Ethical Marketing Strategies for ESG Adoption among Property Developers: Bridging Tradition and Technology

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Abstract

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) has become increasingly important in the real estate sector because property development affects natural resources, communities, employees, consumers and the wider economy. However, ESG adoption is not only a matter of regulations, reporting and environmental certifications. The way property developers communicate their sustainability practices to customers and other stakeholders is equally important. Marketing communication that exaggerates environmental benefits or presents unsupported sustainability claims can create distrust and contribute to greenwashing. This conceptual paper explores how ethical marketing strategies can support ESG adoption among property developers. The paper connects contemporary ESG practices with selected principles of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), particularly Dharma, Satya, Ahimsa, Seva and Nishkama Karma. These principles provide an ethical foundation based on responsibility, truthfulness, non-harm, service and long-term orientation. The paper also draws on Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy Theory and Virtue Ethics to explain the relationship between ethical marketing and ESG adoption. Existing literature indicates that ethical communication, transparency, stakeholder orientation and credible sustainability claims can strengthen trust and support sustainable business practices. The paper proposes a conceptual framework in which IKS-based ethical values influence ethical marketing strategies, which in turn encourage authentic ESG orientation and responsible property development. The paper argues that technology and AI should be used to improve transparency and stakeholder communication rather than merely promote sustainability claims. The study contributes a conceptual perspective for integrating traditional ethical values with contemporary marketing and ESG practices in the Indian property sector.

Keywords: Ethical Marketing, ESG, Property Developers, Indian Knowledge Systems, Sustainability, Green Marketing, AI, Real Estate

1. Introduction

The real estate and property development sector is an important contributor to economic growth, employment generation, infrastructure development and urbanisation. At the same time, property development has considerable environmental and social consequences. Construction activities require large quantities of land, water, energy and raw materials and generate construction waste and emissions. Property projects can also influence local communities, employment, health and safety, accessibility, public infrastructure and quality of life. Therefore, responsible property development requires attention to environmental and social considerations in addition to financial performance. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) has emerged as an important approach for addressing these broader responsibilities. The environmental dimension of ESG covers areas such as energy consumption, carbon emissions, water management, waste reduction, resource efficiency and ecological impact. The social dimension includes employee welfare, occupational health and safety, customer interests, community development and inclusion. Governance relates to transparency, accountability, ethical conduct, compliance and responsible decision-making. In India, ESG has become increasingly relevant because of regulatory developments, investor expectations and growing public awareness of sustainability. The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) introduced the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report (BRSR) framework for listed entities, providing a structured approach to sustainability-related disclosures. Such developments demonstrate a shift from general corporate responsibility statements towards more systematic and measurable sustainability reporting. However, ESG adoption is not limited to reporting. A company may publish sustainability information without fully integrating ESG principles into its operational decisions. Similarly, property developers may use sustainability-related terms in promotional campaigns without providing sufficient evidence to support those claims. This creates an important relationship between ESG adoption and marketing communication. Marketing communication plays a particularly important role in the property sector because property purchases are high-value and long-term decisions. Homebuyers and other customers may depend heavily on information provided by developers when evaluating properties. Sustainability claims concerning energy efficiency, water conservation, renewable energy, green spaces, waste management and environmental

certifications can influence perceptions of a project. The problem arises when sustainability communication becomes more promotional than informative. Claims such as "eco-friendly", "green", "sustainable" or "environmentally responsible" may create positive perceptions, but such terms can be difficult for consumers to interpret when they are not supported by measurable information. Exaggerated or unsupported environmental claims can contribute to greenwashing and reduce stakeholder trust. Ethical marketing provides an alternative approach. Rather than treating sustainability as a promotional message, ethical marketing emphasises truthful, transparent and responsible communication. It requires organisations to ensure that sustainability claims reflect actual practices and that important information is communicated clearly to stakeholders.

