

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY TO UNDERSTAND THE INFLUENCE OF CSR ON BRAND PREFERENCE AMONG BUSINESS SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has changed from a voluntary beneficial activity into a strategic operation which will increase the loyalty among consumers. In today's market world with heavy competition, concerned with the company's social, ethical and environmental aspects among the Commerce students, which decides the price of the company's share and influences the management values as the students are the future leaders, This limited research has found the relationship between the CSR activities done and the preference of Brand among Business, Commerce students, educators and Consumers.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, Brand preference, Business school students, Purchase intention, Consumer trust

I. INTRODUCTION

CSR has become one of the most chosen strategies among the corporate companies mostly for further development among the public. Beyond obtaining monetary objectives, they are expected to fulfill their responsibilities in the areas of environmental development and social sustainability, societal upliftment. Stakeholders today analyze not only through the quality goods and services but also concerning the kinds of responsibility that any company takes up for overall welfare. Also on the other side, CSR has emerged as an important indication of corporate reputation, customer trust, competitive advantage and long term sustainability. The increasing awareness of environmental challenges, social inequalities, and ethical concerns and societal needs has significantly influenced stakeholder expectations. Consumers usually are attuned to companies who are responsible towards the social development, revising the CSR initiatives of the business even before they become an integral part of the company, which attracts the right customers, investors and employees who values the organisation and understanding the roots of the service setups which results in employee motivation towards their responsibility and paves way for the overall development of the company.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sobczak, Debucquet, and Havard (2006) examined the influence of higher education on students' and young managers' perceptions of companies and corporate social responsibility (CSR). The purpose of the study was to determine how higher education institutions influenced students' perceptions of their social and environmental obligations. The study came to the conclusion that attitudes on social responsibility were significantly influenced by academic culture. Rather than treating social and environmental issues as electives, the authors suggested incorporating them into the main curriculum. This could assist aspiring managers in cultivating ethical principles and implementing them in their organizational and professional capacities.

Mohamed Akli Achabou (2020) examined the effect of perceived corporate social responsibility (CSR) effort on consumer brand preference in the clothing and footwear sector. Conjoint analysis with an orthogonal factorial design was used, along with two-step cluster analysis. The independent variables were brand name, social information, environmental information, price, and degree of novelty, while consumer brand preference was the dependent variable. Age, gender, education, and profession were considered moderating variables, while perceived CSR effort was the mediating variable. The findings showed that consumers valued social information and price more than environmental information and brand name. Despite recognizing Patagonia's stronger CSR efforts, respondents slightly preferred Nike, indicating that a longer CSR history does not necessarily lead to stronger consumer preference.

Nelarine Cornelius, James Wallace, and Rana Tassabehji (2007) investigated the teaching of ethics, corporate identity, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) in business schools. The researchers used content analysis of institutional and home websites to assess corporate identity, engagement in socially responsible programmes, and social inclusion. They also compared the corporate identity of top and regular business schools to evaluate the consistency of CSR and ethics teaching across institutions. The authors concluded that reactive ethics education mainly encouraged legal compliance, whereas proactive ethics programmes could promote socially responsible thinking and create meaningful changes in organisational culture and values.

Ioana A. Coman, Shupey Yuan, and Jiun-Yi Tsai (2022) focused on the way Generation Z consumers expected companies to act concerning some controversial social/public issues, analysing their rationale. Whereas open-ended questions analysed the rationale. Qualitative analysis has shown that there are three significant cognitive dimensions: attribution of responsibility, control perception, and fit. The study revealed that Generation Z expects companies to be active civic actors dealing with important societal issues, rather than focusing on the issues directly connected with businesses' activities. Indeed, expectations of Generation Z about the social responsibilities of companies can influence their attitudes towards companies and their brands. In this respect, the results of the study can be seen as an appropriate basis for analysing the connection between CSR and brand preference among business school students who belong to Generation Z.

Sana Tariq, Mohammad Sohail Yunis, Shandana Shoaib, Fahad Abdullah, and Shah Wali Khan (2022) aimed at exploring the impact of employees' perceptions of corporate social responsibility on their pro-environmental behaviour in three business schools located in Peshawar, Pakistan. The researchers used qualitative multiple-case study design and selected fourteen interviewees employing purposive sampling. Results showed that CSR activities in terms of plantation, cleanliness, minimization of waste and energy saving had an effect on employees' pro-environmental behaviour. Factors that influence employees' pro-environmental behaviour include awareness of the problem, eco-civicness, value-based attitude, personal characteristics and organizational support for the environment. It also confirms the role of the CSR initiatives in the formation of stakeholder reaction to the organization. These results lay the foundation for further investigation of the relation between perceptions of CSR among students and brand preference.

