

Measuring perceived social sustainability of brands – A scale development

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Measuring Perceived Social Sustainability of Brands – A Scale Development

Abstract

Consumer perceptions regarding a brand's commitment to social sustainability is a crucial differentiator and contributes to brand equity. Despite the acknowledged importance, presently no measurement scale is available for measuring consumer Perceived Social Sustainability of Brands (PSSB). This study, therefore, attempts to develop and validate the PSSB scale. Results from two empirical studies were used to establish the psychometric properties of the PSSB scale. Findings reveal PSSB comprises of six underlying dimensions namely: supporting education, supporting community, supporting innovative growth, supporting poverty elimination, supporting healthy living, and supporting sustainable water management. Based on the empirical studies a final refined scale with 26 measurement items was developed after testing for reliability and validity. We also tested the predictive validity of the scale, which show that that PSSB is a valid predictor of outcomes such as brand trust and brand image. PSSB scale is developed around SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) to help managers measure, understand, and accordingly mainstream the brand's social sustainability perceptions among their target consumers and potential markets.

Keywords: social sustainability, sustainable development goals, brand perception, scale development, scale validation and reliability.

1. Introduction

Achieving SDGs and prioritizing it as a universal approach has become a primary agenda for business entities. SDGs have been identified across three dimensions – economic, social, and environmental. Among the three dimensions, firms have hitherto focused their efforts mostly on the environmental concerns (Dangelico and Vocalelli, 2017). Consequently, extant research place greater emphasis on firm level strategies that address environmental problems. There is a growing realization that non-environmental aspects of SDGs like social sustainability and economic sustainability are equally important and therefore must become the focus of a wider research effort (Iyer and Reczek, 2017). Given the criticality of social sustainability in creating conditions for the harmonious development of society (Gomaa and Sakr, 2015), remarkably the need to explore firms' social sustainability practices is yet to assume importance. Further, social sustainability is a construct that is yet to be clearly defined (Cuthill, 2010), it lacks clarity in terms of its underlying dimensions (Hák et al., 2018) and often very contextual and difficult to monitor (Pitkänen et al., 2023). Additionally, De Fine Licht and Folland, (2019) state the prevailing confusion in definition along with a lack of consensus about the constituent dimensions of social sustainability. This is despite the fact that social sustainability as a distinct construct has always been accepted and recognized (Dempsey, Bramley, Power, & Brown, 2011; Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014).

However, it should also be noted that the extant literature which identifies social sustainability as an identifiable, distinct concept is quite fragmented and is spread across a variety of academic domains like urban economics, political science, sociology, strategic management, education, and supply chain. Hence, unlike the extant literature on economic and ecological sustainability, the social sustainability concept is not adequately discussed and is lacking (McClinchey, 2021; Torkayesh et al., 2021). As a consequence, measures

for environment and economic sustainability concepts are well developed and widely applied in research (Dong and Hauschild, 2017; Papadas et al., 2017; Zhong and Wu, 2015).

The social sustainability dimension has been defined in many forms and contexts, such as temporary appropriation (Lara-Hernandez and Melis, 2018), preserving social-cultural preferences (Gomaa and Sakr, 2015), value-chain sustainability (Petit et al., 2018) etc. Furthermore, it has been explored in a plethora of different industry specific contexts like public procurement in the construction industry (Montalbán-Domingo et al., 2018), sustainable communities, urban development, urban social sustainability (Dempsey et al., 2011; Parjanen et al., 2019; Weingaertner and Moberg, 2014) construction projects (Maddaloni and Sabini, 2022), community resilience (Magis, 2010), land use planning processes (Rashidfarokhi et al., 2018) etc.. Although firms have explored sustainability practices, and have redefined their processes as per the SDGs agenda (Kramer and Porter, 2019), however essentially there is hardly any literature that explains social sustainability from a consumer's perspective. No specific principles have focused exclusively on the social dimensions (Vila and Moya, 2023), attention to it has been relatively limited (Khan et al., 2021), and it is challenging to measure social sustainability (Govindan et al., 2021).

Considering the significant range of activities that brands indulge in for promoting social sustainability, absence of an instrument to measure how end-users perceive brands in their social sustainability related performance is proving to be a critical limitation, despite growing awareness among them (Mathiyazhagan et al., 2023). Communicating social sustainability therefore becomes a challenging task especially for brands when they try to target multiple stakeholders, and there is no discussion on social sustainability especially social advertising (Sander et al., 2021). However, due to the vast array of issues often brought under the umbrella term of 'social issues,' it is challenging for brands to understand how exactly their target consumers perceive social sustainability. Therefore, a unifying

framework that captures and measures social sustainability perceptions becomes extremely important for brands.

In the present study, social sustainability of a brand as perceived by its consumers is measured, validated, and presented as the framework that represents the multidimensionality of social sustainability. The present research has the following objectives. Firstly, we investigate the dimensions of social sustainability. Next, we develop and validate the Perceived Social Sustainability of Brands (PSSB) scale from the consumer's perspective.

The subsequent sections of this article are divided as follows: Section 2 presents the conceptual basis the perceived social sustainability of brands. Section 3 presents the literature review. Section 4 presents the methodology and scale development. Section 5 presents the scale validation and result analysis. Section 6 presents the discussion and conclusions.

2. Perceived Social Sustainability of Brands

It is widely accepted that consumers are sensitive towards the social responsibilities of the brands and, their commitment towards the brands are based on the values of the company, i.e., "are the values of company acceptable to the values of the consumer"¹. Producer pro-social credentials are even more likely to influence consumer product decisions (Mejia et al., 2022) and expect suppliers to adhere to social sustainability standards (Venkatesh et al., 2021). While environmental sustainability is perceived to be important, there is considerable anecdotal evidence to show that consumers are equally concerned about a brand's contribution towards the social dimensions of sustainability. For instance, during

¹ Why Do People Organize Boycotts?, The Marketing Journal (accessed on 26th, March 2022),(available at <https://www.marketingjournal.org/consumer-boycotts-an-essential-method-of-peaceful-protest-philip-kotler/>).

the covid pandemic, JD Wetherspoons (pub chain), announced a delay in paying wages, that led to a public outcry and caused a trend on Twitter with #BoycottWetherspoons. Similarly, P&G (Procter & Gamble) faced criticism over its 'Our Home' initiative over its poor labor practices around tropical forests in Indonesia, Malaysia, and boreal forest of Canada. In response to this growing trend, brands and corporates have been very keen to communicate their contribution towards social sustainability. Piracci, Boncinelli, & Casini (2022) found that consumers attach significant importance to socially relevant attributes, and consumers do think about other people while buying social sustainability products through social label (Fröberg et al., 2023).

