

Digital marketing of Sustainable Food Products and Ethical Eating in India from a theoretical perspective

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Abstract:

Sustainable living is extremely important in contemporary global society and can be connected to our food habits too. By eating in a responsible manner, reducing food wastage and consuming Sustainable Food, the problem of global hunger can be eradicated. In India, the awareness about Sustainable Food is still very less. Sustainable Food and Ethical Eating are very closely related, because a person will be motivated to eat responsibly and become consciously aware of the environmental, economic and industrial influences behind meals. Ethical eating concerns can include the wages of local farmers, traceability of meat, and humane working conditions. Digital marketing can be used to increase awareness about Sustainable and Ethical eating habits, through judicious use of the internet. This paper aims to discuss how Digital Marketing can be used to increase consumer awareness on Sustainable Food and Ethical Eating in India, through the application of established marketing theories and a recommendation of a conceptual framework after the theoretical discussion.

Keywords: Sustainable Food, Ethical Eating, Digital marketing, India

1. Introduction

Food is the most essential component for the existence of living beings. People are becoming increasingly more aware about healthy eating, and thus, more emphasis is being put on sustainable production and consumption of food items. In simple words, sustainability can be defined as the usage of resources in a manner that doesn't impact the future generations. "For food, a sustainable system might be seen as encompassing a range of issues such as security of the supply of food, health, safety, affordability, quality, a strong food industry in terms of jobs and growth and, at the same time, environmental sustainability, in terms of issues such as climate change, biodiversity, water and soil quality" ("Sustainable Food", n.d.).

In India, sustainable consumption of food is still a relatively new concept. The country is

still grappling with the issue of agricultural productivity and child as well as adult nutrition. In the 2018 Food Sustainability Index, India was placed 33 on the list of 67 countries (Krishnan, 2018). A lack of balanced diet leads to nutritional deficiencies in Indian people. Poverty and lack of education are major reasons behind the nutritional deficiency in people's diets. Most Indian people cannot afford to purchase a wide variety of food items, due to low disposable incomes. They make do with what they can afford and suffer from deficiency of essential nutritional components. Often, people are not even aware of what they should eat and how much quantity of food items they should consume.

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Improper usage of resources is also a major issue that mars the agricultural productivity of India. Lack of sufficient water and the absence of water recycling are also major problems in the growth of crops and livestock in the country. While the Indian government is taking initiatives for proper management of nutritional campaigns in the country, people are yet to understand the implications of Ethical Eating.

In this societal scenario, digital marketing can be one of the most important tools for the promotion of Sustainable Food in India. Through a series of campaigns on a range of channels, people can be made aware of this concept and encouraged to eat responsibly. The aim of this paper is to discuss how Digital marketing techniques can help in the propagation of the idea of Sustainable Food and the manner in which such campaigns can be designed.

Ideas associated with Sustainable Food:

Diversification of Eating – People should put more emphasis on eating a wide range of food items, to ensure that a proper utilization of resources takes place. Apart from this, people can also gain a good balance of nutrients through responsible eating.

Opting for local produce- The emphasis should be on eating food that has been responsibly sourced and locally produced. Farmers will be encouraged to produce better quality resources, if there is a sufficient demand in the market. Such practices can help in proper nutritional education; people can learn how the food was grown, how it was harvested, etc.

Eating in a mindful manner- The onus should be on eating the right quantity of appropriate food items, which can make them healthy and fit.

Putting more emphasis on vegetarian food- Meat sources are major contributors to Green House Gas emissions. Alternatively, eating a plant-based diet can help reduce freshwater withdrawals and deforestation. Plant-based diets are healthier than meat-based ones.

Eating food with credible certificates- If a food item has proper eco certifications, consumers can be assured that the food has been produced with adherence to quality standards and has proper nutritional content.

Reducing food wastage- A lot of food wastage occurs at the consumer level and multiple resources are wasted on preparing food that is never eaten. Severe food wastage can be alarming for a country, where poverty is a major issue. Eating responsibly can ensure that resources are not wasted.

