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Steven Kayambazinthu Msosa
D.Sc. in Philosophy, Academician of Marketing, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Durban, South Africa;
e-mail: kayambazinthu@outlook.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-9074-5644
(Corresponding author)

Asanda Mlaba
Candidate of Sciences in Public Administration, Student of Marketing, Mangosuthu University of Technology, Durban, South Africa;
ORCID: 0009-0008-1457-2188

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CUSTOMERS' PERCEPTIONS OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) INITIATIVES, BRAND IMAGE AND LOYALTY IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN RETAIL SECTOR

ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is becoming increasingly prominent as companies see how important it is to safeguard the environment and society. CSR encompasses a wide range of activities, including philanthropy, environmental sustainability efforts, ethical practices, and community engagement. These actions are driven not just by ethical considerations but also by the objective to enhance corporate reputation and foster customer loyalty. This study adopted the Stakeholder Theory (ST) to analyse customer perceptions of CSR initiatives, brand image, and loyalty in the South African retail sector. A quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional research design was employed to collect data using a self-administered questionnaire. Additionally, a simple random sampling approach was used to select 400 respondents to participate in the study. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics by means of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The results show a high level of agreement on the efficacy of CSR initiatives, brand image, and loyalty. This study has contributed to the literature on CSR initiatives, brand image, and loyalty in the South African retail sector. Furthermore, the study could serve as a springboard for developing and altering policies so that they are environmentally and society-friendly.

Keywords: brand image, brand loyalty, community, education, environment, stakeholder, sustainability

JEL Classification: M14, M31

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a crucial component of business operations, has grown in significance as firms understand the value of making beneficial contributions to both the environment and society. CSR initiatives include a wide range of activities, such as giving to charity, protecting the environment, acting morally, and community development. Not only do these programs have ethical reasons for being there, but they are also aimed at boosting the brand's image and customer loyalty (Abidin et al., 2025). Customers who might want to buy could be drawn to businesses that are actively trying to solve social and environmental problems. Similarly, consumers, business partners, and community members may be more willing to support companies that show they care about corporate social responsibility. Thus, CSR activities may be very significant for encouraging sustainable development by dealing with social, environmental, and economic problems. Therefore, companies that incorporate sustainability principles into their operations and decision-making processes may help build a more sustainable future. These companies may positively affect society and the environment by implementing environmentally friendly practices, creating social fairness, and supporting community development initiatives (Molin et al., 2023).

The CSR activities-brand image/loyalty relationship has been the subject of increasing interest among researchers and practitioners. Although there are some findings indicating the positive effect of CSR on brand image and loyalty, research has produced mixed or inconclusive findings (Le, 2023). Various authors have investigated the effect of CSR activities on brand image and loyalty (Le et al., 2024). Thus, past research has established that CSR initiatives have a positive effect on customers' word-of-mouth, trust, and brand image for Indian banks. The effect of CSR on brand image varies based on whether or not the customer has preconceived ideas concerning why the firm practises CSR. If the customers find CSR as greenwashing or a Public Relations (PR) gimmick, then the effect on brand image and loyalty will be minimal (Tu et al., 2024). CSR programs and their effects on brand image and loyalty are guided by a variety of worldviews, such as business ethics, sustainability, and Stakeholder Theory. These worldviews guide how firms respond to CSR and how stakeholders expect companies to act. This requires companies to recognize the influence CSR activities have on brand loyalty and image since companies want to establish good and long-term relationships with stakeholders (Cowan & Guzman, 2020). Although prior research has established that this relationship exists, much is still unknown in the field of CSR, particularly from the developing nations of the world. Therefore, this study analysed customers' perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, brand image, and loyalty in South Africa's Retail sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stakeholder Theory

The Stakeholder Theory, one of the most popular theories of management, has been valued for its descriptive adequacy, instrumental utility, and normative validity (Valentinov & Hajdu, 2021). Stakeholder Theory as a strategic management theory has progressed to include an understanding of how companies address stakeholders, illuminating the implications for performance of the relationship between companies and stakeholders (Dmytriyev et al., 2021). Additionally, the theory places importance on understanding and meeting the unique expectations of different stakeholder groups (Tu et al., 2024). The theory has had an influence on debates surrounding Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), with some researchers seeing Stakeholder Theory and CSR as complementary, while others see them as antithetical (Freeman et al., 2023). Furthermore, CSR has been linked with sustainability practices, which attests to its applicability in the contemporary business environment (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023).

In addition, Stakeholder Theory has been an influential contribution in dealing with the complex problem of stakeholder involvement in organisational decision-making, in efforts to close the issues with value creation (Freeman et al., 2021). Examining issues using a Stakeholder Theory approach enables businesses to better understand the wants and needs of various stakeholder groups. This results in improved and more cohesive decision-making. Institutional Stakeholder Theory (IST) is an extension of Stakeholder Theory that focuses on the role of institutional pressures in shaping corporate behaviour. Institutional stakeholders are entities such as governments, regulatory bodies, industry associations, and professional organisations that influence a company's operations through regulations, norms, and expectations (Risi et al., 2023). Institutional Stakeholder Theory argues that companies are influenced by three types of institutional pressures: coercive, normative, and mimetic. Coercive pressures are created by legislation and regulation; normative pressures by social norms and expectations; and mimetic pressures by doing what successful firms are expected to be doing (Kauppi & Hannibal, 2017). Normative pressure is the term applied to norms, attitudes, and ideas prevalent in a society or an industry, upon which the basis of this type of pressure is built. For an organization to be respectable and socially accountable, it believes it needs to follow some standard. One of the normative pressures for companies is adopting green practices in an effort to reduce their carbon footprints. Regulatory pressure refers to government authorities, legislations, and rules that act as pressure regulators. In an effort not to be fined or penalized by the law, organizations need to adapt to some standards. Financial institutions, for example, are required to comply with consumer protection and money laundering laws (Li et al., 2025). Finally, Cognitive pressure is the result of highly embedded attitudes and assumptions in a particular business or society. Since they are "the right thing to do" or because they are in conformance with the prevailing perceptions, organisations can adopt some practices or behaviour. For example, for technology businesses to remain competitive, there exists a cognitive imperative to innovate constantly. To evolve towards satisfying these imperatives, organisations undergo such processes as institutionalisation, where they assimilate the institutional environment standards, beliefs, and practices into their internal policies and procedures. By doing this, they are able to become legitimised and legitimated in their environments, which subsequently enhances their status and provides them with access to resources for long-term survival (Li et al., 2025).