In the Indian context, selected principles of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer an additional ethical perspective. Concepts such as Dharma, Satya, Ahimsa, Seva and Nishkama Karma can be related to responsibility, truthfulness, non-harm, service and long-term orientation. These principles can provide a value-based foundation for understanding why organisations should communicate sustainability responsibly. At the same time, technology and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are transforming marketing communication. Digital platforms can make sustainability information more accessible, while AI and data analytics can assist organisations in collecting, analysing and communicating ESG information. However, technology can also increase the speed and scale of misleading communication if it is used without adequate verification. Therefore, the integration of IKS-based ethical principles with contemporary ESG practices and technology presents an important area for conceptual examination. This paper explores how ethical marketing strategies can support ESG adoption among property developers while maintaining transparency, stakeholder orientation and credibility.

2. Statement of the Problem

The increasing importance of ESG has resulted in growing sustainability communication by property developers. Developers increasingly highlight green buildings, energy-efficient systems, solar power, rainwater harvesting, waste management, green landscaping and other sustainability-related features in marketing communication.

However, the increasing use of sustainability claims creates a potential communication problem. Sustainability statements may be vague, exaggerated or unsupported by adequate evidence. Consumers may not have the technical expertise required to verify claims regarding energy savings, water conservation, carbon reduction or environmental performance.

This problem is particularly significant in the property sector because purchasing property involves substantial financial investment and long-term consequences. If sustainability claims are misleading or incomplete, stakeholders may form inaccurate perceptions about the environmental and social performance of a project.

Greenwashing can therefore weaken trust between property developers and stakeholders. It can also undermine genuine sustainability efforts because stakeholders may become sceptical about sustainability claims generally. Another issue is that ESG is sometimes treated primarily as a reporting or compliance requirement rather than as an organisational value. If ESG becomes disconnected from organisational behaviour, marketing communication may emphasise sustainability without corresponding changes in business practices.

Indian Knowledge Systems provide a potentially useful ethical foundation for addressing this issue. Principles such as Dharma, Satya, Ahimsa, Seva and Nishkama Karma emphasise responsibility, truthfulness, non-harm, service and long-term orientation. However, there is limited conceptual discussion connecting these principles specifically with ethical marketing and ESG adoption in the Indian property development sector.

The problem addressed by this paper is therefore the need to understand how ethical marketing strategies can connect IKS-based ethical values, contemporary ESG practices and technology in order to encourage more authentic ESG orientation among property developers.

3. Objective of the Study

The study has one objective:

To explore how ethical marketing strategies can support ESG adoption among property developers by integrating selected Indian Knowledge Systems principles with contemporary marketing and technology practices.

4. Review of Literature

4.1 Review I: ESG, Ethical Marketing and Sustainable Property Development

The concept of sustainable marketing has developed beyond the traditional objective of promoting products and increasing sales. Sustainable marketing considers the environmental and social consequences of organisational activities and emphasises long-term relationships with consumers and society.

This perspective is particularly relevant to the property sector because buildings have long operational lifetimes. Environmental decisions made during planning, construction and operation can influence resource consumption and environmental impacts for many years.

ESG has further strengthened the importance of measurable environmental, social and governance performance. In India, the BRSR framework introduced by SEBI has provided listed companies with a structured approach for communicating sustainability-related information. The development of BRSR Core has further increased attention towards selected measurable ESG indicators.

However, sustainability reporting and sustainability marketing are not identical. Reporting generally focuses on structured disclosure, whereas marketing communication often aims to influence consumer perceptions and decisions. This difference creates the possibility that marketing may simplify sustainability information to the point where important context is lost.

Ethical marketing can address this challenge by ensuring that communication is accurate, transparent and supported by evidence. Instead of making broad claims, property developers can provide specific information about energy efficiency, water management, waste reduction and relevant certifications.

The literature on green marketing also identifies greenwashing as an important concern. When companies exaggerate environmental benefits or use ambiguous sustainability language, consumers may find it difficult to distinguish genuine environmental performance from promotional claims.

Stakeholder orientation is therefore important. Property developers communicate not only with buyers but also with investors, employees, suppliers, regulators, communities and other stakeholders. Ethical communication should recognise the legitimate information requirements of these different groups.

The literature consequently suggests that marketing can support ESG when it is integrated with actual sustainability practices. Ethical marketing can encourage greater consistency between what organisations do and what they communicate.

