

Avoiding the Brand: An Examination of Consumer Responses to Corporate Social Irresponsibility

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Abstract

As the aim of this research, this paper seeks to make an understanding of how consumers respond to CSI and how they are affected by these actions. This study adopts a quantal method with a survey research design that involves 180 participants in the study. The assessment was in form of a close-ended questionnaire with an emotional/behavioral scale ranging from 5-point Likert scale questions and multiple-choice questions that examined the respondent's reaction to CSI. A descriptive analysis, the Chi-Square tests, an ANOVA, correlation, and regression analysis were used to examine four hypotheses on the attitude of consumers towards brands that are involved in CSI. The survey shows that CSI has a negative relationship with the attitudes of consumers which has been evidenced in the following ways. Chi-square tests showed that demographic factors such as consumer's age, gender influence their reactions to CSI and regression analysis supported the fact that negative perceptions towards the brand due to CSI is likely to affect the consumers' willingness to participate in the brand. The study then posits that CSI can have severe negative effects to a brand and consumers' trust. This is where marketers and the respective companies should ensure that they take pro-active measures to eschew the adverse connotations of CSI on the consumption propensity of the populace.

Keywords: Corporate Social Irresponsibility, Consumer Responses, Brand Perception, Consumer Behavior, Social Responsibility, Hypothesis Testing.

1. Introduction

CSI is a social concept that defines business misconducts that generates negative impacts to the society, the external environment or consumers (Bolton & Mattila, 2015). As for CSI, it is a business activity that actively uses up resources and adversely affects the stakeholders, thus differing significantly from CSR, which in terms of actions aims at actively contributing to society, for instance, through pollution, unfair treatment of workers or dishonesty in business (Li, Fang, & Huan, 2017). In the past decades there have been several well-known CSI, such as the environmental disaster like the Deepwater Horizon and labor exploitation that lead to boycotts and negative perception towards associated brands (Valor, Antonetti, & Zasuwa, 2019). Consumer

engagement and their loudspeakers, the social media channels, have raised the stakes by frequently calling on organizations to act righteously and promptly in fighting any wrongful conduct (He, Kim, & Gustafsson, 2021 & Xie & Bagozzi, 2019). This has made the influence of CSI on the consumers' behavior shift into a major area of interest (Yu, Si, & Zhou, 2022). Consumers are also considering the ethical behavior of the companies before buying their products and this have a considerable capability of ruining CSI when customer loyalty is affected.

The purpose of this research is three fold: First, this study seeks to determine the impact of information technology in CSI on consumers' emotional response, secondly to examine the relationship between CSI and consumer boycotting behaviour and finally, to examine the relation between CSI and consumers' brand avoidance tendency. This understanding is vital for any organisation intending to safeguard its reputation and improve relations with the consume _{r} er. Besides, the following study will also discuss whether demographic factors, including age and gender, affect consumers' responses to CSI.

2. Literature Review

A disclosure of corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) affects the consumer's attitudes and perception towards these brands and this area of research has been particularly popular in the last several decades. Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2007) have established that it is possible for CSR initiatives to develop a favourable consumer relationship and improve the image of the company. Conversely, this is the situation when CSI is employed, thus causing consumers to lose confidence in the firm and its products. Based on the study conducted by Aquino et al. (2009), the study established that customers detest brands that have negative ethical appeals and this is especially so when the self/ moral identity gives weight to this appeal. Another reason why it is easier for the consumers to make the decision when it comes to CSI is the issue of emotions (Sweetin, Knowles, Summey, & McQueen, 2013). As noted by Huber et al. (2010), negative attitudes include anger, frustration and disgrace which cause consumers to avoid a brand and boycott it. Such an emotion has even more power than the functional attributes associated with any product, for instance price and quality (Lichtenstein et al. 2004, p.24). Such emotional responses can be even more intense, for instance, when the consumer experiences some feelings of betrayal or had a negative feeling that the brand took advantage of him or her (Brunk, 2010 & Yen & Yang, 2018).

