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Identifying Key Drivers Influencing the Future of Humanitarian Marketing in Companies Active in Green Products

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and thematically model the key drivers influencing the future trajectory of humanitarian marketing in companies engaged in green product development. This qualitative exploratory study utilized semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively and theoretically sampled experts in green and humanitarian marketing. Participants were selected based on academic rank, expertise in sustainability, and familiarity with content analysis. Data collection was informed by a prior literature review (2020–2024) and evaluated using a 10-item critical appraisal checklist. Interviews transitioned from unstructured to semi-structured formats to ensure thematic emergence. Thematic analysis followed a three-level coding process (open, axial, selective), resulting in 315 codes, 32 basic themes, 6 organizing themes, and 3 global themes. MAXQDA software was used for coding. Reliability of themes was confirmed via Fuzzy Delphi analysis, applying triangular fuzzy numbers and a defuzzified mean threshold of 0.70. Thematic analysis revealed three global dimensions—individual rights, institutional rights, and social rights of customers—governing humanitarian marketing in green product firms. The “social rights” dimension, encompassing green norm internalization and legitimacy, had the highest frequency (35.55%), followed by institutional rights (32.69%) and individual rights (31.76%). The most robust theme in the Delphi analysis was “Green Customer Solidarity” (mean = 0.79), affirming stakeholder involvement as a key future driver. Themes highlighted include green value cognition, eco-symbolism, legal compliance, trust-building, societal equity, and participatory marketing. Humanitarian marketing in green product contexts is evolving into a multidimensional rights-based framework that requires alignment between ethical narratives, customer values, and institutional accountability. Future success hinges on firms’ ability to integrate cognitive, legal, and societal imperatives while ensuring cultural coherence, technological readiness, and stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: Humanitarian marketing; green products; thematic analysis; customer rights; strategic philanthropy.

Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of corporate marketing has undergone a significant transformation, driven by mounting environmental concerns, evolving consumer values, and increasing pressure on businesses to engage in

socially responsible practices. Among these shifts, humanitarian marketing—defined as the alignment of marketing strategies with altruistic and philanthropic objectives—has emerged as a powerful tool for businesses seeking to foster long-term consumer trust and contribute to sustainable development. The relevance of this approach becomes even more pronounced in the context of companies engaged in the development and promotion of green products. These companies operate at the intersection of environmental responsibility and market competitiveness, making them fertile ground for examining the future of humanitarian marketing through a sustainability lens (Ali et al., 2024; Zandinassab & Kimasi, 2022).

The evolution of humanitarian marketing is deeply intertwined with the broader paradigms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), cause-related marketing, and strategic philanthropy. These constructs are increasingly seen not as peripheral activities, but as core business strategies that influence brand authenticity, customer loyalty, and market differentiation (Bhatti et al., 2022; Léo & Élisabeth, 2023; Tsui-Hsu Tsai et al., 2014). Companies producing green products often rely on a combination of environmental messaging and value-driven narratives to appeal to ethically aware consumers. Research has shown that such marketing practices, when perceived as authentic and well-integrated into corporate identity, can yield both reputational benefits and tangible competitive advantages (Bradu et al., 2023; Chen & Huang, 2016; Lopes et al., 2023).

A critical component of humanitarian marketing in the green sector is its capacity to reflect and reinforce consumer values. With a rising number of consumers expressing preferences for brands that embody environmental altruism, the strategic alignment of marketing with sustainable and humanitarian goals is no longer optional—it is essential (Mansoor & Paul, 2022; Yu, 2020). This alignment is especially impactful when it emphasizes not only environmental benefits but also broader social values such as equity, intergenerational justice, and community well-being (Greenspan et al., 2012; Leach et al., 2018; Perdomo, 2023). These values resonate with the emerging expectations of global stakeholders, including regulatory bodies, investors, and advocacy organizations, all of whom are influencing the strategic decisions of companies operating in green markets (Arco-Castro et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023).

