



Influence of CSR Practices and Ethical Leadership on Consumer Trust: Mediating Roles of Brand Image and Perceived Sustainability

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Abstract

Purpose: This research examines the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices and Ethical Leadership on Brand Image, and how these factors subsequently affect Perceived Sustainability, ultimately fostering Consumer Trust.

Research Methodology: A quantitative research design was utilized, collecting data from 150 respondents spanning diverse demographic groups. Statistical analyses including descriptive statistics, reliability testing, and factor analysis were conducted to ensure construct validity and internal consistency.

Findings: Results demonstrate a significant positive relationship between CSR and Ethical Leadership on Brand Image. This enhanced Brand Image further strengthens Perceived Sustainability perceptions, which in turn cultivates higher levels of Consumer Trust.

Conclusion: The study highlights the critical role of ethical leadership and socially responsible initiatives in shaping favorable brand perceptions and promoting sustainable business practices that build enduring consumer trust.

Originality: This research contributes to the literature by empirically linking CSR and Ethical Leadership with Brand Image and Perceived Sustainability, advancing understanding of their combined effect on Consumer Trust. It provides actionable insights for organizations aiming to reinforce trust and sustainability through ethical and responsible practices.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, ethical leadership, brand image, perceived sustainability, consumer trust

Introduction

In an era of developing environmental awareness and social accountability, corporations are increasingly adopting sustainable practices not only to comply with regulatory norms but also to satisfy the expectations of ethically conscious clients. Among those practices, corporate social

responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a strategic tool that reflects a firm's dedication to environmental safety, social welfare, and moral governance. Studies have always shown that CSR projects undoubtedly influence stakeholder perceptions and make contributions to the development of a sturdy emblem image (Kang et al., 2016). Moral

management, alternatively, plays a vital position in shaping organizational values and fostering trust-based relationships with stakeholders (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Collectively, CSR practices and ethical leadership are believed to beautify the credibility and attractiveness of the company in the eyes of clients.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices and ethical leadership are vital factors in shaping a company's brand image, profoundly influencing stakeholder perceptions of a firm's dedication to ethical conduct and sustainable initiatives. CSR activities that resonate with societal values contribute to enhancing corporate reputation, building brand equity, and fostering consumer loyalty by showcasing transparency, ethical responsibility, and a constructive societal impact. Ethical leadership demonstrated by organizational leaders, characterized by integrity, honesty, and fairness, not only strengthens internal ethical cultures but also enhances public trust in the brand. The interaction between CSR and ethical leadership elevates perceived sustainability, as stakeholders recognize authentic efforts toward environmental stewardship and social responsibility. Consequently, these elements promote consumer trust, with customers more likely to support brands they perceive as responsible and principled. As Mishra et al. (2024) emphasize, the integration of transformative and ethical leadership within institutions supports the development of ethical capital through value-driven practices, cultivating sustainable organizations and enduring trust among consumers, employees, and society at large. Additionally, Mishra and colleagues highlight that applying value management in project settings and fostering ethical capital across the workforce are essential to maintaining a strong brand image and achieving long-term sustainability (Mishra, 2019; Mishra & Aithal, 2023a,&b).

Customer trust has emerged as a pivotal aspect in sustaining long-term customer relationships and constructing brand loyalty in contemporary competitive marketplace. Theoretical and empirical studies suggests that trust is significantly prompted

by using how purchasers perceive a brand's ethical orientation and sustainability dedication (Martínez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013). Brand image acts as an intermediary mechanism that conveys the company's values and practices to the customer, thereby serving as a perceptual bridge between CSR and trust. Furthermore, perceived sustainability — purchasers' belief that the brand contributes positively to society and the environment — serves as an evaluative filter that strengthens or weakens this trust. Those constructs are regularly interlinked in a causal chain, suggesting that purchaser consider is not constructed in isolation, but is a outcome of how CSR and moral management translate into favorable brand perceptions and sustainability attention.

In these days' aggressive and ethically aware market environment, companies are below increasing stress to demonstrate responsible business behavior that goes past profitability. While corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects and moral management have received prominence as strategic equipment, many companies battle to efficaciously translate these values into purchaser believe. The space among what businesses declare through CSR reports and what customers virtually understand frequently undermines consider and brand loyalty. This disconnection raises a important query: Are CSR and ethical leadership without a doubt influencing client believe, or are they simply symbolic gestures without tangible consequences in client perception?

