

Ethical Performance of Consumer Products Retailers in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria: Balancing Profit and Social Responsibility

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Abstract: *This study investigates the ethical performance of consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria, with a focus on how these businesses balance profit-making objectives with social responsibility obligations. Retail markets such as Ariaria International Market and Ekeoha Shopping Centre serve as economic lifelines for millions but often operate within informal frameworks where ethical practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR) are inconsistently applied. Using a mixed-method approach, the research collected data from 200 consumers and 30 retailers through structured questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that while many retailers engage in socially responsible behaviors—such as fair pricing, community support, and basic environmental practices—these efforts are often informal and under-communicated to consumers. Consumer awareness of retailers' ethical conduct was found to be moderately low, but positively correlated with trust and repeat patronage where present. Retailers, particularly small-scale operators, reported struggling to maintain a balance between ethical commitments and profitability due to economic pressures, lack of regulatory incentives, and limited consumer demand for ethical standards. The study concludes that while there is an ethical consciousness among Aba's retailers, institutional support and consumer sensitization are necessary to create a sustainable synergy between profit and social responsibility. Policy recommendations include developing collective CSR initiatives within market associations and implementing local incentive frameworks to encourage ethical retailing. This research contributes to the discourse on ethics and CSR in emerging market retail environments, with implications for small business development, consumer protection, and public policy in Nigeria.*

Keywords: Ethical performance, consumer retailers, corporate social responsibility, Aba, profit, social responsibility, and informal markets.

INTRODUCTION

Retail businesses serve as the backbone of consumer goods distribution in Nigeria, especially in bustling commercial hubs like Aba, Abia State. As one of the largest urban centres in South-Eastern Nigeria, Aba is renowned for its vibrant markets such as Ariaria International Market and Ekeoha Shopping Centre, where thousands of consumer product retailers engage in daily transactions with individuals from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Eze & Ndubisi, 2013). These markets contribute significantly to the local economy by creating employment opportunities, promoting commerce and meeting the consumer demands of both rural and urban populations. However, in the pursuit of profit, many small and medium-sized retailers in Aba face ethical dilemmas that challenge the principles of fairness, consumer protection and community responsibility. Reports of price manipulation, sale of counterfeit or expired goods, poor environmental hygiene and lack of concern for community welfare have raised concerns about the ethical conduct of traders in these markets. The informal nature of many of these businesses, coupled with weak regulatory enforcement has further complicated efforts to ensure socially responsible retailing (Onuoha, 2012). At the same time, consumers are becoming increasingly aware of their rights and are demanding more transparency, accountability and ethical behaviour from the businesses they patronize. Retailers who demonstrate ethical commitment – through fair pricing, environmental cleanliness and genuine concern for customer welfare- may enjoy greater customer loyalty and enhanced reputational value (Idemudia, 201). Yet, the pressure to survive in a competitive and unstable economic environment often leads many retailers to prioritize short-term profit over long-term ethical considerations. This tension between profitability and social responsibility raises important questions about the ethical performance of consumer product retailers in emerging economies. Despite growing academic and policy interest in corporate social responsibility (CSR), most studies have focused on large corporations and formal businesses, leaving a gap in the literature concerning small-scale and informal retailers in cities like Aba (Amaechi et al, 2006).

This study, therefore seeks to examine the ethical performance of consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State, with a focus on how they balance the demands of profit-making with their responsibilities to consumers and the broader community. It also investigates consumer perceptions of ethical retailing and the potential impact of socially responsible behaviour on customer loyalty and business sustainability and analyzes the relationship between ethical performance and customer loyalty or competitive advantage.

Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- H₀₁:** There is no significant relationship between ethical performance and customer loyalty among consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State.
- H₀₂:** There is no significant effect of consumer awareness of ethical practices on retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State.
- H₀₃:** Ethical and social responsibility practices do not significantly influence business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Framework

Market Analysis of Nigerian Consumer Products:

The Nigerian consumer market has exhibited promising growth and adaptability over the years, with annual growth forecasts indicating a robust potential for expansion. Coupled with an impressive GDP growth rate, ongoing economic reforms are designed to create a more auspicious investment climate, despite the various social and economic challenges that persist. Nigeria is home to a population exceeding 200 million, characterized by rapid urban migration and a vibrant, youthful demographic (Adegbite, 2012). This combination drives an increasing demand for trendy and affordable products, while simultaneously fostering the development of modern retail and consumer services. In recent years, the surge in e-commerce, combined with the ongoing digitalization of the marketplace and the pervasive influence of social media, has become increasingly significant in shaping consumer behavior and preferences. Consumer product companies operating in Nigeria are strategically engaging in localization efforts, producing tailored goods that resonate with local tastes, cultural preferences, and purchasing power (Ikubaje, 2014). This approach is essential for meeting the diverse needs of Nigerian consumers, thereby enhancing market acceptability and fostering brand loyalty.

