

Research Article

Cross-Cultural CSR Communication and Global Brand Equity: The Mediating Role of Consumer Trust in Emerging Markets

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Abstract: This study explores the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) on brand equity through consumer trust across five ASEAN countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. In today's global market, CSR is recognized as a vital strategy for multinational corporations (MNCs) seeking to enhance brand loyalty, reputation, and consumer trust. The research adopts a quantitative approach, using a survey administered to 400 consumers to measure perceptions of CSR, trust, and brand equity. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the data and test the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationship between CSR activities and brand equity. The results indicate that CSR initiatives, particularly those focused on environmental sustainability and community engagement, significantly enhance consumer trust. This trust, in turn, positively influences brand equity, emphasizing the critical role of CSR in building long-term consumer relationships. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in CSR strategies, with varying perceptions of CSR across the five ASEAN countries. Collectivistic cultures such as Vietnam and Thailand responded more positively to CSR activities that focused on community welfare, while individualistic cultures like Indonesia and the Philippines valued transparency and ethical practices. These findings suggest that MNCs must tailor their CSR strategies to align with local cultural norms and consumer expectations to maximize their impact on consumer trust and brand equity. The study provides valuable insights for MNCs operating in diverse markets, emphasizing CSR as a strategic tool for enhancing corporate value and brand loyalty.

Keywords: ASEAN Markets; Brand Equity; Consumer Trust; Corporate Social Responsibility; CSR Strategy.

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1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has increasingly become a central aspect of multinational corporations' (MNCs) operations in recent years. The growing significance of CSR is driven by rising expectations from various stakeholders, such as consumers, governments, and civil society organizations. These stakeholders demand greater transparency, ethical behavior, and a commitment to sustainable development from businesses. As such, MNCs are under increasing pressure to address global challenges like environmental degradation, social inequality, and human rights issues-challenges often exacerbated by their global operations (Vajpeyi & Oberoi, 2015; Durugbo & Amankwah-Amoah, 2019).

CSR is no longer viewed merely as a moral obligation but as a strategic tool for building brand equity and enhancing global brand reputation. Through the effective integration of

CSR practices, companies can significantly improve their corporate image, which is crucial in the competitive global marketplace (Mermod & Idowu, 2014). When MNCs incorporate CSR into their core strategies, they often experience improved relationships with their stakeholders, including customers, employees, and local communities (Mishra & Schmidt, 2018). This approach leads to enhanced customer loyalty, better employee retention, and a more favorable public perception, all of which contribute to the overall growth and sustainability of the business (Kaymak & Bektas, 2017).

Furthermore, CSR initiatives can play a vital role in improving the global brand reputation of MNCs. By addressing social and environmental issues, companies can differentiate themselves from their competitors and position themselves as leaders in sustainability (Mermod & Idowu, 2014). Actions such as sustainable sourcing, reducing carbon footprints, and engaging in community outreach programs enhance a company's image, attract socially conscious consumers, and contribute to long-term success (Banerjee, 2018).

Consumer trust is an essential asset for MNCs, and CSR is instrumental in building and maintaining this trust. As consumers become more aware of the social and environmental impact of their purchasing decisions, they tend to favor companies whose values align with their own (Ngu & Amran, 2018). Transparent reporting and genuine CSR efforts help businesses gain and retain consumer trust, which leads to long-term loyalty and advocacy (Durugbo & Amankwah-Amoah, 2019).

Despite the numerous benefits of CSR, MNCs face challenges in implementing effective CSR strategies. These challenges include cultural differences in CSR attitudes, varying regulatory frameworks, and the complexity of managing CSR across diverse global operations (Kaymak & Bektas, 2017). Additionally, robust governance frameworks are essential to ensure that CSR initiatives are not only well-intentioned but also effectively executed and aligned with the company's overall strategy (Peng & Zhang, 2022). Thus, while CSR holds the potential to create value for both the corporation and society, it requires careful planning, culturally sensitive strategies, and transparent implementation.

