

Corporate Social Responsibility, Consumer Trust, and Purchase Intention in the Fast Fashion Industry: Stakeholder Theory Perspectives

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Abstract

The fast fashion industry confronts growing scrutiny over its environmental and social externalities, prompting a wave of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications designed to signal sustainable practices to ethically-minded consumers. However, the conditions under which CSR initiatives translate into consumer trust and purchase intention in fast fashion remain theoretically underdeveloped. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, this study examines how CSR perceptions—disaggregated into environmental responsibility, labor practices, and community engagement dimensions—influence purchase intention through the mediating role of consumer trust, moderated by CSR communication transparency. Survey data were collected from 514 millennial and Generation Z fast fashion consumers across three national markets (Saudi Arabia, Colombia, and Nigeria), and analyzed using multi-group PLS-SEM. Results reveal that all three CSR dimensions positively predict consumer trust ($\beta = 0.28\text{--}0.41$, $p < .001$), which in turn mediates the CSR–purchase intention relationship. CSR communication transparency significantly moderates the environmental responsibility–trust pathway

($\beta = 0.23$, $p < .01$) but not the labor practices or community engagement pathways. Multi-group analysis reveals significant cross-national differences in the CSR–trust relationships, with environmental responsibility exerting the strongest effects in Saudi Arabia and Colombia, while labor practices CSR is most influential in Nigeria. The findings contribute a theoretically nuanced stakeholder perspective on CSR-as-a-strategic-communication-tool and offer market-specific guidance for fast fashion brand managers navigating multicultural sustainability positioning.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, consumer trust, purchase intention, fast fashion, stakeholder theory, CSR transparency, multi-group analysis

1. Introduction

Fast fashion—the business model characterized by rapid production cycles, low price points, and frequent trend-based collections—has expanded from a Western consumer phenomenon to a globally pervasive retail category, generating an estimated USD 106 billion in annual revenue and accounting for approximately 10% of global carbon dioxide emissions

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(Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021; McKinsey & Company, 2022). Despite its commercial success, the fast fashion industry faces intensifying reputational and regulatory pressures arising from documented environmental degradation, labor exploitation in developing-country supply chains, and the proliferation of textile waste in landfills and oceans (Niinimäki et al., 2020; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021).

In response to these pressures—and in recognition of the growing purchasing power of environmentally and ethically conscious millennial and Generation Z consumers—fast fashion brands have increasingly adopted corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, ranging from sustainable material sourcing programs and carbon neutrality commitments to supplier code-of-conduct enforcement and community investment programs (Caniato et al., 2012; Carroll & Shabana, 2010). However, the strategic value of CSR investments in the fast fashion context remains empirically contested. Critics argue that fast fashion CSR constitutes "greenwashing"—the strategic deployment of sustainability narratives without substantive operational transformation—undermining consumer trust rather than building it (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). Proponents counter that genuine CSR signaling, when accompanied by credible communication, can authentically enhance brand equity and consumer loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Du et al., 2010).

The theoretical and empirical resolution of this debate requires a more nuanced examination of how different dimensions of CSR perception differentially influence consumer trust and purchase intention, and

how the credibility of CSR communication shapes these relationships. Most prior studies treat CSR as a unidimensional construct, obscuring the heterogeneous pathways through which environmental, social, and governance dimensions of CSR independently influence consumer evaluations (Öberseder et al., 2013). Furthermore, the explicit role of CSR communication transparency as a moderating mechanism—determining whether CSR claims enhance or diminish trust depending on their perceived authenticity—has received surprisingly limited empirical investigation (Du et al., 2010; Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984; Mitchell et al., 1997) provides the overarching theoretical framework for this study. Stakeholder Theory posits that organizational legitimacy and performance are contingent on the ability to satisfy the expectations and demands of multiple stakeholder groups, including consumers, employees, communities, investors, and regulatory bodies. In the CSR-consumer relationship, Stakeholder Theory predicts that consumers evaluate firms' CSR commitments as signals of their responsiveness to multiple stakeholder interests—environmental stewardship responding to ecological stakeholders, labor practices responding to worker stakeholders, and community engagement responding to local societal stakeholders (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; McWilliams & Siegel, 2001).

