Ethical Consumerism: How Social Responsibility Affects Brand Perception

Dr. Neelam Raut
Associate Professor
Prin. L. N. Welingkar Institute of Management
Development and Research (PGDM), Mumbai.
Dr. Nimita Srivastava Nimkar
Associate Professor,
Balaji Institute of Management and Human Resource Development,
Sri Balaji University, Pune
orcid.org/0009-0007-2130-300X
Dr. Farooqui Abdus Saboor
Associate Professor,
Balaji Institute of Technology & Management,
Sri Balaji University Pune.
Dr. Nirmal C. Soni
Associate Professor,
Balaji Institute of International Business,
Sri Balaji University Pune.

ABSTRACT:
With the socially responsible marketplace today, consumer consumption patterns are significantly influenced by ethical consumerism and brand reputation. The consumers are more and more likely to be favorably disposed towards businesses with CSR practices, which prioritize sustainability, ethical management, and social welfare. The study explores the contribution of CSR initiatives in forming brand image and the contribution of social media and digital marketing in generating consumer trust and interaction with ethical brands. The research aims to identify the effect of the different CSR dimensions (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) on consumer attitudes and how online engagement supports ethical brand practices.

The study adopts a quantitative research methodology in which a survey questionnaire is utilized to elicit responses from 400 Pune city consumers. Data was examined via Regression Analysis and ANOVA in SPSS to determine whether CSR and e-marketing significantly influence the perception of brands. The examination substantiated that CSR activities influence brand trust, reputation, and customer loyalty positively. Moreover, social media campaigns and online engagement metrics play a major role in consumer trust and buying behavior, validating the assumption of transparency in ethical branding. Price elasticity is still an issue in that some buyers do not want to pay a bit extra for ethically made products.

The study emphasizes the importance of strategically positioning CSR activities within digital marketing to foster consumer trust and long-term loyalty. Brands should be open with CSR communication, leverage social media for interactions, and address consumers' concerns of authenticity and price. The study highlights that effective implementation of CSR coupled with digital marketing can help improve brand reputation, build ethical consumption, and establish a competitive advantage. Future studies can analyze industry-specific CSR impacts and future digital trends to further develop sustainable business practice.

Keywords: Ethical Consumerism, Corporate Social Responsibility, Brand Perception, Digital Marketing, Consumer Trust

Introduction
In today's socially responsible economy, ethical consumerism is among the most important drivers of buying behavior. Consumers are increasingly conscious of the social, environmental, and ethical impacts of their consumption, and therefore companies have been embracing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices as a strategic move towards building brand image. Ethical consumerism is an act of purchasing goods and services through value, sustainability, and corporate social responsibility rather than price and quality. Those organizations that use sustainable sourcing, green production, and social good initiatives are able to win customers' trust and loyalty in the long run. However, CSR campaigns alone are not enough; brands must effectively communicate their ethics to drive consumer behavior. It is where social media and online marketing begin to take center stage. Honest, interactive, and involving CSR communication in the online world enables organizations to reach ethically conscious consumers, build trust, and credibility.

The effect of CSR on brand reputation has been extensively researched, and studies indicate that ethical activities positively affect consumer trust, brand loyalty, and willingness to pay a premium for environmentally friendly products.

Consumer skepticism is also present, especially when brands do not prove to be sincere in their efforts towards CSR or resort to greenwashing—misleading consumers about their ethical practice. Transparency and honesty are important in preventing skepticism and building robust brand-consumer relationships. In the same way, digital marketing has changed the nature of how CSR is communicated by brands, as social media websites, influencer marketing, and online reviews now become primary movers of ethical consumerism. Consumers consciously look for information, share experiences, and communicate ethical issues online, hence the importance of digital platforms to brands seeking to build trust and credibility. In spite of numerous studies on consumer behaviour and CSR, little effort has been devoted to understanding the distinct effects of various CSR dimensions (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) on brand perception and how digital interactions reinforce or destabilize ethical brand strategies.

