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Research Article

Sustainability and Ethical Practices in Direct Selling and Their Impact on Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract: The direct selling industry is also under more scrutiny in terms of its sustainability and ethical behaviour since modern consumers are more sensitive to the responsible business behaviour. This theoretical research paper will look at how sustainability and ethical activities affect customer satisfaction in the direct selling environment. Based on the long recognized theories in the field of ethical marketing, corporate social responsibility and relationship marketing, the paper constructs an integrative model to relate the aspects of sustainability (environmental, social and economic) and ethical practice (transparency, fair compensation, responsible recruitment, data privacy and truthful product claims) to customer satisfaction. The paper also brings out the mediating factors of customer trust, perceived value and perceived quality and the signaling effects of certifications and corporate citizenship. The study also makes contributions in the area of literature of ethical marketing and provides a platform upon which future empirical studies can be conducted in relation to direct selling by defining research gaps and put forward testable propositions.

Keywords: Customer Satisfaction, Direct Selling, Ethical Practices, Sustainability, Trust, Corporate Citizenship

INTRODUCTION

Direct selling is a powerful paradigm of international distribution that raises about 197 billion dollars in yearly revenue. The industry is defined by personal-to-personal demonstrations, relationship marketing and decentralized networks of independent distributors, which have increased tremendously with the Indian market alone reaching a high of more than Rest. 21,000 crores. In contrast to the physical retail business, direct selling is more dependent on interpersonal appeal, trust in the relationship and relative authenticity of the distributor which many times takes advantage of the personal social networks to access the consumers.

With the growing awareness of customers over corporate responsibility, the pressure mounts on direct selling companies to incorporate the concept of sustainability and ethical behaviour into their business. Sustainability is the ability to satisfy the current needs without jeopardizing the future generation which includes environmental, social and economic aspects. This especially applies to organizations whose activities may tend to drain the environment or exploit labour. At the same time, ethics is the ethical compass of the industry that regulates behaviour in terms of honesty, fairness, integrity and trust. The foundation of trust on the individual seller and the moral conduct of the firm are closely interconnected in the mind of the consumer.

The customer satisfaction here is derived through purchasing experience that is up to or beyond what a consumer expected. Although the conventional determinants under consideration are the quality of the product, its price and emotional attachment, the recent literature indicates that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sustainability and ethical aspects are now the most essential determinants. It is crucial to establish the satisfaction on the basis of these values and form the long-term loyalty and sustainability of business in the face of increasing anxieties about climate change and environmental degradation. Regardless of the development of the industry, a conceptual research on the particular association between the principles of sustainability, ethical behaviour and customer satisfaction within direct selling is still missing. The aim of this article is to fill this gap and thus present a conceptual model based on a sound theoretical foundation to fill the emerging consumer priorities.

Objectives of the Study:

- To examine how ethical behaviour, including transparency in communication, equitable compensation, data confidentiality, conscientious hiring and truthful product statements, impact on customers and their trust and satisfaction
- To address the mediating position of customer trust between the sustainability and ethical practice and customer satisfaction in the direct selling
- To determine how perceived value and perceived quality relate to customer satisfaction that may emerge due to sustainable and ethical business practices during direct selling
- To assess how corporate citizenship, certifications and ethical label affect customer perception and satisfaction
- To create a broad conceptual model that incorporates sustainability, ethical practices, trust, perceived value and customer satisfaction based on the established management and marketing theories
- To determine the main research gaps and state theoretical propositions to be used in the future empirical research of sustainability and ethical marketing practices in direct selling

Conceptual Framework

Direct selling entails the interface between distributors and consumers, whereby the former engage in sales, promotion and other activities concerning brands and products [1]. Direct-selling firms have increasingly formalized the sustainability drivers and outcomes of their initiatives, consequently enhancing their overall corporate social credit and reputation [2]. Sustainability encompasses social, economic and environmental aspects, the last of which constitutes an urgent imperative for the manufacturing, distribution and marketing of a multitude of products affecting human health and safety. Sustainability entails long-term viability.