Legitimacy

Institutional stakeholders are involved in making a decision about whether or not the company's action is legitimate. Institutional stakeholders view companies that act according to institutional standards and expectations as more legitimate and, hence, are likely to support them. There exist three forms of legitimacy. Regulative legitimacy is based on adherence to formal standards, laws, and regulations. By adhering to regulatory authorities' standards and the law, organisations are likely to achieve regulative legitimacy. For example, to both a regulator and society, a company that has obeyed environmental standards accrues regulative legitimacy (Khan et al., 2015). Normative legitimacy connects to obedience to society's values, beliefs, and norms as the basis of normative legitimacy. Organisations attain normative legitimacy by adhering to the prevailing moral, cultural, and ethical norms in society. A company that is inclusive and diverse, for example, is normatively appropriate in most of today's nations. Cognitive legitimacy is a type of sector or industry's collective beliefs and assumptions that form the basis of cognitive legitimacy. Organisations can obtain cognitive legitimacy by establishing policies, procedures, and practices that are in line with the expectations and values of key constituencies. For instance, the reality that electric vehicles are the mobility's future provides power to those companies that manufacture them (Li et al., 2025).

Isomorphism

Institutional Stakeholder Theory identifies that firms will become increasingly homogenised with one another over time as a result of institutional pressures. Isomorphism is how it happens, and can result in industry practice homogenisation (Beckert, 2010). Uncertainty or lack of knowledge about best practices is generally the trigger for mimetic isomorphism, where groups follow the actions of other groups that they consider respectable or successful. An organisation may, for example, embrace a new management fashion merely because other successful organisations practice it (Barreto & Baden-Fuller, 2006). Normative isomorphism occurs when companies adopt some procedures or forms of organisation because they are appropriate or "the norm" within the sector or industry. Such conventions can evolve through society expectations, industry conventions, or professional practice (Lent et al., 2019). For instance, it does not matter even if better practices exist; a legal firm might adopt some specific billing process simply because other legal firms follow the same (Bondy et al., 2012). If third parties can pay or punish an organisation for adopting certain practices or arrangements, then the phenomenon is referred to as coercive isomorphism. The forces may be financing institutions, governmental agencies, or regulatory bodies. To become a grant-making body, for instance, a non-profit organization can have some reporting protocols in place (Carungu et al., 2021).

Corporate Social Responsibility

Wang, Liao, Wu, and Le (2021) aver that CSR activities can indeed benefit a company's reputation, as it indicates that the firm is concerned with social and environmental issues. Citizens are concerned about what impact their consumption patterns have on society and the environment. Consumers perceive companies that undertake CSR positively, and this translates into increased brand loyalty and a favourable image of the firm. Aside from this, CSR can also help an organization build and maintain a good reputation. Organizations can communicate their values and commitment to doing well rather than simply making a profit by openly participating in social and environmental issues. A good reputation for socially being responsible can boost individuals' confidence, such as customers, shareholders, employees, and the public at large. Stakeholders can perceive the same company differently depending on its CSR practice. The workers will be more loyal and remain with a socially responsible firm since they are happy working for it. Investors will regard CSR activities as a measure of good management and long-term survivability, which could translate into socially responsible investment. The individuals in the communities where the business is operating could have a positive image of the company, which could result in closer relations with local stakeholders (Hashim et al., 2022). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) also plays a significant role in building the company's reputation and relationships with stakeholders, and sustaining long-term growth. Some of the following points are the significant areas where CSR has impacted various industries. Those companies that are genuinely involved in CSR activities denote their commitment to ethical business, social, and environmental responsibility, which can improve their reputation as a sound and socially responsible organization (Nicolaides, 2021). Another avenue a company can use to sell its brand in terms of environmental stewardship is by environmental initiatives based on the community. Engaging the youth in environmental sustainability renders them responsible adults. A firm can reinforce its connection with the community and demonstrate that it values the environment by implementing community service programs that are designed to protect the environment. This link not only gives the firm's brand a good image, but it also implies that it is concerned about social responsibility (Sattayapanich et al., 2022). Furthermore, CSR initiatives can build a good image of a company-society relationship that is beneficial to both in the long term. Corporate sustainability strategies can establish community relations and social development (Ardiansyah & Alnoor, 2024).

Brand Image

Brand image is constructed based on customers' experiences and perceptions of the brand. This could be as a result of the advertising of the brand, the quality of the brand, customer service, among other things (Guliyev, 2023). Brand identity refers to the way in which a brand wishes to be perceived, while brand image refers to the way it is perceived by the

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customers. Brand image alignment to brand identity matters in developing a strong and wholesome brand image (Choudhary & Krishna, 2023). Brand image is affected by rational and emotional forces. The emotional forces are brand attitudes, feelings, and beliefs, and the rational forces are product features, quality, and performance (Cowan & Guzman, 2020). Brands may be linked with human qualities and traits, referred to as brand personality. For instance, a brand may be said to be innovative, dependable, or playful depending on the brand personality (Struweg & Wait, 2022). Brand image is also influenced by what people associate with the brand. These can be product attributes, benefits, values, or celebrity endorsements. Brand image is also closely related to brand reputation, i.e., the respect or esteem consumers have for a brand. Positive brand image can support brand reputation and vice versa (Choudhary & Krishna, 2023). Brand image is an important component of brand equity, the worth of a brand. A strong brand image is able to create more brand equity and financial performance (Dada, 2021). Effective brand communication, such as advertising and marketing campaigns, has a significant influence on brand image and the thinking of consumers. Brand image is a rich and complex phenomenon with many variables (Eyada, 2024). Creating and nurturing a good brand image is necessary in order to gain and retain clients, place the brand in relation to competitors, and eventually generate business success (Tubalawony, 2024).