We attempt to define social sustainability of a brand by adopting the principles provided by Missimer, Robèrt, & Broman (2017). According to Missimer *et al.*, (2017b) a socially sustainable society is – “A society where people are not subjected to structural obstacles to health, influence, competence, impartiality, and meaning-making.” Because the present study is focused towards exploring and understanding consumers' point of view in how they perceive a brand's contribution towards achieving social sustainability in the society, we therefore define perceived social sustainability of a brand (PSSB) as: “Consumers perceptual image of a brand’s contribution towards social sustainability”.

Branding and sustainability has been found to have inherent linkages (Kumar & Christodouloupoulou, 2014; Sheth & Sinha, 2015). Brands typically find their meaning by attaching to the socio-cultural milieu of their consumers (Diamond et al., 2009; Hémar-Nicolas and Rodhain, 2017) and is found to create greater resonance with social issues (Rosenthal et al., 2022; Suarez and Belk, 2017), thus presenting a case for exploring the social sustainability perceptions of brands.

This study investigates the social sustainability attributes and develops and validates a scale to measure Perceived Social Sustainability of Brands (PSSB) based around consumers. In this context perceived connotes understanding, awareness, or thinking of something/somebody at the individual consumer level. The PSSB scale is developed around the guidelines and resolutions adopted by the UN general assembly – "Transforming our World: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development" (United Nations, 2015), consisting of 17 SDGs. Resolution acts as an agenda for global action, with an objective that no one will be left behind. Unlike previous studies, our measure is developed mainly using the SDGs framework intended to be universal in delivering the global vision (Osborn et al., 2015). Moreover, this approach provides an operational definition in achieving sustainable development (SD). SDGs are built around the planet, people, and prosperity, which covers all the aspects of SD and offer comprehensive and collective action to achieve SD by 2030. Moreover, all countries and stakeholders are implementing it in collaborative partnerships.

A PSSB scale is beneficial in several ways. First, it offers a means to examine social sustainability from an individual consumer's viewpoint. Social sustainability concepts are criticized as vague since it is not properly understood (De Fine Licht and Folland, 2019). Further Suchowerska, (2021) states "social sustainability is critiqued for being a vague, fuzzy, chaotic or empty concept that lacks theoretical grounding" citing (Barrado–Timón, 2020; De Fine Licht and Folland, 2019; Dempsey et al., 2011; Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017). Therefore, perceived social sustainability measures will allow the investigation of the consumer's understanding of social sustainability dimensions. Specifically, it will be useful to develop and measure social sustainability's underlying dimensions that can be of help for various stakeholders in implementing social sustainability practices. Secondly, the

measure would be very beneficial in testing perceived social sustainability dimensions more holistically and integrates ideas from the previously developed dimensions.

3. Review of Literature

Among all the three dimensions of sustainability, relatively less attention has been paid to the social dimension (Hellberg, 2023; Kumar and Anbanandam, 2019; Sierra et al., 2017; Vafadarnikjoo et al., 2020) of sustainable development. Literature in social sustainability comprises of frameworks from different domains. Table I provides a list of frameworks / constructs developed around various domains. However, this leaves it open to varying interpretations among scholars.

INSERT TABLE I HERE

Social sustainability research has long focused on the government's right to protect people and promulgate business policy for corporate sustainability. It is commonly recognized as the weakest pillar of sustainable development (Lehtonen, 2004) and documented as an unexplored area (Murphy, 2012). Moreover, understanding the impact of firms on people and society lacks a focused empirical and theoretical foundation (Eizenberg and Jabareen, 2017). Many of the extant studies and definitions have been too specific and often concentrates on a certain study context or discipline-specific criteria (Weingaertner and Moberg, 2014). Social sustainability is widely accepted in different domain contexts, especially in supply chain management area, it has focused on how and why firms implement, manage and pursue social sustainability (Nakamba et al., 2017; Vafadarnikjoo et al., 2020).

Brands face increasing pressure from governments, investors, NGOs, and consumers to protect the planet and people positively and actively. Traditionally, the literature highlights that consumers are perceived as more environmentally conscious and care more about

consuming environmentally friendly products (Veldhuizen et al., 2017). However, consumer concerns regarding social performance of brands is finding increasing attention in recent literature as reported by Crinis, (2019); Miotto and Youn, (2020); and Woo and Jin, (2016).

Consumer perceptions are of course the sine quo none of a brand's existence. Extant literature in branding has therefore developed a variety of models for assessing consumer's perception of a brand like perceived brand authenticity (Cinelli and LeBoeuf, 2020), perceived luxury value (Loureiro et al., 2020), perceived brand globalness and localness (Mandler et al., 2021) etc. Therefore, apart from the environmental aspects, marketing priorities should be reframed around social sustainability dimensions as an opportunity to build sustainable competitive advantage (Lee et al., 2021).

To meet these objectives, we develop the PSSB scale that shall provide insights from the consumer's perspective towards the brand's social contributions. We achieve the scale construction of PSSB by first identifying its constituent dimensions and then testing its validity and reliability across diverse product categories. PSSB scale helps to understand how a brand promotes social sustainability from the consumer perspective and align it with firms branding activities.

4. Methods

To develop the perceived social sustainability of the brands scale, we followed the procedure developed by Churchill, (1979). Table II outlines the scale development process. Accordingly, we report item generation, focus groups, experts' opinion, stimuli selection, scale development, and scale validation and reliability in the following sections.

INSERT TABLE II HERE

4.1 Item Generation

Due to the nature of social sustainability concept, item generation was a challenging task. It was important that the items covered all the dimensions of the concept so that adequate face validity was achieved. Thus, two qualitative studies were conducted to generate an item pool. To generate items, we first conducted a focus group study which comprised of three separate focus group sessions. The results from the focus groups were integrated and adopted for the second stage of the qualitative research which used an expert opinion methodology.