Customer satisfaction denotes the degree to which customer expectations of a service or product have been met or exceeded. Sustainability and customer satisfaction have, therefore, been studied longitudinally in a diverse array of fields. The notion of sustainability is increasingly related to direct selling and is gaining prominence, typically concerning the socio-economic and socio-political dimensions while overlooking the larger paradigm related to these topics. This conceptual framework captures the multi-faceted and interdependent nature of customer satisfaction and sustainability with regard to direct selling. Sustainability and ethical practices are not isolated phenomena and their multi-dimensionality and interconnections are fundamental to addressing these notions in any practical context. Therefore, there is a relevant research gap concerning the interrelations between these concepts in the direct-selling context, despite a growing academic interest in general. The objective of the present work is to explore sustainability and ethical practices in the specified context, thus addressing the aforementioned gap and advancing avenues for future research and better theoretical grounding in the fields concerned.

Definitions of Direct Selling, Sustainability and Ethics

The direct selling industry has grown rapidly in recent years, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. This sector is of considerable economic, social and political importance and regarded as one of the three main pillars of the economy. The study of its characteristics has attracted a growing number of scholars, who have examined marketing strategies, product characteristics and the impact of cultural differences or transformational leadership on customer satisfaction. However, Wang and Yao argue that the influence of sustainability and ethics on customer satisfaction has received insufficient attention.

Direct selling has quite a number of benefits, among them are low overheads, may result in high financial chances, provides opportunities to network and socialize, no pressure to sell and develop personal relationships. Its informal nature means that customer service and the agent-customer relationship are crucial for long-term sustainability. With an industry maturing, though, bottom-line concerns are getting a priority and there is a move toward adopting Sustainable and Ethical Practices. These initiatives can improve image and reputation, increase buyer confidence and shape perceptions of other critical components such as product quality. Accordingly, they can influence customer satisfaction.

Theoretical Perspectives

Sustainability and ethics are two emergent, interrelated phenomena in commerce [3]. Commercial activity is usually perceived within a limited paradigm of economic performance or, to a minor degree, social factors, but a broader outline is also required that encompasses the environmental and sustainability aspects that define the existence of future generations and new economic participants [4]. Interaction is required to facilitate broader multi-sustainability strategies across varying contexts of commerce. Direct selling represents a prevalent, dynamic segment of commerce with robust worldwide demand, in which reward-based selling and real-time demonstration can simply meet the four identified core focuses.

The direct-selling industry strives to meet commercial demand via the utilization of sustainable and ethical practices to engender customer satisfaction [5]. Employed worldwide, the direct-selling mode propounds a diverse range of products across food, cosmetics, personal care and energy sectors. Such direct-selling organizations continuously scan for critical issues and perform analyses to formulate more effective commercial strategies [6].

Consumer understanding of sustainable and ethical practices continues to develop, leading to an increase in private-public partnerships to bolster and in still desired market conditions [7]. Sustainability represents an emergent three-dimensional paradigm across economic, social and environmental domains [8].

Customer Satisfaction in Direct Selling Context

Satisfaction arises from the transaction in the direct selling context, combining the product or service and interpersonal factors [9]. Additionally, the purchasing process occurs face-to-face in most cases, linking direct selling closely with social-marketing concepts. A single product offering is often presented and demonstrated, with the aim of creating positive experience and satisfaction directly influencing purchase intention. Overall, two major factors influence customer satisfaction in the direct selling context: product quality (brand) and salesperson competence.

Sustainable Practices in Direct Selling

Direct selling has gained widespread popularity and interest worldwide, particularly within emerging markets in Asia and Africa, where it has become a booming industry [9]. A variety of factors drive consumer preference for direct selling, including its advantages over conventional retailing, such as greater convenience, proximity, purchasing flexibility and more extensive variety. Direct selling firms can attract more customers by adopting sustainable and ethical practices, which enhance overall customer satisfaction.

