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The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Brand Equity: A Case Study of Unilever UK

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged out of philanthropic activity to become one of the strategic priorities of multinational organisations. Organisations are increasingly incorporating environmental and social activities in branding strategies as a way of reinforcing competitive positioning (Belz, Peattie and Onel, 2025). CSR may shape brand perception, trust, and loyalty in the long-term in consumer-based markets. It is especially so in the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector, where brands are highly competitive, and consumers are always on high alert. According to recent market reports, over 60 per cent of consumers choose brands that make visible sustainability promises (McKinsey & Company, 2023). As a result, sustainability has played a significant role in branding among FMCG companies.

Unilever is generally known to incorporate sustainable business into its business model. Unilever seeks to integrate social responsibility and commercial performance through responsible sourcing, carbon reduction and social impact programmes. Such strategies make the company a sustainability-oriented organisation in the UK retail market.

1.2 Research Problem

Although the investment in CSR has increased, the association between CSR and brand equity is debatable. Some researchers believe that CSR increases trust and consumer loyalty, but others argue that its effectiveness depends on authenticity and transparency (Hossain and Tazin, 2026). Increased consumer scepticism and fears of greenwashing are reputational risks to the companies. Thus, it is necessary to explore CSR with regard to its efficiency in enhancing brand equity in the context of certain industries.

1.3 Research Aim

This study examines how corporate social responsibility influences brand equity in the UK FMCG sector, with a focus on Unilever UK.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To examine the concept of CSR within contemporary marketing and branding strategies.
2. To analyse the theoretical relationship between CSR and brand equity.
3. To investigate how CSR influences brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

4. To evaluate how CSR initiatives influence brand equity in the case of Unilever UK.

1.5 Research Question

How does corporate social responsibility influence brand equity in the UK FMCG sector, particularly in the case of Unilever UK?

The proposal includes a literature review, methodology, anticipated findings, limitations, timeframe, and conclusion.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility is no longer a business of charity but one of strategy. Carroll (2016) theorises CSR as a pyramid of economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic duties. This framework remains powerful because it explains various levels of corporate responsibility. Nevertheless, it is a classic hierarchy that may not fully represent contemporary sustainability demands. García Lara et al. (2025) suggest that CSR in the modern context should be a part of the fundamental strategic choice, not an extra task. According to their view, the value creation and social responsibility are becoming more interdependent. Conversely, as noted by Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka (2018), a lot of companies continue to be involved in symbolic CSR practices, where they focus more on image than actual impact. This criticism questions the wishful thinking that the integration of CSR will automatically create value. These variations of opinion suggest that CSR effectiveness relies not only on its implementation but also on its authenticity and strategic alignment. Thus, CSR cannot be discussed as a fixed responsibility model but rather as an active strategic capability, especially in competitive consumer markets.

2.2 Brand Equity Theory

The marketing impact of CSR is explained on the basis of brand equity theory. Coudounaris et al. (2024) point out that Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) is formed by positive brand associations, perceived quality and loyalty. Strong brands establish unique recollection concepts that affect consumer judgment. Veloutsou and Guzman (2017) further develop this line of thinking by stating that brand equity is relational and is constantly created during the interaction of stakeholders. According to their work, current brand strength revolves around emotional and value-based relationships. There are significant implications of this on CSR. In case consumers consider brands in an ethical and social way more often, CSR can play a role in the cognitive and

emotional elements of brand equity. Nevertheless, when Coudounaris et al. (2024) operate brand equity dimensions as measurable constructs, Veloutsou and Guzman (2017) suggest that dimensions are interdependent and constructed socially. This comparison demonstrates the importance of considering the functionality of CSR in various dimensions of brand equity instead of as a solitary phenomenon.

2.3 CSR and Brand Equity: Mechanisms and Comparisons

2.3.1 CSR and Brand Associations

CSR can also influence the association of brands based on perceptions of corporate personality. As Pfajfar et al. (2022) show, CSR initiatives will influence the way stakeholders assess organisational integrity and social impact. Ethical programs can enhance ties of reliability and accountability. Ferreira, do, and Pereira (2024) also state that CSR leads to satisfaction and trust, which strengthen positive brand meanings. Nevertheless, this good correlation is not absolute. According to Muslim and Pelu (2023), associative benefits might be undermined in case the motives of CSR turn out to be self-serving. Thus, CSR has an impact on brand associations in terms of perceived authenticity. Associative gains can decline without credibility.

