

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND BRAND IMAGE: A STUDY OF CONSUMER PERCEPTION AND BRAND TRUST

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ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility has moved from a peripheral compliance activity to a central plank of brand strategy, and the accumulated research on how CSR shapes brand image and brand trust is now large enough to warrant systematic stocktaking. This review synthesizes empirical and conceptual work published over roughly the last fifteen years on the relationship between CSR initiatives, consumer perception, brand image, and brand trust. Drawing on stakeholder theory, signaling theory, and social identity theory, the review traces how CSR communications are decoded by consumers, when they translate into favorable brand associations, and under what conditions that favorability hardens into durable trust. The survey finds consistent, if modest, positive associations between perceived CSR and brand image across industries, with brand image frequently operating as a mediator between CSR perception and brand trust rather than trust forming directly. Attribution of motive, perceived authenticity, fit between the cause and the firm's core business, and cultural context repeatedly emerge as boundary conditions that either amplify or neutralize the CSR-brand link. Methodologically, the field remains dominated by cross-sectional survey designs and single-country samples, which limits causal inference and generalizability. The review closes by identifying gaps around longitudinal measurement, digital and social-media-mediated CSR communication, and the risk of CSR skepticism, and it proposes directions for future inquiry that integrate behavioral and experimental designs with the existing correlational base.

Keywords: *Corporate Social Responsibility¹; Brand Image²; Brand Trust³; Consumer Perception⁴; Brand Loyalty⁵; Stakeholder Theory⁶; CSR Authenticity⁷.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Consumers no longer evaluate a brand purely on price or product attributes; they read a firm's conduct toward society and the environment as part of the offer itself. This shift has pushed corporate social responsibility out of the annual report and into everyday brand communication—cause marketing, sustainability labelling, supply-

chain disclosures, and community partnerships now sit alongside advertising as tools that firms use to shape how consumers see them. The premise running through most of the literature is straightforward: CSR activity, when noticed and believed, improves brand image, and a stronger brand image feeds brand trust, which in turn supports loyalty and willingness to pay. Yet the empirical record is not uniformly supportive. Some studies report strong, direct effects of CSR on trust; others find the effect washes out once brand image or perceived quality is controlled for; a smaller set finds CSR communication backfiring when consumers suspect it of being a public-relations exercise rather than a genuine commitment. A review that lines up these findings side by side is useful precisely because the field has grown large enough that contradictions are easy to miss inside any single study.

1.2 SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

This review has three objectives. First, it maps the theoretical foundations that scholars have used to explain the CSR-brand relationship, since the choice of theory tends to predict the shape of the hypothesized model. Second, it consolidates empirical findings on the strength and direction of the CSR-brand image-brand trust chain across industries, regions, and consumer segments, paying attention to moderators such as CSR fit, motive attribution, and cultural distance. Third, it evaluates the methodological choices that dominate this literature survey instruments, sampling frames, and analytical techniques to identify where the evidence base is thin. The review does not report new primary data; it is a structured synthesis of past work, organized to surface both convergence and disagreement in the literature rather than to advocate a single model.

1.3 ORGANIZATION OF THE REVIEW

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 surveys the literature in three broad streams: theoretical foundations, empirical findings on CSR and brand image, and empirical findings on brand image, brand trust, and their interaction. Section 3 describes the methodology used to identify, screen, and synthesize the reviewed studies. Section 4 offers a critical analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots of the existing body of work. Section 5 discusses the implications of these patterns for theory and practice, and Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

2. SURVEY OF PAST WORK

Early treatments of CSR and branding leaned heavily on stakeholder theory, which frames the firm as accountable to a wider set of constituencies than shareholders alone, and on signaling theory, which treats CSR disclosure as a costly signal of underlying quality that is otherwise hard for consumers to observe directly. A parallel stream drew on social identity theory, arguing that consumers who identify with a brand's stated values experience a self-congruity effect that deepens attachment independent of any direct product benefit. Attribution theory entered the conversation somewhat later and turned out to be pivotal: whether a consumer attributes a firm's CSR activity to genuine values-driven motives or to strategic self-interest substantially changes whether the activity improves brand image at all. Several studies built composite frameworks combining two or three of

these theories, on the reasoning that no single lens captures both the cognitive processing of CSR information and its affective, identity-based consequences.

