

Research Article

The Legitimacy Premium: How Mandatory ESG Disclosure Laws Reshape Brand Perception and Consumer Trust

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Abstract: The existing paper discusses complex relationship between obligatory Environmental, Social and Governance disclosure regulations, brand perception, and customer trust in the environment of the Indian market. It investigates how these regulatory frameworks and in particular those put across by the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting requirements have an impact on the top 1000 sectors in India on consumer perceptions and trust, and therefore brand equity. This paper states that strong ESG reporting can help to develop the so-called legitimacy premium, contributing to better brand reputation and more committed consumer loyalty by demonstrating that the corporation is responsible. On the other hand, lack or incompetence of such disclosures or even cases of green washing may destroy consumer confidence and the brand value can greatly depreciate especially in a more skeptical Indian consumer market. This study discusses how Indian firms are coping up with such changes in expectations bearing in mind the various industrial environment and the particular difficulties involved in creating customized ESG measures. Moreover, this paper shall critically examine the reality of the existing disclosure policies in India such as the guidelines of Central Consumer Protection Authority on green washing seeking to be used to create actual accountability in corporations and to mitigate on false claims to be environmentally friendly. It will also examine the subtle role played by CSR initiatives in brand equity in the Indian corporate structure, in the context of how the programs are used to create perception and value on the brands by the consumers.

Keywords: ESG disclosure, brand perception, consumer trust, India, legitimacy premium, corporate social responsibility, greenwashing, brand equity.

INTRODUCTION

The growing inter-country focus on the Environmental, Social and Governance aspects has enabled the definition of corporate accountability, especially in the context of India, where a number of mandatory disclosure regulations are changing the condition of brand image and customer loyalty. This paper examines the impact of India strict ESG policies on consumer assessment of corporate environmental responsibility, social responsibility, and governmental banking disclosure, which finally produces indications on purchase decisions and brand commitment. In particular, it examines the legitimacy premium granted to the firms that prove in their compliance with these disclosure requirements, which in turn will boost their market position and lead to closer relationships with stakeholders. This discussion explains how the perceived authenticity of ESG promise, particularly the environmental awareness, social responsibility perception, and transparency in the governance processes, would be translated to product resonance and elevated brand attachment in the Indian market. The paper also explores how marketing tools like sustainable marketing, green labeling and environmental friendly packaging among other regulating tools in addition to others in this regulatory

environment will assist in the consumer confidence and brand loyalty in consumer behavior. Consumer skepticism will also be moderated with an interest to determine its influence on decoding ESG information and the ultimate influence it has on brand recognition and credibility in terms of the Indian multifaceted consumer environment. This more so applies in a market which is characterized with increased consumer awareness concerning environmental impact and moral conduct in business. As the increased importance of ESG is expanding, the current review paper is expected to synthesize the existing literature on the interdependence between the mandatory ESG disclosure regulations in India and the consequent effect on the brand perception and consumer trust, and especially the specific socio-economic and regulatory context of India. It will also discuss how companies can overcome the obstacles associated with greenwashing and integrate the principles of ESG in a real way that would create a long-term consumer trust and increase their brand equity. This entails a careful analysis of the ways perceived environmental, social, and governance programs are converted into real changes in consumer attitudes and behaviors of buying products as far as low-carbon products are concerned.

Conceptual Framework: ESG, Brand Perception, and Consumer Trust

As established in the lengthy body in the section, the conceptual projections highlighted are between the ESG performance of a company and brand image and eventual generation of consumer trust with senior factors being perceived quality and corporate reputation. It investigates the way transparent ESG reporting, its requirements pre-ordained by Indian laws, creates a legitimacy premium, which influences the purchasing decisions of consumers, and results in a brand premium.

Defining ESG Disclosure and its Pillars

The ESG disclosure in India is an inclusive reporting of the practices on the environment, social responsibility, governance practices that extend beyond compliance to strategic corporate communications. Examples of environmental disclosures include carbon footprint, resource use, and waste management policies, which give a quantifiable description of environmental stewardship of a business. Social disclosures refer to labor policies, social relations, and product accountability and are based on the desire of the company to contribute to the welfare of society. Lastly, governance disclosures detail board diversity, executive compensation and anti-corruption, and hold it's accountable and under ethical leadership. These revelations are vital in the evaluation of the non-financial performance of a company by its shareholder and other stakeholders who will determine the overall effect on the society and the environment hence the perception of the brand and the development of buyer confidence.