Brand Loyalty

Brand loyalty is a significant branding and marketing theory that helps describe the extent to which customers repeatedly opt for a specific brand over others. Brand loyalty is usually expressed in repeated engagement with the same brand. This means that loyal customers will purchase the same brand numerous times, even if alternatives exist. It is usually prompted by an emotional connection between the customer and the brand. This emotional connection can be established through satisfaction, trust, and brand loyalty. Brand loyalty serves as a means to propel increased customer retention rates. The loyal customers do not easily switch allegiance and shift to the competition. This enables companies to reap a stable customer base and flow of revenues. Besides that, loyal customers are guaranteed to refer the brand to others, making them brand promoters. This word-of-mouth promotion can be very costly to establish in terms of acquiring new consumers and establishing brand reputation (Lei et al., 2025). Brand loyalty can also decrease consumers' price sensitivity. Loyal customers, who are price-insensitive, can be ready to pay more for the products or services of the brand as a result of their high loyalty and perceived value of the brand.

Loyal customers trust the brand because it will deliver on what it promises and meet expectations every time. Brands are able to foster loyalty through customer contact schemes like loyalty schemes, customized communications, and good customer service. Brand loyalty gives a competitive edge by erecting entry barriers for competitors. Loyal customers won't switch sides so easily, even if their competitors have a good offer or have a catchy slogan. Loyalty can be sustained by high switching costs, i.e., effort, time, or money involved in switching to another brand. Once again, this can enhance brand loyalty and retention. Brand loyalty is a business asset, resulting in customer lifetime value being larger, profitability being higher, and competitive advantage being sustainable. Profound comprehension of customers' needs, ongoing value provision, and successful engagement strategies are necessary in order to create and sustain brand loyalty (Agu et al., 2024). Ethical branding cannot fail to be compatible with corporate goodwill, an intellectual property that must be properly controlled by organizations. Shareholders put pressure on companies to deliver financial performance, with stakeholders demanding social responsibility fulfillment. This dual pressure requires an integrated CSR strategy that links ethical conduct with business goals. Through building a corporate culture on the basis of ethical conduct and social responsibility, organizations are able to reinforce their brand equity and develop a positive image in the public eye (Aftab et al., 2024).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This study analysed customers' perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, brand image, and loyalty in South Africa's Retail sector. Specifically, the following were the objectives that guided this study:

1. To analyse customer perception of corporate social responsibility initiatives (social/community service, ethical business, environmental activities, and education).
2. To evaluate customers' perception of brand image.
3. To assess customer perception of brand loyalty.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive research design to analyse customers' perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, brand image, and loyalty in the South African retail sector. Thus, a descriptive research design is a type of research that is employed in recording systematically the features of a population or phenomenon. It provides answers to the "what", "where", "when", and "how" questions through observation and measurement of variables without altering them for the purpose of creating an accurate and complete description and not a cause-and-effect explanation. The target population of this study was customers who patronised retail outlets in KwaZulu-Natal. A simple random sampling approach, which is a form of probability sampling, was employed to select 400 respondents. Thus, simple random sampling ensures that the sample is representative of the entire population and unbiased.

Data was gathered with the help of a self-administered questionnaire containing closed-ended and Likert-scale items. Questionnaire items were crafted to gather information about participants' attitudes, opinions, and practices regarding the study subject. The survey instrument was pilot tested on a convenience sample prior to data collection to check for clarity and to establish any ambiguity with question wording or format. Data reliability was also evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, which is a measure of internal consistency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient value of 0.70 and above was regarded as acceptable. Ethical principles were upheld during the study. Informed consent was sought from all the participants, and confidentiality was ensured to preserve their privacy. Voluntary responses to the study were ensured, and respondents were informed that their responses would be used only for research purposes. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics by means of SPSS. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to give a description of sample characteristics and the pattern of responses.

RESULTS

Demographic characteristics

Table 1 shows the demographic composition of the sampled respondents. The results show that more than half of the respondents were male (51.5%), who were mainly youth consumers aged between 18 and 30 years (74.8%), and the majority identified themselves as Black (79.5%). The largest number of respondents (43%) were Matric qualified, which represents moderately educated consumers.

Table 1. Respondents' socio-demographic profile.

Variables	Frequency (n=400)	Percentage
Gender		
Male	206	51.5
Female	194	48.5
Age		
18 – 30 years	299	74.8
31 – 50 years	97	24.3
51 – 65 years	4	1.1
Race		
Black	318	79.5
Coloured	54	13.5
Indian	22	5.5
Other	6	1.5
Educational qualification		
Matric	172	43
Degree	16	4.0
Honours Degree	45	11.2
Master's Degree	6	1.5
Diploma	60	15.0
Advanced diploma	101	25.3

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Reliability Analysis of Measurement Scales

To ascertain internal reliability and consistency of constructs assessed in this research, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were determined for each variable. A Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.7 guarantees good reliability, in which all items of a construct measure the desired concept homogeneously. The calculated value of Cronbach's alpha for each scale is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Reliability analysis.

Variables	Items	Number of items	Cronbach alpha
Social/ Community Service	SCS1-4	4	0.717
Ethical Business	EB1-EB4	4	0.734
CSR Environmental Activities	EA-EA4	4	0.719
CSR Education	E1-E4	4	0.754
Brand image	BI-B4	4	0.706
Brand loyalty	BL1-BL7	7	0.716

The Social/Community Service (SCS) scale consists of four items (SCS1-SCS4), and Cronbach's alpha was obtained as 0.717, reflecting high internal consistency. This reflects that the items utilized to measure the attitudes of the respondents towards community service activities of the retailer are reliable. Likewise, for the Ethical Business (EB) scale, the perceived ethical standards and business practices of the retailer by the respondent include four items (EB1-EB4) and have a Cronbach's alpha of 0.734. It suggests good reliability, which implies consistency in responding to these items. The CSR Environmental Activities (EA) construct includes four items (EA1-EA4) with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.719. This consistency reflects those perceptions of the respondents towards the retailer's initiatives for environmental sustainability are assessed systematically in all the items. The CSR Education (E) factor, capturing the initiatives taken by the retailer towards educational activities, is composed of four items (E1-E4) and had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.754. This is the best-performing measure of all the constructs, and it exhibits high internal consistency in measuring respondents' perceptions of the retailer's CSR educational activities.

