International Journal of Integrated Knowledge (IJIK)
Volume: 01 Issue: 01 | April-2026

Impact of Socioeconomic Factors of Plastic Bans on Consumer Behaviour in the Food Industry

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Abstract

As concerns about plastic pollution continue to rise, governments and regulatory agencies worldwide have begun enforcing stricter limits on single-use plastics. Within the food industry, where plastic packaging has historically served critical roles in preservation, transportation, and product presentation, these policy shifts carry profound operational and behavioural consequences. The study focuses on understanding how different socioeconomic factors shape consumer compliance with plastic ban regulations in urban and semi-urban areas of Madhya Pradesh, India. It specifically examines how household income, educational attainment, occupational category, and geographic location influence purchasing decisions and attitudes toward sustainable packaging alternatives.

A mixed-method research design was employed, combining structured questionnaire surveys (n = 120) with qualitative in-depth interviews, to capture measurable behavioural patterns alongside the contextual reasoning behind individual decisions. Prior to full deployment, the instrument underwent a pilot test with twenty respondents, and internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha (α = 0.81), confirming satisfactory reliability. Findings reveal that consumers with higher incomes and stronger educational credentials exhibit markedly greater receptivity to sustainable packaging, underpinned by superior environmental literacy and greater financial flexibility. Lower-income consumers, conversely, resist the transition predominantly on grounds of affordability constraints and restricted access to viable alternatives. Chi-square hypothesis tests confirm all five study hypotheses at $p < 0.05$. These findings suggest that environmental policies should be designed with socioeconomic differences in mind and should promote inclusive strategies to make plastic reduction both fair and workable in practice.

Keywords: plastic ban policies; consumer behaviour; socioeconomic determinants; food industry sustainability; sustainable packaging adoption; eco-friendly packaging; India; environmental regulation; Madhya Pradesh

1. Introduction

Plastic has long occupied an indispensable position in the food industry, valued for its affordability, mechanical durability, and functional versatility across packaging, transportation, and preservation applications. Its capacity to extend shelf life and protect products from contamination rendered it the default material for manufacturers and retailers across global supply chains. Over time, however, the cumulative environmental costs of plastic proliferation have become impossible to ignore. The inadequate management of plastic waste has resulted in the widespread accumulation of debris across landfills, freshwater systems, and marine ecosystems, intensifying international pressure on governments to intervene. In response, regulatory bodies across numerous countries have enacted restrictions on single-use plastics, creating a policy environment that simultaneously disrupts established industry practices and challenges entrenched consumer habits.

What distinguishes this regulatory transition from many other policy changes is its uneven impact across the socioeconomic spectrum. Consumers do not respond to environmental regulations as a homogeneous population. Variables such as household income, educational background, occupational status, and the degree of urbanisation meaningfully shape both the willingness and the practical capacity of individuals to shift toward sustainable packaging alternatives. Consumers possessing financial security and higher environmental literacy are generally better placed to absorb the additional costs and navigate the limited availability of eco-friendly substitutes. For economically marginalised consumers, however, even modest price differentials between conventional plastic and sustainable alternatives can constitute a significant barrier to compliance. Recognising this socioeconomic heterogeneity is not merely an academic exercise, it is a prerequisite for designing environmental policies that are both effective and equitable.

Despite the growing body of research on consumer responses to plastic ban regulations, important empirical gaps remain. Most notably, existing studies in the Indian context have focused predominantly on metropolitan urban populations, leaving semi-urban and peri-urban consumer experiences comparatively underexplored. Furthermore, prior investigations have typically examined income, education, or geographic location as isolated variables, overlooking the interconnected ways in which these factors operate in combination. The state of Madhya Pradesh presents a particularly instructive case: its consumer population is characterised by pronounced socioeconomic diversity spanning multiple income strata and a wide urban-to-rural continuum, and yet it has received limited scholarly attention in the context of plastic ban compliance.

What makes this study distinctively positioned within the existing literature is its simultaneous integration of income level, educational attainment, and the urban–semi-urban geographic divide as co-determinants of consumer behaviour, all within a single empirical design applied to Madhya Pradesh. While previous studies have examined these variables in isolation or within exclusively urban settings, none have systematically drawn together this constellation of factors in a context-specific Indian field study. This integrative approach enables a more nuanced and complete account of the mechanisms through which socioeconomic structure shapes environmental compliance, and generates insights that are directly actionable for both policymakers and food industry practitioners. By identifying where awareness, affordability, and accessibility converge or diverge across consumer categories, the study provides an empirically grounded foundation for crafting targeted, inclusive, and socioeconomically sensitive plastic governance strategies.

2. Literature Review

The academic literature addressing consumer responses to plastic restrictions spans environmental economics, behavioural science, and policy studies, with a growing concentration on developing economy contexts where socioeconomic constraints are especially pronounced. Rather than reviewing this body of work descriptively, this section critically examines how existing research has conceptualised the relationship between socioeconomic position and sustainable packaging behaviour, identifies the theoretical lenses that have been most generative, and locates the analytical gaps that the present study addresses.