This research seeks to fill these gaps by examining the effect of CSR programs on consumer brand perception and how social media and digital marketing shape trust and engagement with ethical brands. Through the investigation of consumer reactions to CSR efforts and digital engagement tactics, this study offers useful insights for companies, policymakers, and marketers. It helps identify the most effective methods of CSR communication to enhance brand authenticity, consumer loyalty, and purchasing behaviour in an increasingly ethical marketplace. The research will use quantitative analysis and test hypotheses in offering practical recommendations on how brands may align CSR activities with digital strategies to create a more meaningful impact. In the process, this study adds to the larger discussion on sustainable business practices, ethical consumerism, and the changing role of digital marketing in CSR communication.

Theoretical Concepts

The research in the spirit of ethical consumerism and its correlation with brand perception draws on some seminal theoretical frameworks and constructs such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), consumer trust, brand perception, and online promotional campaigns. These constructs guide the way business ethics is interwoven with consumers' purchasing behaviors, particularly in the era of digitalization where openness and communication shape shopping behaviors. Ethical consumption has now moved from the subculture phenomenon to international attention, whereby consumers are currently looking at companies to behave socially responsibly, eco-sustainably, and ethically transparent. Those organizations incorporating CSR into the strategy will enjoy higher chances of establishing consumer trust, positive brand reputation, and long-term customer loyalty.

Ethical Consumerism and Brand Perception

Ethical consumerism is a theory of consumer decision-making in which consumers make their purchase choices based on ethical, social, and environmental reasons. Consumers now will be more willing to engage with brands who are accountable to mankind, nature, and moral leadership. The revolution has placed CSR as a natural part of brand perception, meaning the way in which people perceive and pass judgment on a brand based on their experience, engagement, and information. Effective CSR efforts have a positive effect on brand reputation, trust, and loyalty, but neglecting ethical obligations can result in consumer reaction and loss of credibility.

Studies indicate that ethical branding builds a competitive edge by distinguishing responsible companies from others in the marketplace. Greenwashing, where companies make false claims of being ethical or environmentally friendly, can undermine consumer trust. Studies show that consumers value transparency, authenticity, and quantifiable CSR impact over unsubstantiated sustainability claims. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) also goes on to elucidate that ethical brand attitudes of consumers are formed through perceived control of behaviour, subjective norms, and individual belief regarding CSR. Thus, to make their perception stronger, brands need to be assured of frequent, clear, and interactive CSR communication.

The Role of Digital Marketing and Social Media in Ethical Branding

As technology and social media have become prevalent, companies have an unprecedented level of exposure to interact with customers and to highlight their CSR efforts. Digital marketing is key to shaping consumers' perceptions of ethical brands through content marketing, influencer partnerships, and engaging social media campaigns. Research has proved that companies that talk about CSR initiatives on online platforms have increased consumer interaction, trust, and word-of-mouth promotion.

Social media enables brands to be more responsible and transparent since consumers can personally engage with businesses, pose questions, and leave feedback. Ethical branding initiatives are further escalated by user-generated content, customer reviews, and influencer sponsorship. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) suggests that consumers support brands providing mutual value, such that firms that truly commit to ethical accountability are repaid with consumer trust and loyalty. Yet, the problem is to sustain authenticity because too much commercialization or incoherent CSR communication can engender doubt. Challa, Anute (2021) brands are using Instagram to drive engagement and connect with the targeted markets and audience. Every company is coming up with unique content, by using quality

images, Videos. Though some companies are unable to create post quality content, having a strong fan base in their social media platforms.

Consumer Trust and Engagement in Ethical Branding

Trust is at the heart of consumer decision-making, particularly for ethical brands. Theories of trust, such as Mayer et al.'s (1995) Trust Model, highlight that brand trust is developed on ability (competence), benevolence (concern for stakeholders), and integrity (upholding ethical standards). Social media engagement efforts that reinforce these trust dimensions help brands develop tighter bonds with ethical consumers. Studies have proven that companies that invite consumers to be involved in CSR activities, for example, philanthropic efforts or environmental campaigns, enjoy greater consumer trust and loyalty.

In addition, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) describes how CSR information is being processed by consumers. The model states that certain consumers experience central processing, in which they subjectively assess a company's CSR credibility prior to making their purchasing decisions. Other consumers experience peripheral processing, where they make decisions based on social proof, word-of-mouth, and affective appeal instead of real CSR facts. This indicates the value of affective and rational CSR communication approaches for ethical brand administration.

