Impact of Ethical Branding and Corporate Social Responsibility on Purchase Decisions

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Abstract
India's contemporary marketplace is experiencing significant structural and psychological transformation. While historically defined by pronounced price sensitivity, Indian consumers are now increasingly incorporating ethical considerations and socio-environmental awareness into their purchasing decisions. This study investigates the impact of ethical branding and corporate social responsibility (CSR) on consumer purchase behaviour across India's diverse economic landscape, with particular focus on differences between metropolitan centres and emerging Tier-2 cities. In light of mandatory CSR expenditure under the Companies Act, 2013, and the implementation of standardised ESG disclosure requirements through SEBI's Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) framework, corporate accountability has become embedded within the regulatory framework. However, a notable gap remains between environmental awareness and actual sustainable purchasing behaviour. Based on secondary data from Tata Consumer Products, ITC Limited, Mamaearth, Dabur, and selected Tier-2 enterprises, the study finds that localised ethical branding is instrumental in driving market penetration. The analysis also identifies systemic constraints, including greenwashing and the economic challenges posed by ethical price premiums, and offers strategic recommendations for practitioners and policymakers aiming to enhance India's sustainable consumption ecosystem.

Keywords: Ethical Branding, Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainable Consumption, Consumer Purchase Behaviour, Brand Trust, Greenwashing, India

1. Introduction

The Indian consumer landscape presents a notable paradox. Traditionally anchored in cost-consciousness and utility maximisation, the market is now facing increasing environmental consciousness and ethical expectations that are reshaping the definition of brand value. As India strengthens its position as a rapidly expanding global economy, it must also address significant ecological vulnerabilities and persistent socioeconomic disparities. Consequently, consumption is shifting from a purely transactional activity to a means of civic participation and ethical expression.

This transformation has been substantially accelerated by regulatory intervention. India holds the distinction of being the first jurisdiction globally to legally mandate corporate philanthropy through a 2% CSR expenditure requirement under the Companies Act, 2013. Since the inception of this obligation, eligible entities have channelled approximately INR 92,700 crore into CSR-related activities, representing a substantial capital infusion into social development (MCA, 2025). Concurrently, SEBI's BRSR framework has introduced mandatory, quantitative ESG disclosures for the top 1,000 listed entities, effectively dissolving corporate opacity and enabling consumers to scrutinise the ethical posture of commercial organisations (SEBI, 2024).

Notwithstanding this institutional scaffolding, ethical brands frequently fail to achieve market traction commensurate with growing consumer sentiment. The translation of ethical awareness into tangible purchase behaviour remains inconsistent, undermined by macroeconomic inflationary pressures and deceptive marketing practices colloquially termed "greenwashing" which erode consumer trust (ASCI, 2024). The central problem this paper addresses is therefore: although Indian consumers increasingly demand ethical accountability from corporations, its actualisation at the point of purchase is obstructed by price sensitivity, brand scepticism, and pronounced regional heterogeneity.

This paper investigates the catalytic role of ethical branding and CSR in promoting sustainable brand adoption across India. It contends that ethical branding, when implemented with verifiable transparency, cultural resonance, and local relevance, can effectively bridge the persistent "awareness-to-action" gap that constrains sustainable consumption.

2. Literature Review

This literature review synthesisThis literature review synthesises empirical studies and theoretical frameworks alongside evidence from documented corporate practices in the Indian market to establish the scholarly context for this inquiry. Each subsection outlines the methodology, key findings, and research gaps of principal works, and integrates corporate evidence to demonstrate how academic arguments are reflected in practice. *the Intention-Behaviour Gap in Emerging Markets*

2.1 Sustainable Consumption and the Intention-Behaviour Gap in Emerging Markets

The phenomenon of sustainable consumption encompassing purchase behaviours that minimise environmental harm and promote social equity has attracted considerable scholarly attention in the context of emerging markets. A foundational contribution to this discourse is provided by **Wan and Bharti (2025)**, writing in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, who investigate whether restructuring the ethical price premium can overcome the well-documented intention-behaviour gap. Employing *six experimental studies (N = 2,332) conducted across three countries*, the authors test whether offering ethical products at price parity with conventional alternatives but in smaller quantities increases perceived affordability and narrows the gap between stated ethical intention and actual purchase. Results confirm that this "price-to-quantity" transfer meaningfully increases adoption rates, allowing consumers to act on ethical intentions without incurring a monetary premium. The finding carries direct implications for Tier-2 Indian markets where price consciousness is the primary barrier to ethical consumption. The primary research gap in this work is its absence of longitudinal data: the study does not assess whether the affordability effect sustains across repeat purchase cycles, leaving open whether the strategy produces durable behavioural change or a one-time novelty effect.