Sustainable practices from firms that prioritize environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainability are positively related to customer perceptions. Environmental sustainability initiatives foster corporate social responsibility and sustainability leadership. In addition, corporate citizenship is strengthened by firms that conduct social responsibility and community relations. Economic sustainability will provide long-term viability, which is an indicator of stability and reliability and will help to deepen customer relations.

Environmental Sustainability Initiatives

Due to the ever-increasing concern regarding environmental issues, an emphasis on sustainable development is becoming a necessity for organizations [10]. Sustainability expresses a concern that the pursuit of economic growth should not take place at the expense of the environment or social justice. Environmental sustainability, therefore, imposes the responsibility of preserving the state of the environment on organizations of all types [1]. Environmental sustainability constitutes a subset of a broader sustainability framework that is multi-dimensional and includes economic and social dimensions [11]. The social dimension of sustainability relates to social responsibility and community engagement while the economic dimension encompasses long-term viability and economic sustainability. Through direct selling firms, organizations can conduct business practices and processes that demonstrate environmental sustainability.

Environmental initiatives can take various forms, with the sources of those initiatives influenced by many factors, including organizational size, industry sector, geographical region, external stakeholder pressure, competitors and organizational culture. In terms of stakeholder pressure, external parties that drive the growth of environmental initiatives include customers, clients, the media, government, non-government organizations and other organizations within the same industry. The pressure from these external parties is believed to drive organizations to adopt environmental practices such as waste reduction, emissions reduction, resource conservation and use of environmentally friendly products and services. Such initiatives, once adopted and implemented, are also expected to create corporate images that consumers perceive positively. Organizations that pursue environmental initiatives are also perceived as either environmentally responsible or as environmentally friendly.

Social Responsibility and Community Activities

The potential impact of social responsibility practices in direct selling on customer perceptions, relationships and loyalty remains underdetermined. Yet evidence from other sectors indicates that generous engagement with social causes or community development can elevate the satisfaction level of customers. Social responsibility is increasingly recognized as an influential new marketing approach, socially acceptable business strategy, or essential management philosophy [12]. A growing number of companies pursue objectives beyond profits and endeavours to maximize collective welfare or pursue higher societal goals. Thus benefits to the wider community can improve customer satisfaction.

Social responsibility involves taking part in activities aimed at serving the community or promoting the quality of life of community members. Social responsibility is considered a component of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which can be defined as the voluntary actions undertaken by firms to improve their societal well-being. According to Sweeney and Soutar [13], CSR can be categorized into six dimensions: "(1) Fair and Honorable Conduct, (2) Transparency, (3) Ethical Governance, (4) Defensive Contribution, (5) Generous Contribution and (6) Supporting Charities."

Engagement with socially responsible initiatives can serve as a means of managing the negative perception of direct selling. The social responsibility of direct selling organizations may not always be taken positively due to the controversial nature of the business model. Some say that direct selling raises consumer prices. Other argues that it focuses on personal network damages relationship and creates an unhealthy dependence on income from a primary job. In such circumstances, offering an outward and generous social contribution to the community may improve the customer perspective towards direct selling enterprises.

Economic Sustainability and Long-Term Viability

Direct selling firms primarily generate economic value through direct selling activities. Nevertheless, they may also contribute to broader notions of economic sustainability, such as generating national wealth or reducing poverty. Economic sustainability is therefore defined, as a first step toward a broader economic literature review, as the sustainability of economic systems that are additional to the primary firms' own economic sustainability [14]. Through this lens, long-term viability of direct selling firms and additional economic sustainability are addressed together.

Direct selling is recognized as having an important role in economic and social development, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Direct selling expands employment opportunities for segments of the population that find it difficult to establish formal jobs and promotes wealth redistribution. Economic sustainability is thus defined, in the frame of reference for economic sustainability, as the long-term viability of the economy additional to the direct selling firms' own sustainability [15].