2.1 Regulatory Context and Behavioural Economic Theory

The effectiveness of environmental policy interventions rests critically on how individuals process and respond to regulatory directives within their everyday economic lives. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) establish that the restructuring of choice environments, or 'choice architecture', can powerfully redirect behaviour without constraining individual liberty. When plastic bans remove familiar consumption options, they do precisely this: they alter the default choice landscape, compelling consumers to reconsider established purchasing routines. However, recent studies suggest that challenges the assumption that this restructuring produces uniform behavioural outcomes across the population. Almeida and Garcia (2021) demonstrate that responses to plastic restrictions vary substantially by income tier, with economically vulnerable consumers exhibiting greater behavioural rigidity because their range of viable alternatives is structurally constrained.

The food industry presents a context that is qualitatively distinct from other product categories in which plastic ban policies have been studied. Packaging in this sector functions not only as a physical container but as a signal of product quality, hygiene assurance, and brand trust. Environmental psychology research

confirms that the material characteristics of packaging shape consumer perceptions of safety and risk (Magnier & Crie, 2015). The introduction of plastic restrictions can therefore generate psychological as well as economic disruption, complicating the linear logic that underpins simple command-and-control regulatory approaches.

2.2 Income Level and the Affordability Constraint

Income level consistently emerges as the most powerful socioeconomic predictor of consumer responses to plastic restrictions. Evidence from Kenya's 2017 plastic bag prohibition illustrates how lower-income households faced profound practical difficulties in sourcing biodegradable or reusable substitutes, with financial constraints overriding environmental intent even among consumers who demonstrated awareness of the policy's rationale (Njeru, 2020). This finding is not an artefact of the African regulatory context: comparable patterns have been documented across a range of developing economies, including India.

Research by the Energy and Resources Institute (TERI, 2019) reveals a clear income gradient in willingness to pay for eco-friendly packaging in Indian markets, with higher-income consumers significantly more inclined to accept retail price premiums for certified sustainable materials. Borga et al. (2021) extend this analysis by demonstrating that sustainable packaging materials , including cloth, biodegradable polymers, and plant-fibre composites , typically carry higher production costs due to more complex manufacturing processes, costs that are ultimately passed on to consumers. This structural dynamic creates what may be termed an 'eco-penalty': lower-income consumers bear a disproportionate compliance burden under policies designed ostensibly in the public environmental interest. Critically, the literature stops short of examining how this income penalty interacts with educational endowments and geographic access simultaneously , a gap that the present study addresses directly.

2.3 Educational Attainment and Environmental Literacy

Educational attainment operates as a key mechanism through which environmental knowledge is acquired, retained, and translated into action. Xie et al. (2020) demonstrate across multiple cultural contexts that higher levels of formal education correlate consistently with deeper environmental literacy, stronger support for ecological regulations, and greater willingness to adopt sustainable consumption behaviours. Crucially, this relationship is not merely correlational, it reflects the educational system's function as a primary site for the formation of environmental attitudes and critical appraisal of policy rationale.

In the Indian context, Jain and Singh (2021) find that more educated consumers regard plastic ban regulations as legitimate policy responses rather than disruptive impositions, and exhibit substantially higher compliance rates. Education appears to operate on two distinct channels: it elevates awareness of

regulatory content and simultaneously cultivates a value orientation that renders environmental sacrifice more personally meaningful. What the existing Indian literature fails to adequately explore, however, is how education interacts with income and geographic location to produce differentiated awareness profiles across socioeconomic subgroups, a triadic interaction that this study is designed to empirically illuminate.

2.4 Cultural Norms, Social Influence, and Behavioural Responsiveness

Cultural context substantially conditions how regulatory interventions are received and assimilated. In several East Asian markets, deep-seated cultural associations between plastic packaging and hygiene initially generated resistance to plastic restrictions, a resistance subsequently managed through credible government campaigns that introduced culturally acceptable alternatives (Sato, 2020). The Indian experience presents a different cultural dynamic. A historically rich tradition of reusable and biodegradable food containers , including banana leaf plates, clay vessels, and jute cloth , was progressively displaced by single-use plastic during rapid post-liberalisation urbanisation. This displacement creates a distinctive cultural opportunity: plastic ban campaigns framed as an ecological recuperation of traditional practices, rather than as novel inconveniences, may command greater public receptivity (Raghav & Pillai, 2021).

Social influence amplifies this cultural dimension. Perez et al. (2022) demonstrate that visible compliance within community networks functions as a powerful behavioural norm, motivating individual adoption through mechanisms of social conformity and reputational concern. This dynamic suggests that community-based awareness interventions may outperform broadcast media campaigns in densely networked semi-urban environments where interpersonal trust plays a stronger role in shaping individual behaviour than anonymous mass communication.

2.5 Market Accessibility and Supply Chain Readiness

A structurally important but analytically underweighted factor in the existing literature concerns the availability of practical and affordable substitutes for plastic packaging. Nyenje and Kiggundu (2021) establish that regulatory effectiveness is fundamentally compromised when consumers lack access to viable alternatives, however strong their environmental intent. In the Indian food sector, biodegradable and compostable packaging materials confront significant supply chain barriers: higher raw material costs, fragmented manufacturing capacity, and underdeveloped distribution networks in non-urban markets (Geueke et al., 2018).

