



Master of Business Administration

LCMB7035 - Dissertation

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

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Declaration



Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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I, Khirul Amin Sakib, declare that this dissertation has been composed by myself, that the work contained herein is entirely my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or qualification, in whole or in part, except as specified.

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on brand equity in the case of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry in the United Kingdom with specific regard to Unilever UK. The study adopts the qualitative secondary research design with the methodological approach of Interpretivism. The secondary data used in this study are academic literature, industry reports, and corporate literature of the Unilever. The findings from these activities resulted in four prominent themes: CSR credibility, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. The results show that CSR does not necessarily boost brand equity. Rather, such effect is perceived and conditional, through the perception of credibility, authenticity and trust. The major mediating variable identified was CSR credibility which served as the foundation of all the dimensions of brand equity. When approached consciously, with measurable sustainability objectives and reported transparently, these are supported by third party verification, and form the basis of purpose-driven campaigns for brands such as Dove, Hellmann's, Ben & Jerry's and Persil — more positively, brands that can enhance brand value and customer loyalty just by being good business practice. From this it is evident that there will be contextual elements of the study in this research which has been overlooked and it is aimed to cover these gaps in the literature using a qualitative case study approach in the UK FMCG sector. The findings add value to the brand managers who are interested in the CSR as a strategic branding tool, especially in a market where the switching cost is low and consumer's scepticism is high.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has changed a lot over the past few decades. In the past, CSR has been considered in most cases as a charitable activity where companies give to charity in order to build a good image. Nevertheless, recent organisations are considering CSR as a strategic role that is part of the main business processes (Vuong and Bui, 2023). This trend is associated with increasing pressure from stakeholders, especially consumers, who require ethical, social, and environmental responsibility of brands. Recent data indicates that over 60 % of people all around the globe are fond of brands that have sustainability pledges, and numerous others will be ready to pay extra for responsible items (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

CSR is thus a very important element of branding and competitive positioning. It determines the perceptions of the consumers towards companies, including trust, credibility, and long-term loyalty (Gálvez-Sánchez et al., 2024). In industries which are highly competitive, like Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG), where differentiation of products is not really significant, CSR is an extra level of value-creating. Sustainability initiatives help brands to convey either an ethical identity or establish a closer emotional relationship with consumers.

Meanwhile, CSR has become more significant because the contemporary world faces global environmental and social issues. Climate change, scarcity of resources and social inequality are some of the issues that have put pressure on firms to become responsible. As a result, CSR has ceased to be a choice and has become an essential strategy to remain legitimate and relevant in the contemporary markets (Kumar, Rahman and Kazmi, 2016).

Unilever is commonly regarded as one of the best examples of CSR integration. Responsible sourcing, carbon reduction, and social impact programmes are some of the ways through which the company has incorporated sustainability in its corporate strategy. Its Sustainable Living Plan is to ensure that the business growth is aligned with the creation of environmentally and socially relevant values. This makes Unilever a good case study to study the contribution of CSR to brand equity in practice.

1.2 Research Context

The UK FMCG market offers an appropriate background for analysing the connection between CSR and brand equity. The industry is marked with stiff competition, great product supply, and low switching costs, which implies that consumers switch brands without much difficulty. NIQ (2024) states that an average UK consumer spends more than 200 billion pounds on FMCG products annually, which is an indicator of the scale and competitiveness of the market.

Brand differentiation is very important in such an environment. Firms need to move beyond the price and quality to develop significant differentiation. One such differentiating factor has come to be CSR, especially as sustainability issues have been on the rise among UK consumers. According to surveys, about 65 % of consumers in the UK use environmental impact when making a purchase decision (McKinsey & Company, 2023).

There are also regulatory pressures and social scrutiny that have put more pressure on corporate transparency and accountability. This has enhanced the contribution made by CSR towards the development of consumer perceptions and brand choice. In this context, CSR is not just a reputational instrument, but a strategic system of affecting brand equity in the UK FMCG market.

1.3 Research Problem

Although the role of CSR is increasingly significant, its effects on brand equity are still a controversial issue in academic literature. According to some studies, CSR improves brand associations, perceived quality, and customer loyalty through developing trust and emotional connection (Kim, Hur and Lee, 2023). Nonetheless, according to other studies, the success of CSR is greatly influenced by perceived credibility and authenticity.

The growing interest in the topic of greenwashing, whereby businesses overstate or lie about their sustainability practices, is one of the most critical issues. This may cause consumer scepticism and lack of trust and eventually diminish brand equity (Khan et al., 2022). It has been demonstrated that a considerable percentage of the consumer consumers are sceptical about the claims of corporate sustainability, and this leaves the real worth of CSR initiatives in a state of indecision. Moreover, available literature has contradicting results when it comes to the connection between CSR and brand equity. Although there are positive results, others mention low or conditional results, especially in price-sensitive industries like FMCG. The absence of specific studies in the UK FMCG setting (particularly, qualitative methods) is also a problem.

Thus, the research is required to determine the impact of CSR on brand equity, specifically in credibility, authenticity, and consumer perception in a practical situation like Unilever UK.

1.4 Research Aim, Objectives and Question

Aim

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

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.

Research Question

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

1.5 Rationale of the Study

This study is important for both academic and practical reasons. Academically, research on the relationship between CSR and brand equity in the UK FMCG industry remains scanty. Although numerous studies investigate the effects of CSR on a general level, a smaller number investigate the impact of CSR on particular brand equity dimensions in a contextualised environment, including associations, perceived quality and loyalty (Gálvez-Sánchez et al., 2024). Secondly, the majority of the current studies are quantitative, and in such studies, the results are usually measured, but the studies do not cover the mechanisms completely. Thus, there is a need to have a qualitative synthesis to understand the interaction of CSR credibility, trust, and consumer perception to influence brand equity better.

Practically, the study is very relevant in relation to brand managers in competitive FMCG markets. The UK FMCG market is typified by a high degree of competition and low switching costs, with differentiation hard to be obtained only with the help of product features. It is reported that approximately 65% of consumers take sustainability into account during the time of making a purchase (PWC, 2024). This underscores the increased significance of CSR as a strategic branding instrument.

CSR has also provided a competitive advantage from an industry perspective. Nevertheless, it has its threats as well. When CSR activities are seen as fake or deceptive, businesses can suffer branding and consumer distrust (Brugman, van Huijstee and Droog, 2024). Thus, the research on the role of CSR in brand equity, and in what situations it may be efficient, is important to both scholarly practice and management.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research provides academic and managerial implications.

Academic Contribution

The study is important to the existing body of literature as it incorporates CSR and brand equity in the same analysis environment. Whereas in the past, these notions were usually analysed independently, the present study connects CSR credibility to particular dimensions of brand equity, including associations, perceived quality, and loyalty (Luis and Barcellos-Paula, 2024). It also gives a qualitative synthesis of the existing literature, which gives greater insight into the impact of CSR on consumer perception and not merely quantifying results. Moreover, the study fills a gap in context as it deals with the UKFMCG industry, where there is not much in-depth research on the same.

Managerial Contribution

Managerially, the results of this research can be used to help organisations like Unilever to improve their CSR practices. There is evidence that more than three-quarters of consumers want brands to be responsible in their activities toward society and the environment (Willige, 2021). This brings out the importance of good CSR communication and practice. The research offers practical details on the way companies can improve credibility, decrease consumer scepticism, and build brand equity. It is also useful in enabling managers to see the dangers of greenwashing and the need to make CSR activities consistent with real business activities.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This research has a specific scope that is clear and focused in order to provide concentration and depth in the analysis. First, the study focuses on the UK FMCG industry, which is very competitive and characterised by regular consumer buying. This background is especially important, as CSR can contribute to the development of a brand perception through the creation of product differentiation where differences are low (Khan et al., 2022).

Second, the research is limited to one case, which is Unilever. The case study method enables a detailed discussion of CSR practices in a practical organisational environment. But it is also an indication that the results cannot be entirely transferred to all FMCG firms.

Third, the study particularly focuses on the connection between CSR and brand equity. It dwells on the major dimensions that include brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. The analysis does not cover other factors that affect the performance of the brand, including pricing strategies or distribution.

Lastly, the research method embraced is a qualitative secondary research. It uses already available literature in the academic field, company reports, and industry data as opposed to primary data gathering. Thus, it lacks capturing direct consumer responses but rather interprets patterns based on credible sources. This methodology is feasible but academically rigorous.

1.8 Structure of the Dissertation

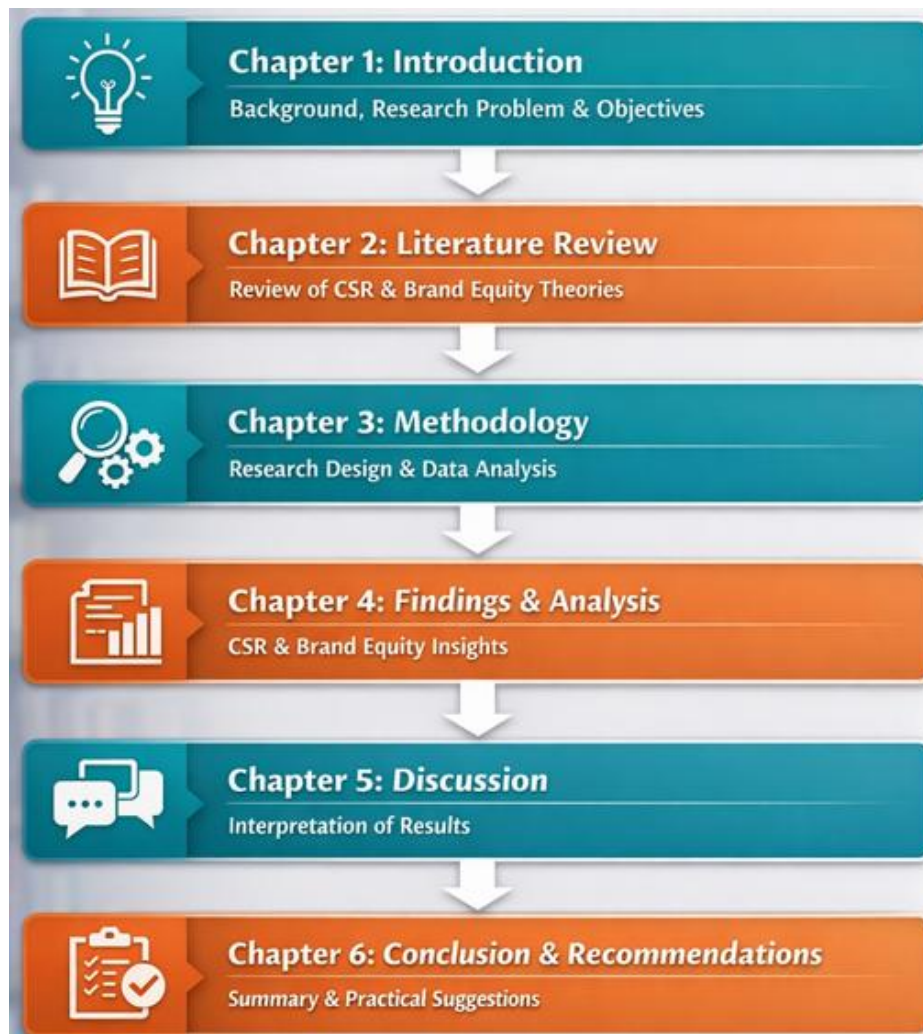


Figure 1 Structure of the Dissertation

Source: (Self-Made)

Chapter	Description
Chapter 1: Introduction	Introduces the research background, context, problem, aim, objectives, and overall significance of the study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review	Critically reviews existing literature on CSR and brand equity, and develops the theoretical and conceptual framework.
Chapter 3: Methodology	Explains the research design, approach, data sources, and analytical methods used in the study.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis	Presents and analyses key themes related to CSR and brand equity based on secondary data.
Chapter 5: Discussion	Interprets findings in relation to existing literature and research objectives.
Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations	Summarises key findings, answers the research question, and provides practical and academic recommendations.

This structure ensures logical progression and clear alignment with the research aim and objectives.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The Chapter is a critical review of the connection between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and brand equity in the FMCG industry. It extends beyond descriptions of what is already known by comparing, assessing, and refuting various scholarly viewpoints. The chapter discusses some of the most important themes, such as the concepts of CSR, the theory of brand equity and how the two are connected, especially using credibility, trust, and consumer perception. It is also based on the particular dynamics of the UK FMCG context, with the lack of product differentiation and price sensitivity, which could affect the effectiveness of CSR. These discussions provide a clear backbone for a qualitative secondary case study of Unilever UK and assist in establishing the major research gap that will guide the current study.

2.2 Conceptualising Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate Social Responsibility is not a small philanthropic notion; it is a more strategic concept that is associated with corporate behaviour, their relationship with stakeholders, and long-term value creation. Initial thought regarded CSR primarily as a collection of obligations that companies ought to meet outside their profit-making, particularly via legal, ethical, and charitable duties (Carroll, 2016). Nevertheless, more recent literature challenges this narrow perspective, as it claims that CSR has ceased to be marginal to business strategy. Dal Mas et al. (2022) introduce the concept of CSR as a source of shared value, implying that social contribution and business performance may be sought jointly and not individually. Both perspectives of thought acknowledge that firms are not solely concerned about profit, although with differing degrees. Carroll offers a framework that can be used to define CSR, but Dal Mas et al. put more focus on CSR as a strategic process.

