ASIAN MICROECONOMIC REVIEW

Volume: 6 Issue: 3

(July-September), 2026

KMF PUBLISHERS ISSN: 2789-9861 www.kmf-publishers.com/amr/

Research Article

Supply Chain Transparency and Consumer Trust: Qualitative Insights from Reports

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Received: 2 May 2026
Accepted: 25 June 2026
Published: 3 July 2026

Abstract

Augmented Reality (AR) is increasingly recognised as a transformative technology in sustainable space planning, offering innovative solutions for visualisation, stakeholder engagement, and decision-making. This study explores the role of AR through a qualitative analysis of secondary data, drawing on peer-reviewed literature, case studies, and documented practitioner and client experiences. The findings indicate that AR significantly enhances spatial understanding by enabling real-time, context-aware visualisation of design proposals. It also fosters participatory planning by improving communication and collaboration among diverse stakeholders. Furthermore, AR contributes to environmental, social, and economic sustainability by supporting simulation-based analysis, inclusive engagement, and efficient design processes. However, challenges such as technological complexity, high implementation costs, accessibility issues, and ethical concerns related to data privacy remain barriers to widespread adoption. The study integrates the Technology Acceptance Model, Participatory Planning Theory, and the Triple Bottom Line framework to develop a comprehensive understanding of AR's impact. Overall, the research highlights the potential of AR to transform sustainable planning practices while emphasising the need for strategic implementation and policy support.

Keywords: augmented reality, sustainable space planning, participatory planning, urban design, digital visualisation, stakeholder engagement, smart cities.

Citation: Aktar, A., & Mannan, K.A. (2026). Supply Chain Transparency and Consumer Trust: Qualitative Insights from Reports. *Asian Microeconomic Review*, 6(3), 1-19. DOI: https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v6i3.amr.8

1. Introduction

In an era characterised by globalisation, digital connectivity, and heightened stakeholder awareness, supply chains have evolved into complex, multi-tiered networks that span across continents and industries. While this complexity has enabled firms to achieve cost efficiencies and scalability, it has simultaneously obscured visibility into sourcing practices, labour conditions, and environmental impacts. As a result, supply chain transparency has emerged as a critical concern for both organisations and consumers. Increasingly, consumers are demanding greater accountability from firms regarding where and how products are made, thereby elevating transparency as a strategic imperative rather than a peripheral concern (Egels-Zandén et al., 2015).

Supply chain transparency refers to the extent to which information about a firm's supply chain activities-such as sourcing, manufacturing, labour practices, and environmental impacts-is disclosed to stakeholders in an accessible and understandable manner (Mol, 2015). This concept is closely tied to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and ethical business practices, as transparency enables stakeholders to evaluate whether firms adhere to acceptable standards. With the rise of digital technologies, including blockchain, data analytics, and traceability systems, organisations now possess unprecedented opportunities to disclose detailed supply chain information. However, the degree to which these disclosures influence consumer perceptions and trust remains an area of ongoing academic and managerial interest.

Consumer trust, defined as the willingness of consumers to rely on a firm based on the expectation of its reliability, integrity, and competence (Mayer et al., 1995), is a fundamental driver of long-term customer relationships and brand loyalty. In the context of supply chains, transparency can serve as a mechanism for reducing information asymmetry between firms and consumers, thereby enhancing trust. When consumers are provided with credible and verifiable information about product origins and ethical practices, they are more likely to perceive the firm as trustworthy (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Conversely, a lack of transparency or instances of supply chain misconduct, such as labour exploitation or environmental violations, can severely erode trust and damage brand reputation.

The growing importance of supply chain transparency is further reinforced by regulatory pressures and societal expectations. Governments and international organisations have introduced policies aimed at improving transparency and accountability, such as the UK Modern Slavery Act and the California Transparency in Supply Chains Act. These regulations require firms to disclose efforts to eliminate unethical practices from their supply chains, thereby institutionalising transparency as a compliance requirement (Gold et al., 2015). At the same time, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media outlets, and advocacy groups play a critical role in scrutinising corporate behaviour and disseminating information to the public, thereby influencing consumer perceptions and trust.