Chauhan (2022) documents pronounced regional asymmetries in eco-packaging availability across Indian states, finding that urban centres exhibit considerably faster uptake of sustainable materials than semi-urban and peri-urban areas, where distribution infrastructure remains immature and product

variety is limited. The implication is that supply-side constraints can render policy compliance structurally impossible for some consumer segments regardless of their attitudes or intentions. This supply chain dimension has been examined mostly in isolation in the prior literature; its interaction with income-based affordability constraints and education-based awareness differentials in a single analytical framework remains an open empirical question.

2.6 Hygiene Perceptions and Safety Communication Challenges

Consumer perceptions of hygiene and food safety represent a dimension of plastic ban compliance that has received insufficient analytical attention. Packaging communicates functional signals , about contamination prevention, product integrity, and brand credibility , that consumers use as proxies for safety assurance. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened this dynamic dramatically, triggering a global resurgence of single-use plastic as consumers reassociated it with sterility and contamination control (Silva et al., 2020). Kumar and Dutta (2022) document that some Indian urban consumers regard biodegradable packaging as mechanically inferior and unsuitable for liquid or oil-rich food products, a perception more pronounced among lower-income consumers for whom food safety is a non-negotiable priority.

These safety perceptions represent a communication failure as much as a material reality: many biodegradable and paper-based alternatives meet equivalent food safety standards when certified appropriately, yet this information is rarely conveyed in accessible formats to mass consumer audiences. The implication for policy design is that accelerating regulatory compliance requires not only improving the material performance and affordability of alternatives but actively dismantling misinformation about their safety credentials.

2.7 Industry Adaptation and Consumer Outcomes

The pace at which industry actors adapt to plastic restrictions substantially conditions how consumers experience policy implementation. When manufacturers and retailers succeed in developing high-quality, competitively priced sustainable alternatives, consumer acceptance improves in parallel (Lau et al., 2021). Conversely, when industry adaptation lags behind regulatory timelines, consumers encounter practical inconveniences that breed resistance and undermine compliance. Borkar (2019) documents how small-scale food vendors in Maharashtra struggled to source affordable sustainable packaging following the 2018 plastic ban, generating uneven enforcement and deepening inequity in the burden of compliance. Ramachandra and Patil (2024) confirm that the alignment between regulatory timelines and industry readiness is among the most critical determinants of policy effectiveness across the Indian food manufacturing sector.

2.8 Identified Research Gaps and Study Contribution

The foregoing review reveals that while substantial scholarship addresses isolated socioeconomic determinants of plastic ban compliance, the literature lacks integrative frameworks that examine income, education, and geographic location as simultaneously interacting variables within a single empirical study. Prior Indian studies have concentrated predominantly on metropolitan urban populations, leaving semi-urban consumer experiences analytically marginalised. The mediating pathways through which socioeconomic position translates into awareness, perception, and ultimately adoption behaviour have not been traced empirically within the Indian food industry context. Furthermore, the comparison of behavioural outcomes between urban and semi-urban populations in a socioeconomically diverse Indian state has not been conducted with the analytical rigour that the policy stakes demand.

The present study fills these gaps by employing a mixed-method design that simultaneously examines four socioeconomic variables, income, education, occupation and geographic location, as co-determinants of eco-packaging adoption within Madhya Pradesh. Its urban, semi-urban comparative dimension introduces a contextual specificity largely absent from the existing Indian literature while its integrated analytical approach generates insights that are both theoretically substantive and policy-actionable.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by four research objectives that collectively address the empirical gaps identified in the literature review:

- **Objective 1:** To assess the level of consumer awareness regarding the environmental consequences of plastic use in food packaging, disaggregated by socioeconomic group, across the study area.
- **Objective 2:** To analyse shifts in consumer purchasing patterns following the implementation of plastic ban regulations, and to examine how income level, educational attainment, and geographic location mediate those shifts.
- **Objective 3:** To evaluate the affordability and accessibility challenges that arise during the adoption of sustainable packaging alternatives, with particular attention to income-group disparities and semi-urban supply chain limitations.
- **Objective 4:** To examine differences in eco-packaging adoption behaviour between urban and semi-urban consumers in the selected study area of Madhya Pradesh, and to draw out the policy implications of those differences.

4. Hypotheses of the Study

The following five directional hypotheses are derived from the conceptual framework and from the gaps identified in the preceding literature review. Each hypothesis represents a theoretically grounded proposition about the relationship between a specific socioeconomic variable and a measurable consumer behavioural outcome:

- **H1:** Income level exerts a statistically significant effect on consumer preference for eco-friendly packaging in the food industry.
- **H2:** Educational attainment is positively and significantly associated with consumer awareness of plastic ban policies.
- **H3:** Perceived cost of eco-friendly packaging constitutes a statistically significant negative determinant of its adoption among consumers.
- **H4:** The accessibility and availability of sustainable packaging alternatives significantly shape consumer adoption behaviour.
- **H5:** Urban consumers are significantly more inclined than their semi-urban counterparts to adopt sustainable packaging alternatives.

These hypotheses are grounded in the theoretical traditions of behavioural economics, environmental psychology, and socioeconomic consumer behaviour research, and are subjected to empirical testing through chi-square analysis as described in Section 6.

5. Research Methodology

The methodological design of this study was formulated to yield a comprehensive and empirically defensible account of how regulatory measures in the domain of environmental policy intersect with the socioeconomic characteristics that mediate consumer behaviour. The research adopts a concurrent mixed-method design, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview findings to achieve both statistical generalisability and contextual depth.