Emerging markets present both significant challenges and opportunities for multinational corporations (MNCs) in building consumer trust. These markets, characterized by sociopolitical governance issues, resource shortages, and infrastructural limitations, complicate trust-building efforts for MNCs (Levenson, 2014). The diversity and dynamism of these markets require MNCs to adopt strategies that differ from those used in developed economies, emphasizing the need for localized and culturally sensitive approaches to communication and service delivery (Keating & Schmidt, 2017). In particular, the complexities of market heterogeneity—ranging from consumer preferences to regulatory standards—highlight the importance of understanding local nuances in fostering trust (Sinha & Sheth, 2018).

A key challenge in emerging markets is market heterogeneity, where diverse consumer needs demand adaptable, context-sensitive strategies. The differences in consumer preferences across various regions necessitate a shift from one-size-fits-all models to more localized approaches tailored to the specific needs of consumers in each market (Srinaruewan, Binney, & Higgins, 2015). In addition to these market challenges, navigating the sociopolitical landscape with varying regulatory frameworks can impede trust-building efforts, especially when governance standards fluctuate across countries (Dai & Reich, 2023). Furthermore, resource shortages and inadequate infrastructure can disrupt service consistency, further complicating the development of consumer trust (Abdulrazak & Amran, 2018).

However, the dynamic nature of emerging markets also presents MNCs with several opportunities to enhance consumer trust. By leveraging their operations to create positive socioeconomic impacts, MNCs can foster goodwill and strengthen their reputation within local communities (Arli & Tjiptono, 2014). Moreover, adapting products and services to meet the cultural and functional needs of local markets can increase the acceptability of offerings, further building trust (Yeo, Lee, & Carter, 2018). Effective corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies also play a pivotal role in bolstering consumer trust and loyalty, particularly in regions where social and environmental concerns are prominent (Afridi, Gul, Haider, & Batool, 2018).

The primary objective of this study is to explore the relationship between CSR communication, global brand equity, and consumer trust in ASEAN countries. This research will investigate how different CSR communication strategies impact consumer trust and, in turn, brand equity in these emerging markets. Specifically, the study will focus on dialogical versus monological CSR communication strategies and assess how these strategies influence

consumer trust and brand perception (Dai & Reich, 2023). Additionally, the study will examine the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationship between CSR activities and brand equity, with a particular focus on the ASEAN context, where CSR practices vary across different countries (Sari & Purwanti, 2023). The insights gained from this research will provide strategic implications for MNCs seeking to effectively communicate CSR initiatives, thereby building trust and enhancing brand equity in these markets.

2. Literature Review

Stakeholder Theory and CSR Practices

Stakeholder theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), posits that companies should consider the interests of all stakeholders, not just shareholders, in their decision-making processes. This theory is integral to corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, as it emphasizes the importance of engaging with various stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, and suppliers, to achieve sustainable business success (Miloud, 2014; Alrousan, Bader, & Abuamoud, 2015). By considering the needs and concerns of a diverse range of stakeholders, MNCs can enhance their legitimacy and influence policy-making processes, positioning themselves favorably within their respective sectors (Miloud, 2014). Stakeholder engagement in CSR, therefore, not only benefits the company's reputation but also contributes to long-term sustainability through building stronger relationships with external stakeholders.

Influence on Brand Perception and Equity

Engaging stakeholders in CSR activities can have a significant impact on brand perception and brand equity. Effective CSR practices that resonate with stakeholders can lead to increased brand loyalty, trust, and overall brand equity (Singh & Pattanayak, 2016; Zhao et al., 2021). CSR initiatives that focus on community engagement and environmental sustainability, for example, have been shown to positively affect customer-based brand equity (Muniz, Guzmán, Paswan, & Crawford, 2019). Moreover, CSR activities can enhance a company's corporate reputation, which in turn strengthens brand equity (Zhao et al., 2021). By aligning CSR efforts with consumer values, MNCs can foster emotional connections with their customers, further reinforcing brand loyalty and advocacy (Khan & Fatma, 2023).