Complementing this perspective, **Tiwari et al. (2025)**, writing in the *Journal of Retail Management*, investigate the impact of inflationary conditions on cosmetic buying behaviour in Indore and Bhopal two representative Tier-2 Indian cities. Using a *descriptive survey methodology with structured questionnaires* administered to urban consumers, the study establishes that even ethically inclined consumers revert to price-driven decisions when macroeconomic pressures intensify. Crucially, the study identifies an accessibility deficit: sustainable product options remain physically and commercially underrepresented in non-metropolitan retail channels. The research gap pertains to supply-side dynamics; the study does not examine how retailer stocking decisions and supply chain structures contribute to this underrepresentation, an area warranting dedicated empirical inquiry.

The practical implications of both studies are demonstrated by **Dabur India**'s market strategy in rural and Tier-2 segments. Acknowledging the financial constraints of non-metropolitan consumers, Dabur introduced micro-packaging formats, such as toothpaste in 20-gram units, to lower per-unit costs while maintaining its Ayurvedic ethical brand heritage. This approach operationalises Wan and Bharti's (2025) quantity-restructuring model at the retail level and directly addresses the affordability barrier identified by Tiwari et al. (2025). Research published in the *Journal of International Research for Engineering and Management* (2025) on Dabur's rural marketing strategies found that the combination of accessible pricing and heritage-based ethical positioning positively influenced consumer buying behaviour in rural segments, with brand trust and cultural relevance serving as primary drivers of loyalty. Notably, Dabur's case demonstrates that ethical legitimacy in India's non-metropolitan markets can be conveyed through cultural heritage rather than formal ESG disclosure mechanisms, indicating that regulatory transparency frameworks may be less influential outside urban, digitally connected segments.

The affordability constraint identified in the literature also shapes how grassroots enterprises in Tier-2 cities construct their ethical narratives. **Bhumisha Organics and Pavika Organics**, both based in Bhopal, have achieved commercially viable scale by anchoring their brand positioning in hyperlocal economic empowerment rather than price-premium sustainability claims. Bhumisha Organics has engaged over 2,000 farmers in sustainable organic farming (Krishi Jagran, 2025), while Pavika Organics supported by the PM Mudra scheme produces cold-pressed oils using environmentally responsible packaging (Walmart Vriddhi, 2025). These enterprises circumvent the intention-behaviour gap not through price restructuring but through identity-based local relevance, suggesting an alternative pathway to ethical consumption that neither Wan and Bharti (2025) nor Tiwari et al. (2025) theorise a gap warranting further investigation, particularly in the context of India's growing rural FMCG market.

2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility as a Driver of Brand Trust and Purchase Behaviour

The relationship between CSR and consumer purchase behaviour in India has been rigorously examined by **Chaudhary, Hurrah, and Maqbool (2020)**, published in *Metamorphosis: A Journal of Management Research* (Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow). Drawing on responses from *378 Indian consumers*, the authors employ *descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis* to test the influence of CSR on actual buying behaviour. Their findings indicate that purchase intention, intended loyalty, and consumer trust in socially responsible firms jointly exert a statistically significant positive effect on actual purchase behaviour, with intended loyalty emerging as the single most powerful predictor. The managerial implication is that CSR must be embedded within the marketing mix rather than treated as a peripheral reputational activity. The key limitation and corresponding research gap is the study's reliance on self-reported behavioural data, which is susceptible to social desirability bias; the gap between claimed CSR-responsiveness and revealed purchase behaviour remains insufficiently addressed in the Indian empirical literature.

