

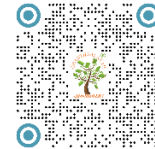
Original Article

CONSUMER RESPONSES TO SHRINKFLATION IN THE FMCG SECTOR: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Shrinkflation, defined as the stealth reduction in product volume at a constant or increased price, has become a common price adjustment strategy for companies to combat inflation in the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) market, but the evidence of its impact on consumers is scattered by methods, contexts and constructs. This study provides a systematic review of the empirical and conceptual works on the consumer responses to shrinkflation and package downsizing, putting special emphasis on perceived value, ethics, brand trust and brand switching.

Design/methodology/approach: The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines were chosen to conduct a systematic review. Peer-reviewed and reputable studies were selected based on the use of major databases, followed by screening of studies based on pre-defined eligibility criteria and then the results were synthesized narratively and thematically. A total of 23 studies were found from 2004 to 2025 that met the inclusion criteria and were charted on context, method, focal constructs and findings.

Findings: The synthesis resulted in six themes: awareness and detection of shrinkflation, perceived value and price (un)fairness, ethical assessment of shrinkflating, loss of brand trust, consequences of brand loyalty and brand switching, and transparency and communication as a remedy. Even though some of the studies focus on some of these other areas, the findings regarding covert downsizing are consistently reported as unfair and deceptive, a decrease in perceived value, a decrease in trust, an increase in switching intention, and how disclosed downsizing and transparency can counteract these effects. Cross-sectional surveys are used extensively in the literature and there is limited use of trust as a mediation mechanism and detection capability as a construct.

Originality/value: The review brings together a disjointed space, uses an experience map of the methods and gaps, and recommends an agenda that is integrative and focuses on brand trust as the primary driver that relates shrinkflation perception to switching behaviour for emerging markets like India.

Keywords: Shrinkflation, Package Downsizing, Brand Trust, Brand Switching, FMCG, Price Fairness, Systematic Literature Review, PRISMA

INTRODUCTION

Not all inflationary pressure is reflected in the price. Another method that manufacturers use to offset increasing costs is a quieter one that is known as shrinkflation, where the price of the product remains the same but the number of units, content or

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weight of the product is decreased Kemp (2024). Shrinkflation, in this context, is a hidden increase in prices that consumers are not made aware of, because the unit price increases without notice. Shrinkflation is a hidden increase in prices that consumers are not made aware of because the unit price increases without notice Gupta (2023). The tactic is an old one, but has gained in popularity and visibility since recent commodity, pandemic, and supply-chain shocks Hudson (2013), Taylor (2022), and it is harder and harder to hide in the glare of media and social-media attention Smith (2018).

Shrinkflation is especially significant in the FMCG industry, which includes food, drinks, personal care, and household goods—where the consumer purchases frequently and evaluates the product regularly, meaning that any decrease in the quantity of the product becomes noticeable, and where any perceived drop in value can rapidly negatively impact the brand's evaluation and purchasing patterns Prasain and Pandey (2022). Many empirical and conceptual studies have investigated consumers' detection, evaluation, and responses to downsizing, ranging from experiments to surveys and sales data analyses of various countries and product categories. This evidence, however, is not necessarily centralized: there are various theoretical approaches used, various constructs (awareness, price sensitivity, value, ethics, trust, loyalty), and various conclusions that have not been synthesized. There is no previous work that explores this area with a clear and repeatable methodology.

This paper aims to fill that gap by systematically reviewing the literature on consumer reactions to shrinkflation and package downsizing in a systematic way according to PRISMA 2020 guidelines. The following questions are asked in the course of the review:

RQ1. What theoretical perspectives and constructs have been used to study consumer responses to shrinkflation and package downsizing?

RQ2. What does the evidence show about how shrinkflation affects perceived value, fairness, ethical judgements and brand trust?

RQ3. What does the evidence show about the effect of shrinkflation on brand loyalty and brand-switching behaviour, and what role does brand trust play?