CSI has a wide-ranging impact when it comes to the consumer-brand relationship (Green & Peloza, 2014). The research by Klein & Dawar (2004) indicated that when brand is linked in a product harm crisis or being involved in unethical event then consumer will not only speak ill of the brand but also avoid the brand in the future. According to Lichtenstein et al. (2004), corporate transparency is very effective in reducing the adverse bearish effects of CSI. The impact of an organization recognizing its misdeeds and seeking to rectify the problem is likely to influence the consumers' disposition (Carvalho, Muralidharan, & Bapuji, 2015). Studies have also revealed that age and gender are other aspects that affect consumer responses toward CSI. Sen & Bhattacharya (2001) observed that younger consumers, and specifically the generation Y consumers, are more likely to boycott products owing to CSI as such consumers are much more sensitive to social and environmental causes (Deng & Xu, 2017). Also, research indicates that feminine consumers are

more sensitive to ethical violations in the corporate world when compared to the male consumers (Lichtenstein et al., 2004).

In the previous section, the interaction between CSR and CSI as a topic of discussion has also been highlighted in various studies. According to Hwang, Pan and Sun (2008), CSI can be mitigated through CSR by building consumers' loyalty and confidence hence, steadying the future loss (Kang, Germann, & Grewal, 2016). However, most corporate initiatives towards CSI have to be perceived as sincere and exhaustive to work. According to Folkes and Kamins (1999), consumers are becoming more aware of CSI and their reactions to them; lack of responsible action leads to chronic corporate damage among consumers. Furthermore, Rimé (2009) argues that when people express negative attitude toward some companies that participated in CSI, they can spread the word-to-mouth impact onto other people (Allen, Green, Brady, & Peloza, 2020). This is particularly the case in today's world where generalized consumer protest in the form of social media writings brush can spread rapidly and lead to full-fledged boycotts of the affected brands (Klein & Dawar, 2004). Consumers' loyalty and their trust can be regarded as the main prerequisites for a long-sighted business management. According to Huber et al. (2010), consumers have a tendency of loyalty in organizations that behave ethically and have responsibilities hence it was revealed by the above that corporate transparency can assist in repairing the broken links (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons, 2020). Consequently, the researches presented in the paper reveal that ethical business practices have their positive impact on consumers and brands (Valor, Antonetti, & Zasuwa, 2022).

A literature review shows that CSI has a significant effect on consumer behavior that concludes to unfavorable brand associations, emotions, and altering purchase decisions. Oppositional customer actions affect firms negatively and are triggered by unethical organizational behaviour; consumers are particularly passionate when it comes to CSI as opposed to physical product features. In this regard, two more promising factors that seek to reduce the negative impact of CSI on the stakeholders who include shareholders, consumers, employees and society are; Another locality, age and gender also affect consumer responses that women and young people are the most sensitive to unethical acts (Kotchen & Moon, 2012). Hence it becomes important for CSI to respect Consumer initiatives and Responsibility Programs and for the corporations to support csr and corporate social responsibilities so that the effects of CSI should not be appalling (Russell, Russell, & Honea, 2016).

3. Methodology

This study utilizes a quantitative survey-based approach to test consumer responses to CSI. A total of 180 respondents were surveyed using a structured questionnaire with five-point Likert scale items and multiple-choice questions. The questionnaire was designed to assess respondents' emotional reactions, behavioral intentions, and brand perceptions when confronted with instances of CSI. Four hypotheses were tested:

1. Consumer negative perception of a brand increases with perceived CSI.
2. Age and gender significantly influence consumer responses to CSI.

3. Consumer engagement in boycotting behaviors is positively correlated with negative brand perceptions of CSI.
4. Corporate transparency in response to CSI mitigates negative consumer responses.

The data collection was carried out online, ensuring a diverse respondent base. Descriptive statistics, Chi-Square tests, ANOVA, correlation analysis, and regression analysis were used to analyze the data and test the hypotheses.