4.2 Review II: Indian Knowledge Systems and Ethical Business Practices

Indian Knowledge Systems represent a broad and diverse body of knowledge, philosophy, ethics and cultural traditions. The present study focuses on selected principles that can provide an ethical perspective for contemporary marketing and sustainability.

Dharma can be broadly understood in relation to duty, responsibility and appropriate conduct. In property development, Dharma can encourage developers to recognise responsibilities towards customers, employees, communities and the environment.

Satya refers to truthfulness. Its connection with ethical marketing is particularly strong because marketing communication should represent products and services accurately. Sustainability claims should therefore be based on reliable information rather than exaggeration.

Ahimsa is generally associated with non-harm. In the context of property development, it can provide an ethical orientation towards reducing avoidable environmental and social harm. Seva refers to service. It can encourage developers to consider the welfare and legitimate needs of stakeholders rather than viewing customers and communities only as commercial targets.

Nishkama Karma is associated with action without excessive attachment to the fruits of action. In an organisational context, it can support a long-term orientation where responsible behaviour is not undertaken only for immediate promotional benefits.

These principles have relevance to contemporary discussions of responsible business and sustainability. They provide a normative dimension that complements the measurement-oriented nature of ESG.

ESG frameworks can identify what an organisation should measure, disclose and manage, whereas ethical principles can contribute to the question of how an organisation should behave while pursuing those objectives. The literature therefore provides a basis for connecting IKS principles with ethical marketing. However, their specific application to ESG-oriented marketing among property developers remains relatively underexplored. This provides the conceptual gap addressed by the present paper.

5. Theoretical Foundation

The paper uses three complementary theoretical perspectives: Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy Theory and Virtue Ethics.

5.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, particularly associated with Freeman, emphasises that organisations have responsibilities towards multiple stakeholders. For property developers, stakeholders include buyers, investors, employees, contractors, suppliers, regulators, communities and other affected groups.

From an ethical marketing perspective, this means that sustainability communication should not focus exclusively on attracting buyers. Information should also address the legitimate interests of other stakeholders.

5.2 Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy Theory suggests that organisations seek acceptance by demonstrating that their activities are consistent with broader social expectations.

Sustainability communication can help organisations demonstrate such alignment. However, if communication is inconsistent with actual performance, stakeholder confidence may decline. Ethical marketing therefore requires substantive ESG practices behind sustainability communication.

5.3 Virtue Ethics

Virtue Ethics focuses on moral character and qualities rather than only rules or outcomes. The selected IKS principles can be interpreted as ethical qualities that influence organisational behaviour.

From this perspective, ethical marketing is not simply a communication technique. It reflects the character and values of the organisation. A developer committed to truthfulness and responsibility is more likely to communicate sustainability information carefully and transparently.

6. Research Methodology

The study adopts a conceptual research methodology based on secondary sources.

Academic literature concerning ESG, ethical marketing, sustainable marketing, stakeholder management, greenwashing and Indian Knowledge Systems was reviewed and conceptually synthesised. Relevant institutional and regulatory documents concerning ESG and sustainability reporting in India were also considered.

The literature was examined thematically to identify connections between ethical values, sustainability communication, stakeholder expectations and technology.

Based on this synthesis, a conceptual framework was developed linking selected IKS principles with ethical marketing strategies and ESG orientation in property development.

The study does not collect primary data and does not use statistical analysis. Therefore, the findings represent conceptual interpretations rather than empirically tested relationships.

7. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on property developers in the Indian context. Residential, commercial and mixed-use property development are within the broad scope of the discussion. The paper specifically examines the relationship between ethical marketing and ESG adoption. It does not attempt to measure the financial performance or ESG scores of individual property developers.

The IKS discussion is limited to Dharma, Satya, Ahimsa, Seva and Nishkama Karma because these principles have direct conceptual relevance to responsibility, truthfulness, non-harm, service and long-term orientation.

The technology component focuses primarily on AI, digital platforms and data-based communication. Technology is considered as a tool for improving transparency and stakeholder communication rather than as a replacement for ethical decision-making.