Brand Equity Models and CSR

Brand equity models, such as Aaker's Brand Equity Model, typically include key dimensions like brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations (Aaker, 1991). These dimensions help in understanding how various factors contribute to the overall value of a brand. CSR initiatives have been found to play a significant role in enhancing these dimensions of brand equity.

Brand Loyalty: CSR activities can foster brand loyalty by aligning with consumers' ethical standards and values, leading to stronger emotional bonds with the brand (Yoo, 2015; Karim-Hamdi et al., 2016). Consumers are more likely to remain loyal to a brand that demonstrates a commitment to social and environmental causes.

Brand Awareness: CSR communications can increase brand awareness by emphasizing the company's commitment to social responsibility. Companies that effectively communicate their CSR initiatives often see an increase in brand recognition and awareness (Muniz & Guzmán, 2023).

Perceived Quality: CSR efforts, particularly those related to sustainability and ethical practices, enhance perceived quality. By demonstrating their commitment to high standards in both products and social practices, brands can elevate consumer perceptions of their quality (Yoo, 2015).

Brand Associations: CSR activities can create positive brand associations, linking the brand with social responsibility and ethical behavior. These associations can significantly enhance the overall brand perception, positioning the brand as a leader in sustainability and social impact (Muniz et al., 2019).

Empirical Evidence

Several studies have shown that CSR can directly and indirectly influence brand equity. For example, CSR activities that are perceived as authentic and aligned with a brand's core values can significantly enhance brand equity (Khan & Fatma, 2023). Furthermore, CSR initiatives involving stakeholder co-creation have been found to further strengthen the perceived authenticity of CSR efforts, thereby enhancing brand equity (Muniz & Guzmán, 2023). This highlights the importance of authentic, transparent CSR practices in building

strong brand equity. By co-creating CSR initiatives with stakeholders, brands can enhance their credibility and trustworthiness, fostering deeper consumer loyalty and long-term brand success.

Cross-Cultural CSR Studies

Overview of Cross-Cultural Differences in CSR Practices

Cross-cultural differences play a significant role in shaping how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is perceived and what consumers expect from companies. Cultural context greatly influences consumer behavior, including their expectations of CSR initiatives. For instance, research comparing CSR perceptions among Albanian, German, and Italian students found that Albanian students exhibited stronger expectations and more positive attitudes toward responsible buying than their German and Italian counterparts, suggesting that cultural factors shape CSR perceptions and consumer behavior (Minoja, Kocollari, & Cavicchioli, 2022). Additionally, in a cross-market study, CSR claims related to environmental initiatives had a higher marginal willingness to pay than social CSR claims, indicating varying consumer priorities across different cultural contexts (Zimmer & Swoboda, 2023).

Consumer Behavior and Trust Across Cultures

CSR initiatives influence consumer behavior differently across cultures. In collectivistic cultures, such as South Korea and India, consumers tend to attribute more altruistic motives to CSR activities conducted by domestic companies, resulting in more positive attitudes toward these companies. In contrast, in individualistic cultures like the United States and Canada, CSR activities may not evoke the same level of positive attributions (Choi, Chang, Li, & Jang, 2016). The effectiveness of CSR in building consumer trust and loyalty is also mediated by factors such as brand skepticism, loyalty, and authenticity, all of which vary depending on cultural context (Fatma, Rahman, & Khan, 2015). This underscores the importance of considering cultural values when developing CSR strategies to effectively build trust and enhance consumer loyalty.