The Brand Image (BI) scale is made up of four items (BI1-BI4) and possesses a Cronbach's alpha of 0.706. Although this is the lowest among the scales, it is, however, above the threshold for reliability that was acceptable, indicating that the items capturing brand image perceptions are consistent internally. Likewise, the Brand Loyalty (BL) scale, which assesses respondents' intent to shop at the retailer in response to the retailer's CSR activities, consists of seven items (BL1-BL7) with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.716. The reliability measure is taken to ensure that items are consistently measuring the intended construct.

Corporate Social Responsibility Dimensions

The CSR was measured with four dimensions, namely social/community service, ethical business, environmental activities, and education.

Social/ Community Service

Figure 1 illustrates the customer responses to the social/community services factor. The results show that an overwhelming majority of the respondents believe that the retailer is committed to charity donation, with 39.3% in agreement and 18.8% strongly agreeing with this assertion. Nevertheless, 30.3% of the respondents were neutral, followed by relatively modest percentages disagreeing (9%) or strongly disagreeing (2.8%). With respect to the CSR activities of the retailer in contributing to society and in benefiting people, 45.5% agreed, and 17% strongly agreed, which shows a very good impression. Yet, 26.3% of them were neutral, 9% disagreed, and 2.3% strongly disagreed.

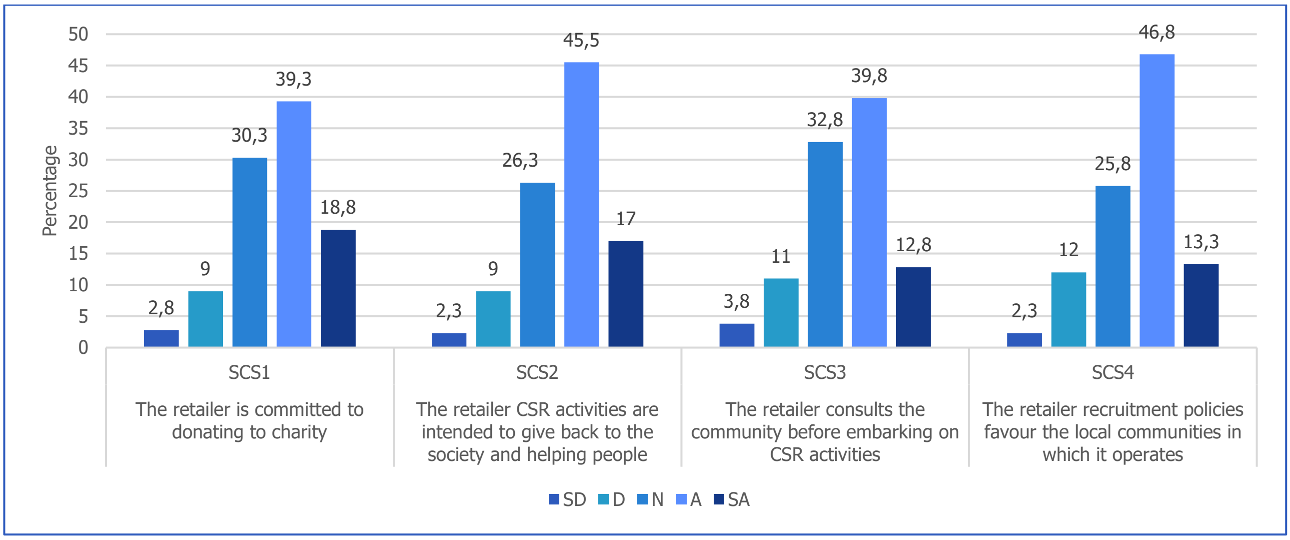

Figure 1. Customers' perception of social/ community service.

On the part of consultation of the community prior to CSR activities, there was more variability of opinion. Although 39.8% and 12.8% agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, a considerable 32.8% were neutral, while a corresponding larger group (11%) disagreed with the statements. Another 3.8% strongly disagreed, with some amount of scepticism towards the retailer's role in the community being included in CSR planning. Finally, in reference to recruitment in local communities' favour, the orientation was positive, with 46.8% agreeing and 13.3% in strong agreement. But 25.8% were neutral, while 12% disagreed and 2.3% strongly disagreed. Overall, the evidence suggests that respondents will be positively inclined towards the CSR practices of the retailer but will also record a high percentage of neutral responses, especially in community consultation and employment policies, which can be a sign of ignorance or ambivalence towards these practices.

Ethical Business

Figure 2 depicts customer responses to ethical business elements. The survey indicates that the majority of the respondents view the retailer as an ethical business. Indeed, 47% and 12.3% agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, with the statement. Nevertheless, 25% were neutral, while 12.8% disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed, thereby raising the possibility that there is a minority of respondents who question the ethical practices of the company. Regarding the role of the retailer against child labour and exploitation, there is a highly positive perception. Nearly half (49.5%) of the respondents agreed that the company does not promote such activities, and 14.2% strongly agreed. At the same time, 26% were neutral, and a few (10%) disagreed and (0.3%) strongly disagreed, which indicates that even though most respondents perceive the retailer as being ethical in this respect, some ambiguity persists.