Moreover, despite the fact that previous studies have for my part tested the roles of CSR and leadership ethics, there is restricted empirical research that explores their mixed have an impact on on client believe, especially through mediating variables together with brand image and perceived sustainability. This creates a theoretical and realistic gap in know-how how these constructs engage inside agree with-constructing framework. Addressing this gap is important for groups seeking to construct lengthy-time period relationships with ethically conscious clients in an age in which brand accountability and sustainability are key marketplace differentiators.

The significance of this study lies in its capacity to bridge the conceptual and sensible gap between corporate social responsibility (CSR), ethical leadership, and consumer trust in nowadays sustainability-targeted marketplace. Even as CSR has become a strategic imperative for firms seeking stakeholder engagement, its actual value is found out only when clients understand these efforts as genuine and regular. With the aid of exploring how ethical leadership complements CSR initiatives and enhances brand image and perceived sustainability, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how these constructs interact to influence purchaser attitudes and behavior. The study as a result gives valuable insights for companies aiming to move beyond tokenistic CSR and include values-based totally leadership as a foundation for sustainable brand fairness.

Moreover, this research has important implications for marketing strategists, company policymakers, and sustainability advocates. In a generation in which customers are increasingly more pushed via moral considerations and environmental responsibility, understanding the dynamics between CSR practices, leadership integrity, and trust becomes vital. The study's findings can assist companies design more credible CSR applications and undertake leadership methods that resonate with public expectancies, thereby improving brand authenticity and long-term client loyalty. furthermore, by empirically validating the mediating roles of brand image and perceived sustainability, the studies informs each educational discourse and commercial enterprise practice inside the domains of ethical branding and stakeholder trust.

Research Objective

This research examines the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices and Ethical Leadership on Brand Image, and how these factors subsequently affect Perceived Sustainability, ultimately fostering Consumer Trust.

Literature Review

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has developed from a philanthropic idea to a strategic tool that enhances organizational recognition and stakeholder agrees with. Numerous studies affirm that CSR projects definitely have an impact on client perceptions, especially when aligned with social and environmental values (Kumar, 2024). In step with Carroll and Shabana (2010), CSR activities that deal with community welfare, sustainability, and ethical conduct not only construct brand fairness but additionally foster stronger emotional connections with clients. Furthermore, socially responsible companies are frequently rewarded with more consumer loyalty, as customers increasingly more prefer manufacturers that show proper dedication to societal problems (Du et al., 2010).

Ethical leadership performs a pivotal role in reinforcing the effectiveness of CSR strategies. Brown et al. (2005) outline ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively suitable behavior and the advertising of such conduct to followers. Leaders who act ethically set a tone of integrity and duty that displays throughout the corporation's practices, along with CSR efforts. Research by Eisenbeiss et al. (2015) indicates that ethical leaders notably shape stakeholder perceptions by aligning corporate conduct with ethical requirements, thereby improving both internal and external trust.

Brand image serves as a vital mediating variable in the CSR-consumer trust relationship. A positive brand image created via CSR and ethical leadership efforts can expand client perceptions of trust and reliability. According to Keller (1993), brand image is the set of associations connected to a brand inside the client's memory, and those associations are formed by various organizational behaviors, along with CSR. When companies continuously act in socially responsible and ethically sound methods, they create a favorable image that enhances consumer confidence and enhances brand preference (Lai et al., 2010).

Perceived sustainability, described as the

consumer's assessment of a brand's environmental and social effect, has ended up a significant determinant of purchase choices and trust. Researches show that purchasers tend to assess brands not just based on product functions but additionally on the sustainability of commercial enterprise practices. [Leonidou et al. \(2013\)](#) argue that perceived sustainability complements consumers' psychological consolation and reduces perceived threat in transactions, especially in environmentally sensitive markets. Moreover, a excessive level of perceived sustainability is frequently associated with elevated brand loyalty and effective word-of-mouth.