Ethical Eating

Choosing diet options, based on the ethical implications of the production of foods, is called Ethical Eating. Vegetarianism, veganism and conscious meat-eating are some examples of Ethical Eating. Production of plant-based food does not use much of the planet's resources and it has also been seen that compared to meat-based diets, vegetarian diets have very little harmful Green House Gas emissions. Besides, eliminating fishes and other seafood variants from human diets can have a positive effect on the replenishing marine stocks (GreenWorld, 2016). Even health wise, a higher proportion of plant protein is good for the human heart because of low saturated fat and high saturated fibre (GreenWorld, 2016).

Vegans do not even consume dairy and egg products and abstain from all sorts of animal products in their diets. Veganism is often referred to as an ethical eating option because people who follow this diet are more considerate towards animal welfare and sustainability of the planet's resources.

Even conscious meat eaters can contribute to Ethical Eating because rearing different livestock, using the land judiciously, and finally consuming the same produce is an efficient way of ensuring environmental benefit (GreenWorld, 2016). Eating meat in moderation also has health benefits for people because the protein intake is higher than a vegetarian or vegan diet.

But it has to be ensured that people follow diets that can be sustainably produced, so that there is no overexploitation of the planet's resources and enough is saved for future generations as well. Ethical Eating also ensures that cruelty on other life forms is reduced and people look for alternate options of healthy diets. Sustainable Food and Ethical Eating are closely related as concepts.

Literature Review

According to Ilbery and Maye (2007), food labelling has promoted Sustainable Food Digital marketing in the European countries. Such labelling schemes also need economic incentives and institutional support to serve the purpose of promoting sustainability. Social media has far-reaching implications on children's food habits and tend to consume more unhealthy snacks (Coates et al., 2019). Thus, it is the onus of brands to ensure that social media tools are used responsibly and not in a detrimental manner, which can impact eating habits negatively. It has been seen that "while high-status consumers can be foodies or ethical consumers, the highest status consumers prioritize ethical *and* foodie preferences" (Kennedy, Baumann, and Johnston, 2019). Thus, it can be predicted that high-status consumers are more prone to spend money on Sustainable Food because they can pay premium prices. As per Tempels, Blok, and Verweij (2020), the food industry needs to act in a responsible manner, in order to

reevaluate and refrain from promoting unhealthy food to people. There should be an ethical approach in food digital marketing and people's health should be the first priority, rather than profitability.

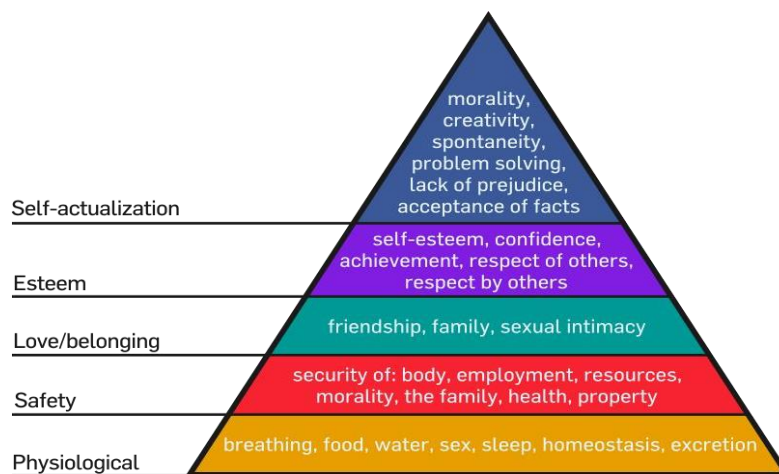
Reasons for lack of previous work on the study

Ethical Eating is a relatively new concept in India, and not many empirical studies have been conducted on this topic because the general population is not aware of how to eat sustainably. While there are several people in India who are vegetarians, they follow this diet out of religious and cultural beliefs. Meat eaters in India do not still understand the production of sustainable protein and thus, they do not understand how to eat ethically by opting for sustainably produced meat. Besides, sustainable production comes at a higher price and India is still a developing country. It is perhaps, not possible to allocate separate funds for sustainable production of crops and meat, when the population of the country is so high, and funds are not adequate. Thus, this area of study needs more time in India, before several empirical researches are conducted.

