A Critical Study of SDG Centered Marketing & Consumer Behavior

Dr. Nitin Kumar Agarwal
Associate Professor
TMIMT (TMU), Moradabad
nitin.management@tmu.ac.in

Dr. Sidharth Jain
Professor
Manglaytan University, Aligarh.
sjainbsr@gmail.com

Dr. Vikhyat Singhal
Associate Professor
IIMT Engineering College, Meerut
Vikhyat3179@gmail.com

Dr. Sahdev Singh Tomar
Assistant Professor
IIMT Engineering College, Meerut
sahadevsinghtomar@gmail.com

Abstract

The United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals aimed at eradicating poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all. These goals cover a broad range of issues, including climate action, gender equality, responsible consumption, and economic growth. Sustainable marketing goes beyond promoting products; it promotes values and long-term commitments to environmental and social well-being. SDG-focused advertising is a strategic tool that communicates a brand's alignment with global goals, aiming to educate and influence consumers while building a responsible brand image. As modern consumers become more informed and socially conscious, they are more likely to support brands that resonate with their values. This study seeks to explore whether SDG-based advertising efforts truly resonate with consumers and translate into favorable brand attitudes and loyalty. This research provides valuable insights into the influence of SDG-centered marketing on consumer behavior, particularly with respect to consumer perception and brand loyalty. Findings reveal that while explicit awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals among consumers may be limited, there is a clear intuitive understanding and positive reception

of sustainability-themed messages, especially those aligned with SDG 12—Responsible Consumption and Production.

Keyword: SDG, Sustainable Marketing, Consumer Behavior, brand attitude

1. Introduction

In recent years, sustainability has moved from being a niche concept to a central theme in global discourse. With growing environmental concerns, social inequalities, and ethical expectations, both consumers and corporations are shifting their focus toward sustainable practices. Advertising, as a powerful communication tool, plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and guiding consumer behavior. In this context, brands are increasingly aligning their messages with global sustainability frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This alignment is not only a moral imperative but also a strategic move to strengthen consumer trust and loyalty.

Introduction to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015, establishing 17 Sustainable Development Goals aimed at eradicating poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all. These goals cover a broad range of issues, including climate action, gender equality, responsible consumption, and economic growth. The SDGs serve as a blueprint for governments, institutions, and businesses to collaborate for a better future. For the private sector, including the marketing industry, the SDGs provide a framework to develop socially and environmentally responsible strategies that contribute to sustainable development.

Importance of Sustainable Marketing and SDG-Focused Advertising

Sustainable marketing goes beyond promoting products; it promotes values and long-term commitments to environmental and social well-being. SDG-focused advertising is a strategic tool that communicates a brand's alignment with global goals, aiming to educate and influence consumers while building a responsible brand image. As modern consumers become more informed and socially conscious, they are more likely to support brands that resonate with their values. Therefore, integrating SDGs into marketing campaigns not only enhances a company's ethical appeal but can also foster stronger brand loyalty and more positive consumer perceptions.

Research Problem and Significance

Despite the growing trend of SDG-focused advertising, there is limited research studies on its actual impact on consumer behavior, particularly regarding perception and brand loyalty. While some brands successfully use sustainability narratives, others risk being perceived as engaging in "greenwashing" if the messaging appears insincere or inconsistent with actual practices. This study seeks to explore whether SDG-based advertising efforts truly resonate with consumers and translate into favorable brand attitudes and loyalty. Understanding this impact is crucial for marketers aiming to build meaningful relationships with their audience in a sustainability-driven market.

2. Literature Review

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an ambitious set of 17 global objectives designed to address a wide range of social, economic, and environmental challenges by 2030. Among these, SDG 12—Responsible Consumption and Production—is particularly relevant to marketing practices. SDG 12 encourages sustainable consumption patterns, waste reduction, resource efficiency, and responsible production practices. For businesses and marketers, SDG 12 provides a framework for engaging consumers with products and services that have minimal environmental impact and contribute to long-term social well-being. Many companies have integrated SDG 12 into their marketing strategies to showcase their commitment to sustainability, aligning their corporate values with consumer expectations.

SDG 12 emphasizes the importance of educating consumers about responsible consumption, reducing waste, and making choices that contribute to sustainability. As such, SDG 12 has emerged as a focal point for brands that seek to promote environmentally friendly products or services while positioning themselves as ethical market leaders.

