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**CONSUMERS' TRUST IN CORPORATE SOCIAL
RESPONSIBILITY COMMUNICATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH BRAND EQUITY IN THE FAST
FASHION INDUSTRY**

Master's thesis

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I hereby declare that I have compiled the thesis independently and all works, important standpoints and data by other authors have been properly referenced and the same paper has not been previously presented for grading.

The document length is 17836 words from the introduction to the end of the conclusion.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a pivotal element for organisations, as stakeholders are demanding accountability from businesses. Consequently, CSR is being fully integrated into strategic management and corporate governance. While trust is known to mediate the impact of CSR on brand equity, there is a lack of understanding regarding the relationship between consumer trust in CSR communication through social media (CSR-S) and brand equity within the fast fashion industry. This is a relevant aspect particularly in the fast fashion industry considering the potential for increased scepticism due to the industry's unsustainable reputation. This research seeks to address this gap.

This research aims to identify dimensions that can shape consumers' trust in CSR-S, investigate whether consumers trust fast fashion brands' CSR-S overall, and demonstrate if there is a relationship between this trust and brand equity. In this research a quantitative research method is utilized, employing a survey to collect data from young adults residing in Finland and Estonia. The objective is to scrutinize the level of consumer trust in CSR-S and to assess how this trust influences the fast fashion brands' equity.

The findings reveal a positive link between consumer trust in CSR-S and brand equity in the fast fashion industry. Furthermore, the study outlines four key dimensions that influence consumer trust: ability, benevolence, integrity, and problem-solving orientation. Integrity and benevolence emerge as the most significant factors impacting consumers' trust in CSR-S. The research also points out that consumers' trust in CSR-S is in general relatively low in the fast fashion industry.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, brand equity, social media, consumer trust, fast fashion

INTRODUCTION

During the twenty-first century corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a global phenomenon and a pivotal element for every organisation. Different stakeholders, such as governments, consumers, and the media are more intensely demanding organisations to take responsibility for their actions. (Porter & Kramer, 2009; Carroll, 2008) Consequently, CSR is being fully integrated into strategic management and corporate governance. Moreover, organisations have realised that, in addition to incorporating CSR initiatives into their actions, it is equally important to communicate these initiatives effectively to their audiences (Tata & Prasad, 2014).

As technology has evolved, the dissemination of CSR communications has significantly expanded into digital platforms, particularly social media. In the current digital landscape, social media is an important and trustworthy platform for communicating CSR initiatives (Lee & Chung, 2023; Ali, Jimenez-Zarco & Bicho, 2015) The role of social media in CSR communication is significant (Yang & Basile, 2023) and the use of social media has been continuously increasing. In October 2023, there were 4.95 billion social media users worldwide, and the number is estimated to grow to approximately 6 billion in 2027 (Statista, 2023). Previous research has shown that CSR communication through social media (CSR-S) has a positive influence on consumers' loyalty, via admiration (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021; Gupta *et al.*, 2021). Further, transparent communication of CSR initiatives on social media can lead to enhanced attitudes towards the organisation and hereby influence consumers' purchase intentions (Lee & Chung, 2023).

Nevertheless, consumers are becoming progressively aware of the discrepancies between an organisation's stated social responsibility practices and the actual practices (Mickelsson *et al.*, 2022). As a result, consumers are becoming sceptical of CSR activities and the communication of these activities. Hence, trust conveys a significant role in CSR communication, and CSR activities should be implemented carefully to avoid scepticism. (Fatma *et al.*, 2015; Kraft *et al.*, 2019) A survey conducted by the Center for Business in Society showed that a vast majority of respondents believe that 70% of CSR initiatives are solely cosmetic programs to support corporate reputation

(Vaccaro, 2016). A key challenge for businesses in CSR communication is generating favourable CSR attributions and reducing stakeholder scepticism (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010).

Previous studies have highlighted trust as a pivotal factor that governs how CSR impacts factors such as brand equity, and corporate reputation (Fatma *et al.*, 2015; Zhao *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, when building consumer-brand relationships and communicating CSR initiatives, trust is a significant aspect for organisations to consider. Furthermore, different studies have indicated that brand equity positively influences factors such as consumer purchase intentions (Cobb-Walgreen *et al.*, 1995), market share (Agarwal & Rao, 1996, as cited in Zarantello *et al.*, 2020), and consumer evaluations of brand extensions (Aaker, 1991). Consequently, brand equity holds significant importance for every organisation and is one of the most popular concepts in marketing (Zarantello *et al.*, 2020). Nevertheless, the relationship between trust in CSR-S and brand equity remains unidentified. Examining this realm is highly pertinent, considering the increasing importance of social media as a platform for CSR communication, the pivotal role of trust in effective CSR communication, and the significance of brand equity for an organisation's performance.

This study focuses solely on the fast fashion industry, as the sector has been subject to extensive inspection of its economic, environmental, and overall social impact. Subsequently, fast fashion brands have begun to make changes to their processes to meet stakeholder demands regarding environmental and social sustainability. Nonetheless, these efforts have led to multiple greenwashing scandals, as the stated efforts have been untruthful or misleading. Mention, the global fast fashion brand H&M with its collection H&M Conscious. (Adamkiewicz *et al.*, 2022; Alexa *et al.*, 2021) These scandals may have led to increased scepticism among consumers within the fast fashion industry. Therefore, researching consumers' trust in CSR communication in this particular field is relevant. Furthermore, research on consumers' trust in CSR communication in the fashion industry is currently limited.

Despite trust being known to mediate the impact of CSR on brand equity, there is a lack of understanding regarding the relationship between consumer trust in CSR communication through social media (CSR-S) and brand equity within the fast fashion industry. This is a relevant aspect particularly in the fast fashion industry considering the potential for increased scepticism due to the industry's unsustainable reputation. This research seeks to address this gap.

The problem this research addresses is the gap in understanding how consumers' trust in CSR-S shapes the brand equity of fast fashion labels and what factors may shape this trust. The research aim is to identify dimensions that can shape consumers' trust in CSR-S, investigate whether consumers trust fast fashion brands' CSR-S overall, and demonstrate if there is a relationship between this trust and brand equity. The research questions this study aims to answer are:

RQ1: What is the relationship between trust in CSR communication on social media and brand equity within the fast fashion industry?

RQ2: What dimensions can shape consumers' trust in CSR communication on social media?

RQ3: To what extent do consumers trust the CSR communication of fast fashion brands on social media?

This study encourages brand managers within the fast fashion industry towards more ethical engagement and highlights the role of trust in sustainable business practices. It enables organisations to uncover new insights into customers' preferences, and attitudes. It delves into consumers' cognitive responses to CSR-S, which can help organisations deepen their understanding of the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of CSR-S. It aids organisations to better understand how consumers perceive CSR-S, and how it may affect their brand equity. Hence, this research offers valuable insights to improve an organisation's overall performance. Furthermore, this study contributes to the existing literature in the fields of the fast fashion industry and CSR-S.

In this research, a quantitative research method is used. The research employs a questionnaire method to collect data from young adults, specifically those in between 18 and 34 years old, residing in Finland and Estonia. The objective is to scrutinize the level of consumer trust in CSR-S and to assess how this trust influences the fast fashion brands' equity. Data analysis is conducted in SPSS. This research begins with a literature review, where relevant studies and theoretical models are presented. This is followed by a methodology section that outlines the sampling methods, and data collection techniques used. In the results and discussion section, the research findings are presented. Lastly, findings are interpreted and summarized in the conclusion.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews previous literature related to the concepts of this study. Hence, it includes literature related to CSR, CSR communication, and CSR-S. Furthermore, it includes literature related to consumer trust in CSR, brand equity, and the fast fashion industry. The chapter concludes with a theoretical framework established from the findings of the literature review.

1.1. Corporate social responsibility (CSR)

The concept of modern CSR dates back to the 1950s. The concept has numerous different definitions, and during the early period, it has also been referred to as social responsibility (SR) solely. Initially, the CSR concept was focused on the employees' well-being, but over the years it has expanded to include all stakeholder categories. Nowadays CSR is inevitable for organisation's long-term success, and organisations need to be prepared to evolve business models for sustainable development. However, there is still no common consciousness on the definition of the concept. (Carroll, 2018; Ferioli *et al.*, 2021)

Among the first researchers to define the concept of modern social responsibility was Howard R. Bowen. He defined the concept in his book: "It (SR) refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society" (Bowen, 1953, as cited in Carroll, 2018). Bowen has been seen as the founding father of CSR and a visionary in the field. A more recently developed and broadly used definition was constructed by the European Commission. According to this definition, CSR refers to: "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis" (Commission of the European Communities, 2001). The general idea of the concept is that contemporary companies should expand their responsibilities beyond just their shareholders to encompass a larger societal impact. Different stakeholders, such as consumers, employees, local

communities, governments, and the environment should be more significantly accounted for in business considerations. (Paetzold, 2010, p.3)

Four well-known authors, Friedman, Elkington, Carroll, and Buchholtz all have very different perceptions of what CSR stands for. Friedman (1962) views CSR solely as a tool to increase an organisation's profit. In his opinion, environmental and social initiatives should only be governments and communities' problem to deal with. Elkington (1997) views CSR as a three-folded aspect encompassing of economic, ecological, and social value. His model is often referred to as the triple bottom line. Carroll and Buchholtz (2003) expanded the three-folded perceptive into a four-folded aspect encompassing of economic, ethical, legal, and philanthropic responsibilities. (Friedman, 1962; Elkington, 1997; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2003; Paetzold, 2010, p.7)

Perhaps the most widely known construct of CSR is Carroll's four-part definitional framework for CSR (Carroll, 2016). Carroll's definition states: "Corporate social responsibility encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (philanthropic) expectations that society has of organisations at a given point in time" (Carroll, 1979, 1991, as cited in Carroll, 2016). These dimensions create a framework for businesses to operate responsibly within society (Carroll, 2016). Figure 1. represents the CSR pyramid constructed by Carroll.

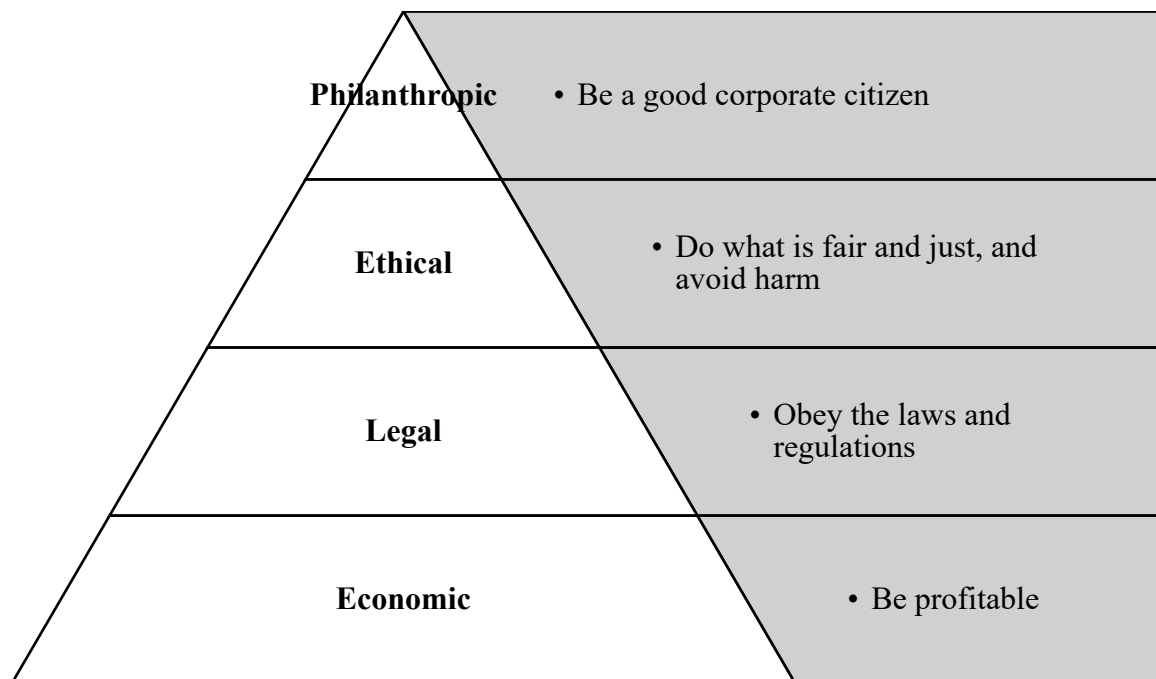


Figure 1. Representation of Carroll's CSR pyramid
Source: Carroll (1991, 42)