Despite the potential for long-term growth signalled by these reforms, the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) sector—a critical component of the overall consumer products landscape—has faced a downturn. This decline can be attributed to a series of unprecedented challenges, including significant increases in the cost of raw materials, the implications of removing fuel subsidies, elevated tariffs, and import restrictions (Crane & Matten, 2016). Additionally, the floating exchange rate has continued to exert pressure on market dynamics, leading to increased operational costs that are inevitably passed on to consumers. This scenario has contributed to wavering consumer confidence and economic uncertainty.

Balancing Profit and Social Responsibility.

The primary objective of establishing a firm or business is to generate revenue while ensuring sustainable operations. Hart (1995) asserts that “the social responsibility of business is to increase its Profits.” However, companies are increasingly facing pressures to be both ethically responsible and profitable. Hawken (1993) posits that long-term business success is predicated on the health of the overall system in which it operates, given credence to his popular quote that “You cannot have a healthy business without a healthy society, and you cannot have a healthy society without a healthy business, further highlighting that sustainable commerce cannot do well in isolation from societal and ecological wellbeing. With a rise in consumer awareness and advocacy for socially responsible practices, retail businesses in Aba and the country in general are urged to provide products that not only satisfy profitability goals but also adhere to ethical standards. It’s therefore certain that incorporating ethical considerations into their business models can serve as a key differentiator for companies seeking to stand out in a competitive retail market. For an organization to thrive, they must keep making money, no matter how virtuous their mission is, meaning that profit should not be seen as a dishonest word, because profit without social responsibility is likened to a body without a soul” (Pfeffer, 2015). While maintaining focus on profitability objectives, retail businesses should also integrate social initiatives such as supporting local vendors, engaging in philanthropy, and

participating in community activities. This approach not only enhances their brand reputation but also contributes positively to the communities they serve. Striking a balance between profitability and ethical responsibility therefore is essential for building trust and loyalty, ultimately fostering long-term profitability that benefits customers, the organization, and society.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate social responsibility requires integrating economic, social and environmental considerations into business operations to benefit the communities around a business area, customers, employees and the environment. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) should be an integral part of a company's business strategy, focusing on the obligation to serve the community through ethical practices, adherence to legal standards, and strong economic performance (Uadiale & Fagbemi, 2012). Thus, CSR should extend beyond mere corporate philanthropy, which is just one aspect of the broader concept of CSR (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). CSR describes how a brand or business entity contributes to the wellbeing of the community and individuals in their environment. The benefit of CSR outweighs the profit motives of an organization and geared towards making positive impact on society. Part of the moral case for CSR is that society and business have mutual obligations within a social contract, (Boddy, 2017). CSR leads to enhanced reputation, customer trust, social stability, strengthening community relations, and give a business more competitive advantage over unethical competitors. Businesses in Aba can embrace this initiative by being environmentally friendly, promoting diversity, equity, treating employees fairly, ensuring ethical decision making in business and giving back to the community. According to Porter & Kramer (2006), aligning social responsibility with business strategy can provide organizations with a competitive advantage. This approach integrates profit generation with societal benefits, fostering a synergistic relationship between business goals and social contributions.

Environmental Responsibility

The environment will always be a shared resource; there would be no society or community if the environment were destroyed. Therefore, for businesses to be sustainable, their operations must be environmentally responsible (Hawken 1993). Changes in the natural environment caused by individual or business activities can be beneficial or harmful and can directly or indirectly affect the atmosphere, climate, land, soil, water resources, animals, and plants. Organizations must consider the impact of their operations on the environment as part of their responsibilities to stakeholders (Crane & Matten, 2016). Environmental responsibility is an investment in the future and should not be viewed as an expense. When businesses or individuals fail to manage these environmental impacts properly, it can lead to resource depletion, pollution, and loss of biodiversity, jeopardizing a healthy planet for future generations. Boddy (2017), referencing Eccles et al. (2014), found that highly sustainable companies outperform less sustainable ones. This difference is especially clear in companies that sell directly to consumers, compete based on brand and reputation, and use significant natural resources. A firm's willingness to adopt environmentally sustainable strategies will ultimately become a key competitive advantage (Hart, 1995). Managing waste is a significant challenge in Aba due to the high volume of trading activities of consumer products. Before the new administration of Governor Alex Oti took over, Retailers in Aba did not prioritize proper

waste disposal, eco-friendly packaging which had led to high volume of waste on major roads and streets, blocking drainages and causing more pollutions to the environment. The ethical consideration of businesses and individual residences is to behave responsibly in ways that preserve and protect the natural environment both for the present and future generation.