4.1.1 Focus Group

Following the accepted paradigm for scale development provided by (Churchill, 1979; DeVellis, 2014), as part of qualitative inquiry, focus group discussion were conducted to uncover the consumer perceptions (Arnold and Reynolds, 2003) and identify their interpretations of brands' contribution and commitment towards social sustainability. The main objective of the focus groups was to understand the scope and depth of consumers perceptions of the social sustainability dimensions of brand. This was important to the overall scale development process as the focus of our scale was consumer perceptions of social sustainability and it is important to understand the span of activities that the measurement scale needs to capture.

To capture the different viewpoints among age groups and geographic locations. We conducted three focus group discussions, each consisting of eight to ten members. Participants were recruited on a voluntary basis in exchange for a snack's coupon. The first group consisted of ten students from different university programs in a metropolitan city. Nine faculty members from different university departments were recruited for the second group. The third group was conducted in a different city with eight target consumers as participants. Each focus group lasted 45 – 60 minutes, with the author moderating the

discussion (Fern, 1982). The discussion commenced by asking what do they mean by sustainability? Do they remember any brands who are contributing towards social sustainability and what do they mean by social sustainability. The data was recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Among all the three-focus group discussions, we found that (i) consumers were strongly conscious about brands commitment towards social sustainability and (ii) consumers do pay attention towards brands contribution towards society and recognize it. e.g., one of the focus group participants was able to recall the brand X which contributed towards girls' education and brand which focused on affordable sanitary pads for underprivileged sections of the society.

Considering the insights with different perspectives and multiplicity of views, the focus group discussions concluded that social sustainability issues that were discussed and were often evaluated by consumers had substantial overlap with SDGs. Therefore after careful consideration of the literature and focus group discussions, we adopted the UN general assembly – “Transforming our World: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development” (United Nations, 2015) for generating the scale items. As SDGs provide a clear indicator for a sustainable path, which requires a radical transformation from a broad range of stakeholders, brands being one of them.

4.1.2 Experts Opinion

For the purpose of finetuning social dimensions from the 169 targets prescribed by the UN resolution document and capture the original construct of interest we consulted with ten independent experts working in the sustainability domain to highlight the targets related to social sustainability. The experts are a mix of eminent academicians and practitioners from the US, Europe, and India working in the sustainability domain. Experts have experience

in the sustainability domain and have substantially published in the domain. Adopting the procedures suggested by (Obermiller and Spangenberg, 2000), five of those experts were informed about the purpose of the study for an hour and asked to highlight the targets closely associated with the social dimension. SDGs document consisting of 169 targets was shared among all the experts. Some experts indicated the overlap of dimensions on the environmental and social fronts. In such cases, we consulted the remaining five experts for their views on exclusion or inclusion. Targets highlighted by the experts were coded and recorded on the excel sheet. If three or more experts agreed/highlighted, targets were included, and the rest were excluded. Out of the 169 targets from the document, based on the overlap of the experts' opinion, we generated 72 items among 169 targets related to social sustainability.

4.1.3 Stimuli selection

Replicating the methodology used in the previous studies of Steenkamp *et al.*, (2003) and Yoo and Donthu, (2001) we selected product and service brands from five categories as stimuli. These five categories were banking services, telecommunication services, e-commerce services, automobile products, and umbrella brands. A wide variety of categories were selected to enhance the assessment of the cross-applicability of scale and to increase the generalizability of our results. Further, one local² and global³ brand was selected and added for in all the categories. Brands were selected based on their rankings in –Brand equity, most trusted brands 2020⁴, and Forbes's most valuable brands 2020⁵. In

² Local brands refers to brands that are developed for and tailored to the unique needs and desires of local markets(Özsomer, 2012)

³ Global brand refers to brands that consumers can find under the same name in multiple countries(Steenkamp et al., 2003)

⁴ "Most Trusted Brands 2020 - ET BrandEquity" (2020), ETBrandEquity.com, (accessed March 24, 2020), [available at <https://brandequity.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/industry/most-trusted-brands-2020/74800967>].

⁵ (2020), Forbes.com, (accessed April 20, 2020), [available at <https://www.forbes.com/powerful-brands/list/2/>].

addition, based on ESG and annual disclosure reports of 2020 (Table I, Annexure I), Shortlisted brands' contributions to the SDGs and global reporting initiatives have been coded and tabulated.

We selected a total of 20 brands: Amazon and Flipkart (e-commerce services), Citi Bank and State Bank of India (banking services), Maruti and Toyota (automobile products), Jio and Vodafone (telecommunication services), Procter & Gamble, HUL (Hindustan Unilever) and Nestle (global umbrella brands), ITC, AMUL, and TATA (local umbrella brands). Firstly, the brands have contributed significantly to achieving the SDGs and referred to at least 14 (82%) of them in their disclosure reports, this criterion ensured that brands have identified and committed to focus on a purpose to assess, communicate, measure, and contribute to meeting the goals. At this stage, we dropped six brands as they did not meet our specified criteria. Second, we examined the selected brands for perceived brand globalness and brand familiarity (Steenkamp et al., 2003) and brand localness (Özsomer, 2012). A total of 83 students from a university were recruited in exchange for academic credits. Participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which they disagreed or agreed on measuring brand familiarity and perceived brand globalness/localness of the selected brands (average scores listed in Table II, Annexure 1). All the brands had an average score of above 3.5 out of a maximum score of 7.

4.3 Scale Development

A questionnaire was constructed containing the 72 items (on a 7-point scale) that were previously selected from item generation stage. Two marketing professors and one English language professor examined the wording and face validity of the questions. We further conducted a pilot study for all the brands. 40 MBA marketing students were recruited in exchange for academic credits for their participation in the study, MBA students show high

level of heterogeneity and exhibit similar heterogeneous adult sample characteristics (Ashraf and Merunka, 2017). Respondents were informed to identify and report any ambiguity or uncomfortable wording in the questionnaire. Two questions were remodified based on the responses and respondents identified all the four reverse coded questions, each respondents received questionnaire referring to one brand.