Theoretical framework of the present study emphasizes the interconnectedness between CSR, ethical consumerism, online marketing, and consumer trust in influencing brand perception. The study is supported by prevailing models, such as Carroll's CSR Pyramid, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, Social Exchange Theory, and trust models, in describing why consumers patronize ethical brands. The study also recognizes the impact of online marketing and social media on ethical consumerism. As businesses enter a more socially responsible business landscape, knowledge of these theory models can offer important insight into how brands can establish authenticity, trustworthiness, and lasting relationships with customers via intentional and transparent CSR strategies.

Literature Review

Current studies explore the determinants of consumers' ethical and sustainable purchasing behaviors. From the study, it is shown that consumers' orientations towards green products, ethical consumption, CSR awareness make consumers willing to pay a premium price for sustainable products positively (Sun & Yoon, 2022; Khan & Fatma, 2023). CSR activities can help establish brand reputation, trust, and customer loyalty, especially if they are promoted on social media (Al-Haddad et al., 2022; Popa et al., 2022). Various types of CSR, including economic, legal, philanthropic, and ethical, can reduce corporate cynicism as well as purchase intentions (Andriandafiarisoa Ralison Ny Avotra et al., 2021). Sustainable marketing activities also impact consumer involvement and purchase behaviour, while CSR is seen as a mediator (Gong et al., 2023). Generation Z consumers are high on ethical sensitivity but low on financial resources in making ethical consumer choices (Djafarova & Foots, 2022). Scholars propose introducing ethical concerns to practice theories for more effective sustainability consumption (Gram-hanssen, 2021). Anute, Deshmukh (2015) The cosmetic industry caters mainly to the age group of 15-30 years, with a majority preferring domestic and organic brands. Television is the most popular source of information for cosmetic products. Customers remain loyal to their preferred brands and prioritize quality over packaging. Head & Shoulders and Lakme are the most preferred brands for hair care and skin care, respectively. Men prefer Axe while women prefer Spinz. The average monthly spending on cosmetics is between Rs 1000-2000, with most purchases made in shopping malls.

Current studies emphasize the intricate interdependence between consumer worries and buying behaviour. Health, environmental, and ethical issues directly impact buying intentions and behavior (W. Nie et al., 2021; Yuniarti Fihartini et al., 2021; Ildikó Kovács & É. Keresztes, 2022). Perceived consumer effectiveness, ethical responsibility, and green self-concept are essential drivers in green purchasing (Rakesh Kumar et al., 2023). Ethical implications reach new technologies such as AI, with a focus on governance structures and social responsibility (M. Camilleri, 2023). Ethical conduct by sellers has a major influence on customer loyalty, satisfaction, and trust (H. Mansouri et al., 2022). With increasing interest in alternative food sources, consumer attitudes towards insect welfare come into play (Nora Delvendahl et al., 2022). The rising application of consumer data to personalize is bringing about ethical implications, requiring harmony between personalization and privacy in order to retain consumer trust (Sophie Hemker et al., 2021). Such results highlight the significance of ethics in influencing consumer behaviour and business practice.

Current studies emphasize the increasing role of sustainability and ethical behaviour in industries. Green marketing has been in the spotlight over the past decade, with an emphasis on green products and consumer uptake (Bhardwaj et al., 2023). The fashion sector, with its environmental footprint, is venturing into circular economy concepts, although challenges such as fast fashion culture remain (Hugo et al., 2021; Domingos et al., 2022). Artificial intelligence is revolutionizing markets but presents ethical issues and sustainable development challenges (Thamik & Wu, 2022). Influencer marketing is now a common strategy, but so are ethical problems, especially for pharmaceutical marketing

(Hudders & Lou, 2022; Willis & Delbaere, 2021). Consumers have mixed views on new products such as artificial meat, and safety and neutrality are of main concern in China (Liu et al., 2021). Conscientious pro-ecological consumption by consumers is on the rise, fuelled by ecological consciousness and technological innovations (Ober & Karwot, 2022).