Despite the growing consensus on the strategic importance of humanitarian marketing, its future trajectory remains uncertain and subject to multiple dynamic forces. The marketing environment is being reshaped by technological innovation, digital transformation, and cultural shifts, each of which introduces new variables into how humanitarian values are expressed and perceived in the marketplace (Ali et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2023). Moreover, consumer behavior is becoming more complex and segmented, with some individuals motivated by self-interest and others by altruism, a duality that complicates the messaging strategies of green product firms (Byambadalai et al., 2023; Hui & Wenan, 2022). Understanding these behavioral patterns is crucial for designing humanitarian marketing strategies that resonate with diverse audiences and withstand scrutiny.

The strategic use of philanthropy as a marketing lever also underscores the importance of measurement and accountability. Philanthropic initiatives must demonstrate not only intent but also impact to gain credibility with both internal and external stakeholders. This has led to an increasing focus on the metrics and evaluation frameworks used to assess philanthropic effectiveness, particularly in green product industries where outcomes are closely tied to social and environmental indicators (Barsky & Dvorak, 2015; Liket & Maas, 2015). Strategic philanthropy is thus evolving from symbolic gestures to evidence-based programs that require sophisticated analytical tools and cross-functional coordination (Gotteland et al., 2020; Mehta et al., 2022).

As companies explore new frontiers in digital marketing and data-driven decision-making, the nature of humanitarian engagement is also being redefined. Artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and immersive technologies are being leveraged to personalize humanitarian messages, optimize campaign efficiency, and track real-time sentiment (Sharma et al., 2023; Singh & Pathak, 2023). However, these advances also raise questions about authenticity, ethical boundaries, and the potential commodification of altruistic values. In this context, transparency and stakeholder participation become critical for safeguarding the moral foundation of humanitarian marketing (Bhatti et al., 2022; Semenov & Randrianasolo, 2024).

Furthermore, the interplay between organizational culture and external legitimacy remains a decisive factor in shaping the future of humanitarian marketing. Firms must internalize ethical values through leadership commitment

and employee engagement to authentically project humanitarian identities to the public (Amirhosari et al., 2021; Plant et al., 2017). This requires an alignment between corporate philosophy and operational practices—particularly in companies involved in green product development, where inconsistencies can quickly erode trust and reputation. Social media, as a double-edged sword, amplifies both positive engagement and critical backlash, making consistency across platforms and touchpoints a non-negotiable standard (Mohammad Salehi et al., 2023; Shetty et al., 2021).

A related dimension is the responsiveness of humanitarian marketing to socio-political and environmental shocks. Crises such as climate change, pandemics, and geopolitical instability have exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains and reshaped consumer priorities. In response, green product companies are increasingly adopting humanitarian narratives that emphasize resilience, solidarity, and long-term well-being. This adaptive capability reflects not only organizational agility but also the strategic foresight required to remain relevant in a rapidly evolving landscape (De Costa, 2017; Valian et al., 2019).

In light of these transformations, the identification of key drivers that influence the future of humanitarian marketing in green product firms becomes both a theoretical and practical necessity. These drivers span institutional, technological, environmental, and behavioral domains, and their interplay determines the direction and effectiveness of humanitarian strategies. By systematically identifying and analyzing these drivers, companies can better navigate complexity, align with stakeholder expectations, and contribute meaningfully to societal well-being (Bagheri Gharah Bolagh & Mohammadi, 2024; Panda et al., 2019).

The present study addresses this gap by employing a qualitative methodology grounded in expert interviews and thematic analysis to extract the most influential factors shaping the future of humanitarian marketing within the green product sector.

Methods and Materials

This research employed a qualitative exploratory design based on thematic content analysis to identify the key drivers shaping the future of humanitarian marketing in green product companies. The statistical population consisted of expert participants selected using purposive and theoretical sampling. These participants were marketing scholars and practitioners with substantial academic backgrounds and practical research experience in the field of humanitarian and green marketing. Selection criteria for inclusion included academic rank (assistant professor or above), research expertise in sustainability and social responsibility, familiarity with content analysis methodology, and motivation to participate. To enhance analytical richness, the study followed the Henwood and Pidgeon (1992) framework, emphasizing relevance, theoretical differentiation, field awareness, and interpretive clarity in the selection process.