This study is distinguished by three design features that collectively advance the literature. First, it disaggregates CSR perceptions into three domain-specific dimensions and tests their differential effects on consumer trust, providing a more

granular stakeholder-theoretic mapping of the CSR–trust mechanism. Second, it introduces CSR communication transparency as a moderator, directly testing the theoretical proposition that perceived authenticity of CSR communication amplifies the trust-building capacity of environmental CSR claims. Third, multi-group PLS-SEM across three culturally diverse national markets—Saudi Arabia, Colombia, and Nigeria—provides cross-cultural evidence that challenges the implicit cultural universalism of prior CSR research, which has been heavily skewed toward Western consumer samples.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility: Definitional Landscape and Dimensional Structure

CSR has been variously defined over the past six decades, reflecting evolving societal expectations of corporate conduct. Carroll's (1991) pyramid model defines CSR as encompassing economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities, arranged in hierarchical order of obligation. More contemporary formulations emphasize the strategic and relational dimensions of CSR: McWilliams and Siegel (2001) define CSR as "actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law" (p. 117), while the European Commission (2011) frames CSR as "the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society" (p. 6).

For consumer-facing CSR research in the retail and fashion domain, three dimensions

are consistently identified in the empirical literature. Environmental CSR encompasses actions related to ecological sustainability, including carbon footprint reduction, sustainable sourcing, recycling programs, and biodiversity protection (Peloza & Shang, 2011; Rausch & Kopplin, 2021). Labor practices CSR encompasses supplier code-of-conduct compliance, fair wage policies, worker safety standards, and transparency in supply chain management (Caniato et al., 2012; Perry & Towers, 2013). Community engagement CSR encompasses local community investment, educational initiatives, cultural sponsorships, and stakeholder dialogue programs (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Godfrey, 2005).

2.2 Consumer Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

Consumer trust—defined as a consumer's willingness to rely on a brand based on the expectation of positive, reliable, and value-congruent behavior (Mayer et al., 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994)—has been extensively theorized as the primary psychological pathway through which CSR perceptions influence purchase-related behaviors. Several mechanisms underlie this relationship. Cognitive trust mechanisms operate through the evaluation of brand competence and integrity signals embedded in CSR communications (Kim et al., 2019). Affective trust mechanisms involve the emotional resonance and ethical congruence between consumer values and brand CSR commitments (Vlachos et al., 2009). Identity-based trust mechanisms reflect the degree to which CSR commitments reinforce consumers' self-concept and desired social identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate positive CSR–trust relationships in the retail context. Pivato et al. (2008) find that organic product CSR initiatives enhance consumer trust and, through trust, purchase behavior in Italian consumers. Willmott (2003) demonstrates that trust in brand ethics is a stronger predictor of loyalty than functional quality in many product categories. In the fashion domain specifically, Caniato et al. (2012) identify supply chain transparency as a critical antecedent of consumer trust in fashion brands, while Perry and Towers (2013) emphasize the role of third-party CSR certification in establishing trust signals that bridge the gap between brand claims and consumer perception.

2.3 CSR Communication Transparency as a Moderator

The growing literature on CSR communication highlights the paradox of strategic CSR communication: while increasing CSR visibility is generally associated with positive consumer responses, overly promotional CSR messaging can trigger skepticism and backfire, particularly among consumers who perceive a mismatch between corporate rhetoric and operational reality (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Lyon & Maxwell, 2011). This "CSR communication double-edged sword" phenomenon underscores the importance of communication quality attributes, of which transparency is the most theoretically central.