Hart (1995) posits that the natural environment can serve as a source of competitive advantage for ethical organizations rather than merely functioning as a constraint. He identifies three interrelated strategies concerning environmental responsibility that firms can employ to attain this advantage. The first strategy is Pollution Prevention, which focuses on minimizing waste and emissions. This approach can lead to reductions in material costs, legal and regulatory fines, and negative environmental impacts, thereby contributing to a more sustainable future. The second strategy highlighted by Hart (1995) is Product Stewardship. This concept emphasizes the importance of mitigating environmental impacts by taking responsibility for the entire lifecycle of a product—from design and sale to use and final disposal. Firms that actively monitor this process to promote material reuse and responsibly manage disposal consistently distinguish themselves in a competitive retail market. Lastly, Hart (1995) emphasizes the necessity of long-term strategies that aim to develop capabilities contributing to a sustainable future, which he refers to as Sustainable Development. This approach advocates for systemic change and the adoption of clean technologies, striving to create a shared vision of sustainability that effectively leverages an organization's resources to achieve such goals.

Price sensitivity and profitability concerns of Aba Consumers

The present economic realities have made consumers savvier, price-sensitive, and more demanding about every aspect of their shopping journey, searching for products that resonate with real value and competitive pricing, especially in essential commodities (Okoye, 2009). The price sensitive nature of consumers in Aba and other cities in Nigeria has made consumers to drift towards ensuring they get fair deals or bargains and as such engage in price comparison between the traditional open market and modern retail markets where emphasis is also placed on getting quality consumer products and positive customer experience which is now a conundrum for organized retailers squeezing margins between tightening cost. These high expectations from shoppers put organized retailers in very tight corners, trying to catch up with their ethical requirements to ensure fair prices and push them to seek more promotional deals, rebates from vendors, and focus more on lines with higher turnover, still not compromising on quality.

Consumer Safety and Health

With the growing trend for organic and eco-friendly product, most consumers are now prioritizing their physical and overall wellbeing making them to encourage the purchase of ethical brands. Nwagbara & Brown's (2014) report has it that about 66% of consumers would not mind paying more for sustainable brands, as health and safety is now the absolute determining factor when consumers are looking out for a place to shop. Murphy et al (2005) posits that the ethical challenges faced by consumer product retailers in Aba are:

i).Adulteration and Counterfeiting

The bustling city of Aba known for its manufacturing and trading activities is ravaged with a mix of both standard, substandard, counterfeit and adulterated products, which has become of ethical concern to consumers. Consumer products in this regard are considered risky and present a serious ethical concern for all categories of retailers. As Solomon et al (2019) put it, Consumers depend on retailers as gatekeepers for reliable and safe products. It is no wonder that retailers in Aba face pressure to range cheaper unauthentic or fake products due to customers' demand for lower prices. Retailers should therefore ensure that the consumer products they sell to the public are safe for consumption and do not results in any form of public health issues.

ii).Weak regulatory enforcement and ethical standards.

Absence of standards enforcement by regulatory bodies like SON, NAFDAC FCCPC etc. can present significant ethical challenges for both retailers and consumers. When quality standards and regulations are not rigorously upheld, it undermines trust in the market. To address these challenges, retailers must adhere to legal and ethical standards, as well as ensure regulatory compliance. This commitment not only fosters consumer confidence but also demonstrates the retailer's dedication to social responsibility and ethical practices in their operations.

iii).Pricing strategies and transparency

Pricing strategies vary among retailers in Aba. Customers are naturally attracted to bargain prices and special offers on cheaper products, due to their conservative tendencies, even if they suspect the goods are not authentic. It's generally believed that businesses cannot compete if they only sell genuine products. Unfair pricing or price gouging, which is viewed as unethical, involves significantly raising the price of essential products to unreasonable levels, especially when there's a sudden shift in demand or a reduction in supply, also called scarcity. Olayinka & Oluwakayode (2014) argue that fair pricing is both ethical and essential for maintaining consumer trust and social responsibility. Price gouging, prevalent in Aba and other emerging markets, is used to exploit consumers, particularly during scarcity or crises.

iv).Consumer Protection and Rights.

This involves safeguarding individual buyers or consumers when making purchases of goods or services and protecting the general public against unfair practices in the marketplace. Consumers often face difficulty in seeking redress for unfair practices, defective, or faulty products due to weak consumer protection mechanisms, lack of awareness of their rights, and challenges in reaching regulatory authorities. Among the consumer rights prevalent in this environment are the right to be informed, to be heard, the right to choose, and the right to safety. These rights are enforced by the Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (FCCPC).

Case Studies

(Case study 1: Whole Foods Market)

Whole Foods Market, recognized for its commitment to natural and organic food retailing, was acquired by Amazon in 2017. Over the years, Whole Foods has established itself as a leader in conscious consumption within the U.S. retail sector. This positioning is reflected in its mission statement, operational practices, and brand identity. The company uses in-store displays and digital screens for storytelling about local farmers and suppliers, enabling customers to learn more about where their food comes from, its production methods, and sustainable practices.