The same tendency can be found in literature focusing on stakeholders. Both Pfajfar et al. (2022) and Mayorova (2019) agree that CSR is influenced by the increasing stakeholder expectations, particularly those of consumers, communities, and society. Their labour corroborates the notion that companies are being evaluated more not by their financial performance but by their social and environmental contribution. However, this literature is less explicit on the way organisations ought to strike a balance between competing stakeholder interests in practice. This is important to the current study as FMCG companies like Unilever are in markets where there are several stakeholder

pressures at the same time, which include consumer expectations, sustainability requirements, and commercial performance goals.

It is also true that the literature agrees that sustainability has currently occupied the centre-stage of CSR discussions, although there is some debate on whether the move represents a true change or merely a rhetorical image handling. Merler (2022) view sustainability as a significant factor in contemporary corporate decision-making. In contrast, Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka (2018) and Rooi, Botha and Van Der Walldt (2023) raise the question of the fact that the use of CSR is substantive in many firms, as it can be an act of impression management instead of true responsibility. Rahdari et al. (2020) further support this criticism by noting the risk of greenwashing. Similarly, Shahzadi et al. (2024) differentiate between substantive and symbolic action of CSR, and Muslim and Pelu (2023) caution that self-serving CSR may undermine trust instead of supporting it.

All in all, it is possible to state that the literature indicates that CSR became more strategic and stakeholder-oriented. Nonetheless, it is still debatable as the authors disagree on whether CSR generates actual value or just images. This difference is the focus of the current study since the impact of CSR on brand equity in Unilever UK would probably not rely on CSR activity per se, but rather on the perceived authenticity and credibility of that activity.

2.3 Theoretical Approaches to CSR

Corporate Social Responsibility has different theoretical approaches that give different explanations of how organisations should organise and execute social responsibility. The pyramid of CSR is still among the best-known models, which implies that companies have to meet economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic obligations (Castaldo, Ciacchi and Penco, 2022). Its power is in its clarity and organised hierarchy. Nevertheless, Coudounaris et al. (2024) question this hierarchical perspective, stating that the tasks of CSR are not consecutive but mutually dependent. Though both schools of thought concur that CSR comprises various responsibilities, they differ in the way the responsibilities are to be structured. This distinction is important since it implies that inflexible models might fail to capture how companies like Unilever might operate CSR in practice, where both economic and ethical pressures can be experienced concurrently.

The stakeholder perspective is another approach that is opposite in that it does not emphasise the existence of a structure of responsibilities but focuses on relationships. Nyame-Asiamah and Ghulam (2020) and Mehedi and Jalaludin (2020) agree that CSR is to be measured in terms of the

responsiveness to the expectations of the stakeholders. Such an opinion is in line with the growing relevance of consumers and society in determining corporate behaviour. But in contrast to the CSR pyramid, the stakeholder theory does not offer a clear-cut approach to prioritisation where the interests of stakeholders clash (Unilever, 2025b). This poses a constraint, especially in the case of FMCG, where companies have to strike a balance between affordability, sustainability and consumer demand. Thus, although the stakeholder theory broadens the CSR perspective, it adds practical complexity that has not been completely addressed in the literature.

Strategic CSR and shared value views seek to solve this shortcoming by merging social and economic goals. Both Shahzadi et al. (2024) and Akhouri and Chaudhary (2019) both suggest CSR has the potential to create a competitive advantage when it is aligned with business strategy. This is a reaction to proactive CSR. Nevertheless, Ji, Tao and Rim (2022) challenge this positive perception by stating that conventional models are not flexible enough in dynamic settings. Equally, Waheed and Zhang (2022) and Oware and Mallikarjunappa (2022) point out that the practice of CSR in an institutional context differs, which makes the notion of universally relevant models questionable.

Another area of conflict is the role of perception and authenticity. The majority of CSR theories describe what firms ought to do, but there is not much on how the stakeholders understand the actions of the firms. Viererbl and Koch (2022) claim that communication and awareness are critical to the results of CSR. This implies that well-crafted CSR strategies can be useless unless they can be viewed as credible.

Generally, the literature concurs that CSR is a strategic issue, yet there are discrepancies in its organisation, actualisation, and measurement. These dissimilarities are pertinent to this research due to the fact that they reveal that CSR efficiency in Unilever UK might be contingent not just on theoretical compatibility, but also context, adaptability, and client consideration in the UK FMCG market.

2.4 Conceptualising Brand Equity

Brand equity is often interpreted as value added to a brand in terms of its features. One of the prevailing perspectives in the literature outlines brand equity as a customer-centred perspective where value creation is achieved by the consumer perceptions that include brand associations, perceived quality, and loyalty (Coudounaris et al., 2024). Similarly, Porto et al. (2024) emphasise the importance of brand knowledge in consumer choice, especially in the low-involvement FMCG

scenario. These schools of thought are in agreement that brand equity is more cognitive and perception-based, with the emphasis on the process and recollection of brand information by the consumer.

Nevertheless, this opinion is getting more and more disputed. According to Veloutsou and Guzman (2017), brand equity is not cognitive, but relational, and it will develop in the course of constant interactions between brands and stakeholders. This stance can be further affirmed by Merler (2022), who suggest that brand equity has become more interactive and dynamic in digital environments. Although the two views appreciate the role of consumer perception, they vary in terms of emphasis. The classical perspective is based on quantifiable cognitive aspects, and the relational perspective emphasises ongoing interaction and co-creation (Unilever, 2025a). This distinction matters as it implies that brand equity cannot be well-encapsulated with the help of only static measures.

There is additional dispute on the nature of consumer responses. Yang and Wang (2024) emphasise the role of mental availability and brand salience, which supports the cognitive viewpoint. In contrast, Appiah-Nimo, Muthambi and Devey (2024) argue that brand relationships are deeply emotional and symbolic, challenging purely rational interpretations. This implies that both cognitive and emotional processes affect brand equity.

2.5 Theoretical Approaches to Brand Equity

There is a great deal of agreement between theoretical approaches to brand equity that brand value is created in terms of consumer-based dimensions, although the approaches vary in the way these dimensions are structured and construed. The model presented by Aaker, which is mirrored in Macias, Barquet-Arenas and Yambay-Aucancela (2024), describes brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty as the fundamental elements of brand equity. Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides and Veloutsou (2019) similarly view brand equity as consumer-based, but the CBBE approach renders it as a process that progresses through stages of salience to resonance. The two models share the view that consumer perception determines brand equity and not product features. Nevertheless, they are different as Aaker provides a more constituent structure, whereas the CBBE model describes the way in which the constituents evolve through experience and meaning.

More recent researches question the adequacy of these conventional models. According to Catherine, Kiruthiga and Gabriel (2024) and Ertz, Rouziès and Sarigöllü (2024), emotional

attachment, identity, and continuous interaction are other factors that shape brand equity. This is unlike the previous cognitive models because it considers consumers as agents of brand meaning as opposed to being passive evaluators of brand characteristics. Wallström, Lidholm, and Sundström (2024) support this criticism on the assumption that cognitive models alone do not take into account emotions and personal values. Wang and Jiang (2019) extend this challenge further by asserting that most brand equity models are not attentive to context, such as industry and culture. These distinctions are important to this study as CSR will not probably affect brand equity with the help of awareness or recall. CSR has the potential to influence the perception of a brand as a morally, emotionally and relationally acceptable brand in the UK FMCG industry. Thus, a limited cognitive model would not be applicable to the analysis of Unilever UK. In general, it can be concluded that the literature recommends perceiving brand equity as a multidimensional concept influenced by the rational consideration and value-based consumer reactions.

2.6 CSR and Brand Equity: Theoretical Relationship

There is a general agreement in the literature that CSR may reinforce brand equity, but there is no agreement as to whether this is direct, automatic or conditional. According to the theory of signalling, CSR is a way of signalling to the consumer ethical values and organisational competence, which reduces uncertainty and enhances trust (Yang and Basile, 2019). This is supported by Jannat, Haque and Chowdhury (2022), who argue that CSR signals decrease information asymmetry and affect consumer judgement. Similarly, Irfan et al. (2021) and Adewole (2024) also suggest that CSR can enhance confidence, identification, and attachment, which in turn contribute to better brand results. These studies thus concur that central processes that connect CSR with brand equity are trust and perception.

Nevertheless, the other studies question the quality and reliability of this relationship. Ke, Jia and Li (2024) present an argument based on value congruence that states that CSR is most effective where brand values concur with consumer values. However, as Araújo, Pereira and Santos (2023) demonstrate, positive attitudes towards CSR do not necessarily lead to behavioural outcomes, particularly when operating in price-sensitive markets. This implies that positive perception might not be enough to create loyalty or a greater brand preference.

Another point of conflict is related to authenticity and communication. All three articles (Gilal et al. 2024, Zhao et al.(2021, and Cuesta-Valiño et al. 2024) indicate that when CSR seems to be misaligned or inauthentic, the value of CSR is lost. Chan et al. (2024) also suggest that credible

CSR can be ineffective when the consumer does not know about it, and Min and Leong (2024) suggest that CSR influences brand equity indirectly via mediators like trust and reputation. The differences might occur due to the assumptions of ideal communication and positive consumer interpretation in some studies, and the actual market conditions influenced by scepticism and limited attention in other studies.

The significance of this difference to the current study is that it implies that CSR in the UK FMCG industry might not enhance the brand equity of Unilever by merely being there. Its impact is bound to be dependent on credibility, visibility, and value alignment. In general, the literature suggests that the relationship between CSR and brand equity is indirect, conditional and not universal.

2.7 CSR and Brand Associations

The literature generally agrees that CSR can strengthen brand associations by linking brands with ethical values and social responsibility. Both Cheng, Zhu and Golan (2024) and Modreanu et al. (2024) propose that CSR helps to create positive corporate associations, which go beyond product characteristics and influence overall brand appraisals. This common perception brings out CSR as a major differentiation tool, especially in the FMCG markets where functional differentiation is minimal.

Other studies, however, dispute the uniformity of this beneficial effect by highlighting the contribution of perceived motives. According to Ferreira, do, and Pereira (2024), CSR contributes to stronger associations only when perceived to be genuine. In contrast, Chan et al. (2024) and Ul Hassan, Mahmood and Zaman (2022) demonstrate that, in the event of CSR being perceived as a self-serving action, it may undermine brand attitudes and not reinforce them. This conflict can occur due to the fact that in certain studies, it is assumed that real CSR is being practised, whereas others view consumer scepticism and critical scrutiny of corporate motives.

Furthermore, Diallo et al. (2024) highlight that inconsistent CSR communication can create negative associations, such as perceived hypocrisy. This implies that CSR does not necessarily result in positive brand meaning, but may also harm brand image in some circumstances.

This distinction is significant to the current research in that it shows that CSR within the UK FMCG industry might not have consistent positive effects on brand associations at Unilever. Rather, its effects will probably be contingent on the perception of the genuineness and steadiness of CSR actions among the consumers.

2.8 CSR and Perceived Quality

There is general agreement in the literature that CSR may impact perceived quality by indicating organisational credibility and trustworthiness. Both Zhao et al. (2021) and Wang et al. (2021) propose that CSR is an extrinsic cue, which makes consumers conclude about the better quality of products. This view presupposes that responsible corporate behaviour is the expression of overall competence, which positively influences consumer judgement.

Other studies, however, dispute the consistency of this relationship. Sharma and Jain (2019) discovered that positive CSR perceptions do not necessarily lead to increased perceived quality, especially in the case of FMCG. Similarly, Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides and Veloutsou (2019) propose that sustainability claims, at times, may diminish perceived product performance because consumers may equate ethical products with trade-offs in functionality. This conflict can be due to the fact that there are studies that assume perfect conditions, and there are those that represent actual consumer interests relating to the efficacy of the products.

This relationship is further complicated by price sensitivity. According to Khan et al. (2022), in their everyday shopping, consumers tend to give more importance to price and functionality than ethical factors.

The significance of this difference to the current research is that CSR might not have a beneficial effect on the perceived quality of Unilever UK unless it is backed by good product performance.

2.9 CSR and Brand Loyalty

The literature is broadly in agreement that CSR is capable of leading to brand loyalty, but it points out that this is not a direct relationship. Both Viererbl and Koch (2022) and Vanlalhriati and Lalhmingthanga (2024) claim that CSR enhances loyalty with the help of trust and emotional commitment. Similarly, Yadav et al. (2024) and Merler (2022) emphasise that CSR increases emotional attachment and identification when it is associated with consumer values. These findings thus concur that CSR favours long-term relations in that it influences affective and relational results.

