendly packaging has positively impacted consumer perceptions of food products (Ahsan Ansari & Siddiqui, 2019; d'Astous & Labrecque, 2021)(d'Astous & Labrecque, 2021). Marketers play a pivotal role in promoting socially responsible products and providing consumers with accurate and reliable information about the products' attributes, thereby assisting them in making informed choices (International Chamber of Commerce, n.d.).

Studies have also shown that many consumers are conscious of environmentally friendly practices and prefer sustainable and recyclable packaging (India, 2011). Consequently, food sector marketers focus on developing products that align with consumers' ethical and environmental values by prioritising factors such as labelling, packaging, ingredients, and price. Overall, understanding how consumers perceive and respond to these marketing strategies can aid firms in designing effective and ethical marketing strategies for food products.

Previous studies reveal consumers are eager to pay higher prices for responsible products. Their intention to buy is influenced by the health benefit analysis of food products (Chao & Uhagile, 2022). The category of the products influences the willingness to pay higher prices. However, there is limited literature available for Indian society regarding the intention to purchase socially responsible products. Moreover, it is further narrowed regarding responsible food products (Khan et al., 2022).

The food sector has been selected in the research context, as consumers are concerned about their health and well-being. The pandemic has created health consciousness in consumers' minds. Consumers are now more concerned regarding their food purchase behaviour. Food product buying behaviour is frequent and continuous, so the impact of food consumption on society and the environment is high (D'Souza et al., 2006; Nirino et al., 2019). Consumers have demanded socially responsible, sustainable, healthy food products for the last few years. In response, companies have moved towards a socially responsible approach (Adams, 1993; Nirino

et al., 2019). The socially responsible approach increasingly receives consumer attention and is specifically relevant in the food sector (Nguyen et al., 2020). Consumers must trust food companies and responsible marketing, as their buying behaviour drives this sector (Luhmann & Theuvsen, 2017).

2.4. Theories and models associated with consumer perception of Socially Responsible Marketing

2.4.1. Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) by (Ajzen, 1991) explains that attitude and perceptions influence an individual's behaviour. This theory is the extended version of the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The theory of Reasoned Action considers humans to be rational and make systematic use of information available to them. It was based on voluntary behaviour, which states that individuals think before behaving in a particular way. However, the theory of planned behaviour argued that human behaviour may or may not be voluntarily controlled, and perceived behavioural control became a component of the TPB model. The theory of planned behaviour is used to explore human behaviour related to animal welfare, organic products, and environmental and sustainability issues (Chao & Uhagile, 2022; Prendergast & Tsang, 2019). It suggests three parts: attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Attitude refers to a person's evaluation of the behaviour; Subjective norm represents the perceived social or peer pressure to perform the behaviour; and Perceived behavioural control reflects an individual's belief in their ability to execute the behaviour. The model used in the paper involves factors that align well with the Theory of Planned Behaviour components, showcasing how ethical and socially responsible marketing practices can influence consumer attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control, ultimately affecting their intentions and behaviours.

2.4.2. Theory of Consumer Perception

The Theory of Consumer Perception plays a pivotal role in socially responsible marketing. According to (Kotler, 2006), Consumer perception is "acting and reacting on what one sees". This theory elucidates

how consumers sense, organise, interpret, and assign meaning to marketing stimuli. For instance, the quality of a product, brand image, consumer experiences, and others might be perceived as more responsible and can lead to trustworthiness towards the brand.

Trustworthiness explains how consumers gather information and judge products, brands, and services based on the stimuli they receive. This theory suggests that sensory, cognitive, and emotional factors influence consumers' perceptions, which help them interpret and evaluate the trustworthiness, quality, and values associated with a brand. In this study of socially responsible marketing, the theory is relevant as it explains consumer perception, which depends on how brands communicate their ethical practices, transparency, and reliability.

