RESEARCH ARTICLE

DOI: 10.54392/ajir25211

Asian Research Association

ASIAN JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Sustainable Brand Positioning in Indian FMCG Sector: A Multi-Criteria Decision-Making Approach

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54392/ajir25211
Received: 11-03-2025; Revised: 19-06-2025; Accepted: 27-06-2025; Published: 30-06-2025

Abstract: Sustainable brand positioning has emerged as a strategic imperative in the Indian fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector, driven by evolving consumer values, regulatory shifts, and environmental challenges. This study adopts a structured Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) approach, employing Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis to identify and analyze the interrelationships among eight key enablers of sustainable brand positioning. The findings reveal a clear hierarchical structure, with environmental concern and innovation capability identified as foundational drivers, while consumer trust and cost considerations serve as sensitive linkage variables. Digital influence and stakeholder engagement emerge as outcome factors, largely shaped by upstream strategic actions. The MICMAC classification further confirms these dynamics by categorizing variables into driver, linkage, dependent, and autonomous groups. These insights provide actionable guidance for brand managers and policymakers seeking to embed sustainability into brand strategy. The study contributes to the sustainability and marketing literature by offering a systems-based framework tailored to the Indian FMCG context, with implications for strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and long-term brand equity development.

Keywords: Sustainability, Brand positioning, Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM), FMCG Sector, India.

1. Introduction

The Indian Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector, valued at over USD 110 billion in 2022, is one of the most dynamic and rapidly expanding sectors in the global economy (Davis *et al.,* 2021). It encompasses a wide range of essential product categories, including food and beverages, personal care, home care, and health care items goods that are characterized by high turnover and relatively low cost (Santhanam *et al.,* 2025). The sector plays a pivotal role in the Indian economy, contributing significantly to employment generation, retail trade growth, and rural development. Several factors are driving this growth trajectory. Rapid urbanization has led to increased disposable incomes and evolving consumption patterns, particularly among the expanding middle-class population (Sarangi *et al.,* 2021). According to Kumar Bhardwaj *et al.,* (2021), India is poised to become the third-largest consumer economy by 2030, largely due to the increasing purchasing power of its urban and semi-urban populations. Furthermore, digital penetration has revolutionized the FMCG landscape, with e-commerce platforms and direct-to-consumer (D2C) channels enabling broader market access and consumer engagement, even in Tier II and Tier III cities (Kumar Bhardwaj *et al.,* 2021).

In parallel with this growth, there is an evolving emphasis on product innovation and customization driven by shifting consumer lifestyles. Today's consumers are more informed, health-conscious, and environmentally aware, resulting in increased demand for organic, sustainable, and ethically sourced products (Lim *et al.,* 2022). Companies are responding by incorporating sustainability into their core strategies, investing in green packaging, reducing carbon footprints, and enhancing supply chain transparency. Nevertheless, the sector is not without its challenges. Increasing scrutiny over environmental impact, concerns regarding ethical sourcing, and growing regulatory pressures have placed the sustainability agenda at the forefront. Issues such as plastic waste, water usage, and labor practices are now under intense examination from regulators, consumers, and investors alike (Kumar Bhardwaj *et al.,* 2021; Nalluri *et al.,* 2025). As a result, FMCG firms are under pressure to adopt circular economy principles and sustainable business models to ensure long-term resilience and stakeholder trust.

Brand positioning plays a pivotal role in influencing consumer choice, fostering brand loyalty, and establishing competitive advantage, particularly in highly saturated markets like the FMCG sector (Cohen *et al.,* 2025; Kumar Bhardwaj *et al.,* 2021). Traditionally, brands have positioned themselves based on tangible attributes such as quality and price, as well as intangible elements like emotional appeal and lifestyle association (Aparna *et al.,* 2022). However, with the growing global focus on environmental challenges and the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), sustainability has emerged as a vital dimension of brand differentiation (Mahato *et al.,* 2025). Sustainable Brand Positioning (SBP) involves integrating principles of environmental stewardship, social equity, and long-term economic viability into brand values, messaging, and operations (Chhabra, 2017). In the Indian FMCG context, this translates to adopting responsible practices across sourcing, packaging, labor treatment, supply chains, and waste management. Increasingly, Indian Millennials and Gen Z consumers, who are digitally savvy and socially conscious, are rewarding brands that demonstrate genuine commitments to sustainability (Chawla and Kumar, 2022).