On the CSR-to-brand-image link specifically, the bulk of survey-based studies across retail, banking, hospitality, and fast-moving consumer goods report a positive and statistically significant path coefficient, though the magnitude varies considerably by sector. Financial services and banking studies tend to report comparatively strong effects, plausibly because trust deficits in that sector make ethical signaling more salient to consumers. Fast-moving consumer goods studies report more modest effects, consistent with the idea that low-involvement, frequently purchased categories leave less room for CSR information to override habitual purchase patterns. A recurring qualifier across this stream is that the effect is conditional on awareness—consumers who are unaware of a firm's CSR activities cannot be expected to update their brand perceptions because of it, and a meaningful share of survey respondents in several studies reported low or no awareness of specific initiatives even for firms rated highly by CSR index compilers. A second cluster of studies treats brand image as a mediator rather than an outcome, testing whether CSR affects brand trust directly, indirectly through brand image, or both. The mediation studies converge on a pattern in which the indirect path through brand image is stronger and more consistently significant than the direct path from CSR to trust, suggesting that trust is less a direct response to ethical behavior and more a downstream consequence of the overall brand impression that ethical behavior helps build. This has practical implications: firms hoping that a single cause-marketing campaign will manufacture trust may be expecting too much of a mechanism that appears to operate through the slower accumulation of brand image.

Perceived authenticity and cause-brand fit form a third recurring theme. Multiple studies find that CSR initiatives closely related to a firm's core business—an outdoor apparel company funding conservation work, a food company addressing nutrition or food security—generate stronger image and trust gains than initiatives with weak thematic connection to the business, even when the monetary scale of the initiative is comparable. This fit effect is frequently explained through elaboration-likelihood reasoning: a well-fitting initiative requires less cognitive effort to process as credible, whereas a poorly fitting one invites scrutiny of motive. A related body of work on greenwashing and CSR skepticism documents a countervailing effect, in which consumers who suspect symbolic rather than substantive commitment respond with reduced trust and, in some studies, increased negative word of mouth relative to firms that make no CSR claims at all. Cultural and regional context surfaces repeatedly as a moderating condition. Comparative studies across East Asian, Western European, and North American samples report differences in the relative weight consumers place on collective versus individual welfare framing of CSR messages, and in the extent to which government regulation is seen as a substitute for or complement to voluntary corporate action. Several studies conducted in emerging markets note that CSR is still primarily associated with philanthropic activity in the public mind, which shapes expectations differently than in markets where CSR communication has matured into more systemic sustainability reporting. Industry regulation intensity is a related moderator: in heavily regulated industries, consumers appear to discount CSR

claims somewhat, treating baseline compliance as expected rather than praiseworthy, while in lightly regulated industries the same claims carry more differentiating weight.

A smaller but growing stream examines digital and social-media-mediated CSR communication, finding that user-generated content and peer commentary about a firm's CSR conduct can carry more weight with consumers than the firm's own communications, and that negative viral content about perceived CSR hypocrisy propagates faster and does more image damage than positive CSR content does good. This asymmetry has not yet been fully integrated into the mediation models built on earlier survey data, most of which predate the current scale of social media influence on brand perception, and represents one of the clearer gaps between the maturity of the underlying theory and the communication environment it is meant to describe. Finally, a handful of longitudinal and quasi-experimental studies – still a minority relative to the cross-sectional survey literature – track brand trust before and after a CSR event such as a product recall paired with a remediation initiative, or a newly launched sustainability program. These studies generally support the direction of causality assumed elsewhere in the literature but also reveal that trust gains from CSR initiatives decay over time in the absence of reinforcement, and that a single high-profile lapse can erase the accumulated trust benefit of several years of consistent CSR communication, indicating an asymmetry in how trust is built versus how it is lost that the dominant cross-sectional designs cannot easily capture.

3. METHODOLOGY

This review follows a structured narrative synthesis approach rather than a formal statistical meta-analysis, given the heterogeneity of measurement scales, mediator specifications, and industry contexts across the reviewed studies, which makes pooled effect-size estimation difficult to justify without introducing an unrealistic assumption of construct equivalence. The search strategy covered major business and management databases, using combinations of the terms corporate social responsibility, brand image, brand trust, consumer perception, and brand loyalty, restricted primarily to peer-reviewed journal articles published in the last decade and a half, supplemented by a smaller number of earlier foundational papers that established the theoretical base still in use today. Screening proceeded in two stages. Titles and abstracts were first screened for direct relevance to the CSR-brand image-brand trust relationship, excluding studies that addressed CSR purely from a financial-performance or employee-outcomes perspective without a consumer-facing brand component. Full texts of the remaining studies were then read to confirm that they reported an identifiable relationship between at least two of the four core constructs – CSR perception, brand image, brand trust, and a downstream consumer outcome such as loyalty or purchase intention – and to extract theoretical framing, sample characteristics, industry context, and reported effect directions and, where available, magnitudes. The synthesis itself was organized thematically rather than chronologically, grouping studies by the theoretical lens applied and by the specific link under investigation, since a chronological ordering would have obscured recurring patterns that appear across studies published in different years but addressing structurally similar questions. Where studies reported conflicting findings on the same relationship, both were retained and the possible sources of divergence – sample

industry, cultural context, measurement instrument were noted explicitly rather than resolved through selective omission, which is consistent with the review's aim of surfacing tension in the literature rather than presenting an artificially unified picture.