The trust-to-purchase mechanism identified by Chaudhary et al. (2020) finds empirical substantiation in the marketing practice of **ITC Limited**. The company's Classmate stationery range employs cause-related marketing, contributing Rs. 1 to primary education for every four notebooks purchased (Wikipedia, Classmate Stationery). **Dhyani (2017)**, writing in the *Journal of Advanced Research in Economics and Business Management*, used *Factor Analysis and Scree Plot methodology on a consumer sample from Delhi NCR* to examine what drives Classmate purchase decisions. The study found that the CSR message printed on every notebook back cover functions as a purchase reinforcement cue at the point of sale; brand

name and perceived quality were the dominant purchase drivers, with the cause-link serving as a competitive tie-breaker. Notably, 93.3% of surveyed respondents stated willingness to recommend Classmate to others, attributing this in part to the education contribution a finding consistent with Chaudhary et al.'s (2020) finding that intended loyalty is the strongest predictor of purchase. **Tata Consumer Products** provides a complementary illustration of how embedding social purpose at the product development stage rather than appending it as an external communication generates enduring brand trust: 29% of its product launches are concentrated in health and wellness segments, reflecting an integrated approach to ethical positioning (Tata Consumer Products Integrated Annual Report, 2024-25).
Extending this empirical base, **Verma and Lall (2024)**, published in the *International Journal of Advanced Research in Commerce, Management and Social Science*, investigate the digitally mediated pathway between CSR performance disclosure and consumer purchase decisions. Using *multiple regression analysis on 141 postgraduate respondents at Patna University*, the study reports an R^2 value of 0.941, indicating that digitised CSR information accounts for over 94% of the variance in consumer buying decisions. Trust in online CSR data and purchase decision modification following digital CSR messaging both demonstrated high statistical significance. While methodologically rigorous within its scope, the study's reliance on a single-institution student sample limits generalisability, particularly to rural or lower-digital-literacy consumer segments a gap that remains unaddressed in the literature.

2.3 Social Identity Theory and the Ethically Conscious Consumer

To account for the psychological underpinnings of ethical consumption, Social Identity Theory (SIT), originally developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), offers a productive analytical lens. SIT postulates that individuals derive a portion of their self-concept from the social groups they identify with, and that brand affiliation can serve as a vehicle for social identity construction and expression. In consumer markets, this implies that purchasing from an ethical brand becomes an act of identity affirmation, not merely a product transaction.

In the Indian corporate governance context, this framework has been applied empirically in a **longitudinal study published in the Asia Pacific Journal of Management**, examining how board-level social identity diversity influences CSR investment decisions among Indian corporations. Using a *longitudinal empirical design tracking board composition and CSR allocations over multiple years*, the study finds that boards with greater caste-based social identity diversity are associated with higher overall CSR engagement and a pronounced emphasis on social over environmental CSR. The implication for ethical branding is significant: the social composition of corporate leadership shapes both the volume and the thematic focus of CSR activity, which in turn determines whether CSR initiatives resonate with the identity commitments of target consumer segments. The primary research gap concerns the consumer-side of this equation how the alignment between CSR thematic focus and consumer social identity translates into differential purchase behaviour across socioeconomic cohorts remains empirically underexplored.

This theoretical gap is directly illuminated by the divergent trajectories of **Mamaearth** and **Forest Essentials** in India's personal care market. Mamaearth (Honasa Consumer Ltd.) pursued identity-driven ethical branding through ingredient transparency, Made Safe certification, and a "Plant Goodness" initiative linking every purchase to measurable tree planting. The brand positioned itself as a symbol of conscious, toxin-free parenthood an identity category that resonates strongly with millennial consumers and young families. The commercial results of this SIT-aligned strategy are quantifiable: Mamaearth's revenue grew from INR 1,142 million in FY2020 to INR 19,696 million in FY2024, representing a CAGR of 103.8%, and by 2023 it had become the third-largest skincare brand in India according to Euromonitor

International (Orangeowl.marketing, 2025; Storyboard18, 2024). The brand's documented trust erosion in FY2025, triggered by over-rapid SKU expansion and distributor channel strain (Inc42, 2024), further validates SIT's prediction that identity-based brand loyalty is contingent on consistent value expression once perceived to have been compromised, the identity-purchase link weakens rapidly.