Nonetheless, other studies question the strength of such a relationship. According to Araujo, Pereira and Santos (2023), price, convenience, and availability are still also a strong determinants of loyalty in FMCG markets, which could limit the behavioural effects of CSR. Nguyen et al. (2023) also believe that loyalty is a multidimensional concept that is determined by both attitudinal and behavioural dimensions, and therefore, CSR cannot be used to explain consumer loyalty

entirely. This variation could be due to the fact that some of the studies are ideal value-based consumers, whereas others are real purchasing behaviour where practical factors prevail.

Also, Aditya et al. (2024) demonstrate that CSR does not directly generate loyalty but acts in a mediated manner via trust, satisfaction, and identification.

This distinction is also significant to the current study, as it means that CSR activities in Unilever UK are unlikely to lead to the creation of loyalty alone. Rather, their success will be determined by the way they relate to the consumer expectations, value congruence, and market dynamics in the UK FMCG market.

2.10 CSR Credibility, Greenwashing and Consumer Scepticism

There is a great agreement in the literature that the credibility of CSR is a vital requirement that defines whether CSR positively affects brand equity or negatively affects it. Both Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka (2018) and Khan and Fatma (2023) conclude that as long as CSR is seen as authentic, it becomes more trustworthy and enhances consumer reaction. This common opinion brings out the fact that the effectiveness of CSR lies not just in actions but also in the interpretation of actions by the consumers.

Nonetheless, other reports highlight the dangers of low credibility, especially due to greenwashing. Porto et al. (2024) and Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides and Veloutsou (2019) take the position that symbolic or deceptive CSR gives false impressions, which are detrimental to trust once uncovered. Although these studies have shared the same opinion regarding the adverse effect of greenwashing, they vary in priorities. Yang and Basile (2019) posit that substantive CSR in line with business activities can create lasting value, but Wortel, Vanwesenbeeck and Tomas (2024) note that consumers are very much aware of the perceived manipulation even in cases where the intention is not so much deceptive. The difference could be made by the fact that some of the studies suppose transparent communication, and the other ones represent the growing scepticism of consumers within the actual markets.

Consumer scepticism itself adds to the complexities. According to Nguyen et al. (2023), sceptical consumers are less likely to respond to CSR, no matter how authentic it is, and Cho and Taylor (2019) believe that when the message is unclear, it can lead to increased scepticism. Fatma and Khan (2023) go further to demonstrate that unsuccessful CSR can proactively hurt brand affiliations and loyalty.

This distinction is significant to the current research since it indicates that CSR in Unilever UK is not necessarily likely to improve brand equity. Rather, the influence it would have is probably contingent on credibility, transparency, and consumer trust in the UK FMCG environment.

2.11 CSR in the FMCG Sector and Unilever

The literature mostly concurs that FMCG is a unique environment to study CSR and brand equity because of the competitive nature and low switching cost. Both Srivastava (2024) and Bulmer et al. (2024) imply that CSR can be an important differentiator as it can generate non-functional value and improve brand perception. This common perspective underscores the fact that when there is low product differentiation, ethical positioning has the power to build the brand's meaning.

But there are other researchers who question the success of CSR in this regard. Zaborek and Nowakowska (2024) believe that CSR does not always affect the purchasing behaviour directly, and Merler (2022) demonstrate that the ethical preferences are usually replaced by the price and convenience during everyday consumption. This conflict could be due to the fact that in some research, the ideal consumer values are used, whereas others are actual behaviour in a low-involvement market where functional and economic considerations are the main factors.

Unilever is often referenced as one of the examples of CSR integration in FMCG (Unilever, 2024). Ma et al. (2022) underline its strategic emphasis on sustainability, such as responsible sourcing and environmental efforts. Nevertheless, according to Yang and Basile (2019), large multinational companies have the difficulty of ensuring uniformity within intricate global supply chains, which can have an impact on credibility. This implies that CSR may be embedded strategically, but not be effective.

The significance of this difference to the current study is that it suggests that CSR in the UK FMCG industry might not have the same effect on brand equity. The effects of CSR in the example of Unilever UK are likely to be contingent on how effectively the ethical efforts meet consumer perceptions, price elasticity, and perceived authenticity.

2.12 Critical Synthesis of Literature

The literature broadly agrees that CSR and brand equity are closely linked, but not through a simple direct relationship. Researchers like Pfajfar et al. (2022) and Veloutsou and Guzman (2017) indicate that CSR is an indirect contributor to brand equity, as it enhances trust, relationships, and consumer perception. This shows that there is a common perception that the mediating factors are central in producing brand outcomes.

There is, however, a lot of conflict over the strength and uniformity of this association. According to the arguments of Muslim and Pelu (2023), the effectiveness of CSR is based on perceived motives, and Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka (2018) mention the dangers of symbolic CSR that decrease credibility. Similarly, Salehzadeh, Khazaei Pool and Jafari Najafabadi (2018) indicate that consumer reactions differ with regard to awareness and individual values. Such differences can be due to the fact that some of the studies will be based on favourable conditions, but others will be based on scepticism in the real world and varied consumer behaviour.

This distinction is significant to the current study since it implies that CSR does not necessarily create brand equity. Rather, it is affected by credibility, trust, and perception, especially in the UK FMCG environment and the case of Unilever UK.

2.13 Research Gap

Although there is a lot of literature on CSR and brand equity, there are still a number of key gaps. First, the literature is mainly generalised in the sense that little attention is paid to the UK FMCG sector, where the low switching costs and price sensitivity can change the effectiveness of CSR (Srivastava, 2024). Second, the majority of research is based on quantitative designs, which quantify relationships but cannot explain the mechanisms and reasons behind the impact of CSR on brand performance. Min and Leong (2024) highlight the need for qualitative approaches to capture these underlying mechanisms. Third, although the importance of CSR credibility is acknowledged, its particular influence on brand association, perceived quality, and loyalty has not been thoroughly studied (Muslim and Pelu, 2023). Lastly, little case analysis of large companies like Unilever exists.

In this paper, the focus on the gaps is filled by a qualitative secondary single-case study of Unilever UK in the FMCG sector.

2.14 Conceptual Framework

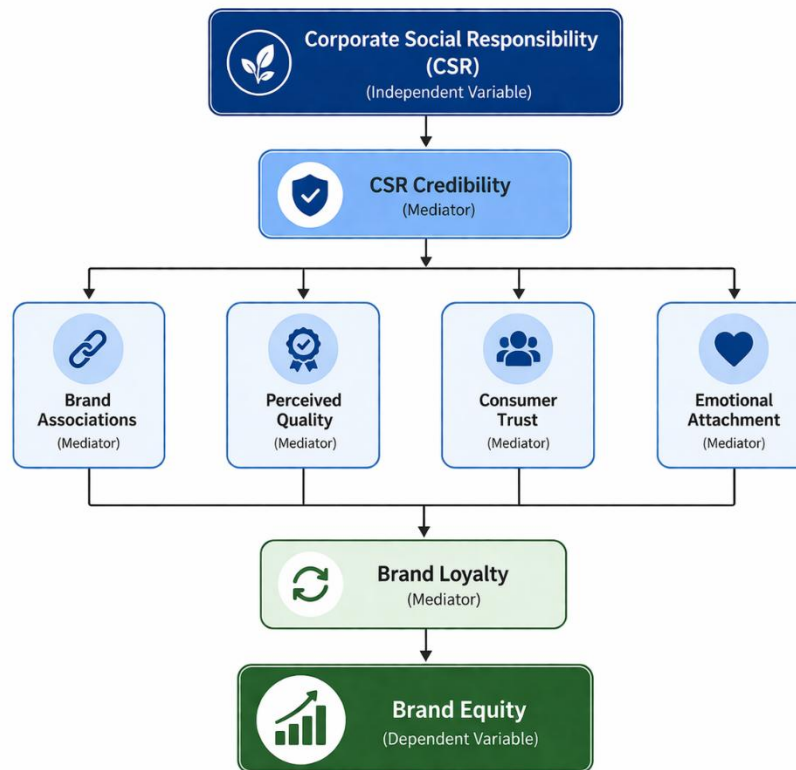


Figure 2 Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the author based on Shahzadi et al. (2024), Ul Hassan, Mahmood and Zaman (2022) and Jannat et al. (2022)

In this research, a conceptual framework is formulated to describe the correlation between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and brand equity in the UK FMCG industry. The framework is created by synthesising the available literature, especially the works of Shahzadi et al. (2024), Ul Hassan, Mahmood and Zaman (2022), and Jannat et al. (2022), by identifying that CSR has an indirect effect on brand equity mediated by such mechanisms as credibility, trust, and consumer perception.

CSR will be the independent variable, and brand equity will be the dependent variable. CSR initiatives are initially impacting CSR credibility, which indicates the degree to which corporate activities are seen as genuine and credible. Increased credibility enhances consumer confidence and minimises scepticism.

Brand association is then influenced by CSR credibility as consumers associate the brand with responsible and ethical values. It also improves the perceived quality, because responsible behaviour is an indicator of organisational competence. These attitudes lead to brand loyalty, which is one of the major behavioural consequences of constructive brand associations.

All in all, the framework shows that CSR does not directly generate brand equity but rather by working through credibility, perception, and relational processes. The model is based on signalling theory and value congruence theory, which focus on the effectiveness of CSR being based on consumer interpretation and alignment with personal values.

2.15 Expected Outcomes / Propositions

The literature generally suggests that CSR can enhance brand equity, but this effect is indirect and conditional rather than guaranteed. According to Irfan et al. (2021), CSR enhances trust and satisfaction, which in turn relate to loyalty. Nonetheless, other researchers demonstrate that such a relationship is based on authenticity and consumer interpretation. Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides and Veloutsou (2019) believe that believable and coherent CSR programs have a higher chance of creating robust consumer-brand relations. This distinction is noteworthy in the sense that it indicates that CSR does not necessarily enhance brand equity in FMCG markets. Rather, its usefulness will probably be based on credibility, value alignment and consumer perception. As such, it is anticipated that CSR will have a positive impact on brand equity in Unilever UK only when it is viewed as genuine and pertinent to consumer values.

2.16 Chapter Summary

This chapter has critically examined the relationship between CSR and brand equity. It established that there is a general agreement that CSR is strategically significant, yet indicated variation in terms of its effectiveness and mechanisms. The review revealed that CSR has indirect effects on brand equity via trust, credibility and perception, but not direct. These differences are important as they indicate that CSR results are different in each situation, especially in the UK FMCG industry. The chapter recognised some of the gaps in the context, credibility and methodology. The following chapter highlights the research approach adopted to fill these gaps by a qualitative secondary case study of Unilever UK.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This paper has explored the impact of corporate social responsibility on brand equity in the UK FMCG industry, and in particular, Unilever UK. The research has aimed to understand how CSR affects brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty within a competitive and price-sensitive market. The research question has been as follows: how does corporate social responsibility influence brand equity in the UK FMCG sector, particularly in the case of Unilever UK? This chapter has clarified the way the study has been done and the reasons why the methodological decisions have been taken. This paper has used a qualitative secondary research design based on a single case study approach of Unilever UK. This design has been well spelt out in the first place so that consistency and transparency are maintained in the course of the research. The chapter has defined the research philosophy, research approach, research design, and case study strategy. It has made sure that every methodological choice has been rationally related to the research aim and question. Research Onion framework has been used to provide the methodological framework of this study and has helped maintain a systematic flow of research philosophy to data collection and analysis.

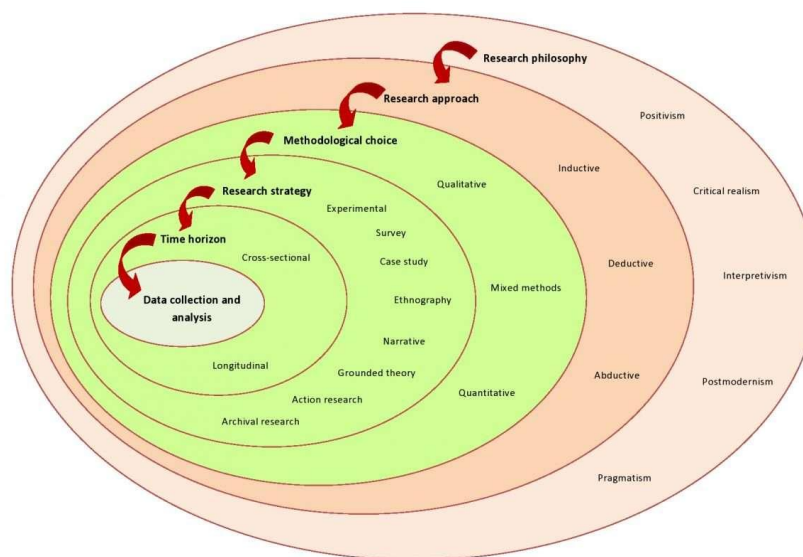


Figure 3 The Research Onion framework

Source: (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023)

3.2 Research Philosophy

The philosophy of research has informed the interpretation of knowledge in this study. This study has embraced an interpretivist philosophy, which presupposes that reality is socially constructed and is perceived with subjective meanings. This approach has been appropriate since CSR and brand equity are pegged on consumer perception, trust, and interpretation, as opposed to objective quantification (Bell, Bryman and Harley, 2022). Credibility and emotional attachment concepts are dependent on the way people perceive corporate behaviour.

