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Applications of the Ethical Positioning Index in the Home Appliances and Fast Moving Consumer Goods industries

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Abstract

The construct of ethics in marketing is a subject matter of increasing interest in today's demanding, globally connected and dynamic markets. Ethics in branding has been studied in a variety of ways, however, measures that help assign a number and rank the ethical brand positioning attributes are few and offer limited scope. This research is an attempt to practically apply the Ethical Positioning Index framework to a set of target consumers of those specific brands, and utilize the data thus obtained to derive index values. The application of the model proposed by Sagar et al is a maiden attempt to provide a mathematical metric to how a brand positions itself among its consumers, within their ethical contexts.

Keywords: Brand Positioning, Ethical Positioning Index, Measuring Ethics.

Introduction

Ethics in marketing and branding, is increasingly a subject of keen academic and practical interest. Consumers today, probably more than ever before, are concerned, and demanding, about subjects such as responsibility, sustainability and the environment. Further, they are equipped with more information access, greater exposure to alternative product options and the ability to share their perceptions, opinions and experiences, faster and across the globe. Increased media attention, pressure from special interest groups, political or otherwise, and other stakeholders' interest also contribute to this development. Fair trade businesses, particularly, those that follow a system of exchange that respects producers, communities, consumers and the environment, and is rooted in people-to-people connections, justice and sustainability have shown significant growth in sales, in proliferation of product types and in their presence in mainstream retailing establishments, thus assuring increased awareness among consumers (Szmigin *et al*, 2007). An increasing number of people make their consumption decisions on the basis of ethical values, such as environmentally friendly products and production methods, labour standards (wage rates and working conditions), and human rights. Ethical consumerism is a growing phenomenon that underpins ethical trade activities (Tallontire *et al*, 2001).

Given the fact that the customers' ethical landscape affects their choices, preferences and purchase decisions, the ability to measure the impact of this complex inter-relationship of parameters that clearly have a profound impact on a brand's perception, reputation and ability

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to attract its customers, is worth exploring. In the words of Ying Fan (2005), '*Ethical branding could provide the company with a differential advantage as a growing number of consumers become more ethically conscious. It could also help overcome the increasing consumers' skepticism and cynicism towards branding communications.*'

Academic research, however limited in this area, is crossing an initial phase of nascence, and there has been at least one notable attempt to address the all important aspect of metrics and their ability to impact and predict a brand's success. Sagar *et al* (2011) present a model for calculating the Ethical Positioning Index (EPI), - a maiden attempt to measure a logical mix of brand and ethics parameters. If applied as a standard and at a large scale, an EPI ranking model can provide a comprehensive and consistent baseline for understanding and analyzing a brand's performance in a given market. Further, it can also offer a brand the ability to better synchronize with its target customer set on the basis of facts and data derived from the same audience group.

This study takes the EPI construct and applies it in two different industry scenarios (home appliances and fast moving consumer goods), primarily aiming to present a practical guide to utilizing the model and deriving useful customer insights from it. An attempt is made to derive weights of parameters based on first-hand customer responses, and utilize the same to develop EPI values, again based on brand-specific scores obtained from the same audience group.

The Brand and its Elements

A brand represents a promise of trust. It is the emotional and psychological relationship a product has with its customers. More than just a symbol, a name, an image or an impression, the brand is also a representation of the customers' experience and the expectations she has in mind when doing business with your company. Walter Landor, one of the greats of the advertising industry, has said, "*By identifying and authenticating a product or service, a brand delivers a pledge of satisfaction and quality.*"

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. It represents a collection of perceptions in the mind of the consumer. Thjømmøe (2008) states "*A brand can convey up to six levels of meaning: attributes, benefits, values, culture, personality and user. The first two levels are related to the product performance, while the next three are related to product perceptions, or non-product related values.*"

Positioning "refers to how customers think about proposed and/or present brands in a market (Perrault and McCarthy 1999)." Ries and Trout (1982) expressed that the positioning "starts with the product [. . .] a piece of merchandise, a service, a company, an institution, or even a person [. . .]" and positioning is not what is done to the product/service, but rather what is done to the mind of the prospect. The essence of positioning is to place a product in the mind of the consumer, preferably favorably. Aaker (1992) defines a brand's positioning as a part of its identity and value proposition, which is actively communicated to target markets. A strong brand is always built upon consumer associations with the brand. Through a brand's positioning, based on both tangible and intangible product attribute(s), it aims to build a sustainable competitive advantage in the mind of the consumer.