Forest Essentials, by contrast, pursues a "Luxury Ayurveda" positioning that targets a narrower, premium social identity segment: consumers who define themselves through heritage craft and sustainable luxury. A brand strategy analysis (Suramya, 2025) documents how this identity anchoring commands sustained price premiums and repeat purchase loyalty among upper-income urban consumers, even in a highly competitive category. A comparative analysis of eco-friendly beauty brands in India (ResearchGate, 2025) concludes that the commercial divergence between these two brands one achieving mass-market scale, the other premium depth demonstrates that the effectiveness of SIT-based ethical branding is contingent on precise segment-identity alignment. This finding validates the theoretical framework while revealing the complexity of executing it across India's socially stratified consumer landscape. The research gap, as the board diversity study implies, is the absence of systematic empirical measurement of identity-purchase alignment at the consumer level a limitation shared by both the academic literature and the practitioner evidence reviewed here.

3. Research Objectives

This study is guided by three principal objectives:

1. To examine the influence of ethical branding and CSR on consumer purchase decisions across India's metropolitan and Tier-2 markets.
2. To identify key structural barriers to ethical consumption, including greenwashing, inflationary pressures, and the ethical price premium.
3. To propose evidence-based recommendations for brands, marketers, and policymakers to advance sustainable consumption under India's evolving regulatory frameworks.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design grounded in secondary data synthesis. Source material was drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals, corporate sustainability disclosures, management consultancy reports, industry white papers, and regulatory frameworks issued by SEBI and the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA). Comparative analysis and thematic synthesis were applied to derive insights pertaining to CSR efficacy, regional behavioural consumption.

5. Scope of the Study

The study encompasses the Indian retail, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), and lifestyle sectors, with particular focus on behavioural differences between Tier-1 metropolitan hubs and Tier-2 cities. Product categories examined include eco-friendly personal care, organic agriculture, sustainable fashion, and corporate social initiatives, with data drawn primarily from the 2025-2026 period.

6. The Role of Ethical Branding and CSR in Sustainability

Ethical branding and CSR serve as operational bridges between abstract sustainability objectives and measurable market outcomes. In India, these concepts shift sustainability from a compliance metric to a driver of value creation and competitive differentiation. Ethical branding involves a comprehensive commitment to people, the environment, and transparent business practices, fundamentally rejecting profit models based on societal externalities. By incorporating fair labour practices, sustainable sourcing, circular economy principles, and credible communication, ethical brands renew the social contract between corporations and communities, aligning financial performance with environmental stewardship.

7. Current Landscape: Ethical Branding and CSR in India

7.1 Regulatory Frameworks and Market Dynamics

Unlike Western markets, where CSR has evolved largely as a voluntary governance exercise, India's trajectory has been shaped by statutory intervention. The MCA mandate requiring eligible companies to allocate 2% of average net profits to CSR activities has produced approximately INR 92,700 crore in cumulative CSR expenditure, with education (25%), healthcare (18%), and environment and sustainability (13%) representing the dominant thematic allocations (MCA, 2025). Complementing this, SEBI's BRSR framework mandates standardised, auditable ESG disclosures for the top 1,000 listed entities, encompassing greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy consumption, and sustainable sourcing metrics (SEBI, 2024).

The PwC Voice of the Consumer 2025 survey documents a shift in consumer preferences, reporting that 73% of Indian consumers are willing to pay a premium for sustainably produced food, a proportion significantly higher than the global average of 44% (PwC India, 2025). Nutritional value, quality, and taste have become primary determinants of purchase, increasingly competing with price as key decision criteria.

7.2 Corporate Practice: Ethical Branding in Action

The regulatory and attitudinal shifts described above find varied expression across India's corporate landscape. Among large corporation, **Tata Consumer Products** and **ITC Limited** represent two distinct models of CSR-driven brand building. Tata Consumer Products has institutionalised ethical positioning at the product development level, with 29% of product launches concentrated in health and wellness segments an approach that embeds social purpose within the commercial offering rather than communicating it as an external add-on (Tata Consumer Products, 2025). ITC's Classmate range operationalises cause-related marketing through a direct purchase-to-impact mechanism: Rs. 1 is contributed to primary education for every four notebooks sold (Wikipedia, Classmate Stationery). This point-of-sale CSR signal, printed on every notebook, converts a routine stationery purchase into an act of social participation, reinforcing the brand loyalty dynamics identified by Chaudhary et al. (2020).