According to Carroll's theory, economic responsibility is a fundamental requirement for any organisation. The society requires businesses to be profitable to sustain themselves. Businesses provide goods and services to societies, which are necessary for them to function and are desired by the citizens. However, society has constituted minimal rules and regulations for businesses, and it is obligatory for every business to operate within these rules and regulations. These rules and regulations create the legal framework for the organisation's functions. (Carroll, 2016)

Nonetheless, according to Carroll, obeying solely the legal obligations is not enough. Societies expect businesses to operate ethically. This involves behaving in a way that aligns with the commonly accepted standards of society's expectations and ethical principles. Moreover, acknowledging and honoring emerging or changing ethical norms that are adopted by society. Carroll's theory emphasizes especially the significance of ethical responsibilities that businesses have for society and stakeholders. Lastly, Carroll's theory involves corporate philanthropic responsibilities (all forms of giving), which are desired by society. These include voluntary initiatives to provide good. (Carroll, 1979, 1991, as cited in Carroll, 2016)

During the past years, there has been a growing interest in researching corporate social responsibility. There were 34 articles published involving the phrase "corporate social responsibility" in the Journal of Management Communication Quarterly during the period from 2011 to 2015 (Ji *et al.*, 2022). In contrast, during the period from 1980 to 2000, there were only four articles published. This enormous amount of research has revealed the strategic values of CSR. (Ji *et al.*, 2022) To mention, CSR efforts can lead to enhanced brand perception (Khan & Fatma, 2023) and brand equity (Singh *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, perceived CSR can have a positive impact on customer attitudes and retention (Van Doorn *et al.*, 2017). Studies have also indicated that there is a strong correlation between CSR and brand image (Khan & Fatma, 2023). These factors can thereafter influence positively consumers' purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth (Wang *et al.*, 2021; Khan & Fatma, 2023).

As a result, organisations have started to see CSR as a strong tool to improve their company image and revenues. The primary reason for companies to invest in CSR is the desire for it to pay off in the future. Moreover, commitment to CSR can impact employee satisfaction, which can increase productivity. The financial motivation behind CSR initiatives is significant. Friedman (1962) has even suggested that the focus should be only on satisfying the company's shareholders and on the

other financial aspects. Although most of the contemporary companies have distanced themselves from this ideology, the financial motivation behind CSR is inevitable. (Paetzold, 2010, p. 8-10)

During the 21st century, organisations have started to move towards ‘positive purpose’, ‘business-for-purpose’, and ‘purpose-driven business’ concepts. Moreover, the mindset of ‘be the change’ is currently dominant in Western societies. These concepts are somewhat complementary terms with CSR. These concepts encompass authentic contributions to making a positive change in the environment and our societies. The aim is to create a so-called win-win situation for all stakeholders involved. This involves benefits for both the organisation and societies. Therefore, the focus is not solely on the company’s profits. One way for organisations to move towards this has been the adoption of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals were first introduced in 2015 and after that, there has been a flood of SDG-related material into company communication, especially in the Western countries. (Munro, 2020, p. 36-41)

Climate change, child labour, and social responsibility behaviour towards the environment are factors that consumers take into consideration when making purchase decisions. As of today, social responsibility can be seen as an equally important aspect as the price and quality when choosing a product or service. In 2008 Harvard research team experimented to measure the impact of a company’s social responsibility on purchase decisions. The experiment revealed that consumers preferred to purchase products with fair labour labels even when the price was ten percent higher compared to the unlabelled similar products. This verified the assumption that consumers are more willing to purchase products from socially responsible companies. (Paetzold, 2010, p. 52-54)

It has been recognized that the strategic benefits of CSR are dependent on creating stakeholder awareness and managing stakeholder attributions toward CSR activities. Therefore, business managers must understand the different aspects of communicating CSR activities effectively. (Testarmata, 2018; Du & Bhattacharya, 2010) These aspects and CSR communication will be discussed in detail in the next sub-chapter below.

1.1.1. Corporate social responsibility communication

Growing public consciousness regarding social, environmental, and humanitarian concerns has enormously increased stakeholder demands for CSR practices. Furthermore, businesses are anticipated to communicate these initiatives to various stakeholders. (Testarmata, 2018; Yang, *et al.*, 2023; Wang, *et al.*, 2021). Stakeholders are demanding transparency in CSR practices, and therefore CSR communication has become progressively important for organisations. To be considered responsible and trustworthy organisations need to communicate their CSR initiatives successfully to their audiences. (Lee & Chung, 2023) Further, to attain the strategic benefits from CSR activities, stakeholders need to be aware of the CSR initiatives. Thus, if an organisation fails to communicate its CSR initiatives, it might not attain important strategic benefits from CSR. (Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

CSR communication is defined by Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen (2018) as “a communicative practice, which corporations undertake to integrate social, environmental, ethical, human rights and consumer concerns into their business operations and core strategy in close collaboration with their stakeholders”. According to a Cone research study (2007), 87 % of American consumers are likely to switch from one brand to another (price and quality being equal) if the other brand is associated with a good cause. In contrast, 85 % of respondents in the survey will consider switching to another company’s product or service due to the company’s negative corporate responsibility practices. Moreover, 66 % will boycott such a company’s products or services. (Cone, 2007, as cited in Du & Bhattacharya, 2010) Therefore, CSR communication is a crucial factor in building long-lasting relationships with customers.

According to Kim & Ferguson (2018), dimensions that can contribute to effective CSR communication are informativeness, third-party endorsement, personal relevance, consistency, self-efficacy, self-promotional message tone, and transparency. These dimensions are expected by consumers and should be acknowledged by businesses. One of the basic factors of CSR communication is to inform stakeholders and the public about the company’s social responsibility practices. Informativeness is defined by Kim & Ferguson (2018) as information that should be communicated regarding a company’s CSR efforts by the company. It involves communication on CSR commitment, impact, motives, and fit. (Kim & Ferguson, 2018)

Third-party endorsement refers to having credible third parties who endorse the company's CSR messages. It is important because third-party endorsement can lower consumer scepticism and enhance the credibility of CSR communication. Moreover, to increase public acceptance of CSR communication, integrating communication messages that are connected to stakeholders' personal lives and interests is crucial. This is referred to as a personal reference in Kim & Ferguson's (2018) study. Further, self-efficacy refers to providing people with the opportunity to participate in CSR or influence the results of the CSR, which can also be an important factor in the success of CSR communication. According to Kim & Ferguson (2018), a self-promotional message tone can negatively influence consumer perceptions of CSR due to increased skepticism. Therefore, a self-promotional message tone should be avoided in CSR communication. Consistency in this model refers to how steadily the company communicates about its CSR goals. (Kim & Ferguson, 2018)

According to Kim & Ferguson (2018), frequency has some advantages and disadvantages in CSR communication. Frequency can increase awareness among stakeholders, but it can also increase scepticism. In particular, companies should be careful when using a lot of money on CSR promotion as it might lead to negative perceptions among stakeholders even if it would increase awareness. In this model, transparency refers to communicating openly regarding whether the matter is considered as good or bad. Transparency is an important factor in effective CSR communication as it might lead to increased trust in the company. Increased trust can thereafter reduce scepticism among consumers. All these above-mentioned factors determined by Kim & Ferguson (2018) can impact the success or failure of CSR communication. (Kim & Ferguson, 2018)

Another study that focused on CSR communication was conducted by Du & Bhattacharya (2010). According to Du & Bhattacharya, a key challenge for businesses in CSR communication is generating favourable CSR attributions and reducing stakeholder scepticism. To gain a deeper understanding of CSR communication requirements, Du & Bhattacharya (2010) created a framework for CSR communication. The framework is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Representation of Du & Bhattacharya's (2010) framework of CSR communication

CSR communication	Contingency factors	Communication outcomes
<p><i>Message content:</i> <u>Issue:</u> Importance <u>Initiative:</u> Commitment, Impact, Motives, Fit</p>	<p><i>Stakeholder Characteristics:</i> Stakeholder Types Issue Support Social Value Orientation</p>	<p><i>Internal Outcomes:</i> Awareness Attribution Attitudes, Identification Trust</p>
<p><i>Message Channel:</i> <u>Corporate:</u> CSR Report, Corporate Website, PR, Advertising, Point of Purchase <u>Independent:</u> Media Coverage, Word-of-Mouth</p>	<p><i>Company Characteristics:</i> Reputation Industry Marketing Strategies</p>	<p><i>External Outcomes:</i> <u>Consumers:</u> Purchase, loyalty, advocacy <u>Employees:</u> Productivity, Loyalty, Citizenship Behavior, Advocacy <u>Investors:</u> Loyalty, Amount of Invested Capital</p>

Source: Du & Bhattacharya (2010, 11)

CSR communication consists of message content and message channels. Message content refers to factors a company can emphasize in its CSR communication. To mention, it can be a commitment to an initiative or a reason to participate in a specific social initiative. There are multiple different channels through which an organisation can communicate its CSR initiatives. These channels are divided into corporate and independent channels. Corporate channels are controlled by the organisation, whereas independent channels are external communicators of CSR (e.g., media, customers, forums/blogs). Communication through corporate channels arises often more scepticism among consumers and is considered less credible than non-corporate communication through independent channels. (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010)

The contingency factors that can influence the effectiveness of CSR communication are company-specific- and stakeholder-specific characteristics. A poor company reputation can impact the outcome of CSR communication negatively, whereas a good reputation can benefit the CSR communication outcomes. Moreover, if the industry in which an organisation operates is perceived as suspicious, CSR communication can be perceived more negatively. Lastly, marketing strategy, which is referred to as CSR positioning by Du & Bhattacharya (2010) can impact the outcomes of CSR communication. To mention, if a company is positioned as sustainable, CSR communication will be perceived as more authentic. (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010)

The stakeholder characteristics that can impact CSR communication outcomes are stakeholder type, issue support, and social value orientation. Stakeholders differ in terms of their expectations

of the business. Therefore, it is important to bear in mind what the unique characteristics of potential audiences are. Moreover, stakeholders' motivation to process and support CSR information influences the CSR communication outcomes. This is referred to as the issue support factor. It is important to know what type of social issues stakeholders support and what social issues stakeholders perceive as the most important before launching a marketing campaign. Additionally, social value orientation, which refers to an individual's values, impacts how communication is perceived. The last part of the framework consists of communication outcomes, which are divided into internal and external outcomes. (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010)

To conclude, CSR communication is a complex phenomenon that constitutes many different aspects, mentioned above. Nowadays organisations have realized that in addition to incorporating CSR initiatives into their actions, it is equally important to communicate these initiatives effectively to their audiences (Tata & Prasad, 2014). Therefore, business managers today need to take different aspects of CSR communication into account when implementing CSR communication strategies. It has been acknowledged in multiple studies that one of the major issues regarding CSR communication is scepticism among consumers (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010; Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Kraft *et al.*, 2019; Vaccaro, 2016). To overcome this issue, actions need to be taken by organisations.

1.1.2. Corporate social responsibility communication through social media

The rise of social media has shifted business communication styles. Traditionally, business communication has been one-way communication. Nowadays, with the rise of social media and other digital platforms, businesses are integrating interactive two-way communication models into their operations (Lee & Chung, 2023). Hereby, stakeholders, such as consumers, can have their voices heard. This allows organisations to build deeper relationships with customers. (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021).