Sagar *et al.* (2006) have proposed a brand positioning framework within which they have identified five fundamental elements of brand positioning. These five elements are - brand identity, brand image, brand personality, brand communication and brand awareness. Of these five, an organization controls the three elements of identity, personality, and communication in the context of the brands it creates.

The first step in the development of a brand positioning framework is the creation of the brand identity (Kapferer, 1992; Aaker, 1992, 1996a, b). It is the central concept to building a strong brand and provides direction, purpose, and meaning for the brand. Brand personality (Aaker, 1997) refers to projecting the brand identity in a human form, in a manner such that the human psychological attributes seamlessly integrate with the brand-related attributes. Thus the brand “connects and develops” a relationship with customers through the use of a symbol or a sound or a specific characteristic trait, which is formed in harmony with the brand’s identity.

Brand communication (Keller, 1993) is the process of a company informing its target audience about the product function and features, and also emotional attributes that help the brand connect better with the consumer. This process encapsulates all means of media and communication such as advertising, campaigns, promotions, sponsorships, trade fairs, word of mouth, print media. Brand personality and brand identity are communicated to the customer through the process of brand communication.

Fill (1999) wrote that to achieve successful positioning, a brand should adopt a customer perspective. Further it needs to understand how customers perceive products and how they attach importance to particular attributes that can be grouped under a construct. Supporting this perspective, Dibb *et al.* (1997) write: “...positioning is based on consumers’ perceptions and is therefore only partly within the control of marketers...in-depth market research (often focus group discussions) is required if customer motivations and expectations in a particular market are to be fully understood...management’s intuition is not always sufficient...”.

Successful positioning is linked to the long term growth of the firm. Porter (1996) mentions that companies that focus on operational efficiency and ignore the long term benefits of positioning strategies, are often not able to take advantage of the benefit of long term growth.

Decoding Ethics

In philosophy, ethical behavior is that which is “good.” The field of ethics involves developing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior. These concepts are not relative to the situation, but instead considered to be immutable.

The most common way of defining ethics, however, is norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. One may also define ethics as a method, procedure, or perspective for deciding how to act and for analyzing complex problems and issues. Traditionally, normative ethics was the study of what makes actions right and wrong. These theories offered an overarching moral principle one could appeal to in resolving difficult moral decisions. On the other hand, Descriptive ethics examines ethics not from a top-down a priori perspective but rather as observations of actual choices made by moral agents in practice.

In the context of our research, ethics represents a construct which is beyond moral discourses. In fact, ethics is the sum total of a complex interdependence of various aspects such as of culture, religion, society, and business. The ethical landscape of an audience set results in undefined, yet definitive patterns and behaviors of that society. These behaviors determine whether a concept, practice or idea is acceptable or not for that set of people. Consumers have their individual or group ethical contexts (which might or might not overlap), and, derived from those, ethical concerns about the brands they associate themselves with. Such concerns do not necessarily become manifest in their actual purchasing behavior (Yin Fang, 2005).

Ethical Brand Positioning

It is oftentimes hard to clearly delineate differences between some brand-related constructs, - the real significance lies simply in the consumer’s perception of the product (Thjømmøe, 2008),

derived from the positioning it manages to create. A brand which identifies the acceptable reference points for its customers (based on their ethical parameters), and positions itself in the context of the same is able to better connect and communicate with its target audience and gain significant competitive advantage. Positioning a brand, in the minds of its target customer, in sync with the ethical framework of that audience set is what we refer to as ethical brand positioning. It, therefore, implies that the brand identity, brand personality and brand communication – all are synchronized keeping in mind the ethical eco-system of the target audience.

Ethical brand positioning, this implies, is sensitive to various social, cultural, religious, environmental and operational issues important to the target customer. Some aspects could include, for instance, environment sensitivity, secular demeanor, racial outlook, consumer responsiveness, social responsibility or technology adoption. While ethically conscious brands would harmonize with these and other aspects of the ethical construct, ethically incorrect brands are likely to be seen as insensitive or ignorant to these issues, such as those relating to race, religion, gender, environment, or other such socio-cultural ethical elements.

In competitive environments, given the rush to gain market share and customer mindspace, focus on ethical issues is oftentimes not a primary priority for brand managers. In fact, examples such as extensive advertising claiming leadership positions based on incomprehensive data sets, or focus on extensive promotions targeting vulnerable children population, misleading or incorrect reporting of facts – these and more such examples are rampant in today's marketplace, tending to ethically questionable branding strategies, even among the more popular brands.

