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COMPARATIVE CONSUMER PERCEPTION OF HANDICRAFT PRODUCTS FROM MSMEs IN WESTERN UTTARAKHAND AND ROHILKHAND REGION: IMPACT OF DIGITAL SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING STRATEGIES

Rohit Kumar

ABSTRACT

India's handicraft sector represents a major component of the rural and cultural economy and contributes significantly to employment generation through Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). In regions such as Western Uttarakhand and Rohilkhand, handicraft production reflects regional heritage, local craftsmanship, and socio-economic identity. With increasing digitalization and rising environmental consciousness among consumers, MSMEs are adopting digital sustainability marketing strategies to enhance market visibility and influence consumer behavior. This literature review critically examines previous studies related to consumer perception, sustainable consumption, green marketing, digital promotion, and handicraft MSMEs. The review comparatively evaluates regional characteristics influencing consumer attitudes in Western Uttarakhand and Rohilkhand. Existing literature suggests that digital tools such as social media marketing, e-commerce platforms, eco-branding, online storytelling, and influencer engagement positively affect consumer trust and purchase intention toward sustainable handicraft products. However, very limited research has comparatively analyzed consumer perception in these two regions within the context of digital sustainability marketing. The review identifies important theoretical and empirical gaps and proposes future research directions for doctoral-level investigation.

KEYWORDS: Handicrafts, MSMEs, Consumer Perception, Sustainable Marketing, Digital Marketing, Green Consumer Behavior, Western Uttarakhand, Rohilkhand

1. INTRODUCTION

The handicraft industry in India is deeply associated with the country's cultural diversity, traditional knowledge systems, and rural economy. Handicrafts produced by MSMEs not only preserve indigenous art forms but also generate livelihood opportunities for artisans and small entrepreneurs. Regions such as Western Uttarakhand and Rohilkhand possess rich handicraft traditions based on local resources, cultural practices, and community-based production systems.

Western Uttarakhand is widely known for woolen crafts, wooden artifacts, handloom products, bamboo items, and eco-friendly handmade goods. In contrast, the Rohilkhand region has

developed a strong reputation for zardozi work, embroidery, cane products, decorative handicrafts, and textile-based artisan industries. Although both regions contribute significantly to the handicraft economy, differences in geography, culture, urbanization, digital access, and consumer awareness influence market dynamics and purchasing behavior.

In recent years, consumer preferences have shifted toward environmentally sustainable and ethically produced goods. Digital technologies have accelerated this transformation by enabling businesses to communicate sustainability values more effectively. MSMEs increasingly use social media platforms, e-commerce channels, digital storytelling, eco-labeling, and

online branding to attract environmentally conscious consumers.

Digital sustainability marketing has emerged as a strategic approach that combines sustainability communication with digital engagement tools. This strategy is particularly important for handicraft MSMEs because consumers often evaluate handmade products based on authenticity, emotional attachment, ecological value, and cultural significance.

Despite the growing importance of sustainable digital marketing, existing studies mainly focus on general green products or urban retail sectors. Comparative research examining consumer perception toward handicraft products in Western Uttarakhand and Rohilkhand remains limited. Therefore, a detailed literature review is essential to identify conceptual foundations, research trends, and gaps for future empirical study.

2. CONCEPT OF CONSUMER PERCEPTION IN HANDICRAFT MARKETS

Consumer perception refers to the process through which consumers interpret and evaluate product-related information. In the handicraft sector, perception is influenced not only by product quality and price but also by cultural identity, artisan value, uniqueness, sustainability, and emotional connection. Previous studies indicate that consumers generally perceive handmade products as:

- More authentic,
- More culturally valuable,
- Environmentally sustainable,
- Socially responsible,
- Emotionally meaningful.

Consumers increasingly associate handicrafts with ethical consumption and support for local communities. Sustainable handicraft products often attract buyers who value eco-conscious lifestyles and responsible purchasing behavior.

Researchers have also found that perception toward handicraft products differs according to:

- Education level,
- Income,
- Age,
- Environmental awareness,

- Urban or rural background,
- Digital exposure.

In many cases, younger consumers are more influenced by online marketing and sustainability messaging, whereas older consumers emphasize traditional value and durability.