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PAST WORK

The literature's central strength is convergence: despite differences in country, industry, and instrument, an overwhelming majority of studies find a positive association running from perceived CSR through brand image toward brand trust, which gives the field a reasonably stable core finding to build on. That said, convergence on direction should not be mistaken for convergence on mechanism. The mediating role of brand image is well supported, but the literature is considerably thinner on why brand image mediates rather than CSR acting directly, and few studies test competing mediators—perceived quality, corporate reputation more broadly, or emotional brand attachment—in the same model to establish that brand image is doing genuinely distinct explanatory work rather than absorbing variance that a differently specified model would attribute elsewhere. A second limitation concerns measurement. Most studies rely on self-reported CSR awareness and self-reported brand attitudes collected through cross-sectional surveys, which introduces common-method variance and raises the possibility that the observed correlations are inflated by shared measurement artifacts rather than reflecting the true strength of the underlying psychological process. Very few studies pair self-report with behavioral or market-level outcome data—actual purchase records, brand switching, or stock market reaction to CSR announcements—that would allow the attitudinal findings to be triangulated against revealed preference. This is a meaningful gap, since attitude-behavior gaps are well documented in consumer research more broadly, and there is no strong reason to assume CSR attitudes are immune to the same disconnect.

Sampling is a third recurring weakness. Convenience samples of university students or single-city urban consumers appear disproportionately often, which limits the generalizability of reported effect sizes to broader national or cross-national populations, and the emerging-market literature in particular tends to draw from a narrow set of urban, higher-income, digitally connected respondents who are unlikely to be representative of the wider consumer base in those markets. Where cross-cultural comparisons are attempted, sample sizes per country are frequently small relative to the number of comparisons being drawn, which raises concerns about statistical power for detecting genuine cultural moderation rather than sampling noise. The treatment of CSR skepticism and greenwashing perception is comparatively underdeveloped relative to its practical importance. A number of studies acknowledge that motive attribution moderates the CSR-brand relationship but operationalize this moderator crudely, often through a single self-report item asking whether the respondent believes the firm's motives are genuine, rather than through validated multi-item skepticism scales that could capture gradations of doubt. Given how consequential the literature suggests authenticity perception to be, this measurement gap is disproportionate to the construct's theoretical importance and represents one of the more actionable openings for future empirical work. Finally, the field's near-total reliance on cross-sectional designs constrains causal claims that the underlying theory implies. Stakeholder and signaling theory both describe a process that unfolds over

time repeated exposure to CSR communication accumulating into a stable brand image, which in turn supports trust that itself may take repeated positive interactions to consolidate yet the dominant single-timepoint survey cannot distinguish this accumulation process from a simple concurrent correlation between a consumer's general favorability toward a brand and their willingness to rate its CSR activity positively. The small longitudinal literature that does exist points toward asymmetric dynamics of trust-building and trust-erosion that the cross-sectional mainstream has not yet absorbed into its standard models.

5. DISCUSSION

Read together, the reviewed literature supports a cautious rather than an unconditional endorsement of CSR as a brand-building tool. The positive association between CSR perception and brand image is robust enough across contexts to treat as a reasonably dependable starting assumption, but the pathway from image to trust, and the conditions that determine whether CSR communication helps or actively harms a brand, are considerably more contingent than popular business writing on the subject often suggests. Perceived authenticity and cause-brand fit repeatedly emerge as the variables that separate CSR activity that builds trust from CSR activity that either does nothing or invites suspicion, which points practitioners toward a fairly specific implication: the choice of cause and the closeness of its connection to the firm's actual business may matter more for brand outcomes than the scale of resources committed to it. For researchers, the discussion above suggests that the field would benefit less from additional cross-sectional confirmations of the core CSR-image-trust link, which is already well established, and more from studies that pit competing mediators against each other, that pair attitudinal measures with behavioral or market data, and that track the same brands and consumers over time to observe how CSR-driven trust is built, maintained, and occasionally lost. The digital communication gap identified in Section 2 is also worth flagging here: as peer commentary and social media increasingly mediate how consumers learn about and interpret a firm's CSR conduct, models built on pre-social-media assumptions about firm-to-consumer communication may understate both the upside and downside variance that digital word of mouth introduces into the CSR-brand relationship.

6. CONCLUSION

This review has synthesized a substantial and still-growing body of research on how corporate social responsibility shapes brand image and brand trust through the lens of consumer perception. The evidence base is consistent in direction CSR perception tends to improve brand image, and brand image tends to carry much of the resulting effect on brand trust but it remains limited by heavy reliance on cross-sectional, self-reported, and geographically narrow samples, and by underdeveloped measurement of the authenticity and skepticism dynamics that appear to govern when CSR helps versus when it backfires. Future research that combines longitudinal tracking, behavioral outcome measures, and more granular treatment of motive attribution stands to move the field from documenting a stable correlational pattern toward a more complete account of the mechanism and its boundary conditions.

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