Despite the increasing emphasis on transparency, challenges persist in its implementation and communication. One major challenge is the risk of information overload, where excessive or overly technical disclosures may confuse consumers rather than enhance understanding (Sodhi & Tang, 2019). Additionally, there is the issue of credibility, as consumers may question the authenticity of information provided by firms, particularly in the absence of third-party verification. Greenwashing and selective disclosure further complicate the relationship between transparency and trust, as they can create a false impression of ethical practices without substantive action (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust is also influenced by contextual factors such as cultural values, industry characteristics, and consumer awareness levels. For instance, consumers in developed markets may place greater emphasis on ethical sourcing and sustainability compared to those in emerging markets, where price and accessibility may take precedence (Auger et al., 2010). Similarly, industries such as fashion and food, which are closely associated with ethical and environmental concerns, may experience stronger consumer reactions to transparency initiatives.

Given these complexities, there is a need for in-depth qualitative exploration of how supply chain transparency influences consumer trust. While quantitative studies have provided valuable insights into the correlation between transparency and trust, they often fail to capture the nuanced interpretations and meanings that consumers attach to transparency disclosures. Secondary data sources, such as corporate sustainability reports, NGO publications, and industry analyses, offer rich qualitative insights into how transparency is conceptualised, communicated, and perceived across different contexts.

This study aims to address this gap by conducting a qualitative analysis of secondary data to explore the relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust. Specifically, it seeks to understand how transparency disclosures are framed in organisational reports, how these narratives align with theoretical constructs, and how they contribute to the formation of consumer trust. By synthesising insights from diverse sources, the study contributes to both academic literature and managerial practice, offering a comprehensive understanding of transparency as a trust-building mechanism.

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform organisational strategies and policy development. As consumers become increasingly vigilant and empowered, firms must adopt transparent practices not only to comply with regulations but also to build and sustain trust. By examining qualitative insights from reports, this study provides a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of transparency and trust, highlighting both opportunities and challenges for organisations operating in complex supply chain environments.

2. Literature Review

Supply chain transparency has been conceptualised as the disclosure of relevant, accurate, and timely information about supply chain operations to external stakeholders (Mol, 2015). It encompasses multiple dimensions, including visibility, traceability, and disclosure. Visibility refers to the ability to access information about supply chain processes, while traceability involves tracking the movement of products and materials across different stages. Disclosure, on the other hand, pertains to the communication of this information to stakeholders in a meaningful way (Kamble et al., 2020).

Transparency is often positioned within the broader framework of sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Firms that engage in transparent practices demonstrate accountability and commitment to ethical standards, which can enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). However, transparency is not merely about information disclosure; it also involves the quality, credibility, and accessibility of the information provided. Inadequate or misleading disclosures can undermine stakeholder trust and lead to reputational risks (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

The relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust can be understood through several theoretical lenses, including signalling theory, stakeholder theory, and institutional theory.

Signalling theory suggests that firms use transparency as a signal to convey unobservable qualities, such as ethical practices and product integrity, to consumers (Spence, 1973). In markets characterised by information asymmetry, transparency serves as a credible signal that reduces uncertainty and enhances trust. However, for signals to be effective, they must be costly to imitate and verifiable, which underscores the importance of third-party certifications and audits.

Stakeholder theory emphasises the role of organisations in addressing the needs and expectations of various stakeholders, including consumers, employees, suppliers, and regulators (Freeman, 1984). Transparency enables firms to engage with stakeholders and demonstrate accountability, thereby fostering trust and long-term relationships. From this perspective, transparency is not only a strategic tool but also an ethical obligation.

Institutional theory highlights the influence of external pressures, such as regulations, norms, and cultural expectations, on organisational behaviour (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Firms adopt transparent practices to conform to institutional norms and gain legitimacy. This is particularly relevant in industries facing intense scrutiny, where transparency becomes a means of aligning with societal expectations.

2.2 Consumer Trust in the Context of Transparency

Consumer trust is a multidimensional construct that encompasses perceptions of competence, integrity, and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995). In the context of supply chains, trust is influenced by the extent to which consumers believe that firms are honest, reliable, and committed to ethical practices. Transparency plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions by providing evidence of organisational behaviour.

Research indicates that transparency can enhance consumer trust by reducing perceived risk and uncertainty (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). When consumers have access to detailed information about product origins and production processes, they are better equipped to make informed decisions. This is particularly important in industries where ethical concerns are prominent, such as apparel and food.