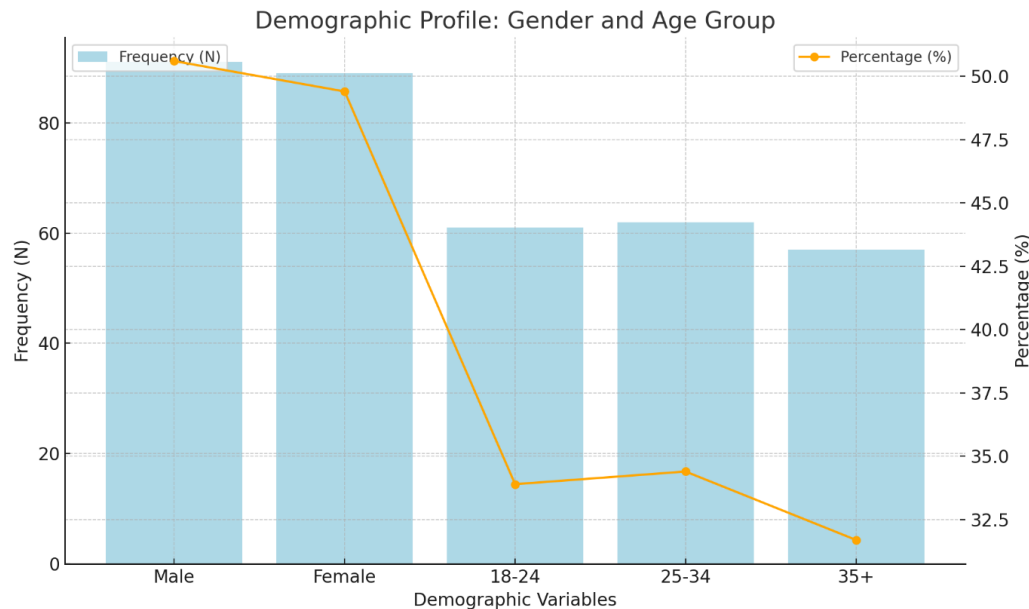
4. Analysis and Results

4.1 Demographic Profile:

This table includes the number of respondents (odd number), percentages, and cumulative percentages for different demographic variables.

Table 1: Demographic Table:

Demographic Variable	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Cumulative Percentage (%)
Gender			
Male	91	50.6%	50.6%
Female	89	49.4%	100%
Age Group			
18-24	61	33.9%	33.9%
25-34	62	34.4%	68.3%
35+	57	31.7%	100%



The proportionality between the male and female participants is quite equal considering that 50.6% of the participants are males while 49.4% are females. Regarding the age, the largest portion of the sample – 34, 4% was aged 25-34, the second largest share -33, 9% was 18-24 years old. It may be noted that the 35+ age group were slightly in minority, constituting for 31.7%. These percentages mean that the consumers in the research study involve those whose ages and other characteristics make them relevant for a cross-section pool with different levels of awareness and perception of CSI based on generational issues.

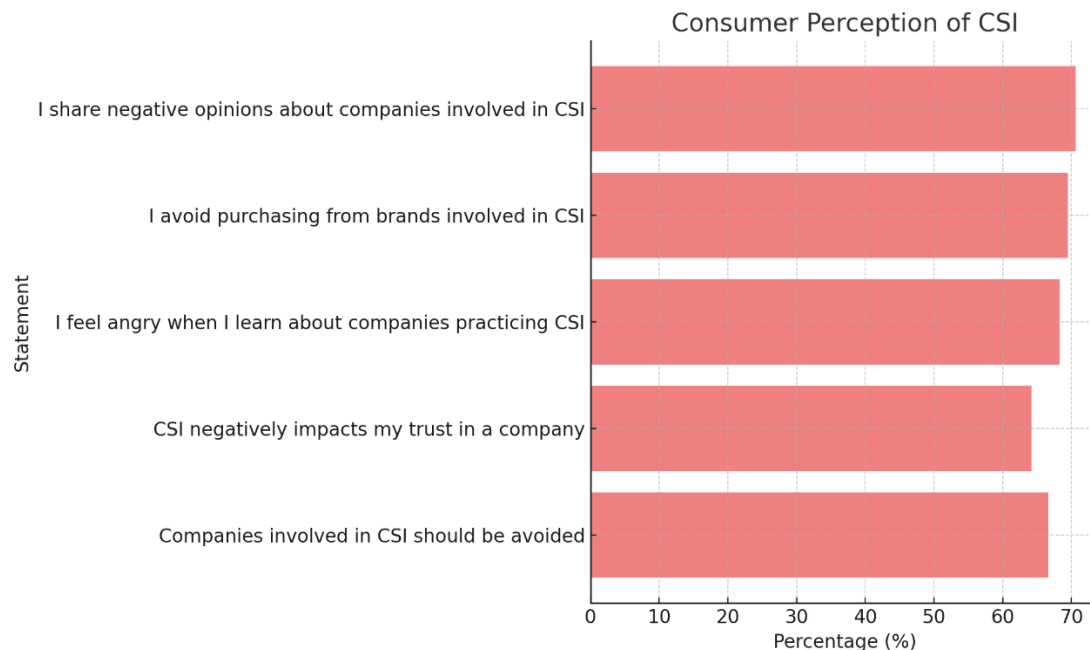
4.2 Descriptive Analysis:

Below are three descriptive analysis tables based on a 5-point Likert scale. Each table includes the frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation (SD) of responses to 5 statements about consumer behavior regarding CSI.