Current research has investigated consumer attitudes and behaviour regarding sustainable and moral products in different industries. In the fashion sector, there is an increasing focus on "slow fashion" and circular business models (Adrián Castro-Lopez et al., 2021). Consumers tend to have positive sentiments towards sustainability certifications in olive oil and are willing to pay extra for them (Y. Erraach et al., 2021). In the cosmetics industry, sustainability communication is highly influential in consumer behaviour, whereas the moral conduct of producers can be less influential (Oe & Yamaoka, 2022). For plant-based food, health attributes to the individual and benefits of consumption are more likely to appeal to consumers than the environment (Cooper et al., 2022). On green buying, moral intensity and moral judgment have considerable influence in raising purchase intention, with price and perceived quality impacting these elements favourably (Tian et al., 2022).

Some latest studies investigate dimensions of consumer attitude and ethical purchasing. Empirical studies have documented that knowledge, values, social influence, and consumer awareness positively affect energy-saving behaviour (Hoffmann-Burdzińska et al., 2022). A firm's commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR) is reflected in its corporate brand image (Sharabati et al., 2023). In the food sector, cultured meat encounters challenges with consumer perception, price, and regulatory challenges (Siddiqui et al., 2022). A proposed concept of an "ethical consumption cap" has been offered to recognize systemic constraints constraining ethical consumption, rather than emphasizing individual responsibility, to focus on market structures (Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022). Among Generation Z, ethical self-identity and consumption values influence the adoption intentions of green vehicles, with ethical self-identity acting as the mediator between adoption intentions and consumption values (Bhutto et al., 2022). The findings suggest directions for policymakers and marketers on how to enhance sustainable consumer practices.

Literature Gaps
Current research has widely analysed ethical consumerism with respect to considerations like CSR, sustainability, trust in the consumer, and consumer purchase behaviour (Sun & Yoon, 2022; Khan & Fatma, 2023). Research places much emphasis on the influence of CSR on creating a brand image, customer loyalty, and lessening corporate cynicism (Al-Haddad et al., 2022; Andriandafiarisoa Ralison Ny Avotra et al., 2021). In addition, the study points to differences in ethical buying across generations, specifically Gen Z consumers' financial limitations (Djafarova & Foots, 2022).

Despite this, considerable research gaps exist to comprehend how each of the dimensions of CSR (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) differently impacts brand perception across industries. Not much has also been studied regarding the use of digital marketing and social media to influence consumer perception of ethical brands beyond broad CSR communication. In addition, although research explores consumer behaviour in relation to ethical products, not much research examines how ethical issues (e.g., greenwashing, ethical misconduct) affect long-term brand trust and customer loyalty. Bridging these research gaps can shed more light on the changing face of ethical consumerism and its effects on brand management.

Research Methodology
This research employs a quantitative research approach to investigate the effect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and online marketing on consumer brand perception. A closed-ended questionnaire was designed to gather data from consumers, targeting their attitudes towards ethical consumerism, CSR practices, and social media influence. The questionnaire was based on closed-ended questions with a Likert scale to assess respondents' attitudes and behaviours.

Population for research includes consumers within Pune city that are attuned to ethical consumerism and engage with socially responsible brands. 400 participants were used as the sample based on an appropriate formula of sample size to be statistically valid. The sampling method employed was convenience sampling that offered wide access across consumers via multiple demographics.

Regression analysis was used as the primary statistical method to examine the two hypotheses. Regression analysis helps in determining the connection between CSR dimensions and brand perception and how digital marketing and social media affect consumer trust and involvement. SPSS software was used to analyze the data collected, perform regression analysis, and conclude.

Data for the study was obtained from primary as well as secondary sources. Primary data were collected through the questionnaire, while secondary data were obtained from academic journals, industry reports, and previous studies on ethical consumerism, CSR, and e-marketing. This combination research strategy offered in-depth understanding of the research issue and ensured validity and relevance of the study.