However, the relationship between transparency and trust is not always straightforward. Excessive or poorly communicated information can lead to confusion and scepticism (Sodhi & Tang, 2019). Additionally, consumers may question the credibility of self-reported information, especially in cases where firms have a history of unethical behaviour. Therefore, the effectiveness of transparency in building trust depends on factors such as clarity, consistency, and third-party validation.

2.3 Role of Digital Technologies in Enhancing Transparency

Advancements in digital technologies have significantly transformed supply chain transparency. Technologies such as blockchain, Internet of Things (IoT), and big data analytics enable real-time tracking and verification of supply chain activities (Kamble et al., 2020). Blockchain, in particular, offers a decentralised and immutable ledger that enhances the credibility of information, thereby addressing concerns related to data manipulation.

These technologies not only improve operational efficiency but also facilitate greater transparency for consumers. For example, QR codes and mobile applications allow consumers to access detailed information about product origins and sustainability practices. This increased accessibility can strengthen consumer trust by providing verifiable and user-friendly information.

Despite these benefits, the adoption of digital technologies also presents challenges, including high implementation costs, data privacy concerns, and the need for standardisation. Moreover, the effectiveness of these technologies in building trust depends on consumer awareness and understanding, which may vary across different demographic groups.

2.4 Challenges and Critiques of Transparency

While transparency is widely regarded as a positive attribute, it is not without its limitations and critiques. One major concern is the risk of information overload, where consumers are presented with excessive amounts of data that are difficult to interpret (Sodhi & Tang, 2019). This can lead to decision fatigue and reduce the effectiveness of transparency initiatives.

Another challenge is the issue of greenwashing, where firms selectively disclose positive information while concealing negative aspects of their operations (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Such practices can create a false sense of transparency and ultimately erode consumer trust when inconsistencies are exposed.

Furthermore, transparency may not always lead to behavioural change among consumers. Studies have shown that while consumers express a preference for ethical products, their purchasing decisions are often influenced by factors such as price, convenience, and brand familiarity (Auger et al., 2010). This highlights the gap between attitudes and behaviour, which limits the impact of transparency on market outcomes.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gap

The existing literature provides valuable insights into the relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust. However, much of the research is based on quantitative methods, which may not fully capture the complexity and contextual nuances of this relationship. There is a need for qualitative studies that explore how transparency is interpreted and experienced by consumers, as well as how it is communicated by organisations.

Additionally, while previous studies have examined specific industries or regions, there is limited research that synthesises insights from diverse sources, such as corporate reports, NGO publications, and industry analyses. These sources offer rich qualitative data that can enhance our understanding of transparency as a multifaceted construct.

This study addresses these gaps by employing a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data. By analysing reports from various stakeholders, it seeks to uncover patterns, themes, and narratives that shape the relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust. This approach not only complements existing quantitative research but also provides a deeper and more holistic understanding of the topic.

3. Theoretical Framework

The relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust is multifaceted and requires a robust theoretical grounding to understand how information disclosure influences consumer perceptions and behaviours. This study integrates signalling theory, stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and trust theory to construct a comprehensive framework that explains how transparency functions as a strategic and relational mechanism in contemporary supply chains.

3.1 Signalling Theory

Signalling theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how firms communicate unobservable attributes to consumers in situations characterised by information asymmetry (Spence, 1973). In supply chains, consumers often lack direct visibility into production processes, labour practices, and environmental impacts. As a result, firms rely on transparency disclosures-such as sustainability reports, certifications, and traceability tools-to signal their ethical standards and operational integrity.

Effective signals must be credible, costly to imitate, and easily interpretable by the receiver. In this context, third-party certifications, independent audits, and verifiable data systems enhance the credibility of transparency initiatives (Connelly et al., 2011). For example, certifications related to fair labour or environmental sustainability function as strong signals that reduce consumer uncertainty and foster trust. Conversely, vague or unsubstantiated claims may be perceived as weak signals, thereby diminishing their effectiveness.

However, signalling theory also highlights the potential for opportunistic behaviour, where firms may engage in symbolic actions-such as selective disclosure or superficial reporting-to create a false impression of transparency. This underscores the importance of signal reliability and the role of external verification mechanisms in reinforcing consumer trust.