The final questionnaire was administered using two formats - online survey software and printed questionnaires were administered. We prepared different versions⁶ of the questionnaire for each brand surveyed. For the 1st stage of data collection – exploratory factor analysis, we sent the survey forms (through student email) randomly to 12,000 students of a large university. Students were informed about the purpose of the study and the definition of social sustainability. Respondents were informed about the confidentiality of the data to be reported only in aggregate, and information will be coded and remain confidential. Respondents were also informed about the chance to win cash rewards ranging from 0.68 dollars to 6.80 dollars through a lottery system for 66 students. Student subjects are accepted for theory testing in research (Calder et al., 1981; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Furthermore, college students provide useful data (Kardes, 1996). It is possible to generalize the results using college students as subjects provided they are replicated with nonstudent subjects (Peterson, 2001). To enhance the generalizability of results multiple samples with heterogeneous nonstudent samples were selected for further studies. Consequently many empirical studies have conducted and examined using students as subjects (‘t Hart and Phau, 2022; Kilsheimer Eastman et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022; Yoo and Donthu, 2001). Moreover, younger generations of consumers have a stronger preference for socially responsible offerings (Martin and Burpee, 2022).

⁶ Fourteen different versions of questionnaires were prepared replacing brand names only, rest of the questions remained the same.

A total of 945 survey forms were completed after a follow-up with two reminder emails to the 12000 sample. 77 respondents' data was found invalid post deletion of missing data questionnaires and decoding the reverse coded questions. We applied Cooks distance and Mahalanobis distance test to clean the data further leaving us with a final sample size 560 respondents. All 72 items generated in the previous stage were subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and were assessed using Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's chi-square. EFA was performed using principal axis factoring with eigenvalues > 1 . Following (Flury et al., 1988) guidelines, a six -factor model was estimated. Factors exhibiting low factor loading ($<.40$) and high cross-loadings were candidates for elimination. Consequently, 33 items were removed from further analysis. The remaining 39 items were submitted to further EFA applying the same empirical considerations. KMO sample adequacy of 0.959 was reported, and the chi-square test was significant with 63% variance. Finally, we received six factor model. The factors were labeled as: (i) supporting education, (ii) supporting community, (iii) supporting innovative growth, (iv) supporting poverty elimination, (v) supporting healthy living, and (vi) supporting sustainable water management (see Table IV).

4.3.1 Supporting Education

Beyond its conventional concept of writing, reading, and counting, literacy is now understood as a means of interpretation, identification, understanding, and communication in the fast-changing digital world. Literacy expands life opportunities, reduces poverty, and is the driver of sustainable development.⁷

4.3.2 Supporting Community

⁷ UNESCO. n.d. Literacy. [online] Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/themes/literacy>; [Accessed 23 January 2022].

A community is a social unit (MacQueen et al., 2001) define a community as a group of people with diverse characteristics linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings.

4.3.3 Supporting Innovative Growth

Innovation shall lead to improving social sustainability, the impact of socially conscious initiatives can be quantified relatively easily (Hunt et al., 2022). Demographic dynamics of social and economic aspects are crucial in sustainable development. The direct link between innovation and access to equality can be established to achieve social sustainability, and innovative growth intends to be people centered.

4.3.4 Supporting Poverty Elimination

SDGs encompass all people who must enjoy a basic standard of living; meeting the needs of the most vulnerable should be prioritized (Streeten, 1981) suggested indicators – health, education, food, water supply, and sanitation as essential basic needs, yet not all the needs need to have the same status.

4.3.5 Supporting Healthy Living

Defining well-being is a complex phenomenon. It requires understanding towards relative importance of people's lives. Well-being revolves around meeting various human needs. In this context, the three pillars of understanding and measuring people's well-being - material living conditions, quality of life, and sustainability(OECD, 2011) would be accepted as pillars of better well-being tomorrow.

4.3.6 Supporting Sustainable Water Management

“Water stress affects countries on every continent, and hinders the sustainability of natural resources, as well as economic and social development”(UN, 2018). Tackling water scarcity and conserving freshwater is one of humanity's significant challenges. Sustainable management of freshwater resources shall be imperative in achieving social development,

and strong linkage can be established water and social dimensions of sustainable development. Through sustainable water management concept social development may be supported (EL-Nwsany et al., 2019). Hellberg (2023) highlights social aspects of water governance is captured through equity.

5. Scale Validation

The external validity of the scale depends on the evidence and stability of the factor structure. Relying on the scale purification procedures, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on independent sample (Golossenko et al., 2020). A questionnaire was constructed containing 39 items extracted from EFA. Each participant provided responses about one randomly assigned brand. Participants rated their opinion on the brand from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Brands remained the same as adopted during the EFA stage. We took permission from two large technoparks in a large metropolitan city with an average footfall of 150,000 people per day for data collection. A kiosk was set up in March 2021 to collect the data in exchange for a can of fruit juice worth 0.68 dollars. A total of 423 completed survey forms were collected, 42 incomplete survey forms were rejected, leaving a final sample size of 381. Following is the breakup of brand level responses: Amazon n=27(7.1%), Amul n=27(7.4%), Citi bank n=29(7.6%), Flipkart n=29(7.6%), HUL n=31(8.1%), ITC n=33(8.7%), Jio n=23(6 %), Maruti n=26(6.8 %), Nestle n=27(7.1%), P & G n=26(6.8%), SBI n=27(7.1%), TATA n=25(6.6%), Toyota n=26(6.8%), Vodafone n=25(6.6%). The sample constituted of 245 (64.3%) males and 136 (35.69%) females. Rest of the demographic details are available in table III.

INSERT TABLE III HERE

The first confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) results for the correlated model consisting of six dimensions with 39 items derived from the EFA did not show satisfactory model fit.

Following (Hair et al., 2015) recommendations, we deleted the items with high covariances between the constructs as suggested by (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Following this process, items were reduced from 39 to 26 (see Table IV). Before eliminating the items, two independent judges examined the items for ambiguity and clarity (Golossenko et al., 2020). As per the suggestions and model fit indices, constructs were eliminated, for example, "brand X helps in reducing biodiversity loss" or "brand X helps in reducing all forms of violence," as these items were closely related to both environmental and social sustainability concerns. This process resulted in 26-item correlated good model fit ($\chi^2/d.f = 1.855$; CFI = 0.971; SRMR = 0.034; RMSEA = 0.047; PClose = 0.742) see Table V, 26-item factor loadings. Fig.1 depicts the measurement model for six extracted PSSB dimensions. Demographic characteristics are presented in Table III.