In the personal care segment, **Dabur India** demonstrates how ethical branding can be successfully adapted for non-metropolitan markets. The company's Ayurvedic heritage provides a culturally resonant ethical anchor, while its micro-packaging strategy toothpaste in 20-gram units makes the brand economically accessible to rural and Tier-2 consumers without compromising its ethical positioning. A study on Dabur's rural marketing strategies (*Journal of International Research for Engineering and Management*, 2025) found that brand trust and cultural relevance were the primary drivers of consumer loyalty in these segments, reinforcing the argument that ethical legitimacy in India's non-metropolitan markets operates through cultural heritage rather than formal ESG disclosure. At the Tier-2 grassroots level, enterprises such as **Bhumisha Organics** and **Pavika Organics** in Bhopal demonstrate that commercially viable ethical branding can be constructed around hyperlocal economic empowerment narratives. Bhumisha Organics has engaged over 2,000 farmers in sustainable farming (Krishi Jagran, 2025), while Pavika Organics has leveraged health consciousness and environmentally responsible packaging to build consumer loyalty among Tier-2 buyers (Walmart Vriddhi, 2025) approaches that differ structurally from the national brand strategies above but achieve comparable identity resonance within their geographic and demographic contexts.

8. Mechanisms: How Ethical Branding Influences Purchase Decisions

The following mechanisms are identified through the convergence of academic literature and documented corporate evidence reviewed in this study. Each subsection identifies the scholarly source from which the mechanism is drawn and the empirical data that substantiates it in the Indian market context.

8.1 Trust, Authenticity, and Credibility

This mechanism is grounded in the empirical work of **Chaudhary, Hurrah, and Maqbool (2020)**, whose regression analysis of 378 Indian consumers identified consumer trust in socially responsible firms as a statistically significant predictor of actual purchase behaviour (*Metamorphosis: A Journal of Management Research*). The study found that intended loyalty which is contingent on trust was the single strongest predictor of actual purchase, establishing that the conversion of ethical corporate practice into purchase behaviour is not driven by product attributes alone but by the perceived authenticity of the corporate commitment behind those attributes.

Supporting data from the corporate domain corroborates this mechanism. Mamaearth's commercial ascent reaching the rank of India's third-largest skincare brand by 2023 (Euromonitor International, as cited in Storyboard18, 2024) is attributed by market analysts to ingredient transparency, Made Safe certification, and consistent ethical communication (Latterly.org, 2025; Orangeowl.marketing, 2025). The brand's "Plant Goodness" initiative, which tracks tree planting linked to each order, provides quantifiable proof of ethical commitment a form of supply chain transparency that Chaudhary et al. (2020) identify as central to trust formation. Conversely, Mamaearth's documented trust erosion in FY2025, triggered by over-rapid SKU expansion and distributor channel strain (Inc42, 2024), illustrates that authenticity, once perceived to have been compromised, rapidly reverses the trust-to-purchase pathway. Supply chain transparency and independent third-party verification are therefore not merely marketing devices but foundational to the mechanism's operation.

8.2 Educational Scaffolding and Behaviour Shaping

This mechanism draws on the **intention-behaviour gap literature** synthesised by **Wan and Bharti (2025)**, who demonstrate that structural framing of the purchase decision not merely awareness communication is required to convert ethical intention into action. Their six experimental studies (N = 2,332) show that consumers provided with a clear, low-friction mechanism for ethical expression (same price, smaller quantity) are significantly more likely to act on ethical values than those who must absorb an explicit monetary premium. This implies that effective ethical branding functions less as persuasion and more as *decision architecture*: the brand must reduce the cognitive and financial burden of ethical choice, not simply assert its ethical credentials.