Advertising is one of the most powerful tools used to influence consumer behavior. Traditional advertising focused primarily on product features and benefits, but modern advertising increasingly highlights emotional connections, ethical concerns, and sustainability issues. Research has shown that advertising messages that align with consumer values—especially those related to social and environmental responsibility—can significantly influence purchase intentions and brand perception (Peattie & Crane, 2005).

Studies have demonstrated that consumers are more likely to trust brands that demonstrate authentic engagement with sustainability, rather than those perceived as merely promoting "green" messages without real action (Chen, 2010). Consumer behavior studies also suggest that the effectiveness of sustainable advertising depends on the transparency, consistency, and authenticity of the brand's message (Lichtenstein et al., 2004). Moreover, sustainable advertising can influence emotional reactions, creating a positive brand association that strengthens consumer loyalty (Choi et al., 2015).

However, advertising focused on sustainability must carefully balance emotional appeal with factual, actionable outcomes to avoid "greenwashing"—a practice where companies falsely claim to be environmentally friendly. Such misleading claims can damage brand credibility and erode consumer trust (TerraChoice, 2010).

Brand loyalty refers to a consumer's consistent preference for one brand over others, often resulting in repeat purchases, advocacy, and emotional attachment (Oliver, 1999). Loyal consumers are typically less sensitive to price and are more likely to promote the brand through word-of-mouth. Several studies have explored the relationship between brand loyalty and corporate social responsibility (CSR), finding that brands with a clear commitment to social and environmental issues enjoy stronger brand loyalty among ethical consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

Consumer perception, on the other hand, is the process through which consumers interpret and respond to a brand's message and image. Perception plays a critical role in shaping brand loyalty, as it determines how consumers view the company's values, ethics, and actions. When a brand's advertising aligns with SDG principles, it can positively influence consumer perception by positioning the brand as trustworthy, transparent, and socially responsible (Kotler et al., 2010).

Research has indicated that positive perceptions of a brand's sustainability efforts—whether through SDG-focused advertising or actual sustainability initiatives—can lead to stronger consumer loyalty and increased purchase behavior (Homburg et al., 2015). Consumers are more likely to support brands that reflect their personal values, especially when these values are aligned with broader societal goals like the SDGs.

Several theoretical models can provide insights into the relationship between SDG-focused advertising, consumer perceptions, and brand loyalty. These include:

The AIDA model explains how advertising attracts attention, generates interest, builds desire, and motivates action. SDG-focused advertising can be viewed through this lens as a strategy to capture consumer attention and foster a deeper emotional connection by aligning the brand's values with societal goals. Research shows that consumers are more likely to be drawn to brands that reflect ethical values and engage them emotionally (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB): According to the TPB, consumers' intentions and behavior are influenced by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. SDG-focused advertising may shape consumer attitudes towards sustainability, influencing their decision-making process. When brands promote sustainable behaviors and align their offerings with SDG principles, they can strengthen positive consumer attitudes and ultimately affect behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Models: CSR models emphasize the role of businesses in contributing to social good. Studies have shown that CSR practices, especially those aligned with global goals like the SDGs, can positively influence brand perception and consumer loyalty. Brands that focus on responsible practices—such as reducing environmental impact or promoting social equity—are often perceived more favorably by consumers, leading to stronger brand loyalty and advocacy (Carroll, 1999).

3. Gaps in Existing Literature

While there has been considerable research on sustainable marketing, there remains a gap in understanding the specific impact of SDG-focused advertising on consumer perceptions and brand loyalty. Few studies have examined how consumers react to SDG-specific messages in advertising, and even fewer have linked these messages to changes in long-term brand loyalty. Furthermore, while existing studies often emphasize environmental sustainability, more research is needed to explore the intersection of these SDGs with consumer behavior, particularly how messaging around social sustainability influences perceptions and loyalty.

4. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the influence of SDG-focused advertising on consumer perceptions.
2. To assess the relationship between SDG-focused advertising and brand loyalty.
3. To explore consumer attitudes toward brands that integrate SDGs into their marketing campaigns.
4. To evaluate whether SDG-aligned messages affect trust and long-term engagement with brands.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research methodology** grounded in observational techniques to explore the influence of SDG-focused advertising on consumer behavior and brand loyalty. As per the objectives of the research study, for understanding perceptions, attitudes, and emotional responses—a qualitative approach being best suited to capture the depth and nuance of consumer experiences has been applied. The study involves **non-participant observations of advertisements** across various media platforms (TV, digital, social media) that explicitly integrate SDG themes, particularly those aligned with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). In addition, **in-depth interviews** and **focus group discussions** were conducted with consumers to gain insights into their interpretations, emotional reactions, and behavioral intentions related to SDG-centric advertising.