Conscious consumption refers to a purchasing philosophy where consumers make informed and deliberate choices regarding their buying decisions, considering the economic, social, and environmental impacts. This approach encourages support for ethical organizations and products while discouraging patronage of those deemed harmful or unethical. The ethical marketing strategies for conscious consumers are (Nwagbare & Brown, 2014):

- i).Supply Chain Responsibility: Whole Foods promotes ethical sourcing practices from the acquisition of raw materials to the product's ultimate disposal.
- ii).Prioritizing Environmental and Social Impact: The Company seeks to balance quality and price while maintaining a strong focus on environmental and social considerations.
- iii).Health and Wellness: Whole Foods provides free educational resources to consumers regarding nutrition and food sourcing, empowering them to make healthier choices.
- iv).Demanding Transparency: The Company ensures transparency in all operational aspects, allowing consumers to understand the origins and impacts of their purchases.

Whole Foods differentiates itself from conventional grocers by fostering customer loyalty through its dedication to conscious consumption. The company employs various strategies to promote this ethos, including (UNIDO, 2020):

- i).Organic Offerings: Whole Foods provides a wide range of organic produce, meats, and packaged items that are free from pesticides, GMOs, and other harmful substances.
- ii).Banned Ingredients: The store prohibits over 500 ingredients across beverages, supplements, body care products, and household items. This ban includes preservatives, artificial food colors, and hydrogenated oils, catering to health-conscious consumers.
- iii).Sustainability Standards: Whole Foods maintains high sustainability standards in relation to animal welfare and ocean health, ensuring that all practices and activities are certified for sustainability.
- iv).They are actively involved in the support of regenerative agriculture practices among suppliers, energy efficient store practices, food waste reduction strategies and in 2008 they prohibited the use of single-use plastic bags at the store's checkout.

v).Whole Foods' commitment to ethical sourcing, quality standards, transparency, community engagement, and environmental initiatives continues to resonate with consumers, particularly as surveys indicate a growing demand among Gen Z for transparency in food quality and sustainability.

(Case study 2: IKEA SUSTAINABILITY DRIVE)

IKEA's commitment to sustainability showcases how a global company can embed environmental responsibility into its core business strategy. Rather than treating sustainability as a mere philanthropic effort, IKEA has integrated it deeply into its operational framework. This approach is evident in their vision statement, which aims "to make sustainable living desirable and affordable for the many, not just the few." Through these efforts, IKEA is setting a standard for how retail businesses can actively contribute to a more sustainable future. IKEA's sustainability initiative is deeply integrated into its overarching "People and Planet Positive" framework, which aims to infuse sustainable practices throughout every aspect of its value chain (Ikugbaje, 2014)). This comprehensive approach not only emphasizes the importance of eco-conscious product design and responsible raw material sourcing but also encompasses retail operations and logistics. IKEA has set an ambitious goal to achieve 100% renewable

energy across its entire value chain by the year 2030, positioning itself to not only reduce its environmental footprint but to become a climate-positive organization (Murphy et al, 2005):

i).Circular Economy Model: One of the standout initiatives in IKEA's strategy is its “Buy Back and Resell” program, which actively promotes the principles of reuse, repair, and resale. This program encourages consumers to rethink their purchasing habits by prioritizing repairs over replacements, thereby extending the lifecycle of products and minimizing waste.

ii).Living Wage Standards: IKEA is committed to fair labour practices, implementing stringent standards for safe working conditions. This commitment extends across its supply chain, ensuring that ethical practices are upheld and that workers are compensated fairly, fostering a culture of respect and dignity.

iii).Risk Management: IKEA proactively addresses potential risks associated with sustainability by staying ahead of emerging trends and regulatory changes. This proactive stance helps mitigate reputational damage and avoid controversies linked to social and environmental issues, thus safeguarding the brand's integrity.

iv).Competitive Advantage: By aligning its practices with the growing consumer demand for sustainable and ethically sourced products, IKEA effectively transforms sustainability into a competitive advantage. This alignment not only enhances brand loyalty but also cultivates an improved public reputation, attracting a broader customer base that values corporate responsibility.

v).Innovation: The drive for sustainability at IKEA acts as a catalyst for innovation across various dimensions of the business. It inspires new business models, creative product designs, and the use of sustainable materials, all of which contribute to a forward-thinking brand identity.

vi).Cost Efficiency: IKEA's sustainability efforts are also reflected in its commitment to cost efficiency. Initiatives aimed at reducing waste, lowering carbon emissions, and adopting large-scale renewable energy solutions contribute not only to environmental goals but also drive operational efficiencies that enhance energy security and reduce costs.

IKEA is committed to empowering customers to make environmentally conscious decisions and minimize their ecological footprint. The company provides a comprehensive range of information and resources, both in-store and online, to assist individuals in embracing sustainable living practices, including waste reduction and energy conservation. Furthermore, IKEA implements initiatives such as the “Green Friday” promotion to encourage and enhance sustainable consumption among its clientele. Through these comprehensive strategies, IKEA exemplifies a forward-looking approach that not only prioritizes environmental stewardship but also positively impacts society.