INSERT TABLE IV HERE

INSERT Fig.1 HERE

5.1 Internal scale reliability

Coefficient alpha (α) was measured to find the internal consistency. Reliability coefficients of 0.70 or greater are considered to be acceptable. All the extracted factors namely - supporting innovative growth ($\alpha = 0.904$), supporting poverty elimination ($\alpha = 0.894$), supporting sustainable water management ($\alpha = 0.938$), supporting education ($\alpha = 0.927$), supporting healthy living ($\alpha = 0.905$) and supporting community ($\alpha = 0.877$), indicated desirable internal consistency.

5.2 Validity and reliability

In order to assess the validity and reliability of the 26 item, PSSB was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (Henseler et al., 2015). The internal consistency reliability for composite reliability (CR) should be above 0.70, average variance extracted should be

above 0.50 (Fornell, C., & Larcker, 2016). For each construct, as shown in Table V, all the factor loadings were statistically significant. AVEs for each construct were above the threshold of 0.50. The required threshold for CRs also exceeded 0.70, thus providing evidence of convergent validity.

Following Fornell-Larker and heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations criterion, discriminant validity was established between the PSSB constructs. The square root of AVE was greater than PSSB inter-construct correlations, confirming sufficient evidence for the discriminant validity of the PSSB. As shown in Table V, HTMT scores between the constructs were below the suggested cutoff of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), indicating that correlations of indicators across the constructs measure different phenomena, supporting the discriminant validity across the PSSB.

INSERT TABLE V HERE

5.3 Nomological validity

To test the 26 item PSSB for nomological validity, the constructs for the sample included 5 – item brand image scale (Cretu and Brodie, 2007; Martínez Salinas and Pina Pérez, 2009) and 4 – item brand trust scale (Holbrook and Chaudhuri, 2001). Participants rated their opinion on the brand from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Correlation estimates were compared between all possible combinations (Table VI) from a valid sample of (n=381).

INSERT TABLE VI HERE

5.4 Predictive validity

The results indicated that PSSB exhibits high levels of discriminant and convergent validity. However, the measure must predict some theoretical outcomes and apply them in practice. To assess the predictive validity of the PSSB, we proposed a set of relationships on perceiving a brand's social sustainability activities that affects brand trust and brand image. Brand image is conceptualized and operationalized in a number of ways (Faircloth et al., 2001). Literature reports numerous definitions and scales to measure brand image (Cretu and Brodie, 2007). Research also highlights brand image as a vital element of brand equity. It is usually referred to as consumer's perceptions of "brands tangible and intangible associations" (Engel et al., 1993). The brand image represents the shared values with consumers and brands. Several studies have concentrated on enhancing brand image through environmentally friendly products or services such as, consumer perception towards the environment friendly increases brand image (Kim and Heo, 2021), moreover positive brand image leads to positive financial value of the firm (Kim and Heo, 2021). In this context, the brand image represents the consumers' perception of the brands based on their interactions and shared values. Apart from environmental sustainability, consumers expect brands to be doing socially good. Brand's social sustainability approach would lead to a higher brand image.

Brand trust is defined as the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function (Holbrook and Chaudhuri, 2001). They also point out that people incorporate beliefs about reliability, honesty, and safety as important facets of trust. Brand trust leads to brand commitment and loyalty, and consumers often prefer trusted brands. In line with this, a firm's sustainability practices often help build brand trust, and literature also highlights expertise in sustainability and perception of its importance can build sustainable brand trust (Stoica and Hickman, 2021). Therefore, consumers' perception of brands' social sustainability builds brand trust.

Validation sample data (n=381) was used to measure the predictive validity. Participants were randomly assigned with one of 14 brands, as discussed earlier. They indicated their familiarity with the brand assigned and rated the brand on brand trust (Holbrook and Chaudhuri, 2001) and brand image (Cretu and Brodie, 2007; Martínez Salinas and Pina Pérez, 2009). Participants rated their opinion on the brand from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). As shown in Table VII, PSSB was a significant indicator of brand trust and brand image.

5.5 Common method bias test

In order to check the common method bias, we applied Harman's single-factor test, and the study found six factors via exploratory factor analysis. The results showed that the first factor accounted for 34.09% of the total variance (less than 50%), demonstrating the absence of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

INSERT TABLE VII HERE

6. General discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

Several studies have concentrated on understanding social sustainability from different domain contexts (Gomaa and Sakr, 2015; Lara-Hernandez and Melis, 2018; Rashidfarokhi et al., 2018) addressing social sustainability from the viewpoint of the brand and consumer's perspective is yet to be measured. Hence, this study attempted to conceptualize and construct a comprehensive and empirically tested framework that captures the perceived social sustainability of brands from the consumer's perspective. Our research makes several theoretical contributions. Firstly, the validated scale PSSB provides detailed insights into consumers' perceptions of brands' social sustainability activities. Literature frequently highlights environmental measures (Dangelico and Vocalelli, 2017) and less on social

sustainability measures even though consumers are equally concerned about a brand's contribution to the social dimensions of sustainability. Further, brands, through their CSR activities often contribute towards social sustainability, the outcomes of which seldom gets measured. It is therefore extremely important to assess brand perceptions based on their social-sustainability dimensions. The validated scale in this research therefore provides an opportunity to understand social sustainability from the consumer's perspective.

Secondly, existing literature on corporate social sustainability efforts and outcomes has focused mostly at institutional level activities (eg. Dempsey et al., 2011; Parjanen et al., 2019; Weingaertner and Moberg, 2014) without considering consumer perceptions as a possible outcome of social sustainability efforts even though a few studies have argued that a firm's pro-social credentials are more likely to influence consumer product decisions (Mejia et al., 2022). Absence of studies that consider consumer outcomes for social sustainability related activities can in turn reduce the motivation for developing marketing plans, especially to build brand development plans around social sustainability activities. This research fills this gap and puts forward the brand image building effects of the social dimensions. The social sustainability dimensions identified in this research establishes the theory that links social sustainability as a possible foundation to build brands. In fact, by identifying the different dimensions of social sustainability, the study takes forward this theoretical stream and helps in future assessment of brand perceptions. Further studies can utilize this framework to evaluate the outcomes of social sustainability programs.

Thirdly, our research contributes to the ongoing discussion around Sustainable Development Goals and corporate strategies (Galeazzo et al., 2023; Silva, 2021; van der Waal and Thijssens, 2020). Extant studies in this research domain have rarely examined SDGs and consumer perspectives. In this study, we fill this gap by developing measurement scale items that reflect a firm's commitment to the UN resolution document delivering the global vision (Osborn et

al., 2015) and explore their impact on consumer perceptions. This study thus goes towards establishing the empirical linkage between the different SDG dimensions connected to a firm's sustainability efforts and brand image.