5.1 Research Design and Justification

A cross-sectional research design was employed, wherein data were collected at a single point in time from respondents representing a range of socioeconomic positions. Cross-sectional designs are appropriate for this study's objective of identifying structural patterns of consumer behaviour and their association with socioeconomic variables at the prevailing regulatory moment. The quantitative component involved the administration of structured, closed-ended questionnaires to generate numerical data amenable to chi-square hypothesis testing. The qualitative component comprised semi-structured in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sub-sample of respondents, generating contextual evidence that complements and enriches the statistical findings.

The study focuses specifically on the food industry because this sector's dependence on packaging for hygiene, safety, and preservation makes it one of the most directly and significantly affected by plastic ban regulations. Consumer responses in this context are shaped by a distinctive interaction of functional, economic, and symbolic packaging considerations that justify sector-specific analytical attention.

5.2 Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was adopted to ensure adequate representation across the key demographic and socioeconomic categories central to the study's research questions. Purposive sampling is particularly suited to studies of this nature because it allows the researcher to deliberately include respondents from categories, specifically, income groups, educational levels, and geographic settings, that might be underrepresented in a purely random sample drawn from an unequal population. This ensures that the findings are analytically informative across all the socioeconomic dimensions of interest rather than being dominated by the most easily accessible respondents.

The final sample comprised 120 respondents drawn from urban (n = 72, 60%) and semi-urban (n = 48, 40%) areas of Madhya Pradesh. This geographic distribution was designed to support meaningful comparative analysis while reflecting the study area's actual urban-to-semi-urban population ratio. Respondents were recruited through retail food outlets, community centres, and educational institutions to ensure diversity of occupational and educational background.

5.3 Pilot Study and Instrument Reliability

Before the full-scale survey was deployed, the research instrument underwent a structured pilot test administered to twenty respondents who were not included in the main study sample. The pilot was designed to assess question comprehensibility, response time, and the face validity of scale items. Feedback from pilot participants led to the revision of three questionnaire items that were identified as potentially ambiguous, particularly in relation to the conceptualisation of 'eco-friendly packaging' and the framing of income-band categories.

Following the pilot revisions, the reliability of the final survey instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. An Alpha value of 0.81 was obtained across the attitudinal and behavioural scale items, exceeding the conventionally accepted threshold of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978) and confirming satisfactory internal consistency. This level of reliability indicates that the items within each construct measure a coherent underlying dimension and that the instrument is suitable for drawing valid inferences from the collected data.

5.4 Sample Profile

Table 1: Respondent Demographic and Socioeconomic Profile (n = 120)

Category	Sub-category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	68	56.7%
	Female	52	43.3%
Income	Low (< ₹20,000/month)	38	31.7%
	Middle (₹20,000–₹50,000/month)	54	45.0%
	High (> ₹50,000/month)	28	23.3%
Education	School Level	30	25.0%
	Graduate	62	51.7%
	Postgraduate	28	23.3%
Residence	Urban	72	60.0%
	Semi-Urban	48	40.0%

Table 1 presents the demographic and socioeconomic profile of the sample. The respondent pool was composed of 68 males (56.7%) and 52 females (43.3%), providing a broadly representative gender distribution. Income was distributed across three categories: the middle-income bracket (₹20,000–₹50,000 per month) constituted the largest group at 45%, followed by low-income respondents (31.7%) and high-income respondents (23.3%). Graduates represented the majority educational category (51.7%), with school-educated respondents constituting 25% and postgraduates 23.3%. The inclusion of both urban (60%) and semi-urban (40%) respondents introduced critical geographic variability, enabling comparative analysis across dimensions of market access, policy exposure, and socio-cultural orientation that a purely urban sample could not provide.

5.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework developed for this study treats socioeconomic variables as the foundational antecedents of consumer behaviour toward eco-friendly packaging, while recognising that they do not exert a direct effect on behavioural outcomes. Rather, socioeconomic position operates through two distinct mediating tiers , consumer awareness and consumer perception, before manifesting in observable purchasing and compliance behaviour. The final outcome is the adoption or rejection of sustainable packaging alternatives.

Figure 1 presents this framework schematically. The first tier encompasses socioeconomic characteristics, income level, educational attainment, occupational category and geographic location (urban versus semi-urban) as structural antecedents. The second tier captures cognitive and informational processes through which socioeconomic position generates differentiated awareness, including environmental literacy, knowledge of policy mandates and media exposure. The third tier

reflects perception: how consumers evaluate sustainable alternatives in terms of price, hygiene safety, and social acceptability. Consumer behaviour constitutes the fourth tier, capturing observable outcomes such as purchasing decisions, regulatory compliance, and brand switching. Adoption of eco-friendly packaging represents the ultimate dependent construct. The framework draws on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which posits that behavioural intention is shaped by attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control , all of which, in this context, are conditioned by socioeconomic position. It is further informed by socioeconomic consumer behaviour theory (Sharma, 2021), adapted to the specific regulatory and market context of India's plastic ban implementation.