Consumer trust, that's prompted by using CSR, ethical leadership, brand image, and perceived sustainability, acts as a key outcome variable inside the formation of long-term customer relationships. Trust is defined as the willingness of the purchaser to rely on the brand under situations of risk ([Morgan & Hunt, 1994](#)). According to [Chaudhuri and Holbrook \(2001\)](#), trusted brands advantage from better client dedication and decreased price sensitivity. when CSR initiatives are guided with the aid of moral management and correctly communicated via strong brand image and sustainability messaging, consumer trust is probable to deepen, leading to competitive advantage and brand resilience.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 150)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78	52.0%
	Female	72	48.0%
Age Group	Below 25 years	35	23.3%
	25 – 35 years	58	38.7%
	36 – 45 years	32	21.3%
	Above 45 years	25	16.7%
Occupation	Students	40	26.7%
	Working Professionals	68	45.3%
	Entrepreneurs/Small Business	30	20.0%
	Others	12	8.0%

Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the influence of corporate Social responsibility (CSR) and ethical leadership on customer trust, with brand image and perceived sustainability appearing as mediators. Primary data was gathered using a structured questionnaire disbursed among 150 respondents across various districts of Kerala. The respondents consisted of educated consumers, including working professionals, students, and small business owners, who're acquainted with CSR projects and corporate branding. Convenience sampling was used to reach participants, and efforts had been made to make certain diversity in age, gender, and professional background to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used for facts analysis to evaluate both the direct and indirect effects of the variables. This methodological technique gives robust empirical proof to support the proposed conceptual framework and contributes to better information of the position of moral practices in shaping consumer trust.

Results and Discussion

Studies show that CSR and ethical leadership boost brand credibility and consumer trust, with brand image and perceived sustainability mediating the effect, ultimately strengthening brand loyalty.

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Education	Undergraduate	54	36.0%
	Postgraduate	76	50.7%
	Others (Diploma/Professional)	20	13.3%
Monthly Income	Below ₹ 20,000	40	26.7%
	₹20,001–₹ 40,000	45	30.0%
	₹40,001– ₹ 60,000	38	25.3%
	Above ₹60,000	27	18.0%

The demographic profile of the respondents reveals a fairly balanced gender distribution, with 52% male and 48% female participants. the majority of respondents fall within the 25–35 years age group (38.7%), followed by those under 25 years (23.3%), indicating a predominantly young to early middle-aged pattern. concerning occupation, working professionals constitute the largest segment (45.3%), with students (26.7%) and entrepreneurs/small business owners (20%) forming significant portions, suggesting a mixture

of early-career and business-involved individuals. In terms of educational background, over half of the respondents are postgraduates (50.7%), followed by undergraduates (36%), reflecting a properly-educated sample. The monthly earnings distribution suggests that 30% earn between ₹20,001 and ₹40,000, whilst 26.7% earn below ₹20,000, and 25.3% fall within the ₹40,001–₹60,000 range, highlighting a predominantly middle-income group among the members

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics

Construct	No. of Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	5	4.12	0.56	2.8	5
Ethical Leadership	5	4.05	0.61	2.6	5
Brand Image	4	4.21	0.58	3	5
Perceived Sustainability	4	4.08	0.52	2.9	5
Consumer Trust	5	4.18	0.49	3	5

The descriptive statistics indicate generally high average scores across all constructs, suggesting that respondents perceive positively the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, ethical leadership, brand image, perceived sustainability, and consumer trust within the studied context. Among the constructs, brand image recorded the highest mean score ($M = 4.21$), accompanied closely by consumer trust ($M = 4.18$) and CSR ($M = 4.12$), highlighting their strong presence within the perceptions of the individuals. the lowest mean was

observed for ethical leadership ($M = 4.05$), even though it still reflects a favorable view. Standard deviations ranged from 0.49 to 0.61, indicating mild variability in responses. The minimum scores throughout all constructs fall below 3.0, even as the maximum scores reach the upper limit of 5.0, signifying a variety of perceptions but with a general tendency towards agreement or strong agreement. This reflects a strong perception of ethical and sustainable practices contributing to client trust via brand positioning.

Table 3*Reliability Analysis*

Factors	Number of attributes	Cronbach's alpha
Corporate Social Responsibility	5	0.769
Ethical Leadership	5	0.785
Brand Image	4	0.736
Perceived Sustainability	4	0.816
Consumer Trust	5	0.778
Overall	Cronbach's alpha	0.789
	No. of Items	23

The reliability analysis of the study reveals that all five constructs exhibit desirable levels of internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the normally accepted threshold of 0.70 (Tavakol and Dennick (2011)). Especially, Perceived Sustainability demonstrated the highest reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.816, indicating strong internal consistency among its four items. Ethical leadership and corporate Social responsibility

accompanied with values of 0.785 and 0.769 respectively, while consumer trust and brand image additionally confirmed satisfactory reliability at 0.778 and 0.736. the overall Cronbach's alpha for all 23 items was 0.789, confirming that the measurement tool used in the study is dependable and consistent for further statistical evaluation and hypothesis testing.