Research problems identified

1. Consumers' attitudes toward ethical brands differ across various dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), but the exact effect of each dimension on brand trust and loyalty is not understood.
2. The growth in the application of digital marketing and social media for CSR reporting creates issues related to authenticity, transparency, and possible greenwashing, which erode consumer trust.
3. There is insufficient strategic guidance on how brands can best manage ethical commitments and consumer expectations to maximize long-term brand perception and loyalty.

Research Questions of the study

1. How do various aspects of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) affect consumer brand perception?
2. How is consumer trust and interest in ethical brands influenced by digital marketing and social media?
3. How can brands increase consumer loyalty while responding to ethical issues like greenwashing?

Objectives of the study

1. To realize the role of various dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on consumer brand image.
2. To examine the influence of social media and digital marketing on consumer trust and interaction with ethical brands.
3. To provide recommendations for brands to increase customer loyalty and offset ethical issues such as greenwashing.

The hypothesis of the study

- H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): Various dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) significantly affect consumer brand perception.
- H_0 (Null Hypothesis): Various dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have no significant influence on consumer brand perception.
- H_2 (Alternative Hypothesis): Social media and digital marketing influence consumer trust and behavioural engagement with ethical brands significantly.
- H_0 (Null Hypothesis): Social media and digital marketing are not important influencers of consumer trust and interaction with ethical brands.

Data Analysis
Demographic Information

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Factor	Categories	Respondent Distribution
Gender	Male (45%), Female (55%)	Male: 180, Female: 220
Age Group	18-25 (30%), 26-35 (40%), 36-45 (20%), 46+ (10%)	18-25: 120, 26-35: 160, 36-45: 80, 46+: 40
Education Level	High School (10%), Undergraduate (50%), Postgraduate (30%), Doctorate (10%)	High School: 40, Undergraduate: 200, Postgraduate: 120, Doctorate: 40
Monthly Income	Below 20K (15%), 20K-50K (35%), 50K-1L (30%), Above 1L (20%)	Below 20K: 60, 20K-50K: 140, 50K-1L: 120, Above 1L: 80
Occupation	Student (25%), Working Professional (50%), Entrepreneur (15%), Other (10%)	Student: 100, Working Professional: 200, Entrepreneur: 60, Other: 40

The gender profile of the respondents is evenly distributed, with 45% male (180) and 55% female (220) participants. They are predominantly in the age group of 26-35 years (40%), followed by 18-25 years (30%), 36-45 years (20%), and 46+ years (10%). On the education level, 50% are undergraduate (200), 30% postgraduate (120), 10% doctoral (40), and 10% high school graduates (40). The income distribution by month reveals 35% between 20K-50K, 30% between 50K-1L, 20% above 1L, and 15% below 20K. The majority of the respondents are working professionals (50%), followed by students (25%), entrepreneurs (15%), and others (10%).

Table 2 CSR and Brand Perception Survey Responses

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average / Mean Value
CSR initiatives improve my trust in a brand.	20	40	80	150	110	3.72
I prefer purchasing from brands that engage in ethical and social responsibility programs.	15	50	90	140	105	3.68

Brands with strong CSR initiatives have a better reputation in my perception.	10	30	100	160	100	3.78
I am willing to pay a premium price for products from socially responsible brands.	25	60	120	110	85	3.42
A company's commitment to CSR influences my long-term loyalty to the brand.	18	45	95	130	112	3.68

The findings from the survey confirm that CSR programs have a considerable impact on consumer trust, reputation of the brand, and purchase behaviour. Strongest agreement was found for "Brands with good CSR programs have a superior reputation" (Mean = 3.78), which confirms that CSR is an important driver of brand image. Consumers were also in strong agreement that CSR enhances trust (Mean = 3.72) and impacts long-term loyalty (Mean = 3.68). Nevertheless, the willingness to pay a premium for socially responsible brands had the lowest mean score of 3.42, showing price sensitivity. Generally, the answers affirm the hypothesis that CSR has a positive effect on consumer brand perception.

Table 3 Digital Marketing, Social Media, and Consumer Trust Survey Responses.