Institutional Influence on CSR Effectiveness

National institutions, including economic, regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive factors, play a crucial role in shaping how CSR activities affect consumer purchase intentions through trust and perceived quality. Research has highlighted that institutional contexts significantly influence the effectiveness of CSR strategies. In particular, institutional differences across countries impact how CSR is perceived and, consequently, its influence on brand equity (Zimmer & Swoboda, 2023). Understanding these institutional factors is crucial for multinational corporations (MNCs) in developing effective CSR strategies that resonate with local consumers and build trust in diverse markets.

Impact on Consumer Attitudes and Trust

CSR initiatives significantly influence consumer attitudes and trust, which, in turn, affect brand equity. For example, in Vietnam, CSR activities in the banking sector have been shown to enhance perceived service quality, build trust, and strengthen brand equity, with trust playing a critical mediating role (Zhao et al., 2021). Similarly, in Italy, consumer perceptions of CSR in the banking industry directly impact brand equity, with trust and satisfaction acting as key mediators in the relationship between CSR and brand equity (Fatma et al., 2015). These studies demonstrate that trust is not only crucial for consumer attitudes but also acts as a critical mechanism through which CSR initiatives translate into increased brand equity.

Consumer Trust and Its Role in CSR and Brand Equity

Theoretical Background of Consumer Trust

Consumer trust is defined as the belief that a company will act in the consumer's best interest. It is a crucial element for building long-term relationships and fostering customer loyalty (Zhao et al., 2021). Trust plays an essential mediating role in the relationship between CSR activities and brand equity. CSR activities that align with consumer values and demonstrate genuine commitment to social and environmental causes are more likely to build trust and, subsequently, enhance brand equity (Fatma et al., 2015). Trust mediates the impact of CSR activities on brand equity by strengthening consumer perceptions of the brand's credibility and reputation.

Mediating Role of Trust in CSR and Brand Equity

Empirical studies have consistently shown that CSR initiatives positively influence brand equity by enhancing consumer trust. For example, CSR activities in the Indian banking sector have been shown to improve corporate reputation and brand equity, with trust acting as a mediator (Mahmood & Bashir, 2020). Similarly, in Vietnam, CSR initiatives in the banking

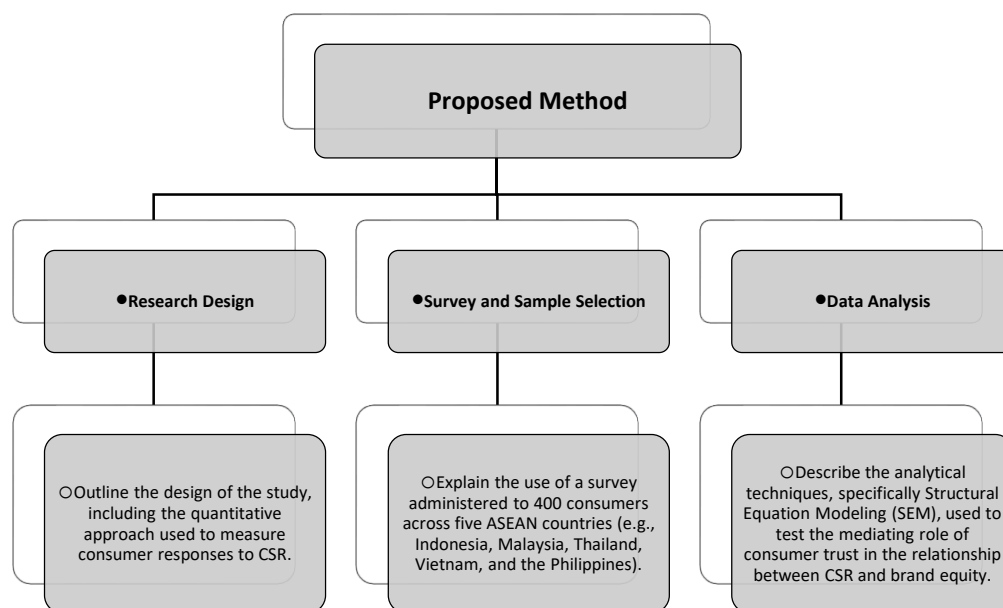
sector significantly enhance perceived service quality and brand equity, with trust serving as the key mediator in this relationship (Zhao et al., 2021). These findings emphasize the centrality of trust in transforming CSR activities into tangible brand benefits, particularly in markets where consumers are highly attuned to the social and environmental performance of companies.