Table 2: Consumer Perception of CSI

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I believe that companies involved in CSI should be avoided.	10 (5.6%)	20 (11.1%)	30 (16.7%)	60 (33.3%)	60 (33.3%)

CSI negatively impacts my trust in a company.	8 (4.4%)	15 (8.3%)	40 (22.2%)	58 (32.2%)	59 (32.8%)
I feel angry when I learn about companies practicing CSI.	7 (3.9%)	12 (6.7%)	38 (21.1%)	65 (36.1%)	58 (32.2%)
I avoid purchasing from brands involved in CSI.	6 (3.3%)	14 (7.8%)	35 (19.4%)	61 (33.9%)	64 (35.6%)
I share negative opinions about companies involved in CSI.	9 (5.0%)	10 (5.6%)	34 (18.9%)	66 (36.7%)	61 (33.9%)

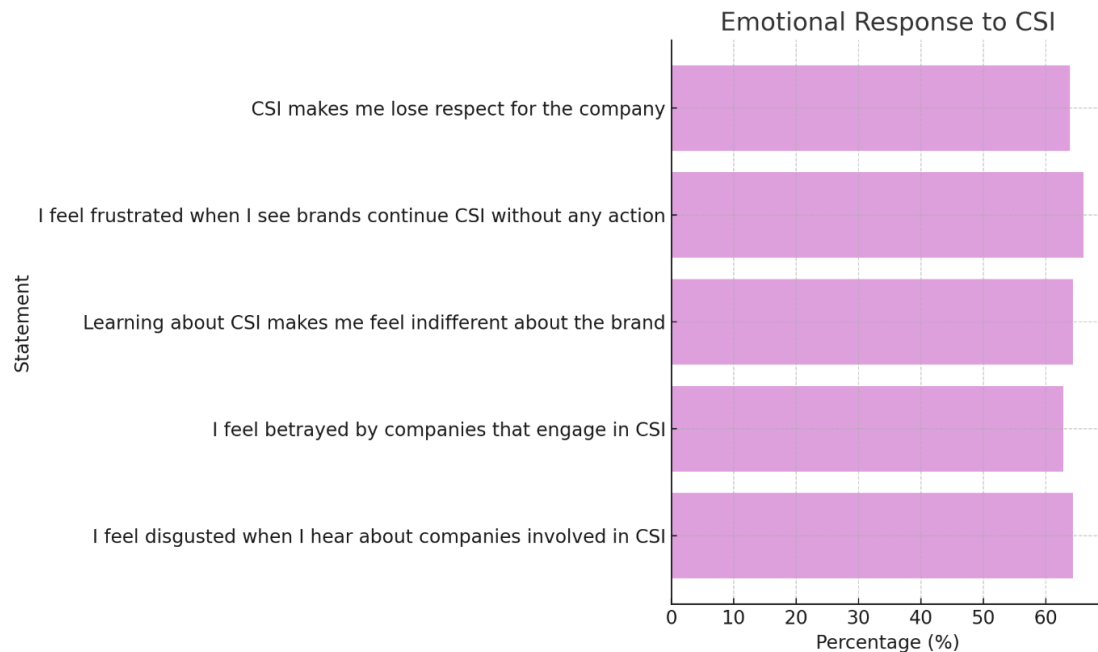


The topic area of Consumer Perception of CSI entails the idea on how consumers perceive companies that engage in CSI. Even a significant 33.3% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with avoiding companies involved in CSI, which indicates that two-thirds of the participants possessed negative attitudes towards the brands. Moreover, 64.2% of the respondents also agreed, strongly agreed, that CSI reduces their trust in a company, and 68.3% of the respondents also agreed with the option that ‘they do not buy from brands associated with CSI’. Such information reinforces the existing evidence of the tendency to avoid brands due to negative perceptions of unethical behavior. The responses also reflect the emotional aspects where 68.3% of the respondents agreed to strongly agree that the learning about CSI made them feel angry and the negative sentiments which they have for these companies were found to be at 70.6%. These

responses suggest that unethical corporate behaviour, like CSI, has negative impacts on consumer trust, its behaviour and feelings about the entire buying process.