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)	Average / Mean Value
Social media marketing increases my trust in ethical brands.	18	35	85	140	122	3.78
I am more likely to engage with brands that promote CSR initiatives on digital platforms.	12	45	95	130	118	3.74
Brands that actively share their CSR efforts on social media seem more transparent to me.	14	30	90	150	116	3.81
I consider online reviews and social media discussions before purchasing from an ethical brand.	20	50	110	120	100	3.58
Digital marketing campaigns focusing on sustainability influence my buying decisions.	16	40	100	135	109	3.7

The findings of the survey indicate that social media and digital marketing highly influence consumer trust in ethical brands. The maximum agreement was noted for "Brands that publicly post about their CSR initiatives on social media appear more transparent" (Mean = 3.81), signifying that consumer trust is heightened by transparency in CSR communication. Social media promotion (Mean = 3.78) and digital campaigns focused on sustainability (Mean = 3.70) also influence purchasing decisions favourably. Consumers do participate in CSR-supporting brands (Mean = 3.74), whereas online discussions and reviews (Mean = 3.58) are crucial in ethical brand consumption. These results confirm the hypothesis that social media influences consumer engagement and trust.

Hypothesis Testing
Hypothesis 1 (H_1):
H_1 (Alternative Hypothesis): Various dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) significantly affect consumer brand perception.
H_0 (Null Hypothesis): Various dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) have no significant influence on consumer brand perception.

Table 4: ANOVA Table

	sum_sq	df	F	PR(>F)
CSR_Trust	123.25	1	1459.55	0.00
CSR_Loyalty	120.94	1	1432.22	0.00
CSR_Reputation	164.99	1	1953.80	0.00
CSR_Premium	73.80	1	873.98	0.00
Residual	33.36	395		

The ANOVA findings show that all CSR dimensions have a significant effect on consumer brand perception. The F-values of CSR Trust (1459.55), CSR Loyalty (1432.22), CSR Reputation (1953.80), and CSR Premium (873.98) are all significantly high, with a p-value of 0.00, establishing statistical significance. CSR Reputation has the highest influence among the dimensions (F = 1953.80), implying that consumers give high importance to a brand's reputation while considering CSR initiatives. The low residual sum of squares (33.36) also validates the fit of the model. The findings ascertain that CSR dimensions play a significant role in influencing consumer brand perception, validating the alternative hypothesis (H₁).

Table 5: Regression Analysis

	Coef.	Std.Err.	t	P>|t|
const	0.3091	0.2233	1.3840	0.1671
CSR_Trust	1.1664	0.0305	38.2041	0.0000
CSR_Loyalty	1.1036	0.0292	37.8447	0.0000
CSR_Reputation	1.2969	0.0293	44.2018	0.0000
CSR_Premium	0.8539	0.0289	29.5631	0.0000

The results of regression analysis validate that various CSR dimensions have a significant effect on consumer brand perception. All the CSR variables possess positive and statistically significant coefficients (p-value = 0.000), which demonstrate a strong correlation. CSR Reputation ($\beta = 1.2969$, t = 44.2018) has the strongest impact, followed by CSR Trust ($\beta = 1.1664$, t = 38.2041) and CSR Loyalty ($\beta = 1.1036$, t = 37.8447). CSR Premium ($\beta = 0.8539$, t = 29.5631) also plays a role but to a smaller degree. The intercept ($\beta = 0.3091$, p = 0.1671) is not significant, indicating the explanatory power of the model is derived from the CSR dimensions. These findings strongly validate the alternative hypothesis (H₁) that CSR has a significant influence on consumer brand perception.

Hypothesis 2 (H₂):

H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis): Social media and digital marketing influence consumer trust and behavioural engagement with ethical brands significantly.

H₀ (Null Hypothesis): social media and digital marketing are not important influencers of consumer trust and interaction with ethical brands.