3. MSMEs AND THE INDIAN HANDICRAFT SECTOR

MSMEs form the backbone of the Indian handicraft industry. They provide employment to artisans, preserve regional traditions, and contribute to exports and rural development. Handicraft MSMEs often operate with limited financial resources, low technological capability, and restricted market access. Several challenges faced by handicraft MSMEs include:

- Lack of digital literacy,
- Poor branding strategies,
- Weak supply chain systems,
- Limited online visibility,
- Competition from machine-made products,
- Inadequate government support.

However, digital transformation has created new opportunities for MSMEs to expand beyond local markets. Online platforms now allow artisans and small producers to market products directly to consumers without depending entirely on intermediaries.

Studies suggest that digital integration improves:

- Customer engagement,
- Brand recognition,
- Consumer trust,
- Market accessibility,
- Sales performance.

The increasing role of sustainability in consumer decision-making has further encouraged MSMEs to adopt environmentally responsible branding and communication practices.

4. SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND GREEN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Sustainable consumption refers to purchasing behavior that minimizes environmental damage and promotes social responsibility. Green consumers

prefer products that are:

- Eco-friendly,
- Ethically produced,
- Recyclable,
- Handmade,
- Locally sourced.

Research in consumer behavior demonstrates that environmental concern strongly influences purchasing decisions. Consumers who possess higher ecological awareness are more likely to support businesses promoting sustainability.

Important determinants of green purchasing behavior include:

- Environmental knowledge,
- Social influence,
- Product credibility,
- Trust in sustainability claims,
- Perceived quality,
- Lifestyle orientation.

However, many researchers identify an “attitude-behavior gap,” where consumers express positive attitudes toward sustainable products but may not consistently purchase them due to price sensitivity, convenience issues, or lack of information.

In the handicraft industry, sustainable consumption is closely linked with:

- Preservation of traditional craftsmanship,
- Rural empowerment,
- Ethical production,
- Reduced industrial pollution,
- Cultural sustainability.

Consumers often perceive handmade handicrafts as alternatives to mass-produced industrial goods.

5. DIGITAL SUSTAINABILITY MARKETING STRATEGIES

Digital sustainability marketing refers to the use of online communication tools to promote environmentally and socially responsible products. This concept combines digital marketing techniques with sustainability-oriented branding strategies. The literature identifies several major digital sustainability marketing tools used by handicraft MSMEs.

5.1 Social Media Marketing

Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Pinterest have become important channels for handicraft promotion. MSMEs use these platforms to:

- Showcase handmade processes,
- Share artisan stories,
- Display eco-friendly production methods,
- Build customer interaction,
- Create emotional engagement.

Visual storytelling through social media significantly affects consumer trust and product attractiveness. Consumers tend to prefer brands that communicate authenticity and transparency. Social media also enables small handicraft businesses to compete with larger brands at relatively low promotional cost.

5.2 E-Commerce Platforms

E-commerce has transformed the traditional handicraft market by removing geographical barriers. Online platforms provide MSMEs with access to national and international consumers. Digital marketplaces improve product visibility, price comparison, consumer convenience, and direct customer communication.

Studies reveal that online purchasing behavior is influenced by:

- Product reviews,
- Website trustworthiness,
- Secure payment systems,
- Product presentation quality,
- Delivery reliability.

For handicraft products, detailed visual representation and storytelling are especially important because consumers cannot physically inspect products before purchase.

5.3 Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is increasingly used to connect consumers emotionally with handicraft products. Stories related to artisans, heritage, sustainability practices, and community impact improve product authenticity and customer attachment. Consumers often develop stronger purchase intention when they perceive a product as carrying cultural meaning or social value. Storytelling also enhances brand

identity, consumer loyalty, emotional branding, and memorability.

5.4 Eco-Branding and Eco-Labeling

Eco-branding involves positioning products as environmentally responsible and ethically produced. Eco-labels and sustainability certifications increase consumer confidence regarding product authenticity and environmental claims. Studies indicate that consumers are more likely to trust products when businesses provide transparent information about raw materials, production methods, waste reduction, ethical sourcing, and artisan welfare. Eco-labeling also positively affects premium pricing acceptance among environmentally conscious consumers.