Ethical Practices in Direct Selling

Direct selling as an alternative way of manufacturing and distributing goods has gained momentum for certain economic and social settings. However, direct selling, in addition to its acceptance and adaptation, has not escaped the shadow of ethical issues. The critical investigation of the ethical issues in direct selling systems has been neglected and under-explored. Direct selling is still one of the most debatable marketing channels because of the rapid spread of supernatural and unethical business practices largely driven by speculation as the motive. There are signs of innate ethical problems/shortcomings in the direct-selling producers [16]. The issues of ethics in the marketing environment need further critical examination. Hence, this section investigates the nature of ethical issues associated with direct selling operations, by addressing the following key dimensions: Clarity and comprehensiveness of the descriptions of the ethical issues as applicable to direct selling systems; formulation and classification of the ethical issues into specific criteria and marketing orientation (e.g. information-oriented, motivation-oriented, shipment-oriented); identification of the inter-relation among differing ethical issues.

Truthfulness and Openness in Communication

Openness and honesty in the communication is the fundamental moral duty in the direct selling industry. Ethical communication imposes that the organizations and distributors provide correct, full and verifiable information on the characteristics, pricing systems and terms of use and limitations to use of the products. The possibility to manipulate or omit information intentionally can destroy the trust of the consumer and negatively impact on relationships with the customers in the long term. Besides the communication concerning the products, transparency must be incorporated in the disclosures of the business opportunities and compensation schemes to the potential distributors. Ethical companies make sure the income potential is made to be known in a realistic manner rather than exaggerating the statements in a way that can give false hopes. Open communication does not only build consumer confidence but also helps in the credibility of the organization and long term performance of the organization in the market.

Just Compensation and Workforce Ethics

Equity and sustainability in direct selling operations are ensured by fair compensation and compliance to labour ethics. Moral institutions also have clear compensation plans that are performance-based, clear and depending on the effort and contributions of distributors. These systems minimize the exploitation threat and create the impression of fairness and motivation in the participants.

Other ethics in labour is the regard of rights, autonomy and well-being of the distributors, who usually act as independent contractors. Some of the ethical practices involve proper training, not using force to meet sales and promotion of a balanced work environment. When organizations are fairly treated and compensated, this increases the level of satisfaction in the distributors, reduces the turnover and indirectly enhances the level of quality of customer service.

Privacy, Data Protection and Consumer Rights

The increased adoption of online platforms in direct selling has escalated the ethical issues of privacy, data protection and consumer rights. Ethical organizations should gather and handle consumer information in an ethical manner thus keeping it confidential and in accordance with any applicable data protection laws and regulations. Ethical data management must include policies of transparency of data use and informed consent.

Consumer rights respect also includes the protection of the consumers against unauthorized data sharing, invasive marketing and use of personal information. Companies that uphold privacy and other data security policies are accountable and build trust that is essential towards sustaining customer relations in a competitive market.

Responsible Recruitment and Claims of Products

The ethical conduct in the direct selling industry is based on responsible recruitment practices. Employers need to make sure that the recruitment messages are founded on the facts and the real images of the business opportunities. Ethical recruiting practices will not practice pressure tactics, false projections of income and false portrayal of chances of success.

On the same note, product claims should also be supported by empirical data, regulatory clearances or scientifically determined information. Unproven or unverified claims, especially within such areas as health, nutrition and personal care, might be confusing consumers and can be very dangerous in terms of morality and legal actions. Sound recruitment and correct product statements will increase the legitimacy of the organization and help in sustaining business.

Interactions between Sustainability, Ethics and Customer Satisfaction

Mechanisms of Connection between Ethical Conduct and Trust and Loyalty: Ethical behaviour is an important tool that helps organizations to develop customer trust and loyalty. Consumers have positive perception of reliability and integrity when firms are always honest, fair and accountable in their operations. Ethics minimizes uncertainty and feeling of risk when purchasing a product, especially in companies that deal with direct selling of their products where interpersonal communication is an important aspect.

The role played by trust is an intervening factor in the relationship between ethical behaviour and loyalty to customers. On the one hand, customers who feel that an organization is ethical tend to make repeat purchasing, promote the brand among others and have a long-lasting relationship with the organization. Ethical practices are an indicator of commitment to the welfare of the customer, which enhances the customer attachment feelings, strengthening loyalty in the long term.