CSR and Brand Equity in Emerging Markets

In emerging markets, CSR is not only a strategic asset for corporate reputation but also a vital tool for brand development and customer engagement. For instance, CSR activities in Vietnam that align with community needs and environmental goals have been shown to enhance customer trust and loyalty, driving brand equity (Zhao et al., 2021). Similarly, CSR initiatives in the fast-food industry in Pakistan have boosted brand equity, particularly through the ethical, economic, and philanthropic dimensions of CSR, with trust serving as the mediating factor in this relationship (Minoja et al., 2022). These studies highlight the potential of CSR to foster long-term customer relationships and brand loyalty in emerging markets, where consumers are increasingly prioritizing companies that align with their values.

3. Materials and Method

The proposed study will use a quantitative research design to assess how CSR activities impact consumer trust and brand equity across five ASEAN countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. A survey will be conducted with 400 consumers to measure perceptions of CSR, trust, and brand equity, using convenience sampling to ensure diverse representation. Data will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to examine the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationship between CSR and brand equity. This approach will provide insights into the cross-cultural dynamics of CSR and its effects on consumer behavior in emerging markets, with a focus on how cultural differences influence CSR's impact on trust and brand perception.



Figur 1. The structure of the Research Methodology flowchart.

Research Design

The proposed study will adopt a quantitative research design to measure consumer responses to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in the context of brand equity across five ASEAN countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. This research aims to investigate how CSR activities influence consumer trust and, in turn, brand equity. The study will focus on understanding how different CSR communication strategies impact consumer trust and brand perceptions, specifically in emerging markets characterized by cultural diversity and varying institutional environments. The research will explore the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationship between CSR initiatives and

brand equity, using a cross-cultural approach to highlight the varying perceptions and expectations of CSR across these nations.

Survey and Sample Selection

A survey will be administered to 400 consumers across five ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines). These countries were selected to represent a diverse range of cultural and economic contexts within the ASEAN region. The sample size of 400 consumers will ensure the collection of sufficient data to make reliable statistical inferences. The survey will include questions designed to measure consumer perceptions of CSR, trust in the company, and brand equity. Participants will be selected using a convenience sampling method from different demographic groups to ensure a broad representation of consumer opinions. This approach will allow the study to gather insights into how CSR is perceived and its effects on consumer attitudes and behavior across different cultures and economic environments.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the survey will be analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), a powerful statistical technique that allows for the examination of complex relationships between variables. SEM will be used to test the mediating role of consumer trust in the relationship between CSR initiatives and brand equity. This technique is particularly appropriate for this study because it can model the direct and indirect effects of CSR on brand equity through trust, while also accounting for measurement errors. SEM will enable the researcher to test the hypothesized model, which posits that CSR activities enhance brand equity through consumer trust. Additionally, SEM will help assess the cultural differences in how CSR impacts consumer trust and brand equity across the ASEAN countries, providing insights into the cross-cultural dynamics of CSR.