Table 4*Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Bartlett's test*

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.716
Corporate Social Responsibility	Approx. Chi-Square	2218.4
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	65
	Sig.	0

The results of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity indicate the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The KMO value of 0.716 suggests a middling level of sampling adequacy, which is acceptable for proceeding with exploratory factor analysis (Salowi et al., 2025). According to Kaiser's (1974) classification, values between 0.7 and 0.8 are considered good. Moreover, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yielded a statistically significant result (Chi-square = 2218.4, df = 65, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and that there are significant relationships among the variables. This confirms that factor analysis is appropriate for the dataset used in the study.

The structural model exhibits several statistically significant relationships among the variables examined. Ethical leadership explains a positive and significant influence on brand image ($B = 0.342$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 4.69$, $\beta = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$), explaining that ethical conduct and transparency examined by leadership enhance the public perception of the brand. Similarly, CSR practices also positively impact brand image ($B = 0.311$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 7.75$, $\beta = 0.457$, $p < 0.001$). Notably, the standardized coefficient for CSR practices is higher than that of ethical leadership, suggesting that CSR initiatives contribute more substantially to strengthening brand image in the consumer's view. Further analysis indicates that brand image

significantly predicts perceived sustainability ($B = 0.466$, $SE = 0.17$, $t = 2.12$, $\beta = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that a positive brand image, shaped by CSR and ethical leadership, fosters stronger consumer perceptions regarding the organization's commitment to sustainability. In addition, ethical leadership demonstrates a direct and significant effect on perceived sustainability ($B = 0.280$, $SE = 0.08$, $t = 4.42$, $\beta = 0.469$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting its dual role in influencing sustainability perception both directly and indirectly through brand image.

Finally, perceived sustainability is found to significantly impact customer trust ($B = 0.111$, $SE = 0.03$, $t = 4.66$, $\beta = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$). This

finding underscores the vital role of perceived sustainability in improving consumer trust, which is crucial for fostering long-term relationships and brand loyalty. The standardized coefficient suggests a reasonably strong effect, supporting the proposed sequential mediation pathway. The findings validate the hypothesized model and affirm that ethical leadership and CSR practices significantly influence consumer trust through their impact on brand image and perceived sustainability. Those results provide empirical support for the mediating roles of brand image and sustainability perception in shaping customer trust in the context of sustainability-driven organizational practices.

Table 5

Variables-Unstandardised & standardised co-efficients

Variables	Unstandardised co-efficient (B)	S.E.	t	Standardised co-efficient (B)	p
Brand Image \leftarrow Ethical Leadership	0.342	0	4.7	0.358	<0.001**
Brand Image \leftarrow CSR Practices	0.311	0	7.8	0.457	<0.001**
Perceived Sustainability \leftarrow Brand Image	0.466	0.2	2.1	0.424	<0.001**
Perceived Sustainability \leftarrow Ethical Leadership	0.28	0.1	4.4	0.469	<0.001**
Consumer Trust \leftarrow Perceived Sustainability	0.111	0	4.7	0.398	<0.001**

H0: There is no significant effect of Corporate Social Responsibility and Ethical Leadership on Consumer Trust through Brand Image and

Perceived Sustainability. The hypothesized model has a good fit.

Table 6

Table 5: Model fit indices

Fit Index	Result	Interpretation
Chi-square (χ^2)	7.210	Significant; minor deviation from ideal
Degrees of Freedom (df)	4	Used in χ^2/df ratio
Chi-square/df (CMIN/DF)	1.802	(≤ 5.00) – Good Fit
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.986	Exceeds 0.90 threshold – Excellent Fit
Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)	0.981	Greater than 0.90 – Good Fit
Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI)	0.907	Surpasses 0.90 – Good Fit
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	0.977	Well above 0.90 – Strong Fit
Root Mean Square Residual (RMR)	0.220	Below 0.08 – Very Good Fit
RMSEA	0.078	Below 0.08 – Very Good Fit