3.2 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory posits that organisations are responsible for addressing the interests and expectations of multiple stakeholders, including consumers, employees, suppliers, regulators, and communities (Freeman, 1984). Supply chain transparency can be viewed as a strategic tool for engaging stakeholders and demonstrating accountability.

From this perspective, transparency is not merely a communication strategy but a reflection of ethical responsibility and governance practices. Firms that proactively disclose supply chain information signal their commitment to stakeholder welfare, which can enhance legitimacy and trust (Phillips et al., 2003). Transparency also facilitates stakeholder dialogue, enabling organisations to respond to concerns and adapt their practices accordingly.

In the context of consumer trust, stakeholder theory emphasises the relational dimension of transparency. Trust is built through consistent and meaningful engagement, where consumers perceive that firms prioritise their interests and uphold ethical standards. This aligns with the notion of relational trust, which is grounded in ongoing interactions and shared values rather than isolated transactions (Mayer et al., 1995).

3.3 Institutional Theory

Institutional theory provides insights into how external pressures shape organisational behaviour and drive the adoption of transparency practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). These pressures can be coercive (e.g., regulations and laws), normative (e.g., industry standards and professional norms), or mimetic (e.g., imitation of leading firms).

In recent years, regulatory frameworks such as the UK Modern Slavery Act and similar policies have compelled organisations to disclose supply chain practices, thereby institutionalising transparency. Additionally, societal expectations and advocacy by non-governmental organisations have created normative pressures for firms to adopt ethical and transparent practices (Gold et al., 2015).

Institutional theory suggests that firms may adopt transparency not only for ethical or strategic reasons but also to gain legitimacy and conform to prevailing norms. However, this can result in varying levels of substantive versus symbolic transparency. While some organisations genuinely integrate transparency into their operations, others may adopt it superficially to meet external expectations. This distinction is critical in understanding how transparency influences consumer trust, as consumers are increasingly adept at identifying inconsistencies between rhetoric and reality.

3.4 Trust Theory

Trust theory provides a direct framework for understanding how transparency influences consumer perceptions. According to Mayer et al. (1995), trust is based on three key dimensions: ability, benevolence, and integrity. These dimensions are particularly relevant in the context of supply chains.

- **Ability** refers to the competence of a firm in managing its operations effectively. Transparency regarding production processes, quality control, and supply chain management can enhance perceptions of ability.
- **Benevolence** reflects the extent to which a firm is perceived as caring about stakeholder welfare. Disclosures related to fair labour practices, community engagement, and environmental stewardship contribute to this dimension.
- **Integrity** involves adherence to ethical principles and consistency between words and actions. Transparent reporting, supported by verifiable data, reinforces perceptions of integrity.

Transparency acts as an informational bridge that enables consumers to assess these dimensions, thereby reducing uncertainty and fostering trust. However, trust is not solely determined by the availability of information; it also depends on the credibility and interpretation of that information. Inconsistent or misleading disclosures can undermine trust, even in the presence of extensive transparency.

3.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study conceptualises supply chain transparency as a multi-dimensional construct that functions as both a signal and a relational mechanism within an institutional context. Transparency disclosures serve as signals that reduce information asymmetry (signalling theory), facilitate stakeholder engagement (stakeholder theory), and align with external pressures (institutional theory), ultimately influencing the formation of consumer trust (trust theory).

The framework proposes that:

- Transparency disclosures act as signals that communicate ethical and operational attributes.
- The credibility of these signals is influenced by stakeholder engagement and institutional pressures.
- Consumers interpret these signals based on their perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity.
- These perceptions collectively shape consumer trust.

This integrated framework provides a comprehensive basis for analysing qualitative data from secondary sources, enabling the study to explore how transparency is constructed, communicated, and perceived across different contexts.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on the analysis of secondary data. Qualitative approaches are particularly suitable for exploring complex and context-dependent phenomena, such as the relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on measurement and statistical relationships, qualitative research emphasises interpretation, meaning, and the exploration of underlying processes.

The use of secondary data allows for the examination of a wide range of perspectives, including those of corporations, non-governmental organisations, and industry bodies. These sources provide rich, narrative-based insights into how transparency is conceptualised and communicated, as well as how it is perceived by stakeholders.