This philosophical perspective has aided in the discussion of subjective meanings of CSR and brand equity. It has allowed the study to investigate the perception of the stakeholders towards the CSR activities and the effects of such perception on brand value. Conversely, positivism has lacked suitability, as it centres on objective reality, testing of hypotheses and numerical measurement (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). This paper has not sought to test the hypotheses and come up with statistical relationships. Rather, it has concentrated on the perception-based and complex relations. This interpretivist position has been in line with the qualitative secondary research design taken in this study, thus making sure that the philosophical position concurs with the entire research design.

3.3 Research Approach

This study has adopted an inductive research approach. Inductive reasoning means deriving insights based on the available information and not by testing hypotheses. This has been the right approach since the study has sought to understand how CSR affects brand equity and not to establish a particular model. The existing literature has revealed inconsistent results on the effectiveness of CSR, especially when it comes to credibility and consumer scepticism (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2022). Thus, an inductive method has enabled such differences to be delved into. This method has facilitated the appearance of patterns and themes based on the existing literature and case-based evidence. It has helped in establishing the links between CSR and trust, perception, and brand outcomes. In contrast, a deductive approach has not been suitable, as it focuses on hypothesis testing and quantitative validation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). In this research, no numerical measurement or statistical analysis has been done.

This inductive methodology has conformed to the qualitative secondary case study design because it has provided flexibility and in-depth interpretation of available data. Based on the Research Onion model, the study has assumed the interpretivist philosophy and inductive approach to make sure that the qualitative research design is obtained.

3.4 Research Design

The research design has determined the structure and the way the research was carried out. This research has evidently taken a qualitative secondary research design. Qualitative research emphasises meanings, perceptions, and relationships as opposed to numbers. This has been befitting since CSR and brand equity are complicated and perception-based constructs. The research has sought to investigate the impact of CSR on consumer judgement, trust and brand-related outcomes (Stewart and Kamins, 1993). The study has used secondary sources of data such as scholarly journals, company reports, and industry publications. Secondary research has made available numerous credible and relevant pieces of information. It has also made it possible in terms of time and resources, with a high level of academic rigour. Existing literature has enabled comparing various points of view and identifying major themes (Walliman, 2021).

This qualitative design has been applied using secondary sources of data to make it consistent with the aim of the research. This design has been able to offer deep and detailed insights, which has been a strength of the design. The fact that no primary data has been collected has, however, been a limitation since no direct consumer responses have been gathered.

3.5 Research Strategy: Case Study (Unilever UK)

This study has adopted a single-case study strategy focusing on Unilever UK. A case study method allows one to have a deep and situational insight into a particular organisation. It has been appropriate since the study has sought to learn the role of CSR in brand equity in a practical setting. Unilever UK has been chosen because of its good reputation in terms of sustainability and CSR integration (Johnston, 2014). The company is in a highly competitive FMCG industry that is characterised by low product differentiation. This renders CSR a significant strategic brand positioning tool. The case study has thus offered a topical background to the analysis of CSR practices and how these practices affect brand equity.

The research question, which is based on the impact of CSR on brand equity, has been directly supported by the case study strategy. Other strategies, including surveys, have been discarded since they offer generalised information and are rather applicable in quantitative research. Conversely, the case study method has enabled further analysis.

This approach has made it consistent with the qualitative secondary research design by implementing it within the context of Unilever UK.

3.6 Data Collection

This research has used secondary data only. Secondary data is the information that has been gathered and published by other researchers and organisations. This method has been aligned with the qualitative case study design since it has enabled the research to investigate CSR and brand equity based on a broad scope of available evidence (Omeihe and Harrison, 2024).

Data has been collected from three main sources. First, theoretical and empirical evidence on the relationship between CSR and brand equity has been offered using peer-reviewed academic journal articles. Second, CSR practices in a real organisational context have been learned through company reporting, especially Unilever's sustainability and annual reports. Third, reports on the industry by McKinsey, PwC and NIQ have been applied to give market-level information on consumer behaviour and FMCG dynamics.

Systematic searches are carried out on databases like Google Scholar and university library resources to collect data in the process of data collection. Relevant sources have been identified using keywords like CSR, brand equity, FMCG and Unilever (Dubicki, 2010). In order to maintain transparency in the choice of sources, a systematic screening procedure has been adhered to. First, a wide search was carried out with a combination of keywords like: CSR and brand equity, CSR credibility, FMCG sustainability and Unilever CSR strategy. This search brought a great number of studies. These sources were then shortlisted using title and abstract to determine how relevant the sources were to the research objectives. At this point, articles that did not specifically tackle CSR, brand equity or consumer perception were filtered out. The second phase was full-text screening that allowed assuming the conceptual alignment in the study focus of brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. The sources that were included were required to be published between 2015 and 2026, in the English language, and in peer-reviewed journals or reputable industry reports. Non-academic and duplicate sources (blogs or opinion pieces) were filtered out. This methodical screening allowed the resulting dataset to include quality and relevant evidence to be analysed.

3.7 Sampling Strategy

The purposive sampling strategy is used to make sure that only high-quality and relevant sources of secondary data are involved. Inclusion and exclusion criteria have been followed in the selection process. The inclusion criteria were that the sources had to be discussing CSR, brand equity, consumer perception or the dynamics of the FMCG industry. Further, peer-reviewed journal

articles, known industry reports and official company publications were only taken into consideration. There was also a need to have sources that could help give conceptual, empirical, or contextual information with regard to Unilever or other FMCG companies. The exclusion criteria were outdated studies before 2015, sources which do not have academic credibility, and studies that do not refer to branding or CSR (Adams et al., 2007). There were also duplicate studies and sources that were purely on financial CSR outcomes with no consumer perspective. This systematic sampling method guaranteed consistency, relevance and academic rigour in the data selection process.

3.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is developed according to the six-phase model suggested by Braun and Clarke (2021) and has clear operational steps to guarantee transparency and rigour.

The first phase was familiarisation through the repetitive reading of all the sources chosen, as this was to ensure a deep understanding of the material. Major concepts regarding CSR, credibility and brand equity were observed at this phase.

The second phase involved initial coding done manually. Descriptive codes like CSR credibility, consumer trust, greenwashing risk, and brand loyalty drivers were used to label relevant pieces of text. All sources were coded in a systematic manner so as to be consistent.

During the third step, codes were sorted into larger categories. An example is the integration of codes on trust, authenticity, and transparency, which was incorporated under the theme of CSR credibility. Likewise, the codes of perception and emotional response were combined into consumer perception.

Review and refinement of themes were done in the fourth stage. This included verifying the accuracy of the themes in reflecting the coded data and verifying that there was no overlap in themes (Creswell and Creswell, 2023). Weak or ambiguous themes were either combined or eliminated.

During the fifth stage, themes were clearly identified and labelled. The last themes that were found during this study are CSR credibility, brand associations, perceived quality and brand loyalty. These are the themes that are in line with the research objectives.

During the last stage, the themes were explained and connected to the research question and literature. This step entailed cross-source comparisons and finding patterns, contradictions and relationships.

This systematic methodology also saw to it that the analysis did not remain descriptive but offered a systematic and clear interpretation of the data.

3.9 Research Quality and Rigour

Several measures have been taken to ensure the quality and rigour of the research. The multiple data sources using academic literature, company reports, and industry publications have helped to support validity (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2022). This has made the findings comparable, and the accuracy of the interpretations strengthened. The validity of the study has been further boosted by the consistency between the sources.

A clear and structured research process has ensured reliability. Data collection and analysis steps have been outlined in a systematic manner, which would enable other researchers to replicate the study. Such openness has enhanced the validity of the results.

Triangulation has helped in strengthening credibility. The application of various kinds of sources of data has minimised the dependency on one particular view and has given a more balanced view of the subject of the research.

Nevertheless, it has been accepted that qualitative research implies certain subjectivity. The researcher has impacted interpretations depending on his or her view (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2023). This limitation has been overcome through the application of a variety of sources and a coherent approach to analysis.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This research has employed secondary data alone and has not involved human subjects. Thus, there have been minimal ethical risks. All sources have been cited and referenced in order to preserve the state of ethical integrity. This has ensured that intellectual property has been respected and plagiarism has been avoided.

All the data is interpreted and presented without distortion (Walliman, 2021). The research has adhered to the university's ethical principles in conducting the study. Transparent and accountable use of secondary data has ensured ethical integrity.

3.11 Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, the use of secondary data means that direct consumer perspectives have not been collected. Second, the research has been based on published materials, which can be biased or subject to selective reporting. Third, the study is based on one case study, which can restrict the generalisability of the results.

These weaknesses have been addressed through the use of a broad scope of credible sources and a critical comparison of studies. This has helped to ensure a balanced and reliable analysis.

3.12 Chapter Summary

The methodology of this study has been described in this chapter. It has embraced a qualitative secondary research design that involves a case study of Unilever UK. Academic, company, and industry sources have been used to gather data, and the data have been analysed using thematic analysis. The chapter has guaranteed consistency, rigour and transparency in the research process. The following chapter will provide the results and discussion according to the themes determined.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter gives the results of the secondary data analysis used to answer the main research question: Does corporate social responsibility affect brand equity in the UK FMCG industry, and especially in Unilever UK? The review is based on 38 secondary sources such as peer-reviewed scholarly journals, industry reports, and corporate-level publications such as annual reports and sustainability disclosures by Unilever.

The six-stage framework of Braun and Clarke (2021) was used to apply thematic analysis. There were four large themes: CSR credibility, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. All the themes are discussed with clear mention of the CSR activity of Unilever UK, so that Objective 4 assessment of the impact of CSR activity on brand equity occurs throughout the chapter in the case of Unilever UK. Findings interpretation will be done in Chapter 5.

4.2 Description of Data Set

The data set consists of 38 sources, chosen by systematic purposive sampling. Theoretical and empirical evidence is given in 30 peer-reviewed journal articles. Five industry report papers by McKinsey, PwC, and NIQ provide market-level information on UK consumer behaviour. Direct organisational evidence that underlies the case study analysis is three Unilever corporate documents, such as sustainability reports and annual disclosures.

However, it is important to note that Unilever corporate documents are self-published and may present CSR in a positive light. Hence, they are valuable as they can help to identify the intended CSR strategies, yet need to be taken with care and be counterbalanced with independent academic and industry findings to be critically analysed.

Table 1 Summary of Secondary Data Sources

Source Category	Number of Sources	Purpose in Analysis
Academic journal articles	30	Theoretical and empirical patterns on CSR and brand equity dimensions
Industry reports	5	UK FMCG consumer behaviour and sustainability trends

Unilever company documents	3	Unilever-specific CSR practices and brand equity evidence
Total	38	Full qualitative secondary dataset for thematic analysis

4.3 Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2021). The process began with repeated reading of all 38 sources to achieve familiarisation. Initial descriptive codes were then assigned to relevant data segments, including labels such as CSR credibility, consumer trust, greenwashing risk, and brand loyalty. Similar codes were grouped into broader candidate themes. These themes were reviewed, refined, and clearly defined before being written up in direct relation to the research question and objectives. Throughout this process, Unilever's corporate documents were treated as primary case evidence and coded separately to ensure Unilever-specific patterns were captured distinctly from general academic findings.

4.4 Coding Framework

Table 2 Coding Framework

Code	Meaning	Unilever-Specific Focus
CSR Credibility	Perceived authenticity and trustworthiness of CSR actions	Measurable targets, third-party verification, transparent reporting
Brand Associations	Consumer perceptions linked to ethical and social values	Dove Real Beauty, Hellmann's food waste, brand purpose strategy
Perceived Quality	Consumer judgement of product quality is influenced by CSR	Product reformulation, eco-label use, performance-sustainability balance
Brand Loyalty	Consumer commitment and repeat behaviour	Market share retention, purpose-driven loyalty, Ben & Jerry's activism

4.5 Theme 1: CSR Credibility

The data always indicate that consumers are not apt to respond to CSR because it is present. Their reaction hinges upon the credibility and authenticity of the CSR initiatives. In the academic literature, credibility is consistently associated with transparency, quantifiable promises, and alignment between the corporate promises and actual performance (Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and

Sroka, 2018; Shahzadi et al., 2024). The trend is sound and is evident in theoretical as well as empirical literature.

The statistics also demonstrate that there is a high relationship between credibility and consumer trust. Customers are more prone to build a more favourable brand image when CSR is perceived as authentic, and they tend to sustain faith in the long term (Pfajfar et al., 2022; Jannat, Haque and Chowdhury, 2022). Credibility thus serves as a precondition to any downstream brand equity good. However, when CSR is viewed as a sham or fake, the level of consumer scepticism also grows and mistrust (Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides and Veloutsou 2019; Nguyen et al., 2023). Greenwashing is also a recurrent threat in the academic and industry literature.