Application of Theories

Application of Maslow's Hierarchy Pyramid

Since Sustainable Food and Ethical Eating are relatively new areas of study in India, it is important to correlate these concepts with an established theory in Marketing. Maslow's Theory of Needs will be used to understand how Ethical Eating can be promoted through a hierarchy of needs in human minds. According to Maslow's Theory, there are 5 stages of progressive needs, that range from physiological to self-actualization, with safety, psychological and esteem needs in between.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

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The correlation between Ethical Eating and Maslow's Theory can be elaborated as:

- a) **Physiological level-** Since food is the most important necessity for living beings, marketers can show how proper eating can have positive impacts on people as well as the planet (Medhora, 2017). In fact, Ethical Eating is about consuming those food items that are healthy for human bodies as well as the betterment of the environment. Marketers have to make consumers understand that eating properly can make them healthy and thus, promote Sustainable Food as the best option for good health and longer lives.
- b) **Safety level-** Security of the body is essential and people have become more health-conscious with time. Digital marketing campaigns can be designed to depict how unhealthy food can jeopardize people's safety in the long run. A campaign can be used to compare the pros and cons of Ethical Eating and Irresponsible Eating. Consumers will be automatically attracted towards the healthier option, because they worry about their health safety.
- c) **Social level-** Consumers would want to belong to a group, which is deemed as responsible and justified. Digital marketing campaigns can help people recognize the importance of belonging to a socially responsible group, which promotes healthy eating. Consumers can be educated about the importance of Ethical Eating, through focus groups, activity groups, etc. When a group of people can be brought together, they are more likely to develop a sense of belonging and identify with the cause. When several people support an idea, others are more likely to conform to the same idea too (Medhora, 2017).
- d) **Esteem Needs-** Digital marketing campaigns can be designed to impact the psychology of people in a manner, that they feel Ethical Eating

earns them more respect from other people and it is an achievement to switch to a healthier diet, from the conventional one. If people can relate their social esteem with Ethical Eating, they are more likely to adopt to it.

- e) **Self-Actualization Needs-** The final acceptance of the need theory is Self-Actualization and if marketers can show consumers how Ethical Eating is related to a moral and ethical way of existence, they are more likely to adapt to it. A digital marketing campaign can be designed to show how Sustainable Food can impact the planet in a positive manner and promote better agricultural and animal husbandry practices. People are more likely to buy Sustainable Food if they feel that their contribution is meaningful for the planet.

Maslow's Theory provides a series of need categories and different needs are classified under distinct levels. However, there can be an overlap between different levels of needs and clear lines cannot be drawn between which needs fit into which category (Burton, 2012). The main theoretical contribution of this study is depicting how Ethical Eating can be incorporated into each level of the Maslow pyramid, and how marketers can target each of these needs to impact consumers to purchase and consume Sustainable Foods.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats(SWOT) Analysis

The aforementioned analysis of a digital campaign can be identified as:

a) Strengths:

- i) **Positive Environmental Impact-** Responsible and sustainable feeding habits can benefit the environment in a

better manner, in the long run. Resources can be saved and used beneficially, if people understand the concept of Sustainable Food through Digital marketing campaigns.

- ii) **Promotion of local and natural sources of food-** Through such campaigns, people will be encouraged to eat natural and fresh sources of food. Such food habits are healthy and beneficial for people.
- iii) **Better health awareness-** Sustainable and responsible food habits can help people take care of their health better and live long as well as healthy lives.

b) Weaknesses:

- i) **Lack of norms:** There is no standard protocol regarding Sustainable Food in India. Due to lack of standardization, there is no clear mandate on which foods can be classified as sustainable.
- ii) **Lack of interest amongst consumers:** Majority of the Indian population does not understand why it is important to eat in a responsible and sustainable manner. The main focus of people is to eat 4 meals a day and consume tasty food. With such a mindset amongst people, it is difficult to convince them to understand the implications of Sustainable Food.

c) Opportunities:

- i) **Approval from Government:** A Sustainable Food campaign can tie up with governmental agencies and reach large sections of the Indian population through such a collaboration.
 - ii) **Use of innovative tools and media:** Mobile phones, social media websites, pamphlets and word-of-mouth can be used to reach more people and encourage them to try a new way of eating.
- d) **Threats:**
- i) **High costs:** Such campaigns can be expensive and have high costs of implementation. Unless such ventures are profitable, organizations will not venture towards sustainability practices.
 - ii) **Competition from well-established brands:** There are many popular food brands, which are liked by Indian consumers. It will be difficult to convince people to try Sustainable Food, when they are already inclined towards these brands. Competition can be a threat to any new brand because people are already used to established brands (Jackson, 2019).