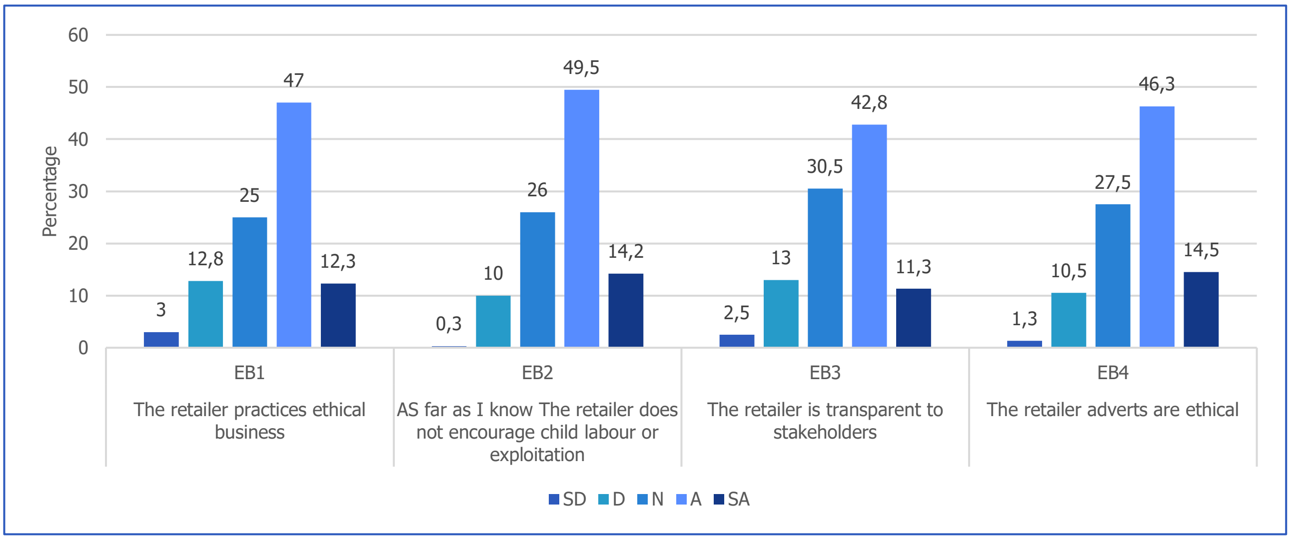

Figure 2. Customer perception of ethical business.

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For transparency to stakeholders, 42.8% agreed that the retailer is open, and 11.3% strongly agreed. Yet, 30.5% were neutral, and together 15.5% (13% disagreed and 2.5% strongly disagreed) questioned, meaning although most individuals feel the company is open, more needs to be done to get better. Finally, the attitude towards the advertising ethics of the retailer was highly affirmative, with 46.3% of the respondents agreeing that the company's ads are ethical and a further 14.5% who agreed strongly. Nevertheless, 27.5% were neutral, and fewer still (10.5% disagreed and 1.3% strongly disagreed) were apprehensive. Overall, the data indicate that although the retail store is widely perceived as an ethical business with honest business practices, there is a significant proportion of respondents who were neutral, especially about transparency and advertising ethics. This could be an indication of a need for additional communication or exposure of the company's moral causes and campaigns.

CSR Environmental Activities

Figure 3 shows the responses to environmental activities. The findings suggest that the retailer is generally perceived as being involved in environmental sustainability efforts. Regarding waste reduction, 45.8% of respondents agreed that the retailer is actively engaged in this area, whilst 9.3% strongly agreed. However, 30.5% of respondents remained neutral, and 14.5% (13% disagreed and 1.5% strongly disagreed) expressed doubts. This suggests that while a significant portion of respondents recognize the retailer's waste reduction initiatives, some remain uncertain or sceptical. When asked about the retailer's involvement in reducing air pollution, 47.8% of respondents agreed, and 12.3% strongly agreed. Though 32% were neutral, there was a minority of 7.5% disagreeing and 0.5% strongly disagreeing. Strong agreement at high levels indicates that there is widespread perception that the retailer is doing something about ending air pollution. 47% of the respondents agreed, and 13% strongly agreed about considering the environmental factor while coming up with new products and promoting them. Still, 26.8% of them were neutral, and in total, 13.3% (10.5% didn't agree and 2.8% strongly didn't agree) were not in agreement. This indicates that though most believe the retailer considers the environment, there are certain respondents who don't know about such endeavours or don't find them fruitful. Last but not least, in terms of eco-friendly packaging, 49.5% said the retailer applies such packaging, and 14.5% strongly agreed. 26.5% were neutral, and a lower percentage (8.8% disagreed and 0.8% strongly disagreed) were worried.

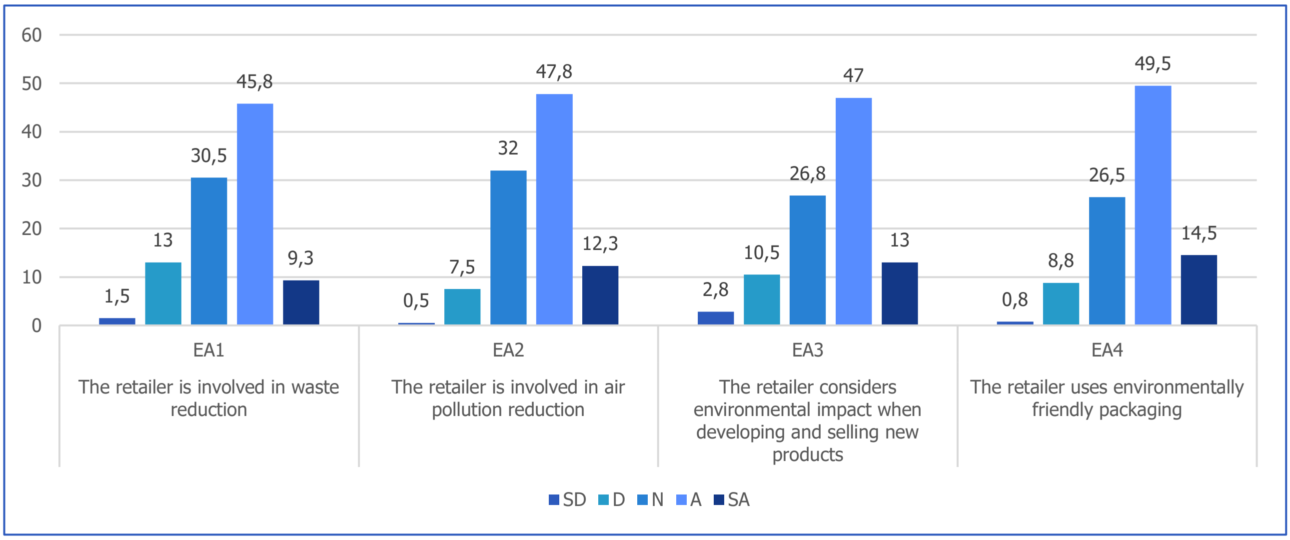

Figure 3. Customer perception of environmental activities.

In conclusion, the research findings indicate that most of the respondents agree that the retailer is concerned with environmental sustainability, specifically reducing air pollution and using environmentally friendly packaging. The neutral feedback, however, indicates perhaps that more awareness or information about the company's green initiatives is necessary.

CSR Education

Figure 4 shows the responses to questions relating to statements involving educational aspects. The findings confirm the retailer's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) message and initiatives strongly. Fifty percent (50%) of the respondents agreed, and 11.5% strongly agreed, that the retailer publicizes its CSR initiatives. Nevertheless, 26.3% were neutral, while a minority group (10.3% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed) was against it. This suggests that while most respondents support increased CSR communication, some may feel indifferent or see no need for additional efforts.