It is important to bring out here a key difference between an ethically incorrect product and an unethical brand. There may be many instances of an entire product category to be labeled unethical without referring to specific brands in those categories. Examples include cigarettes, tobacco products, and alcohol. Typically, products in such category are seen as harmful to an individual and/ or society as a whole.

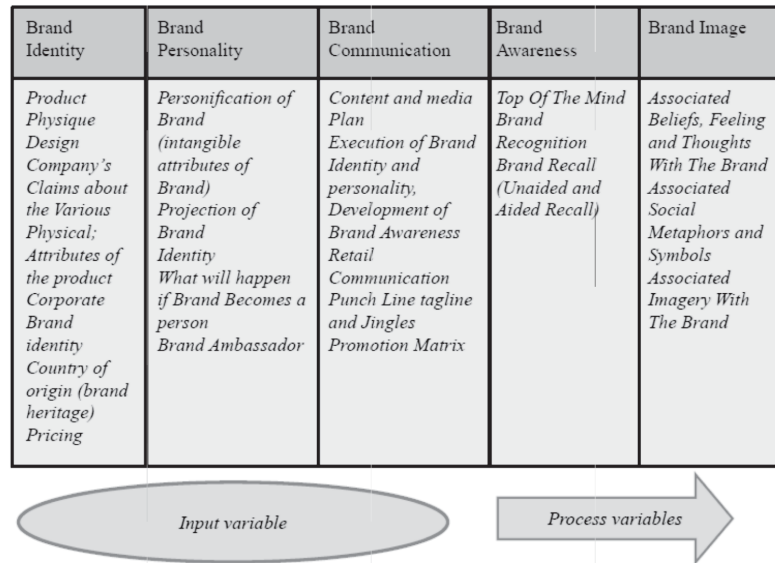
In some cases, however, the product category is not harmful, but specific products or brands within that category might be perceived to be unethical in terms of their positioning strategies. For instance, an advertisement for products that promote fair skin can be deemed unethical if they are alluding to the fact that dark skin is ugly, or only fair skin can be beautiful. Similarly, advertisements for a car designed specifically for women drivers might not make the cut in a conservative society which does not encourage women to be sitting behind the wheel. Or a promotion for a social networking site might depict meeting family members as a waste of time, possibly ruffling the feathers in a society that encourages strong ties with one's family and roots.

“A brand may be amoral, but there are ethical issues in branding. Ethical branding, as a subset of ethical marketing, relates to certain moral principles that define right and wrong behavior in branding decisions. A brand needs to be evaluated not just by the economic or financial criteria but also by the moral ones. An ethical brand should not harm public good; instead it should contribute to or help promote public good.” (Yin Fang, 2005)

Calculating the Ethical Positioning Index

Adjusting the elements of branding in the context of ethical and cultural issues by drawing a connect between brand identity, brand personality, and brand communication with the ethical sensitivities of the audience is what helps define the framework of ethical positioning. If the elements of branding are in congruence with the ethical and cultural issues, it can be expected that the brand will be better positioned in its competitive landscape.

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Source: Sagar et al. (2006)

Figure 1: Brand Positioning Framework

Sagar et al (2011) have proposed a mathematical model for deriving the Ethical Positioning Index (EPI). The model uses the factors of the blended ethical brand positioning construct, along with the obtained consumer-driven weights. Data for determining the same was obtained through an exploratory research using a customer survey on the subject. The EPI score can be evaluated with the help of the mathematical model thus derived:

$$EPI_{SCORE} = (W_{B1} * S_{B1} + \dots W_{B5} * S_{B5}) + (W_{E1} * S_{E1} + \dots W_{E10} * S_{E10})$$

- W_{B1} - W_{B5} are the calculated weights for the mentioned brand-positioning variables
- S_{B1} - S_{B5} are the brand-positioning scores (unique for a particular brand) corresponding to the attributes
- W_{E1} - W_{E10} are the calculated weights, for the mentioned ethical variables
- S_{E1} - S_{E10} are the ethic scores (unique for a particular brand) corresponding to the attributes

Weights were thus derived, agnostic of any product or industry category, for both the brand attributes and the ethics parameters, by the team of researchers.

We will now apply this model in two industry scenarios and study the implications.