4.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study relies on multiple types of secondary data, including:

- Corporate sustainability and annual reports
- Supply chain disclosure statements
- Reports from non-governmental organisations (NGOs)
- Industry analyses and white papers
- Policy documents and regulatory reports

To ensure the relevance and credibility of the data, the following selection criteria are applied:

- **Relevance**: The document must address supply chain transparency, ethical sourcing, or consumer trust.
- **Credibility**: Sources must originate from reputable organisations, such as established corporations, recognised NGOs, or academic and industry institutions.
- **Recency**: Preference is given to documents published within the last ten years to capture current trends and practices.
- **Diversity**: The sample includes documents from different industries and geographical contexts to enhance the generalizability of findings.

This purposive sampling approach ensures that the data set is both comprehensive and aligned with the research objectives (Patton, 2015).

4.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involves systematic identification, retrieval, and organisation of relevant documents. Publicly available reports are accessed through corporate websites, organisational databases, and online repositories. Each document is catalogued and stored in a structured database, with metadata including publication year, source type, industry, and geographical focus.

To maintain consistency, a standardised protocol is followed for document selection and inclusion. This includes screening titles and abstracts, followed by full-text review to confirm relevance. Documents that do not meet the inclusion criteria are excluded.

4.3 Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis

The study employs thematic analysis as the primary method for data interpretation. Thematic analysis is a widely used qualitative technique that involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis follows a six-step process:

- **Familiarisation**: Reading and re-reading the documents to gain an overall understanding of the content.
- **Initial Coding**: Generating codes that capture key concepts related to transparency and trust.
- **Theme Development**: Grouping codes into broader themes, such as signalling mechanisms, credibility, stakeholder engagement, and trust dimensions.
- **Reviewing Themes**: Refining themes to ensure coherence and distinctiveness.
- **Defining and Naming Themes**: Clearly articulating the meaning and scope of each theme.
- **Interpretation**: Linking themes to the theoretical framework and research questions.

This systematic approach enables the identification of recurring patterns and insights across diverse data sources.

4.4 Ensuring Trustworthiness

To enhance the rigour and credibility of the study, several strategies are employed, based on the criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

- **Credibility**: Achieved through the use of multiple data sources (triangulation) and careful interpretation of findings.
- **Transferability**: Ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and data sources.
- **Dependability**: Maintained through a transparent and documented research process.
- **Confirmability**: Supported by linking findings to data and minimising researcher bias.

These measures contribute to the robustness and reliability of the research.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

As the study relies on publicly available secondary data, it does not involve direct interaction with human participants. However, ethical considerations remain important. All sources are properly cited to ensure academic integrity and avoid plagiarism. Additionally, the analysis is conducted objectively, without misrepresenting or selectively interpreting the data (Mannan & Farhana, 2026).

4.6 Limitations of the Methodology

While the use of secondary data offers several advantages, it also presents limitations. First, the study is dependent on the availability and quality of existing documents, which may vary across sources.

Second, corporate reports may contain biases, as organisations may present information in a favourable light. Third, the absence of primary data limits the ability to capture real-time consumer perspectives.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative analysis of diverse and credible secondary sources provides valuable insights into the dynamics of supply chain transparency and consumer trust.

5. Findings & Analysis

The qualitative analysis of secondary data reveals several interrelated themes that illuminate how supply chain transparency is conceptualised, communicated, and linked to consumer trust. These themes include: transparency as a signalling mechanism, credibility and verification, stakeholder-oriented narratives, digital-enabled transparency, tensions between transparency and information overload, and discrepancies between symbolic and substantive transparency. Each theme is discussed in detail below, with connections to the theoretical framework.

5.1 Transparency as a Signalling Mechanism

Across corporate sustainability reports and industry documents, transparency is consistently framed as a strategic signal used to communicate ethical commitment and operational integrity. Organisations frequently highlight their disclosure practices, such as supplier lists, sourcing policies, and audit results, as evidence of responsible behaviour. These disclosures function as signals intended to reduce information asymmetry and enhance consumer confidence (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011).