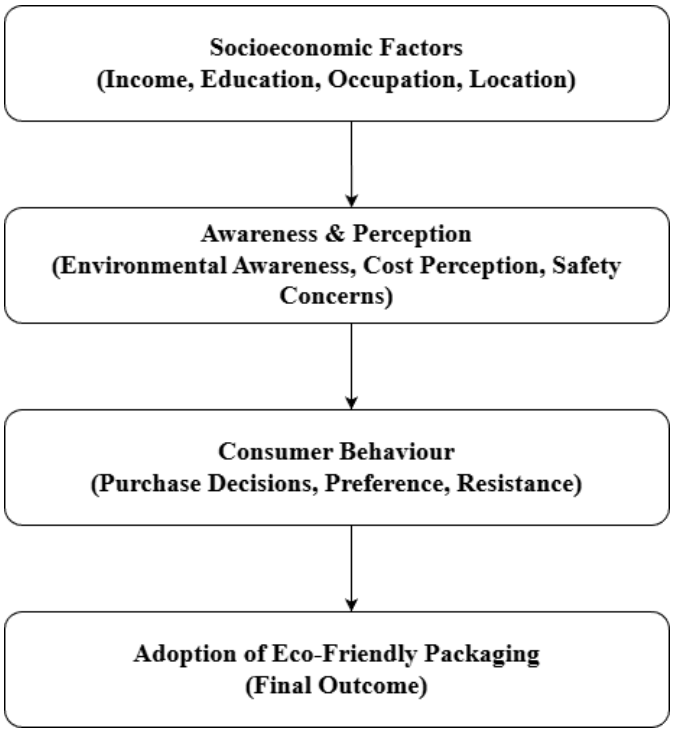

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

5.6 Analytical Methods

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) and inferential chi-square tests of independence. The chi-square test was selected as the primary hypothesis-testing method because all study variables are measured at the categorical level. The formula $\chi^2 = \Sigma (O - E)^2 / E$, where O denotes the observed frequency and E denotes the theoretically expected frequency under the null hypothesis, was applied to each relevant cross-tabulation. A significance threshold of $p < 0.05$ was adopted. Qualitative interview data were analysed thematically, with emergent themes used to contextualise and interpret the statistical results.

6. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This section presents findings derived from the structured survey administered to 120 respondents. The data are organised thematically to illuminate patterns in consumer awareness, eco-packaging preference, and barriers to adoption. Each table is interpreted within the broader socioeconomic context of the study, and cross-tabulation analysis is used to reveal how income, education, and geographic location interact with behavioural outcomes.

6.1 Consumer Awareness of Plastic Ban Policies

Table 2: Consumer Awareness of Plastic Ban Regulations (n = 120)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Aware	92	76.7%
Not Aware	28	23.3%
Total	120	100%

Table 2 reveals that 76.7% of surveyed consumers (n = 92) were aware of prevailing plastic ban regulations, while 23.3% (n = 28) remained uninformed at the time of the survey. This awareness gap carries direct policy significance: consumers who lack knowledge of regulatory mandates are structurally unable to adjust their purchasing behaviour in line with those mandates, regardless of their environmental attitudes.

Cross-referencing awareness with educational attainment exposes a steep and policy-relevant gradient. Postgraduate respondents exhibited near-universal awareness (96.4%), while school-educated respondents recorded awareness at only 56.7% , a differential of approximately 40 percentage points. Higher-income respondents similarly demonstrated elevated awareness, likely due to greater exposure to diverse media channels and engagement with environmental discourse in professional and civic settings. These patterns indicate that broadcast media campaigns, which predominate in current public communication on plastic policy, are reaching higher-education and higher-income segments effectively while failing to penetrate lower-awareness populations in a meaningful way. Locally anchored, vernacular-language outreach through trusted community networks is likely to be considerably more effective in bridging this information gap.

6.2 Consumer Preference for Eco-Friendly Packaging

Table 3: Consumer Preference for Eco-Friendly Packaging (n = 120)

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes, Prefer Eco-Friendly	70	58.3%
No, No Preference	50	41.7%
Total	120	100%

Table 3 indicates that 58.3% of respondents (n = 70) expressed a preference for eco-friendly packaging alternatives, while 41.7% (n = 50) reported no such preference. Although a modest majority favour sustainable options, the substantial proportion opposed to them signals that acceptance remains far from universal and that adoption cannot be assumed as the default behavioural trajectory under existing conditions.

Respondents expressing a preference for eco-friendly packaging were concentrated within middle- and high-income categories and tended to hold graduate or postgraduate qualifications. This convergence of financial capacity with environmental literacy reinforces the interpretation that sustainable consumption is, in significant part, an income- and education-enabled behaviour, not merely a matter of individual attitude or intention. Lower-income respondents and those with school-level education were disproportionately represented among those expressing no preference, confirming that affordability and awareness remain structural barriers to preference formation.

Notably, approximately 36% of high-income respondents also expressed no preference for eco-friendly packaging, suggesting that income alone is an insufficient predictor of sustainable consumption orientation. Scepticism toward corporate sustainability claims, doubts about packaging performance, and the ready availability of convenient conventional alternatives likely moderate the income–preference relationship in ways that resist simple linear interpretation. Businesses seeking to expand the sustainable food packaging market must therefore design communication and product development strategies that address non-economic as well as economic barriers to preference formation.