The importance of social media as a platform to communicate CSR initiatives is constantly growing (Yang *et al.*, 2023; Lee & Chung, 2023). The advantage of social media is its interactive communication style, and its availability to different stakeholders in a short period. (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021) Moreover, CSR-S is considered to be trustworthy, and transparent (Lee & Chung, 2023; Ali *et al.*, 2015). Communication of CSR initiatives in social media has some specific characteristics. These include interactive features that facilitate the viral spreading of CSR messages through

sharing, CSR empowerment, and incorporation of humane-oriented appeals (Fernandes *et al.*, 2021).

In 2017, IBM and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation Corporate Citizenship Center investigated the influence of CSR mentions on different social media platforms. The study revealed that increased engagement on social media positively correlated with improved brand image and reputation. Furthermore, it helped especially to transform consumers with 'neutral' perceptions of a company to 'positive'. (IBM, 2017) Other studies conducted also agree on the positive effects of CSR-S. CSR-S can enhance consumer loyalty (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021), brand equity (Yang *et al.*, 2018), and attitude toward the company (Lee & Chung, 2023). These aspects can thereafter influence consumers' purchase intentions. Moreover, if an organisation's CSR initiatives are perceived as credible and consumers have a positive attitude towards the organisation, they are more likely to respond to CSR-S. (Lee & Chung, 2023)

Based on previous literature on CSR-S Fernández *et al.* (2021) created a theoretical model of drivers and processes of social media CSR communication effectiveness. The model aims to provide a better understanding of the processes impacting the effectiveness of CSR-S. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021.) The representation of this theoretical model is illustrated in Figure 2.

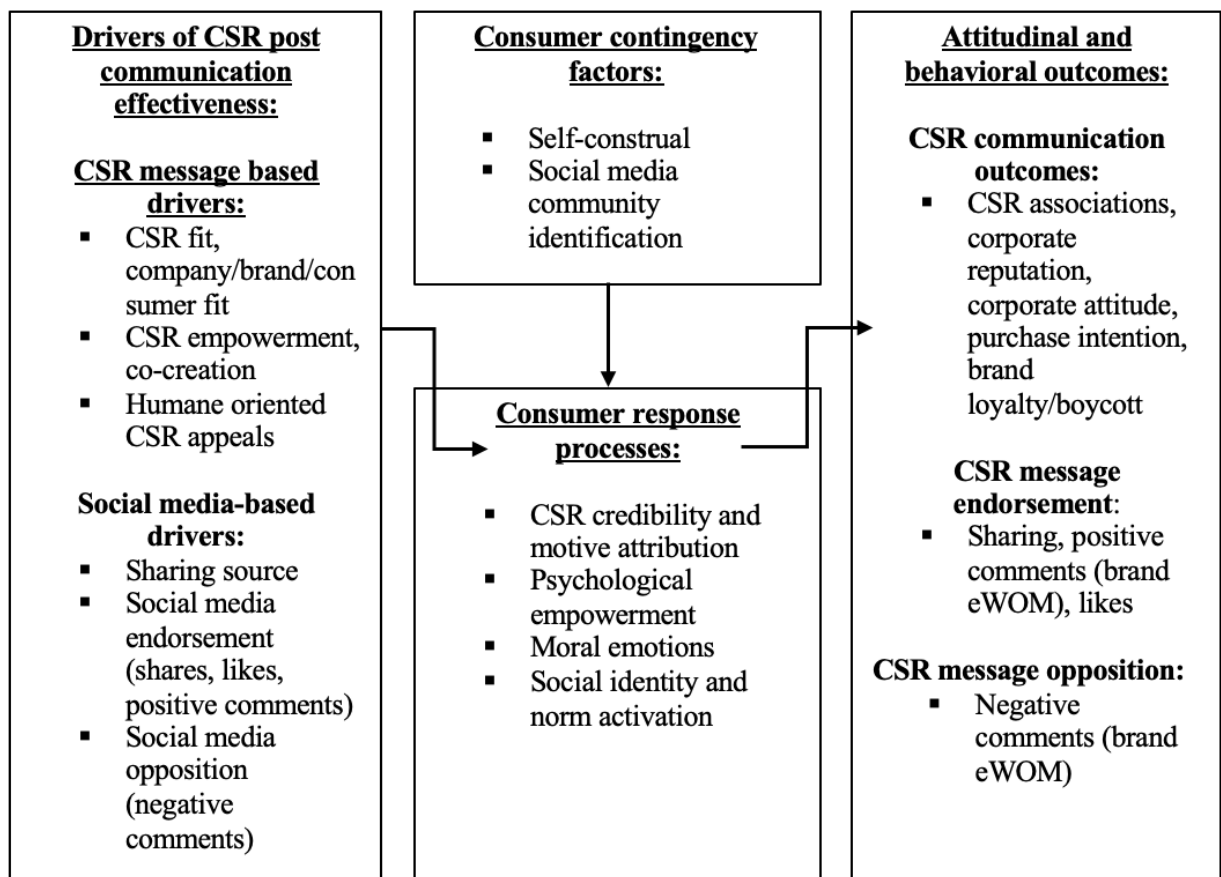


Figure 2. Representation of Fernández *et al.* (2021) a theoretical model
 Source: Fernández *et al.* (2021, 404)

Drivers of CSR post effectiveness are message and social media factors. CSR-message-based drivers involve CSR fit, CSR empowerment, and humane-oriented CSR appeals. CSR fit refers to CSR initiatives that are aligned with the organisation’s core activities, brand values and are relevant to its customer base. By promoting CSR activities with good fit company can build greater trust among consumers (Go & Bortree, 2017). CSR empowerment refers to the amount consumer has control over organisation’s CSR activities. In general, CSR empowerment can include allowing consumers to engage in CSR activities and allowing consumers to influence organisation’s CSR initiatives. It has been identified that if consumers can participate in CSR activities the effectiveness is higher. Further, interactive messages tend to be more efficient than solely informative messages (Go & Bortree, 2017). Humane-oriented appeals refer to CSR posts that include emotional communication such as communication on social justice or the well-being of people. CSR messages with humane-oriented appeals evoke positive emotions among consumers (Diehl *et al.*, 2015). These positive emotions are likely to result in a positive effect on brand attitude and support towards the CSR messages in social media. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021)

Social media factors involve sharing sources, social endorsement, and social media opposition. The sharing source of the message impacts the perceived credibility and effectiveness of the CSR post (Du & Bhattacharya 2010). Du & Bhattacharya (2010) also identified in their study, that if the CSR message is shared by non-corporate sources, consumers perceive it more trustworthy. Hence, if the message is shared by an unbiased and trustworthy source, it has a positive impact on CSR associations. Social endorsement refers to likes, shares, and comments on social media. Positive comments can enhance the effectiveness of CSR posts and vice versa. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021)

The mediation processes include consumer contingency factors and consumer response processes. For CSR communication effectiveness credibility and perceived authenticity is extremely crucial (Afzali & Kim, 2021; Fatma *et al.*, 2015; Du & Bhattacharya 2010). If consumers do not perceive the CSR initiatives as credible and authentic scepticism increases. The credibility of CSR initiatives is affected by motive attribution. This includes how the consumer perceives the organisation's motives for CSR. Further, psychological consumer empowerment affects the effectiveness of CSR-S. Psychological consumer empowerment refers to an individual's sense of control and autonomy. Interaction and co-creational features in social media can enhance empowerment and therefore, impact positively the outcome of CSR communication. To mention, CSR posts with co-creational features can enhance CSR associations, attitudes, and social media endorsement. Moreover, CSR empowerment can increase positive word-of-mouth and purchase intentions. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021)

Additionally, consumer's emotions and social identity motives influence the response process. Positive moral emotions can impact positively on consumers' responses to CSR. Subsequently, negative moral emotions can lead to negative behavioural responses. CSR posts that have a humane-oriented appeal can influence consumer's moral emotions positively. Social identity motives refer to individuals' desire to strengthen their self-identity by adhering to group norms, which results in social approval as a result. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021) To give an example, if one sees a non-corporate source or a peer sharing, commenting, or endorsing social media posts, it can positively impact their associations with the organisation's CSR initiatives. Moreover, they can be keener to share or comment on the post themselves. On the contrary, negative comments can hurt associations and attitudes. (Hartman *et al.*, 2020)

Contingency factors are the moderators of all these consumer response processes. Du & Bhattacharya (2010) identified two contingency factors in CSR communication (company-specific- and stakeholder-specific factors). However, Fernández *et al.* (2021) focused solely on the variables that are consumer-based and relevant specifically to CSR-S. Hence, in Fernández *et al.* (2021) study the contingency factors are self-construal and community identification. These variables pertain to how individuals interact with social groups and how they engage with social issues. Self-construal, as defined by Markus and Kitayama (1991), refers to how individuals view themselves in relation to others, specifically the degree of connection with or disconnection with others. The more one perceives oneself as connected with others, the more positive the outcomes of CSR communication often are. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021)

The marketing outcomes of CSR-S can be divided into two: ones that are related to the brand, corporate attitude, and purchase intentions, and the ones related to the viral spreading of CSR posts. Previous research has indicated that CSR communication can enhance corporate reputation, and brand equity, and create positive attitudes among consumers (Yang *et al.*, 2018; Lee & Chung, 2023). Moreover, CSR-S can enhance consumer loyalty (Ahmad *et al.*, 2021). These aspects can influence consumers' purchase intentions. The viral spreading of CSR posts encompasses the sharing of the post by the recipient. As the recipient shares the post the audience widens, and the post can go viral. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021) A recent study conducted by Vo *et al.* (2019) identified that organisation's CSR engagement increases its corporate image and impacts word-of-mouth positively on Twitter. Therefore, CSR message endorsement, such as sharing, liking, and commenting, is an important and wanted factor for CSR-S. (Fernández *et al.*, 2021)

1.1.3. Consumers' trust in corporate social responsibility communication

Trust is a critical factor in every relationship between consumers and service providers (Shirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002). It is said to be the key component of long-term relationships and a motivator for positive word of mouth (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Moreover, it has been recognized that trust plays an important role, especially within CSR communication (Khan & Fatma, 2023). Shirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002), define consumer trust as: “the expectations held by the consumer that the service provider is dependable and can be relied on to deliver on its promises”.

Despite the strategic benefits that are recognized widely in the literature, the implementation of CSR communication is often challenging due to scepticism and mistrust (Hyosun & Tae, 2018). As mentioned, trust plays a significant role in CSR communication, and CSR activities should be

implemented carefully to avoid scepticism. (Fatma *et al.*, 2015). According to Fatma *et al.* (2015), customer trust mediates the relationship between CSR activities and marketing performance. Simply put, the strategic benefits of CSR communication occur when consumers trust the message. Therefore, it is important to nurture trust within CSR activities and communication to gain strategic benefits from CSR initiatives. (Fatma *et al.*, 2015)

It has been recognized that CSR activities can build trust in a company (Khan & Fatma, 2023). This trust can then positively impact brand equity (BE) and corporate reputation (Jannat *et al.*, 2022). However, consumers are becoming more and more sceptical towards organisation's CSR efforts and might hold negative views regarding these efforts. These negative perceptions impact their trust in the company as well as their intentions to support and recommend the business. (Vlachos *et al.*, 2009) Furthermore, trust has been found to mediate the relationship between consumer perception of CSR and positive word of mouth (Kim *et al.*, 2015; Khan & Fatma, 2023). Therefore, to evaluate the effectiveness of CSR communication managers should measure the amount of trust consumers have towards their CSR actions regularly and consider trust as a significant factor (Vlachos *et al.*, 2009; Kim *et al.*, 2015).