Research Design and Data Collation

The objectives of this research are defined here.

R1: Apply the construct of ethical positioning index in the home appliances market and rank the selected brands based on the data thus obtained and analyzed.

R2: Apply the construct of ethical positioning index in the fast moving consumer goods market and rank the selected brands based on the data thus obtained and analyzed.

R3: Analyze and study the implications of the two studies conducted for achieving R1 and R2 and derive actionable intelligence.

To achieve both R1 and R2, similar questionnaires were developed, but administered to two different sets of audience. These were created on the lines suggested by Sagar *et al* (2011) in their original research that was conducted to arrive at the mathematical model for EPI.

The questionnaires were made in three parts – the first set of questions was prepared by taking various brand positioning factors (5 factors enumerated across 15 questions) in the context of ethics - thus aiming to judge the relative importance of various Brand Positioning attributes. The second part of the questionnaire carried questions developed by combining the variables of ethics (10 in all) in the context of a brand. This questionnaire identified the preference and importance of ethical variables in the consumer purchase decisions. The attributes selected to represent ethics were, once again, derived from the research paper on EPI, in order to maintain continuity with the same thought process. It is acknowledged, however, that aspects of ethics that need to be considered for a given audience set might vary, in different geographical, cultural, regional or economic settings, and also might change in the contexts of different product categories. As part of this research, however, such complex interplays have thus far been avoided, and are expected to provide room for future studies in this area.

Responses to the above sets of questions were used to derive the weights W_{B1} - W_{B5} for the mentioned brand-positioning variables and W_{E1} - W_{E10} , for the mentioned ethical variables.

The third set of questions aimed to rank a selected range of brands in that industry, on each of these attributes of ethics and brand positioning. Likert scale was used to rank the brands, and the average scores for the brands across the sample was used to derive the scores S_{B1} - S_{B5} for the brand-positioning scores and S_{E1} - S_{E10} for the ethic scores (these were unique for every brand in that category).

A judgment sample was selected on the basis of the judgment of the researchers, to ensure that questions were asked of consumers who are aware, informed and involved in the purchase decision on these products and brands. The sample was also spread across various professional categories to be able to garner a diverse opinion and avoid any pitfalls of a thematic bias. All respondents were from the metro city of New Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR) in India. Details of the respondent demographic profiles for the two samples are given below.

Table 1: Demographic Details of the Samples

	For R1	For R2
Sample Size	96	76
Male	68	28
Female	28	48
Age 21-30	16	28
Age 31-40	52	36
Age 41 and above	28	32

Data obtained from the first two parts of the questionnaire was used to drive the consumer-driven weights for each of the attributes of brand and ethics, as postulated by Sagar *et al* (2011). For both the sets of consumers (for research objectives R1 and R2), a similar exercise was conducted to derive the weights of each of the chosen parameters.

For the 15 questions on brands, first the average across the entire sample population was derived for each question. Then these 15 questions were condensed into 5, representing the 5 brand positioning factors of

- Product design and manufacturing

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- Product packaging
- Product imagery
- Product advertisements
- Product sales and promotion

For each of these factors then, the average scores were determined and weights were derived. Similarly, weights were derived for each of the attributes for ethics (10 questions).

Table 2: Weights Derived from Consumer Data

Brand Attributes	W_{B1}-W_{B5} for R1	W_{B1}-W_{B5} for R2	Original Study
Product design and manufacturing	0.25	0.25	0.25
Product packaging	0.21	0.22	0.23
Product imagery	0.20	0.18	0.19
Product advertisements	0.16	0.16	0.15
Product sales and promotion	0.17	0.20	0.18
Ethics Attributes	W_{E1}-W_{E10} for R1	W_{E1}-W_{E10} for R2	Original Study
Nature and environment	0.11	0.12	0.11
Sex-related images	0.11	0.11	0.10
Jealousy, fear, and violence	0.11	0.1	0.11
Family values 0.11	0.11	0.11	
Contribution to social causes	0.10	0.10	0.10
Customs and festivals	0.08	0.09	0.09
Leadership claims	0.08	0.07	0.08
Indianness and ethnicity	0.09	0.10	0.11
Depiction of animals	0.10	0.10	0.10
Connotations of luxury	0.10	0.10	0.10

Close inspection shows that despite the product categories being vastly different (home appliances versus fast moving consumer goods), the weights given by consumers to the brand and ethics attributes are relatively similar. When compared with the results presented by Sagar *et al* (2011), wherein they provided a model for EPI by taking the general weights, independent of product categories, it is evident that consumers have given similar range of weights to each of these attributes. Given the fact that we are talking of urban Indian consumers in both cases, this basically implies that customer perspective on different aspects of brand and ethics that impact them tend to be similar across product categories. However, one can certainly delve deeper into these marginal differences and arrive at a more fine grained analysis – deriving and interpreting the statistical significance of these differences is beyond the scope of this research.