Perceived Value, Quality and Corporate Citizenship

Central determinants of customer satisfaction are perceived value and quality which are highly affected by ethical business practices. Customers link products with quality and greater value when companies enter into fair pricing, responsible sourcing and quality assurance. Ethical practices do not only improve quality in functional terms but also in symbolic and emotional aspects as well as perceived.

Corporate citizenship also influences the perceptions of customers in that it indicates that an organization is socially, environmentally as well as economically responsible. Companies that contribute to the community development, environmental sustainability and the welfare of its staffs are seen as socially responsible organizations. The attitudes of the customers are affected positively by such perceptions, which will result in greater brand recognition and purchase intentions.

Certifications and Labels and their impact in Customer Perceptions

The presence of certifications and labels that reflect ethical practices can be viewed as valuable information clues with the capacity to shape customer perceptions and decision-making. Quality certifications, sustainability marks and ethical compliance seals are some of the labels that minimize the information asymmetry and give assurances about the product standards and organizational practices. These cues are especially useful in markets where the customers might not know all about the products.

Having established certifications increases perceived credibility, trustworthiness and product legitimacy. Customers tend to believe that certified products are safer and more reliable and are connected to ethical values. As a result, certification and labels have strategic influence in the formation of customer confidence in the market, enhancement of brand reputation and ethical positioning in competitive markets.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodological Considerations for Conceptual Inquiry

Conceptual Mapping and Constructs: Conceptual mapping is an initial move towards structuring and explaining the major constructs and connections that are underlying the proposed research framework. Ethical behaviours in direct selling are also being conceptualized in the current context as multidimensional constructs and include aspects of transparency in communication, fair compensation, data privacy, responsible recruitment and truthful product claims. The combination of these dimensions in the framework depicts the independent variables.

Primary dependent constructs are customer-related outcomes such as trust, perceived value, perceived quality, satisfaction and loyalty. Trust is introduced as a mediating factor that clarifies the process according to which ethical practices determine the long-term customer results. Moreover, two moderating variables include corporate reputation, regulatory environment and credibility of certification, which might determine the intensity and the course of these links. This conceptualized mapping gives a clear picture of concepts and facilitates the systematic investigation of the empirical data.

Future Empirical Test Propositions

According to the conceptual model, a series of research propositions are formulated, which will be used to provide empirical confirmation in the future. To begin with, it is suggested that ethical conduct during direct selling impacts customer trust positively in a significant way. Second, trust would be expected to mediate the relationship between ethical practices and customer satisfaction and enhance repeat purchase intentions and loyalty.

Other propositions postulate that there is a partial mediating role of perceived value and quality in the relationship between ethical behaviour and customer satisfaction. Also, the presence of known certifications and the corporate citizenship programs are suggested to adjust the customer perceptions and to increase trust and credibility. These hypotheses present a theoretically based foundation to either quantitative research or mixed-method research designs to test causal relationships.

Outer Presuppositions and Constraints

Although the conceptually applicable, the given framework is vulnerable to some contextual limitations and restrictions. The model might not be universally applicable in cultural, regulatory and economic settings with the advanced and the emerging markets being the most predominant. The societal norms, the enforcement of the law and the maturity of the market affect the ethics and trust perceived by the consumer, which might restrict the generalizability of the results.

Moreover, the framework is based mainly on the perceptual constructs, which can be biased in responses and prone to subjectivity in the empirical measurement. The possibility to limit the opportunities to prove the presence of causation can also be limited by the cross-sectional character of the majority of studies based on the use of survey. To overcome these weaknesses, future studies can take into consideration longitudinal designs, other stakeholder perspectives and apply the framework to other service-based sectors.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The increased focus on sustainability and ethics in direct selling has great implications to the organizational practice and policy. Sustainable and ethical business models have ceased to be considered as a matter of choice but a factor that is critical in determining customer satisfaction, trust and competitiveness in the long term. This section covers practical and policy implications that may emerge as a result of the inclusion of the ethical conduct and sustainability in direct selling operations.