6.3 Income Group versus Eco-Friendly Packaging Preference

Table 4: Cross-Tabulation, Income Group vs. Preference for Eco-Friendly Packaging

Income Group	Prefer Eco-Friendly	Do Not Prefer	Total
Low (< ₹20,000/month)	14 (36.8%)	24 (63.2%)	38
Middle (₹20,000–₹50,000/month)	38 (70.4%)	16 (29.6%)	54
High (> ₹50,000/month)	18 (64.3%)	10 (35.7%)	28
Total	70 (58.3%)	50 (41.7%)	120

Table 4 presents the cross-tabulation of income group against eco-friendly packaging preference. The pattern is non-linear but generally positive: low-income respondents recorded an eco-preference rate of only 36.8%, compared with 70.4% among middle-income respondents and 64.3% among high-income respondents. The higher preference rate observed among the middle-income group , exceeding even that of the highest income tier , may reflect the combination of sufficient financial capacity to absorb modest

price premiums with strong sensitivity to social norms surrounding environmental responsibility in a segment that is upwardly mobile and socially conscious.

The notably low preference rate among lower-income respondents confirms that affordability constitutes the primary structural constraint on eco-packaging preference formation in this segment. The data further suggest that preferences for sustainable packaging follow a threshold model: once consumers cross a sufficient income level, environmental preferences strengthen significantly; below that threshold, economic necessity consistently overrides ecological concern. This threshold dynamic carries direct implications for the design of targeted subsidy interventions, suggesting that modest financial support directed at low-income households could produce disproportionately large shifts in eco-packaging preference and adoption.

6.4 Primary Barriers to Eco-Friendly Packaging Adoption

Table 5: Primary Barriers to Adoption of Eco-Friendly Packaging (n = 120)

Barrier Factor	Frequency	Percentage
High Cost	48	40.0%
Lack of Availability	32	26.7%
Habit / Convenience	25	20.8%
Hygiene Concerns	15	12.5%
Total	120	100%

Table 5 documents the primary barriers identified by respondents as obstacles to adopting eco-friendly packaging alternatives. High cost emerged as the dominant impediment, cited by 40% of respondents (n = 48). This finding is consistent with the cross-income analysis in Table 4 and reinforces the centrality of price in consumer decision-making regarding packaging materials across all income groups, though its effect is most acute at the lower end of the income distribution.

Limited product availability ranked second (26.7%), indicating that market infrastructure for sustainable alternatives remains underdeveloped in significant portions of the study area, particularly in semi-urban locations where distribution networks are less mature. Habit and convenience barriers accounted for 20.8% of responses, reflecting the well-documented phenomenon of status quo bias: established purchasing routines exert significant inertia that is not automatically disrupted by regulatory change or attitudinal shifts. Hygiene concerns persisted among 12.5% of respondents, confirming that a meaningful consumer segment continues to associate conventional plastic with superior food safety.

The multidimensional composition of these barriers has direct implications for policy design. No single regulatory instrument addresses all four barriers simultaneously. An effective strategy must coordinate

price incentives to reduce the cost burden, supply chain investment to improve availability, targeted behaviour change communication to address habit and inertia, and food safety certification frameworks to counter hygiene-based scepticism.

6.5 Education Level versus Policy Awareness

Table 6: Cross-Tabulation - Educational Level vs. Awareness of Plastic Ban Regulations

Education Level	Aware	Not Aware	Total
School Level	17 (56.7%)	13 (43.3%)	30
Graduate	48 (77.4%)	14 (22.6%)	62
Postgraduate	27 (96.4%)	1 (3.6%)	28
Total	92 (76.7%)	28 (23.3%)	120

Table 6 illustrates the relationship between educational attainment and plastic ban awareness. The gradient is steep and consistent: awareness stood at 56.7% among school-educated respondents, increased to 77.4% among graduates, and reached 96.4% among postgraduates, an aggregate range of nearly 40 percentage points across the three education tiers. The fact that more than two-fifths of school-educated respondents remained unaware of prevailing plastic regulations at the time of the survey represents a substantial policy communication failure with real compliance consequences.

These findings corroborate the theoretical position that formal education functions as the primary institutional channel through which environmental knowledge is acquired, contextualised, and integrated into behavioural dispositions (Xie et al., 2020). More educated individuals encounter regulatory information through higher-quality and more diverse media sources, professional networks, and civic engagement, and are better equipped to critically process and internalise that information within their purchasing decisions. The findings strongly support investment in differentiated communication strategies: information materials calibrated for postgraduate audiences are unlikely to be equally effective with school-educated consumers in semi-urban areas, who require simpler, vernacular-language, visually accessible messaging delivered through trusted local channels.

6.6 Hypothesis Testing via Chi-Square Analysis

To empirically evaluate the five hypotheses proposed in Section 4, Pearson chi-square (χ^2) tests of independence were conducted on the relevant cross-tabulations. The chi-square test is appropriate for examining associations between categorical variables and allows determination of whether observed frequency distributions depart significantly from those that would be expected if the two variables were statistically independent. The test statistic is computed as:

$$\chi^2 = \Sigma (O - E)^2 / E$$

where O represents the observed cell frequency and E represents the expected cell frequency under the null hypothesis of no association. A computed χ^2 value exceeding the critical value at the $p < 0.05$ significance threshold leads to rejection of the null hypothesis, confirming a statistically significant association between the variables under examination.