2.2. Understanding Brand Perception in the Indian Context

The issue of brand perception in India is closely interwoven with cultural principles, morality and perceived genuineness of a company and its obligation towards sustainable and responsible practices. Effective communication of the Environmental, Social, and Governance initiatives is one of the key factors affecting this perception and influencing consumer attitudes and making them purchase the product. More importantly, the foundation of brand loyalty which is consumer trust is achieved through the steady and open ESG performance which is extremely important to the rising ethical awareness of the Indian consumer. It has been shown that the positive impacts of consumer trust in a brand have an upward trend as these consumers feel that a company is committed truly to ESG standards, thus, enhancing brand equity.

2.3. The Dynamics of Consumer Trust

The trust is a resolute arbitrator that links good ESG performance with a lasting consumer loyalty and advocacy. This association is particularly applicable to the Indian fast-moving consumer goods sector, where the corporate social responsibility projects significantly transform the purchasing behavior and brand loyalty in the long term outlook. Also, prompt reporting on ESG activities would encourage prompt decision-making by all stakeholders and create a sense of responsibility and cementing the

relationship between firms and different partners. The high competitive environment of the Indian market, in which the brand image plays a significant role, calls a big commitment to the philosophy of the ESG as the key to the stability of the confidence and loyalty of the stakeholders. It is a vigorous engagement that builds a strong corporate image, and, therefore, it can lead to a substantial increase in brand equity and financial performance. This strategic communication, using signalling, enables the business to communicate their intentions and pledges of sustainable and responsible business practices and consequently, improve stakeholder trust in the business and financial performance. This improved image also can translate into a greater confidence of the consumer as research has discovered that consumers tend to favor businesses that show great interest in corporate social responsibility programs as they begin to view them as more reliable and trustworthy.

THE EVOLUTION OF ESG DISCLOSURE IN INDIA

3.1. Voluntary Initiatives and Early Adopters

Even before the enactment of compulsory rules, a number of Indian firms had literally opted to have an ESG reporting policy, which was usually instigated by the pressure of the international community, ready access to international capital markets, and a growing realization that long-term value generation had little to do with financial exploitation and profit. These early adopters were oftentimes pioneers, who had shown the possibility of improved financial performance and increased brand image because of integration of their different ESG. Their active involvement preconditioned the following changes in regulations affecting not only the best practices within the industry, but also the process of making the government policies. This was also voluntary disclosure that created a standard of transparency which also led to a more general adjustment in the Indian corporate environment towards more accountability and strategic reporting of the non-financial performance. Additionally, early disclosure of information helped to minimize information asymmetries between firms and stakeholders, thus creating trust and possibly reducing agency expenses. These initiatives were usually aimed at the inclusion of good corporate governance practices, such as open decision-making and involvement of stakeholders, which are implicitly connected with CSR practices and law-abiding.

3.2. Regulatory Landscape: From SEBI BRSR to Mandatory Reporting

The Securities and Exchange Board of India was instrumental in institutionalizing ESG disclosures where it started by the release of mandatory Business Responsibility Reports on listed companies since the 2013-14 fiscal year. This directive further developed into the broader Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting framework, which requires disclosure of a broader scope of ESG parameters, to align the Indian companies with global standards of sustainability reporting. This movement of regulation is indicative of the increased dedication by India in promoting responsible corporate practices and allowing the investor and other stakeholders to make better informed

choices on the effects of the environment and social consideration. The rise of sustainability reporting in India started in 2009 as the Ministry of Corporate Affairs required the top 100 listed companies to submit Business Responsibility Reports by 2012 which grew to the top 500 companies by 2016 as global sensitivity to ESG increased. The most recent, the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report which today requires ESG reporting on the 1000 largest listed corporations is a giant step forward in the regulatory environment to corporate sustainability reporting in India.

3.3. Key Stakeholders and Their Influence

It is an entire regulatory system, as well as the broadening to include additional companies, which is expected to increase the quality and quantity of sustainability disclosures, which has been demonstrated to increase the firm value. The reason behind adopting the step is directly related to the increasing demands of investors and customers globally to gain increased transparency about the ESG performance. This emergence shows that sustainability is planned to be entrenched by corporate governance on other than merely compliance in developing culture of business responsibility within the Indian economy. This is a broad need, particularly when you are talking of the Business responsibility and Sustainability Reporting of the top 1000 companies in that it has served as a proof of the environmental parameters being a demand on sustainable development and resolving problems like pollution.

Impact of Mandatory ESG Disclosure on Brand Perception

4.1. Transparency and Accountability as Drivers of Brand Image

Such transparency will be enhanced by the availability of mandatory ESG disclosures as similar to those submitted by SEBI as it will require that the environmental, social, and governance indicators should be disclosed in more detail and, consequently, the brand perception should be influenced directly as a consequence of corporate responsibility. This increased disclosure will assist the stakeholders in effectively questioning the goodwill of a business to engage in sustainability and, consequently, will result in the development of trust and a positive disposition towards the multitude. In addition to this, this disclosure focus has been noted to generate shareholder value, meaning that firms that engage in these practices can also enjoy better financial performance besides better brand image. These revelations enable the consumer to be aware and decide to choose those brands that will prove to be provisional in the sense of ethical and sustainable operations and thereby to establish a good brand image and spur loyalty in the long run.