Despite this evolving consumer preference, there remain critical research gaps that limit the effective implementation and measurement of SBP in the Indian FMCG landscape. First, most existing models are globally oriented and lack contextual sensitivity to Indian consumer behaviors, cultural nuances, and market dynamics (Davis *et al.,* 2021). Second, there is a scarcity of validated scales to measure the effectiveness of SBP and its direct impact on brand trust, purchase intention, and loyalty. Moreover, while consumer interest in sustainability is rising, skepticism around greenwashing presents a challenge, as few studies explore how Indian consumers discern authentic versus superficial brand claims (Nag and Mishra, 2024). Another overlooked area is the behavior of rural and semi-urban consumers, who represent a significant portion of the FMCG market yet remain underrepresented in SBP research. Lastly, the role of digital platforms and social media in communicating sustainable brand values remains insufficiently explored. Addressing these gaps is essential for both academic inquiry and for guiding FMCG brands toward more effective and credible sustainability-driven branding strategies. Despite the importance of SBP, there is limited structured research in the Indian context on how different factors interact to enable or hinder sustainable brand positioning. Existing literature often treats these factors in isolation, lacking a systemic view. This study aims to address this gap by employing a robust Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) framework, particularly Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) and MICMAC analysis, to explore the complex interdependencies among key enablers of SBP. Therefore, the objectives of this study are:

- To identify the critical enablers of sustainable brand positioning in the Indian FMCG sector.
- To explore the interrelationships among these enablers.
- To develop a hierarchical model for strategic decision-making.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sustainability in the FMCG sector

The concept of sustainability in business gained prominence following Sachdeva & Singh, (2023) definition of sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." In the FMCG sector, sustainability translates into eco-friendly sourcing, reducing water and energy consumption, minimizing packaging waste, promoting recycling, and ensuring ethical labor practices. Global trends indicate a shift towards sustainability-driven purchasing. According to a Nielsen report,

73% of global consumers say they would change their consumption habits to reduce environmental impact. In India, the sustainability consciousness is also rising, particularly among urban and tech-savvy consumers. Sustainability initiatives in Indian FMCG include the use of biodegradable packaging (e.g., Patanjali), carbon-neutral operations (e.g., ITC), and ethical sourcing (e.g., Hindustan Unilever). Government regulations, such as the Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) guidelines, are pushing brands to embed sustainability into core business strategies. However, challenges remain in scalability, cost trade-offs, consumer education, and supply chain complexities. Thus, understanding what drives sustainable brand positioning becomes critical.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is the strategic process of establishing a unique and favorable image of a brand in the consumer's mind. As defined by Haider & Mishra, (2021), positioning is "not what you do to a product, but what you do to the mind of the prospect" highlighting that the essence of positioning lies in influencing consumer perception rather than altering the product itself. Effective positioning involves creating mental associations that distinguish a brand from its competitors, often through perceived value, quality, emotional appeal, or unique functional attributes (Yusof *et al.,* 2023). This differentiation enables brands to carve out a specific space in the market and establish relevance in targeted consumer segments. In today's dynamic and competitive environment particularly within sectors like FMCG brand positioning serves as a critical mechanism for building trust, loyalty, and long-term customer engagement.

One of the most influential frameworks for understanding brand positioning is Keller's (Chaudhuri *et al.,* 2022) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model, which emphasizes that brand equity is built through consumer perceptions and experiences. The model outlines six interconnected dimensions: brand salience (awareness and recall), brand performance (functional attributes), brand imagery (emotional and symbolic associations), consumer judgments, feelings, and brand resonance (loyalty and attachment). Traditionally, brand positioning strategies have focused on these elements to develop compelling brand narratives. However, in light of growing environmental concerns and social expectations, many brands are now integrating sustainability as a core dimension of their positioning. Sustainable brand positioning (SBP) extends the CBBE model by embedding environmental values (e.g., eco-friendly materials, carbon reduction), social impact (e.g., fair labor practices), and ethical governance into the brand identity (Dutta & Sarma, 2023). Achieving authenticity in SBP requires a coherent and integrated communication strategy, consistent operational practices, and transparent stakeholder engagement. Such alignment between messaging and practice is critical for building credibility and enhancing long-term brand equity in increasingly socially conscious markets.