Decoy Effect

This psychological theory states that consumers are more likely to choose an option, when it is placed in comparison with an inferior choice. It is a digital marketing strategy to place the three options side by side, and consumers are more prone to choose the best one, even at the cost of paying a price premium (Mortimer, 2019). To promote Sustainable Food, newspapers

and television ads can be used wisely. Three pictures can be shown, one highlighting the benefits of Ethical Eating, the second showing the benefits of normal eating and the other depicting the ill consequences associated with bad eating habits. The first picture can showcase the good environmental impacts, animal welfare and health benefits associated with sustainable beef (priced at \$32). The second one can show how regular beef (priced at \$20) is good but not as beneficial as the sustainable beef. The last one can depict environmental degradation, cruelty on animals and poor health associated with unsustainably produced beef (priced at \$14). Consumers will understand the importance of Sustainable Food when they compare the benefits with irresponsible eating habits. Even if Sustainable Food comes at a higher price, consumers will be more likely to buy and eat it.

Information Gap Theory

A marketing campaign should consist of 4 U's, where each U stands for Urgent, Unique, Useful and Ultra-specific (Golman and Loewenstein, 2018). When TV ads or local newspaper ads follow these 4 principles, it is easier to capture audience attention and transmit the message effectively in their minds. A campaign for Sustainable Food marketing can highlight the immediacy of adopting to Ethical Eating in an innovative and engaging manner. The benefits of Ethical Eating can be highlighted in a brief and succinct manner in the advertisements. For example, the TV advertisement can show how Sustainable Beef is a good alternative to regular beef because it has better health benefits, produced without cruelty to animals. A to-the-point campaign can depict sustainable animal farming with just one caption "Eat Ethically" to drive the message in the minds of consumers. A brief campaign can be more

effective, and consumers can be motivated to switch to Sustainable Food, once they get more information on the same.

Network Theory

Network theory studies connections and relationships between fellow humans. Social network analysis is a very useful tool that delves into finding patterns within social networks and their subsequent impact on human behaviour (Morrison, 2015). Digital Marketing can help capture, measure and analyse customer opinion through social media websites and campaigns can be reworked accordingly. For increasing awareness about Sustainable Food, surveys and questionnaires can be circulated on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Based on their responses, campaigns can be redesigned and circulated back to increase awareness about Ethical Eating. Communication amongst people can increase the consumer segment for Sustainable Food. Positive feedback on such marketing campaigns can lead to more people adopting Ethical Eating habits. It is essential that campaigns are circulated on all social platforms and different users can refer these campaigns to other users, in turn (Morrison, 2015). Thus, campaigns need to be created to elicit positive responses from consumers, so that further communication is also positive and beneficial.