Initially, 25 experts who met the selection criteria were invited to participate. Of these, 17 responded positively. After a further round of theoretical filtering based on their cognitive fit with the study's aims—assessed via a brochure detailing the study's nature and objectives—12 experts were selected for in-depth interviews. These individuals demonstrated high levels of conceptual understanding and practical involvement in the subject area. The sampling approach was theoretical, aiming to reach theoretical saturation, consistent with methodological recommendations by researchers such as Fugard and Potts (2015), Braun and Clarke (2022), and Azoem et al. (2022). Saturation was achieved when no new codes or themes emerged during data collection, indicating completeness in thematic extraction.

The primary data collection tool was semi-structured interviews, preceded by unstructured exploratory discussions. Interviews were informed by a set of open-ended questions designed from a systematic review of relevant literature between 2020 and 2024. This review helped formulate initial codes and themes for probing expert insights. Additionally, a 10-item critical appraisal checklist was used to evaluate the methodological quality of the literature used to inform interview content. Only studies scoring 30 or higher were considered to ensure novelty and theoretical depth. The interviews started as open-ended to capture the full range of expert perspectives and gradually transitioned to semi-structured as the key thematic areas became clearer. This phased approach helped minimize bias from pre-existing theoretical constructs and allowed themes to emerge organically from participants' lived experiences and insights.

The coding process began immediately after each interview, using both primary and secondary coding phases. Emergent primary themes were grouped into broader conceptual categories, eventually forming organizing and global themes. A theoretical model was then constructed from this thematic synthesis, outlining the major drivers of humanitarian marketing in green product contexts.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis based on coding saturation and thematic hierarchy. Thematic extraction was carried out through a three-level coding structure: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. A total of 315 open codes were distilled into 32 basic themes, which were then grouped into 6 organizing themes and ultimately integrated into 3 overarching global themes. The analysis process was supported by MAXQDA software to manage and categorize textual data.

To validate the reliability of the identified themes, a Fuzzy Delphi method was applied. Experts were asked to assess each organizing theme using a seven-point Likert-scale checklist. Fuzzy triangular numbers (l, m, u) were used to capture the uncertainty in expert judgments, and the defuzzified average scores were calculated. A threshold of 0.70 was set as the minimum acceptable reliability. Themes exceeding this threshold were deemed robust and retained for integration into the conceptual framework. The final output of the analysis was a structured model depicting the key drivers likely to shape the future of humanitarian marketing in companies focused on green product development, grounded in both theoretical literature and empirical expert insights.

Findings and Results

In terms of gender distribution, 7 participants were male, accounting for 58.34% of the total sample, while 5 participants were female, comprising 41.66%. Regarding age, 4 participants were between 40 and 45 years old, whereas 8 participants were over the age of 45. Concerning work experience, 6 individuals had between 10 and 15 years of professional experience, and the remaining 6 participants had more than 15 years of experience in their respective fields.

To identify the underlying thematic structure related to the humanitarian marketing functions in green product development, the analysis began by reviewing prior theoretical literature, followed by in-depth interviews with experts. Across 12 semi-structured interviews, a total of 315 open codes were generated. Through a rigorous thematic analysis using three stages of coding—open, axial, and selective—these codes were synthesized into 32 basic themes, then further refined into 6 organizing themes and 3 overarching global themes. The distribution of these elements is summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Nature of Emergent Themes Based on Three-Level Coding