2.3 Sustainable Brand Positioning and Its Factors

To identify the core dimensions and drivers of SBP, a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) was conducted using established review protocols (Muduli & Choudhury, 2024). The review sought to answer three primary research questions: (1) how is SBP defined and conceptualized? (2) What are the key factors influencing SBP? (3) What methodologies dominate existing SBP research? A structured search was performed across Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar using keywords such as "sustainable brand positioning," "green brand," and "FMCG sustainability." Studies published between 2000 and 2024 were considered. After screening 178 articles based on inclusion criteria (peer-reviewed, English language, conceptual or empirical relevance), 42 articles were retained for full-text review and synthesis.

Thematic analysis of the selected literature revealed several critical factors influencing SBP. These include environmental responsibility (e.g., green packaging, carbon reduction) (Tambe *et al.,* 2021), social responsibility (e.g., fair labor practices, community engagement), transparency and authenticity in communication, and the integration of sustainable values in brand messaging (Saini & Kharb, 2025). Other influential factors identified are consumer trust and perception, emotional resonance and symbolic value (Lim *et al.,* (2022), and demographic influences such as generational values and cultural orientation. While existing research provides useful insights, gaps remain in context-specific studies, particularly in emerging economies like India, as well as in the exploration of

digital platforms' role in SBP. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing robust and actionable SBP strategies in the evolving FMCG landscape.

Table 1. Identified factors of SBP.

Factors	Meaning	References
Environmental concern (F1)	Brands that demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability attract environmentally conscious consumers. Attributes include carbon neutrality, zero waste goals, and eco-friendly packaging.	Kaushik *et al.,* (2022); Kumar, (2020); Sachdeva and Singh, (2023)
Consumer trust (F2)	Trust is essential for sustainable brands as consumers are skeptical of greenwashing. Trust builds through transparency, third-party certifications, and consistent messaging.	Chawla and Kumar, (2022); Davis *et al.*, (2021)
Regulatory pressure (F3)	In India, regulators are increasing oversight on product safety, advertising claims, and environmental practices. Compliance is not only a legal requirement but a brand asset.	Cohen *et al.,* (2025); Kumar Bhardwaj *et al.*, (2021); Aparna et al., (2022)
Innovation capability (F4)	Sustainability often requires new business models and product innovations. For example, biodegradable containers or waterless personal care products show a brand's capability to innovate sustainably.	Chaudhuri *et al.,* (2022); Haider and Mishra, (2021); Yusof et al., (2023)
Cost considerations (F5)	Transitioning to sustainable practices often involves upfront costs. Balancing cost efficiency with sustainability is a strategic challenge.	Manna *et al.,* (2021)
Digital influence (F6)	Social media and online platforms amplify sustainable brand narratives. They are also essential for educating consumers and managing reputational risks.	Dutta and Sarma, (2023); Saini and Kharb, (2025); Muduli and Choudhury, (2024)
Stakeholder engagement (F7)	Sustainable branding requires active collaboration with stakeholders including suppliers, customers, NGOs, and government agencies.	Tambe *et al.*, (2021); Lim et al., (2022)
Brand legacy and heritage (F8)	A brand's historical values and practices influence its perceived authenticity. Brands with a legacy of ethical behavior find it easier to transition to sustainability.	Lim *et al.,* (2022); Nag and Mishra, (2024); Chhabra, (2017)

3. Methodology

To explore the interrelationships among key factors influencing sustainable brand positioning in the Indian FMCG sector, this study employs the ISM approach. ISM is a well-established qualitative modeling technique that helps identify and structurally represent complex relationships among variables through expert judgment. Originally developed by Warfield (1981), ISM has been widely applied in sustainability, supply chain management, and strategic decision-making research.