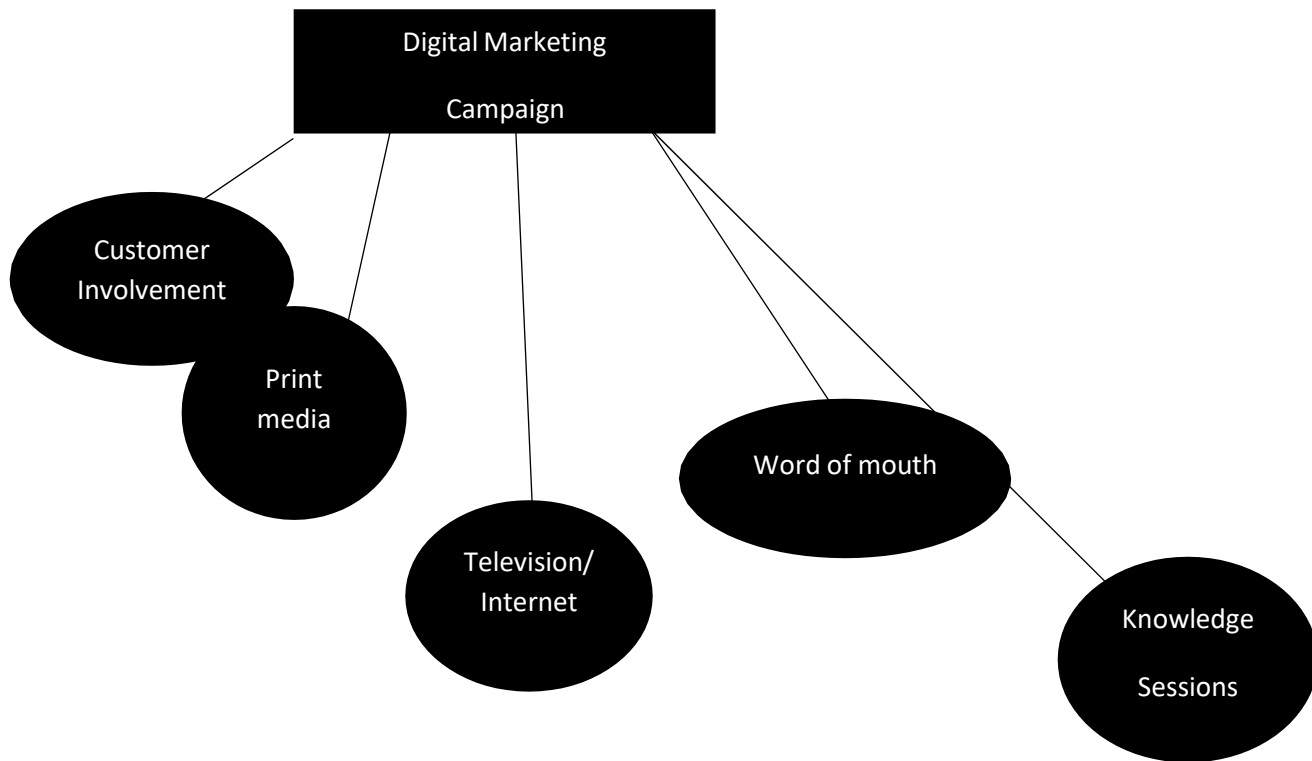
Collective Intelligence

This theory states that the subgroups can solve a problem more productively than the main group. One task can be divided into several smaller tasks. These tasks are

distributed to different individuals, with different skill sets, for total completion in the best possible manner. On social media websites like Facebook, Twitter, etc., entire campaigns can be subdivided into smaller subparts and different consumer segments can be targeted accordingly. For example, for the X-generation, pamphlets and newspaper advertisements are more relevant. This customer segment can be encouraged to practice Ethical Eating through home deliveries of local and fresh produce, providing them with healthy recipes, etc. For the millennials, the campaigns can include Twitter hashtags, Facebook pages, Instagram photography, etc. to increase awareness on Sustainable Food. Different consumer segments have different marketing needs, and thus, the total campaign can be broken down into subparts for these consumer segments. The success of the total campaign can be measured through the sum of consumer reactions of these separate consumer segments. Marketers can come together, to design innovative campaigns for different consumer segments. When different marketers come together, their collective intelligence can propagate the message of Sustainable Food better.

Suggested Conceptual Framework

Based on the discussions above, a campaign will be designed keeping the various independent variables, as discussed above, into account. A conceptual framework can be designed to determine which factors are important for an effective digital marketing campaign.



The Sustainable Food Digital marketing Campaign can be designed through:

- a) **Customer Involvement:** Consumers will be asked to participate in designing the campaign and interact with the officials of the food brands. If consumers themselves highlight what appeals to them in Sustainable Food, their contributions can help in designing an effective and far-reaching campaign.
- b) **Print Media:** Based on the responses from the survey, colourful and informative print media advertisements can help in the campaign. Eye-catching phrases and factual data can be presented in these advertisements, so that readers are immediately attracted towards the idea of Sustainable Food. The main data pointers will be highlighted in bold, to catch the attention of readers immediately.
- c) **Television/Internet:** Similar campaigns can be designed for TV and Internet. Top celebrities can be appointed for promoting Sustainable Food and trendy hashtags like **#Eat Well, #Responsible Eating, #Good Food**, etc. can be used for retweets and shares across social media. Even common people can be asked to respond to what is their opinion on Sustainable Food and these clips can be used for advertisements only.
- d) **Word of Mouth:** Positive feedback can be circulated as a chain reaction amongst consumers. The more good feedback is associated with a brand, the more likely people are to

associate themselves with it. Sustainable Food can be propagated further if the positive word of mouth is transmitted in the campaigns.