2.3.2 CSR and Perceived Quality

CSR can also affect perceived quality by signalling. Pfajfar et al. (2022) state that responsible behaviour makes a company credible, which may prompt consumers to deduce the quality of the offered products. Ethics can be indicators of organisational capabilities outside of functional characteristics. This relationship is, however, disputed. As Araujo, Pereira and Santos (2023) find, positive sentiments towards CSR may not always be converted into action. Functional performance and affordability in price-sensitive FMCG markets might supersede ethical considerations. This observation implies that CSR improves perceived quality on the condition that it is a complement and not a substitute for product performance.

2.3.3 CSR and Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is said to be the result of brand equity. According to Ferreira, do and Pereira (2024), CSR leads to emotional attachment and long-term commitment in a case where initiatives are based on consumer values. Irfan et al. (2021) also indicate that trust and satisfaction are mediators between CSR and loyalty. The implication of these findings is that the loyalty created by CSR is based more on psychological processes than on persuasion. Nonetheless, Araujo et al. (2023) warn that competitive pressures and sensitivity of the consumer

price can moderate the loyalty effects. This shows that CSR leads to loyalty when it is recurrently incorporated into the wider brand strategy. In general, the effects of CSR on loyalty seem to be indirect in terms of trust, value congruence, and emotional involvement.

2.4 CSR Credibility and Consumer Scepticism

Credibility is another emerging theme in the literature. According to Muslim and Pelu (2023), the perceived hypocrisy decreases trust and undermines the brand equity results. Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka (2018) also cautions that symbolic CSR is a risk that can damage its reputation. All these criticisms imply that the effectiveness of CSR is subject to transparency, consistency and long-term integration. Thus, the effect of CSR on brand equity is sequential. CSR programmes influence ideas of genuineness. Authenticity creates trust and builds brand associations. The perceived quality and emotional attachment are improved with trust. These aspects lead to brand equity and brand loyalty over time.

2.5 CSR in the FMCG Context and Unilever

CSR in the FMCG sector is subject to a very competitive, price-sensitive environment. According to Srivastava (2024), sustainability programs may be used to improve brand image as a part of marketing. This is supported by Irfan et al. (2021), who indicate that environmental commitment is a distinguishing attribute of consumer goods brands. Nevertheless, according to Araujo et al. (2023), ethics positioning might not equalise price and convenience. This conflict renders the UK FMCG industry a pertinent environment to study CSR impact. Unilever is also often given as an example of strategic CSR integration. The article by García Lara et al. (2025) identifies a shared value that connects sustainability and commercial results. Still, Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka (2018) mentions that global supply chains make transparency difficult. Therefore, the ultimate test of CSR strengthening brand equity is the stakeholder perceptions.

2.6 Research Gap

Although current literature acknowledges the possibility of CSR affecting brand equity, little research has been done in regard to the UK FMCG environment. Besides this, the processes connecting CSR credibility with the specific brand equity dimensions need more qualitative investigation. This paper fills these gaps by conducting a case study of Unilever UK.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The proposed study will be qualitative secondary research. The proposed research will draw on a literature review and available evidence to investigate the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities on brand equity in the UK FMCG industry (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). The qualitative approach is suitable, as the study will not measure numerical variables but rather seek to understand meanings, interpretations, and relationships among concepts.

The secondary research will facilitate the review of previously published academic literature, business reports, and industry analyses, without primary data collection. This design will be effective for exploring strategic branding because CSR and brand equity are complex constructs that are extensively discussed in academic and professional literature (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). The qualitative secondary method will enable the researcher to critically synthesise existing theories, compare findings, and identify common themes concerning CSR credibility, authenticity, and brand value.

3.2 Research Strategy

The research will use a case study approach to Unilever UK. The case study approach will be relevant because it will enable a deep investigation of CSR practises in a particular organisational setting. Using a large FMCG company, the study will examine how sustainability efforts are framed in brand strategies and how they can lead to brand equity (Creswell and Creswell, 2023).

A case study approach will facilitate contextual analysis rather than generalisation. Unilever UK will be chosen because of its strong commitment to sustainability and its presence in the UK consumer market. This emphasis will enable the research to examine the integration of CSR, communication strategy, and brand positioning in a practical business context.