The credibility of Unilever CSR is marked by particular, verifiable and transparent commitments. It has a Climate Transition Action Plan that aims to become net-zero in its value chain by 2039 (Unilever, 2025b). By 2023, Unilever had more than 60% of its agricultural raw materials sustainably sourced, and any palm oil and tea are tracked via third-party certification systems, such as the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (Unilever, 2024). These are non-abstract sustainability commitments. They are quantifiable objectives with an independent validation on which the transparency contingencies that are linked with credible CSR are directly taken care of. Unilever also reports on the progress being made against these targets on an annual basis, and this minimises the information asymmetry that can be the cause of consumer scepticism. This fact puts Unilever in a position of an organisation that works towards managing CSR credibility, as opposed to merely making claims about it, which fits the requirements in the literature that trust formation requires.

Even with these quantifiable commitments, these indicators are self-reported by Unilever. This would require independent research or polls by consumers to establish whether consumers in the UK believe in these efforts. Therefore, the results on the credibility of CSR are to be viewed as reflective of corporate intent as opposed to evident consumer perception.

4.6 Theme 2: CSR and Brand Associations

The data always demonstrate that CSR affects brand associations as it links brands to ethical, social, and environmental values beyond product functionality. Consumers are more inclined to connect a brand to trust, care for the environment, and responsible behaviour when brands perform sustainability and social responsibility practices (Shahzadi et al. 2024; Modreanu et al., 2024). Such associations are not cognitively but symbolically and emotionally based.

Numerous sources affirm that sustainability-focused CSR is becoming even more integrated in brand identity than a distinct activity. The more consistent the ethical positioning of the brands, the more positive and long-lasting consumer associations they are likely to create (Veloutsou and Guzman, 2017). Ethical brand associations are a significant competitive difference in the context of the UK FMCG in particular, where the product differences are rather functional (Srivastava, 2024). But sources also warn that such associations are dependent on perceived authenticity. In situations where CSR is regarded as self-serving, associations may become negative (Chan et al., 2024).

Unilever offers concrete details on brand-level brand associations that are CSR-based. The Dove "Real Beauty" campaign has established a lasting relationship between the brand and social responsibility by rejecting the strict notion of beauty and fostering self-esteem. According to Unilever, the self-esteem education programmes of Dove have reached more than 82 million individuals across the world by 2023 (Unilever, 2025a). This level of social interaction supports identities of non-fakeness, concern and societal sensitivity which transcends the product. Hellmann's has also built good ties with food sustainability via the food waste minimisation campaigns, as well as food retailing connections that promote responsible consumption. These are not the only marketing programs within brand levels. They are incorporated into the Unilever "Compass" strategy that officially incorporates social purpose into brand positioning throughout its entire portfolio (Unilever, 2024). This data shows that the perception and association of individual brands by consumers at Unilever UK is directly influenced by CSR, and it serves as a central process enabling the establishment of brand equity.

Nevertheless, Unilever reports these numbers, which can be overstated to reflect the success of the campaign. Consumer perception research should be conducted independently to determine whether these initiatives really do boost brand associations in the minds of UK FMCG consumers.

4.7 Theme 3: CSR and Perceived Quality

The data indicate that CSR may be used as an extrinsic quality signal; however, the connection is uneven and depends on the context. According to some sources, with responsible corporate behaviour, consumers conclude about increased organisational competence and product reliability (Salehzadeh, Khazaei Pool and Jafari Najafabadi 2018; Wang et al. 2021). When it happens that way, CSR conveys organisational care at large, and the consumers will translate it into quality judgements. Nonetheless, other sources do not show any positive correlation consistently,

including low-involvement FMCGs where consumers are highly dependent on habitual buying as opposed to critical consideration (Sharma and Jain, 2019).

Another trend that is evident in the data is the existence of trade-off perceptions. Some consumers also relate sustainably produced products with low performance, believing that the efficacy of a product is undermined by ethical production (Chatzipanagiotou, Christodoulides and Veloutsou, 2019). Sensitivity to price makes it even more difficult. According to PwC (2024), although UK consumers say they are willing to pay a 9.7% sustainability premium, that desire is not always reflected in real buying behaviour when it comes to purchasing everyday essential products. Quality signals related to CSR are often ignored in favour of functional and economical factors during the point of purchase (Khan et al. 2022).

The response of Unilever to the supposed quality challenge is directly reflected in its corporate publications. The company has been working on reformulating its products in its cleaning and personal care lines to minimise environmental impact without affecting performance (Unilever, 2025a). As an example, concentrated laundry preparations of the Persil brand have been reengineered to reduce carbon footprint without compromising cleaning effectiveness. This reformulation strategy is an intentional attempt to ensure that the perception of trade-off is not instrumental in cutting consumer confidence. Another way in which Unilever demonstrates sustainability credentials to UK consumers is by operating with eco-labels and third-party approvals, which send a strong signal of product quality and sustainability alongside the ethical and functional demands of UK consumers. This fact indicates that Unilever does know that there is an antagonism between what CSR is and what perceived quality entails in the context of the FMCG, and it is taking actual action to address it. But the question of whether these activities can completely address the issue of price sensitivity and habitual buying behaviour of UK consumers is a debatable issue in Chapter 5.

As much as these product reforms portray the concern of Unilever, consumers may have a different perception of quality. The perceived quality effect is not a direct part of the consumer evaluation that is reported in secondary evidence, and therefore, the perceived quality effect must be viewed with caution, with the realisation that price and habitual buying behaviour can still play a greater role in consumer appraisals.

4.8 Theme 4: CSR and Brand Loyalty

The statistics indicate that CSR helps in brand loyalty, but in an indirect manner. The trend that is most prevalent is that CSR creates loyalty by trusting, feeling connected, and identifying oneself with brand values (Irfan et al., 2021; Min and Leong, 2024). In cases where consumers view CSR as authentic, the consumers have a higher chance of developing a sense of association with the brand that makes them feel committed to the brand over time. Repeatedly, trust is pointed to as the most important mediating variable, and believable CSR yields increased trust levels, which facilitate attitudinal and behavioural loyalty (Yadav et al., 2024; Merler, 2022).

Nevertheless, the data also display a very evident weakness. Price, availability, and convenience are practical aspects of the market that often dominate CSR-related preferences during the purchase of FMCGs (Araújo, Pereira and Santos, 2023). Such an attitude-behaviour gap is a recurring result in the literature, and it can be argued that favourable impressions of CSR do not necessarily lead to loyal purchasing behaviour.

The results of Unilever operations in the market can give useful information about CSR and loyalty. According to NIQ (2024) data, Unilever has good market shares in several categories of UK FMCG, such as laundry, personal care, and food. Persil, Lynx, and Ben and Jerry brands have high repurchase rates. In the sustainability reports of Unilever, a portion of this consumer retention is attributed to the increasing correspondence between brand purpose and consumer value, especially among the younger demographics in the UK (Unilever, 2025b). This is especially evident with Ben and Jerry. The brand has integrated an unswerving quality of its products with audible and evident social activism on matters such as climate justice and racial equality. This builds a good brand awareness among the ethically conscious consumers, and this generates a loyalty beyond the preference for the product. Such instances indicate that in cases where CSR is systematically infused into brand identity and where credible communication of brand identity occurs, CSR can facilitate quantifiable loyalty evidence in the UK FMCG market.

But these market-share data alone do not provide full evidence that loyalty is a CSR-driven phenomenon. Repeat purchase behaviour may also be affected by other aspects such as the performance of the product, the price, and convenience. Thus, the impact of CSR on loyalty cannot be viewed as a direct factor but rather as one that may be mediated by trust and the congruence with consumer values.

4.9 Key Patterns Across Data

All themes can be traced by three cross-cutting patterns. First, the effect of CSR on brand equity is always indirect and acts via credibility, trust, and perception, but not through direct brand effects. Second, the effectiveness of CSR depends on credibility. Where Unilever can be proven to have transparent CSR practices, the chances of positive brand equity scores are likely to be higher. In places where credibility is poor or doubted, the results are poor or negative. Third, the corporate evidence of Unilever has always demonstrated strategic alignment between the dimensions of CSR strategy and the brand equity, which has made it stand out among the companies that consider CSR to be peripheral.

It must be pointed out, though, that this trend is in large part founded on corporate evidence on the part of Unilever itself. The results could be exaggerated by the effect of CSR due to the lack of an independent assessment of the consumer perception. Hence, while these patterns are illustrative, their generalisability and critical validity should be considered with caution.

4.10 Link to Research Objectives

Table 3 Link Between Findings and Research Objectives

Research Objective	Relevant Theme	Key Finding	Unilever Evidence
Objective 1: Examine CSR in contemporary marketing	Theme 1: CSR Credibility	CSR is strategic and stakeholder-driven; credibility is central	Net-zero targets, sustainable sourcing disclosures
Objective 2: Analyse the theoretical relationship between CSR and brand equity	Themes 1–4	CSR influences brand equity indirectly through trust and perception	Compass strategy linking brand purpose to equity
Objective 3: Investigate CSR's influence on brand associations, perceived quality, and loyalty	Themes 2, 3, 4	CSR strengthens associations and loyalty; a quality relationship is inconsistent	Dove, Hellmann's, Ben & Jerry's brand campaigns

Objective 4: Evaluate CSR's influence on brand equity in Unilever UK	All Themes	Unilever's measurable CSR practices support brand equity across all dimensions, conditioned by credibility.	Reformulation, third-party certification, market share retention
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4.11 Limitations of Data Analysis

The analysis has been based solely on secondary data, which implies that there are no direct voices of consumers. The corporate documents of Unilever are reputational in nature, and this aspect might be inclined to the selective presentation of positive results. Such limitations are recognised and will be critically dealt with in Chapter 5.

4.12 Chapter Summary

Thematic analysis revealed four key themes, namely CSR credibility, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. In all themes, the particular CSR practices of Unilever UK were explored and related to the dimensions of brand equity. The results have been consistent in proving that CSR has an indirect and conditional impact on brand equity and that credibility plays a central role as the mediating condition. These findings will be critically interpreted against existing literature and research objectives as described in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings presented in Chapter 4 in relation to the research question, literature review, and conceptual framework. The purpose of this research was to investigate the effect of Corporate Social responsibility on brand equity in the UK FMCG industry and, more specifically, Unilever UK. The key research question was: What is the impact of corporate social responsibility on brand equity in the UK FMCG industry and in the example of Unilever UK?

Chapter 4 provided the results of the secondary data analysis (qualitative). This chapter, however, transcends presentation and offers a critical interpretation. It looks into the meaning of the findings, their importance, and their connection to the current academic discussions. This difference is significant since CSR is not a branding device due to automatic merits. According to the literature, CSR is capable of enhancing brand equity, yet its effectiveness largely depends on whether it is perceived as genuine, dependable, and applicable to values by the consumers (Jannat, Haque and Chowdhury, 2022; Ke, Jia and Li, 2024).

The discussion is organised around four key themes identified in Chapter 4. These include: CSR credibility, CSR and brand associations, CSR and brand perceived quality and CSR and brand loyalty. The themes demonstrate the key dimensions of brand equity in the study. They also align directly with the conceptual framework that implies that CSR affects brand equity in an indirect manner, via credibility, trust, and consumer perception.

The key point of this chapter is that the CSR enhances the brand equity only in particular circumstances. It should be believable, observable, cohesive and correlated with consumer values. The role of CSR in enhancing brand equity in the example of Unilever UK seems to be conditional, but not assured.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The findings show that CSR may not always enhance brand equity. This finding suggests that the perception of CSR should be that of a credibility-based branding tool rather than a generator of brand value, which should be automatic. This is particularly critical in the UK FMCG industry as customers tend to buy on impulse, responsive and easily, and this occurs due to convenience. Hence, brand equity can only be supported as a result of CSR as long as it is robust to alter consumer trust in addition to the typical product expectations. This means that value can only be

conceived through responsible business activity when it is viewed as legitimate, genuine and relevant to values by consumers. This interpretation is also backed by Min and Leong (2024) because they present this conclusion by stating that the perception of CSR directly affects brand loyalty through brand trust and brand image, but not through a direct effect. It also assists Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka (2018), who demonstrate that CSR needs to be credible prior to establishing positive reactions in the stakeholders. Thus, CSR plays the role of a potential brand equity, rather than an insured one.

In all themes, the primary requirement emerged to be CSR credibility. It is important to note that CSR would be able to enhance brand associations, perceived quality and loyalty only when it is believed that the claims by the company are authentic. However, CSR that appears promotional, excessive, or unproven may increase the scepticism and water down trust (Nguyen et al., 2023). This is more important with large multinational corporations such as Unilever because of its size, it has the resources to prepare CSR programmes, but it can also translate to consumers being suspicious of their motives. This means that self-claims of Unilever would come in handy to show corporate purpose, goals and CSR reporting. They, however, cannot prove the consumer trust as the company reports are often aimed at presenting the organisation as appealing in the first place. This is why the results should be complemented by separate academic knowledge on CSR scepticism and industry knowledge of the UK consumer behaviour.

The findings also suggest that CSR can re-establish positive brand relationships with the campaigns that are linked to social and environmental responsibility. This is important since, in many instances, the brands in the FMCG markets compete with each other, and the switching costs are very low. But CSR will not take the place of functional value. Every day purchasing decisions might continue to focus on price, quality, convenience and availability to the consumers. This is significant to the UK FMCG industry as ethical positioning is in a rivalry with utilitarian purchasing decisions. PwC (2024) shows that consumers are not always willing to pay a sustainability premium that will remove the cost-of-living pressure. Therefore, CSR can strengthen brand associations, but does not necessarily impact the actual purchasing behaviour.