- e) **Knowledge Sessions:** Sustainable Food, as a concept, will be discussed on open podiums and mass platforms. Such interactive sessions will help people become more aware and eager to involve themselves in such socially-responsible campaigns. Such knowledge sessions will be organized all across India, in order to bring about a social change in people.
- f) **Sustainable Food Trips:** A Sustainability Food Mart session can be conducted online, where the host speaks about how food is produced locally and ethically. When consumers virtually visit a sustainable farm, where food is sourced ethically, they are more likely to realize the significance of eating ethically.

Potential Recommendations for a successful Digital Marketing Campaign

- I. Integrating the concept of “SUSTAINABILITY” and “ETHICS in the digital branding-** Globally, consumers have become much more aware about the importance of sustainability and green digital marketing. Brands can build strong consumer loyalty through adherence to environmentally-sustainable standards. More people will be encouraged to opt for those food brands, which focus on sustainability. The message should be firmly implanted in the brand offerings.
- II. Using marketing channels judiciously-** With the advent of social media, it has become easier to

promote products at cheaper costs to large groups of people. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can help in promoting the theme of “green” through pictures, logos and press statements. The Government of India can provide support to food producers by proper allocation of funds, that can be further used for extensive digital marketing. Even farmers can promote how they produce products and sell them to consumers directly. Digital marketing through newspapers and television channels can help more people understand the significance of eating in a sustainable manner.

- III. Communicating a clear message-** Brands should be clear about the message that they want to present about Sustainable Food. Consumers have to understand how Ethical Eating is necessary for their own benefit as well as that of the society. The main onus of companies should not be just on earning profits, but rather on ensuring that the brand comes across as an environmentally responsible one.
- IV. Creating focus groups-** Consumers can be invited to discuss and present their views on Ethical Eating. Such discussions can educate people more and feedback from focus groups can help companies incorporate changes that can benefit everyone. Apart from discussions, consumers can be taken on visits to the food production units, asked to participate in the production process themselves and given knowledge pamphlets to read.
- V. Creating transparency in operations-** Food brands should be accountable to its shareholders through honest reports of operations. The motto of brands should be on

taking care of quality in their operations and being clear to stakeholders about how sustainable practices are parts of the organization goals.

- VI. Using fresh ingredients as an integral part of promotion-** Brands should focus on local produce and collaborate with farmers, fishing men, etc. to help them earn livelihoods as well. Such collaborations can ensure that companies use fresh products and also build a good image in the minds of consumers.
- VII. Building a clear brand archetype-** To reach a wider number of consumers, the digital campaign should focus on having a specific brand archetype, which people can relate to. In this case, “the sage” archetype can be used because it will help people feel assured and safe (Dodani, 2019) about adopting ethical eating. The sage brand archetype depicts knowledge and guidance. Consumers can feel more confident of trying a new way of eating, if the digital campaign will focus on creating a similar image for the brand.

Conclusions & Limitations

The study is still in the initial stage, but it can be still said that the existing literature on the subject is limited. Original research needs to be conducted to delve deeper into the topic. Besides, more clarity on the term Sustainable Food is necessary for further research on the topic. In India, sustainability is still at a nascent stage. Besides, people do not associate food and eating habits with sustainability. In India, Ethical Eating is still a novel idea and the country is grappling with issues like grain wastages, poor fodder and lack of awareness. The study on Ethical Eating in India has been very limited in the past and thus, there are still uncertainties regarding how to proceed with digital marketing campaigns. Food digital marketing is a relatively new area and more work needs to be done to combine this area with sustainability. Currently, the study is still at an initial stage only. While the application of digital marketing has been highlighted in this paper, with the usage of marketing theories, no empirical research has been conducted in this paper. Further work can be conducted in this area through statistical study on the subject.

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