Managerial and Organizational Implications

To practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of integrating ethical and sustainable principles in the fundamental business strategies as opposed to considering them as appendages. Organizations that engage in direct selling should also internalize transparent communication systems; that are systems where product information, pricing schemes and reward schemes are effectively made known to both the customers and the distributors. Moral leadership and internal controls are very important in strengthening integrity and accountability in the selling network.

They also urge organizations to come up with equitable and sustainable compensation systems to achieve balance between profitability and welfare of distributors. Distributor competence and ethical sensitivity can be maximized by investing in ethical training programs and sustainability awareness and monitoring compliance. These initiatives do not only enhance efficiency in the operations but also enhance customer satisfaction through creation of trust and provision of uniformity in service delivery.

Customer Relationship Management Implications

Sustainability and ethical practices play major roles in perceived value and satisfaction (customer relationship point of view). The customers are also increasingly judging brands taking into consideration its ethical sourcing, environmental responsibility and social contributions besides functional product features. Direct selling companies that incorporate sustainability messages in their customer relationships are in a better position to establish long term relational relationships.

Ethical behaviour lowers the perceived risk and increases trust in the purchasing decision that results in increased customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. To convey that they are sustainable, organizations ought to use ethical certifications, eco-labels and open reporting. These behaviours are trust indicators that create customer satisfaction and brand credibility.

Policy and Regulatory Implications

At the policy level, the paper identifies the need to have strong regulatory measures that will enhance ethical behaviour and sustainability in the direct selling business. The regulators of the industry and policymakers need to come up with clear rules that dictate what lies in advertising, responsible recruitment, data protection and fair compensation practices. Enforcement and a stronger mechanism of compliance can be used to curb unethical practices and safeguard the interests of consumers.

Associations and self-regulatory bodies in the industry are also crucial towards ensuring the ethical standards are promoted by means of codes of conduct, certification and unremitting monitoring. It can be proposed that joint work of regulators, organizations and consumer advocacy groups can contribute to transparency and accountability throughout the sector. These policy interventions help to have a more sustainable and reliable direct selling environment.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Implications

Sustainable and ethics direct selling practices are well aligned with the wider sustainability development goals. Just labour, conscientious consumption and responsible marketing helps in inclusive economic growth and social wellbeing. Through implementing such a pro-environment sourcing and distribution strategy, direct selling companies will be able to minimize their ecological footprint and promote sustainable consumption trends.

These efforts do not only respond to the expectations of the society, but it also shapes the customer satisfaction in a positive way by matching the organizational values with the ethics of the customers. Companies that show a willingness to be sustainable have a higher chance of attracting consumers who are ethical and they are likely to be relevant in the market in the long term.

CONCLUSION

This paper gives an in-depth conceptual analysis of sustainability and ethical practices in direct selling and how they affect customer satisfaction. Based on the available theories and literature, the paper illuminates the interdependence of the functions of ethical behaviours, sustainability efforts, trust, perceived value and corporate citizenship in influencing customer perceptions and attainment of customer satisfaction.

As it is proved by the analysis, sustainability and ethics are no longer marginal issues and they are the core strategic forces in the direct selling business. Ethical communications, equitable compensation, sustainable hiring and data security measures would aid in establishing trust, whereas environmental and social sustainability projects would increase perceived value and brand trust. All these combine to build customer satisfaction, loyalty and long-term relation commitment.

In the way it suggests a systematic conceptual framework and research propositions, the study will add to the theoretical development of literature on ethical marketing and sustainability. It is also a base of future empirical studies, which can prove the proposed relationships in various cultural and regulatory settings.

Practically, the findings highlight the need to inculcate the idea of ethics and sustainability into the mainstream approaches to organizations. Industry regulators and policymakers are urged to reinforce governance systems facilitating transparency, consumer protection and sustainable activities of a business.

To summarize, sustainability and ethical behaviour are important factors of customer satisfaction in direct selling. Companies that are actively trying to balance their work with the values of a good organization and sustainability goals have a higher chance of becoming successful in the long run, gaining customer loyalty and having a competitive edge in a more aware market.

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