2.4.3. Stakeholder Theory

Firms must consider various internal and external stakeholders when developing organisational strategies. The stakeholder concept originated in 1963. It emphasises the importance of addressing the concerns and interests of all shareholders rather than focusing only on profits (Polonsky, 1995). Stakeholder theory (ST) is used in marketing, especially in environmental marketing, to align organisational objectives with those of various stakeholders. In the Food industry, the theory considers that ethics in areas such as packaging and promotion is not just a compulsion but an essential element in maintaining positive relationships with customers, suppliers, investors, government, society and other stakeholders. Ethics in packaging and promotion has become a crucial component of socially responsible marketing, as it directly influences consumer trust and brand loyalty.

3. Hypotheses Development

The literature discussed in the above paragraphs helped find the factors that can impact consumer perception towards socially responsible food items. Growing demand for sustainable food products requires the proper knowledge and information about consumers' needs. A positive impact on consumer perception results in buying behaviour and thus acts as a competitive advantage for the firms. Based

on the literature, four hypotheses are formulated for consumer perception regarding packaging and promotion, labelling, price and trustworthiness. The following conceptual model in Figure 1 depicts this.

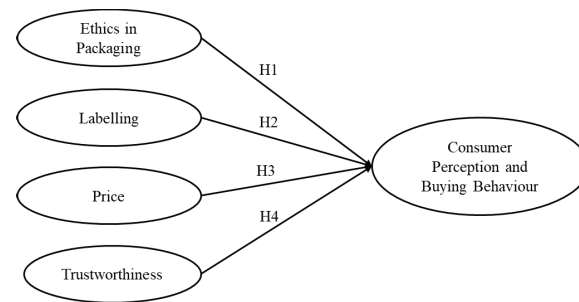


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

3.1. Consumer Perception of Socially Responsible Marketing in Response to Ethics in Packaging and Promotion

According to stakeholder theory, firms are responsible to shareholders and all stakeholders, including consumers, the environment, and society. This responsibility induces companies to adopt ethical marketing practices that meet the expectations of these stakeholders (Maignan et al., 2005; Polonsky, 1995). The framework stresses that adopting ethical marketing practices will affect consumer buying behaviour. Including this factor in the model would provide an improved understanding of consumer behaviour, which may help encourage and reinforce socially responsible purchase behaviour among consumers.

Quality of life plays a vital role in socially responsible marketing objectives. (Sirgy & Lee, 1996) emphasised that quality of life promotes, prices, plans and distributes goods and services to the consumer that help improve their well-being. This approach integrates ethical principles in developing products, services and programmes that minimise the negativity for the consumer. Moreover, ethical and responsible decision-making fosters an organisational climate that increases profitability, effectiveness and consumer satisfaction (Singhapakdi et al., 2001).

Packaging is a medium of communication for consumers. When used to communicate with the

consumer, packaging has an opportunity to integrate sustainability and social responsibility and act as an accessible way to connect with eco-friendly consumers (Bivins, 2018). (Ahsan Ansari & Siddiqui, 2019) have analysed many studies and depicted that different packaging features like design, type, packaging material, versatility, and environmental impacts influence consumer buying behaviour. Buyers are inclined towards their environmentally conscious values, creating a desirable self-image (Jerzyk, 2016).

Ethical marketing practices have a positive effect on consumer perception. Social and ethical marketing is instrumental in affecting consumer buying behaviour, increasing sales and enhancing company image (Lialiuik et al., 2019). Ethical practices, like a social theme, cause, or awareness for the consumer, significantly improve consumers' perceptions of the brand. (Bhatia & Jain, 2014; Yelamanchili et al., 2021). Transparency and openness in promotional events are other necessary ethical marketing actions (G. R. Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Hence, packaging and promotion ethics significantly impact consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

H1: Ethics in packaging and promotion significantly impact consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

3.2. Consumer Perception of Socially Responsible Marketing in Response to The Product Label

Labels are considered valued and essential and influence consumers' purchase decisions (Thøgersen, 2002). They are treated as input to purchase results. Not only this, but labelling is also considered an effective way to communicate specific benefits and characteristics of the product and its safety. Consumers seek "sufficient" label information to make informed purchase decisions (D'Souza et al., 2006). This indicates that firms should ensure their labels are clear, precise and legible, as this can enhance consumers' satisfaction with both the label information's accuracy and effectiveness.