Case Study 3: Sundry Markets Ltd

Sundry Markets Nigeria Ltd, the owner of the Market Square brand, is one of the leading grocery retailers in Nigeria. The company's vision is "to provide the most superior shopping experience in the Nigerian market." They have integrated Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into their operations and decision-making processes, establishing themselves as a key

player in consumer product retailing across major cities in Nigeria, including Aba. Sundry Markets Ltd has adopted several initiatives to demonstrate its commitment to social and environmental responsibility. These initiatives include (Store Brands, 2015):

- i).Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): The company actively engages in medical and educational programs that benefit the local communities where they operate, reinforcing their commitment to the well-being of the people.
- ii).Consumer Safety and Health: Sundry Markets emphasizes the importance of customer safety by offering a range of safe, high-quality products sourced ethically. They focus on transparent labelling and marketing practices, ensuring a safe shopping environment for their growing customer base.
- iii).Transparency and Honest Communication: The company prioritizes clear and truthful information about their products and avoids deceptive advertising, fostering trust among consumers.
- iv).Fair labor Practices: Sundry Markets is dedicated to fairness across all operational dimensions, providing safe working conditions and promoting continuous improvement in labour practices. Through these efforts, Sundry Markets Ltd demonstrates a balanced approach to conducting business in a morally responsible and socially acceptable manner, reinforcing their position as a leader in the retail sector.

World Bank (2022) states that the benefits of ethical practices for retailers are:

- i).Building Trust and Enhancing Reputation: Retailers in Aba can significantly enhance their brand reputation and build consumer trust by committing to ethical practices. In a market plagued by counterfeits, standing out as a seller of genuine products can foster sustainable business growth and create a lasting positive impact on the community. By focusing on ethical practices—such as offering genuine products of the right quality at fair prices—retailers can establish strong relationships with consumers, leading to increased loyalty and repeat business.
- ii).Risk Reduction and Legal Compliance: Adhering to ethical standards enables retailers to minimize risks associated with legal penalties and fines. By steering clear of counterfeit or substandard products, these businesses can mitigate potential damages and liabilities.
- iii).Economic Benefits: Retailers who embrace ethical practices often experience heightened sales and customer loyalty. This commitment can lead to lowered operational costs and contribute to individual welfare and economic prosperity. Furthermore, aligning with global ethical standards can create opportunities for national and international partnerships.
- iv).Social Stability and Goodwill: Ethical retailers typically enjoy community goodwill and positive publicity, which can contribute to social stability by reducing tensions and conflicts. As retail businesses and individuals prioritize social responsibility, ethical norms can stimulate local economic growth, encourage the success of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and attract foreign direct investment to Aba.
- v).Competitive Advantage: Retailers dedicated to ethical conduct often achieve a superior reputation that distinguishes them in a crowded marketplace. This competitive edge can drive higher patronage and promote long-term sustainable growth.
- vi).High Employee Morale and Productivity: Workplaces that prioritize ethical practices tend to foster trust, cohesion, fairness, and employee satisfaction. Motivated employees are generally more productive, benefiting all stakeholders involved.
- vii).Customer Satisfaction and Retention: When businesses adopt ethical norms, customers receive quality, safe, and authentic products, leading to higher satisfaction. Satisfied customers

often share their positive experiences through word-of-mouth, effectively promoting the business and encouraging repeat purchases.

Procurement Magazine (2025) recommends the following for ethical retailing:

i).Educate Consumers and Staff on Ethical Rights and Responsibilities: Regulatory bodies should develop comprehensive educational initiatives aimed at both consumers and retail staff. These programs should cover key topics such as ethical rights, consumer protection laws, and employees' responsibilities in promoting ethical retail practices. This education will empower individuals to make informed decisions and recognize their rights in the marketplace.

ii).Source Responsibly from Verified Vendors: Retail supply chains should adopt a strict policy for sourcing products from verified, reputable vendors. This involves conducting thorough audits and background checks to ensure that vendors adhere to ethical practices, including fair labor conditions and sustainable sourcing. By supporting vendors who align with these values, retailers can enhance product integrity and foster a culture of responsibility.

iii).Advocate for Stronger Consumer Protection Laws: There is a pressing need to lobby for the creation and enforcement of robust consumer protection laws. Retailers and advocacy groups should work together to identify gaps in current legislation and propose amendments that address emerging ethical issues in retail. Firm enforcement of these laws will help deter unethical practices and provide consumers with recourse when their rights are violated.

iv).Implement Comprehensive Quality Control Measures: Retail businesses must establish and maintain formidable internal quality control systems. These systems should include regular inspections, testing protocols, and robust compliance checks to ensure that all products meet established safety and quality standards. By prioritizing quality, retailers can build consumer trust and minimize the risk of distributing substandard or harmful products.