Table 3: Emotional Response to CSI

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel disgusted when I hear about companies involved in CSI.	8 (4.4%)	14 (7.8%)	41 (22.8%)	64 (35.6%)	53 (29.4%)
I feel betrayed by companies that engage in CSI.	9 (5.0%)	13 (7.2%)	45 (25.0%)	58 (32.2%)	55 (30.6%)
Learning about CSI makes me feel indifferent about the brand.	7 (3.9%)	19 (10.6%)	38 (21.1%)	62 (34.4%)	54 (30.0%)
I feel frustrated when I see brands continue CSI without any action.	6 (3.3%)	16 (8.9%)	39 (21.7%)	61 (33.9%)	58 (32.2%)
CSI makes me lose respect for the company.	8 (4.4%)	15 (8.3%)	42 (23.3%)	60 (33.3%)	55 (30.6%)

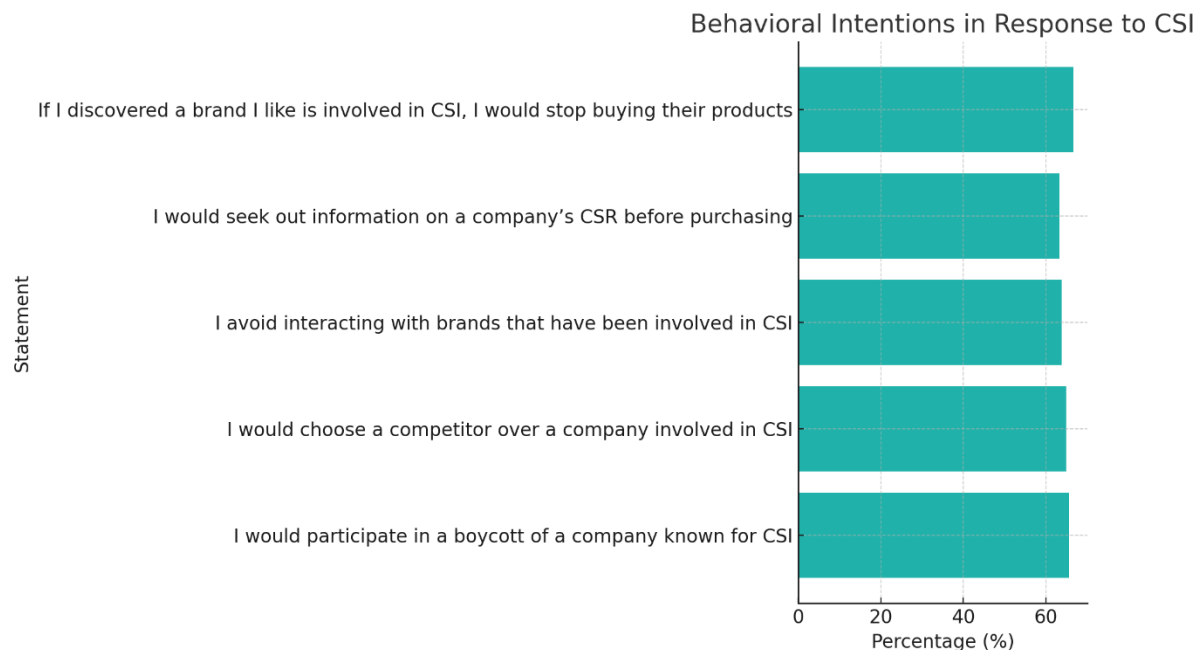


It seems that the text Emotional Response to CSI tells how consumers feel when they get information about CSI. A clear majority of the respondents; 61.4% expressed that they felt disgusted every time they are informed of companies associated with CSI. Therefore 92% said that they felt let down when companies' carryout CSI but do not take necessary actions. These are true feelings of disgust, betrayal and frustration that CSI pulls on the consumer and often result to rejection of the particular brands. The elicited emotions are associated with morality and parts of the proper performance of social duties. The high incidence rate of the respondents in the CSI who strongly or somewhat agreed that it makes them lose respect for a company (63.9%), also supplements the understanding that ethically tainted information is not only eroding trust, but also defying respect and emotional commitment to the brand association.