Transparency is one of the most important factors in enhancing consumers' trust in CSR communication. Organisations' CSR initiatives are perceived as more trustworthy the more transparently the organisation is communicating its initiatives. Additionally, if an organisation is communicating its CSR initiatives in a highly transparent way consumers are more likely to trust the organisation and skepticism towards them decreases. Therefore, according to Hyosun & Tae (2018), one of the most effective ways to increase trust in CSR communication is to be highly transparent. Nevertheless, transparency involves a lot more than just communicating facts to stakeholders. It includes communicating truly meaningful information to stakeholders and taking accountability for the organisation's initiatives. Moreover, it includes involving stakeholders in the conversation with a two-way communication style. (Hyosun & Tae, 2018)

A study "An Integrative Model of Organisational Trust" by Mayer, Davis & Schoorman (1995) proposed a model for organisational trust. This model identified three key dimensions that influence an individual's trust in an organisation. These dimensions are ability, benevolence, and integrity. These dimensions create a foundation for trustworthiness. (Mayer *et al.*, 1995)

Ability refers to having skills, competencies, and characteristics that allow one to be effective in a particular area. A crucial characteristic when building trust among two parties is the perceived expertise of the trustee. Expertness and perceived competencies can lead to enhanced trust. Benevolence refers to the extent to which a trustee is believed to want to do good to the trustor. It includes the trustee having a positive orientation towards the trustor. If the trustor perceives that the trustee wants to do good for them and has an overall positive orientation, trust towards the trustee increases. Integrity refers to the belief that the organisation one is placing trust in follows a set of moral or ethical rules that one agrees with. If an organisation's actions do not match with their words or their sense of fairness is different compared to the trustor trust can decrease. Moreover, previous history can impact the perceived integrity of an organisation. The perception of organisation's integrity is crucial in developing trust between two parties. (Mayer *et al.*, 1995)

All these above-mentioned dimensions have an impact on how much one has trust in an organisation. If the perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity are high the trustee is most likely seen as trustworthy. However, the propensity to trust also influences trust. The propensity to trust can be defined as the general willingness to trust others. The general willingness to trust others differs among people who have different developmental experiences, personality types, and cultural backgrounds. Hence, in addition to the dimensions of trust, the personal propensity to trust influences the amount of trust one has. (Mayer *et al.*, 1995)

A similar type of approach to the dimensions of trust has also been created by Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002). According to Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002), dimensions of trustworthy behaviours and practices include operational competence, operational benevolence, and problem-solving orientation. Operational competence refers to the skills, knowledge, and ability to execute tasks. Operational competence is a crucial factor in building trust between two partners. If consumers do not believe that the company has sufficient competencies to execute its tasks trust in the company decreases. (Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002) This dimension is an identical dimension with the ability dimension found in Mayer *et al.* (1995) study.

The second dimension according to Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002), operational benevolence, refers to the underlying motivation to put the consumer's interest ahead of their interests. This dimension is also referred to as "goodwill trust". Further, this motivation needs to be visible to consumers. Consumers trust in the company increases if they believe that the organisation puts consumers'

needs before their own and has the instinct motivation to serve consumers. (Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002) This dimension is called solely benevolence in Mayer *et al.* (1995) study.

The last dimension according to Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002), problem-solving orientation, refers to the motivation to solve problems that may occur during and after a service exchange. If consumers believe that organisation is willing to solve occurring problems efficiently trust in the company increases. (Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002) In this study the dimensions found by Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002) and Mayer *et al.* (1995) will be utilized together. Hence, the dimensions of trust utilized in this research are ability, benevolence, integrity, and problem-solving orientation. The four dimensions of trust are illustrated in Figure 3.

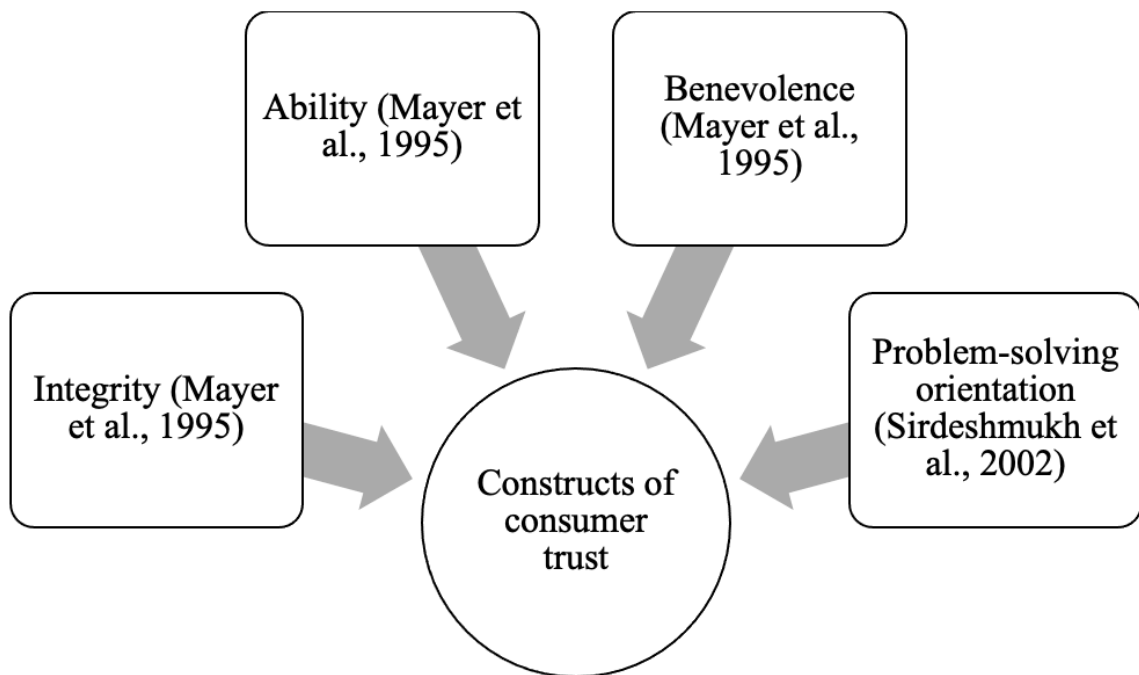


Figure 3. Dimensions that can influence an individual's trust
Source: Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002) & Mayer *et al.* (1995)

Based on the dimensions of trust that have been identified trust in organisation can be measured. Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002) measured trust using four items. The trust measures were adopted from extant literature by Ganesan (1994) and Morgan & Hunt (1994). The questions to measure overall trust included questions regarding the trustworthiness of a company, competencies of a company, the integrity of a company, and the responsiveness of a company. Based on these four items the overall trust measure was created. Questions assessed companies on a scale: “very

dependable”/”very undependable”, “very incompetent”/”very competent”, “very low integrity”/”very high integrity”, “very unresponsive to customers”/”very responsive to customers”. (Sirdeshmukh *et al.*, 2002)

Scepticism, which is a crucial factor in building trust toward CSR initiatives, can also be measured. Ford *et al.* (1990) created a scale to measure scepticism. The two items to measure scepticism identified by Ford *et al.* (1990) were "How likely is it that this claim is true?" and "How skeptical are you about the truth of this claim?" In 2018 Hyosun *et al.* modified this scale to fit their study and measured scepticism with two items. These items were similar to the ones used in Ford *et al.* (1990) study. In this study scepticism will be included when measuring overall trust, as it is a pivotal factor governing how CSR communication is perceived by consumers. Based on the constructs of consumer trust that have been identified, this study will explore which of these dimensions may influence consumer’s trust in CSR-S.

1.2. Brand equity and corporate social responsibility

The upcoming chapter will delve into the concept of brand equity. In this chapter, the definition and dimensions of brand equity are explored. Further, this chapter reviews the measurement of the brand equity concept. Lastly, this chapter explores the relationship between brand equity and CSR.

1.2.1. Dimensions and measuring of brand equity

Brand equity is viewed as a crucial metric for assessing the financial success of a brand and it has been widely researched during the past decades. Nevertheless, there is still no common consciousness of its definition or its dimensions. Moreover, a clear agreement on how to measure brand equity is unidentified. (Tasci, 2021) Research on brand equity has been driven by both financial considerations, aiming to assess the value of a brand, and strategic objectives, seeking to enhance marketing efficiency. (Keller, 1993)

The conceptualization of brand equity started in the 80s with a focus on financial metrics, such as cash flow and sales, solely. However, in the 90s perception-based brand equity was created by Aaker (1991, 1996) and Keller (1993). Subsequently, the focus shifted to perceptual metrics such as loyalty, awareness, image, and perceived value. The constructs of brand equity created by Aaker

(1991, 1996) and Keller (1993) are most widely known and used in the literature. Hence, this study follows these constructs of brand equity.

Aaker (1991) defined brand equity as: “A set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that adds to or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers”. On the other hand, customer-based brand equity is defined by Keller (1993) as: “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. In other words, a brand can possess positive customer-based brand equity when consumers respond more favourably to the product, price, promotion, or distribution associated with the brand compared to the same elements linked to a fictitious or unnamed version of the product or service. This favourable consumer response can then lead to increased revenue and profits, and decreased costs. (Keller, 1993) A similar definition to Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) is constructed by Yoo, Donthu & Lee (2000) who define brand equity as “the difference in consumer choice between the focal product and an unbranded product given the same level of product features”.

Multiple studies have indicated that brand equity positively influences factors such as consumer purchase intentions (Cobb-Walgren *et al.*, 1995), market share (Agarwal & Rao, 1996, as cited in Zarantello *et al.*, 2020), and consumer evaluations of brand extensions (Aaker, 1991). Consequently, brand equity holds significant importance for organisation’s overall performance. Brand equity can provide value for both the customer and the firm. Brand equity assets can help customers interpret and process information regarding a brand. Moreover, they can increase the confidence in the purchase decision and enhance customer satisfaction. From a company perspective, brand equity assets can generate cash flow by increasing brand loyalty, attracting new customers, and creating a competitive advantage. (Aaker, 1991)

According to Aaker (1991), brand equity consists of four dimensions: brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality of brand, and brand associations (Aaker, 1991, 1996). These dimensions have been identified and accepted by other researchers as well (Yoo *et al.*, 2000; Tasci, 2021). This study follows Aaker’s dimensions of brand equity.

Aaker (1991) defines brand loyalty as “the attachment that a customer has to a brand”. If brand loyalty is high customers are less likely to switch to another brand even if price or product features are changing. Thus, brand loyalty refers to consumer behavior of purchasing a brand repeatedly

over a period (Lin *et al.*, 2000). Additionally, brand loyalty makes consumers purchase products or services more regularly. Therefore, the more loyal consumers are the more brand equity will increase. (Aaker 1991)

Brand awareness is defined by Aaker (1991) as “the ability for a buyer to recognize or recall that a brand is a member of a certain product category”. Brand awareness consists of brand recognition and recall (Keller, 1993). Brand recognition refers to how well consumers identify a brand when they are given the brand as a cue. Brand recall refers to consumers being able to retrieve a brand when they are given the product category as a cue. When a consumer recognises and/or recalls a brand the probability of the consumer choosing the brand increases. (Keller, 1993)

Brand associations are defined by Aaker (1991) as “anything linked in a memory to a brand”. A set of meaningful brand associations is referred to as a brand image. The link to a brand will be stronger when the consumer has more than a few experiences and memories with the brand. Associations create positive feelings and attitudes among consumers and can be the foundation for brand extensions. Associations can be divided into attributes, benefits, and attitudes. Attributes refer to the descriptive features that define a product or service. Consumers ascribe personal values to the attributes of a product or service, which are then referred to as benefits. Lastly, attitudes refer to the overall evaluations of a brand. (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) Perceived quality refers to the quality or superiority of a product. It is based on consumers’ subjective evaluations of the product quality. Perceived quality impacts purchase intentions and loyalty directly. Further, it can also be a foundation for brand extensions. (Aaker, 1991)

In this research brand equity will be measured using Aaker’s (1996) framework. Researchers have used different methods to measure brand equity, and there is no common consciousness on the measurement of brand equity. Nevertheless, Aaker’s (1996) framework has been one of the most widely used in research (Tasca, 2020; Yoo *et al.*, 2000).

Aaker (1996) designated the framework as “The Brand Equity Ten”. This framework is grouped into five categories. The first four categories represent customer perceptions of the brand, and the last category (market behaviour measures) represents information gained from the market. Table 2. represents the model created by Aaker (1996).