For instance, many firms explicitly emphasise traceability initiatives that allow consumers to track the origin of raw materials. These initiatives are presented as tangible proof of ethical sourcing, thereby reinforcing perceptions of organisational competence and accountability. The presence of detailed metrics, such as percentages of audited suppliers or reductions in carbon emissions, further strengthens the signalling value of transparency by providing quantifiable evidence.

However, the analysis also reveals variation in the strength of these signals. While some organisations provide comprehensive and verifiable disclosures, others rely on generalised statements and aspirational language. This distinction aligns with signalling theory, which posits that strong signals are those that are costly to imitate and difficult to falsify (Connelly et al., 2011). Weak signals, characterised by vague or unverifiable claims, are less effective in fostering consumer trust and may even raise scepticism.

5.2 Credibility and the Role of Verification

A recurring theme in the data is the critical importance of credibility in shaping the effectiveness of transparency initiatives. Consumers are not only concerned with the availability of information but also with its reliability and authenticity. As such, third-party verification mechanisms-such as certifications, independent audits, and partnerships with reputable organisations- play a central role in enhancing trust.

Corporate reports frequently reference certifications related to labour standards, environmental sustainability, and ethical sourcing. These certifications serve as external endorsements that validate the firm's claims, thereby increasing the perceived integrity of transparency disclosures (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Similarly, NGO reports often highlight the presence or absence of independent verification as a key determinant of credibility.

The findings also indicate that transparency without verification may be insufficient to build trust. In several cases, organisations that disclosed extensive information but lacked third-party validation were subject to criticism and scepticism. This suggests that transparency must be accompanied by credible assurance mechanisms to be effective.

Moreover, the analysis reveals that inconsistencies between reported practices and external assessments can significantly undermine trust. When discrepancies are identified, such as gaps between corporate claims and NGO findings, consumers may perceive the firm as lacking integrity. This reinforces the importance of alignment between internal disclosures and external evaluations.

5.3 Stakeholder-Oriented Narratives

Another prominent theme is the use of stakeholder-oriented narratives in transparency disclosures. Organisations frequently frame their supply chain practices in terms of their impact on various stakeholders, including workers, communities, and the environment. These narratives emphasise ethical responsibility, social impact, and long-term sustainability.

Such narratives align with stakeholder theory, which emphasises the importance of addressing the interests and expectations of multiple stakeholder groups (Freeman, 1984). By highlighting initiatives such as fair labour practices, community development programs, and environmental conservation efforts, firms seek to demonstrate benevolence and ethical commitment.

The analysis suggests that stakeholder-oriented narratives play a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions of trustworthiness. Consumers are more likely to trust organisations that are perceived as caring about the well-being of others, rather than solely focusing on profit. This is consistent with the benevolence dimension of trust theory (Mayer et al., 1995).

However, the effectiveness of these narratives depends on their authenticity and consistency. Narratives that are supported by concrete actions and measurable outcomes are more persuasive than those that rely solely on rhetoric. Additionally, the inclusion of stakeholder voices-such as testimonials from workers or community members-can enhance the credibility and emotional resonance of transparency disclosures.

5.4 Digital-Enabled Transparency

The integration of digital technologies into supply chain transparency practices is another key finding. Many organisations have adopted tools such as blockchain, QR codes, and online platforms to provide real-time and accessible information to consumers. These technologies enable greater visibility and traceability, thereby enhancing the transparency of supply chains (Kamble et al., 2020).

For example, several reports describe the use of QR codes on product packaging that allow consumers to access detailed information about the product's origin, production process, and sustainability attributes. This interactive approach to transparency not only increases accessibility but also empowers consumers to make informed decisions.

The analysis indicates that digital-enabled transparency can strengthen consumer trust by providing verifiable and user-friendly information. However, it also highlights challenges related to consumer awareness and technological literacy. Not all consumers are equally equipped to interpret or utilise digital transparency tools, which may limit their effectiveness.

Furthermore, the adoption of advanced technologies raises questions about data accuracy and governance. While technologies such as blockchain offer enhanced security and immutability, their effectiveness depends on the quality of data input and the integrity of participating actors. Thus, digital transparency must be complemented by robust governance frameworks to ensure reliability.

5.5 Transparency and Information Overload

While transparency is generally associated with positive outcomes, the analysis reveals that excessive or poorly structured information can have unintended negative effects. Many reports include extensive data, technical terminology, and complex metrics that may be difficult for consumers to understand.