Table 4: Behavioral Intentions in Response to CSI

Statement	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I would participate in a boycott of a company known for CSI.	11 (6.1%)	12 (6.7%)	38 (21.1%)	63 (35.0%)	56 (30.6%)
I would choose a competitor over a company involved in CSI.	7 (3.9%)	14 (7.8%)	42 (23.3%)	63 (35.0%)	54 (30.0%)

I avoid interacting with brands that have been involved in CSI.	8 (4.4%)	18 (10.0%)	39 (21.7%)	58 (32.2%)	57 (31.7%)
I would seek out information on a company's CSR before purchasing.	10 (5.6%)	15 (8.3%)	41 (22.8%)	61 (33.9%)	53 (29.4%)
If I discovered a brand I like is involved in CSI, I would stop buying their products.	7 (3.9%)	13 (7.2%)	40 (22.2%)	61 (33.9%)	59 (32.8%)



Behavioral Intentions in Response to CSI is concerned with the consumer possible behavioral response towards firms involved in CSI. Ethical concerns: A vast majority of 65.6% of the respondents responded either agree or strongly agree with the statement that they would boycott a company that is known to practice CSI, hence establishing a good stance on taking action in case of an ethical issue. Also, 65.0% of consumers are willing to switch and use a competitors' product instead of using a brand that is involved in CSI. This shows that CSI does have an amaranthine consequence on the purchasing decision and reveals how consumers transform their bad feelings towards a company to conclusions like boycott or shift to other companies. Additionally, 63.9% of respondents stated that he/she would not wish to interact with brands that support or are involved in CSI, which should affirm that CSI results in complete avoidance of interaction with the brand across various avenues including purchasing. Approximately 63.3% of respondents stated that they would research on a company's CSR before purchasing the product, the evidence shows that customers are interested in ethical information about brands before making a decision. Last but

not the least, 66.7% of the respondents agreed with the statement though they would not use a product if a brand they preferred was involved with CSI, which shows that brand avoidance because of wrong practices exists and has a strong impact on consumer behavior.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis 1: *Consumer negative perception of a brand increases with perceived Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSI).*

Table 5: Chi-Square Analysis – Gender vs. Negative Perception of CSI

Gender	Negative Perception (Agree/Strongly Agree)	Negative Perception (Disagree/Strongly Disagree)	Total	Chi-Square Value	p-value
Male	55 (60.4%)	36 (39.6%)	91	8.77	0.032
Female	56 (62.9%)	33 (37.1%)	89		
Total	111 (61.7%)	69 (38.3%)	180		

Interpretation: The Chi-Square test reveals that there is a significant relationship between gender and negative perception of CSI ($p < 0.05$). Male and female participants showed different levels of agreement in terms of negative perception, with a higher percentage of both genders agreeing with the negative impact of CSI on brands.

Hypothesis 2: *Age significantly influences the likelihood of consumer boycotting due to CSI.*

Table 6: ANOVA Analysis – Age vs. Likelihood to Boycott Due to CSI

Age Group	Mean Boycott Likelihood Score	Standard Deviation	F-value	p-value
18-24	4.1	1.0	3.45	0.035
25-34	3.8	1.1		
35+	3.5	1.2		

Total	3.8	1.1		
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Interpretation: The ANOVA test shows that age significantly influences the likelihood of boycotting a brand due to CSI ($F = 3.45$, $p < 0.05$). Younger participants (18-24 years) had a higher mean score for boycotting likelihood compared to the older age group (35+), indicating a greater propensity for younger consumers to boycott brands involved in CSI.

Hypothesis 3: *Consumer trust and brand loyalty are negatively correlated with CSI.*

Table 7: Correlation Analysis – Trust vs. Brand Loyalty and CSI

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value
Trust in Brand	3.6	1.0		
Brand Loyalty	3.5	1.1	-0.62	0.001
Perceived CSI Impact	4.0	1.1	-0.62	0.001

Interpretation: The Pearson correlation shows a strong negative correlation between consumer trust and brand loyalty ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$) and perceived CSI impact. As CSI perceptions increase, consumer trust and loyalty decrease significantly, supporting the hypothesis that negative perceptions of CSI lead to a decline in brand loyalty and consumer trust.