Fourthly, our scale contributes to the emerging literature on the critical role played by a firm's social sustainability efforts. Compared to environmental measures, our dimensions act as a catalyst for measuring social sustainability built around SDGs. Furthermore, our dimensions serve as a foundation for mainstreaming social sustainability research from the standpoint of consumers. Our dimensions would be helpful in future research efforts to implement and measure social sustainability toward downstream assessments of product and service brands. The scale is not constrained to a single domain and may be used in several domains for a more significant social impact due to its multidimensional nature. Furthermore, due to the rigorous mixed method approach applied in PSSB development, this scale is applicable in other contexts and will be suitable for use in developed and developing countries.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Understanding social sustainability dimensions has gained desired attention, as seen from various reports.⁸ and consumers like brands that are willing to get involved in social issues⁹ (e.g., Apple is addressing housing scarcity and homelessness through its affordable housing initiatives), but it has never been measured, especially from the marketing perspective. Besides the firm's environmental sustainability activities, consumers are also concerned about the social sustainability commitments of the brands towards society. Previous scales and frameworks on

⁸ Citi Bank. [online] Available at <https://www.citigroup.com/citi/about/esg/downloads.html> [Accessed 28th March 2022] and SBI [online] Available at <https://sbi.co.in/documents/17826/24401/140621-Sustainability+Report%28SR%29+year+2020-21.pdf/ba271367-9542-e96a-0589-2968954b2e17?t=1623659643326> [Accessed 28th March 2022].

⁹ Knit. (2022). Popularity of brand canceling due to its marketing activities among Generation Z in the United States as of May 2022. Statista. Statista Inc.. Accessed: March 14, 2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1340466/brand-cancel-gen-z-usa/>

social sustainability do not fully capture its dimensions, especially from consumers' perceptions. Brand practitioners can adopt this scale to enhance firms branding through social sustainability.

Our research demonstrates that PSSB can enhance brand image and brand trust, which leads to building brand equity around social sustainability aspects. Understanding consumer perception towards social sustainability is essential in building a brand around social sustainability aspects and gaining competitive advantage. Our findings can help managers mainstream social sustainability in constructing branding and marketing communication campaigns. Furthermore, the scale can be applied in different domain contexts since it is developed around SDGs and consumers' perspectives. For example, government agencies can introduce and implement a supportive framework to achieve social sustainability (e.g., promote public transportation usage). Policymakers can encourage stakeholders to take responsibility for providing quality education, which could help achieve social sustainability in collaboration with all the stakeholders. The PSSB scale is well equipped to be a catalyst in prioritizing social sustainability and making brand managers achieve social sustainability goals.

6.3 Limitations and future research

In any scale development research, the generalizability of scale in different domain contexts is needed. Although we believe our scale should work across different domains due to its multidimensional nature, care should be exercised by future researchers in establishing its validity. The concept of social sustainability may vary between the demographics and therefore it is suggested to be further developed based on the etic approach. Our study captures the consumer perceptions on social sustainability aspects, and further studies are required to contemplate the interplay between social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Further research could examine how a sustainable agenda could be promoted across the firm's value

chain. Additional studies should be carried out to understand the relationship between environmental and social sustainability measures.

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List of Tables

Table I

Existing social sustainability constructs / framework developed among various domains.

Author	Domain	Constructs / Framework	Research Focus
(Magis, 2010)	community resilience as an indicator of social sustainability	dimensions - community resources, active agents, resource development, resource engagement, impact, equity, strategic action, collective action, active agents.	Resilience of forest dependent communities as an indicator of social sustainability.
(Cuthill, 2010)	urban growth - southeast Queensland region in Australia	social justice & equity, social infrastructure, engaged governance, social capital.	Conceptual framework - Social dimensions in urban growth.
(Valdes-Vasquez and Klotz, 2013)	social sustainability-considerations in construction projects	stakeholder engagement, project consideration, health assessment, social impact assessment, sustainable outcomes, follow-up plans.	Integrating and evaluating social considerations in construction projects.
(Mani et al., 2016)	social sustainability in supply chain	equity, safety, philanthropy, human rights, ethics, health and welfare.	Identify dimensions of supply chain social sustainability.
(Badri Ahmadi et al., 2017)	supply chains in manufacturing companies	work health and safety, training education and community influence, contractual stakeholders influence, occupational health and safety management systems, the interests and rights of employees, the rights of stakeholders, information disclosure, employment practices.	Framework – social sustainability of supply chains in manufacturing companies.
(Ahmad and Thaheem, 2017)	residential building - related social sustainability assessment	functional, aesthetic, innovative design approach, user comfort & safety.	Formulate – residential building social sustainability assessment
(Qiu Zhang et al., 2017)	social sustainability scale for tourism	host-guest conflict, social tolerance, social acceptance.	Assessment of social sustainability in destination settings.
(Staniškienė and Stankevičiūtė, 2018)	social sustainability-employee perspective in csr committed organization	employee participation, employee cooperation, equal opportunities, employee development, health and safety, and external partnership.	Measuring social sustainability from the employee perspective.
(Ajmal et al., 2018)	social sustainability business world	external / societal perspective - social development, social growth, social justice. internal / companies perspective - learning and growth,	Recognize and integrate social dimensions of sustainability in business operations

		community development, safety & security.	from societal and corporate perspective.
(Olakitan Atanda, 2019)	social sustainability green building assessment tools	social equity, environmental education, participation & control, social cohesion, health & safety, accessibility & satisfaction, cultural value, physical resilience.	Evaluate building projects socially and develop social criteria framework.
(Kumar and Anbanandam, 2019)	social sustainability freight transportation system	internal human resource, external population, stakeholder participation, macro-social performance.	Computing social sustainability index – freight transportation system.
(Denu et al., 2023)	Company's social sustainability performance	community, equity, poverty alleviation, human rights, ethics, regulatory enforcement, and employees.	Scale development – emerging African economies.