RQ4. What methodological patterns, contexts and gaps characterise the field, and what agenda follows for future research?

By answering these questions, the review consolidates current knowledge, exposes methodological and conceptual gaps, and articulates a research agenda in which brand trust functions as the central mechanism linking shrinkflation perceptions to switching—an agenda of particular relevance to emerging markets such as India, where shrinkflation is widespread and price sensitivity is high.

**REVIEW METHODOLOGY
PROTOCOL AND REPORTING FRAMEWORK**

The review was designed and reported following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) statement that outlines the procedure of identification, screening and inclusion of studies, and documents search, selection and synthesis decisions in a clear manner. To limit selection bias, and to achieve reproducibility, a review protocol was established that outlined the questions, eligibility criteria, search strategy, selection process and the data-extraction items.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they (i) addressed consumer perceptions of, or responses to, shrinkflation or package downsizing; (ii) evaluated at least one of the focal outcomes reviewed (awareness/detection, perceived value, price fairness/ethics, brand trust, brand loyalty/brand switching); (iii) were empirical or substantive conceptual contributions; (iv) were published in English; or (v) appeared in peer-reviewed journals or reputable industry/scholarly outlets. Studies were omitted when they discussed prices or inflation without pricing quantity reduction, did not report an outcome related to consumer behaviour, or were editorials or news items with no analytical content, or were too vague in methodological detail. The search window started in 2004 and ended in 2025 to include the baseline downsizing studies, all the way to the latest shrinkflation studies. Eligibility is summarised in table 1.

Table 1

Table 1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria	
Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Focus on shrinkflation or package downsizing	Pricing/inflation studies with no quantity-reduction focus
Reports a relevant consumer outcome (awareness, value, fairness/ethics, trust, loyalty, switching)	No consumer-behaviour outcome reported
Empirical or substantive conceptual study	Editorials/news items lacking analytical content

Published 2004–2025, in English	Outside window or non-English
Peer-reviewed or reputable scholarly/industry outlet	Insufficient methodological detail to chart

INFORMATION SOURCES AND SEARCH STRATEGY

Searches were carried out across major academic databases—Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Emerald Insight—supplemented by Google Scholar for grey literature and reputable industry sources, and by backward citation searching of included studies. The search combined terms for the practice, the sector and the consumer outcomes using Boolean operators. The principal search string is shown in Table 2; it was adapted to each database’s syntax. Searches were limited to titles, abstracts and keywords.

Table 2

Table 2 Search Concepts and Terms	
Concept	Search terms (combined with OR within concept; concepts combined with AND)
Practice	“shrinkflation” OR “package downsizing” OR “product downsizing” OR “quantity reduction” OR “slack fill*” OR “hidden inflation”
Sector/context	“FMCG” OR “fast-moving consumer goods” OR “food and beverage” OR “grocery” OR “packaged goods”
Consumer outcome	“brand trust” OR “price fairness” OR “perceived value” OR “purchase intention” OR “brand loyalty” OR “brand switch*” OR “consumer perception*” OR “ethic*” OR “cognitive dissonance”

STUDY SELECTION

Records were obtained from all sources and a "clean up" was done to eliminate duplicates. Titles and abstracts were then screened according to the eligibility criteria and the remaining records were then examined in full text. Studies were not included at the full text stage if they failed to meet the criteria; reasons for exclusion were noted. The number of records at each stage in the selection process and the number of records selected at each stage are illustrated in the PRISMA flow diagram shown in Figure 1. Twenty-three studies were selected to be synthesized.