Global Themes	Organizing Themes	Number of Basic Themes	Open Codes	Row Total	Frequency (%)
Individual Rights of Customers	Cognitive Green Value Creation	6	44	101	31.76%
	Green Customer Awareness	5	57		
Institutional Rights of Customers	Green Customer Trust-Building	6	51	103	32.69%
	Green Customer Solidarity	5	52		
Social Rights of Customers	Green Norm Internalization	5	51	112	35.55%
	Green Customer Legitimacy	5	61		
	Total	32	315		100%

As reported in Table 1, the most frequently observed theme cluster relates to the social rights of customers, which encompassed 112 open codes and represented 35.55% of the total coded content. This was followed closely by the institutional rights dimension, accounting for 103 codes (32.69%), and finally, individual rights, making up 101 codes (31.76%). These percentages suggest a relatively balanced but slightly prioritized focus on the social dimension in the collective understanding of humanitarian green marketing. The thematic structure also shows that each global theme is supported by two organizing themes, indicating a symmetrical coding hierarchy that provides conceptual clarity and analytical depth.

To further elaborate on the qualitative structure of these findings, the next table presents a more granular breakdown, linking each global and organizing theme to its corresponding basic themes, which emerged directly from the coded interviews.

Table 2. Thematic Mapping of Humanitarian Marketing Functions in Green Product Development

Global Themes	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Individual Rights of Customers	Cognitive Green Value Creation	Enhancing perceived green utility, strengthening perceived green expectations, elevating green value cognition, perceptual profiling of green innovations, stimulating green emotions, visualizing green attitudes
	Green Customer Awareness	Using eco-symbolism in product design, offering structural information about green development, incorporating green logos, maintaining a green consumption chain, presenting green product advantages over competitors
Institutional Rights of Customers	Green Customer Trust-Building	Conforming to consumption patterns in green development, adhering to emission standards, disseminating greenhouse gas reduction data, complying with carbon regulations, utilizing clean energy models, using standard environmental audit trademarks
	Green Customer Solidarity	Engaging customers in resolving environmental legal deficiencies, reporting test results on green compliance, creating legal news channels for licenses, sharing inspectors' reports, publicizing legal compliance ratings
Social Rights of Customers	Green Norm Internalization	Encouraging customer cooperation with NGOs, enrolling customers in green product clubs, inviting participation in green product expos, combating green social discrimination, presenting generational rights charters
	Green Customer Legitimacy	Allocating revenues to charity, offering special sales for green supporters, redirecting net profits to social causes, investing in energy infrastructure, allocating profits to recycling initiatives

As shown in Table 2, the global theme "Individual Rights of Customers" encompasses organizing themes focused on cognitive value and awareness. These are further expressed through 11 distinct basic themes that span perceptions, expectations, and product symbolism. The "Institutional Rights of Customers" theme emphasizes normative and legal compliance through 12 basic themes related to trust and solidarity. Lastly, the "Social Rights of Customers" theme—receiving the most frequent coding—includes efforts to embed ethical norms and legitimize green marketing through 10 basic themes focused on societal engagement, equity, and environmental investment.

Altogether, the findings illustrate that green humanitarian marketing operates through a triadic rights-based structure—individual, institutional, and social—each composed of two core operational dimensions. These thematic clusters reveal that the effectiveness of green marketing lies not only in product innovation but also in aligning marketing messages with customer rights, societal values, and legal expectations. The richness and balance of themes further indicate that participants recognized the interconnected nature of green values and customer engagement strategies, which span emotional, cognitive, legal, and social domains.

Table 3. Reliability Results from Fuzzy Delphi Analysis

Components	u	m	l	Defuzzified Mean	Result
Cognitive Green Value Creation in Customers	0.81	0.73	0.64	0.70	Confirmed
Green Customer Awareness	0.86	0.79	0.70	0.75	Confirmed
Green Customer Trust-Building	0.88	0.80	0.72	0.76	Confirmed
Green Customer Solidarity	0.91	0.83	0.78	0.79	Confirmed
Green Norm Internalization	0.85	0.78	0.69	0.74	Confirmed
Green Customer Legitimacy	0.79	0.71	0.63	0.70	Confirmed