v).Train Retail Employees to Identify and Prevent Counterfeit Products: Retail employees play a crucial role in maintaining the integrity of products offered to consumers. Regular training sessions should be organized to equip staff with the skills to recognize counterfeit goods and understand the implications of such products on consumer safety and brand reputation. Additionally, employees should be made aware of environmental impacts related to counterfeit goods, emphasizing the importance of sustainable retailing.

vi).Promote Awareness and Education on Ethical Consumption: Retailers should actively promote campaigns that educate consumers about the value of ethical consumption. This includes highlighting the benefits of purchasing ethically produced goods and informing customers about the differences between ethical and non-ethical products. By encouraging consumers to prioritize sustainability and ethical practices in their purchasing decisions, retailers can drive demand for responsible products and foster a more ethical marketplace. These detailed recommendations aim to create a comprehensive framework for ethical retailing, prioritizing consumer safety, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility in all retail practices.

Theoretical Framework.

Triple Bottom Line (TBL): This model suggests that business success should be measured by profit, people (social responsibility), and planet (environmental impact). The triple bottom line, a concept introduced by John Elkington in 1994, is an essential framework that

significantly enhances the assessment of a firm's performance by integrating social equity, environmental sustainability, and economic viability. This approach empowers organizations to elevate their focus beyond mere financial profits and to prioritize value creation that makes a meaningful difference in society and the environment. By actively engaging with the "three Ps" — People, Planet, and Profit (or Prosperity) — firms can assertively drive their success while contributing to a sustainable future.

People (Social Responsibility):

The framework emphasizes the importance of Internal Stakeholders, particularly employees, addressing key areas such as fair wages, respectful treatment in the workplace, safe working conditions, non-discrimination, and overall employee welfare. Additionally, it highlights the role of External Stakeholders, including the community and society at large, by promoting ethical engagement with these groups. This includes ensuring the well-being of suppliers and customers, advocating for fair trade practices that benefit diverse populations, and striving to guarantee product availability and accessibility for all.

Planet (Environmental Sustainability):

The concept in question emphasizes the importance of reducing the adverse effects of business activities on the natural environment and ecological systems. Key areas of focus include the protection of biodiversity, effective waste management practices, reduction of energy consumption, and lowering greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, it highlights the significance of conserving water resources, utilizing recycled materials, and preventing air and water pollution. These efforts collectively aim to promote sustainability and ensure a healthier planet for future generations.

Profit (Economic Viability)

Generating revenue and securing long-term financial health are critical objectives that must be pursued ethically and sustainably. Elkington (1997) asserts that economic gains should be achieved through fair and responsible means. This involves implementing fair pricing strategies, actively supporting local businesses, committing to responsible tax practices, prioritizing sustainable product development, and executing ethical marketing. Organizations that align with these principles not only achieve financial success but also fulfil their obligation to promote positive community and environmental impacts. It's essential to adopt these practices for the sake of responsible business operations. As consumers become increasingly aware, driven by rising regulatory pressure and the need for value creation for stakeholders, integrating the principles of the Triple Bottom Line (3Ps) becomes not just an ethical requirement but also a strategically advantageous approach for retail market firms seeking long-term success.

Stakeholder Theory in the Retail Context

This theory emphasizes that businesses should be accountable not only to shareholders but also customers, employees and communities. The stakeholder theory was proposed by Freeman, R. E. (1984) which suggests that businesses should create value not just for the owners (shareholders) but for all stakeholders. The retail industry with vast consumer base, extensive supply chains with a public-facing environment becomes a thing of concern because of the high expectations and interest from stakeholders, which include employees, customers,

suppliers, communities, governments, and the environment. Crane et.al (2014) asserts that retailers must go through the complex stakeholder landscape where issues from consumer rights, supply chain transparency, and labour conditions are closely scrutinized. Businesses must therefore consider the interest of all stakeholders.

Ethical Marketing by Retailers.