Step 1. Identification of variables

A systematic literature review and expert consultation were conducted to identify critical factors influencing sustainable brand positioning in the Indian FMCG sector. This process resulted in a finalized list of variables, such as environmental concern, consumer trust, regulatory pressure, cost considerations, innovation capability, and stakeholder engagement.

Step 2. Establishing contextual relationships

Using expert opinions (via interviews or focus groups), pairwise contextual relationships were determined among the variables. Experts were asked whether and how one variable influences another within the context of sustainable brand positioning.

Step 3. Development of Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM)

The contextual relationships were structured into a Structural Self-Interaction Matrix (SSIM) using the following notations:

V: Variable i influences variable j

A: Variable j influences variable i

X: Variables i and j influence each other

O: No influence between variables

Step 4. Development of reachability matrix

The SSIM was converted into a binary reachability matrix by replacing the notations with 1s (indicating influence) and 0s (no influence). Transitivity, a key concept in ISM was applied to ensure consistency in the matrix.

Step 5. Level partitioning

By determining the reachability set (variables influenced) and the antecedent set (variables influencing it), the levels of each variable were identified. Variables at the top level were removed, and the process was repeated iteratively to classify all variables into hierarchical levels.

Step 6. Formation of ISM model

A directed graph (digraph) was developed from the final reachability matrix, visually displaying the hierarchical structure and relationships among the variables. This was then transformed into the final ISM model, representing the multi-level relationships.

Step 7. MICMAC analysis

To further analyze the driving and dependence power of the variables, a Matrice d'Impacts Croisés Multiplication Appliquée à un Classement (MICMAC) analysis was conducted. This classified the variables into four categories: autonomous, dependent, linkage, and independent (driving) factors.

4. Result and Discussion

The ISM methodology was adopted to explore the structural interrelationships among eight key factors influencing SBP in the Indian FMCG sector, identified through an extensive literature review and expert consultations. These factors include: environmental concern, consumer trust, regulatory pressure, innovation capability, cost considerations, digital influence, stakeholder engagement, and brand legacy and heritage (see Table 1).

Using pairwise comparisons, a SSIM was developed to capture the contextual relationships among the factors. This was followed by the formulation of the Reachability Matrix by converting SSIM values into binary format and ensuring transitivity. The reachability and antecedent sets were used to derive hierarchical levels, leading to the ISM model structure. The results of level partitioning revealed environmental concern (F1) as the foundational driver at Level VI, while stakeholder engagement (F7) and digital influence (F6) were identified as the most dependent variables at levels I and II, respectively.

The final ISM hierarchy is presented in Figure 1, demonstrating the flow of influence from foundational drivers to outcome variables. To further understand the driving and dependence power of each factor, MICMAC analysis was conducted based on the final reachability matrix. The analysis classified the factors into four categories (see Figure 2): driver variables (F1, F4), linkage variables (F2, F5), dependent variables (F6, F7), and autonomous variables (F3, F8).

Table 2. SSIM matrix.

Factors	F8	F7	F6	F5	F4	F3	F2	F1
F1	A	V	X	V	V	V	V	-
F2	X	V	V	X	A	A	-	
F3	O	V	O	V	A	-		
F4	O	V	V	V	-			
F5	O	V	V	-				
F6	O	V	-					
F7	A	-						
F8	-							

Table 3. Reachability matrix.

Factors	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	Driving power
F1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	7
F2	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	5
F3	0	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	4
F4	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	6
F5	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	4
F6	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
F7	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
F8	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	1	5
Dependence power	2	6	3	2	5	6	8	2	34