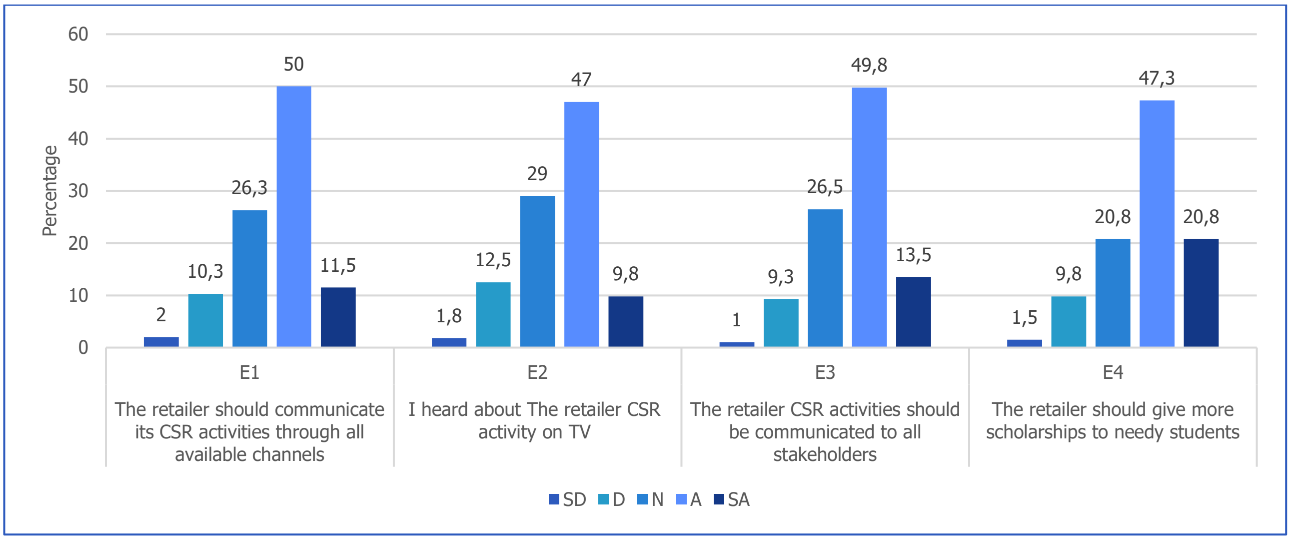

Figure 4. Customers' perception of CSR education.

As far as exposure of the retailer's CSR initiatives via TV is concerned, 47% of the respondents agreed, and 9.8% strongly agreed that they had witnessed the same on television. Nevertheless, 29% were neutral, and 14.3% (12.5% disagreed and 1.8% strongly disagreed) showed that they had not witnessed any CSR efforts via television. This indicates that television has been a successful means of communication for CSR, but more work can be done to reach more people. When queried if the retailer informs stakeholders about its CSR activities, 49.8% agreed, and 13.5% strongly agreed, also indicating that wider communication is needed. A quarter of the respondents (26.5%) were neutral, and only a minority (9.3% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed) did not see any need to reach out further. This shows that there is overall agreement among the majority of the respondents in terms of valuing offering information to all stakeholders about CSR initiatives. Finally, when it comes to giving scholarships to deserving students, 47.3% and 20.8% respectively agreed and strongly agreed that the retailer provide scholarship opportunities. While just 20.8% were neutral, a minority of 9.8% disagreed, and 1.5% strongly disagreed with the notion. The huge majority indicates a strong expectation of the company to spend more on education.

In general, the evidence indicates that most of the respondents share the opinion that the retailer needs to improve the visibility of its CSR activities, especially through diverse communication channels, and continue to sponsor educational programs like scholarships. Even though television has been a medium of CSR awareness that has been shared by most, further communication might be needed in order to reach even more individuals effectively.

Composite for the Corporate Social Responsibility dimension

Table 3 indicates consumers' attitudes towards the retailer's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives.

Table 3. Consumer perceptions of the retailer's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities.

Dimensions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Df	P value	Cohen's d
Social/ Community Service	400	3.58	.70	101.548	399	<.001	.70
Ethical Business	400	3.57	.68	104.710	399	<.001	.68
CSR Environmental Activities	400	3.59	.64	111.591	399	<.001	.64
CSR Education	400	3.63	.68	106.420	399	<.001	.68

The findings indicate that the attitude of consumers toward the retailer's participation in social and community service activities is positive, with a mean value of 3.58. The value of the standard deviation, 0.70, indicates moderate variability of responses. The t-test statistic ($t = 101.548$) and extremely significant p-value (<0.001) are conclusive statistical evidence of consumer perceptions very much different than a neutral value. A Cohen's $d = 0.70$ indicates that the effect size is moderate to large, which implies a significant impact of this CSR attribute on consumer attitudes. The same degree of endorsement was accorded to the ethical business commitment of the store, since its mean value of 3.57 also indicated.

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Its standard deviation of 0.68 indicates quite a homogeneous response. The extremely high t-value of 104.710 and highly significant p-value (<0.001) confirm that the respondents highly acknowledge and appreciate the ethical business practices of the company. The Cohen's d value of 0.68 reflects a large to moderate impact and reveals that business ethics have a significant impact on how people perceive things. The effort of the retailer to reduce the environmental footprint was ranked the highest at 3.59. The standard deviation of 0.64 reflects relatively low variability of response in comparison with other dimensions. A very high and important t-value of 111.591 and a p-value of <0.001 confirm the statistically significant positive attitude. The effect size, in terms of Cohen's d, is 0.64, meaning there is a moderate effect size and environmental initiatives are highly considered, but there is still scope for improvement. The most highly rated CSR dimension was education-related CSR activities of the retailer, with a mean rating of 3.63. This indicates that customers perceive and emphasize the educational contributions of the company. The 0.68 standard deviation indicates a medium range of responses. The t-value (106.420) and p-value (<0.001) indicate a very strong positive perception, and the Cohen's d of 0.68 indicates a medium to large effect size.