Figure 1

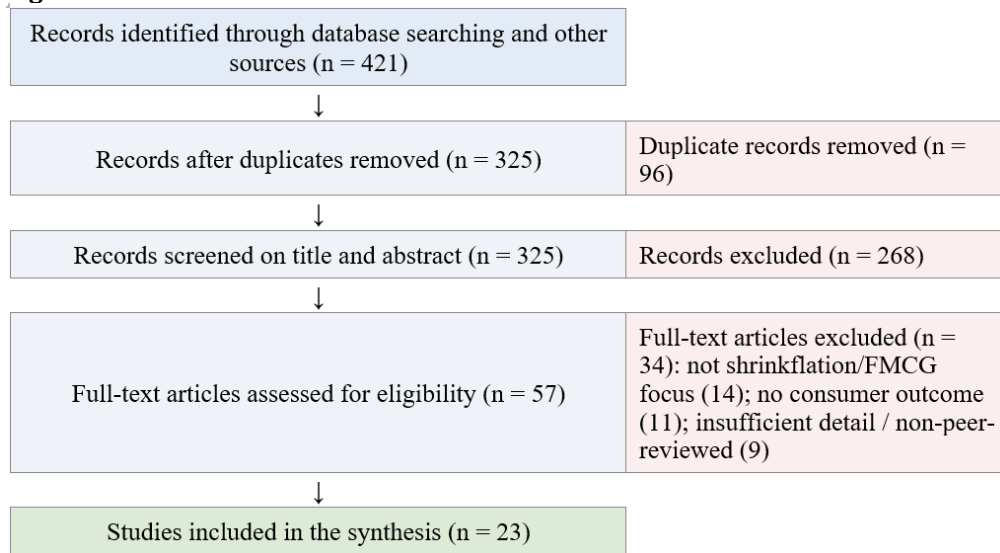


Figure 1 PRISMA Flow of Study Identification and Selection

DATA EXTRACTION AND SYNTHESIS

For each included study, the following items were charted: author and year; geographic and product context; research method and sample; focal constructs; and key findings (Table 3). Because the studies differ widely in design, measures and reporting, a meta-analysis was not appropriate; instead a narrative and thematic synthesis was conducted, grouping findings into recurring themes and comparing results across methods and contexts. Methodological characteristics were also tabulated to address the review’s methods-focused question.

RESULTS**OVERVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE BASE**

The 23 studies cover the period from 2004 to 2025, and are particularly weighted towards the last few years, since 2022, as a resurgence of interest in this period. Geographically, the corpus is a mix of United States and European downsizing research (e.g. the Chicago ice-cream market, Romanian dairy), a number of conceptual contributions and industry analyses and a developing collection of Indian and South Asian FMCG studies. Cross-sectional consumer surveys, which are analysed using correlation, regression, ANOVA, or structural equation modelling, dominate in terms of methodological approach; some use controlled experiments and/or analyse transaction/sales data; and sample sizes for survey studies fall within a relatively narrow range of 450–600 consumers. The food and beverages category have been the most researched category, and the category that is most salient to consumers and most exposed to downsizing.

CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED STUDIES**Table 3**

Table 3 Characteristics of included studies (n = 23)				
Author (Year)	Context	Method and sample	Focal constructs	Key findings
Gourville and Koehler (2004)	US (experimental)	Experiments; ~300 participants; t-tests, ANOVA	Price vs quantity sensitivity	Consumers react more strongly to price increases than to equivalent quantity cuts; downsizing is less noticeable.
Coulter and Coulter (2005)	US (experimental)	Experiments; 200 participants; ANOVA, regression	Magnitude congruency, price perception	Congruent size–price representation raises perceived fairness and purchase likelihood.
Gupta (2007)	US	Survey + focus groups; 500; descriptive, regression	Ethics of downsizing, trust	Many view covert downsizing as unethical; trust falls; consumers prefer price rises to hidden quantity cuts.
Kachensky (2011)	US	Mixed methods; surveys + interviews	Persuasion knowledge, unit price	Reducing content harms attitudes to brand and retailer; raising unit price affects them differently.
Akira and Balagtas (2014)	US (Chicago)	Market/consumer analysis	Package downsizing, brand integrity	Consumers are highly sensitive to size cuts; perceive less value and question brand integrity.
Cakar and Balagtas (2014)	US (Chicago ice cream)	Transaction data; stratified sampling; regression, econometrics	Downsizing, price sensitivity, switching	Downsizing is quickly noticed, lowers purchases, raises price sensitivity and prompts switching to rivals.
Malik (2016)	India	Survey; 100; descriptive, correlation	Preference, quantity and price concerns	Cadbury preferred on quality/brand; consumers raise concerns about quantity and pricing for both brands.
Yonezawa and Richards (2016)	Multi-industry (firm level)	Surveys + interviews; 300 firms; game theory, regression	Competitive package-size decisions	Firms adjust package size strategically against rivals; consumer value perceptions shape choices.
Wilkins et al. (2016)	International	Survey; 600; correlation, regression	Deception, cognitive dissonance, trust	Deceptive packaging/downsizing creates dissonance, lowers trust, loyalty and repurchase.
Chandon (2017)	International	Mixed methods; 500; regression, ANOVA	Size-change perception, satisfaction	Consumers notice and dislike shrinkage more than growth; shrinkage lowers value perception and trust.

Jensen (2021)	UK/industry	Sales data, trend analysis	Package size trends, transparency	Trend toward smaller packs; flags shrinkflation as a transparency and trust concern.
Kumari (2022)	Conceptual	Conceptual analysis	Brand equity, trust, loyalty	Shrinkflation seen as manipulative; weakens trust, equity and loyalty; recommends transparency.
Prasain and Pandey (2022)	South Asia	Survey; 500; correlation	Awareness, value, loyalty	High awareness and dissatisfaction; awareness linked to lower purchase intention and switching.
Sarkar (2022)	India	Conceptual/industry	Trust, loyalty, transparency	Rising awareness raises value-for-money concerns; urges transparency and consumer education.
Munteanu and Bozga (2022)	Romania (dairy)	Survey; 500; correlation, regression	Brand reputation, trust	Downsizing harms reputation and trust; consumers intend to switch to better-value brands.
Gupta (2023)	India	Survey; 500; correlation	Size-change perception, intention	Perceived size change linked to second-guessing and exploring alternatives; stresses quality and transparency.
Yan (2023)	International	Survey; 500; regression	Package size, unit price, quality	Larger packs perceived as better value and quality; packaging cues shape value perception.
Joshy and Banudevi (2023)	India	Survey; 600; ANOVA, correlation	Awareness, value, trust	Low awareness in part; aware consumers trust affected brands less and seek substitutes.
CivicScience. (2024)	US (industry)	Consumer survey/analysis	Loyalty, generational difference	More frequent shrinkflation lowers loyalty; younger consumers most sensitive and likely to stop buying.
Fernandes (2024)	International	Survey; 600; SEM	Price sensitivity, loyalty, intention	Consumers sensitive to size/quantity cuts; perceived unfairness raises switching; urges transparency.
Joshy and Banudevi (2024)	India (chocolate)	Survey; 500; SEM	Price sensitivity, shrinkflation perception	Price-sensitive consumers view shrinkflation negatively, lowering purchase and loyalty.
Kemp (2024)	International	Survey; 450; correlation, regression	Awareness, quality perception, trust	Size cuts without price cuts lower trust and loyalty and raise switching consideration.
Zaware (2025)	Conceptual/secondary	Conceptual + secondary synthesis	Ethics, fairness, trust	Detected shrinkflation seen as unethical; triggers deception feelings, lower intention, more switching.

THEMATIC SYNTHESIS

The synthesis of the findings resulted in six interrelating themes, which are summarized below and presented in relation to the questions in the review.