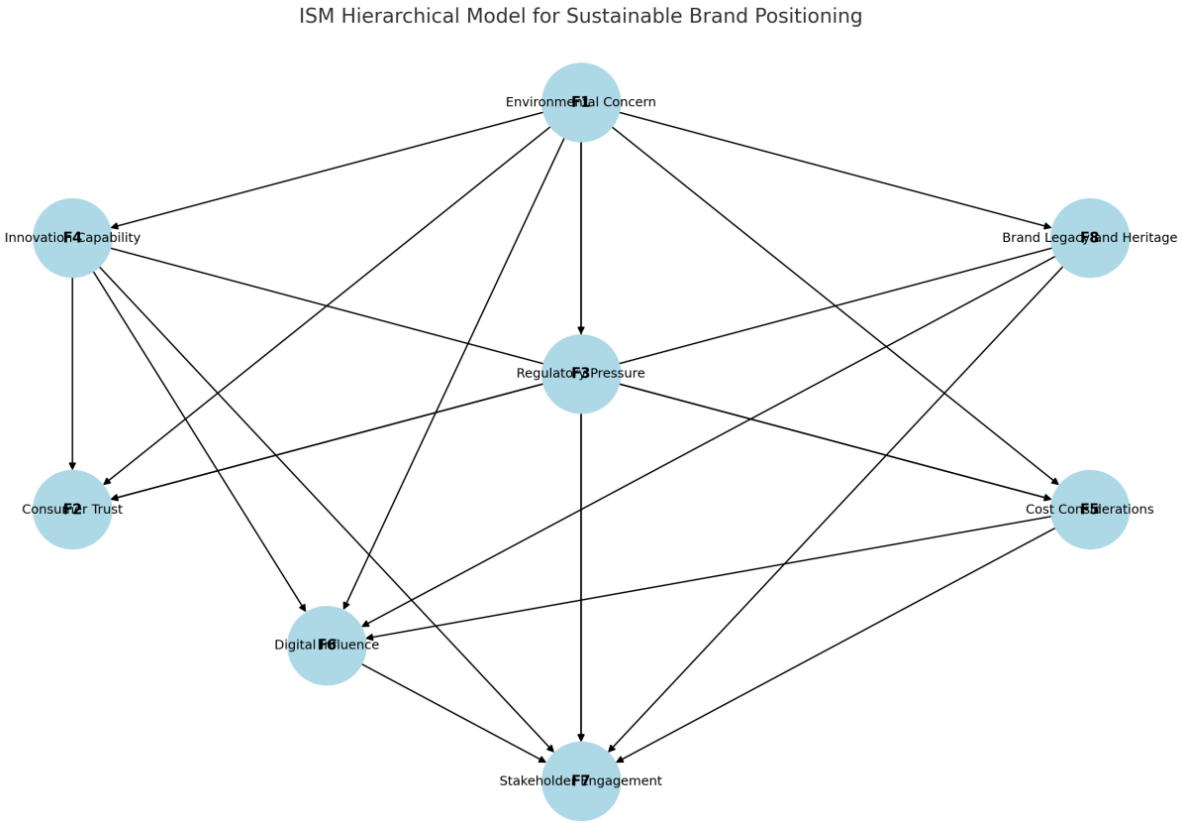

Figure 1. ISM network.

MICMAC results reinforced the ISM findings, with F1 (environmental concern) and F4 (innovation capability) emerging as the most strategic levers for sustainable brand positioning, having high driving power and influencing multiple downstream variables. Linkage variables like consumer trust and cost considerations hold both high influence and high dependence, indicating their sensitivity within the system.

Dependent variables such as digital influence and stakeholder engagement are largely outcomes of systemic enablers. These insights provide a clear roadmap for practitioners and policymakers to prioritize environmental and innovation strategies in driving authentic, consumer-aligned sustainable brand positioning.