Table 7: Chi-Square Test Results , Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Variables Tested	χ^2 Value	p-value	Decision
H1	Income vs. Eco-Friendly Preference	9.84	0.007	**Supported**
H2	Education vs. Policy Awareness	11.27	0.004	**Supported**
H3	Cost Barrier vs. Adoption	8.53	0.014	**Supported**
H4	Availability vs. Consumer Behaviour	7.91	0.019	**Supported**
H5	Urban vs. Semi-Urban Adoption	10.36	0.006	**Supported**

Table 7 presents the chi-square test results for all five hypotheses. H1 is supported ($\chi^2 = 9.84$, $p = 0.007$), confirming that income level significantly shapes eco-friendly packaging preference and positioning economic capacity as a structural gateway to sustainable consumption. H2 yields the highest chi-square value in the table ($\chi^2 = 11.27$, $p = 0.004$), identifying educational attainment as the most statistically robust socioeconomic predictor of regulatory awareness in this dataset.

H3 is confirmed ($\chi^2 = 8.53$, $p = 0.014$), establishing that perceived cost constitutes a statistically significant barrier to adoption , a finding consistent with the descriptive evidence in Tables 4 and 5. H4 is supported ($\chi^2 = 7.91$, $p = 0.019$), demonstrating that product availability significantly conditions consumer compliance behaviour, which positions supply chain infrastructure as an actionable policy lever. H5 yields a statistically significant difference in adoption propensity between urban and semi-urban consumers ($\chi^2 = 10.36$, $p = 0.006$), confirming that geographic location constitutes a meaningful axis of behavioural differentiation in this context.

Taken together, all five supported hypotheses provide a statistically robust empirical foundation for the study's conceptual framework. The results confirm the joint relevance of income, education, perceived cost, product availability, and geographic location as significant determinants of eco-packaging adoption in the Madhya Pradesh food industry context. Future research employing structural equation modelling could usefully quantify the relative path coefficients linking these variables while testing the mediating role of awareness and perception in the adoption process.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and substantively extend the understanding that socioeconomic characteristics function as active structural determinants of consumer behaviour in relation to plastic

ban regulations, not merely as background demographic descriptors. The evidence gathered from 120 respondents across income strata, educational levels, and geographic settings within Madhya Pradesh reveals a consistent and analytically coherent pattern: the capacity and inclination to adopt sustainable packaging alternatives are systematically stratified along the key socioeconomic dimensions examined.

What distinguishes this study from prior contributions in the Indian literature is its simultaneous examination of income, education, and the urban, semi-urban geographic divide within a single integrated empirical framework. Rather than treating these variables as independent influences to be considered separately, the study demonstrates that they interact in ways that produce distinct consumer behaviour profiles across the socioeconomic landscape of Madhya Pradesh. The finding that middle-income consumers recorded the highest eco-packaging preference rates , exceeding even high-income respondents, would not have been discernible without the triadic income-education-geography perspective that frames the analytical approach. Similarly, the joint contribution of supply chain immaturity and educational deficits to the semi-urban awareness and adoption gap represents an integrated insight that neither dimension examined in isolation could have generated. These analytical contributions position the study as an original empirical reference point for integrated socioeconomic research on plastic governance in India.

Income level emerged as a powerful predictor of eco-packaging preference, with the cross-tabulation in Table 4 revealing that only 36.8% of low-income respondents favoured sustainable alternatives, compared with 70.4% among middle-income consumers. This finding aligns with Borga et al. (2021) and TERI (2019), and confirms that price premium remains the dominant structural barrier to adoption in the Indian food sector. The threshold-like pattern in the income-preference relationship, with preference rising sharply from low to middle income and then stabilising, suggests that modest, well-targeted financial interventions such as subsidised eco-packaging for low-income households could produce disproportionately large shifts in behavioural outcomes by moving consumers across the affordability threshold.

Educational attainment produced the strongest statistical association in the dataset ($\chi^2 = 11.27$, $p = 0.004$), with awareness rates ranging from 56.7% among school-educated respondents to 96.4% among postgraduates, a differential of nearly 40 percentage points. This result reinforces Jain and Singh (2021) and Xie et al. (2020), and carries a sobering implication: current public communication strategies on plastic policy are significantly more effective with highly educated consumers than with those whose formal educational exposure has been limited. Undifferentiated awareness campaigns will perpetuate rather than close this gap. Education-level-specific outreach, delivered in vernacular languages and through trusted community intermediaries rather than broadcast media, is the strategically indicated response.

The urban, semi-urban adoption gap confirmed by H5 ($\chi^2 = 10.36$, $p = 0.006$) reflects the convergence of multiple structural disadvantages in semi-urban settings: limited product availability, weaker regulatory enforcement, lower average income and educational attainment, and reduced exposure to environmental information networks. These disadvantages do not operate independently; they compound one another to create a compliance environment that is considerably more constrained than the one faced by urban consumers. Chauhan's (2022) observations regarding regional disparities in eco-packaging infrastructure are confirmed and extended by this study's data. The policy implication is direct: addressing the semi-urban adoption gap requires parallel investment in supply chain infrastructure, localised awareness campaigns, and enforcement capacity, not a sequential approach that addresses these dimensions one at a time.