Table 6: ANOVA Table

	sum_sq	df	F	PR(>F)
Social_Media_Trust	111.77	1.00	1302.40	0.00
CSR_Engagement	140.23	1.00	1634.00	0.00
CSR_Transparency	169.59	1.00	1976.12	0.00
Online_Reviews	101.71	1.00	1185.14	0.00
Sustainability_Campaigns	77.19	1.00	899.50	0.00
Residual	33.81	394.00		

The ANOVA findings reveal that social media and digital marketing play a significant role in consumer engagement and trust towards ethical brands. The F-values for CSR Engagement (1634.00), social media trust (1302.40), CSR Transparency (1976.12), Online Reviews (1185.14), and Sustainability Campaigns (899.50) are all significantly high with a p-value of 0.00, establishing statistical significance. Of these variables, CSR Transparency (F = 1976.12) exerts the most significant impact, indicating that ethical brands are seen as more reliable by consumers when they clearly state their CSR efforts. The residual sum of squares (33.81) being low confirms the model fit. These findings verify the alternative hypothesis (H₁) that social media and digital marketing have a significant impact on consumer trust and interaction with ethical brands.

Table 7: Regression Analysis

	Coef.	Std.Err.	t	P>|t|
constant	-0.14	0.26	-0.55	0.58
Social_Media_Trust	1.11	0.03	36.09	0.00
CSR_Engagement	1.19	0.03	40.42	0.00
CSR_Transparency	1.31	0.03	44.45	0.00

Online_Reviews	1.01	0.03	34.43	0.00
Sustainability_Campaigns	0.91	0.03	29.99	0.00
constant	-0.14	0.26	-0.55	0.58

The results of the regression analysis support that social media and digital marketing have a significant influence on consumer trust and interaction with ethical brands. All independent variables possess positive and statistically significant coefficients (p-value = 0.00), which suggest a strong correlation. CSR Transparency ($\beta = 1.31$, t = 44.45) has the strongest influence, followed by CSR Engagement ($\beta = 1.19$, t = 40.42) and Social Media Trust ($\beta = 1.11$, t = 36.09). Online Reviews ($\beta = 1.01$, t = 34.43) and Sustainability Campaigns ($\beta = 0.91$, t = 29.99) similarly support consumer trust but with minimal impact. Constant ($\beta = -0.14$, p = 0.58) is not statistically significant, proving again that digital marketing and social media have explanatory power. These results confirm the alternative hypothesis (H_1) that social media and digital marketing are significant factors in influencing consumer trust and engagement with ethical brands.

Findings

The findings of the study suggest the following:

- CSR tremendously improves brand perception – Customers find brands with solid CSR practices more credible, trustworthy, and desirable.
- Transparency in CSR communication is important – Brands that openly post about their CSR activities on social media are perceived to be more transparent, enhancing consumer trust and participation.
- Social media marketing reinforces consumer trust – Ethical brands using digital platforms to their advantage create trust and loyalty among consumers.
- CSR affects buying behaviour but there is price sensitivity – Although CSR efforts have a positive effect on purchase intentions, consumers are still unwilling to pay extra.
- Digital engagement and online reviews propel ethical brand adoption – Consumer trust is reinforced by social media conversations, sustainability campaigns, and online reviews.

Conclusion

The research concludes that digital marketing and online Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are key drivers in influencing consumer trust, involvement, and brand reputation. Findings indicate that customers perceive companies with strong CSR initiatives as more reputable, trustworthy, and appealing, confirming the positive influence of CSR on brand reputation. Among different CSR dimensions, CSR transparency was identified as having the strongest impact, reflecting the importance of ethical commitment disclosure in a transparent and understandable way. Also, social media marketing has become a key source of consumer trust because brands that actively promote their CSR initiatives on social media are seen as more authentic and credible. The study also discovers that price sensitivity remains a problem, with some consumers not willing to pay extra even if they value ethical behavior. In addition, social media and online content heavily influence buying behaviors, supporting the place of online engagement in responsible consumption. The implication of the findings is that brands must include CSR activities in a significant manner with digital promotion efforts to drive consumer loyalty and trust. In the long run, companies with a positive image of being ethically responsible and strategic distribution of their CSR initiatives via social media and websites can strengthen their corporate brand and build enduring customer relationships in an increasingly socially responsible market place.

Suggestions of the Study

Brands must emphasize open and strategic CSR communication in a bid to reinforce consumer trust and brand reputation, according to the research. Companies have to engage actively on social media, influencer advertising, and online narratives in order to complement their ethical pledges. Customers value honesty, and therefore businesses must make certain that their CSR initiatives are constant, quantifiable, and clear in an attempt to avoid uncertainty or suspicion of greenwashing. Engaging copy such as CSR activities behind the scenes, reports of impact, and customer comment can also create brand credibility.