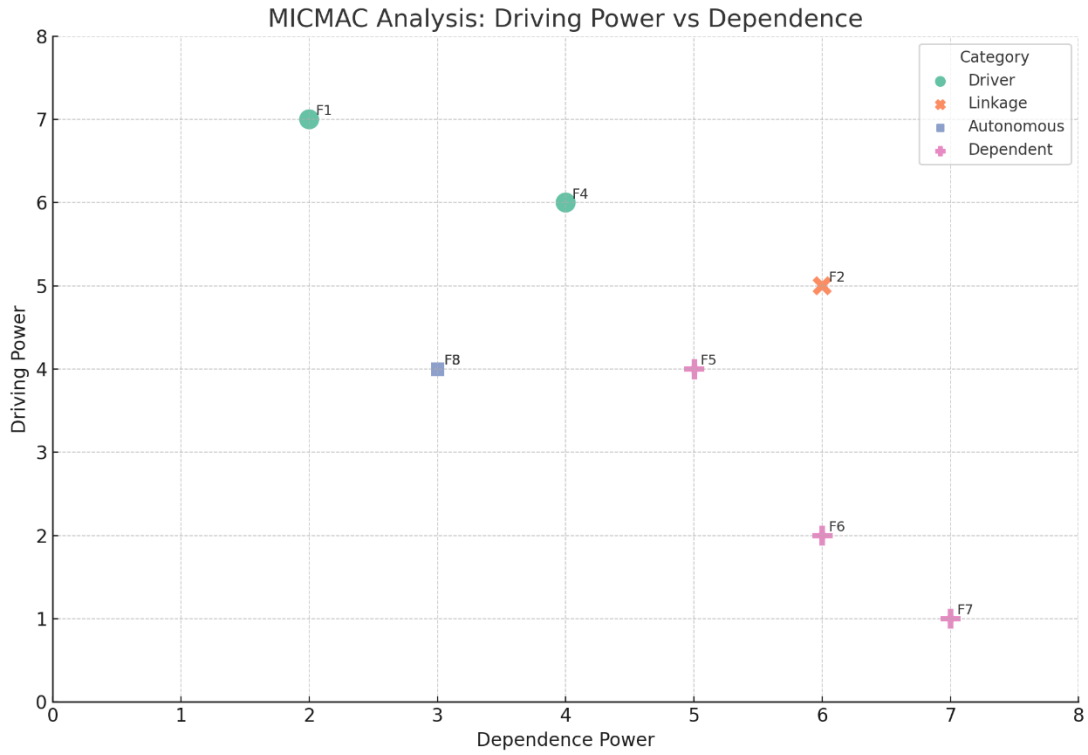

Figure 2. MICMAC matrix.

This study employed ISM and MICMAC analysis to explore the interrelationships among critical factors influencing SBP in the Indian FMCG sector. The ISM hierarchy revealed that environmental concern (F1) sits at the top of the model, acting as the most influential driver. This aligns with existing literature that highlights the increasing role of ecological consciousness in shaping brand narratives and competitive advantage (Davis et al., 2021;Mahato et al., 2025). It underscores that brands must integrate genuine environmental practices such as carbon neutrality, eco-packaging, and resource efficiency to build a sustainable brand image.

Following F1, innovation capability (F4) and brand legacy and heritage (F8) emerge as important enablers at the intermediate level. Innovation is vital for the development of eco-friendly products, biodegradable materials, and new delivery models (Manna *et al.,* 2021), while brand legacy contributes to perceived authenticity a key driver of trust in sustainability claims. Notably, regulatory pressure (F3) also influences this mid-tier layer, indicating that policy compliance and adherence to environmental standards are not merely legal obligations but also reputational assets (Manna *et al.,* 2021). The lower levels of the ISM hierarchy feature consumer trust (F2), cost considerations (F5), digital influence (F6), and stakeholder engagement (F7) factors that are more reactive in nature. The MICMAC analysis supports these findings by categorizing F1 and F4 as driver variables, highlighting their high driving power and strategic significance. In contrast, F6 and F7 are dependent variables, which indicates they are shaped by other foundational elements and have lower autonomous influence.

Interestingly, F2 (consumer trust) and F5 (cost considerations) are identified as linkage variables high in both driving and dependence. This dual role implies they are sensitive to changes in the ecosystem and critical in sustaining momentum across the SBP model. For example, trust hinges on transparent communication and ethical

Sourcing, yet is easily disrupted by inconsistencies or perceived greenwashing (Dutta and Sarma 2023). Similarly, cost remains a constraint, particularly for Indian FMCG companies attempting to scale sustainability without alienating price-sensitive consumers (Lim *et al.,* 2022). In addition, this research highlights that while sustainability in brand positioning is rooted in deep structural factors like environmental concern and innovation, its successful execution relies on managing dynamic interactions across trust, cost, digital communication, and stakeholder participation

(Deepthi *et al.,* 2024). These insights suggest that FMCG firms in India must adopt a systemic and multi-level strategy aligning operational innovations with credible narratives and inclusive stakeholder engagement to position their brands as truly sustainable.