Businesses differentiate their products and communicate responsible messages using labelling. Marketers use many ways to convey specific product

claims, for example, "eco-friendly", "biodegradable", and "environmentally safe" (Morris et al., 1995). These labels act as a guide for responsible products. Labels communicate the social responsibility of a product, influencing the consumer's attitude toward the product, which in turn affects their purchase intentions. The theory of planned behaviour explains this relationship by showing that a positive attitude toward a product (Ajzen, 1991), such as a socially responsible product, will increase the likelihood of buying that product. According to TPB, when consumers perceive product labels as an indication of socially responsible marketing practices, their positive attitudes are strengthened, leading to higher intentions to purchase. This framework highlights the critical role that labelling plays in shaping consumer perceptions and motivating purchasing decisions.

Information about the product and its labelling significantly impacts purchase intention. Consumers, while buying a product, are concerned about the knowledge of the product and its labelling (Nayga, 1999). According to Galati et al. (2019), consumers who want to make a responsible change through their purchase pay more attention to the product label and its information. Moreover, concern for the origin and content of food products is closely linked to perceived product safety, with consumers valuing transparent labelling that denotes product ingredients, nutritional value, associated risks, and other relevant information (Memery et al., 2005). Furthermore, studies by Jayachandran et al. (2004) and Rao & Monroe (1988) highlight the crucial role of product knowledge in consumer attitudes and purchasing decisions. Additionally, the concept of eco-labelling is identified as a significant dimension that consumers value when making purchasing decisions, as indicated by (M. L. Loureiro et al., 2001, 2002; Mancuso et al., 2021). Thus, labelling impacts consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

H2: Labelling significantly impacts consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

3.3. Consumer Perception of Socially Responsible Marketing in Response to Price

Perceived behavioural control, a key construct in the Theory of Planned Behaviour, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). In the study of socially responsible marketing, perceived behavioural control can influence consumers' perceptions towards ethical purchasing decisions. For example, when consumers face higher prices, they perceive that they have control over their choices and are more likely to pay a premium for socially responsible products. Price considerations have a significant influence on consumers' purchase decisions. The impact of socially responsible products, which may come at a higher cost, on consumer perceptions has been a subject of study. (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004) Their study implied that a fraction of consumers who were supporters of environmental protection were willing to encourage and pay more in the cause-related market. Setting fair and reasonable prices is a road map towards gaining consumer confidence (Hanzaee & Nasimi, 2012; Xia et al., 2004). Unfair pricing strategies, often employed when consumers lack the time to compare prices, can detrimentally affect the reputation of businesses (Khandelwal & Bajpai, 2012). Conversely, fair pricing practices can foster positive consumer behavioural intentions and a willingness to pay premium prices when a company demonstrates social responsibility (Kumar & Mokhtar, 2016). So, price significantly impacts consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

H3: Price significantly impacts consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

3.4. Consumer Perception of Socially Responsible Marketing in Response to Trustworthiness

Trust refers to the level of confidence that consumers have towards a product. (Y.-S. Chen (2010) defined it as "willingness to depend on a product or service based on the belief or expectations resulting from its credibility, benevolence and ability about environmental performance." Many studies have shown that trust positively and significantly

influences buying behaviour (Iftikhar et al., n.d.). The more consumers trust brands, the more they form positive associations with them (Y. Chen & Chang, 2013).

According to (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), one of the most widely used definitions of trust is trust as confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity. Consistency, competence, honesty, fairness, accountability, helpfulness, and compassion are all linked to dependability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). They also further state that their concept of trust includes the behavioural goal of being willing to act. This trustworthiness can also be stated in terms of brand credibility, i.e. the believability of the information in a brand, and it depends upon consumers perceiving that the brand is able (expertise) and willing (trustworthiness) to deliver its promises. This credibility ensures that the brand equity does not erode. Both expertise and trustworthiness reflect the accumulated impact of the brand's past and present marketing strategies (Erdem & Swait, 2004).