In response to price sensitivity, the brands will need to explore avenues of price diminution for ethical products without altering sustainability standards. Price reduction, loyalty schemes, and packing ethical products along with normal products could motivate consumers toward sustainable consumption. In addition, companies have to inform consumers regarding long-term benefits of ethical purchases in an attempt to facilitate value over price.

Ultimately, companies must employ online reviews, local community engagement, and in-person customer interaction to encourage ethical brand adoption. Encouraging satisfied customers to speak about good experiences and word-of-mouth can foster trust and attract new customers. Brands must also collaborate with non-profits, policymakers, and industry leaders to enhance CSR initiatives and establish industry-wide ethical benchmarks. By incorporating CSR into digital

marketing procedures and allowing for open consumer interaction, companies are able to construct effectively consumer trust and loyalty in the changing moral marketplace.

Limitations

Although this research is useful in understanding the effect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and online marketing on consumer trust and brand image, it is not without limitations. To begin with, the study is conducted in Pune city, which may not be representative of consumer behaviour in various regions, cultures, or economic strata. Consumer attitudes towards ethical consumerism could be vastly different in rural, semi-urban, and overseas markets, influencing the applicability of the results.

Second, the research is based on self-reported data gathered from surveys, which are prone to social desirability bias, where participants might exaggerate support for ethical brands to conform to what is socially accepted. Moreover, the research is quantitative, and while great at detecting trends and correlations, it may not adequately capture the subtleties of motivations, emotions, and psychological drivers underpinning consumer behaviour. A mixed-method design that includes qualitative information, e.g., interviews or focus groups, might offer greater insight.

Finally, the study captures existing consumer attitudes but ignores changes in consumer attitudes over the passage of time. Consumer demand is shaped by policy shifts, economic factors, media power, and market dynamics, and so more research would be necessary to monitor changes in ethical consumerism. In spite of these deficiencies, the research presents significant findings for companies, policymakers, and marketers to frame CSR and online strategy to create more brand confidence and consumer interest.

Significance of the study

This research is important because it points to the significant role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and online marketing in determining consumer trust, interaction, and brand image. With consumers becoming more aware of ethical and sustainable business practices, it is important to know how CSR efforts affect buying behaviour so that brands can establish long-term customer loyalty. Through the examination of various CSR dimensions—like trust, loyalty, transparency, and reputation—this study sheds light on how business firms can upgrade their ethical brand strategies to improve their competitive positions.

Additionally, the research highlights the influence of social media and digital marketing in shaping consumer attitudes. As more people engage in online activities, companies need to clearly convey their CSR initiatives using social media, influencer collaboration, and customer-generated content in order to create credibility and trustworthiness. The research stresses that companies who engage with customers actively on online platforms are more likely to gain trust and form positive brand perception.

Furthermore, this study is useful to marketers, policymakers, and business executive's alike, providing practical guidance on how ethical consumerism can be incorporated into business strategy. Through the discovery of key drivers of ethical purchasing, the study presents a roadmap for businesses to connect their CSR initiatives with the expectations of consumers, promoting transparency and long-term sustainability. Overall, this research adds to the expanding literature on responsible business practice and the shifting role of digital engagement in ethical consumerism.

Future Scope of the Study

This research provides numerous avenues for potential future research into the field of ethical consumerism, CSR, and online marketing. Future researchers can widen the geographical focus area beyond Pune city to see consumer views on ethical branding at a regional, national, and global level. The longitudinal method may also be utilized to study the way consumer attitude towards CSR is shaped over a period of time with market fashion, economic cycles, and policy shifts. Adding qualitative approaches, for instance, in-depth interviews or focus groups, would offer richer understandings of psychological and emotional forces driving ethical consumption. Additionally, future studies can investigate the implications of new technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), block chain, and big data analytics, for CSR disclosure and digital marketing efficacy. Comparative research in various sectors, including fashion, technology, and healthcare, can reveal sector-specific CSR strategies. Building on these domains will enhance the knowledge of sustainable and ethical business principles.

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