One implication, therefore, is for brands to understand and learn about consumer perspective

and mindset for different product categories. The results tabulated here seem to imply that the consumer attitude towards these parameters of brand and ethics is relatively independent of the product category being discussed, though there are likely to be small nuances of that which would reflect in the actual value of the consumer weights for that attribute.

Further, the questionnaire also gets actual scores for a few brands in the two chosen categories (home appliances and fast moving consumer goods) on the same parameters. The respondents were asked to rank 5 brands in each of the categories of Air Conditioners and Soaps, on a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being the highest. The responses were then averaged across each attribute. The results obtained are tabulated below. These are, therefore, the scores S_{B1} - S_{B5} for the brand-positioning attributes, and S_{E1} - S_{E10} are the scores on the ethics related attributes. The chosen 5 brands in each category were:

Air Conditioner: Hitachi, LG, Samsung, Whirlpool, Videocon

Soap: Lux, Dove, Dettol, Pears, Santoor

For the Air Conditioner brands, here are the scores:

Table 3: Scores Obtained from Consumer Data for R1

	Hitachi	LG	Samsung	Whirlpool	Videocon
S_{b1}	3.361111	3.323611	3.105556	2.87222	2.354167
S_{b2}	2.75	3.1875	3.1875	3.0625	2.71875
S_{b3}	3.325	2.956944	3.068056	2.998611	2.73333
S_{b4}	2.6	3.095833	2.93125	3.4	2.747917
S_{b5}	2.033333	3.366667	3.5	4.366667	3.366667
S_{e1}	2.53333	3.1875	2.625	3	2.73333
S_{e2}	2.071429	2.785714	3	2.357143	2.214286
S_{e3}	2.071429	2.785714	2.214286	2.571429	2.466667
S_{e4}	2.5	3.466667	3.466667	3.357143	2.785714
S_{e5}	4.2	2.6	2.73333	2.466667	2.8
S_{e6}	2.214826	3.4	3.133333	3.142857	3.642857
S_{e7}	3.066667	3.6	3	3	2.571429
S_{e8}	2.214286	3.428571	3.357143	3.142857	3.714286
S_{e9}	2.583333	2.75	2.416667	2.416667	2.5
S_{e10}	4	2.73333	2.66667	2.642857	2.357143

For the Soap brands, the scores are as below:

Table 4: Scores Obtained from Consumer Data for R2

	Lux	Dove	Dettol	Pears	Santoor
S_{b1}	3.082598	3.850163	3.395016	3.517075	2.563725
S_{b2}	3.753676	4.068015	2.873979	3.731618	2.780392
S_{b3}	3.519891	4.066931	4.797229	3.748869	2.917232
S_{b4}	3.529412	4.205882	3.205882	3.352941	2.470588
S_{b5}	3.35	3.320833	2.902083	2.939583	2.875
S_{e1}	2.5	3.5625	3	3.4375	3.4375
S_{e2}	3.785714	2.857143	2.214286	2.928571	2.642857
S_{e3}	2.2	2.33333	1.866667	1.8	1.6
S_{e4}	2.33333	2.6	3.6	3.8	2.73333
S_{e5}	2.928571	2.642857	2.5	2.642857	2.428571
S_{e6}	2.5	2.75	2.75	3.0625	2.6875
S_{e7}	3.0625	3.75	3.3125	2.625	2
S_{e8}	3	3.125	2.9375	3.125	3.5625
S_{e9}	2	2.285714	2.214286	2.285714	1.857143
S_{e10}	3.357143	4.357143	2.571429	3.357143	2.285714

We can now apply the mathematical model for EPI and calculate the EPI value for each of these brands. The model used to get these scores is:

$$EPI_{SCORE} = (W_{B1} * S_{B1} + \dots + W_{B5} * S_{B5}) + (W_{E1} * S_{E1} + \dots + W_{E10} * S_{E10})$$

The scores thus derived are presented below

Table 5: EPI Scores for R1

Brand	EPI Score
LG	6.25
Whirlpool	6.09
Samsung	6.01
Hitachi	5.62
Videocon	5.5

Table 6: EPI Scores for R2

Brand	EPI Score
Dove	6.89
Pears	6.4
Lux	6.19
Dettol	6.12
Santoor	5.27

Fulfilling objectives R1 and R2 respectively, we, therefore, have the EPI scores for the selected brands. They also give us insights into how the brands are viewed by the customers on different attributes of brand positioning and their ethical stance.