Lastly, CSR helps in brand loyalty primarily via trust and value congruency. This means that CSR does not enable loyalty in itself, but it is the interplay of CSR consumer expectations and brand experience. It has limited evidence since this research is based on secondary sources such as corporate reports of Unilever. The advantage of these reports is that they depict the sustainability

statements and CSR strategy of Unilever, but they do not directly show how the statements are viewed by the consumers in the UK. Hence, the results must be approached with a degree of care and be countered with independent scholarly and industry evidence.

5.3 Discussion of CSR Credibility as the Foundation of Brand Equity

The findings indicate that CSR credibility proves to be the key defining mechanism based on which CSR can have an impact on brand equity. This implies that credibility is by far the most critical requirement of CSR in order to affect the consumer trust, brand association, perceived quality or brand loyalty. CSR is not able to establish brand value through its presence or report on the company, but through consumers perceiving initiatives as authentic, visible, and in line with actual business operations (Stonkutė, Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2018). This is important since assumptions about CSR being overly positive in terms of boosting brand equity can inherently mislead managers to overrate the worthiness of their efforts without taking into account the way stakeholders will perceive them. In this way, the effectiveness of CSR depends on the presence of consumer perception, trust and brand value alignment (Jannat, Haque and Chowdhury, 2022). Such an outcome is meaningful since it alters the argument on what Unilever is accusing them of doing to assess how that can be judged by the consumers. The issue of credibility is a major concern in the UK FMCG market, as consumers are overwhelmed with a myriad of messages on sustainability and might question the authenticity of these messages in comparison with the reality of business practice.

This conditionality could be best comprehended when there is a differentiation between the substantive and symbolic CSR. Practical organisational change is substantive CSR, in contrast to symbolic CSR, which puts image-based communication into the limelight (Ul Hassan, Mahmood and Zaman, 2022). This differentiation holds significance when used in the context of Unilever UK, where the consumers of FMCG products are exposed to green, ethical and purpose-driven communication at all times. This means that the brand equity may not even be enhanced by even the sound CSR programs when the consumers perceive it to be a symbolic or promotional program, but not an actual one. Another risk factor related to greenwashing is emphasised in the literature as consumers are increasingly critical of CSR statements and might negatively react when they see inconsistencies between outlined goals and actual outcomes (Min and Leong, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023).

Unilever offers quantifiable initiatives, including net-zero, sustainable sourcing, third-party certification, and yearly sustainability reporting, to boost trustworthiness (Unilever, 2025b). The reason behind this is that the actions which are verifiable independently and transparently stand more opportunities of decreasing scepticism and building trust. However, the data is elusive because the analysis is carried out by the corporate reports, which may give a positive image of CSR performance. These signs, however, indicate the organisational will, but cannot helpfully represent the view of the consumer completely. This shortcoming is critical in highlighting the importance of critically interpreting the findings as opposed to taking corporate evidence at its face value.

The tendency that the results produce is that quantifiable and open CSR practices can consolidate downstream brand results, yet just when they are exhibited persistently across various facets. Credibility is never an achievement but an ongoing process, which entails alignment of targets, reporting, product-level marketing campaigns and acts. Coherence will make sure that CSR indirectly develops positive brand associations, which are perceived as quality and loyalty. However, irregularity or the appearance of strategic manipulation can only serve to heighten doubt and reduce consumer confidence, which can destroy brand equity rather than enhance it.

On the whole, the discussion demonstrates that the notion of CSR credibility is the key to CSR having an impact on brand equity. CSR can have an impact on the attitude and behaviour of consumers, only when it is seen to be authentic, transparent and when it is linked to the actual business operations. The sources of evidence are also poor since it depends more on secondary sources and corporate reports of Unilever, but the trend shows that credibility is not only required but is also adequate to initiate positive changes in brand equity of the UK FMCG industry. Therefore, managers should aim for credibility in CSR strategy since they know that consumer interpretation mediates all the downstream effects on brand value.

5.4 Discussion of CSR and Brand Associations

The findings indicate that CSR can create symbolic and emotional brand values in addition to practical attributes of products. It means that CSR will allow FMCG brands to go beyond price, availability and product usage, and establish links with responsibility, care, fairness and sustainability. This is significant because the FMCG industry has been highly competitive and a commoditised industry in which there are many commodities that can be equally useful in terms of functionality. Associations related to CSR have the potential to contribute to differentiation in

this kind of market, giving the consumer additional points of identification and preference for a brand.

This understanding coincides with Sharma and Jain (2019), who suggest that CSR can influence consumer perception through the establishment of favourable corporate identities. It also aligns with Modreanu et al. (2024), who believe that CSR helps brands to come up with meanings other than product features. However, the findings also prove the fact that CSR-based associations are not purely rational. They are emotional and relational because the responsible brand behaviour can be equated by the consumers with the values and social identity of the consumers. This assists Veloutsou and Guzman (2017) in establishing brand equity as a consequence of the ongoing interplay between brands and stakeholders. In this way, the CSR will contribute to brand equity when it gets incorporated into the emotional and symbolic meaning the consumer attributes to the brand.

Unilever provides practical examples of the process. The Dove Real Beauty campaign associates the brand with inclusion and social responsibility, as well as self-esteem. This means that Dove is not merely a brand that encompasses personal care, but also a brand that is associated with confidence and social value. Similarly, the Hellmann food waste campaigns position the brand as a responsible eating and sustainability. These examples show that CSR can be integrated into brand identity provided that it is connected with a high-quality brand story and category. Such a strategy can also be supported by Unilever Compass, which connects the brand strategy and purpose (Unilever, 2024).

The evidence is, however, scanty since much is based on second-hand reports and company letters and no actual evaluation of the consumers. This means that the analysis will show what type of brand associations Unilever wants to have, but will not be able to conclusively conclude on how the UK consumers interpret them. This is a serious bottleneck which could either positively or negatively affect the association of CSR. Chan et al. (2024) caution that brand attitudes can decline instead of increasing when consumers perceive CSR as a means of self-interest.

This way, it can only strengthen the brand associations of Unilever by being authentic, consistent, and applicable to the product setting and CSR. Because it shows continuity as compared to temporary publicity, the continuity concept of long-term campaigns, such as the Dove campaign, is more convincing. Overall, CSR assists in brand equity, with it creating emotional and symbolic meaning, which depends on consumer trust and interpretation.

5.5 Discussion of CSR and Perceived Quality

The evidence suggests that CSR is not adequate to guarantee more perceived quality. This means that consumers are able to identify a company as a responsible one, but may not necessarily judge its products to be superior. This matters because price, performance, convenience, habit and supply are key factors to the consumers of these FMCGs as they often make prompt and repeated purchasing decisions. Therefore, CSR may be regarded as a support feature of the product compared to the performance of the product.

CSR may also lead to the perceived quality since accountability and competence are signalled by responsible behaviour, which may indicate organisational care. Vanlalhriati and Lalhmingthanga (2024) posit that CSR is able to enhance consumer assessment by demonstrating that a business acts in a responsible manner. Similarly, Yadav et al. (2024) believe that responsible corporate behaviour can create good assumptions about the quality of products. This means that CSR can lead to consumers believing that an ethical company with good ethical practices also has a great probability of having good product governance. However, this is just an indirect effect as the consumers do not rely on the ethical statements and base the quality of FMCG on them.

A more conservative interpretation is evidenced as well. The perceived quality of CSR claims might not necessarily be enhanced in cases where the sustainability messages are not trusted or where consumers doubt eco-labels. Kovač, Aditya et al. (2024) state that sustainability claims do not always lead to an increase in quality perceptions. This is significant because customers may believe that it means that there is a performance trade-off in having ethical/sustainable products. As an example, certain consumers might think that a more environmentally friendly cleaning product is weaker, or that a sustainable personal care product is ineffective. Khan and Fatma (2023) support this problem by proving that CSR can give rise to suspicion when the customers tend to associate sustainability with decreased product performance.

Unilever UK is directly related to this issue. Unilever attempts to include sustainability and product performance within Persil concentrated laundry products. These products are able to reduce packaging, transportation impacts, and environmental imprints, but consumers require excellent cleaning results. Therefore, the CSR policy of Unilever must demonstrate that sustainability and performance can work together. This message can be reinforced by reformulation, and third-party approvals and eco-labels, but only under the condition that consumers have confidence in the signals and are getting positive product outcomes.

The evidence is also limited in that the consumer perception is not directly measured by means of interviews or surveys, but by secondary means. Information of Unilever corporation itself, however, possesses sustainability and reformulation, which is also positively presented, but this may not be the ideal reflection of consumer judgement. This drawback implies that the results need to be taken with caution. This study can determine that Unilever, through CSR, is willing to boost quality perceptions, but cannot fully prove that the activities in this instance are read in the same way by the UK consumers.

Overall, CSR is contingently and less directly related to perceived quality in comparison to brand associations. Ethical meaning has the ability to make a brand seem more responsible, but it does not necessarily make the product seem to be better. Product performance, innovation and consumer value most probably will increase perceived quality in the example of Unilever UK, in case it is combined with CSR. As such, sustainability is not a quality alternative, but must be introduced within quality.

5.6 Discussion of CSR and Brand Loyalty

These findings indicate that trust, emotional attachment, identification, and value alignment can be cultivated to form CSR as a form of indirect loyalty. This implies that CSR does not generate any regular repeat purchases, but rather acts to impact consumer feelings with respect to a brand (Irfan et al., 2021; Min and Leong, 2024). This is important since in FMCG markets, loyalty is very price sensitive, convenience sensitive, and availability sensitive. The switching costs are low, which means that consumers can easily switch brands even when they are so fond of a company due to its CSR activities. CSR may therefore be seen as enabling other factors to loyalty and not a particular process to repeat purchase behaviour.

CSR appears to particularly excel in the attitudinal aspect of loyalty, i.e. liking, trusting or respecting a brand. By purchasing products, consumers can use their own values to show their identities with purpose-led brands and gain emotional attachment and identification, as was the case with Ben and Jerry due to its social activism (Yadav et al., 2024; Ferreira, do and Pereira, 2024). It means that when the functional qualities are not dissimilar at first sight, customers will be capable of developing a positive relationship with the brand. However, behavioural loyalty (based on a repeat buy) is not so guaranteed as the consumers take into account such things as short-run factors such as price and convenience. Imagine that when consumers are under the pressure of the cost of living, they decide in favour of a less expensive alternative to an ethically

favourable brand (PWC, 2024). This indicates that CSR indirectly and partially aids loyalty, which strengthens attitudes to a greater extent compared to purchasing behaviour that is actually done.

The evidence sources are small, as the primary sources are mostly secondary sources and reports of the company. The real consumer behaviour was not directly measured, and thus the relationship between CSR and loyalty is not proven but rather deduced. Nonetheless, the trend shows that CSR would be most applicable in high-quality products and congruent brand messages. Lasting, genuine and brand purpose CSR projects will have a greater likelihood of becoming trust and emotional linkage (Araua, Pereira and Santos, 2023).

Purpose-led branding would increase loyalty toward the brand among younger generation, ethically minded consumers interested in sustainability and social responsibility, in the case of Unilever UK. This implies that CSR will be in a position to enhance its dealings with these consumer groups. However, this is a relative advantage: customers begin to turn to digital resources more frequently to check corporate statements, and the perception of inconsistencies may ruin trust. In this way, the loyalty of CSR does not depend on the message itself, but on its correspondence to the quality of the product, its availability and value.

Lastly, CSR will be able to enhance brand loyalty, but it cannot be deemed as the sole one. It is effective as a complementary factor, which is both product performance, accessibility, pricing and brand consistency. This definition aligns with the general thesis of the paper: CSR creates brand equity in the case when it is plausible, feasible and within the expectations of the consumers. CSR enhances the attitudinal loyalty and creates a base of trust and identification in the UK FMCG setting, though the behavioural loyalty in the end turns out to be dependent on actual product and market conditions.

5.7 Discussion in Relation to Research Objectives

The discussion in this chapter demonstrates that the research objectives have been met based on a critical interpretation of the four themes that were revealed in Chapter 4: CSR credibility, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty. These themes were directly related to the research question and conceptual framework of the study.

Table 4 Relation to Research Objectives

Research Objective	How Chapter 5 Answers the Objective
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Objective 1: To examine the concept of CSR within contemporary marketing and branding strategies.	CSR is demonstrated as a strategic branding resource and not a purely charitable act. This discussion has shown that CSR has come to aid brand differentiation, trust of the stakeholders and ethical positioning in competitive FMCG markets.
Objective 2: To analyse the theoretical relationship between CSR and brand equity.	The chapter demonstrates that CSR has an indirect impact on brand equity through credibility, trust, consumer perception, and value alignment. Therefore, CSR does not create brand equity automatically.
Objective 3: To investigate how CSR influences brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.	CSR has a powerful impact on brand associations due to the fact that it generates symbolic and emotional meanings. It affects loyalty indirectly via trust and identification. Nevertheless, its effect on perceived quality is conditional since consumers continue to focus on the performance of the products, price, and convenience.
Objective 4: To evaluate how CSR initiatives influence brand equity in the case of Unilever UK.	In Unilever UK, brand equity is supported by measurable CSR activities, transparent reporting, third-party certification, brand purpose, product reformulation, and trust-building campaigns, including Dove, Hellmann's, Persil and Ben & Jerry's.