5. Implications

The findings from this study offer several critical implications for Indian FMCG firms, policymakers, and sustainability-driven marketers. First, the positioning of environmental concern (F1) as the most influential driver underscores the urgent need for companies to embed sustainability at the core of their brand strategy, not merely as a compliance function but as a key market differentiator. In a country like India, where environmental degradation, plastic waste, and carbon emissions are increasingly visible public concerns, brands that proactively communicate their eco-initiatives such as plastic-free packaging, green supply chains, and carbon-neutral goals can gain long-term consumer trust and loyalty. Furthermore, this aligns with the Indian government's policy thrust on circular economy principles and extended producer responsibility (EPR), reinforcing that brand positioning and regulatory alignment can be mutually reinforcing.

Second, the dual role of consumer trust (F2) and cost considerations (F5) as linkage variables reflects the delicate balance Indian FMCG brands must strike between affordability and ethical credibility. India's price-sensitive market structure makes it challenging to scale sustainability without perceived value dilution. However, younger Indian consumers, especially Millennials and Gen Z in urban and Tier II cities, are increasingly valuing authenticity, transparency, and purpose in brand narratives. Thus, investment in innovation capability (F4) another key driver can help bridge this gap by enabling low-cost, high-impact sustainability innovations such as biodegradable packaging, refill models, and upcycled product lines. Moreover, the emergence of digital influence (F6) and stakeholder engagement (F7) as dependent factors suggests that brands should leverage India's rapid digitalization and mobile first consumer base to amplify their sustainability messaging through social media, influencer collaborations, and real-time stakeholder feedback loops. Overall, this research highlights that sustainable brand positioning in India is not just about what companies claim, but how credibly and consistently they implement and communicate those values across a diverse and dynamic consumer base.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a structured and interpretive understanding of the factors influencing Sustainable Branding Practices (SBP) in the Indian FMCG sector through the application of ISM and MICMAC analysis. Eight critical factors were identified through a combination of literature review and expert validation and were hierarchically structured to reveal the interrelationships among them. The findings indicate that environmental concern and innovation capability are the primary driving forces behind sustainability oriented brand strategies. In contrast, stakeholder engagement and digital influence are dependent factors, influenced by upstream strategic and operational actions. The MICMAC analysis further reinforces these insights by categorizing the factors based on their driving and dependence powers, offering a robust decision-making framework for practitioners. The study contributes uniquely by integrating qualitative modeling techniques to provide a systemic view of SBP addressing a research gap where most prior work focused narrowly on consumer perceptions or isolated green marketing tactics. Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The ISM model is based on expert judgment, which may introduce subjectivity. Its cross-sectional design does not capture evolving consumer trends or policy changes over time. Furthermore, the focus on Indian FMCG brands may limit generalizability. Future research should explore empirical methods such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) or fuzzy-MICMAC and consider longitudinal and cross-sectoral studies to validate and extend these findings across broader contexts (Sama et al., 2023).

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Authors' Contributions

D. Srinivasa Kumar: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, writing—original draft preparation. Jikku Susan Kurian: Conceptualization, methodology. N. Bindu Madhavi: formal analysis, validation. H. Devanna: validation, writing—review and editing. Parveen Sharma: funding acquisition, project administration. Nellore Manoj Kumar: writing—original draft preparation, funding acquisition, project administration. All the authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Does this article screen for similarity?

Yes

Ethics approval

No ethical clearance certificate is applicable for this present study.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. There is also no financial interest to report. The author certifies that the submission is original work and is not under review at any other publication.

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D. Srinivasa Kumar, Jikku Susan Kurian, N. Bindu Madhavi, H. Devanna, Parveen Sharma, Nellore Manoj Kumar, Sustainable Brand Positioning in Indian FMCG Sector: A Multi-Criteria Decision-Making Approach, Asian Journal of Interdisciplinary Research, 8(2), (2025) 177-186. https://doi.org/10.54392/ajir25211