Table II Scale development process

Stages of scale development process	Details
Stage 1: Construct definition and content domain - PSSB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of the construct – PSSB • Literature review
Stage 2: Item generation and expert review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus Group • Experts Opinion • Stimuli Selection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three focus group discussions to identify consumers interpretations of brands contribution towards social sustainability. • Generation of scale items based on UN – resolution document (SDGs). • Five expert reviews – degree of association 72 items was generated for the next step. • Stimuli selection – 14 national and global brands were selected based on their contribution towards SDGs. • Survey - Brand localness, brand familiarity and brand globalness was examined n=83. • Two marketing professors and a language professor examined the face validity of the questions. • Pilot study n=40.
Stage 3: Scale Purification <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scale Development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey of n=560 respondents • Exploratory factory analysis – six model factors were labeled. • 39 items were extracted and retained for the next step. • Confirmatory factor analysis - Survey of n=381 respondents • Two independent judges examined the items for ambiguity and clarity. • 26 items produced a good model fit. • All 26 items meet the validity tests.
Stage 4: Scale Validation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal reliability • Validity and reliability • Nomological validity • Predictive validity • Discriminant validity • Convergent validity.

Table III

Demographic summary

Gender	
Male	64.3
Female	35.4
Marital Status	
Unmarried	50.1
Married	49.9
Age	
21 - 25	29.9
26 - 35	43.6
36 - 45	20.5
>46	6
Educational Qualification	
Graduate	55.1
Postgraduate	34.4
Executive Degree	2.3
others	8.2
Work Experience	
0 – 5 Years	41.2
5 – 10 Years	29.7
>10 years	29.1

Sample size (n=381)

Table IV

Items, descriptive statistics

	Factor Loadings	Mean	SD
Supporting Innovative Growth			
Brand X provides a safe and secure working environment	.73	5.41	1.16
I believe Brand X is an equal opportunity employer.	.76	5.30	1.07
Brand X has adopted equal pay for work of equal value.	.77	5.19	1.11
Brand X supports promoting local culture.	.72	5.22	1.23
Brand X has adopted clean technologies in its processes.	.82	5.40	1.15
Brand X supports in promoting wellbeing	.77	5.40	1.09
Brand X promotes higher productivity through innovation.	.74	5.44	1.15
Supporting Poverty Elimination			
I believe Brand X improves the poor's quality by providing basic services (such as health care, education, and water).	.74	5.06	1.28
Brand X supports the underprivileged sections of the society.	.83	5.04	1.14
Brand X helps in eradicating poverty	.85	4.99	1.24
Brand X assists in the eradication of malnutrition	.88	4.99	1.24
Supporting Sustainable Water Management			
Brand X has adopted water recycling.	.90	4.97	1.23
Brand X supports water harvesting.	.93	4.97	1.24
Brand X supports increasing water-use efficiency.	.88	5.04	1.28
Brand X has adopted a wastewater treatment policy.	.85	4.98	1.24
Supporting Education			
Brand X promotes equal and affordable access to education.	.86	5.13	1.23
Brand X promotes early childhood education.	.85	5.03	1.30
Brand X helps in increasing the proficiency of child literacy.	.87	5.03	1.27
Brand X supports in providing quality education.	.88	5.07	1.22
Brand X supports the elimination of violence against all women and girls.	.78	5.18	1.21
Supporting Healthy Living			
Brand X promotes universal health coverage.	.88	5.01	1.29
Brand X supports reducing illnesses caused by pollution.	.85	4.91	1.30
Brand X promotes the reduction of communicable diseases.	.88	4.93	1.27
Supporting Community			
Brand X promotes the usage of public transportation	.79	4.83	1.38
Brand X involves itself in building sustainable urbanization	.87	4.95	1.30
Brand X strives in conservation of cultural and natural places.	.85	5.00	1.29

X represent the specific brand. Factor loadings are standardized.