Brand Image

Figure 5 shows the responses to the statement used to measure brand image. The findings reveal an overall positive image of the retailer's social initiatives, brand integrity, and product quality among respondents. The majority of respondents (49.5% agreed and 17.8% strongly agreed) demonstrated awareness of the retailer's social and sustainable initiatives. Nevertheless, 24% were neutral, while a few (7.5% disagreed and 1.3% strongly disagreed) had no idea about these activities. This means that although the efforts of the company towards sustainability are highly acclaimed, there is always room for improvement in communication to be able to reach the uninformed and indifferent.

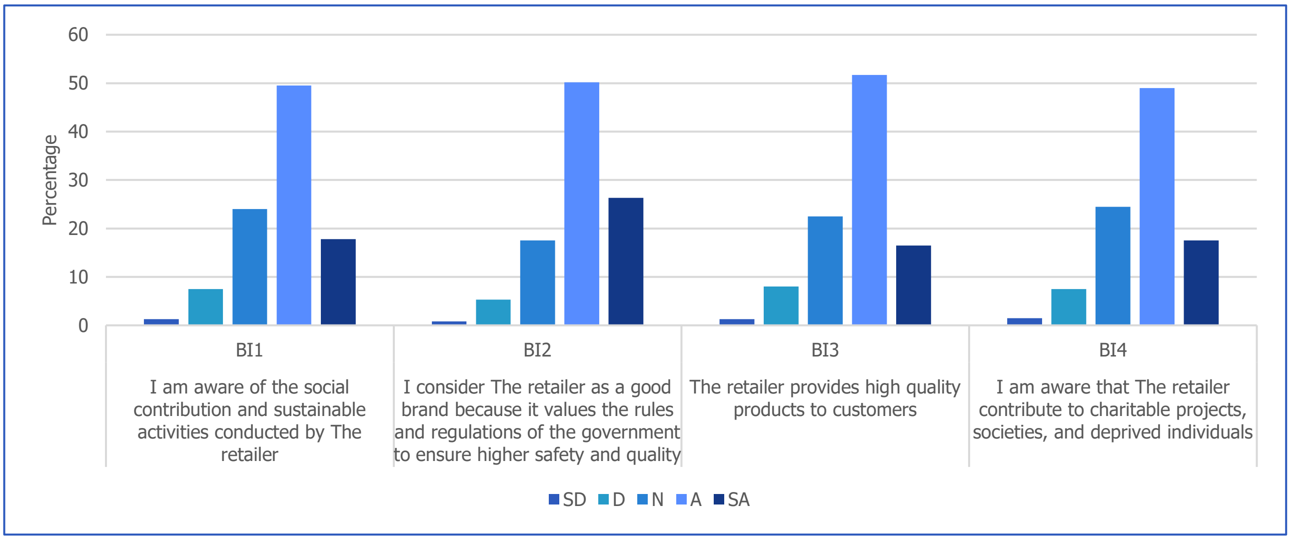

Figure 5. Customers' perception of brand image.

In terms of compliance of the retailer with government regulations in terms of safety and quality, 50.2% of customers agreed, and 26.3% strongly agreed that the brand values compliance. As few as 17.5% were neutral, and only a minuscule percentage (5.3% disagreed and 0.8% strongly disagreed) otherwise. This shows a high confidence that the retailer is doing business in a responsible manner under regulatory frameworks, continuing to hold its position as a responsible brand. Product quality was a category in which the retailer lost some positive sentiments. The highest number of respondents (51.7% agreed and 16.5% strongly agreed) believed that the retailer sells quality products. But 22.5% were neutral, 8% disagreed, and 1.3% strongly disagreed that it is true. From these findings, there is a strong positive reputation founded on quality, but there is still scope for more to be built in consumer trust. On charitable donations, 49% of the respondents agreed, and 17.5% strongly agreed that the store offers help to charities, societies, and poor individuals. In addition, 24.5% indicated they were neutral, which implies some uncertainty, while 7.5% disagreed and 1.5% strongly disagreed. This implies that although many customers acknowledge the retailer's philanthropy, increased visibility on these efforts can aid in solidifying the firm's position in social responsibility.

Overall, the research reveals that the retailer is being viewed as a responsible brand towards sustainability, compliance, quality, and social contribution by consumers. There is scope to make the consumers even more sensitive to its efforts,

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DISCUSSION

This research analysed customers' perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, brand image, and loyalty within the South African retail industry. The findings of this study showed customers had varied perceptions across the dimensions of CSR, brand image, and brand loyalty.

Firstly, the study analysed customer perception of social/community service. The results indicate that while participants in general have a positive attitude towards the retailer's CSR initiatives, there is a high rate of neutral answers, especially concerning employment policy and community consultation, which may reflect uncertainty or unfamiliarity regarding such practices. The reality is that people in most community's view supermarkets as both local and daily enterprises. They are common places where people meet and talk, and a wide range of community members attend. Consequently, several entities should engage the local community in their CSR initiatives (Lee et al., 2021).

A new study by the Food Ethics Council (2021) observed that supermarkets should put money into developing the capacity of local communities, especially when it comes to helping people find jobs or other non-food ventures.

Further analysis on the ethical practices of the retailer shows that although the retailer is predominantly perceived as an ethical entity with responsible business procedures, a significant proportion of respondents remain indifferent or sceptical, especially concerning transparency and advertising ethics.

Pavić (2024) believes that even though it is still difficult to make transparency encompass how customers consume and impact the environment, retailers can establish trust and faith by conducting business through ethical channels of sourcing. Since people get to know what they purchase, efforts to become transparent will become essential in making the retail sector sustainable, as well as towards changing for the better. There are many things that affect how ethical consumers act in stores, from their traits to the circumstances they are in. Retailers aiming to align their processes with customer preferences and values must understand these influencing factors.

With respect to environmental activities, the majority of the customers consider the retailer as being devoted to environmental sustainability, notably in air pollution reduction and ecologically friendly packaging. To ensure the switch to a green retail company, there is a need to meet the customers' needs and the reasons they choose green packaging. Currently, consumers make purchases based on numerous factors, among which are how they think the packaging can affect the environment. It has been shown that people do care about practices that contribute to environmental protection (Simanjuntak et al., 2023). Data analysis on CSR education shows that the majority of the customers intimate that the retailer should make their CSR operations more visible, especially through more than one communication channel, and provide more money to educational programmes like scholarships. According to Prabhu and Aithal (2023), CSR should be planned with certain types of customers or areas in mind. For example, a retailer may grant money to students who deserve it or start programs to teach people in certain regions about financial management. These tailored programs create a positive relationship between the retailer and the targeted consumer group, which increases the chances of getting new clients from that group.