Based on the results of the fuzzy Delphi analysis presented in Table 3, all six organizing components identified in the qualitative phase achieved a defuzzified mean score exceeding the threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability. The component "Green Customer Solidarity" demonstrated the highest reliability with a defuzzified mean of 0.79, while both "Cognitive Green Value Creation in Customers" and "Green Customer Legitimacy" had the lowest confirmed reliability at 0.70, yet still above the minimum acceptable cutoff. The triangular fuzzy numbers (l, m, u) across all components consistently reflect expert consensus, with narrow ranges that suggest strong convergence of opinion. These results confirm the stability and internal consistency of the identified themes, qualifying them for further validation in the quantitative phase of the study.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the multidimensional nature of humanitarian marketing in companies active in green product development and offer a structured thematic model based on expert consensus. The three global themes identified—individual rights, institutional rights, and social rights of customers—reflect an evolving understanding of humanitarian responsibility that transcends traditional philanthropic messaging. Through 315 open codes, 32 basic themes, and 6 organizing themes, the study reveals that future-oriented humanitarian marketing requires an integrated

approach addressing consumer cognition, emotional engagement, legal compliance, social inclusion, and ethical legitimacy.

One of the key insights emerging from the findings is the emphasis placed on the individual rights of customers, particularly through cognitive green value creation and awareness-raising mechanisms. This dimension underscores the importance of aligning marketing efforts with the internal perceptions, expectations, and emotions of environmentally conscious consumers. These results are in line with prior research suggesting that green product consumers evaluate brand authenticity and ethical consistency based on the cognitive and emotional resonance of marketing messages (Chen & Huang, 2016; Léo & Élisabeth, 2023). Furthermore, companies that invest in symbolic communication strategies—such as eco-labels, product design elements, and information transparency—are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy by green consumers (Lopes et al., 2023; Mohammad Salehi et al., 2023).

The organizing theme of institutional rights, which includes drivers like green trust-building and solidarity, reinforces the argument that humanitarian marketing is also institutional and systemic in nature. Experts in this study emphasized legal compliance, emission standards, and transparency in reporting as non-negotiable pillars of future marketing legitimacy. These findings align with the notion of strategic philanthropy discussed by (Liket & Maas, 2015), which posits that firms must move beyond one-time giving toward sustained, measurable, and institutionally integrated initiatives. Similarly, the idea that firms should reflect their environmental commitments through regulatory compliance is consistent with observations by (Wang et al., 2023), who showed that firms' philanthropic behavior is increasingly influenced by environmental regulation mechanisms.

The social rights dimension, which includes norm internalization and legitimacy, emerged as the most dominant category in terms of frequency and thematic richness. This indicates that stakeholders now expect green product companies to actively foster collective well-being through community engagement, social equity, and intergenerational responsibility. These results reinforce the findings of (Greenspan et al., 2012), who noted that environmental philanthropy often intersects with broader behavioral patterns tied to social justice and sustainability. Likewise, the integration of social causes—such as reinvestment in green infrastructure or support for underrepresented groups—into marketing narratives aligns with the inclusive frameworks proposed by (Leach et al., 2018) and (Perdomo, 2023), both of whom emphasize the importance of equity and ethical stewardship in sustainable development.

The Fuzzy Delphi analysis provided empirical confirmation of the reliability of the six organizing themes. All themes surpassed the 0.70 threshold for defuzzified means, indicating robust expert agreement. Notably, “Green Customer Solidarity” scored the highest, which affirms that active involvement of consumers in legal, social, and ecological decision-making processes is a pivotal future driver. This finding echoes the insights of (Arco-Castro et al., 2020), who illustrated that stakeholder engagement can significantly modulate the effectiveness of philanthropic strategies. Similarly, the centrality of co-created trust and shared values in marketing echoes the argument by (Bhatti et al., 2022), who emphasized the importance of mutual identification and emotional alignment in cause-related marketing.