This phenomenon, often referred to as information overload, can lead to confusion, disengagement, and reduced trust (Sodhi & Tang, 2019). When consumers are overwhelmed by the volume or complexity of information, they may rely on heuristics or ignore the information altogether. This undermines the intended purpose of transparency, which is to facilitate informed decision-making.

The findings suggest that effective transparency requires not only the disclosure of information but also its clear and accessible presentation. Simplified summaries, visual aids, and user-friendly interfaces can enhance comprehension and engagement. Additionally, tailoring information to different audience segments may improve its relevance and impact.

5.6 Symbolic versus Substantive Transparency

A critical insight from the analysis is the distinction between symbolic and substantive transparency. Symbolic transparency refers to superficial or performative disclosures that are intended to create an impression of openness without meaningful change. Substantive transparency, on the other hand, involves genuine efforts to improve supply chain practices and provide accurate, comprehensive information.

Several NGO and industry reports highlight cases where firms engage in symbolic transparency, such as publishing selective information or emphasising positive aspects while omitting negative ones. These practices are often associated with greenwashing and can erode consumer trust when exposed (Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

In contrast, organisations that adopt substantive transparency demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement, accountability, and stakeholder engagement. These firms are more likely to disclose both successes and challenges, thereby enhancing their credibility and trustworthiness.

The analysis underscores that the impact of transparency on consumer trust depends not only on the presence of disclosure but also on its depth, honesty, and consistency. Substantive transparency is more effective in building trust, while symbolic transparency may provide short-term reputational benefits but poses long-term risks.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. This section interprets the results in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature, offering deeper insights into the mechanisms through which transparency influences trust.

6.1 Transparency as a Multifaceted Trust-Building Mechanism

The analysis confirms that supply chain transparency functions as a multifaceted mechanism that influences consumer trust through multiple pathways. Consistent with signalling theory, transparency disclosures act as signals that reduce information asymmetry and convey information about a firm's ethical and operational attributes (Spence, 1973). However, the effectiveness of these signals depends on their credibility, clarity, and consistency.

The findings extend existing literature by demonstrating that transparency is not a uniform construct but rather a spectrum that ranges from symbolic to substantive practices. This aligns with institutional theory, which suggests that organisations may adopt transparency for different reasons, including compliance, legitimacy, and strategic advantage (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The distinction between symbolic and substantive transparency highlights the importance of examining not only the presence of disclosure but also its quality and intent.

6.2 The Central Role of Credibility and Verification

One of the most significant insights from the study is the central role of credibility in mediating the relationship between transparency and trust. While transparency provides the informational basis for trust, credibility determines whether that information is accepted and believed by consumers.

This finding reinforces the importance of third-party verification and external validation, as emphasised in both signalling theory and prior research (Connelly et al., 2011; Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Certifications, audits, and partnerships with reputable organisations serve as credibility enhancers that strengthen the integrity dimension of trust (Mayer et al., 1995).

The discussion also highlights the potential risks associated with credibility gaps. Inconsistencies between corporate disclosures and external assessments can undermine trust and damage reputational capital. This underscores the need for alignment between internal practices and external communication, as well as the importance of transparency in addressing both positive and negative aspects of supply chain performance.

6.3 Stakeholder Engagement and Relational Trust

The findings emphasise the role of stakeholder-oriented narratives in shaping consumer trust. By framing transparency in terms of its impact on workers, communities, and the environment, organisations appeal to the benevolence dimension of trust. This supports stakeholder theory, which posits that organisations must address the needs and expectations of multiple stakeholders to achieve legitimacy and long-term success (Freeman, 1984).

The discussion suggests that trust is not solely a function of information disclosure but also of relational engagement. Consumers are more likely to trust organisations that demonstrate genuine concern for stakeholder welfare and engage in meaningful dialogue. This aligns with the concept of relational trust, which is built through ongoing interactions and shared values (Mayer et al., 1995).

However, the effectiveness of stakeholder narratives depends on their authenticity and alignment with actual practices. Narratives that are perceived as exaggerated or inconsistent may lead to scepticism and distrust. Therefore, organisations must ensure that their communication strategies are grounded in substantive actions and verifiable outcomes.