Further analysis was also conducted to gauge the effectiveness of the CSR dimensions to determine if the customers perceive their importance and relevance. The findings suggest that there are favourable customer attitudes towards the retailer's CSR initiatives in the four dimensions because the mean values are higher than 3.5. Statistical tests confirm that these attitudes are significantly divergent from zero, and effect sizes (values of Cohen's d) reveal that CSR initiatives in social services, ethical business, environment, and education significantly shape consumers' attitudes. Amongst these, CSR in education received the highest mean score, while environmental sustainability initiatives had the lowest variability, indicating a more consistent consumer perception. In today's business world, where retailers are judged not just on how much money they make but also on how they affect society and the environment, it's important for employees to focus on professional development that includes CSR. It is important to make sure that the company's beliefs and business goals match the social and community goals. It is imperative to include concepts like ethics, fairness, and social impact in employee training through CSR programs. It is also important to train employees in change management and leadership skills so that the whole company can be aligned towards these goals (Aivaz et al., 2024).

Lastly, further analysis on brand loyalty and image was performed to ascertain customer perception. The findings show that the majority of the respondents had a positive perception of the impact of different initiatives on brand loyalty and brand image. Flores-Hernández et al. (2021) assert that CSR policies may enhance brand image, which, as a significant intangible asset, may bolster customers' decision-making processes and their contentment with the purchased product or service. If firms can create this virtuous loop, they may expect excellent behaviour that isn't transactional but very valuable. Most people think "good firms" (those that are socially responsible) will get customers to buy their products, while "bad companies" (those that don't care about their social responsibilities or lie in their reports) will be punished by customers, such as by boycotts (Dal Mas et al., 2022).

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined consumers' attitudes towards corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, brand image, and loyalty in the South African retail sector. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a necessity among organizations that desire to establish their reputation and have individuals be loyal to their brand. Retail businesses that donate money to schools, hospitals, or social welfare schemes in their surrounding areas can establish a good reputation as responsible business citizens. Moreover, community-based CSR initiatives give people a sense of belongingness and emotionally engage them with the company. Fulfilling social obligations of their staff implies concern and a sense of responsibility of a business towards the welfare of society. Strategic alignment of the firm's CSR initiatives with community requirements strengthens its brand image. Consumers can see for themselves how the company is really making a difference in communities. Additionally, education-focused CSR efforts are also a key driver of brand loyalty. Organizations offering scholarships, sponsoring education programs, or associated with schools convey care about long-term social growth. Therefore, CSR efforts aimed at learning can also lead to brand loyalty due to perceived learning and enhancement on the part of the consumers. Thus, customers would be willing to spend and be faithful to businesses that care for their well-being.

The other significant CSR area is environmental sustainability, which has an impact on the reputation and brand loyalty of a company. As people become more aware of the environment, they are more careful about what they buy and where they shop. Businesses that show they care about the environment, like by cutting down on carbon emissions, using renewable energy, and cutting down on waste, enhance their brand image. Customers are more inclined to give their support to companies that have initiatives aimed at protecting the environment. Nowadays, customers are starting to see this dedication to sustainability as a sign of creativity and forward thinking, which are positive for a company's brand. Therefore, adding CSR to a company's programmes is not just the right thing to do; it is also a useful strategic tool.

This study's results suggest that companies that engage in activities like ethical business practices, community service, education, and protecting the environment through CSR may set themselves apart from their competitors based on their market positioning. These firms may boost brand loyalty, improve their brand image, and gain a long-term competitive edge in the market by aligning their brand values with what socially conscious consumers want. Despite the comprehensive findings, the study has some limitations. For instance, the sample size was small, so the results cannot be generalized to the entire population.

In addition, this study was confined to a particular player in the South African retail market, so the findings cannot be generalised beyond their current scope. Future studies should consider a comparative analysis of several players in the retail sector and also use a qualitative analysis to gauge customer experiences.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have contributed equally.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Мсоса С. К., Млаба А.

СПРИЙНЯТТЯ КЛІЄНТАМИ ІНІЦІАТИВ КОРПОРАТИВНОЇ СОЦІАЛЬНОЇ ВІДПОВІДАЛЬНОСТІ (КСО), ІМІДЖ БРЕНДУ ТА ЛОЯЛЬНІСТЬ У СЕКТОРІ РОЗДРІБНОЇ ТОРГІВЛІ ПІВДЕННОЇ АФРИКИ

Корпоративна соціальна відповідальність (КСВ) стає дедалі помітнішою, оскільки компанії усвідомлюють, наскільки важливо захищати довкілля та суспільство. КСВ охоплює широкий спектр діяльності, включаючи філантропію, зусилля з екологічної сталості, етичні практики та залучення громади. Ці дії зумовлені не лише етичними міркуваннями, а й метою підвищення корпоративної репутації та сприяння лояльності клієнтів. У цьому дослідженні була

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використана теорія стейкхолдерів (ST) для аналізу сприйняття клієнтами ініціатив царині КСВ, іміджу бренду та лояльності в секторі роздрібної торгівлі Південної Африки. Для збирання даних за допомогою самоадміністрованого опитування було використано кількісний описовий і крос-секційний дослідницький дизайн. Крім того, для відбору 400 респондентів для участі в дослідженні було використано простий підхід випадкової вибірки. Дані аналізували за допомогою описової статистики за допомогою Статистичного пакета для соціальних наук (SPSS). Результати демонструють високий рівень згоди щодо ефективності ініціатив у царині КСВ, іміджу бренду та лояльності. Це дослідження зробило внесок у літературу про ініціативи в царині КСВ, імідж бренду та лояльність у роздрібному секторі Південної Африки. Крім того, дослідження може стати відправною точкою для розробки та зміни політик, щоб вони були екологічно й суспільно дружніми.

Ключові слова: імідж бренду, лояльність до бренду, спільнота, освіта, довкілля, зацікавлені сторони, сталий розвиток

JEL Класифікація: M14, M31