6. Data Collection Method

For this research, data collection was conducted using a combination of non-participant observational techniques and qualitative interviews to gain comprehensive insights into the influence of SDG-focused advertising on consumer behavior. Observations involved analyzing a diverse range of advertisements across platforms such as television, digital media, and social media, with a particular focus on campaigns that explicitly incorporated themes from SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production). Additionally, primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with a purposive sample of consumers, allowing the researcher to explore participants' perceptions, emotional responses, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward SDG-centered marketing efforts. This methodological approach facilitated a

rich, contextual understanding of how sustainability narratives impact consumer trust and brand loyalty.

7. Data Analysis & Findings

This section presents a thematic analysis of the data collected through non-participant observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The study aimed to capture consumer perceptions, emotional responses, and behavioral intentions in response to SDG-focused advertising, particularly campaigns aligned with SDG 12. The key themes that emerged from the qualitative data are discussed below.

7.1 Awareness and Recognition of SDG Themes in Advertising

Findings:

Most participants demonstrated a moderate to low level of awareness about the UN SDGs as a formal framework. However, when exposed to advertisements incorporating sustainability themes such as eco-friendly packaging, recycling, ethical sourcing, or reduced carbon footprint, they were able to identify the broader message of environmental responsibility.

Interpretation:

Although brand consumers may not explicitly associate marketing messages with "SDGs," they can intuitively recognize values like sustainability and ethical production. This implies that while explicit SDG branding may not always be necessary, the *messaging must clearly communicate values that align with SDG principles* to ensure consumer resonance.

7.2 Emotional Engagement and Trust

Findings:

Participants reported feeling more positively toward brands that used emotional storytelling to portray their sustainability initiatives (e.g., showing impact on communities, wildlife, or future generations). Ads that featured real-life stories, children, or emotional music had a higher emotional engagement. Brands perceived as genuinely committed to sustainability gained more consumer trust.

Interpretation:

Emotional appeal in SDG-aligned ads enhances trust, a key driver of brand loyalty. Consumers

tend to trust brands that are *emotionally authentic* and *transparently responsible*. This supports the AIDA model, suggesting that well-crafted narratives not only grab attention but also foster long-term desire and loyalty.

7.3 Perception of Authenticity vs. Greenwashing

Findings:

A recurring concern among participants was skepticism toward "eco-friendly" or "green" labels. Participants expressed distrust toward brands that made vague or unsubstantiated sustainability claims. Authenticity was perceived higher when the brand's sustainability efforts were consistent across its marketing, packaging, and corporate actions.

Interpretation:

Consumers are increasingly critical and can distinguish between genuine efforts and performative activism (greenwashing). This highlights the importance of consistency and transparency in SDG-centric marketing. CSR models reinforce that perceived authenticity significantly affects trust and loyalty.

7.4 Influence on Purchase Intentions and Behavior

Findings:

Participants, especially younger consumers, indicated a willingness to support SDG-aligned brands, even at a higher cost. However, price sensitivity remained a barrier for certain demographic groups. Participants preferred brands that combined ethical messaging with functional value (e.g., product quality, durability).

Interpretation:

While ethical alignment positively influences purchase intentions, actual consumer behavior is influenced by *perceived value for money*. This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behavior, where perceived control (price, availability) moderates the intention-behavior gap.

7.5 Impact on Brand Loyalty

Findings:

Several participants reported repeat purchases from brands they considered sustainable. Positive

perception of a brand's values led to increased word-of-mouth promotion and advocacy, especially on social media. However, any perceived inconsistency or scandal led to quick erosion of loyalty.

Interpretation:

Brand loyalty is not only reinforced by sustainable practices but is also vulnerable to perceived breaches of trust. Consumers expect consistency across all touchpoints—advertising, operations, and customer service. Brands that *walk the talk* are more likely to secure long-term engagement.

8. Conclusion:

This research provides valuable insights into the influence of SDG-centered marketing on consumer behavior, particularly with respect to consumer perception and brand loyalty. Findings reveal that while explicit awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals among consumers may be limited, there is a clear intuitive understanding and positive reception of sustainability-themed messages, especially those aligned with SDG 12—Responsible Consumption and Production.

Emotional engagement emerged as a powerful tool in fostering trust and loyalty, reinforcing the significance of storytelling and authentic brand communication. Consumers were found to respond more positively to brands that demonstrated consistent, transparent, and meaningful sustainability efforts across various platforms.