Trust is a significant predictor of loyalty and a driver of consumer retention, willingness to act, purchase intention, and overall market performance (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Erdem & Swait, 2004; Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). As explained earlier, the Theory of Consumer Perception states that consumers form evaluations and make purchase decisions based on their perceptions of a brand's attributes, including its trustworthiness, ethics, and social responsibility. Successful marketing strategies hinge on consumer commitment and trust. According to (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), A firm's reliability is based on honesty, fairness and responsibility. The interplay of these values with trust and satisfaction influences consumers' buying behaviour and, thus, helps retain consumer loyalty (Ranaweera & Prabhu, 2003). (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014), emphasise the importance of transparency and social responsibility in cultivating trust, positive attitudes, purchase intentions, and positive word-of-mouth for the organisation.

Legal responsibility dictates that firms refrain from deceptive and unfair advertising practices and makes a consumer believe that a firm does not use manipulative or misleading selling practices

(Altinbasak-Farina & Burnaz, 2019; Cheung & To, 2021; Kendrick et al., 2013). Brand credibility requires that consumers perceive that the brand can deliver what it promises, i.e., its trustworthiness reflects its cumulative image of how it was and how it is (Erdem & Swait, 2004). Marketers are urged to embody and promote ethical values, such as responsibility, openness, transparency, and honesty, to boost consumer confidence in the integrity of the marketing system (G. R. Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Trust is paramount for the organisation's efficiency and effectiveness, with high ethical standards as a nurturing force (G. R. Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). So, it can be formulated that trust significantly impacts consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

H4: Trustworthiness significantly impacts consumer perception of socially responsible marketing.

4. Research Methodology

The study is descriptive to determine consumer perception towards socially responsible marketing. This quantitative study collects data through a self-administered questionnaire using online (Google Forms) and offline methods to potential respondents, assuming that consumers are aware of socially responsible marketing and that their decision to purchase socially responsible products will depend on different factors. 250 questionnaires were administered using a purposive convenient sampling method, out of which only 180 were found appropriate for this study. Previous studies (Devi Juwaheer et al., 2012; Patino et al., 2014; Singh, 2009) also have used around 200 samples, providing satisfactory results. Also, this research is still in its early stages and is a preliminary version. Resource constraints also played a role in determining a feasible sample size. Further, this will be extended to a more significant and larger population.

The questionnaire was adopted from various studies, namely (Mancuso et al., 2021); (Cheung & To, 2021); (Gurbuz & Macabangin, 2019); (Kitz et al., 2022); (Gielissen, 2011); (Patino et al., 2014); (Ahsan Ansari & Siddiqui, 2019); (Bhatia & Jain, 2014); (Kang & Hustvedt, 2014); (Vržina & Pepur, 2021). The respondents were asked to express their agreement and disagreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 =

Strongly agree, 2= Agree, 3= Neutral, 4= Disagree, 5= Strongly Disagree) to measure the variables.

5. Results

5.1. Factor Analysis

The socially responsible marketing of food products in this study was studied using different constructs that comprised five variables, i.e., Ethics in packaging and promotion, Labelling, Price, Trustworthiness and consumer perception and buying behaviour towards socially responsible marketing. Initially, there were 25 statements used to measure consumer perception, i.e., Ethics in packaging and promotion consisted of six (6) statements, labelling consisted of four (4) statements, price consisted of six (6) statements, trustworthiness consisted of four (4) statements and Consumer perception and buying behaviour towards socially responsible marketing consisted of five (5) statements. The factor analysis was done in around eight to ten rounds, out of which we dropped a few items due to fewer dual-factor loadings, resulting in 19 items, of which 14 items were independent variables, and five were dependent variables. The results of the study are given in Table 1.

The final run of factor analysis constituted four factors, with Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant at 0.000, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin was 0.732 (KMO>0.6) (Williams et al., 2010). The Communalities ranged from 0.449 to 0.729. There were no other items with dual-factor loadings.