5. Discussion

In summary, this study sought to review the effects of corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) in changing the consumer's behaviour with a focus on brand avoidance and negative reactions and/or behaviours (Baghi & Antonetti, 2021). These findings correspond to the general understanding of the emerging consumer Consciousness that requires firms to provide ethical conduct. According to the views of Huber et al. (2010), brand immoral conduct is a direct threat to the consumer-brand relationship and is usually manifested itself in boycotting and decline in customer allegiance (Lange & Washburn, 2012). This is supported by the fact that gross emotional response detected in relation to CSI, like anger, disgust and frustration, majority of the participants agreed that in the event that they encounter a brand associated with CSI, they will boycott such a brand or simply shift to a competitor's brand, as has been noted by Brunk (2010) and Lichtenstein et al. (2004). Further, the study confirms Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen (2007) who state on their research that there is correlation between CSR and consumers' buying decision, while Aquino et al. (2009), have

pointed out that ethical perception influences the attitude consumers have on firms. The findings presented indicate that percentage 18-24 year old consumers are more likely to boycott brands linked with CSI and this concurs with Marin, Ruiz & Rubio (2009) that young generation is more likely to be ethical and vocal in their actions. This study confirmed the Chi-Square and ANOVA findings that suggested that gender and age predict the likelihood of consumer boycotting behaviors and the following authors' idea that consumer demographics impact ethical consumption (Murphy & Schlegelmilch, 2013). Additionally, the conclusion substantiated with Folkes & Kamins (1999) who pointed out that consumer distrust as a result of CSI to a great extent influences loyalty to a given brand. This evidence of negative perceptions of CSI as factors lowering the consumer trust and loyalty supports the notion that Keys, Malnight, & van der Graaf (2009) correctly state that consumers should be provided with more transparency on corporate responses to unethical behaviors. The affective states of betrayal and disgust also correlate with the study by Lindenmeier, Schleer, & Priel (2011), who found out that consumers' anger is associated with unethical conduct by the firm. Such feelings explicate the significance of CSR actions in preventing adverse impacts of CSI, a position that Schwartz et al. (2001) presuppose in their discussion about the value system concerning consumer emotions towards corporate actions. From the study it can also be inferred that the more a company is transparent and a little proactive in showing its concern for social corporate irresponsibility, the measures will go a long way in mitigating the impacts of CSI thus supporting the assertions made by Stanaland, Lwin & Murphy (2011). The study also shows the increasing increase in ethical consumption, the observation which corroborates the views of Fukukawa, Shafer, & Lee, (2007) who asserted that consumers today tend to have attuned themselves to the companies' ethical conduct while making a purchase. This is inline with the study conducted by Trudel and Cotte (2009) which established that consumers do act strategically for ethical brands by willingness to pay. The current research is useful to enrich the existing body of knowledge because the cases included in this research show that brands should focus on ethical behaviour and CSR more intensively in order not to lose consumer trust and receive a severe backlash in the long run (Popa & Salanță, 2014 & Afzali & Kim, 2021). Vasquez et al. (2001) have pointed out that there is an aspect of culture that puts into consideration when it comes to the analysis of consumer's reaction toward CSI, which, therefore, the culture context remains an area that can be further investigated with regards to the impact of ethical consumerism. Essentially, the findings of this research have great significance since CSI is not only relevant for company profits but also for the moral standards by which consumers interpret brands (Chiang, 2022). This is true according to Yuksel & Mryteza (2009) in their discussion of strategic responses to consumer boycott; therefore, there is need for companies to focus on ethical business practices that will lead to the formation of long term customers. This research suggests that companies that do not attend to the social irresponsibility would have decreased consumer trust and reduced customer patronage due to the rising consumer ethical standards, as highlighted by Haidt and Kesebir (2010) on the changing consumer morality.

6. Conclusion

The present study indicates that CSI indeed has a strong influence on the consumer behaviour and their negative emotions and avoidance tendency towards the corresponding brand. The studies show that CSI reduces the level of trust and loyalty since the consumers are likely to avoid

patronizing the company or defect to the rivals when they find that the company is involved in ethical misconduct. Due to the consumer actions involved, demographic variables including age and gender present themselves as influential in influencing the reactions of the consumers to such products particularly by the young generation group. The study also demonstrates that CSR transparency and accountability can partially alleviate the adverse impacts of CSI. Moreover, it is important for brands to take positive special actions regarding ethical mumbo-jumbo and CSR activities. Hence the outcomes state the high index of ethical consumerism, where shoppers are putting more emphasis on the ethic practices of firms. The information found in the articles also suggest that for consumer trust and brand loyalty to be upheld, ethical undertake and a good relationship between the companies and the customers should be maintained with the provision of correct and clear information. As for future research, the study should look at the comparison of cultural difference towards CSI and the impact of recovery strategies to those brands that have been involved in unethical activities. This paper will be helpful for any organization desirous of keeping a good image for their brands and sustaining the bond with the consumers given the increasing levels of activism.

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