8. Ethical Marketing Strategies for ESG Adoption

8.1 Truthful Sustainability Claims

The principle of Satya provides a direct foundation for truthful sustainability communication.

Property developers should avoid vague and unsupported statements such as "100% green" or "completely sustainable" unless such claims can be clearly demonstrated.

Instead, communication can provide measurable information about energy efficiency, water conservation, renewable energy, waste management or recognised sustainability certifications.

The distinction between existing performance and future commitments should also be made clear. A proposed environmental initiative should not be communicated as though it has already been implemented.

8.2 Responsibility and Dharma

Dharma can be connected with the responsibility of developers to ensure that marketing communication reflects actual organisational practices.

This requires coordination between marketing departments and technical, sustainability and governance teams. Sustainability claims should be reviewed against available project data before being communicated.

In this way, ethical marketing becomes part of organisational responsibility rather than an isolated promotional activity.

8.3 Ahimsa and Responsible Communication

Ahimsa can encourage developers to consider the environmental and social consequences of their projects.

Marketing communication can therefore explain how projects address construction waste, water use, energy consumption, worker safety and community concerns.

The purpose is not to present a project as having zero impact, which may be unrealistic, but to communicate how potential impacts are identified and managed.

8.4 Seva and Stakeholder Orientation

Seva provides a service-oriented perspective on marketing.

Property developers can treat communication as a service through which stakeholders receive useful and understandable information.

For example, digital platforms can provide information about project sustainability features, energy systems, water management, waste practices and community initiatives.

This approach shifts communication from simply persuading customers towards helping stakeholders make informed decisions.

8.5 Nishkama Karma and Long-Term Orientation

Nishkama Karma provides a conceptual basis for long-term thinking.

Property developers can communicate sustainability performance throughout the property life cycle rather than focusing only on sustainability features during the sales period.

Where reliable information is available, developers may communicate post-occupancy performance, maintenance practices and resource efficiency.

This approach can support a longer-term relationship between developers and stakeholders.

9. Role of Technology and AI

Technology provides new opportunities for improving sustainability communication.

AI can assist in analysing ESG information, identifying inconsistencies, simplifying technical information and responding to stakeholder questions.

For example, an AI-supported digital platform could explain the energy-saving features of a building in simple language and provide stakeholders with relevant project information. However, AI also creates risks. AI-generated marketing content can produce persuasive claims without adequately verifying whether the claims are supported by actual data.

Therefore, human review and data verification are essential. AI should operate within organisational governance systems and should not independently determine the truthfulness of sustainability claims.

Digital ESG dashboards can also improve transparency by allowing stakeholders to access selected environmental and social indicators.

Technology can further support traceability by maintaining digital records relating to sustainability certifications, materials, energy systems and project-level information.

The key principle is that technology should improve transparency and stakeholder communication, rather than merely increase the persuasive power of sustainability marketing.

10. Proposed Conceptual Framework

The paper proposes the following conceptual relationship:

IKS-Based Ethical Values

Dharma → Responsibility

Satya → Truthfulness

Ahimsa → Non-harm

Seva → Service

Nishkama Karma → Long-term orientation

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Ethical Marketing Strategies

Transparent communication

Evidence-based sustainability claims

Stakeholder-oriented communication

Responsible disclosure

Ethical use of AI and technology

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Authentic ESG Orientation

Environmental responsibility

Social responsibility

Governance and accountability

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Responsible Property Development

Credibility

Stakeholder trust

Long-term sustainability

Reduced greenwashing

The framework suggests that ethical values can influence marketing behaviour, while ethical marketing can strengthen alignment between ESG communication and actual organisational practices.

Technology supports the framework by improving the collection, analysis, presentation and accessibility of ESG information.