Table 2. Representation of Aaker’s (1996) “The Brand Equity Ten” model

The Brand Equity Ten:	Indicator:
<u>Loyalty measures</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Price premium ▪ Satisfaction/loyalty
<u>Perceived quality/leadership measures</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Perceived quality ▪ Leadership
<u>Associations/differentiation measures</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Value, brand personality ▪ Organisational associations
<u>Awareness measures</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Brand awareness
<u>Market behaviour measures</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Market share ▪ Price, and distribution indices

Source: Aaker, 1996

Loyalty measures consist of price premium and customer satisfaction. Price premium indicates the amount a customer is willing to pay for the brand in comparison with another brand that offers similar services/products. The caution with price premium is that it is limited to only a competitor or set of competitors. For instance, when a brand has competitors in different markets it can be difficult to measure the price premium due to local competitors and legal restrictions. Customer loyalty can be measured by exploring if customers are satisfied or if they would recommend the product or service to others. A limitation of this measure is that it cannot be applied to non-customers. It is worth mentioning that as with all brand equity measures the results differ across different segments (e.g., loyal customers versus non-customers). Therefore, it is good to segment the market by loyalty when measuring brand equity. (Aaker, 1996)

Perceived quality is an important metric of brand equity, as it is associated with price premium, price elasticities, brand usage, stock return, and other brand equity measures. Further, the perceived quality measure is suitable across different product classes, which makes it significant. (Keller, 1993) It is crucial to note that while perceived quality may not decline, brand equity can still suffer. This is due to the constantly evolving dynamics in the market. To mention, the introduction of an innovative product by a competitor or shift in leadership can lead to a decrease in brand equity. (Aaker, 1996)

According to Aaker (1996), leadership has three dimensions. The first dimension reflects the situation where enough customers are purchasing into a brand concept and a brand becomes a sales leader. Then after, in the eyes of customers it must be worth of purchasing. Second dimension reflects to the situation where a brand has an innovation in certain product class. The third dimension reflects the situation where a brand becomes a trend and consumers want to be part of

the trend. Leadership/popularity can be measured by asking consumers whether a brand is a leading brand, one of the leading brands, or not one of the leading brands. Moreover, it can be measured by asking whether a brand is growing in popularity. (Aaker, 1996)

Association/differentiation measures assess dimensions that are distinctive either to a specific product category or a particular brand. These measures can be divided into three categories: the brand-as-product (value), the brand-as-person (brand personality), and the brand-as-organization (organizational associations). The brand-as-product emphasizes the value proposition of the brand. It can be assessed by asking whether the brand provides good value for the money or whether there are reasons to purchase this brand over competitors. Caution to this measure is if it differs from perceived quality. Some studies have identified that the two measures are very close to each other. (Aaker, 1996)

Brand-as-person establishes an emotional connection to the brand and creates a framework for customer/brand relationship and differentiation. It can be a crucial element, especially in situations where differentiation between competitors is not evident. Limitations to this measure are that some brands are more respected due to the functional factors solely not to their personality. In addition, brand personality tends to be relatively stable and may not mirror the dynamics of the market. Brand-as-organisation dimension considers the entirety of the organisation, encompassing its people, values, and programs, which form the foundation of the brand. It plays a pivotal role in showing consumers that the brand is more than its products and services solely. (Aaker, 1996)

All the above-mentioned dimensions display how a brand can be differentiated from its competitors. If a brand fails to differentiate itself, it will not be able to maintain long-term success. Thus, Aaker (1996) created one metric, which incorporated the above-mentioned dimensions into one metric. This metric is called differentiation. According to Aaker (1996), differentiation is the summary measure of brand associations and is highly important. (Aaker, 1996)

According to Aaker (1996) brand awareness encompasses recognition, recall, top-of-mind, brand dominance, brand knowledge, and brand opinion. On the contrary, according to Keller (1993) brand awareness only consists of brand recognition and recall. Further according to Keller (1993) brand equity only consists of only brand image and brand awareness. Hence, Aaker's model is just one model to measure and define brand equity among others. Lastly, Aaker's (1996) model has also been criticized for not being able to separate some dimensions clearly. Especially, brand

awareness, brand associations, and brand loyalty have not been easy to discriminate in all national contexts (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2015).

1.2.2. Corporate social responsibility in brand building

CSR is becoming increasingly important in brand building, and strategic management. Companies have recognized the important role CSR has in enhancing brand equity and creating positive associations among consumers. Hence, companies are nowadays investing heavily in CSR initiatives. Companies have identified that to build successful brands CSR efforts are inevitable. Previous literature has identified that CSR is one of the most significant aspects that transform brand reputation into brand equity. It is also known as one of the most effective ways of marketing. (Hur *et al.*, 2014; Mahmood *et al.*, 2020; Fatma *et al.*, 2015)

Researchers have identified that the link between CSR and brand equity is evident. Particularly, the relationship between CSR and brand equity is mediated by corporate reputation and corporate credibility (Hur *et al.*, 2014). Hence, it can be stated that consumers perceive socially responsible companies as more credible and reputation-wise better (Hur *et al.*, 2014; Mahmood *et al.*, 2020; Fatma *et al.*, 2015). CSR efforts can lead to an increased company reputation, which can be then transformed into increased brand equity (Mahmood *et al.*, 2020). Consumers also consider socially responsible companies as more trustworthy (Fatma *et al.*, 2015). Credibility and trust both have a crucial role in enhancing brand equity and its components. Fatma *et al.* (2015) identified that trust is a critical factor in mediating the effects of CSR on brand equity and brand reputation. Thus, the effects CSR has on brand equity occur through credibility and trust. (Hur *et al.*, 2014.; Mahmood *et al.*, 2020; Fatma *et al.*, 2015) Figure 4. demonstrates CSR effort's relationship with brand equity.

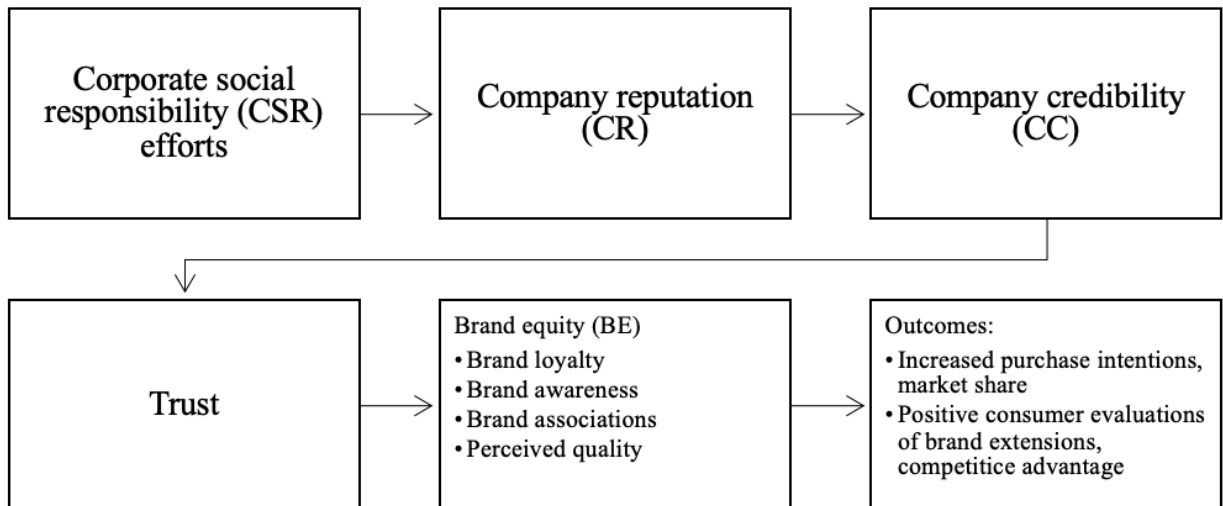


Figure 4. Authors' representation of CSR effort's relationship with brand equity through the mediating role of company reputation, company credibility, and trust

Sources: Mahmood *et al.* (2020), Fatma *et al.* (2015) & Hur *et al.* (2014)

As a result of the Internet sustaining a good reputation has become difficult for companies. Information flows through the Internet and social media is fast and it cannot be controlled by organisations (Mahmood *et al.*, 2020; Fatma *et al.*, 2015). Hence, brand equity is no longer constant, and it can be destroyed relatively quickly by consumers and/or other stakeholders (Mahmood *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, companies should guard closely their reputation. Company reputation is a crucial factor that mediates the relationship between CSR activities and brand performance. Hence, companies should emphasize CSR issues in their branding strategies carefully and be sure that the communication of it is clear and authentic. Most importantly companies should manage CSR activities with the objective of developing trust among consumers and stakeholders. Trust is a critical aspect of creating favourable outcomes for companies. (Fatma *et al.*, 2015)

1.3. The fast fashion industry and corporate social responsibility

This chapter delves into the fast fashion industry and CSR. The environmental and social issues of the industry are addressed and pinpointed. Further, the future of the industry and greenwashing are discussed. Lastly, the theoretical framework established is presented.

Fast fashion refers to clothing that is produced inexpensively and quickly (Bick *et al.*, 2018). It is accessible to consumers quickly due to short lead times and utilizes quick response techniques. Further, it utilizes designs that are considered highly trendy. (Cachon & Swinney, 2011) Over the past decades, the fashion industry has evolved enormously, and as of today, fast fashion dominates the contemporary clothing market (Saagapova *et al.*, 2022) Some of the biggest players in fast fashion include Zara, H&M, and Forever 21. The fast fashion business model revolves around replicating styles from high-end fashion shows and delivering them quickly to consumers at affordable prices using low-quality materials. (Šajn, 2019)

During past decades, consumption has increased enormously, which has been driven by two major trends: fast fashion and the fall in the prices of garments. According to the European Environment Agency, the amount of clothes bought per person in the EU increased by 40 % between 1996 and 2012. (Šajn, 2019) The fast fashion industry is a leading industry and one of the largest employers worldwide. However, on the contrary, it is one of the least sustainable industries globally. (Sagapova *et al.*, 2022; Williams, 2022) On the other hand, it creates job opportunities for people in developing countries, drives economic growth, and makes fashion accessible to large audiences. Nevertheless, the environmental and social costs associated with the production of these clothes are significant. (Bick *et al.*, 2018; Šajn, 2019; Williams, 2022)

The industry produces approximately 92 million tonnes of waste per year and accounts for 70 trillion liters of water consumption (Niinimäki *et al.*, 2020; Šajn, 2019). Further, according to the UN Environmental Programme, the clothing industry is responsible for 2-8 % of global carbon emissions (Nijman, 2019). It is estimated that if no changes are made to the business model the emission-, waste-, and water consumption numbers will double by 2030 (Šajn, 2019).

In addition to the environmental harm, the social issues of fast fashion cannot be overlooked. A primary component of low-cost fashion production is inexpensive labour, which can be found in developing countries. Inexpensive labour is affiliated with low wages and poor working conditions. The people working in the factories experience substantial violations of human rights, experience long working hours, and are exposed to unsafe working conditions daily. (Williams, 2022, Bick *et al.*, 2018) Multiple accidents have occurred in the factories due to impulsive behaviour and poor construction without proper permits. Mention, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, which was the deadliest garment factory disaster. Furthermore, child labour is extensively used in the industry. (Sagapova *et al.*, 2022; Holland, 2023)

Nowadays, consumers have become aware of the massive environmental and social impacts of the fashion industry and have started to demand change. Consequently, fast fashion companies have started to integrate more sustainable practices into their operations. Many brands seem to be dedicated to CSR initiatives and work towards more sustainable processes. Nevertheless, there is a disparity between fast fashion companies' stated efforts to improve corporate social responsibility and the actual efforts. (Sagapova *et al.*, 2022; Mickelsson *et al.*, 2023) This phenomenon is referred to as greenwashing.