Many companies are embracing responsible practices in their resource management and environmental stewardship. A shining example is Marks & Spencer's Plan A 2020, which sets a bold goal to become the world's most sustainable retailer by 2020. This initiative highlights essential areas such as energy efficiency, waste reduction, and the respectful treatment of employees, all aimed at solidifying the company's reputation as a leader in corporate responsibility and sustainability. In addition to industry leaders like Marks & Spencer, many organizations recognize the importance of serving ethical consumers—those who consider ethical and environmental factors in their purchasing decisions and strive to avoid products from companies with poor records. Businesses are increasingly committing to transparency about their operations and the societal and environmental impacts they create. Despite the rising awareness and intention among consumers to make ethical choices, a gap remains between their intentions and actual purchasing behaviours at the checkout. This reality emphasizes that while ethical concerns resonate with many individuals, factors such as convenience, pricing, and brand loyalty often play a significant role in their final decisions. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for companies dedicated to aligning their practices with the values of their customers (Boddy, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive survey design combined with qualitative interviews, employing a mixed-method approach to gather comprehensive data from both consumers and retailers. The research was conducted in Aba, Abia State, focusing on two major commercial areas known as Ariaria International Market and Ekeoha Shopping Centre. These markets are known for diverse retail activities involving consumer goods such as clothing, electronics, cosmetics and household items. The target population of the study comprised retailers of consumer products in the selected markets and consumers who shop regularly in these markets. A total of 200 consumers and 30 retailers were selected using stratified and purposive sampling techniques. Stratified random sampling for consumers across age groups, gender and income level was used while purposive sampling for retailers to ensure inclusion of traders across different product types and business sizes was adopted. Structured questionnaires which covered demographics, ethical practices, consumer perceptions, loyalty and profitability were used for consumers and retailers. Instruments were pre-tested with 10 consumers and 5 retailers for clarity and consistency. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for key sections was above 0.70, indicating acceptable internal consistency. Descriptive statistics- (frequency, mean, tables and percentage), correlation analysis and regression using SPSS were used for quantitative data while thematic analysis based on interview transcriptions to identify patterns and insights on ethical challenges and motivations was used for qualitative data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study adhered to institutional research ethics standards and participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Test of Hypotheses

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between ethical performance and customer loyalty among consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State.

Table1: Correlations analysis of ethical performance and customer loyalty among consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State.

Correlations			STP Framework	Marketing Performance
Pearson correlation	Ethical Perform.	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.703**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.023
		N	380	380
	Customer Loyalty	Correlation Coefficient	.703**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.023	.
		N	380	380

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: SPSS Output Data, 2025

Table 1 shows a correlation coefficient (r) of 0.703**, indicating a strong relationship between ethical Performance and Customer loyalty among consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. In order to estimate the proportion of the variations in customer loyalty attributable to variations in ethical performance, we calculated the coefficient of determination - the square of the correlation coefficient. The $R^2(0.703)^2$ is 0.494. This means that 49% of variations in customer loyalty among consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria is accounted for, by variations in ethical performance. These facts point to the fact that ethical performance has significant relationship with customer loyalty among consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

H₀₂: There is no significant effect of consumer awareness of ethical practices on retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria.

Table 2. Simple regression analysis showing the effect of consumer awareness of ethical practices on retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria.

Coefficients						
		Unstandardized	Standardized			
		Coefficients	Coefficients			
Model		B	Std.Error	Beta	t- value	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.331	0.136		17.176	.000
	Consumer Awareness	0.520	0.031	0.663	17.000	.000
	R	0.796				
	R ²	0.633				
	Adjusted R ²	0.539				
	F – Statistics	19.016				

Dependent Variable: Retailers' commitment to social responsibility

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 shows the effect of consumer awareness of ethical practices on retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. From the simple regression analysis table, consumer awareness of ethical practices was found to be statistically significant at 1% and positively related to retailer's commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State. This implies that an increase in consumer awareness of ethical practices will translate to a corresponding increase in retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. This assertion is at the 99% confidence level. The R² value of 0.633 shows that 63% of variations in retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State, was accounted for by consumer awareness of ethical practices. The remaining 37% was due to some other extraneous factors that were not included in the model. Similarly, the f-statistics value of 19.016 indicates that the model specification was correct while significant at 1%. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no significant effect of consumer awareness of ethical practices on retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria is rejected and the alternative hypothesis upheld.

Ho 3: Ethical and social responsibility practices do not significantly influence business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State.

Table3. Regression on the effect of ethical and social responsibility practices on business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria.

Coefficients						
		Unstandardized	Standardized			
		Coefficients	Coefficients			
Model		B	Std.Error	Beta	t- value	Sig.
1	(Constant)	4.571	4.419		1.076	.000
	Ethical &Social Resp.	0.582	0.212	0.596	2.600	.0006
	R	0.834				
	R ²	0.695				
	Adjusted R ²	0.559				
	F – Statistics	17.273				

Dependent Variable: Business sustainability or competitive advantage

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 shows the effect of Ethical and social responsibility practices on business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria. From the simple regression analysis table, ethical and social responsibility practices was found to be statistically significant at 1% and positively related to business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba. This implies that an increase in ethical and social responsibility practices will translate to a corresponding increase in business sustainability or competitive advantage... This assertion is at the 99% confidence level. The R² value of 0.695 shows that 70% of variations in business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State was accounted for by ethical and social responsibility practices. The remaining 30% was due to some other extraneous factors that were not included in the model. Similarly, the f-statistics value of 17.273 indicates that the model specification was correct while significant at 1%. Therefore, the null hypothesis that ethical and social responsibility practices do not significantly influence business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State is rejected and the alternative hypothesis upheld. This result means that ethical and social responsibility practices has significant influence on business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The key findings of the study are;

- i). Ethical performance has significant relationship with customer loyalty among consumer product retailers in Aba, Abia State.
- ii). Ethical and social responsibility practices significantly influence business sustainability or competitive advantage in Aba, Abia State.