On the whole, the discussion has answered the research question, indicating that CSR has an indirect and conditional effect on brand equity in the UK FMCG sector. At Unilever UK, CSR builds upon brand equity in instances where it is plausible, transparent, consistent with brand purpose and backed by product performance.

5.8 Contribution to Literature and Research Gap

This paper contributes minimally yet explicitly to the CSR and brand equity literature. The contribution is low since the study is based on secondary data instead of the responses of primary consumers. As such, it cannot purport to gauge direct consumer attitudes. Nevertheless, it is still valuable since it summarises academic, industry, and company evidence in a narrow case study of Unilever UK.

The paper fills the research gap revealed in Chapter 2 by narrowing down the scope to the UK FMCG sector. There is significant existing literature on CSR and brand equity in general, but little on how this relationship works in a low-switching-cost and price-sensitive FMCG environment.

This research is also contributing since it provides qualitative secondary interpretation as opposed to mere quantitative measurement. It describes the processes of influence of CSR, particularly credibility, trust and consumer perception.

Another input is the relationship between CSR credibility and particular brand equity dimensions. The results indicate that CSR does not necessarily lead to a stronger brand equity. Credibility instead of CSR empowers or disempowers brand associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. This is significant as it undermines the over-optimistic assumptions regarding CSR and demonstrates that the risk of greenwashing, the scepticism, and the performance issues should be taken into account.

5.9 Chapter Summary

The chapter critically interpreted Chapter 4 findings in line with the research question, the literature review, and the conceptual framework. It demonstrated that credibility, trust, perception, and value alignment are some of the ways CSR influences brand equity. CSR is a significant influence on brand associations as ethical and social meanings may be included in brand identity. The correlation between CSR and perceived quality, however, is not so positive. CSR is capable of supporting quality perceptions, but again, only when there is good performance of the products. The brand loyalty is also indirect and restricted by the situation in the FMCG markets. The conclusion and recommendations are found in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Concluding Overview

This dissertation aimed to research the role of CSR in the development of brand equity in the UK FMCG sector, with Unilever UK as a case study. In this context, the overall research question was as follows: What is the effect of CSR on brand equity? The five previous chapters were devoted to developing a solid theoretical basis, thematic analysis of secondary data and a critical examination against existing literature. The main thesis is that CSR contributes to the brand equity, but only under certain circumstances. It is not a characteristic of any responsibility; it relies on the perception that CSR is authentic, credible, and consistent with a brand's purpose.

This finding also demonstrates that CSR cannot be considered as an automatic generator of brand equity in the UK FMCG sector. Rather, only when it is credible and independently supported, and perceived as genuine by the consumer, does CSR help brand equity. This is significant since the FMCG consumers might be sensitive to ethical behaviour, but the final decision heavily depends on the price, convenience, availability and product performance.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The data was analysed to yield four themes. First, it was determined that the credibility of the CSR is a prerequisite for all brand equity outcomes. If it's not perceived as authentic and transparent, CSR will not have a positive influence on consumer judgment (Stonkute, Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2018; Jannat, Haque and Chowdhury, 2022). Second, CSR enhances the brand associations; the ethical, social and environmental values are incorporated into the brand as shown in Dove's Real Beauty campaign, Hellmann's food waste positioning. Third, the link between CSR and perceived quality is not conclusive, as CSR can demonstrate the competency of the organisation, but FMCG consumers still prioritise product performance, price and convenience (Khan and Fatma, 2023). Fourth, CSR indirectly contributes to brand loyalty as it helps to build trust and value alignment, albeit in an FMCG product, behavioural loyalty is still limited by low switching costs and price sensitivity (Min and Leong, 2024).

Comprehensively, the results indicate that CSR indirectly and conditionally influences brand equity. It operates primarily on credibility, trust and consumer perception. As such, CSR will be more effective in enhancing brand associations and loyalty when consumers witness evident

organisational action. Nonetheless, the less effective implementation of CSR is observed in cases where it can be discussed as promotional, ambiguous or not backed by independent evidence.

6.3 Direct Answers to the Research Questions

The primary research question that is answered is: How does CSR affect brand equity in the UK FMCG sector, especially Unilever UK? CSR affects brand equity indirectly through credibility, trust and perception of consumers. All the objectives were achieved: CSR was explored as a branding tool (Objective 1); theoretical links were examined between CSR and brand equity, and the mediating role was explored using credibility (Objective 2); perceived quality and loyalty were explored as separate mediating variables (Objective 3); and measurable multi-brand CSR was analysed as a contributor to brand equity (Objective 4). The study validates that CSR can create brand equity if the CSR is substantive, observable and consumer value oriented (Shahzadi et al., 2024).

6.4 Addressing the Literature Gap and Contribution of the Study

The research identified a gap in the literature in relation to the CSR-brand equity relationship, and this was studied within the FMCG sector in the UK. Most of the existing literature is quantitative and geographically generalised (Gálvez-Sánchez et al., 2024; Luis and Barcellos-Paula, 2024). This study makes a contribution in that it provides a qualitative secondary analysis of the process of how CSR impacts brand equity and not just the results. Specifically, it establishes CSR credibility as a core mediating factor; a nuance that extends the theoretical insight into the conditions and mechanisms whereby CSR can lead to brand value. It also provides an example of how purpose-driven brand strategies, like those of Unilever UK, can make CSR more operational in a low differentiation market context.

6.5 Limitations of the Study

There are a couple of caveats to note. This study used only secondary data, so there is no voice of consumers. Corporate documents are inherently biased towards their positives (Johnston, 2014). This is a single case study and cannot be extrapolated to the FMCG sector or other national markets. The qualitative approach provides an interpretative depth, but it does not provide a statistical measure of the impact of CSR on individual dimensions of the brand equity. Also, the findings of this research could not be used for the latest mindset of consumers since sustainability is a topic that is always being updated.

Another weakness is the utilisation of the corporate reports of Unilever to provide evidence. Such reports can be handy since they reveal the CSR strategy, sustainability communication and targets of the company. Nevertheless, they are inherently positive and can put the company in a favourable light. Thus, the results will need to be pinpointed with the academic literature, as well as independent sources on the matter in the industry, instead of just accepting the results of the companies.

6.6. Recommendations for Practice and Future Research

This study suggests that CSR should be more of a substance and not a symbol for practitioners. Brand managers need to make sure that sustainability statements are quantifiable, verifiable and uniform both product-wise and product communication-wise. Although not necessarily intending to deceive, greenwashing can cause a lack of trust and brand equity (Nguyen et al., 2023). In its approach to CSR, Unilever UK created a strategy that aligned its initiatives with product launches, third-party certifications, and longer-term campaigns; a way for FMCG companies to do the same. Going forward, more primary consumer research (survey or interview) needs to be conducted to directly assess the extent of differences in perceptions of credibility that may exist between the different demographic groups. Theoretical generalisability would be further strengthened by comparative case studies of different FMCG brands or international markets. Longitudinal studies would shed more light on the causality of CSR outcomes on brand equity over the period of the project.

6.7 Final Reflection

This dissertation states that CSR is an important and strategic, but not necessarily effective, factor in creating brand equity. Authenticity is the value-add that sets it apart from a price-sensitive, well-informed, and sceptical UK FMCG market. Unilever UK shows that CSR, when a part of a brand strategy, can be truly meaningful and can differentiate brands, create emotional ties and ensure a long-lasting loyalty. So, the contribution of this research is not to simply the relationship, but to elucidate the conditions. CSR creates brand equity (when it is believed).

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Appendix

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

In order for research to result in benefit and minimise risk of harm, it must be conducted ethically.

The University follows the OECD Frascati manual definition of **research activity**: “creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications”. As such this covers activities undertaken by members of staff, postgraduate research students, and both taught postgraduate and undergraduate students working on dissertations/projects.

The individual undertaking the research activity is known as the “principal researcher”.

This form must be completed and approved prior to undertaking any research activity.

SECTION A: About You (Principal Researcher)

1	Full Name:	Khirul Amin Sakib
2	Student Number:	2427125
3	Email address:	2427125@student.uwtsd.ac.uk
4	Programme of Study:	Master of Business Administration (MBA) in International Business
5	Supervisor:	Dr. Said Usman

SECTION B: Internal and External Ethical Guidance Materials

	Please list the core ethical guidance documents that have been referred to during the completion of this form (including any discipline-specific codes of research ethics, location-specific codes of research ethics, and also any specific ethical guidance relating to the proposed methodology). Please tick to confirm that your research proposal adheres to these codes and guidelines. You may add rows to this table if needed.	
1	UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice	☒
2	UWTSD Research Data Management Policy	☒
3		☐

4		☐
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SECTION C: Details of Research Activity

1	Indicative title:	The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Brand Equity: A Case Study of Unilever UK		
2	Proposed start date:	16 February 2026	Proposed end date:	08 June 2026
	Introduction to the Research			
3	Purpose of Research Activity This study discusses the impact of corporate social responsibility on brand equity in the fast-moving consumer goods industry of the UK based on Unilever UK as a case study. This subject matter is significant as sustainability, responsible sourcing, and social programmes are currently market positioning tools adopted by numerous large consumer brands. Concurrently, consumers are more worried about whether these activities are real or merely campaign or advertisements. The current literature indicates that CSR can enhance trusting, customer fidelity, perceived quality, and brand linkages although results cannot be uniform. Strengths of the studies argue that CSR enhances brand results, whereas weaknesses of the research suggest that the scepticism and the perceived greenwashing may undermine the results. To gain insights into how these relationships are outlined in the available evidence, this study will consult the academic literature, company reports, and material on the industry. The project will contribute to the knowledge by paying attention to the UK FMCG setting specifically and exploring ways in which CSR credibility is related to certain dimensions of brand equity. This is a critical domain since the markets of the FMCG are competitive, price-sensitive, and reputation-driven, which is why it is an appropriately valuable context in which the role of strategic value and constraints of CSR in branding are explored. (this box should expand as you type)			
4	Research Question How does corporate social responsibility influence brand equity in the UK FMCG sector, particularly in the case of Unilever UK? (this box should expand as you type)			

5	Aims of Research Activity This study examines how corporate social responsibility influences brand equity in the UK FMCG sector, with a focus on Unilever UK. (this box should expand as you type)
6	Objectives of Research Activity 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. (this box should expand as you type)
	Proposed data collection methods
7	The research will be based on the qualitative secondary research alone. There will neither be any primary data collected nor human subjects involved. The study will collect information in the published and publicly available materials. These sources will consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and annual reports, sustainability reports, industry reports, and reputable market analysis concerning CSR, brand equity, FMCG branding, and Unilever UK. The data collection method will also relate to the systematic searching of the academic databases and the reliable sources on the Internet to find the literature and documentary data. The search terms will consist of the combination of such phrases like corporate social responsibility, CSR, brand equity, brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand associations, FMCG, sustainability branding, and Unilever UK. The relevant documents will be chosen based on the academic credibility, the topicality to the research question, and the usefulness in the research to understand how CSR and brand equity are related. The presentation of CSR in corporate strategy and brand communication is going to be researched using the company reports including annual reports of Unilever and publications on sustainability. The contextual information will be availed in terms of consumer expectations and branding in the UK FMCG market through industry publications and marketing analyses. The material obtained will then be arranged in order to be subjected to thematic analysis. The comparison research will be based on the repetitive themes that include: CSR strategy, authenticity, trust, corporate reputation, brand associations, perceived quality, and loyalty. Since the project is fully based on the secondary documentation materials there will be no interviews, questionnaires, recordings, observation, and direct contact with participants. (this box should expand as you type)

SECTION D: Scope of Research Activity

	Will the research activity include:	YES	NO
1	Use of a questionnaire or similar research instrument?	☐	☒
2	Use of interviews?	☐	☒
3	Use of focus groups?	☐	☒
4	Use of participant diaries?	☐	☒
5	Use of video or audio recording?	☐	☒
6	Use of computer-generated log files?	☐	☒
7	Participant observation with their knowledge?	☐	☒
8	Participant observation without their knowledge?	☐	☒
9	Access to personal or confidential information without the participants' specific consent?	☐	☒
10	Administration of any questions, test stimuli, presentation that may be experienced as physically, mentally or emotionally harmful / offensive?	☐	☒
11	Performance of any acts which may cause embarrassment or affect self-esteem?	☐	☒
12	Investigation of participants involved in illegal activities?	☐	☒
13	Use of procedures that involve deception?	☐	☒
14	Administration of any substance, agent or placebo?	☐	☒
15	Working with live vertebrate animals?	☐	☒
16	Procedures that may have a negative impact on the environment?	☐	☒
17	Other primary data collection methods. Please indicate the type of data collection method(s) below.	☐	☒
	Details of any other primary data collection method: (this box should expand as you type)		

If you have ticked NO to every question then the research activity is (ethically) low risk and you may skip section E and continue to section F.