However, the study also highlighted the risks of perceived greenwashing, showing that any disconnect between messaging and actual corporate practices can significantly damage consumer trust. The alignment of SDG principles with functional product value was a key determinant in influencing actual purchase decisions, underlining the importance of balancing ethics with practical benefits.

Overall, SDG-focused advertising, when executed with authenticity and strategic consistency, can significantly enhance consumer trust, emotional engagement, and brand loyalty.

9. Limitations of the Study

- **Limited Awareness of SDGs**: Since many participants were not familiar with the SDGs by name or framework, the study had to rely on indirect interpretations of sustainability themes, which may not fully capture SDG-specific perception.
- **Qualitative Scope**: The research was primarily qualitative and relied on non-participant observation and interviews. While this offered deep insights, it limits the generalizability of findings across broader populations.
- **Sample Bias**: The purposive sampling approach, though suitable for in-depth insights, may have introduced bias in favor of more socially conscious or urban participants.
- **Focus on SDG 12**: The study was primarily centered on SDG 12, possibly overlooking the impact of other relevant SDGs such as gender equality, decent work, or climate action.
- **Short-Term Observations**: The study did not account for long-term behavioral changes, and findings are based on immediate reactions rather than prolonged brand engagement.

10. Suggestions for Future Research

- **Broaden the SDG Focus**: Future studies should include a wider range of SDGs to examine how different sustainability themes (e.g., social equity, clean energy, education) influence consumer behavior across diverse demographic segments.
- **Quantitative Validation**: Complement qualitative insights with large-scale quantitative surveys to validate the relationship between SDG messaging, perception, and loyalty.
- **Longitudinal Studies**: Conduct long-term studies to assess how sustained SDG-centric marketing influences brand loyalty and consumer habits over time.
- **Develop SDG Literacy Campaigns**: Brands and marketers could invest in increasing SDG awareness through consumer education, thereby improving the effectiveness of sustainability-oriented messaging.
- **Transparency and Proof**: Companies should consistently back up sustainability claims with data, third-party certifications, and real-life impact stories to avoid accusations of greenwashing.
- **Targeted Messaging by Demographic**: Since younger consumers show more willingness to support SDG-aligned brands, companies should tailor messages for different age and income groups to overcome barriers like price sensitivity.

- **Integrate Functional and Ethical Value**: Marketers should not rely solely on ethical positioning; combining sustainability with quality, affordability, and convenience remains critical to influencing purchase behavior.

References

- Ajzen, I. (1991). *The theory of planned behavior*. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 50(2), 179–211. https://doi.org/10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T
- Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2004). *Doing better at doing good: When, why, and how consumers respond to corporate social initiatives*. California Management Review, 47(1), 9–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/41166284
- Carroll, A. B. (1999). *Corporate social responsibility: Evolution of a definitional construct*. Business & Society, 38(3), 268–295. https://doi.org/10.1177/000765039903800303
- Chen, Y. S. (2010). *The drivers of green brand equity: Green brand image, green satisfaction, and green trust*. Journal of Business Ethics, 93(2), 307–319. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-009-0223-9
- Choi, S. M., Lee, W. N., & Kim, H. J. (2015). *Lessons from the rich and famous: A cross-cultural comparison of celebrity endorsement in advertising*. Journal of Advertising, 34(2), 85–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2005.10639194
- Homburg, C., Stierl, M., & Bornemann, T. (2015). *Corporate social responsibility in business-to-business markets: How organizational customers account for supplier corporate social responsibility engagement*. Journal of Marketing, 77(6), 54–72. https://doi.org/10.1509/jm.15.0020
- Kotler, P., & Keller, K. L. (2016). *Marketing management* (15th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Kotler, P., Hoon, A. C., Yew, W. L., & Chin, T. T. (2010). *Marketing in the 21st century: Concepts, challenges and imperatives*. Prentice Hall.
- Lichtenstein, D. R., Drumwright, M. E., & Braig, B. M. (2004). *The effect of corporate social responsibility on customer donations to corporate-supported nonprofits*. Journal of Marketing, 68(4), 16–32. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.68.4.16.42726

- Oliver, R. L. (1999). *Whence consumer loyalty?* Journal of Marketing, 63(Special Issue), 33–44. https://doi.org/10.2307/1252099
- Peattie, K., & Crane, A. (2005). *Green marketing: Legend, myth, farce or prophesy?* Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 8(4), 357–370. https://doi.org/10.1108/13522750510619733
- TerraChoice. (2010). *The sins of greenwashing: Home and family edition*. Retrieved from https://sinsofgreenwashing.com