CSR communication transparency refers to the degree to which firms provide accurate, verifiable, complete, and timely information about their CSR activities, outcomes, and limitations (Du et al., 2010; Fieseler et al.,

2010). Transparency signals organizational honesty and accountability, reducing information asymmetry between brands and consumers and enabling more accurate consumer evaluations of CSR authenticity (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). Moderation by transparency implies that the trust-building effect of environmental CSR claims is amplified when consumers perceive the communication as transparent, because transparency serves as a credibility-enhancing cue that validates the environmental claim.

The moderating role of transparency may be particularly pronounced for environmental CSR in fast fashion, where greenwashing accusations are frequent and consumer skepticism is elevated (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). In contrast, labor practices and community engagement CSR claims may be subject to less severe credibility scrutiny, particularly in developing market contexts where these social dimensions are evaluated through more proximal cultural and regulatory lenses.

2.4 Purchase Intention and CSR-Consumer Congruence

Purchase intention—the consumer's expressed likelihood of purchasing a product from a specific brand—is the primary outcome variable in marketing research due to its strong predictive validity for actual purchase behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Morwitz & Schmittlein, 1992). In the CSR-consumer literature, the relationship between CSR perceptions and purchase intention is theorized as operating indirectly through trust (Vlachos et al., 2009), brand attitude (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), and consumer-company identification (Bhattacharya &

Sen, 2003), rather than through direct cognitive evaluation.

The strength of the CSR–purchase intention relationship is moderated by consumer characteristics including CSR awareness, ethical consumption orientation, and brand familiarity (Öberseder et al., 2013; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Market-level moderators include the regulatory environment's enforcement of CSR standards, the strength of civil society advocacy, and cultural values regarding environmental versus social responsibility priorities (Matten & Moon, 2008). The multi-country design of the present study is specifically designed to capture these market-level moderating effects.

2.5 Cross-Cultural Variations in CSR Evaluations

Cross-national CSR research consistently finds that cultural values, institutional environments, and developmental contexts shape consumers' CSR priorities and evaluation processes (Brammer et al., 2012; Matten & Moon, 2008). High power distance and collectivist cultures, such as those found in Saudi Arabia and Nigeria, may respond more strongly to community engagement and labor welfare CSR dimensions that resonate with collective and relational values (Hofstede, 2001; Kolk & Lenfant, 2010). Environmental CSR may be prioritized more strongly in countries with higher environmental awareness, regulatory frameworks, and civil society pressure, conditions increasingly characteristic of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 sustainability agenda and Colombia's active environmental governance initiatives (OECD, 2022).

3. Research Gap

The current study addresses three specific gaps in the literature. First, the simultaneous modeling of three CSR dimensions as independent predictors of consumer trust—while controlling for their intercorrelations—provides a more precise disaggregated Stakeholder Theory analysis than most prior studies that use composite CSR scales. Second, CSR communication transparency has been theorized as a moderator but rarely empirically tested as such in a multi-dimensional CSR model, particularly in the fast fashion sector. Third, cross-national comparative studies of CSR–trust relationships across culturally dissimilar emerging and transitional market contexts (Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Nigeria) are virtually absent from the fast fashion literature, which predominantly features Western European or North American consumer data.

4. Research Objectives

1. To examine the individual effects of environmental responsibility, labor practices, and community engagement CSR dimensions on consumer trust.
2. To test the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationships between each CSR dimension and purchase intention.
3. To investigate whether CSR communication transparency moderates the environmental responsibility–consumer trust relationship.
4. To compare the CSR–trust–purchase intention model across three national market contexts using multi-group PLS-SEM analysis.

5. Hypotheses Development

H1a–c: Environmental responsibility (H1a), labor practices CSR (H1b), and community engagement CSR (H1c) each positively predict consumer trust.

H2a–c: Consumer trust mediates the relationships between environmental responsibility (H2a), labor practices CSR (H2b), community engagement CSR (H2c), and purchase intention.

H3: CSR communication transparency positively moderates the relationship between environmental responsibility and consumer trust.

H4: The CSR–trust–purchase intention model differs significantly across national market groups (Saudi Arabia, Colombia, Nigeria).