If YES to any question, then no research activity should be undertaken until full ethical approval has been obtained.

SECTION E: Intended Participants

Who are the intended participants:		YES	NO
1	Students or staff at the University?	☐	☐
2	Adults (over the age of 18 and competent to give consent)?	☐	☐
3	Vulnerable adults?	☐	☐
4	Children and Young People under the age of 18? (Consent from Parent, Carer or Guardian will be required)	☐	☐
5	Prisoners?	☐	☐
6	Young offenders?	☐	☐
7	Those who could be considered to have a particularly dependent relationship with the investigator or a gatekeeper?	☐	☐
8	People engaged in illegal activities?	☐	☐
9	Others. Please indicate the participants below, and specifically any group who may be unable to give consent.	☐	☐
	Details of any other participant groups: Complete this only if your participants cannot give consent. This includes animals (this box should expand as you type)		

Participant numbers and source Provide an estimate of the expected number of participants. How will you identify participants and how will they be recruited?		
10	How many participants are expected?	Ballpark figures are fine but make sure that you explain how you will identify and contact your participants. (this box should expand as you type)
11	Who will the participants be?	(this box should expand as you type)
12	How will you identify the participants?	(this box should expand as you type)

	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
13	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	☐	☐	☐
14	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	☐	☐	☐
15	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	☐	☐	☐
16	Will you explain to participants that refusal to participate in the research will not affect their treatment or education (if relevant)?	☐	☐	☐
17	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	☐	☐	☐
18	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	☐	☐	☐
19	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	☐	☐	☐
20	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	☐	☐	☐
21	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation, in a way appropriate to the type of research undertaken?	☐	☐	☐
22	If NO to any of above questions, please give an explanation			
	You should be able to tick YES for all of these questions. If not, then explain why not in this box. (this box should expand as you type)			

	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
24	Will participants be paid?	☐	☐	☐
25	Is specialist electrical or other equipment to be used with participants?	☐	☐	☐
26	Are there any financial or other interests to the investigator or University arising from this study?	☐	☐	☐
27	Will the research activity involve deliberately misleading participants in any way, or the partial or full concealment of the specific study aims?	☐	☐	☐
28	If YES to any question, please provide full details			
	You should be able to tick NO for most of these questions. For any cases that you have ticked YES then provide details in this box. If you are using cameras/voice recorders to record interviews, then please state that in this box. (this box should expand as you type)			

SECTION F: Anticipated Risks

	Outline any anticipated risks that may adversely affect any of the participants, the researchers and/or the University, and the steps that will be taken to address them.	
1	Risks to participants For example: sector-specific health & safety, emotional distress, financial disclosure, physical harm, transfer of personal data, sensitive organisational information. If you have identified in section D that there are no participants, then enter N/A and go skip to question 3.	
	Risk to participants: There are no direct participants in this study because no primary data will be collected. Therefore, there is no risk of physical harm, emotional distress, coercion, or misuse of participant information. A minor indirect ethical risk exists if published authors, organisations, or stakeholders are misrepresented through selective interpretation of existing materials. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	How you will mitigate the risk to participants: The study will rely only on lawful, published, and publicly accessible sources. All materials will be cited accurately. Findings will be interpreted fairly, cautiously, and in context. No individual-level personal data will be collected, stored, or reported. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
2	If research activity may include sensitive, embarrassing or upsetting topics (e.g. sexual activity, drug use) or issues likely to disclose information requiring further action (e.g. criminal activity), give details of the procedures to deal with these issues, including any support/advice (e.g. helpline numbers) to be offered to participants. Note that where applicable, consent procedures should make it clear that if something potentially or actually illegal is discovered in the course of a project, it may need to be disclosed to the proper authorities	
	The study does not involve human participants, sensitive questioning, or disclosure-based data collection. It will not investigate criminal activity or personally sensitive issues. If controversial claims appear in secondary sources, they will be reported carefully, with appropriate citation and balanced interpretation. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
3	Risks to the investigator For example: personal health & safety, physical harm, emotional distress, risk of accusation of harm/impropriety, conflict of interest	
	Risk to the investigator: The main risks are academic error, bias in interpretation, overreliance on weak sources, accidental plagiarism, and possible data loss during the writing process. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	How you will mitigate the risk to the investigator: The researcher will use credible academic and professional sources, maintain accurate records of references, apply consistent citation throughout the study, and store working files securely with password protection and backup. The researcher will also follow supervisor guidance and university policies. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

4	University/institutional risks For example: adverse publicity, financial loss, data protection	
	Risk to the University: Potential risks include poor academic practice, plagiarism, inaccurate representation of organisations, weak data management, or inappropriate use of AI tools, which could affect academic integrity or institutional reputation. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	<i>How you will mitigate the risk to the University:</i> The project will follow the UWTSD Research Ethics & Integrity Code of Practice and Research Data Management Policy. All sources will be properly referenced, no confidential or personal data will be collected, and any use of AI will be limited, transparent, and consistent with current UWTSD guidance. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
5	Environmental risks For example: accidental spillage of pollutants, damage to local ecosystems	
	Risk to the environment: The project presents no meaningful environmental risk because it is desk-based secondary research. Minor environmental impact may arise from normal electricity use and optional printing. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	<i>How you will mitigate the risk to environment:</i> The study will be conducted primarily using digital materials. Printing will be minimised, and documents will be stored and reviewed electronically where possible. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

SECTION G: Feedback, Consent and Confidentiality

If you have identified in section D that there are no participants, then enter skip this section and continue to section H.

1	Feedback What de-briefing and feedback will be provided to participants, how will this be done and when?
	You don't need to email your participants with your final report. A good alternative is to set up an email address that they will be able to contact for further details or results. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
2	Informed consent Describe the arrangements to inform potential participants, before providing consent, of what is involved in participating. Describe the arrangements for participants to provide full consent before data collection begins. If gaining consent in this way is inappropriate, explain how consent will be obtained and recorded in accordance with prevailing data protection legislation.

	If you are using a paper questionnaire then you should have the participants sign an appropriate consent form. These forms will count as personal data and should be noted as such in section J. If you are using an online questionnaire, then you should have a screen before the questions start that acts as a consent form, informing participants that by clicking on the NEXT button they are providing consent. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
3	Confidentiality / Anonymity Set out how anonymity of participants and confidentiality will be ensured in any outputs. If anonymity is not being offered, explain why this is the case.
	Do not collect names unless you really need them. Do not name participants or organisations in any research publications (including the thesis) without their explicit permission. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>

SECTION H: Data Protection and Storage

	Does the research activity involve personal data (as defined by the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 “GDPR” and the Data Protection Act 2018 “DPA”)?	YES	NO
1	“Personal data” means any information relating to an identified or identifiable natural person (‘data subject’). An identifiable natural person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person. Any video or audio recordings of participants is considered to be personal data.	☐	☒
	If YES, provide a description of the data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
2	This includes audio/video data of participants but can also include IP addresses and usernames. Names, addresses and emails also count, as do consent forms. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>		
	Does it involve special category data (as defined by the GDPR)?	YES	NO

3	“Special category data” means sensitive personal data consisting of information as to the data subjects’ – (a) racial or ethnic origin, (b) political opinions, (c) religious beliefs or other beliefs of a similar nature, (d) membership of a trade union (within the meaning of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992), (e) physical or mental health or condition, (f) sexual life, (g) genetics, (h) biometric data (as used for ID purposes),	☐	☒
	If YES, provide a description of the special category data and explain why this data needs to be collected:		
4	Not applicable. (this box should expand as you type)		

	Will data from the research activity (collected data, drafts of the thesis, or materials for publication) be stored in any of the following ways?	YES	NO
5	Manual files (i.e. in paper form)?	☐	☒
6	University computers?	☒	☐
7	Private company computers?	☐	☒
8	Home or other personal computers?	☒	☐
9	Laptop computers/ CDs/ Portable disk-drives/ memory sticks?	☒	☐
10	“Cloud” storage or websites?	☒	☐
11	Other – specify:	☐	☒
12	For all stored data, explain the measures in place to ensure the security of the data collected, data confidentiality, including details of backup procedures, password protection, encryption, anonymisation and pseudonymisation:		

	This project will not collect personal or special category data. Research materials, notes, drafts, and reference files will be stored securely on password-protected university and personal devices. Digital files will be backed up using secure cloud storage within the university-managed environment where possible. UWTSD guidance states that research data should be stored in the university's managed environment, and Microsoft OneDrive for Business is identified as a managed storage solution. Any portable storage used temporarily will be password protected. Only the principal researcher, and where necessary the supervisor for academic support, will have access to the files. Data will be organised carefully to avoid loss, corruption, or unauthorised access. As no participant data will be collected, anonymisation and pseudonymisation are not required. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>
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Data Protection			
	Will the research activity involve any of the following activities:	YES	NO
13	Electronic transfer of data in any form?	☒	☐
14	Sharing of data with others at the University outside of the immediate research team?	☐	☒
15	Sharing of data with other organisations?	☐	☒
16	Export of data outside the UK or importing of data from outside the UK?	☐	☒
17	Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, emails or telephone numbers?	☐	☒
18	Publication of data that might allow identification of individuals?	☐	☒
19	If YES to any question, please provide full details, explaining how this will be conducted in accordance with the GDPR and Data Protection Act (2018) (and/or any international equivalent):		
	Electronic transfer may occur when academic drafts are submitted to the supervisor or uploaded to university systems. These materials will not contain personal participant data. Files will be shared only for academic purposes and through secure, password-protected systems and approved university platforms where possible. Research notes and draft chapters will be handled in line with university data management requirements and protected from unauthorised access.		
20	List all who will have access to the data generated by the research activity:		

	The principal researcher. The academic supervisor, where necessary for supervision and feedback. Potentially internal markers and external examiners through the submitted dissertation. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
21	List who will have control of, and act as custodian(s) for, data generated by the research activity:	
	The principal researcher will act as the main custodian of the research data. Oversight will rest with the University through the supervisory and assessment process. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
22	Give details of data storage arrangements, including security measures in place to protect the data, where data will be stored, how long for, and in what form.	
	All research data, including notes, article PDFs, company documents, and dissertation drafts, will be stored in digital form. Files will be kept on password-protected devices and, where possible, on university-managed cloud storage such as Microsoft OneDrive for Business. UWTSD guidance states that research data should be stored in the university's managed environment to reduce risk of breach, loss, corruption, and unauthorised access. Backup copies will be maintained securely. Any temporary use of removable storage will be password protected. Because no personal data is being collected, the storage risk is low. Data will be retained until the project and assessment process are complete and then managed or deleted in line with university requirements. <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>	
22	Confirm that you have read the UWTSD guidance on data management (see https://www.uwtسد.ac.uk/library/research-data-management/)	☒
23	Confirm that you are aware that you need to keep all data until after your research has completed or the end of your funding	☒

SECTION I: Use of AI tools

Use of generative AI and other AI-based tools There are a number of ethical issues relating to the use of generative AI and other AI-based tools, including data security, output bias, and output errors. In general you should assume that any generative AI or other AI-based tool that you pay to use is more secure and accurate than one which is free to use. Will the research use AI tools to do any of the following:		YES	NO	N/A
1	Capture data?	☐	☒	☐
2	Generate and/or edit text?	☒	☐	☐
3	Generate graphics?	☐	☒	☐
4	Generate video?	☐	☒	☐
5	Generate sound/music?	☐	☒	☐

6	Generate code?	☐	☒	☐
7	Generate synthetic data?	☐	☒	☐
8	Analyse data?	☐	☒	☐
9	Analyse personal or sensitive data?	☐	☒	☐
10	Classify data?	☐	☒	☐
11	Do you intend to use the free version of any AI tools?	☒	☐	☐
If you have answered YES to any of questions O1-O11, please provide justification detailing why this is necessary for the research.				
12	<i>The research may use generative AI tools such as ChatGPT only for limited support with language refinement, structure, proofreading, and idea organisation. AI will not be used to collect data, generate evidence, create synthetic data, analyse personal data, or replace the researcher's critical evaluation. No confidential, personal, or special category data will be uploaded into AI systems. The researcher will verify all factual claims, references, interpretations, and final wording independently against original academic and documentary sources before submission. The final responsibility for accuracy, originality, and academic integrity will remain with the researcher. Use of AI will follow current UWTSD student guidance on allowable AI use in assessment and will be acknowledged where required. UWTSD publishes student AI guidance and guidance on allowable uses of AI in assessment.</i> <i>(this box should expand as you type)</i>			

SECTION J: Declaration

The information which I have provided is correct and complete to the best of my knowledge. I have attempted to identify any risks and issues related to the research activity and acknowledge my obligations and the rights of the participants. In submitting this application I hereby confirm that I undertake to ensure that the above named research activity will meet the University's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Practice which is published on the website: https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/research/research-ethics/			
1	Signature of applicant:		Date: 18/03/2026
2	Supervisor:	Dr Said Usman	Date: 18/03/2026
3	Signature:		