11. Findings

The conceptual analysis indicates that ethical marketing can support ESG adoption when marketing communication is aligned with actual sustainability practices. First, truthfulness is fundamental to credible ESG communication. Sustainability claims should be specific, evidence-based and understandable. This reduces the risk of misleading stakeholders. Second, IKS principles provide an ethical foundation for ESG-oriented marketing. Dharma relates to responsibility, Satya to truthfulness, Ahimsa to non-harm, Seva to service and Nishkama Karma to long-term orientation. Third, stakeholder orientation is important for ethical ESG communication. Property developers should consider the information needs of

customers, investors, employees, communities and other stakeholders rather than focusing exclusively on sales communication. Fourth, technology can strengthen transparency when appropriately governed. AI and digital platforms can improve access to ESG information, but human oversight is necessary to prevent inaccurate or unsupported claims. Finally, ethical marketing can encourage stronger internal ESG alignment. When organisations are expected to support their sustainability claims with evidence, they may need better systems for collecting, measuring and monitoring ESG information.

12. Challenges

The first major challenge is greenwashing. Commercial pressure may encourage organisations to emphasise positive environmental features while providing limited information about challenges or negative impacts.

A second challenge is the availability and quality of ESG data. Property developers may not always have adequate systems for measuring environmental and social performance.

A third challenge is the cost of implementation. Developing reliable ESG measurement systems, digital platforms and third-party verification processes can require financial and technical resources.

A fourth challenge relates to AI. AI can make communication faster and more attractive, but inaccurate source data can result in misleading outputs.

Another challenge is the possibility of using IKS principles symbolically. If Dharma, Satya, Ahimsa, Seva or Nishkama Karma are used only as branding terms without influencing organisational behaviour, their ethical significance may be weakened.

Finally, there may be tension between short-term commercial objectives and long-term sustainability. Ethical marketing requires organisational commitment beyond immediate sales targets.

13. Limitations of the Study

The study is conceptual and does not include primary data from property developers, consumers or other stakeholders. Therefore, the proposed relationships have not been empirically tested.

The study also focuses on five selected IKS principles and does not attempt to represent the entire diversity of Indian Knowledge Systems.

The interpretation of IKS concepts is contextual and may vary across philosophical and cultural traditions.

The paper focuses on the Indian property sector, and the proposed framework may require modification for other countries or industries.

Finally, technology and AI are developing rapidly. Changes in technology, regulation and ESG reporting may require further refinement of the proposed framework.

14. Conclusion

ESG adoption in the property development sector involves more than regulatory compliance, reporting and environmental certification. The way developers communicate their sustainability practices to customers and other stakeholders is also an important part of responsible ESG practice.

This conceptual paper explored how ethical marketing strategies can support ESG adoption among property developers by connecting contemporary ESG practices with selected principles of Indian Knowledge Systems and modern technology.

Dharma provides a perspective of responsibility, Satya emphasises truthfulness, Ahimsa focuses on non-harm, Seva encourages service and Nishkama Karma provides a long-term orientation. These principles can provide an ethical foundation for marketing communication that is transparent, responsible and aligned with genuine sustainability practices.

The theoretical perspectives of Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy Theory and Virtue Ethics further explain why ethical communication is important. Stakeholder Theory highlights the responsibility of developers towards multiple stakeholder groups. Legitimacy Theory indicates the importance of consistency between organisational behaviour and social expectations. Virtue Ethics emphasises the role of organisational character and ethical values in decision-making.

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper suggests that IKS-based ethical values can influence ethical marketing strategies, which can in turn encourage authentic ESG orientation and responsible property development.

Technology and AI can strengthen this process by improving access to sustainability information, analysing data and supporting stakeholder communication. However, technology should not be used simply to make sustainability claims more persuasive. Its primary role should be to improve transparency, accountability and communication quality.

The central contribution of the paper is therefore the integration of traditional ethical values, ethical marketing, ESG practices and contemporary technology within the context of Indian property development.

The study suggests that responsible ESG communication should not merely ask how sustainability can be marketed. Instead, it should consider how marketing can accurately communicate sustainability that is genuinely practised by the organisation. When organisational behaviour, ESG performance and marketing communication are aligned, the possibility of greenwashing can be reduced and stakeholder trust can be strengthened.

Thus, bridging tradition and technology can provide a meaningful conceptual pathway for ethical ESG adoption among property developers in India.

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