In interpreting these findings, it is important to position them within the broader digital and technological transformation of the marketing domain. The rise of smart technologies, AI-driven analytics, and consumer data platforms is expected to significantly reshape how humanitarian values are communicated and perceived. Studies by (Sharma et al., 2023) and (Ali et al., 2024) stress that the integration of digital tools can enhance personalization and predictive capabilities in marketing but must be ethically grounded to avoid commodification of altruism. Our study supports this view, as many of the drivers identified require not only strategic intent but also technological infrastructure to implement them transparently and meaningfully.

Moreover, this study affirms the increasing relevance of consumer altruism and green identity as motivational constructs influencing humanitarian marketing strategies. The findings are consistent with previous work by (Mansoor & Paul, 2022), who argued that green altruism is a powerful moderator of consumer behavior in eco-conscious markets. Likewise, (Byambadalai et al., 2023) demonstrated that market incentives can alter altruistic preferences, suggesting that marketers must carefully balance intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Our results illustrate that companies which succeed in this balancing act—by offering socially meaningful and environmentally responsible value propositions—are likely to experience higher loyalty, brand advocacy, and market credibility.

Another noteworthy alignment can be found with the literature on strategic integration of humanitarian initiatives within brand positioning frameworks. Scholars such as (Gotteland et al., 2020) and (Barsky & Dvorak, 2015) have long emphasized the importance of aligning philanthropic activities with brand strategy and market segmentation. Our findings provide further support for this perspective, showing that humanitarian marketing drivers are not standalone interventions but interconnected strategic pillars that influence multiple aspects of business operations—from product development and design to communication and sales.

Lastly, the results emphasize the need for internal cultural coherence within organizations aiming to adopt future-ready humanitarian marketing strategies. The work of (Amirhosari et al., 2021) and (Plant et al., 2017) has illustrated that organizational values, leadership behavior, and employee engagement form the ethical backbone of any marketing claim. Our study corroborates this view by demonstrating that themes such as green solidarity and legitimacy cannot be externally performed without corresponding internal processes and commitments. Companies that neglect this alignment risk accusations of greenwashing and moral inconsistency, both of which can erode long-term stakeholder trust.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant consideration. First, the sample size, while adequate for qualitative saturation, was limited to a specific group of experts with familiarity in green marketing and humanitarian strategies. This may restrict the generalizability of the findings across other sectors or contexts. Second, while the Delphi technique provided strong reliability validation, it still depends on subjective expert judgment, which may be influenced by individual biases or contextual constraints. Third, although the study employed a rigorous thematic analysis, the absence of triangulation with consumer-side perspectives limits our ability to fully capture the reciprocal nature of humanitarian marketing. Future studies could enhance validity by incorporating additional data sources such as customer surveys, ethnographic observation, or longitudinal case studies.

Future research should consider expanding the scope of analysis to include cross-sectoral comparisons between green product companies and firms in traditional or less environmentally driven industries. Comparative studies can reveal which humanitarian drivers are universally applicable and which are industry-specific. Additionally, integrating consumer perception data would provide a more balanced perspective on how humanitarian messages are received, interpreted, and acted upon. Longitudinal research tracking the evolution of humanitarian marketing strategies over time could also shed light on their sustainability, adaptability, and long-term impact. Finally, future inquiries should explore the intersection of digital transformation, AI ethics, and humanitarian values, especially given the increasing reliance on data-driven marketing tools in green product industries.

Companies seeking to implement future-oriented humanitarian marketing strategies should begin by establishing a coherent internal culture that reflects the values they intend to promote. This includes training, leadership commitment, and performance evaluation systems that align with ethical and environmental objectives. Marketers should also ensure that humanitarian messaging is both authentic and evidence-based, leveraging data transparency to build credibility. It is essential to involve consumers as active partners in green initiatives through participatory campaigns, feedback channels, and community engagement. Lastly, companies should invest in technological infrastructure that supports personalized, responsive, and ethically responsible marketing practices while maintaining compliance with environmental and social standards.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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