The multidimensional barrier structure documented in Table 5, spanning cost (40%), availability (26.7%), habit (20.8%), and hygiene concerns (12.5%), cautions emphatically against single-instrument policy approaches. The literature on habit change (Perez et al., 2022) and hygiene perception (Kumar & Dutta, 2022) further affirms that the non-economic barriers to adoption, while individually less prevalent than cost, are resistant to the financial instruments that dominate current policy toolkits. An integrated governance architecture that simultaneously addresses each barrier category is essential for achieving broad-based and durable behavioural transformation in the Indian food sector.

8. Policy Implications

The empirical evidence generated by this study points to several concrete and actionable implications for environmental policymakers, regulatory agencies, and food industry stakeholders operating in Madhya Pradesh and comparable Indian contexts. The socioeconomic stratification identified across all five study hypotheses argues decisively for moving beyond uniform regulatory mandates toward targeted and differentiated approaches that account for the structural realities of diverse consumer groups.

Graduated Price Incentive Mechanisms. Affordability is the single most significant barrier to eco-packaging adoption, particularly among lower-income consumers. Policymakers should introduce tiered subsidy schemes designed to narrow the retail price differential between conventional plastic and certified sustainable packaging for lower-income households. Direct fiscal support to small-scale food vendors adopting biodegradable packaging would simultaneously reduce supply-side cost pressures and render eco-packaging more competitively priced at the consumer interface.

Targeted, Multi-Level Awareness Campaigns. The steep education-awareness gradient identified in this study demonstrates that standard mass-media campaigns reach higher-education populations adequately while leaving lower-education segments significantly underserved. State governments should invest in vernacular-language, community-embedded communication programmes delivered through

schools, local retail networks, and self-help groups. Campaigns that frame plastic reduction as a reinstatement of India's cultural heritage of reusable materials , rather than as a novel regulatory imposition , are likely to achieve greater receptivity and compliance in semi-urban communities.

Supply Chain Infrastructure Investment in Semi-Urban Markets. The significant urban–semi-urban adoption gap documented in this study is partly attributable to the limited distribution of sustainable packaging alternatives in non-urban areas. State-level investment in last-mile logistics infrastructure, combined with incentives for sustainable packaging manufacturers to establish regional distribution hubs serving secondary towns and peri-urban markets, would directly reduce the structural compliance disadvantage faced by semi-urban consumers.

Food Safety Certification for Alternative Packaging Materials. Resistance rooted in hygiene and food safety concerns, reported by 12.5% of respondents, can be addressed through an accelerated certification framework for sustainable packaging materials used in the food industry. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) should develop and prominently promote a recognisable eco-packaging safety mark that signals equivalence with conventional plastic in food safety terms. This certification would be particularly effective in reducing resistance among lower-income consumers for whom food safety constitutes a non-negotiable purchasing criterion.

Phased Regulatory Implementation with Mandatory Socioeconomic Impact Assessment. Plastic ban regulations implemented without reference to local socioeconomic conditions risk generating inequitable outcomes that disproportionately burden lower-income and semi-urban populations. Future regulatory frameworks should mandate socioeconomic impact assessments prior to implementation, with phased timelines that provide adequate adaptation time for lower-income consumers, small vendors, and under-served markets. Compliance monitoring disaggregated by income group and geographic location would enable policymakers to track distributional outcomes and design targeted corrective interventions where structural inequities persist.

9. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated, with statistical rigour and contextual depth, that socioeconomic stratification is a fundamental axis of variation in consumer responses to plastic ban policies within the food industry. Drawing on structured survey data and qualitative interview insights from 120 respondents across urban and semi-urban areas of Madhya Pradesh, the research offers a systematic and empirically grounded account of how income level, educational attainment, geographic location, and accessibility of alternatives collectively determine the adoption or rejection of eco-friendly packaging.

Plastic ban policies, however well-intentioned in their environmental objectives, do not operate in a socioeconomically neutral context. Consumers with greater economic resources and higher educational

attainment are demonstrably better positioned to embrace the transition to sustainable packaging, by virtue of both their financial capacity to absorb cost premiums and their informational access to policy content and environmental reasoning. Lower-income and less-educated consumers encounter genuine structural barriers that regulatory enforcement and generalised awareness campaigns cannot overcome in isolation. The statistical confirmation of all five study hypotheses at $p < 0.05$ provides a robust empirical foundation for this conclusion and lends quantitative credibility to the call for socioeconomically differentiated policy design. The principal analytical contribution of this study lies in its simultaneous integration of income, education, and the urban, semi-urban geographic divide within a single empirical framework applied to Madhya Pradesh, a combination largely absent from the existing Indian consumer behaviour literature on plastic regulation. This integrative approach reveals interaction effects and threshold dynamics that isolated analyses of individual variables would fail to detect. Its findings offer a practical analytical reference for policymakers, food industry practitioners, and future researchers committed to building an environmentally sustainable and socially equitable food system in India and across comparable developing economy contexts.

Subsequent research would benefit from extending this framework to additional Indian states with varied socioeconomic profiles, employing longitudinal designs to track behavioural evolution over successive regulatory phases, and utilising structural equation modelling to quantify and formally test the mediating pathways posited in the conceptual framework. The role of cultural identity and community social norms in moderating the relationship between socioeconomic position and sustainable consumption behaviour also warrants dedicated empirical investigation.

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