Theme 1: Awareness and Detection of Shrinkflation

One thing is consistently observed: consumers are becoming more aware of the reduction in quantities, with varying degrees of awareness. Some studies show that there is a high awareness and a high irritability [Prasain and Pandey \(2022\)](#), [Gupta \(2023\)](#), while others state that a significant part of consumers are unaware, and when they are informed about the practice, they see it as hidden inflation [Joshy and Banudevi \(2023\)](#). Frequently bought food and beverage products are best detected, as are more vigilant and younger consumers [CivicScience. \(2024\)](#), [Çakır and Balagtas \(2014\)](#). Notably, consumers are more aware of the shrinkage than

equivalent size gains [Chandon \(2017\)](#), [Gourville and Koehler \(2004\)](#), suggesting that losses are processed asymmetrically. The ability to detect is not usually considered as a measured variable per se, as indicated below.

Theme 2: Perceived Value and Price (Un)fairness

Downsizing affects the value equation by decreasing the amount of what the consumers are getting without decreasing the price they pay, thus decreasing the value of money for consumers [Yan \(2023\)](#), [Çakır and Balagtas \(2014\)](#). Experimental research demonstrates that consumers are more sensitive to price change than quantity change, which is why firms favor downsizing [Gourville and Koehler \(2004\)](#), and that congruent, transparent size–price representation of products enhances the perception of fairness [Coulter and Coulter \(2005\)](#). If the price to quantity relationship is covertly changed, the implications to consumers are that it is a violation of fairness, which leads to reduced value perceptions and intentions.

Theme 3: Ethical Evaluation of Covert Downsizing

Downsizing is often perceived as unethical and deceptive by consumers when it is hidden [Gupta \(2007\)](#), [Zaware \(2025\)](#). Research on both quantity reductions and price increases consistently finds that consumers dislike price increases more than quantity reductions, and that perceived deception—rather than mere quantity reductions—results in the greatest negative response [Wilkins et al. \(2016\)](#), [Kumari \(2022\)](#). This places importance on the ethics of the practice and the transparency of its communication on consumer response.

Theme 4: Erosion of Brand Trust

The strong and clear finding is that perceived shrinkflation diminishes brand trust. In size-related studies, there is a reduction in trust and loyalty [Kemp \(2024\)](#), and in category-specific studies like dairy, downsizing harms brand reputation and trust in the category [Munteanu and Bozga \(2022\)](#). While trust declines is a phenomenon commonly observed, few studies explicitly model trust as a mediating variable between perceptions and behavior, and it is treated more as one of multiple outcomes.

Theme 5: Brand Loyalty and Switching Outcomes

The most common behavioural outcome is loyalty loss and switching. Transaction-level evidence indicates that shrinking leads to fewer purchases and a shift to competitors that offer a better value [Çakır and Balagtas \(2014\)](#), while survey and SEM studies point to a correlation between shrinkflation perceptions and price sensitivity with reduced purchase intent and increased switching [Fernandes \(2024\)](#), [Joshya and Banudevi \(2024\)](#), [Munteanu and Bozga \(2022\)](#). [CivicScience. \(2024\)](#) shows that younger consumers are likely to be the first to discontinue, with generational evidence demonstrating that this is the case. There are both a trust-mediated route and a more direct route, in which a sense of acute unfairness or a dissonance leads to switching, as suggested by the literature.

Theme 6: Transparency and Communication as a Remedy

Nearly all studies point toward the way transparency is a managerial solution. Important aspects of quantity changes, cost pressures, and product quality and value are repeatedly recommended to keep trust and loyalty intact [Sarkar \(2022\)](#), [Gupta \(2023\)](#), [Prasain and Pandey \(2022\)](#), [Kemp \(2024\)](#). One of the most consistent signals in the corpus is the consistency of this prescription across contexts, which emphasizes the fact that the problem in the short term is not downsizing, but concealment.