6. Research Methodology

A cross-sectional survey design was employed. Participants were 514 adults (18–40 years) who reported purchasing fast fashion products at least twice in the preceding 12 months, recruited via social media platforms and online panels in the three target countries. Constructs were measured using validated multi-item Likert scales (1–7). Environmental CSR (6 items), labor practices CSR (5 items), and community engagement CSR (5 items) were adapted from Öberseder et al. (2013). Consumer trust was measured using 5 items from Mayer et al. (1995) and Morgan and Hunt (1994). Purchase intention was

assessed with 4 items from Ajzen (1991). CSR communication transparency used 4 items from Kim and Ferguson (2018). PLS-SEM (SmartPLS 4.0) with bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) and multi-group analysis (permutation method) were employed.

7. Data Analysis and Findings

7.1 Demographic Profile

Table 1 Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 514)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Country	Saudi Arabia	172	33.5%
	Colombia	171	33.3%
	Nigeria	171	33.3%
Gender	Female	298	58.0%
	Male	207	40.3%
	Non-binary/Other	9	1.8%
Age	18–25 years	189	36.8%
	26–32 years	198	38.5%
	33–40 years	127	24.7%
Generational Cohort	Gen Z (born 1997–)	211	41.1%
	Millennials (born 1981–1996)	303	58.9%

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Purchase Frequency	2-3 times/year	187	36.4%
	4-6 times/year	203	39.5%
	> 6 times/year	124	24.1%

Table 3 Correlation Matrix (Square Roots of AVE on Diagonal)

	ECSR	LCSR	CCSR	CT	PI	TR
ECSR	.786					
LCSR	.492	.794				
CCSR	.471	.511	.779			
CT	.561	.534	.497	.833		
PI	.489	.462	.431	.592	.834	
TR	.513	.448	.439	.574	.498	.827

7.2 Measurement Model

Table 2 Reliability and Validity Statistics

Construct	Items	α	CR	AVE	VIF Range
Environmental CSR (ECSR)	6	.891	.910	.618	1.72-2.31
Labor Practices CSR (LCSR)	5	.873	.895	.631	1.68-2.14
Community Engagement (CCSR)	5	.861	.884	.607	1.61-2.09
Consumer Trust (CT)	5	.902	.918	.693	1.79-2.42
Purchase Intention (PI)	4	.883	.901	.696	1.71-2.28
CSR Transparency (TR)	4	.877	.896	.684	1.64-2.19

7.3 Structural Model Results

Table 4 Direct Effects on Consumer Trust (H1a-c)

Path	β	SE	t	p	95% CI	Decision
ECSR → CT	0.281	0.051	5.51	< .001	[0.181, 0.381]	H1a Supported
LCSR → CT	0.347	0.048	7.23	< .001	[0.253, 0.441]	H1b Supported
CCSR → CT	0.213	0.054	3.94	< .001	[0.107, 0.319]	H1c Supported
R ² (CT)	0.471					

Note. All VIF values < 3.3, confirming absence of multicollinearity (Kock, 2015). HTMT ratios ranged from .612 to .793, all below .85 threshold.

Table 5 Mediation Effects: Consumer Trust Mediating CSR → Purchase Intention (H2a-c)

Indirect Path	β	SE	95% CI	Decision
ECSR → CT → PI	0.189	0.038	[0.115, 0.263]	H2a Supported
LCSR → CT → PI	0.233	0.041	[0.153, 0.313]	H2b Supported
CCSR → CT → PI	0.143	0.036	[0.073, 0.213]	H2c Supported

Note. Direct effects of ECSR, LCSR, and CCSR on PI were non-significant after trust entered the model, confirming full mediation for all three pathways.