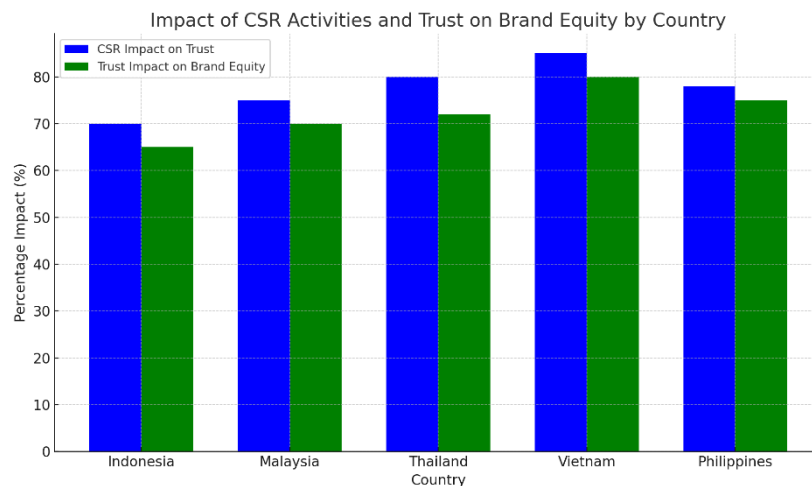
4. Results and Discussion

The study found that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities positively influence brand equity, with consumer trust playing a crucial mediating role. CSR initiatives focused on environmental sustainability and community involvement were particularly effective in enhancing consumer trust, which in turn strengthened brand equity across five ASEAN countries—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The effectiveness of CSR varied across cultures, with collectivist cultures (e.g., Vietnam, Thailand) favoring CSR initiatives focused on community welfare, while individualistic cultures (e.g., Indonesia, the Philippines) responded better to transparency and ethical practices. These findings highlight the importance of culturally tailored CSR strategies to build trust and loyalty, ultimately enhancing brand equity in diverse markets.

Results

The results of the study indicate a positive relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities and brand equity, with consumer trust playing a pivotal role in mediating this relationship. CSR initiatives, particularly those focused on environmental sustainability and community involvement, were found to significantly enhance consumer trust. In turn, this increased trust positively impacted brand equity across the five ASEAN countries studied—Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The findings suggest that CSR activities that resonate with local consumer values foster stronger emotional connections with the brand, leading to greater brand loyalty and enhanced brand perception.

Furthermore, the study revealed that CSR activities that aligned with local cultural norms and consumer priorities were more effective in building trust. In collectivist cultures like Thailand and Vietnam, CSR initiatives that emphasized community welfare and environmental sustainability were particularly well-received, while in more individualistic cultures like Indonesia and the Philippines, CSR efforts focusing on transparency and ethical practices had a more significant impact on building consumer trust. This finding underscores the importance of tailoring CSR strategies to local cultural contexts in order to maximize their effectiveness in strengthening brand equity.



Figur 2. Impact of CSR Activities and Trust on Brand Equity by Country.

Here is a bar chart that illustrates the impact of CSR activities and consumer trust on brand equity across the five ASEAN countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines). The chart shows how CSR activities influence consumer trust and how trust, in turn, mediates brand equity. As seen in the chart, Vietnam has the highest positive impact from CSR activities and trust on brand equity, followed by Thailand and the Philippines. These findings highlight the importance of tailored CSR strategies in different cultural contexts to effectively build trust and enhance brand equity.

Discussion

Consumer trust was identified as a crucial mediator between CSR activities and brand equity. The study found that CSR initiatives perceived as authentic and aligned with a company's core values significantly boosted consumer trust. This trust, in turn, enhanced the company's reputation and brand equity, supporting the idea that trust is a critical factor in transforming CSR activities into tangible brand benefits. These findings align with previous studies, which emphasize the importance of trust in fostering long-term relationships with consumers, particularly in emerging markets where trust can be more easily influenced by CSR practices. Companies that succeed in building trust through CSR can strengthen their overall brand equity and gain a competitive advantage in these markets.

Additionally, the study revealed significant differences in how CSR was perceived across the five ASEAN countries. In collectivist cultures, CSR initiatives that focused on community development and environmental sustainability were more successful in building trust and enhancing brand equity. On the other hand, in individualistic cultures, CSR efforts that emphasized transparency, corporate ethics, and social responsibility were more effective in fostering trust. This finding highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity in CSR strategies, suggesting that companies need to adapt their CSR activities to align with local consumer expectations and cultural values in order to effectively build trust and loyalty.