TerraChoice (2010) defines greenwashing as “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental performance and positive communication about the environmental performance”. In practice, this can mean claiming a positive environmental impact but without any actions. In the fashion industry, greenwashing can mean claims over synthetic fiber's sustainability or eco-labelling. To give an example, H&M has been accused of greenwashing with its collection H&M Conscious. The collection was widely marketed as environmentally friendly due to at least 50 % of sustainably sourced materials. However, there was no actual proof to support the claim. (Alexa *et al.*, 2022; TerraChoice, 2010; Riches, 2022)

Fast fashion promotes over-consumption, but still, sustainability seems to be one of the core strategies for fast fashion companies. Large fast fashion brands' communication strategies are built around sustainability. The brands promote different sustainability initiatives, but there is little evidence of the actual efforts. Hence, it is hard for consumers to identify the truth between greenwashing and substantiated statements. (Alexa *et al.*, 2022) Consequently, consumers tend to be sceptical and cautious towards CSR communication conducted by fashion companies (De Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020).

The industry is under major challenges as stakeholders demand for more sustainable actions. It is evident that there is a need for transformation, and companies must prepare for this shift. (Adamkiewicz *et al.*, 2022.) Still, there is no simple solution to fix the industry. According to Saahimaa *et al.* (2023), “the industry must be radically reconstructed to minimise natural resource intake and waste production”. Yet, the change is unlikely to happen if it is left solely to the businesses and consumers. (Saahimaa *et al.*, 2023)

2. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework established from the literature review. Further, it outlines the methodology utilized in this research. The chapter addresses the research design, articulating the rationale behind the chosen methods. Following, the sampling, sampling techniques, and data collection procedures are discussed. Additionally, the survey design is explained. Concluding this chapter, the data analysis procedures are outlined, setting the stage for the empirical findings that follow.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Based on the key constructs and relationships derived from the literature review, a theoretical framework was established. Figure 5. demonstrates this theoretical framework. The framework was constructed by the author with the aim of concluding the findings of the literature review.

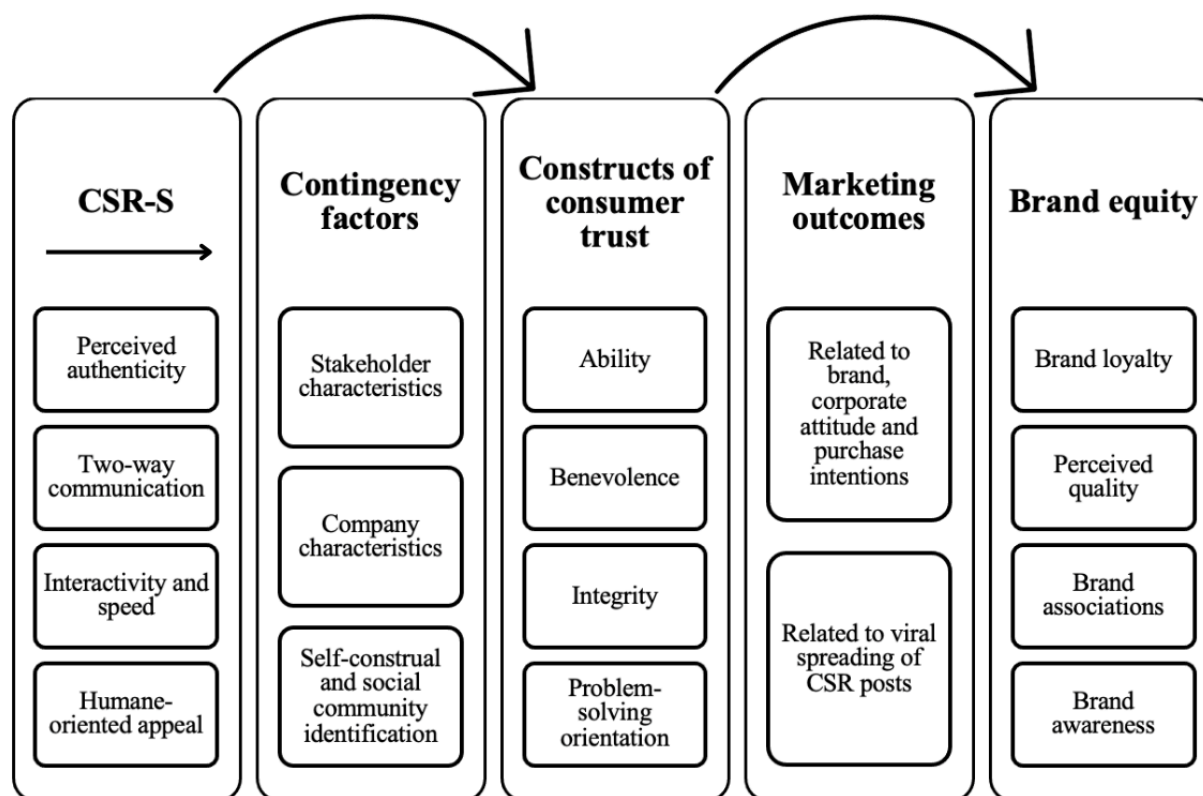


Figure 5. Theoretical framework of the study

Sources: Mayer *et al.* (1995), Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002), Aaker (1991, 1996), Fernandez *et al.* (2021) & Du & Bhattacharya, (2010)

According to various studies, CSR-S is regarded as trustworthy and transparent, offering two-way interaction with consumers. Moreover, information in social media can spread quickly and posts usually have a humane-oriented appeal. These aspects distinguish it from alternative channels. (Fernandez *et al.*, 2021) Some factors affecting the effectiveness of CSR-S include stakeholder and company characteristics, along with individual identity and social community engagement. (Fernandez *et al.*, 2021; Du & Bhattacharya, 2010) The marketing outcomes of CSR include enhanced brand equity, consumer loyalty and purchase intentions among others. However, numerous studies have identified that the strategic benefits of CSR mediate through consumer trust (Fatma *et al.*, 2015; Hur *et al.*, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Khan & Fatma, 2023). On the contrary, according to different studies, the biggest challenges of CSR communication are consumer scepticism and mistrust (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010; Hyosun & Tae, 2018). This makes effective CSR communication challenging.

This is a challenge for businesses to overcome, especially in the fast fashion industry. Fast fashion labels tend to face a high level of scepticism due to the industry's reputation and the history of greenwashing (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020). Hereby, this study aims to identify to what extent consumers trust CSR-S and which dimensions can impact this trust. The constructs of consumer trust identified by Mayer *et al.* (1995) and Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002) provide the basis for identifying these dimensions. Previous research has identified that there is a link between CSR and brand equity (Hur *et al.*, 2014; Mahmood *et al.*, 2020). However, the link between consumer trust in CSR-S and brand equity in the fast fashion industry remains unidentified. Based on the concepts of this literature review, it can be assumed that there might a relationship between brand equity and consumers' trust in CSR-S.

2.2. Methodology

Research design refers to a plan or proposal that is used to examine the question of interest. (Creswell, 2009; Marczyk *et al.*, 2005). It encompasses the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The selection of research design is based on the research problem studied, the researchers' personal experiences, and the audience of the study. In general, there are three types of research designs available. These are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. (Creswell, 2009)

In this research, a quantitative research method is utilized as the aim is to explore the relationship between two variables. Quantitative research is defined as testing theories by exploring the relationship between variables. The variables can be measured usually on instruments that allow data to be analysed using statistical procedures. The methods utilized are instrument-based questions, predetermined approaches, and numeric data. The data is interpreted with statistical analysis. (Creswell, 2009; Marczyk *et al.*, 2005) This study desires to identify if consumers' trust in CSR-S has an impact on the outcome of brand equity within the fast fashion industry. Therefore, the quantitative research method is suitable. The objective is to analyse whether these two variables have a causal relationship. The data will be collected using an online survey and numeric measures of observation will be developed based on the results. Data will be analysed using statistical procedures.

The choice of quantitative research method can be considered to support the author's standpoint as a researcher as well. The authors viewpoint is postpositivist, which is associated with quantitative research. The author believes that the absolute truth can never be found and that the evidence found from research is imperfect and fallible due to human perception, biases, and limitations of measurement tools. Nevertheless, the author believes that through empirical observation, measurement, data, and rational considerations knowledge can be shaped. (Creswell, 2009) Moreover, the author believes that it is crucial for the researcher to be objective and to seek to develop true statements that can explain the situation of concern or describe the causal relationship of interest (Wright *et al.*, 2016).

The strategies of inquiry associated with quantitative research are experimental designs and non-experimental designs, such as surveys. Survey research includes the numerical description of trends, attitudes, or opinions within a population by examining a subset of that population, known as a sample. (Creswell, 2009) In this study, the primary data was collected using an online survey that was distributed via Google Forms. View Appendix 1. for a detailed description of the survey.

The questionnaire method was chosen because it allows quantitative data to be collected in a numerical format. Moreover, it allows the author to gather many respondents, and analyse data using statistical procedures. This research aimed to investigate the relationship between two variables; hence survey method was suitable for this research. A survey can be either cross-sectional or longitudinal. (Watson, 2015; Creswell, 2009) In this research, a cross-sectional survey was utilized. The data gathered from the survey was imported into the statistical package SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) for statistical analysis. Before the data was imported to SPSS the data was coded to numerical format in Excel.

The sample frame of this study consisted of 18-34-year-old people living in Finland and Estonia, who use social media platforms daily. A non-probability sampling technique, more specifically the convenience sampling method, was utilized in this research, as it allowed the author to contact people who were easily accessible. Moreover, it required fewer resources and was more time-efficient to conduct. (Baker *et al.*, 2013) Participants were contacted through WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and word-of-mouth. All participants were selected based on the criteria of fitting into the target group. Nonetheless, some of the participants were eliminated from the analysis as they did not fit the target age group, or they did not use social media platforms daily.

It is worth mentioning that there are some limitations to the non-probability sampling technique. Non-probability samples may not accurately represent the broader population, and hence it can be challenging to generalize results. Moreover, the selection of respondents can be biased, as there is no random selection of respondents, and the selection is based on the authors' judgment. These aspects should be acknowledged when evaluating the results of research that is conducted using a non-probability sampling technique. (Baker *et al.*, 2013; Novosel, 2023; Berndt, 2020)

The measurement was done using the ordinal level of measurement. A 5-point Likert scale was utilized, and the respondents chose a level of agreement from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1). In one question, where scepticism was measured, respondents chose the level of agreement from "not sceptical at all" (5) to "extremely sceptical" (1). Nominal measurement level was utilized in the demographic section of the survey. The error of the measurement cannot be entirely limited, but it was minimized by sending out a pre-survey to the test sample. (Watson, 2015)

To anchor the survey to research questions, each question (excluding the demographic questions) in the survey was guided to answer at least one research question and was based on the theoretical framework established. In the survey, Q1-5 were demographic questions. Q6-16 were constructed to answer RQ1, Q22-23 to answer RQ2, and Q17-21 to answer RQ3. The RQ1 questions were derived from literature related to brand equity and consumer's trust in CSR-S. For RQ2 and the RQ3 questions were derived from literature related to the constructs of consumer trust and CSR-S. Brand equity measures were adopted from Aaker's study (1996). Trust measures were adopted from Mayer *et al.* (1995), Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002), and Ford *et al.* (1990) studies.

The respondents were first asked demographic questions, such as age, gender, and country of residence. Demographic questions also included questions regarding purchase habits and the use of social media platforms. Demographic questions were asked to describe the sample of the study. The sample frame of the study consisted of people living in Finland or Estonia, who are 18-34 years old and use social media platforms daily. This age range was chosen as younger generation tends to use social media actively (Statista, 2024) and the aim was to gather respondents who use social media platforms daily. The descriptive statistics for respondents age is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on the age of respondents

Descriptive statistics, age of respondents					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	104	18	34	25.65	3.358

Source: Author's calculations

The gender distribution was relatively even in the survey. The slight majority were female participants (53,8%). The vast majority of respondents (90,4%) resided in Finland. However, in the data analysis people living in Estonia and Finland will be analysed jointly and no comparison between the two countries will be done, as the countries are geographically and culturally close to each other. Frequencies on the gender, country of residence, purchase habits, and social media usage of respondents are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Frequency table on the gender, country of residence, purchase habits, and social media usage of respondents

Respondents' demographics Q2-4 (n=104)		
	Frequency	Percent %
Gender		
Female	56	53,8
Male	48	46,2
Total	104	100,0
Country of residence		
Finland	94	90,4
Estonia	10	9,6
Total	104	100,0
Have you purchased fast fashion within the last 24 months?		
Yes	95	91,3
No	9	8,7
Total	104	100
Do you use social media platforms daily?		
Yes	104	100,0
No	0	0,0
Total	104	100

Source: Author's calculations

The second section included questions regarding brand equity. To measure brand equity three large fast fashion brands were chosen to represent the industry. The brands that were chosen to represent the industry were: H&M, Zara, and Primark. These three were chosen to represent the industry as they are currently the key players in the fast fashion industry in Europe. In Europe, Zara was the leading company by revenue in the industry in 2019 followed by H&M (Statista, 2020). Therefore, the author chose these two. Primark was the 4th largest by revenue in the industry in 2019 (Statista,

2020). Primark was chosen because the brand is trendy especially among younger consumers and well-known among the target group of the study, based on the the author's assumption. Many fast fashion brands operating in Finland and Estonia are relatively small on a global scale. The author wanted to choose a large global fast fashion brand to represent the industry. Hence, author decided to choose a brand that did not have a physical store in Finland or Estonia. This may have an impact on responses.