5.5 Influencer and Content Marketing

Influencer marketing has become a significant digital strategy for sustainable products. Consumers often trust recommendations from influencers who promote eco-friendly lifestyles and traditional products. Influencer-based promotion helps MSMEs reach younger audiences, increase online engagement, improve credibility, and enhance purchase intention. Content marketing through blogs, reels, videos, and sustainability campaigns also strengthens brand awareness.

6. COMPARATIVE REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

6.1 Western Uttarakhand

Western Uttarakhand possesses strong ecological and cultural identity. Consumer behavior in this region is influenced by environmental sensitivity, eco-tourism exposure, traditional lifestyle values, and natural resource dependence. Consumers in hill regions often demonstrate greater preference for environmentally sustainable products. Handicraft products made from bamboo, wool, wood, and natural fibers are perceived as eco-friendly and culturally authentic.

However, MSMEs in Uttarakhand face several operational challenges: limited digital infrastructure, poor transportation networks, market isolation, and lack of technological training. Despite these constraints, increasing tourism and internet penetration are creating opportunities for sustainable digital branding.

6.2 Rohilkhand Region

The Rohilkhand region of Uttar Pradesh has relatively higher urban connectivity and commercial exposure. Consumer perception in this region is shaped by price sensitivity, urban retail culture, fashion trends, and increasing environmental awareness. Consumers in Rohilkhand are gradually becoming more responsive to sustainable products, especially among educated and middle-income groups. However, purchasing decisions are often strongly influenced by affordability and product utility. The region has better digital accessibility compared to hill regions, which may positively affect online marketing effectiveness.

7. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Several theories provide conceptual support for research on consumer perception and sustainable marketing.

7.1 Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior explains consumer intention through three factors: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. The theory is widely applied in studies related to green purchasing and sustainable consumption.

$$\text{Behavioral Intention} = f(\text{Attitude} + \text{Subjective Norms} + \text{Perceived Behavioral Control})$$

7.2 Value-Belief-Norm Theory

This theory suggests that personal environmental values and moral responsibility influence sustainable behavior. Consumers who possess strong ecological beliefs are more likely to support environmentally responsible products.

7.3 Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory explains how cultural identity and symbolic meanings shape consumer choices. This framework is highly relevant for handicraft research because handicrafts often carry emotional and cultural significance.

8. RESEARCH GAPS

The review identifies several important research gaps:

Area	Research Gap
Regional comparison	Limited comparative studies between Western Uttarakhand and Rohilkhand
Handicraft-specific sustainability research	Most studies focus on general green products
Digital sustainability marketing	Lack of integrated frameworks combining sustainability and digital promotion
MSME-focused consumer studies	Limited empirical studies on handicraft MSMEs
Emotional and cultural perception	Insufficient analysis of symbolic and emotional value
Rural-urban consumer variation	Limited demographic comparison studies
Sustainability communication effectiveness	Lack of region-specific evidence

9. PROPOSED RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Based on the literature, the following variables are relevant for future empirical research.

Independent Variables: Social media marketing, eco-branding, digital storytelling, influencer marketing, e-commerce accessibility, sustainability awareness.

Mediating Variables: Consumer trust, perceived authenticity, environmental concern.

Dependent Variables: Consumer perception, purchase intention, customer loyalty.

Moderating Variables: Region, age, education, income, digital literacy.

Conceptual relationship:

Consumer Perception = f(Digital Sustainability Marketing + Environmental Awareness + Authenticity + Consumer Trust)

10. CONCLUSION

The literature reveals that sustainability and digitalization are reshaping consumer behavior in the handicraft sector. Consumers increasingly prefer products that combine cultural authenticity with environmental responsibility. Digital sustainability marketing strategies such as social media

engagement, online storytelling, eco-branding, and e-commerce integration significantly influence consumer perception and purchase intention.

Western Uttarakhand and Rohilkhand represent two culturally rich but structurally different handicraft regions. Consumers in Western Uttarakhand appear more environmentally oriented due to ecological exposure and tourism influence, whereas consumers in Rohilkhand demonstrate stronger market-driven and utility-based purchasing behavior.

Although existing studies discuss sustainable consumption and digital marketing separately, comparative research specifically examining handicraft MSMEs across these two regions remains scarce. Therefore, future doctoral research can contribute significantly by developing a comparative analytical framework explaining how digital sustainability marketing strategies shape consumer perception in regional handicraft markets.

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