3.3 Data Collection

The data sources used to collect information will be secondary only. The sources will consist of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, books, company sustainability and annual reports, industry publications, and substantiated marketing analyses (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2022).

Theoretical backgrounds on CSR and brand equity will be drawn from academic literature, and company reports will reveal information on Unilever's sustainability and strategic goals.

The market and consumer patterns in the UK FMCG market will be given a contextual Advertisement through industry publications and branding research. All chosen sources will be recent, relevant, and credible to achieve academic rigour (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). Systematic searches of university databases and reputable online repositories will ensure the data collection process is reliable and relevant.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse the collected data. The approach will enable the researcher to discover, systematise, and analyse trends in the literature and corporate records (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Key concepts of CSR strategy, brand perception, corporate reputation, consumer trust, authenticity, and competitive advantage will form the themes.

The thematic analysis will allow a comparison of academic and industry sources, outlining similarities, contradictions, and new insights. This will be analysed by examining the effect of CSR initiatives on dimensions of brand equity, such as brand associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. This systematic method will make the research goals and analysis findings consistent.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study will make use of secondary data only and will not involve any human subjects. Ethical integrity will be ensured by properly citing all sources, following academic referencing guidelines, and avoiding plagiarism (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). The researcher will ensure that all interpretations are impartial and that past research results are presented objectively and fairly.

4. Expected Findings

This research project will establish a positive correlation between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and brand equity in the UK FMCG industry. According to available scholarly sources, CSR projects will enhance brand associations, as the organisation will be seen as ethical, responsible, and socially sensitive. Corporate credibility can be improved through sustainability initiatives, thereby strengthening perceived quality and trust in the company.

The study will also demonstrate that CSR can increase consumer loyalty when initiatives align with brand values and are communicated openly. Ethical sourcing, environmental responsibility,

and social impact programmes can also contribute to consumers' emotional attachment to the brand. In competitive FMCG markets, the reputational benefits of such attachment may support longer-term brand performance.

Nevertheless, the results are also expected to show that the success of CSR largely depends on consumers' attitudes towards authenticity. When CSR activities are seen as symbolic or driven by marketing needs rather than as genuine promises, their effects on brand equity are not enhanced. Thus, it is assumed that Unilever's CSR activities will favourably impact brand equity when they are viewed as routine and reputable and as part of the business strategy.

In general, the research will help clarify the role of CSR as a strategic branding tool and a reputation-protection tool in developed consumer markets.

5. Limitations

This study can be limited in several ways. First, it will utilise solely secondary data, potentially restricting the ability to gain access to the current understanding of consumer perceptions or behavioural reactions. Second, the study is limited by its focus on one organisation, Unilever UK, which may limit the transferability of the results to other FMCG companies. Third, there is also a possibility of publication bias, as published studies are more likely to report only positive CSR results. Nevertheless, these limitations will be mitigated by the use of various scholarly and professional materials, which will allow the analysis to be conducted fairly and make the results more credible.

6. Timeframe

Activity / Month	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5
Proposal Development					
Supervisor Feedback & Revision					
Literature Review					
Secondary Data Collection					
Data Organisation					
Thematic Data Analysis					
Draft Writing (Chapters)					
Editing and Proofreading					
Final Submission Preparation					

A realistic timeline will guide the dissertation to ensure it is completed within the stipulated time. Month 1 will involve refinement of the proposal. Month 2 will be used to complete the literature review. In Month 3, the systematic sourcing of academic and industry materials will be conducted as the secondary data. Month 4 will be devoted to thematic analysis of data and interpretation of results. Lastly, the month 5 will be used to write, edit and revise the dissertation. This timetable will be used in phases to help ensure time management and steady progress in the research process.

7. Conclusion

This proposal describes a research study that investigates how CSR influences brand equity in the UK FMCG industry. The research will use Unilever UK as a case study to examine how sustainability efforts affect brand associations, perceived quality, and perceived longevity among consumers.

The proposal has shown both the theoretical and practical significance of CSR in contemporary branding strategy and identified gaps in UK-centred research. The qualitative secondary research design will be used to conduct a critical analysis of existing literature and corporate data to derive meaningful insights. It is believed that the proposed results will help advance academic knowledge and strategies in sustainable brand management.

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