To measure brand equity Aaker's (1996) framework was utilized. Questions measured brand awareness, brand association, brand loyalty, and perceived quality. Questions were derived from Aaker's study and modified to fit this study. 11 questions were used to measure overall brand equity. Q6 and Q7 measured brand awareness, Q8-Q10 measured brand associations, Q11-13 measured perceived quality, and Q14-16 brand loyalty. An overall brand equity measure was created for each brand by averaging these items together, with a high score indicating high levels of brand equity.

The third section of the survey measured consumer's trust in CSR-S. Overall trust was measured using a multi-dimensional approach. Questions to measure trust were adopted from Sirdeshmukh et al (2002) study and modified to fit this study. Trust was measured using four items:

1. "If I came across this brand's CSR messages on social media, I would find them trustworthy"
2. "I would view this brand's CSR messages on social media as having high integrity"
3. "I believe this brand is very responsive to consumers in social media"
4. "This brand is competent in what they do"

Moreover, one question regarding scepticism was added to the measurement of overall trust. This question was added as scepticism is a highly relevant aspect in consumer trust in CSR-S. The question to measure scepticism was adopted from Ford *et al.* (1990) study and modified to fit this study. Scepticism was measured using the question: "How sceptical are you about the truthfulness of this brand's CSR efforts when communicated through social media?" An overall trust measure for each brand was created by averaging these five items together, with a high score indicating high levels of trust.

Lastly, the dimensions that influence consumer trust in CSR-S were measured utilizing four dimensions of trust identified. The dimensions of trust were adopted from Mayer *et al.* (1995) and

Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002) studies. The dimensions were: ability, benevolence, integrity, and problem-solving orientation. Respondents were asked a question: “I am more likely to believe and trust social responsibility messages from a company on social media if the company... “and then different statements regarding each dimension. These statements measured ability, benevolence, integrity, and problem-solving orientation. Respondents rated their likeliness to believe and trust a company on a 5-point Likert scale, where 5 being “strongly agree” and 1 being “strongly disagree”.

Ability was measured using questions: “has the right skills, knowledge, and capability to get things done” and “is able to execute tasks efficiently”. Benevolence was measured using questions: “prioritises the consumer's interests over one's own” and “has policies that indicate respect for the customer”. Problem-solving orientation was measured using questions: “is motivated to solve problems that may occur during and after a service exchange” and “is willing to bend company policies to help address customer needs”. Integrity was measured using questions: “follows a set of moral or ethical rules that I agree with and “acts in a way that aligns with their words”. Each dimension was constructed of two statements. The average for each dimension was calculated to identify which dimensions had an impact on respondents’ trust. A high score indicated high level of impact. The questions were derived from Mayer *et al.* (1995) and Sirdeshmukh *et al.* (2002) studies.

Every participant was made aware that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were able to withdraw from the survey at any point. No personal information was disclosed, and identities remained anonymous throughout the process. Participants were informed that the data would be solely used for this research purpose.

2.3. Results

In total, there were 109 participants in the survey. Nonetheless, before data analysis was conducted four participants were eliminated as they were over 34 years old, or they did not use social media platforms daily. Hence, 104 participants were included in the data analysis. This is a relatively small sample size, but as the resources and time were limited the author decided to analyse with a small sample. However, as the sample size is small the results need to be interpreted with caution as they may not be representative of a larger population.

Cronbach's alpha is one of the most widely used measures of reliability (Taber, 2017). Hereby, to measure the reliability of variables included a Cronbach's alpha was utilized. Table 5. illustrates these Cronbach's alpha values. The Cronbach's alpha values for brand equity and trust variables suggest that there is a high internal consistency within the items that measure brand equity and trust among all brands. In general, a Cronbach's alpha value that ranges from 0.71 to 0.91 is considered good (Taber, 2017). All Cronbach's alpha values except Primark's brand equity (0.692) were above 0.7. Even though Primark's brand equity value is slightly less than 0.7 it is still considered acceptable (Taber, 2017). The results indicate that the items used to measure BE and trust for H&M, Zara, and Primark are reliable and consistent. The items that measure dimensions of trust also indicate a good Cronbach's alpha value (0.792). Hence, it can be concluded that the items that have been used in this study to measure trust, dimensions of trust, and brand equity can be considered reliable and consistent.

Table 5. Cronbach's alpha values for brand equity, trust, and dimensions of trust

Cronbach's alpha	
H&M BE (n=8)	.804
H&M trust (n=5)	.870
Zara BE (n=8)	.855
Zara trust (n=5)	.790
Primark BE (n=8)	.692
Primark trust (n=5)	.826
Dimensions of trust (n=8)	.792

Source: Author's calculations

In the survey, Q6-Q16 measured H&M's, Zara's, and Primark's BE. In general, there was a relatively consistent pattern of agreements across all the brands. For H&M and Zara brand awareness (BW) measures were high among all respondents. For Primark, brand awareness measures were significantly lower, but still, most of the respondents were familiar with the brand and the logo. Hence, it can be assumed that the majority of respondents were familiar with all three brands.

Generally, Zara appears to have a more favourable perception among respondents compared to H&M and Primark in all categories. H&M had challenges in Q8, Q10, and Q11. Therefore, positive brand associations (BA) and perceived quality (PQ) seem to be weaknesses in H&M's

brand equity. Furthermore, in Q14-16 a high amount of disagreement is shown for H&M. This indicates a relatively low brand loyalty (BL). Table 6. presents the percentage of respondents' attitudes regarding the brand equity of H&M.

Table 6. The percentage of respondents' attitudes across Q6-16 for H&M

Brand equity H&M (Q6-Q16)						
	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	total
Q6-16	%	%	%	%	%	%
6.BW (recognition)	0,0	2,9	1,9	50,0	45,2	100
7.BW (recall)	0,0	1,00	1,00	45,2	52,9	100
8.BA (differentiation)	14,4	48,1	30,8	6,7	0,0	100
9.BA (characteristics)	0,0	3,8	15,4	62,5	18,3	100
10.BA (credibility)	22,1	30,8	33,7	13,5	0,0	100
11.PQ (quality)	17,3	59,6	16,3	6,7	0,0	100
12.PQ (quality)	12,5	39,4	33,7	12,5	1,9	100
13.PQ (popularity)	10,6	30,8	40,4	18,3	0,0	100
14.BL (leadership)	14,4	49,0	19,2	14,4	2,9	100
15.BL (price premium)	32,7	51,0	13,5	1,9	1,00	100
16.BL (loyalty)	14,4	35,6	41,3	8,7	0,0	100

Source: Author's calculations

As mentioned above, Zara appears to have a more favourable perception among respondents compared to H&M and Primark in all categories. Nonetheless, in Q8 and Q11, which measure brand association and perceived quality, results show a significant amount of neutrality or disagreement for Zara. Further, in Q15-16 answers are relatively diverse, which suggests a diversity of opinions related to Zara's brand loyalty. Hence, Zara seems to have challenges in similar areas of brand equity as H&M. Table 7. presents the percentage of respondents' attitudes regarding the brand equity of Zara.

Table 7. The percentage of respondents' attitudes across Q6-16 for Zara

Brand equity Zara (Q6-Q16)						
	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	total
Q6-16	%	%	%	%	%	%
6.BW (recognition)	0,0	1,9	1,9	55,8	40,4	100
7.BW (recall)	1,0	2,9	1,9	50,0	44,2	100
8.BA (differentiation)	3,8	27,9	23,1	42,3	2,9	100
9.BA (characteristics)	1,0	2,9	12,5	69,2	14,4	100
10.BA (credibility)	8,7	36,5	37,5	16,3	1,0	100
11.PQ (quality)	9,6	30,8	39,4	20,2	0,0	100
12.PQ (quality)	2,9	14,4	30,8	43,3	8,7	100
13.PQ (popularity)	7,7	19,2	36,5	33,7	2,9	100
14.BL (leadership)	8,7	10,6	21,2	48,1	11,5	100
15.BL (price premium)	13,5	23,1	22,1	34,6	6,7	100
16.BL (loyalty)	13,5	22,1	31,7	27,9	4,8	100

Source: Author's calculations

The percentages for Primark generally show a lower level of agreement compared to H&M and Zara. Especially, with Q11 and Q12, which measure perceived quality, and Q14- Q16, which measure brand loyalty, a high percentage of disagreement is shown among respondents. The survey suggests that Primark might have lower perceived brand equity than H&M and Zara. The reason for this might be that in comparison to H&M and Zara, Primark offers cheaper clothes with perceived lower quality. Table 8. presents the percentage of respondents' attitudes regarding the brand equity of Primark.

Table 8. The percentage of respondents' attitudes across Q6-16 for Primark

Brand equity Primark (Q6-Q16)						
	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	total
Q6-16	%	%	%	%	%	%
6.BW (recognition)	4,8	9,6	13,5	46,2	26,0	100
7.BW (recall)	10,6	14,4	17,3	36,5	21,2	100
8.BA (differentiation)	6,7	32,7	34,6	23,1	2,9	100
9.BA (characteristics)	5,8	15,4	26,0	43,3	9,6	100
10.BA (credibility)	17,3	35,6	40,4	6,7	0,0	100
11.PQ (quality)	30,8	42,3	24,0	2,9	0,0	100
12.PQ (quality)	31,7	36,5	29,8	1,9	0,0	100
13.PQ (popularity)	8,7	22,1	49,0	20,2	0,0	100
14.BL (leadership)	22,1	36,5	28,8	11,5	1,0	100
15.BL (price premium)	44,2	44,2	9,6	1,9	0,0	100
16.BL (loyalty)	13,5	33,7	39,4	13,5	0,0	100

Source: Author's calculations

For all brands, there are similar areas of improvement and weaknesses (e.g., perceived quality and brand loyalty), which is no surprise considering the fast fashion industry in general. The fast fashion industry is considered to be low quality and unsustainable, which is why perceived quality and brand associations might be weak for all brands. Moreover, respondents do not generally appear to be relatively loyal to any of these fast fashion brands. The competition among fast fashion brands is fierce and product offerings are similar, which might be one of the reasons behind this.

Table 9. encompasses descriptive statistics for H&M, Zara, and Primark’s brand equity measures. The descriptive statistics are based on the BE score that was calculated for each brand by averaging all brand equity questions of the brand. With the average score for each brand, the descriptive statistics were calculated. Additionally, the overall brand equity score was calculated by averaging the brand equity scores of H&M, Zara, and Primark. The overall brand equity score describes the average brand equity score among the brands.

Table 9. Descriptive statistics for brand equity

Descriptive statistics for brand equity scores (n=104)				
	H&M	Zara	Primark	BE Average
Mean	2.869	3.349	2.649	2.911
Median	2.812	3.364	2.636	2.906
Mode	2.812	3.455	2.182A*	2.625A*
Std. deviation	.480	.599	.470	.428
Variance	.230	.359	.221	.183
Skewness	.262	-.222	-.030	-.216
Std. error of Skewness	.237	.237	.237	.237
Kurtosis	-.272	-.054	-.288	-.011
Std. error of Kurtosis	.469	.469	.469	.469
Range	2.182	3.182	2.182	2.313
Minimum	1.909	1.727	1.455	1.625
Maximum	4.091	4.909	3.636	3.938

Source: Author’s calculations

*Multiple modes exist, the smallest mode is shown in the table.