THEORETICAL LENSES AND METHODS (RQ1, RQ4)

Theoretically, it is based on concepts of price-fairness and equity; the perceived value of the product by consumers; the cognitive dissonance; and—rarely—the theory of planned behaviour and self-efficacy. In terms of methodology, it is based mainly on cross-sectional studies with 450-600 consumers analysed using correlation, regression, ANOVA and (more recently) SEM while experiments or transaction data analysis are less frequently used and longitudinal designs are rare. This methodological profile influences the nature of the strengths of the evidence (broad, convergent survey findings) as well as the limited causal and dynamic inferences.

DISCUSSION

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

In 20 of the 23 studies and over 20 years, the evidence is clear and consistent. Over time, consumers are better able to identify quantity reductions, particularly in products that they consume regularly (such as food and beverage items); covert reductions in size reduce perceived value and are seen as unfair and unethical; perceived deception reduces brand trust; and lack of trust, along with perceived unfairness and dissonance, increases brand switching intentions and behaviour. The key mitigating factor is always transparency and honesty. The central story is robust, as it applies to the experimental, the survey and the transaction-data designs and across the three regions of the U.S., Europe and South Asian.

RESEARCH GAPS

There are also clear gaps identified in the review. In most work, only one construct, either awareness, price sensitivity, value or loyalty, is considered, without an integration of the ethical, cognitive and capability-based components of the response. Despite being repeatedly demonstrated as decreasing, brand trust is rarely represented as a mediating variable between perceptions and switching. The ability of the consumer to detect downsizing (detection self-efficacy) is mentioned in an informal way, but is not usually operationalised. There is an expectation gap between what consumers expect and what brands reveal – which is assumed but not measured. Designs are more than twice as likely to be cross-sectional, limiting causal and dynamic inference; designs in emerging markets are growing but the evidence is still sparse and unevenly distributed with respect to the prevalence of shrinkflation in these markets.

TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE AGENDA

These gaps are indicative of an integrative research programme. Future research could test four perception dimensions (perceived ethical pricing behavior, expectation gap for transparency, cognitive dissonance due to shrinkflation, and shrinkflation awareness self-efficacy) as antecedents of brand trust, with its impact on brand switching intention mediated by brand trust, and direct paths to brand switching. A model of this kind would reconcile the reoccurring constructs of the field in a single mediation model and it would put trust under the lens of under-modelling, as well as add detection capability as a measurable construct and transparency gap. Its testing via validated multi-item scales and SEM, ideally with the inclusion of moderators (category involvement, brand attachment, demographics) and longitudinal data would ensure it does not stay within the convergent but mostly descriptive survey findings and is particularly warranted in high prevalence and price-sensitive emerging markets like India.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REVIEW

This review is subject to limitations. It is a composition of secondary sources, and thus reflects the biases of the original sources, including the use of self-reported cross-sectional survey data. Some of the focus on English-language work might have resulted in the omission of relevant work in other languages, while the distinction between substantive conceptual work and the commented or excluded work is a matter of judgement. The protocol was transparent and reproducible, but screening was not independently double coded and there was no formal risk of bias instrument applied with the resulting designs being very heterogeneous. Hence, synthesis is not quantitative and interpretation of the conclusions should be approached as a consolidation of the field, not as a meta-analysis of pooled effect estimates.

CONCLUSION

From an invisible cost management technique to a visible and contested element of FMCG markets, shrinkflation has come into the spotlight. A systematic review of 23 empirical and conceptual studies, all of which told a familiar story: hidden downsizing is being detected more frequently by consumers, is seen as unfair and unethical, reduces trust in the brands engaging in hidden downsizing, and increases consumers' willingness to switch brands – and transparency and honest communication reliably mitigate these impacts. The main limitations of the field are studies that are based on cross-sectional survey designs, that focus on constructs without integrating brand trust as the primary mechanism or the lack of measurement of detection capability and the transparency expectation gap. A framework that is integrative, built on trust, rigorously tested and has been conducted over a period of time and across high-prevalence emerging markets is the most promising. For managers and regulators, the message of the review is clear: whenever downsizing is necessary, transparency is the best way to ensure trust in which the loyalty of employees and customers is grounded.

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