4.2. Reputational Risks and Opportunities

Any of them doing not meet these obligatory disclosure criteria or failing to portray plausible ESG performance risks, instead, the companies to substantial reputational expenses, including negative media attention and backlash on the part of consumers. Conversely, robust and authentic ESG reporting is a significant opportunity that firms have

to stand out, create stronger liaisons with their stakeholders, and increase their brands in a cut-throat economy. This twofold dynamic does not only ensure that companies meet the regulatory requirements but also works towards incorporating aspects of ESG in their business model and strategies due to the fact that the two are directly related in that responsible behavior relates directly to the brand value that should be held in the long term. Besides that, both that variance in the ESG ratings of a business and the misalignment in how the masses perceive the businesses could be an indicator of reputation risks that could need better stakeholder engagement and could lead to the competitive disadvantage.

4.3. Differentiation in Competitive Markets

The dedication to the obligatory disclosure of the ESG and to proactive sustainability schemes under the conditions of the intensely competitive markets is, perhaps, the clear cutting factor since it will enable businesses to attract advanced consumers who are also keen about the ethicality and responsible nature of the business activities. This kind of strategic positioning will help build market share and brand loyalty among the environmentally and socially conscious consumer segments. It can be followed by high ESG policy, along with the appropriate communication implemented in the form of compulsory disclosures that can subsequently contribute to the development of the trust towards stakeholders and ensure customer loyalty, which is a tremendous competitive advantage. Actually, by reducing the waste rates, conserving the energy and adequate utilization of the resources, a company gains considerable savings on the costs due to the ESG activities which, once disclosed, reinforces the position on the market. This improved market position is a multi-dimensional benefit of wholesome ESG engagement, along with an improved financial position as indicated by lower costs of debt financing.

IMPACT OF MANDATORY ESG DISCLOSURE ON CONSUMER TRUST

The mandatory ESG reporting is also important in shaping the trust of the consumers because they provide verifiable information that the consumers can assess the credibility of a company in its sustainability reports. This transparency can be used to resolve any concern related to greenwashing whereby companies make unfounded or fraudulent environmental claims and through this transparency they are therefore able to be trusted by the consumers. The trustfulness of the obligatory reporting would allow consumers to make their purchasing choices depending on their personal focus and values and would raise their loyalty to brands that do actually follow the idea of being ethical and sustainable.

Information Asymmetry and Consumer Confidence

Companies required disclosing ESGs induce an aiding effect on alleviating information asymmetry since consumers can be able to make more informed decisions and therefore would be more likely to trust a business in how it carries out responsible business activities. This heightened reporting fulfils the detachment between corporate action and social values, which allows the

customers to reward the corporations that discern sustainable norms. With this type of transparency, there is increased sense of trust as there is an ever-growing interest to brands that complies with their ethical thought processes and environmental consciousness. The resulting trust could be translated into increased brand loyalty, and a tendency to pay a premium in exploiting products and services of firms that have good ESG performance.

5.2. Ethical Consumption and Purchase Intentions

The reason is that the voluntary reporting of ESRs under the mandatory disclosure is a direct impact on the trends of ethical consumption which authenticates corporate claims on social and environmental responsibility causing increased intention to purchase the product among consumers who will be influenced by the values. This certification establishes the market in which sustainability is the paramount concern which leads to the need to purchase services and goods of those companies, the promise of which can be assessed in terms of ESG. It is even more powerful when the consumer is more inclined to value the environmental and social impact as the aspect of their consumption and high rating ESG reporting is regarded by the consumer as the mirror of the corporate integrity and ethical compliance. In addition, customers are increasingly willing to support brands that demonstrate earnest transparency and accountability in its ESG activities, and they will overlook those that might seem to be engaging in superficial or deceptive environmental, social, and governance activities.

5.3. Building Long-Term Loyalty

This resonance of values of consumers with corporate activities creates a powerful stock of emotional attachment and the outcome is long-term brand loyalty and recommendation. Such loyalty also gets reinforced when individuals understand that brands that are devoted to the ethics of ESG are relatively robust and have projection to the future which is more aligned to the interests and values of the individual in the long run. This forms a virtuous circle where increased transparency has resulted in ethical consumption and this translates to brand trust and long term customer relationships. This communication of commitment to ethical and sustainable practices through mandatory disclosure has assisted companies to build a strong reputation of integrity that is so imperative in attracting and retaining discriminating customers. In addition, clear ESG reporting can result in higher customer interest because it reflects a commitment of a company to common values in society, which can create a better brand reputation and loyalty. These good brand relationships, supported by a steady performance in ESG, are translated to more robust customer equity, which comprises value equity, brand equity and relationship equity.