Oscar Licandro, José Luis Vázquez Burguete, Luis Camilo Ortigueira Sánchez, and Giselle Viviana Pinochet Sánchez (2024) investigated the effect of university and country environments on the perception of students' corporate social responsibility (CSR). As a result of the research, it was found that the interpretation of CSR varies significantly between countries but is quite similar within the same country. The research proves that the perception of CSR by students depends on their education and paves the way for exploring how these perceptions affect the preference of certain brands.

N. Nurhilalia and Yusuf Saleh (2024) assessed the impact of consumer behaviour on the loyalty of consumers in a highly competitive global environment. The study further revealed that customer satisfaction and customer value added significance in strengthening customer loyalty, especially in competitive markets. The study came up with a conclusion that consumer behaviour can enable companies to formulate marketing strategies, build stronger customer relationships and grow sustainably. The study is relevant to the current study since it reveals that consumers' perceptions, experiences, satisfaction, and attitudes can affect consumers' responses to brands. The results give a broader base to investigate whether the perceptions of CSR can affect brand preferences of business school students.

Harrlyn T. Corpuz, Mary Grace C. Del Rosario, and Marigold C. Enriquez (2019) investigate students' attitudes and perceptions towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the impact of socio-demographic factors on these perceptions. In conclusion, researchers found that students had positive perceptions regarding corporate social responsibility and suggested organizations to increase their green advocacy and sustainability activities. The study is highly related to the present study because it shows that students have identifiable perceptions and attitudes about CSR which could affect their perceptions about organizations.

José Javier Rivera, Enrique Bigne, and Rafael Curras-Perez (2019) explored the impact of consumer behaviour on consumer loyalty in a highly competitive global market environment. Customer satisfaction and perceived value had a great impact on consumer loyalty in highly competitive industries. The knowledge about consumer behaviour helped companies to create

effective marketing strategies and build strong relationships with their customers. Thus, the authors came to the conclusion that the sustainable growth of businesses could be achieved due to consumer needs analysis, innovative approach, efficient application of technologies and customer-oriented practices.

Edisa Koro and Samra Jusufi (2023) examined attitudes and perceptions of the respondents on corporate social responsibility (CSR) were evaluated, as well as the effects of socio-demographic factors on CSR perceptions. This study sought to analyse the CSR perceptions of the students, identify socio-demographic factors affecting these perceptions, and evaluate the correlation between perceptions of the organisation and CSR of that organisation. Therefore, the study concluded that there were positive attitudes towards CSR and expectations from organisations to exhibit socially responsible actions. Firms were advised to include green advocacy and sustainability initiatives in CSR activities. The findings of this study were relevant to the present study as students had CSR perceptions.

III. RESEARCH GAP

Existing studies on corporate social responsibility (CSR) have mainly focused on students' perceptions and attitudes towards CSR, while other studies have examined the relationship between CSR and brand preference among general consumers. However, limited research has directly examined whether CSR influences brand preference among business school students. Previous studies have also focused more on understanding students' CSR perceptions rather than examining how these perceptions affect their choice of brands. In addition, the role of business education in shaping students' responses towards socially responsible brands has received limited attention. Therefore, a gap exists in understanding whether business school students prefer brands based on their CSR activities and responsible practices. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the influence of CSR on brand preference among business school students.

IV. OBJECTIVES

1. To know about the level of awareness on CSR activities among Business school students.
2. To study the level of influence the CSR activity has among the brand preference among Business school students.
3. To understand the factor that influences the purchase intention most among attitude, trust, loyalty towards the brand.
4. To obtain whether the price is compromised by consumers, insight with the CSR programmes.

V. RESEARCH NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has increasingly become an important aspect of business practices, as consumers are becoming more aware of the social, ethical, and environmental responsibilities of companies. However, there is a need to understand whether CSR activities actually influence consumers' brand preferences, particularly among business school students. Thus, the purpose of this study, "An Exploratory Study to Understand the Influence of CSR on Brand Preference among Business School Students," is to investigate how students' preferences for brands are influenced by their perceptions of CSR and to pinpoint the CSR elements that have the greatest impact on their choices. By offering deeper understanding of the connection between CSR and brand preference among business school students, the study will add to the body of existing literature. By analyzing how socially conscious actions affect brand preference and evaluation, it may also provide new insights into consumer behaviour.

The results could help society by motivating businesses to implement ethical, social, and environmental business practices. The results may help businesses, brand managers, marketing experts, and business schools understand what young, educated consumers expect. The findings may help companies develop more effective CSR and marketing campaigns, in addition to helping business schools promote ethical business practices and responsible consumption. Finally, the results could serve as a guide for future researchers looking into CSR, brand choice, consumer behavior, and related subjects across different consumer groups, industries, and geographic contexts.

VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study set up a quantitative, deductive research design to evaluate the structural relationships between perceived Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) dimensions, brand equity constructs, and consumer purchase intentions. The conceptual framework models are 3 exogenous independent variables- Economic CSR, Social CSR, Environmental CSR - predicting seven intermediate brand equity constructs (Brand awareness, Perceived Quality, Brand Association, Brand Credibility, Electronic WOM, Brand attitude and Customer engagement), which ultimately drive endogenous behavioural outcomes (Brand preference and Purchase intention). Master of Business Administration (MBA) and business management postgraduate students. Purposive non-probability sampling to target business-educated consumers with baseline awareness of corporate strategy and brand management. Sample size N=52 completed, valid responses extracted following data cleaning.

Structured questionnaire administered and circulated digitally comprising two operational sections:

1. Demographic questions - Age, Gender, Academic Specialization, Program Year, and Branded product purchase frequency.

2. Construct measurements - 38 questions on a 5 point likert scale.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Business students care far more about how a company treats its workers, fair wages being paid and investments in localities than they do about generic eco-friendly ads. Fair treatment of people builds true brand love. Social CSR is the single strongest factor in making students feel positive about a brand ($\beta=0.639$)

Recycling and green initiatives create a great corporate image and help people recognize your brand, However, going green is now seen as a basic expectation. It gets your brand noticed, but it won't single-handedly close a sale. Environmental CSR findings had the highest baseline score (mean=4.07) and strongly drives Brand association ($\beta= 0.681$), but has no direct impact on purchase intention ($\beta > 0.05$).

Customer engagement (mean= 4.08), environmental CSR (mean=4.07), and Brand association (mean=4.07) achieved the highest overall agreement scores, showing that business students actively connect with responsible brands and universally praise eco-friendly initiatives. However while a strong eco- friendly image successfully gets a brand noticed and builds positive mental recognition, it does not automatically trigger direct purchasing decisions. Brand preference (mean= 4.00) and brand credibility (mean= 4.02) also demonstrate high n=baseline scores, reinforcing that educated consumers naturally favor responsible businesses. Ultimately, these high expectations mean that students demand verified proof and genuine trust before developing any real purchasing commitment. Simply put, positive CSR creates strong brand goodwill, but verifies credibility is what converts that goodwill into actual sales.

While Environmental CSR scores highest in baseline perception (Mean=4.07), MBA students show minimal lower scores when financial trade-offs are introduced, such as choosing CSR over a lower-priced competitor (Mean=3.83) or paying a price premium (Mean=3.90).

Business students exhibit classic rational consumer behavior, environmental values create brand goodwill, but demand sensitivity remains elastic, CSR initiatives cannot substitute for baseline price-value parity; rather, they serve as a secondary differentiator once competitive pricing is established.

Although Environmental CSR does not directly drive immediate purchase intention ($p=0.536$) it is primary statistically significant predictor of Brand association ($\beta=0.681$, $p < 0.001$)

Eco-friendly practices function as an indirect strategic asset. Environmental responsibility constructs the overall corporate image and cognitive positioning in the consumer's mind, which subsequently drives the direct commercial outcomes.

MBA students act as digital brand advocates. Socially responsible actions create shareable content that drives organic peer recommendation, making organic digital advocacy a key force multiplier for CSR marketing ROI.

VIII. SUGGESTIONS TO COMPANIES

1. Fix your internal culture first, Don't just plant trees; show fair wages, safe workplaces, and community support. That's what actually wins customer loyalty.
2. Show real proof, not just Buzzwords means Educated buyers demand proof. Use clear, third-party certifications to prove your social claims are real.
3. Turn good deeds into shareable stories creating authentic, transparent stories about your social impact that satisfied customers can easily share online with their peers.
4. To realise that customers are not too ready to spend excessively just because it is an Eco-friendly product.

IX. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Analyze the structural impact of corporate hypocrisy or suspected greenwashing to quantify how quickly lost brand credibility reduces purchase intention.
2. Conduct experimental choice-based conjoint analysis to identify the exact tipping point where price premium overrides CSR-driven purchase intentions.
3. Evaluate non-business student cohorts or general working-class consumers to test if non-academic buyers exhibit the same price sensitivity and reliance on brand credibility.

X. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

People care most about how you treat people, MBA Students care more about how a company treats its employees, workers, and local communities than they do about basic green marketing claims. Good workplace practices directly drive positive brand feelings ($\beta = 0.639$)

Going Green Builds image, Not immediate sales which means Eco- friendly efforts help build a great corporate image and strong brand associations ($\beta = 0.681$), but being green alone doesn't automatically convince people to buy your product right away.

Wallet First, Values second, While shoppers love responsible brands in theory

(mean= 4.07) their support drops when it hurts their wallet. When forced to choose between a CSR brand and a cheaper competitor, price sensitivity kicks in (mean=3.83). People expect a good deal first and social responsibility second.

Trust is the Ultimate Sales bridge as a good corporate image means nothing if buyers don't trust you. Proof of real, honest practices (Brand credibility) is the key trigger ($\beta=0.398$) that actually turns interest into cash purchases ($\text{mean}=4.02$).

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