6.4 Digital Technologies as Enablers and Challenges

The integration of digital technologies into transparency practices represents a significant development in supply chain management. The findings indicate that technologies such as blockchain and QR codes enhance visibility, traceability, and accessibility, thereby strengthening the informational foundation of trust (Kamble et al., 2020).

From a theoretical perspective, digital technologies can be viewed as tools that enhance the signalling capacity of transparency by providing real-time and verifiable information. They also support stakeholder engagement by enabling interactive and user-friendly communication.

However, the discussion also acknowledges the limitations and challenges associated with digital transparency. These include issues related to technological literacy, data accuracy, and governance. The effectiveness of digital tools depends on their usability and the extent to which consumers trust the underlying systems. Therefore, organisations must complement technological solutions with clear communication and robust governance frameworks.

6.5 Managing Information Overload

The issue of information overload presents a critical challenge for transparency initiatives. While the disclosure of detailed information is intended to enhance trust, excessive or complex data can have the opposite effect. This finding contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of information design and communication strategies in transparency practices (Sodhi & Tang, 2019).

The discussion suggests that organisations must strike a balance between completeness and clarity. Providing too little information may lead to suspicion, while providing too much may result in confusion. Effective transparency requires the curation and presentation of information in a way that is accessible, relevant, and meaningful to consumers.

This has practical implications for organisations, which must invest in user-centred design and communication strategies to ensure that transparency initiatives achieve their intended outcomes.

6.6 Implications for Theory and Practice

The study contributes to theoretical understanding by integrating multiple perspectives to explain the relationship between transparency and trust. It highlights the interplay between signalling, stakeholder engagement, institutional pressures, and trust dimensions, offering a comprehensive framework for future research.

From a managerial perspective, the findings provide actionable insights for organisations seeking to enhance consumer trust through transparency. Key recommendations include:

- Prioritising substantive transparency over symbolic disclosure
- Investing in credible verification mechanisms
- Engaging stakeholders through authentic and consistent narratives
- Leveraging digital technologies to enhance accessibility and traceability
- Designing transparency initiatives to minimise information overload

6.7 Limitations and Future Research

While the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The reliance on secondary data may limit the ability to capture real-time consumer perspectives. Additionally, the findings may be influenced by the quality and bias of the selected documents.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data, such as consumer interviews or surveys, to validate and extend the findings. Comparative studies across industries and regions could also provide deeper insights into contextual variations in transparency and trust.

7. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the relationship between supply chain transparency and consumer trust, emphasising the complexity and multidimensionality of this dynamic. By integrating insights from signalling theory, stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and trust theory, the research demonstrates that transparency is not merely an act of information disclosure but a strategic and relational mechanism that shapes consumer perceptions and organisational legitimacy.

The findings highlight that transparency can significantly enhance consumer trust when it is credible, consistent, and supported by verifiable evidence. Transparency disclosures serve as important signals that reduce information asymmetry and enable consumers to assess a firm's ethical and operational performance. However, the effectiveness of these signals depends on their authenticity and the presence of external validation mechanisms, such as certifications and independent audits. Without such assurances, transparency initiatives may fail to achieve their intended outcomes and may even generate scepticism.

A key contribution of this study is the distinction between symbolic and substantive transparency. While symbolic transparency may offer short-term reputational benefits, it poses significant risks to long-term trust if inconsistencies are exposed. In contrast, substantive transparency, characterised by honest, comprehensive, and verifiable disclosures, fosters deeper and more sustainable trust relationships. This underscores the importance of aligning communication strategies with actual practices and maintaining consistency across different sources of information.

The study also identifies the growing role of digital technologies in enhancing transparency. Tools such as blockchain and QR codes provide new opportunities for real-time traceability and consumer engagement. However, their effectiveness depends on usability, data integrity, and consumer awareness, highlighting the need for complementary governance and communication strategies.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that organisations should prioritise clarity, credibility, and stakeholder engagement in their transparency initiatives. By adopting a holistic approach that integrates ethical practices, technological innovation, and effective communication, firms can build and sustain consumer trust in increasingly complex supply chain environments.

In conclusion, supply chain transparency represents both an opportunity and a challenge for organisations. When implemented thoughtfully and authentically, it can serve as a powerful driver of consumer trust and long-term value creation.

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