The factor loadings for the remaining 14 socially responsible food items ranged from 0.581 to 0.802, above the cut-off value of 0.4 for a sample size of around 180 respondents. To summarise, the exploratory factor analysis gave us four factors, namely 1) Ethics in packaging and promotion, 2) Labelling, 3) Price, 4) Trustworthiness, and one dependent factor was Consumer perception and buying behaviour towards socially responsible marketing. These factors were considered valid and valuable.

Factor analysis of the perception of consumers towards socially responsible marketing (Independent variable)

Table 1*Rotated component matrix (independent variable)*

Items	Component			
	1	2	3	4
Factor 1: Ethics in Packaging and Promotion				
Consumers are willing to pay more for the item if it is packed in a biodegradable manner	0.780			
The versatility of product packaging (able to be reused) influences my buying decision	0.818			
Consumers consider the environmental impacts caused by food packaging.	0.581			
Consumers care if promotional message encourages social responsibility in consumer	0.558			
Factor 2: Labelling				
Consumers prefer the nutritional value highlighted in the food product.		0.802		
Consumers prefer the ingredients highlighted in the food item.		0.721		
Consumers prefer to find that all information regarding associated risks is fully disclosed.		0.771		
Factor 3: Price				
All extra costs and features identified influenced consumers' buying decisions.			0.586	
Full disclosure of the total price associated with the product influences consumers' decisions.			0.782	
Consumers compare price with quality before buying.			0.587	
Consumers prefer food companies to be transparent while disclosing their pricing policies.			0.680	
Factor 4: Trustworthiness				
Consumers prefer to look at the company name before buying.				0.581
Consumers prefer to buy from these companies who deliver what they promise.				0.772
The trustworthy name of a company influences the consumers.				0.659
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.				
Total Variance Explained	57.790			
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	0.732			
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	622.126			
Significant	.000			

Note: The questionnaire included personal pronouns to facilitate the respondents' understanding. However, for academic presentation, the items are rephrased in a more formal tone.

Factor analysis of the perception of consumers towards socially responsible marketing (Dependent variable)

Table 2*Rotated component matrix (Dependent Variable)*

Items	Factor loading
Consumer perception and buying behaviour towards socially responsible marketing	
Consumers buy those food products that are environmentally friendly.	.762

Consumers think buying socially responsible food products is a moral duty.	.738
Consumers buy those products that integrate charitable contributions.	.826
Consumers buy products that are made without harming animals.	.720
Consumers buy from those food companies that work with local farmers/businesses.	.736
Total Variance Explained	57.371
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	0.821
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	280.566
Significant	.000

Note: The questionnaire included personal pronouns to facilitate the respondents' understanding. However, for the purpose of academic presentation, the items are rephrased in a more formal tone.

This process involved two rounds. The result of the second round is displayed in Table 2. The final round explained 57.371 per cent of the total variance. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.821 (which should be $KMO > 0.6$), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant at 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) (Williams et al., 2010). The Communalities for the remaining four items ranged from 0.519 to 0.683. Thus, factor analysis met the required criteria.

To ensure the fitness of the data collected and confirm the structure developed in Exploratory factor analysis, we test the reliability of the variables by using Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha helps test the test's internal consistency (Brown, 2002). According to (Gliem & Gliem, n.d.) A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.6 or more is acceptable. Reliability alpha was 0.707 for four items of Ethics in packaging and perception, 0.716 for three items of labelling, 0.651 for four items of price, 0.538 for three items of trustworthiness and 0.808 for five values of Consumer perception towards socially responsible marketing. Overall, Cronbach's alpha is 0.856. Therefore, the obtained values are acceptable.