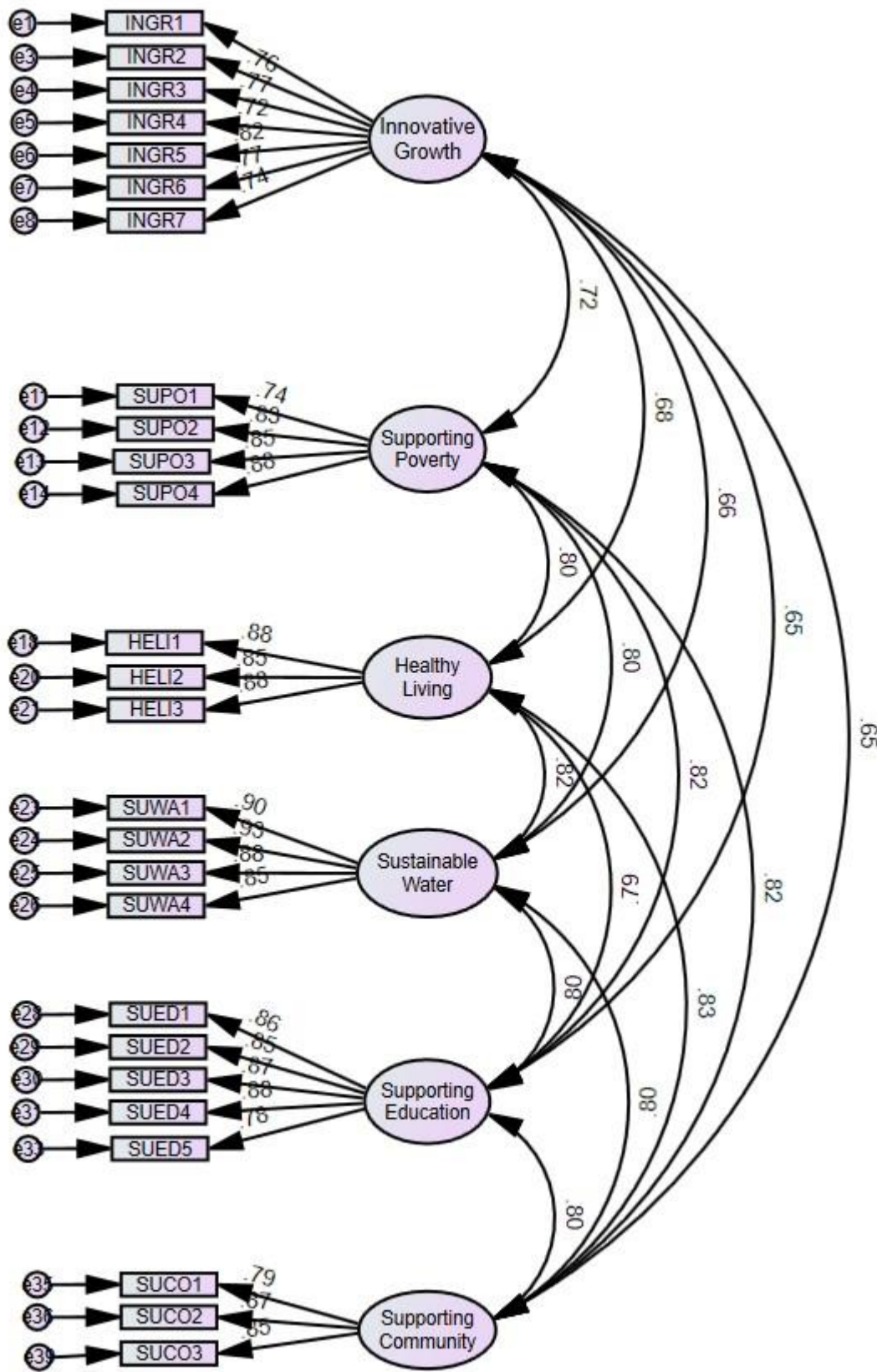


Fig.1 Measurement model for PSSB

Table V

Convergent and Discriminant validity of the dimensions

	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3	4	5	6
Supporting Innovative Growth	0.905	0.578	0.522	0.760					
Supporting Poverty Elimination	0.897	0.686	0.678	0.722(0.722)	0.828				
Supporting Healthy Living	0.906	0.762	0.694	0.682(0.685)	0.799(0.795)	0.873			
Supporting Sustainable Water Management	0.939	0.794	0.666	0.663(0.673)	0.799(0.808)	0.816(0.824)	0.891		
Supporting Education	0.928	0.722	0.678	0.648(0.660)	0.823(0.842)	0.791(0.800)	0.798(0.812)	0.850	
Supporting Community	0.877	0.705	0.694	0.648(0.640)	0.819(0.815)	0.833(0.834)	0.801(0.806)	0.796(0.800)	0.840

All factor loading is significant at $p < 0.001$. Composite Reliability (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Maximum Shared Variance (MSV)

The square root of AVE are reported on diagonal in bold; HTMT ratios are reported in parentheses.

Table VI

Nomological validity

	Supporting Innovative Growth	Supporting Poverty Elimination	Supporting Healthy Living	Supporting Sustainable Water Management	Supporting Education	Supporting Community	Brand Trust	Brand Image
Supporting Innovative Growth	1							
Supporting Poverty Elimination	.649	1						
Supporting Healthy Living	.620	.716	1					
Supporting Sustainable Water Management	.620	.741	.759	1				
Supporting Education	.604	.767	.732	.756	1			
Supporting Community	.568	.721	.742	.730	.720	1		
Brand Trust	.689	.554	.582	.584	.544	.555	1	
Brand Image	.612	.468	.460	.491	.450	.457	.788	1

All the correlations is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

Table VII

Predictivity validity of the PSSB

Dependent variable	Measure	Beta	R square
Brand trust	PSSB	.687	.472
Brand image	PSSB	.580	.336

Note: Standardized coefficients. All the variables were significant at .001

Annexure

Table I: Brands contribution towards Sustainable Development Goals

Goals	SBI	Citi	Jio	Vodafone	Maruti	Toyota	Amazon	TATA	Nestle	P&G	ITC	HUL	
Goal 1	No Poverty	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 2	Zero Hunger	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 3	Good Health and Well-Being	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 4	Quality Education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 5	Gender Equity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
Goal 6	Clean Water and Sanitation	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Goal 8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Goal 10	Reduced Inequalities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes
Goal 11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 13	Climate Action	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 14	Life Below Water	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes
Goal 15	Life on Land	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 16	Peace Justice and Strong Institutions	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Goal 17	Partnerships for the goals	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	-	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-	Yes

Note: Yes indicates - Brand claims they had contributed to achieving specific Goals in their annual/specific SDGs report.

Amul and Flipkart's claims are not reported as their annual / SDGs report was unavailable. However, both brand claims they are progressing towards achieving SDGs in their websites.

Table II: Selection of brands – Brand familiarity, Perceived brand globalness, Perceived brand localness

Measure	Banking Service		Telecom Service		Auto product		E commerce – service		Umbrella - Local			Umbrella - Global		
	SBI	Citi	Jio	Vodafone	Maruti	Toyota	Amazon	Flipkart	ITC	TATA	Amul	Nestle	P&G	HUL
Brand Familiarity	5	7	6	5	6	6	5	5	6	9	5	6	5	7
Brand X is very familiar to me	6.6	4.2	6.5	5.4	6.6	7	6.4	5.2	3.7	6.1	3.8	6.6	3.4	3
Everybody here has heard of Brand X	6.8	4.2	6.6	5.8	6.5	6.6	7	5	4	6.5	4.4	6.2	3.8	3.6
I am very knowledgeable about brand X	5	3.7	5.6	4.4	6.3	4.2	5.8	4.2	3.33	4.6	4.8	5	4	3.7
I have seen many advertisements of brand X in magazines, TV, radio etc.	5.8	4.1	5.5	5.8	6.5	5.6	6.4	5	3.5	6	4.8	6	2.8	4
Perceived Brand Globalness														
To me, Brand X is a Global Brand	--	4.6	--	5.8	--	5.5	7	--	--	--	--	6.1	4.4	4.2
I do think consumers in overseas buy Brand X	--	4.4	--	5.6	--	4.8	5.8	--	--	--	--	5.5	4.4	4.2
Brand X is sold all over the world	--	4.9	--	6	--	5	6.8	--	--	--	--	6.2	4.2	4.2
Perceived Brand Localness														
I associate brand X with things that are Indian	5.2	--	6.2	--	4.3	--	--	4	3.5	5.6	3.2	--	--	--
To me, brand X represents what India is all about	4.6	--	5	--	6.3	--	--	4.4	3.8	5.3	3.4	--	--	--
To me, brand X is a very good symbol of India	5.4	--	6	--	6.3	--	--	4.6	4	5.4	3.6	--	--	--

X represent the specific brand. Sample size(n=83). Values mentioned are average scores on the seven-point scale - strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