In the Indian context, **Verma and Lall (2024)** provide quantitative support for the role of information provision in shaping behaviour. Their multiple regression analysis ($R^2 = 0.941$) on 141 consumers demonstrates that access to digitised CSR performance information is a near-complete predictor of purchase decision modification (*International Journal of Advanced Research in Commerce, Management and Social Science*). This implies that for digitally accessible consumer segments, educational scaffolding delivered through digital channels factual product lifecycle information, certified ingredient disclosures, sustainability impact metrics is a highly effective purchase behaviour lever. ITC's practice of printing its education CSR message on every Classmate notebook back cover (Wikipedia, Classmate Stationery) is a low-cost, point-of-sale instantiation of this mechanism: rather than advertising its CSR agenda externally, the brand delivers the educational cue at the precise moment of the purchase decision.

8.3 Community Creation and Social Proof

This mechanism is theoretically grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) as applied to consumer markets, and empirically supported by the **longitudinal board diversity study** published in the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, which demonstrates that CSR initiatives framed around shared social identities generate greater consumer engagement and identification than those framed around generic environmental metrics. The consumer-side corollary that community membership in an ethically identified brand ecosystem reduces the social cost of ethical purchasing is further supported by research on social proof dynamics reviewed in this study (ResearchGate, 2025; Exchange4Media, 2025).

Corporate evidence substantiates this mechanism at scale. Mamaearth's community-building strategy built around young parents, millennial women, and health-conscious consumers created a socially identified peer group for whom toxin-free purchasing became a marker of responsible parenthood rather than merely a product preference (Latterly.org, 2025). The brand's estimated half-million trees planted through its Plant Goodness programme, visible and trackable per order, served as a shared community achievement that reinforced in-group identity. A comparative analysis of eco-friendly beauty marketing in India (ResearchGate, 2025) finds that community-driven digital marketing significantly outperformed conventional advertising in cost-per-acquisition, particularly in Tier-2 markets where social proof from geographically proximate peers carries stronger purchase influence than national broadcast media. At the grassroots level, Bhumisha Organics in Bhopal demonstrates that community social proof derived from the visible economic transformation of local farmers creates a purchase narrative that national brands cannot authentically replicate (Krishi Jagran, 2025).

9. Recommendations and Strategic Implications

9.1 For Sustainable Brands and Companies

Brands should prioritise measurable authenticity over aspirational rhetoric, replacing ambiguous sustainability language with third-party-certified, auditable metrics. Voluntary BRSR compliance can serve as a credible signal to ethically motivated consumers. Innovation should be directed toward overcoming economic barriers in Tier-2 and rural markets through unit-size restructuring, affordable sub-brand architectures, and localised distribution strategies. Long-term CSR strategy should be integrated within core product offerings rather than confined to episodic philanthropic activity.

9.2 For Marketers and Influencers

Marketing investment should be reoriented toward decentralised, community-led advocacy through locally credible micro-influencers, and toward story-based content that illustrates the real-world impact of consumer purchase decisions. Internal content auditing mechanisms are necessary to prevent greenwashing, ensuring that product endorsements are substantively aligned with brand values.

9.3 For Policymakers and Non-Governmental Organisations

Statutory definitions of sustainability-related marketing claims, coupled with proportionate penalties for greenwashing, are required to restore consumer trust in ethical branding. Tax incentives and infrastructure support for MSMEs engaged in sustainable production would lower the cost basis for ethical goods. A centralised, publicly accessible repository of BRSR disclosures would enable both analytical scrutiny and consumer-level accountability.

10. Conclusion

The integration of ethical branding and CSR into India's commercial ecosystem marks a significant and structurally reinforced change in marketplace dynamics. Legislative mandates, including the MCA's 2% CSR expenditure requirement and SEBI's BRSR framework, have institutionalised corporate accountability. At the same time, a more informed consumer base is redefining brand value by expecting corporations to meet broader societal obligations. While this transformation began in urban centres, its long-term sustainability depends on extending ethical consumption norms to the emerging middle classes in Tier-2 cities. However, mainstream adoption is still limited by the negative impact of greenwashing on brand trust and the ongoing economic challenge that ethical products often carry a price premium, making them inaccessible to price-sensitive consumers. Addressing these challenges through regulatory enforcement, product innovation, and consumer education is essential for advancing sustainable consumption in India.

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