The index values can help derive valuable insight into the brand and how it is ethically perceived by its target customers. Also, since scores are obtained on each of the five critical aspects of brand positioning, the EPI framework helps us better understand what a brand needs to do to improve on each of these parameters in order to synchronize better with its audience perceptions. As an example, LG and Samsung have both scored high in the air conditioner category on the parameter of product packaging, which has slightly lower overall importance in the minds of the consumers, while Hitachi scores the highest on the most important parameter – product design and manufacturing. A brand that understands which of its attributes are more important for its customers, and works towards improving its positioning on those parameters, is bound to strike the right chords with its audience set, and therefore achieve higher brand positioning. It is pertinent to note that these scores were obtained on questions that brought forward these themes in the context of an ethical framework.

In the soaps category, similarly, Dove has the highest value for EPI. Its scores highest, or close to highest, on all the parameters important to its audience. So, while in the soaps category, nature and environment, sexual imagery and family values are important ethical criteria for the audience, Dove scores high in all of these.

The research objective, R3, was aimed at converging the two studies R1 and R2 to understand the implications of applying the EPI framework to brands. As mentioned before, the attributes have similar weights across different product categories, which presents a possibility of creating a standard set of weights for each attribute for any similar study across varying product categories. In subsequent studies of application of this model, therefore, the aim should be to just get the individual brand scores across each of the defined parameters, and not look to calculate the weights over and over again. Application using similar weights of the attributes also helps provide a common threshold against which more such studies can help generate data that can be plotted from a similar baseline, and will, therefore, provide room for comparative analyses. The same can also be used to calibrate this index and see if we can develop an architecture for EPI, making it a more practical and plug-and-play concept for usage by Brand Managers across product categories.

However, a caveat here would be that this standard would apply only if we were to define the parameters of ethics in the same way, as in the study by Sagar *et al* (2011). In a different context, such as a business-to-business scenario, or the services industry, the parameters that define both the construct of brand positioning, and that of ethics might be different, and hence the model would need to be altered to factor those elements. Similarly, in another country or cultural context, these parameters will need to be revisited before any such similar application is run.

Implications and Conclusions

Ethical brand positioning offers a huge potential to benefit an organization by providing it clear and differential advantage over its competition (Ying Fan, 2005).

Application of the EPI framework on actual brands in a real market scenario provides an academically proven comparative ranking index for brands across various product categories, providing them an opportunity to leverage ethical brand positioning. By definition, the EPI model is one that encapsulates the various attributes that are important to a target audience set. Hence, the calculation of the value of the index for each brand represents an important measure that brings together how consumers feel about how well that brand connects with their ethical landscape. The index, therefore, provides a robust and practical, consumer driven mechanism of ranking various brands in a category. Such a categorization can, be applied to understand

how a brand connects and reaches out to its target audience, and what steps it might need to take to get to a higher level of positioning within its target segment.

In light of this real and factual consumer driven information set, using the EPI model can provide a brand or an organization with a very workable tool to capitalize on for addressing their consumer concerns, or reaching out to them in a more focused, targeted and prepared manner.

Sagar *et al* (2011) mention that “*Ethical positioning is an outcome of conscious and deliberate blending of brand and ethics. Ethics can become a product differentiator and a cutting edge tool.*”

In case of the researches conducted as part of this study, there is clear feedback for all brands regarding what attributes they need to focus on to be in better harmony with their customers. The sample size for this research is not very large, but it gives a clear indication on how similar such studies can be conducted to derive actionable intelligence for specific brands.

Further research can be conducted to arrive at a more portable and more universally applicable set of attributes which could have global applications. However, that would require research involving a much wider geographical region, and also involving different classes of consumers with a refined and more robust definition of the framework for their ethical construct. There is also clearly room to create EPI baselines across different industries, and or geographies or demographic audience sets, and utilize the same to study how different brands evolve and mature in their journeys to connect with their aspirational, current and future target customers.

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