5.2. Multiple Regression Analysis

As shown in Table 3, the results of multiple regression analysis show that the correlation of four independent variables with the dependent variable is R-value (0.737). R-squared value (0.543) shows that 54.3 per cent of the variance in Consumer perception and buying behaviour of socially responsible marketing could be explained by Ethics in packaging and promotion, Labelling, Price and Trustworthiness ($R^2 = 0.543$, $p < 0.05$). Table 4 shows the influence of four variables on the dependent variable. The variance inflation factor (VIF) shows the multicollinearity index. Variables are allowed if the multicollinearity index $VIF < 5$ (Akinwande et al., 2015), as shown in the table. Thus, multicollinearity is at a moderate level and is acceptable. The table shows the highest beta coefficient for ethics in promotion and packaging ($b = 0.623$ and $\text{sig.} = .000$) and price ($b = 0.152$ and $\text{sig.} = 0.010$). Both were significant ($p < 0.05$) and positively influenced consumer perception. However, Labelling and Trustworthiness did not significantly impact consumer perception, as the significant value is greater than 0.05. So, Hypotheses 1 and 3 were accepted, and Hypotheses 2 and 4 were rejected.

Hypothesis 1: Ethics in packaging and promotion significantly impact the consumer perception of socially responsible marketing. The hypothesis is accepted as the significant value is .000.

Hypothesis 2: Labelling significantly impacts the consumer perception of socially responsible marketing. Labelling does not significantly impact consumer perception since the significant value of 0.143 is greater than 0.05. Hence, the hypothesis is rejected.

Hypothesis 3: Price significantly impacts the consumer perception of socially responsible marketing, as the significant value of 0.010 is less than 0.05. So, the hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis 4: Trustworthiness significantly impacts the consumer perception of socially responsible marketing. Since the significant value of 0.750 is greater than 0.05, trustworthiness does not significantly impact consumer perception. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 3

Model Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.737 ^a	.543	.532	.46947

Table 4

Coefficients, Significant p-values, and Collinearity Statistics of the Regression Model

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Tolerance	Statistics VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta				
(Constant)	.087	.164		.529	.598		
Labelling	.078	.053	.081	1.473	.143	.846	1.183
Ethics in Packaging and Promotion	.635	.058	.623	10.881	.000*	.784	1.275
Price	.189	.072	.152	2.621	.010*	.761	1.314
Trustworthiness	.021	.065	.017	.319	.750	.884	1.132

Note: Significant: *p<0.05

Dependent variable (consumer perception and buying behaviour towards socially responsible marketing)

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The buyer or the consumer holds a significant position in the market, and their inclination towards socially responsible marketing has steadily risen in recent decades, mirrored by an increasing concern for environmental and social issues. In response to this trend, companies increasingly embrace responsible marketing practices, particularly in the food sector (Belz & Schmidt-Riediger, 2009). Many studies have shown that consumers are attracted towards sustainable and environmentally friendly food consumption as they are more concerned about health (Kamenidou et al., 2019; Rana & Paul, 2017; Stranieri et al., 2017; Verain et al., 2012). This growing consciousness has prompted companies, particularly those in the food sector, to reevaluate their marketing strategies and embrace more responsible approaches. The current study was conducted to understand how consumers perceive socially responsible marketing and how their perception may lead to buying behaviour.

Building on this context, it is evident that consumer perception of socially responsible marketing plays a pivotal role in shaping their purchasing behaviour. The regression result revealed that ethical packaging promotion of food products is a key factor positively impacting consumer perception and purchasing decisions. Researchers (d'Astous & Labrecque, 2021) had similar observations where responsible packaging impacted purchase intention. One more study recommended that food manufacturers integrate better packaging by involving

consumers directly, as it significantly impacts purchase intention (Ahsan Ansari & Siddiqui, 2019).

Price also positively impacted consumers' buying behaviour. This finding is supported by (Bhatia & Jain, 2014; Boztepe, 2012) as they found the price to be a significant predictor of responsible consumption and purchase intention. In the present study, price is the second most important factor participants have considered while buying socially responsible food products.

However, contrary to a study by D'Souza et al. (2006; Nayga, 1999), where labels significantly impacted consumer behaviour, the labelling of the food product was found to have no significant impact on consumer perception. One possible explanation for this difference could be the lack of demographics or differences in cultural context. Also, in low-involvement purchases like food, consumers tend to make habitual decisions and rely less on detailed label information.