Table 6 Moderation Analysis: Transparency Moderating ECSR → Consumer Trust (H3)

	β	SE	t	p
ECSR → CT	0.281	0.051	5.51	< .001
TR → CT	0.312	0.047	6.64	< .001
ECSR × TR → CT	0.229	0.049	4.67	< .001
LCSR × TR → CT	0.041	0.053	0.77	.440
CCSR × TR → CT	0.063	0.051	1.24	.216

Note. H3 supported for ECSR × TR interaction only. Moderation non-significant for LCSR and CCSR as hypothesized.

7.4 Multi-Group Analysis

Table 7 Multi-Group Analysis: Path Coefficients by Country

Path	Saudi Arabia (β)	Colombia (β)	Nigeria (β)	Sig. Differences
ECSR → CT	0.341**	0.312**	0.189**	SA vs. NI*
LCSR → CT	0.298**	0.341**	0.412**	NI vs. SA*, NI vs. CO†
CCSR → CT	0.231**	0.198**	0.241**	NS
CT → PI	0.584**	0.561**	0.547**	NS

Note. *p < .05; **p < .001; †p < .10. NS = not significant. Permutation-based MGA, 5,000 permutations.

Multi-group analysis confirms significant cross-national variation in specific pathways, supporting H4 partially. Environmental CSR exerts significantly stronger trust effects in Saudi Arabia than Nigeria, while labor practices CSR is significantly stronger in Nigeria than Saudi Arabia. These differences likely reflect the salience of Vision 2030's environmental sustainability agenda in Saudi Arabia and the heightened awareness of labor exploitation concerns in Nigeria's apparel sector.

8. Discussion

The findings illuminate the differential strategic value of CSR dimensions for fast fashion brands operating across culturally heterogeneous markets. Labor practices

CSR emerges as the strongest universal predictor of consumer trust ($\beta = 0.347$), likely reflecting the increasing consumer awareness of documented supply chain violations in fast fashion following high-profile disasters such as the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse. The cross-national moderation finding that labor practices CSR is particularly influential in the Nigerian context may reflect the proximity and salience of labor exploitation in African apparel supply chains for Nigerian consumers who have greater informational access to regional labor conditions.

The finding that transparency moderates only the environmental CSR–trust pathway—not labor or community CSR—suggests that environmental claims are evaluated with greater cognitive scrutiny, possibly because environmental greenwashing is more prevalent and better documented than labor or community CSR misrepresentation. This supports Du et al.'s (2010) conceptualization of CSR communication as most critical in the domains where consumer skepticism is highest.

9. Theoretical Implications

This study advances Stakeholder Theory in the consumer marketing domain by demonstrating that consumers function as stakeholders who differentially weight and evaluate the three primary dimensions of CSR. The disaggregated analysis reveals that firms cannot assume uniform stakeholder salience across CSR dimensions or cultural contexts; instead, a sophisticated stakeholder mapping approach that identifies the dominant CSR concerns of specific consumer segments is required for effective

CSR strategy formulation. The study also advances CSR communication theory by establishing transparency as a differential moderator whose impact is CSR-domain-specific rather than universally applicable.

10. Practical Implications

Fast fashion brands should adopt market-specific CSR communication strategies that prioritize the dimensions most salient to target consumer segments. In Saudi Arabia and Colombia, environmental CSR communications accompanied by high transparency standards should be prioritized. In Nigerian markets, labor practices CSR—particularly supply chain transparency and fair wage commitments—should form the core of consumer-facing CSR messaging. The universal finding that consumer trust fully mediates all CSR–purchase intention relationships underscores the primacy of trust-building as the ultimate objective of CSR strategy, regardless of dimension or market.

11. Conclusion

Grounded in Stakeholder Theory, this multi-national study demonstrates that all three dimensions of CSR perception enhance consumer trust, which fully mediates purchase intention relationships. CSR communication transparency amplifies the environmental CSR–trust pathway specifically, and significant cross-national differences exist in the relative salience of environmental versus labor practices CSR across Saudi Arabia, Colombia, and Nigeria. Future research should incorporate

longitudinal designs, actual purchase behavior outcomes, and additional national markets to extend the generalizability of these findings.

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The Journal of Business, Management and Economics Engineering

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