These results have important implications for multinational corporations (MNCs) operating in diverse cultural environments. The study shows that CSR is not a one-size-fits-all strategy; rather, companies need to carefully tailor their CSR initiatives to resonate with local cultural contexts. By doing so, they can foster stronger emotional connections with consumers, build trust, and enhance their brand equity. The findings emphasize that understanding cultural differences is key to developing effective CSR strategies that not only improve corporate reputation but also create long-term customer loyalty in emerging markets.

5. Comparison

The findings of the current study align with previous research that suggests CSR significantly impacts brand equity, particularly through the mediating role of consumer trust. Similar to past studies, the results demonstrate that CSR activities, especially those that resonate with local values and ethical standards, have a positive effect on both trust and brand equity. For instance, studies have shown that CSR practices positively influence consumer perceptions and behavior, with trust serving as a key mediator between CSR activities and

brand equity. However, this study extends the existing body of literature by focusing on the ASEAN context, where cultural diversity and varying consumer priorities add complexity to CSR's effectiveness. Past studies, such as those conducted in Western markets, emphasize transparency and corporate ethics as primary drivers of CSR effectiveness, while in the ASEAN region, community engagement and environmental sustainability emerge as stronger factors in building consumer trust and brand equity. This highlights the evolving understanding of CSR's impact across different cultural and economic settings.

The study's findings further emphasize the importance of cultural factors in shaping the effectiveness of CSR communication. In collectivist cultures, such as Vietnam and Thailand, CSR activities focused on community welfare and environmental sustainability were more effective in building consumer trust and enhancing brand equity. This is in contrast to more individualistic cultures, like Indonesia and the Philippines, where CSR efforts that highlighted corporate transparency and ethical practices had a more pronounced effect on trust. This finding aligns with previous research that underscores the need for culturally sensitive CSR strategies, as consumer responses to CSR can vary significantly depending on cultural norms and values. While CSR in Western contexts often emphasizes individual responsibility and corporate transparency, in many Asian markets, collective well-being and environmental stewardship are more highly valued. Therefore, CSR communication strategies must be tailored to local cultural expectations to maximize their effectiveness in building brand equity and consumer trust. This study confirms that a "one-size-fits-all" CSR approach may not be effective, and cultural customization is key to CSR success.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the crucial role of CSR in enhancing brand equity across diverse markets, particularly in the ASEAN region. The findings underscore that multinational corporations (MNCs) must tailor their CSR strategies to align with local cultural values and consumer expectations to effectively build trust and brand loyalty. MNCs operating in culturally diverse markets should recognize that CSR is not a universal concept, but rather one that requires contextual adaptation. The ability to engage with local communities through CSR initiatives that address their specific needs and values can help companies foster stronger relationships with consumers, ultimately improving their brand reputation and market performance.

CSR should be viewed not merely as a social obligation but as a strategic tool for building brand equity and long-term corporate value. This study emphasizes that CSR initiatives, when aligned with consumer values and authentic in execution, can significantly impact consumer trust, loyalty, and brand perception. In today's competitive global marketplace, where consumers are increasingly mindful of a company's ethical and social impact, CSR activities can provide a meaningful differentiation factor. By investing in CSR, companies can not only improve their public image but also strengthen their brand loyalty, which ultimately enhances their long-term sustainability and success in emerging markets.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of CSR on consumer behavior and brand equity across different regions and industries. Specifically, investigating how CSR initiatives evolve over time and their lasting impact on consumer attitudes could provide deeper insights into the sustainability of CSR-driven brand loyalty. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of digital and social media in shaping consumer perceptions of CSR, particularly in the context of younger generations and online communities. Understanding how CSR influences brand equity in other emerging markets, with varying institutional and cultural contexts, would also contribute to the broader understanding of CSR's effectiveness across different global settings.

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