Unlike studies like (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Rahman & Nguyen-Viet, 2023), the organisation's trustworthiness had no significant impact on consumer perception, which showed brand trust as an essential determinant of purchase intention. Our studies indicate no significant relationship between them. The possible reason could be the use of specific products in our study and, again, the need for demographics. In socially responsible marketing, consumers may be more attracted to specific socially responsible practices like responsible packaging and promotion rather than general trustworthiness.

Our findings empirically demonstrate that food companies can adopt ethical promotional and pricing strategies that can shape the importance consumers place on various social marketing practices.

Moreover, the study's findings also reveal the evolving landscape of consumerism, where responsible considerations influence purchase decisions. This shift diverges from traditional marketing practices, as consumers seek companies that align with their values and are committed to responsible marketing practices. In conclusion, the changing mindset of consumers demands a strategic shift for companies to socially responsible marketing.

As consumer awareness increases, the role of socially responsible marketing will undoubtedly remain a critical consideration for firms gaining a competitive advantage in a socially responsible marketplace.

6.1. Practical Implications

The research offers valuable insights and recommendations for marketing managers, particularly those in the food industry. By highlighting the necessary marketing strategies in the empirical study, firms in the food sector can use them to lure consumer loyalty. Consumers are increasingly conscious of their health and environmental concerns, yet sometimes lack adequate information to make their choices. Thus, by providing firms with information about relevant marketing practices, organisations can increase their competitiveness, expand their consumer base and boost sales as a reward for their practices. Specifically, leveraging socially responsible marketing tools like eco-labelling, ethical packaging and promotion, and fair prices can effectively educate consumers about product attributes, benefits, and environmental harm. The study confirms two main strategies that can help gain a competitive advantage for the firm.

The study suggests that ethical packaging and promotion engagement offer marketing managers added value, like higher marketing performance and power within the business. Managers can frame appropriate sustainable strategies by spreading consumer awareness through eco-friendly packaging and promotion. Policymakers should include socially responsible food products' social and environmental benefits in the promotional campaign to influence consumer buying behaviour. These benefits will lead a business towards sustainability with the help of consumer action and will lead to long-term success.

Marketing managers can interpret these findings and justify expenditures on design, communication and packaging strategies that impact consumers' trust, brand loyalty, and long-term profitability.

Producers and marketers of socially responsible food products should try to empathise with consumers. Marketing strategists should increase consumers' acquaintance with these products and learn about their perceptions. Since the price has a significant

impact, new consumers of socially responsible food products can be provided with a free-of-cost sample or at a marginal cost so that they can check the quality of the product and understand the benefits of socially responsible food products.

Despite being health-conscious, consumers today are still sensitive to pricing. Price is the only element in the marketing mix that allows marketers to earn from their consumers. Marketers can use the cost-benefit analysis and evaluate the benefits of that price. They should make their consumers aware of the factors influencing the price of socially responsible food products. Ethical sourcing, environmentally friendly packaging, and other factors often have higher costs that increase product prices. Transparent communication about price justification through marketing campaigns can help the consumer understand the value behind the price, increasing their trust and willingness to pay. It is also suggested that marketers can strengthen their product value regarding health, safety, and quality for better performance and make consumers willing to pay a premium.

7. Limitations and Future Research

While the study offers several contributions, it also has limitations that can be helpful for further studies:

1. Given the relevance of the food sector, we have only conducted our study within it. Future researchers can extend this research to encompass other industries to increase its applicability.
2. The analysis relies on data collected only from Uttar Pradesh in India, implying the potential for different outcomes in large-scale studies conducted in various geographical areas and other countries.
3. The absence of demographic factors in the analysis highlights the importance of including variables like age, income or gender, as they can significantly influence the results.
4. In addition, more marketing strategies could be undertaken to comprehensively study consumer responses to understand them better and increase consumer loyalty, thereby contributing to an organisation's good positioning and reputation.

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