CSR Symbolism Shaping Brand Trust and Brand Evangelism through Consumer-Brand Identification

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Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a critical determinant of consumer-brand relationships in an era where ethical business practices and environmental sustainability are gaining paramount importance (Kim & Lee, 2019). Consumers increasingly make value-driven purchasing decisions, compelling brands to communicate their CSR commitments transparently to foster trust, strengthen consumer-brand identification (CBI), and inspire brand advocacy (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Rahman & Chakraborty, 2025). The ability of CSR communication to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors is well-documented, with research indicating that CSR initiatives must be clear, concrete, and measurable to maximize impact (Du et al., 2010). However, there is limited understanding on how symbols associated with ethical and environmental responsibilities in CSR messages lead to CBI shaping brand trust and brand evangelism (e.g., activities about advocating a brand). We have addressed this literature gap in the present study.

Literature Review

Construal Level Theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) suggests that individuals evaluate information through different levels of mental construal, with low construal levels favoring concrete and specific details that make information more tangible, immediate, and actionable. Conversely, vague and abstract CSR messages tend to be processed at high construal levels, reducing their perceived relevance and emotional connection with consumers (Min et al., 2023). The effectiveness of CSR messaging is contingent upon the specificity of the information provided. Studies suggest that concrete details and detailed facts and figures about ethical responsibilities, such as supply chain transparency, fair wages, and corporate governance structures, enhance consumer trust and brand loyalty (Hur et al., 2014). Similarly, detailed facts and figures related to environmental sustainability, such as carbon footprint reduction statistics and renewable energy usage, have been shown to impact consumer perception of brand authenticity and reliability positively (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013). A growing body of literature highlights the role of CBI as a mediating factor between CSR communication and consumer responses (Stokburger-Sauer et al., 2012). Consumers who perceive a brand's CSR efforts as credible and aligned with their values are more likely to identify with that brand, fostering brand trust and brand evangelism (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013). Brands that integrate CSR messaging with quantifiable performance metrics and long-term commitments are more successful in cultivating stronger consumer-brand relationships (He & Li, 2010; Rana et al., 2024). Furthermore, CSR communication that adheres to low construal levels through explicit, data-driven commitments mitigates consumer skepticism and enhances engagement (Du et al., 2010). Empirical evidence supports that consumers are more likely to engage in brand evangelism behaviors, such as advocating for and defending a brand when they perceive its CSR

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efforts as genuine, transparent, and substantiated by concrete data (Kim & Lee, 2019). Based on this discussion, we proposed the following hypotheses:
Concrete details (***H1a***) and facts and figures (***H1b***) about ethical responsibilities will positively influence CBI. Concrete details (***H2a***) and facts and figures (***H2b***) about environmental sustainability will positively influence CBI. CBI will positively influence both brand trust (***H3***) and brand evangelism (***H4***). CBI will mediate the relationships between (***H5a***) concrete details on ethical responsibility and brand trust; (***H5b***) detailed facts and figures on ethical responsibility and brand trust; (***H6a***) concrete details on environmental responsibility and brand trust; (***H6b***) detailed facts and figures on environmental responsibility and brand trust; (***H7a***) concrete details on ethical responsibility and brand evangelism; (***H7b***) detailed facts and figures on ethical responsibility and brand evangelism; (H8a) concrete details on environmental responsibility and brand evangelism; (***H8b***) detailed facts and figures on environmental responsibility and brand evangelism.

Method

We conducted an online between-subjects experiment with a national sample of the U.S. (n = 307) in the age group 20 and above recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk through quota sampling. The stimuli included the company's annual report about ESG (CSR-related social work) of four Fortune 500 brands (e.g., eBay, Wayfair, Lowe's and Albertsons) reflecting various symbols of ethical and environmental responsibilities. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four reports. Scales measuring brand trust (Becerra & Badrinarayanan, 2013; Quaye et al., 2022), consumer brand identification (Osmanova et al., 2023) and brand evangelism (Fatma & Khan, 2023) were adapted from extant scales. All measurements were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).

Data Analysis

From the confirmatory factor analysis, we found that the factor loading ranged between .59 to .78. The measurement scales had adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$). Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypotheses in Mplus. The SEM model fitted the data well ($\chi2 = 88.26$, $df = 56$, $p < 0.004$; $\chi2/df = 1.58$; CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.04, SRMR = 0.05). A Bootstrap of 1000 (residual) was used to analyze the mediations. H1a ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$), H1b ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < .001$), H2a ($\beta = .20$, $p < .01$), H2b ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$), H3 ($\beta = .81$, $p < .001$), H4 ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$), H5a ($\beta = .15$, $p = .01$, C.I. = [.03, .17]), H5b ($\beta = .20$, $p < .00$, C.I. = [.06, .19]), H6a ($\beta = .16$, $p = .01$, C.I. = [.04, .18]), H6b ($\beta = .16$, $p = .03$, C.I. = [.02, .16]), H7a ($\beta = .09$, $p = .01$, C.I. = [.02, .12]), H7b ($\beta = .13$, $p < .00$, C.I. = [.04, .13]), H8a ($\beta = .10$, $p = .01$, C.I. = [.02, .12]), H8b ($\beta = .10$, $p = .04$, C.I. = [.01, .11]) were supported.

Discussion and Conclusion

Concrete details and detailed facts and figures related to both ethical responsibilities and environmental sustainability positively influence CBI. Furthermore, CBI significantly impacts brand trust and brand evangelism, establishing its mediating role in the relationship between CSR messaging and consumer outcomes. Our findings expand to the existing literature which state that when consumers resonate with CSR messages, they are more likely to develop a favorable attitude toward the brand, leading to higher levels of trust and identification (Du et al.,

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2010). Therefore, companies should incorporate different forms of symbols reflecting their ethical and environmental responsibilities in the CSR activities to build a favorable CBI and subsequently build stronger brand trust and brand evangelism. Future studies can explore whether the modality of information (text vs. visual vs. audio-visual) and frequency of CSR messaging (e.g., annual vs. monthly vs. weekly report on CSR activities) moderates the relationship between the CSR messaging and CBI.

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