Moderating Factors and Nuances in the Indian Market

6.1. Sectoral Variations in ESG Importance

The importance of mandatory ESG disclosures, followed by their following effects on brand perception and consumer trust differs significantly across the industry in the Indian market. As an example, manufacturing or energy-heavy industries have a higher scrutiny and a

stronger incentive to use ESG programs to gain a reputational benefit than service-based industries. On the other hand, in industries such as finance or technology, the social and governance factors may carry greater importance in the impressions and trust of consumers since they have lower impact on the environmental consequences, but a major impact on the society, and information safety. This industry division requires a distinct approach to ESG integration and disclosure, recognizing the fact that the salience of particular ESG pillars varies depending on the core activity and the stakeholder expectation that are relevant to each industry.

6.2. Socio-Cultural Context and Consumer Values

The multi-cultural aspect of the Indian country has a significant impact on consumer attitudes and responses to the disclosures on the topic of ESG because, in most cases, their ethical consumption behavior is determined by traditional values and community-based views. It means that consideration of local practice, religion, and community values is essential to make companies articulate their ESG engagements and appeal to the multicultural customers. As an illustration, rural development programs, programs on women empowerment, or traditional craft preservations can gain more consumer confidence and brand loyalty compared to more Western-based environmental campaigns. Hence, to ensure that their initiatives have the highest possible influence on the brand perception and consumer confidence, companies will have to localize their ESG strategies and make them reflect the unique aspects of culture and expectation of society in each region of India. Also, it is crucial to establish the contribution that skepticism with respect to green issues has to the Indian consumer group and the fact that levels of skepticism may differ considerably in their ability to moderate the relationship between perceived environmental and social aspects into brand awareness and loyalty.

6.3. Role of Media and Activism

The increase in digital media and the emergence of social activism in India, in turn, affect the popularity and increased attention to corporate ESG performance, shaping the agenda and consumer stance. It has increased transparency brought about by media attention and activism, thereby compelling businesses to be more serious when making their ESG claims with any failure of a business fast losing its brand confidence and reputation. It is under such dynamic environment that important, evidence-driven communication regarding ESG undertakings is critical, all the more so at a time when immaturity and emotion response among investors can be very unstable. In addition, the role of the media is also associated with highlighting more successful companies when it comes to e-sustainable reporting, that is, usually, by awarded sponsorships, and thereby prompting companies to become more responsible and upscale their image. Moreover, the institutional vacuum and ignorance of Corporate Social Responsibility issues among the masses in India itself is a constant challenge that puts the media even further in the position of helping to convey the information and shape relevant stakeholder's attitudes,

therefore necessitating a continuous and clear communication approach by corporations.

CONCLUSION

The combined effects of these moderate variables foster the notion that, whereas the presence of compulsory ESG disclosure policies may provide a structural backbone to the process, the net effect on brand image and consumer confidence in India is still highly reliant on industry-specific factors, socio-cultural factors, and the critical role played by the media and activism. This locality and complexity brings the necessity of firms adopting a complex, and localised approach to ESG communication, which makes them not a disclosure of regulation, but a pledge to sustainable and responsible business practices, which resonates with the Indian stakeholders. An additional understanding of the moderating role of green skepticism between the correlations between perceived ESG and brand recognition and confidence as the governance-based and society-related dimension of ESG is needed since the latter might fail to provide substantive changes in behavior across the levels of various degrees of skepticism. It implies that less critical audiences can consider symbolic ESG statements insufficient and, thus, demand more sophisticated verification instruments, such as the third-party certifications and the explicit carbon accounting. What is of essence in these stringent authentication measures is to remedy consumer scepticism and enforce actual confidence in sustainability initiatives of a company, particularly in the market that has yet to put in place the effective regulatory bargains. Other than that, unremitting perception of greenwashing particularly in the packaged food industry would still continue to impact negativity on consumer distrust, which would neglect a green brand relationship, necessitating a concerted effort by companies in this industry to demonstrate this, rather than merely performing a symbolic show of interest to sustainability. Therefore, developing efficient and transparent communication systems turns indispensable to the Indian companies as it can contribute to the increased levels of trust and legitimacy among the stakeholders, as well as in those cases when the institutional control may be lower. This transparency will not just be in the form of financial reporting, but also the expression of environmental, social and governance policies that will ultimately aid the brand equity and consumer loyalty in the long term.

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