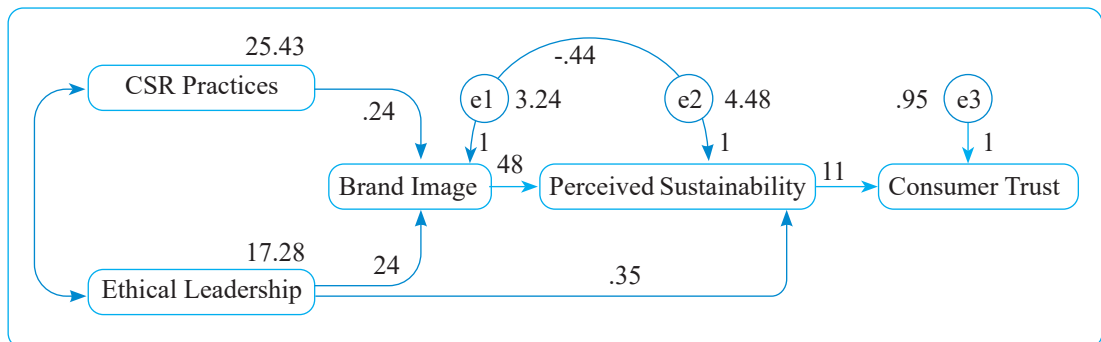
The goodness-of-fit indices presented in Table 5 indicate that the structural model demonstrates an acceptable to excellent fit with the observed data. The Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 7.210$, $df = 4$) is statistically significant, which may indicate a slight deviation from the ideal model fit (Bollen, 1989). However, the Chi-square/df ratio (CMIN/DF = 1.802) falls well within the acceptable threshold of ≤ 5.00 , suggesting a good overall fit (Thamodharan & Ghani, 2023). Multiple incremental and absolute fit indices support the adequacy of the model. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI = 0.986), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI = 0.981), Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index (AGFI = 0.907), and Normed Fit Index (NFI = 0.977) all exceed the recommended threshold of 0.90, indicating a strong and acceptable model fit (Hair et al., 1998). These values confirm that

the hypothesized model adequately captures the variance-covariance structure of the observed data. The Root Mean Square Residual (RMR = 0.220) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA = 0.078) are also within acceptable limits. In particular, the RMSEA is below the critical threshold of 0.08, suggesting a very good approximation of the model to the population data. Although the RMR value is slightly higher than the ideal cut-off of 0.08, its impact is mitigated by the strength of the other fit indices, and it does not pose a major concern regarding overall model validity.

The combination of these fit indices confirms that the proposed structural model demonstrates a good fit, supporting its suitability for hypothesis testing and interpretation of the path relationships.

Figure 1

Integrated CSR–Leadership–Trust Framework



The outcomes of the study provide strong empirical proof against the null hypothesis, confirming that corporate Social responsibility (CSR) practices and ethical leadership substantially influence consumer trust through the mediating roles of brand image and Perceived Sustainability. CSR ($\beta = 0.457$, $p < 0.001$) and ethical leadership ($\beta = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$) positively impact brand image, which in turn significantly predicts Perceived Sustainability ($\beta = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$). Ethical leadership additionally has a direct influence on Perceived Sustainability ($\beta = 0.469$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived Sustainability, as hypothesized, notably impacts consumer trust ($\beta = 0.398$, $p < 0.001$),

validating the sequential mediation path proposed in the model. The overall goodness-of-fit indices (e.g., CFI = 0.986, RMSEA = 0.078) confirm that the structural model is a good representation of the observed data, thereby supporting the research hypothesis and rejecting the null hypothesis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has empirically demonstrated the significant impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices and ethical leadership on building consumer trust, mediated by brand image and Perceived Sustainability. The findings affirm that organizations prioritizing CSR and ethical leadership not only enhance their

brand image but also cultivate a perception of sustainability, which is critical in fostering durable consumer trust. This underscores the increasingly vital role of sustainable and ethical business practices in establishing long-term relationships with clients, particularly in today's market where consumers are more conscious of corporate accountability and environmental stewardship. By validating the structural model and rejecting the null hypothesis, the study offers robust evidence that responsible leadership and sustainability-oriented initiatives are effective strategic tools for companies to differentiate themselves and solidify trustworthiness in competitive markets. Furthermore, these insights hold practical implications for managers and policymakers, emphasizing that investments in CSR and ethical conduct should be integral components of brand management and marketing strategies. Beyond its practical relevance, this study enriches academic literature by bridging the gap between ethical business conduct and consumer behavior, thereby setting a foundational framework for subsequent research exploring the dynamics of sustainability, ethical leadership, and trust across various industries and cultural contexts. Future research could expand upon these findings by investigating other mediating or moderating factors, such as corporate transparency, stakeholder engagement, or technological innovation, to further unravel the complexities of consumer trust in an evolving global marketplace.

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