- iii). Consumer awareness of ethical practices has significant effect on retailers' commitment to social responsibility in Aba, Abia State, Nigeria
- iv). Most small-scale retailers engage in informal ethical behaviours (e.g., community support, fair pricing) but without formal CSR reporting
- v). Consumers do not broadly recognize specific efforts, limiting their effect on loyalty. When recognized, positive effects on trust and repeat patronage are expected.
- vi). Retailers cited lack of financial resources (56%) and low customer awareness (30%) as main barriers to ethical behaviour.
- vii). Most consumers (75%) were unaware of any specific ethical practices by retailers but rated fair pricing and clean store environments as 'very important'.
- viii). Most retailers saw ethics as 'personal obligation' not a business strategy and some gave discounts to vulnerable customers, or helped neighbours during crises.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results demonstrate that ethical performance-particularly fair pricing, product authenticity and shop cleanliness-are critical to customer trust and loyalty in Aba's retail markets. However, practices such as community support and formal CSR engagement remain underreported and undervalued. Retailers often engage in ethical behaviour informally, driven by moral values and customer retention goals, not regulatory or strategic imperatives. Consumers, although not deeply aware of structured CSR efforts, strongly value ethical retail practices when observed. This indicates a potential gap in ethical communication and consumer education. Profitability concerns, inflation and the lack of formal regulatory incentives were major barriers identified by retailers. Many feared that overt investments in CSR may not yield immediate or measurable returns. The significant regression result suggests that ethical behaviour is not only morally right but also strategically beneficial for long-term customer loyalty in Aba's competitive retail environment.

CONCLUSION

The heightened focus on sustainability and ethical practices has led to a substantial increase in demand at both global and local levels. Recent trends in the international arena have motivated many individuals in Aba and throughout Nigeria to prioritize sustainable choices. Consumers are progressively searching for brands that employ eco-friendly materials and adhere to ethical practices that foster societal welfare. This transition signifies a broader commitment to sustainability and responsible consumption. As consumers continue to champion socially responsible practices, retail firms have a unique opportunity to distinguish themselves by incorporating ethical considerations into their business models. Striking this balance is crucial for cultivating trust, loyalty, and integrity, as well as ensuring long-term profitability and future business success. By adopting these principles, we can contribute to the establishment of a more responsible and impactful marketplace, with an emphasis on promoting ethical retailing. The study concludes that while ethical awareness among consumer product retailers in Aba exists, it is often practiced informally and inconsistently. Retailers generally recognize the importance of fair treatment, product authenticity and environmental responsibility, but face challenges in balancing these with the economic demands of sustaining profitability.

Consumers show strong preference for ethical retailers, especially in areas of pricing transparency and product safety, but lack awareness of broader CSR activities. A clear link exists between ethical performance and customer loyalty, suggesting a strategic benefit to responsible retailing. To enhance ethical standards in Aba's retail sector, coordinated efforts are needed from market associations, local government, consumer rights group and retailers themselves.

Recommendations.

Based on the findings of this study, and its conclusion, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen ethical performance and enhance the balance between profit-making and social responsibility among consumer product retailers in Aba.

- i).Local government and market associations should develop CSR capacity-building programs (e.g. workshops on ethical marketing, consumer rights, and waste management).
- ii).Introduce incentive schemes such as tax breaks, awards, or public recognition for ethical retailers.
- iii).Organize public sensitization on ethical retailing benefits through radio, market outreach, and signage.
- iv).Empower consumer protection groups in Aba to create and publish ethical retail ratings.
- v).Encourage collective CSR projects, such as Joint market sanitation exercises, Community healthcare donations from a pool fund, and Group waste/recycling partnerships.
- vi).Market leaders can integrate basic ethical compliance codes into vendor registration processes.
- vii).Periodic evaluations and reward systems can help monitor and motivate performance of retail businesses.

Implications for Policy and Practice.

- 1). For policy makers – Support frameworks or incentives encouraging organized CSR- even in small retail clusters.
- 2). For marketplace associations/market managers - Encourage collective schemes (e.g.,waste disposal, fire-safety training, community outreach) with shared costs.
- 3). For retailers – Highlighting visible social contributions (even small) could enhance consumer goodwill and differentiate them without heavy investment.

Contributions to Knowledge.

The study extends CSR literature into the domain of micro and small-scale retail in informal market settings- specifically the large consumer markets of Aba. It contributes by linking theory (stakeholder / triple bottom line) to lived realities, showing how ethical performance in small retail environments interacts with consumer perceptions and profit-making strategies in Nigeria.

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