Mean describes the average brand equity score across all respondents. Zara has the highest mean score, indicating that there is generally a more favourable perception among respondents towards the brand, as stated also before. Primark’s average BE score is the lowest one of the three. Hence, respondents generally perceive Primark more negatively compared to H&M and Zara. The mode

value indicates the most frequently occurred BE score. Zara has the highest mode followed by H&M. For Primark and the overall BE score, the data suggests multiple modes. Standard deviation measures the amount of variation in scores from the mean (Kotronoulas *et al.*, 2023). The standard deviation is relatively low for each brand. This indicates that the brand equity scores are close to the mean in most cases and do not vary significantly.

The skewness measures the asymmetry of the distribution and kurtosis measures the peakedness of the distribution. A general guideline is that skewness value between -1 and +1 is considered excellent. (Hair *et al.*, 2022) A positive skewness value indicates a longer tail on the right. This indicates that the values are mostly on the left side of the mean. A negative skewness indicates a longer tail on the left side. This indicates that the distribution is mostly on the right side of the mean. (Kim, 2013; Hair *et al.*, 2022) H&M is the only one of the brands that has a positive skewness value for the brand equity variable. Other brands and the average skewness value is negative. However, the skewness values are relatively small, which suggests that there are only slight departures from the symmetry. According to the general guidelines, the skewness value for all brands is considered excellent.

Kurtosis measures the peakedness of the distribution. Negative kurtosis refers to a slightly flatter distribution compared to the normal distribution, whereas positive kurtosis refers to peaks in distribution. In general, if the kurtosis value is above +2, the distribution is too peaked and if the kurtosis values are -2 the distribution is too flat. (Kim, 2013) The kurtosis value is negative for each brand. This indicates that the distribution is flatter compared to the normal distribution. Nonetheless, for all the brands the negative values are relatively small, which indicates that the distribution is close to normal distribution. Normal distribution refers to symmetrical distribution and indicates that 50 % of the data is on the left of the centre and the other half on the right (Kotronoulas *et al.*, 2023). Based on the skewness and kurtosis it can be assumed that the brand equity scores for all the brands are quite symmetrical and close to normal distribution with only small divergence.

Table 10. and 11. presents the percentages of respondents' attitudes regarding trust and scepticism for H&M, Zara, and Primark's CSR-S. Overall, the data suggest that there is a high amount of distrust and scepticism toward all three brands' CSR-S.

Table 10. Percentages of respondents' attitudes regarding trust for H&M, Zara, and Primark's CSR-S

Trust in CSR communication on social media (n=104)						
	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	total
	%	%	%	%	%	%
H&M						
Trustworthiness	34,6	32,7	22,1	10,6	0,0	100
Integrity	23,1	45,2	26,0	5,8	0,0	100
Responsiveness	21,2	28,8	39,4	10,6	0,0	100
Competences	16,3	29,8	28,8	24,0	1,0	100
Zara						
Trustworthiness	19,2	44,2	27,9	8,7	0,0	100
Integrity	13,5	39,4	40,4	6,7	0,0	100
Responsiveness	8,7	28,8	50,0	12,5	0,0	100
Competences	6,7	20,2	43,3	28,8	1,0	100
Primark						
Trustworthiness	33,7	43,3	19,2	3,8	0,0	100
Integrity	23,1	47,1	26,9	2,9	0,0	100
Responsiveness	16,3	33,7	45,2	4,8	0,0	100
Competences	20,2	27,9	35,6	16,3	0,0	100

Source: Author's calculations

H&M and Primark seem to face a higher level of scepticism than Zara. Nonetheless, in general, all brands seem to face a high level of scepticism and distrust. Only a few responses indicate trust and a lack of scepticism. The vast majority of respondents do not trust H&M, Zara, and Primark's CSR-S. Furthermore, respondents are sceptical of their CSR-S. Most of the respondents lean towards disagreement and scepticism in the questions which measure trust and scepticism. However, it is worth mentioning that in Q20, which asked respondents if they believe that the brand is competent, responses showed more positive perception and more diversity compared to the other questions. The reason behind this might be that the question was not straightforward regarding CSR-S, but a more general question. This might have led to more diverse opinions related to the aspect.

Table 11. Percentages of respondents' attitudes regarding scepticism for H&M, Zara, and Primark's CSR-S

Scepticism in CSR communication on social media (n=104)						
	extremely sceptical (1)	sceptical	neutral	slightly sceptical	not sceptical at all (5)	total
H&M	%	%	%	%	%	%
Scepticism	44,2	32,7	12,5	9,6	1,0	100
Zara						
Scepticism	21,2	49,0	20,2	9,6	0,0	100
Primark						
Scepticism	39,4	39,4	12,5	8,7	0,0	100

Source: Author's calculations

In table 12. descriptive statistics for the trust variable are presented. An average trust score for each brand was calculated by averaging the five items, which measured trust and scepticism in CSR-S. The descriptive statistics were calculated based on the average trust score of each brand. Furthermore, the overall trust score among all brands was calculated by averaging the trust scores of H&M, Zara, and Primark.

Table 12. Descriptive statistics for overall trust measures

Descriptive statistics for overall trust (n=104)					
	H&M	Zara	Primark	Average	
Mean	2.230	2.496	2.160	2.2947	
Median	2.200	2.600	2.200	2.200	
Mode	1.6A	2.2A*	2.0A*	2.200	
Std. deviation	0.783	.6287	.6708	.608	
Variance	.613	.395	.450	.369	
Skewness	.233	-.438	.108	.148	
Std. error of Skewness	.237	.237	.237	.237	
Kurtosis	-1.069	.206	-.933	-.428	
Std. error of Kurtosis	.469	.469	.469	.469	
Range	3.0	2.8	2.8	2.8	
Minimum	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	
Maximum	4.0	3.8	3.8	3.8	

Source: Author's calculations

*Multiple modes exist, the smallest mode is shown in the table.

The average trust score across all respondents is approximately 2.295. This suggests that on average respondents have only a moderate level of trust in these brands CSR-S. The score implies that respondents lean towards disagreement in the questions that measure trust in CSR-S. The vast

majority of the respondents have chosen options that imply negative perceptions of trust. Respondents seem to trust Zara's CSR-S slightly more than Primark's and H&M's. The most common value among the respondents is 2.2. This also indicates that most of the respondents perceive H&M, Zara, and Primark's CSR-S as untrustworthy. The results would have shown an even lower score for the overall trust if Q20 had been deleted from the analysis. This is because in Q20 respondents showed more positive perceptions compared to other questions.

Out of the three brands H&M has the highest standard deviation (0.783). This indicates that responses for H&M are spread out over a larger range compared to the other brands. Nonetheless, the standard variation is relatively low across all brands, which indicates that the values tend to be quite close to the mean. When scrutinizing the distribution of responses, the results indicate relatively good values that are quite close to normal distribution. H&M and Primark have a positive skewness value, which indicates a longer tail on the right side. This means that most of the responses are on the left side of the mean (i.e., smaller value). The skewness measure for Zara is negative (-.438), which indicates a longer tail on the left side. This indicates that the distribution in responses for Zara is mostly on the right side of the mean. The average skewness value is slightly positive (0.148), which indicates that on average the distribution in responses is mostly on the left side of the mean. Nonetheless, the skewness values are relatively small, which indicates that the distribution is generally quite close to normal. (Kotronoulas *et al.*, 2023; Hair *et al.*, 2022; Kim, 2013)

The kurtosis value is negative for H&M (-1.069) and Primark (-.933). This indicates that the results are flatter than a normal distribution and there are no peaks in responses. Hence, the results are clustered around the mean. The kurtosis value for Zara is positive (0.206), which indicates that the results are more peaked than a normal distribution. However, the value is relatively close to the normal distribution. The values are not above +2 or -2, which indicates that the responses are not too peaked or flat. The variance in responses is on average 0.369, which indicates a quite low variance in responses. Based on these results, the responses are quite close to normal distribution and symmetrical. (Hair *et al.*, 2022; Kim, 2013)

Table 13. presents the descriptive statistics for dimensions of trust. The mean score for all dimensions is 3.5 or above, which indicates that on average all dimensions have a positive impact on how likely consumers are to believe and trust social responsibility messages from a company in social media. Integrity has the highest mean score (4.255) followed by benevolence (3.947).

The results suggest that these dimensions have a relatively high impact on consumer trust in CSR-S. The mean score for ability is 3.596 and 3.606 for problem-solving orientation. Thus, the results indicate that respondents seem to have a favourable perception regarding each dimension. Hence, all dimensions identified may shape consumers' trust in CSR-S. The most common value among all dimensions was 4. This value also supports the assumption that all the dimensions might shape consumers' trust in CSR-S.

Table 13. Descriptive statistics for dimensions of trust

		Dimensions of trust			
		ability	benevolence	problem-solving	integrity
N	Valid	104	104	104	104
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		3.596	3.947	3.606	4.255
Median		3.500	4.000	3.500	4.000
Mode		4.0	4.0	4.0	4.0
Std. Deviation		.540	.744	.5899	.639
Variance		.292	.553	.348	.408
Skewness		-.440	-.519	.012	-.635
Std. Error of Skewness		.237	.237	.237	.237
Kurtosis		.603	-.042	.288	.000
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.469	.469	.469	.469
Range		3.0	3.0	3.0	2.5
Minimum		2.0	2.0	2.0	2.5
Maximum		5.0	5.0	5.0	5.0

Source: Author's calculations

The standard deviation is highest among benevolence, which indicates that the opinions on benevolence vary most among respondents. However, the standard deviation value for each dimension is relatively similar and the values do not vary significantly. The skewness values for integrity, benevolence, and ability are negative. This indicates that the responses are generally distributed on the right side of the mean. For the problem-solving orientation, the skewness value is slightly positive. (Hair *et al.*, 2022; Kim, 2013)

The kurtosis value for each dimension is considered good as the results are not too peaked or flat. For the integrity dimension, the kurtosis value is 0.0, which indicates that the results are normally distributed with no peaks in responses. For benevolence, the kurtosis value is slightly negative (-.042). However, this value is relatively close to normal distribution as well. For ability and problem-solving orientation, the kurtosis values are positive. This indicates that the responses are

more peaked than a normal distribution. However, the values are relatively low, which indicates that there are no significant peaks. Based on these results, the dimensions appear to be relatively symmetric, with only moderate variability in responses. (Hair *et al.*, 2022; Kim, 2013)

Overall, respondents perceive relatively high levels of benevolence and integrity if compared to ability and problem-solving orientation. Hence, it can be assumed that benevolence and integrity have a more significant impact on how likely consumers are to trust and believe social responsibility messages on social media. Still, in general, the data suggests that all these dimensions can have a positive impact on this matter. The variance in responses is relatively low among all dimensions, which indicates that respondents agree on the aspects. Based on these results, it can be assumed that respondents are more likely to believe and trust social responsibility messages from a company if the company is considered as high in integrity and well-meaning (benevolence). Moreover, if respondents perceive the company’s abilities to execute tasks and problem-solving orientation as high, consumers might be more likely to trust and believe the social responsibility message in social media. Nonetheless, high integrity and benevolence might have a stronger impact on this matter.

To explore the relationship between brand equity and trust in CSR-S within the fast fashion industry a Pearson correlation coefficient analysis was conducted. The correlation coefficient measures how strongly variables are related and whether the relationship is positive or negative (Schober *et al.*, 2018). The correlation was measured separately for each brand and jointly all brands included. The interpretation of the correlation coefficient is shown in Table 14.

Table 14. The interpretation of Correlation Coefficient

Correlation Coefficient	Interpretation
0.00-0.10	Neglible correlation
0.10-0.39	Weak correlation
0.40-0.69	Moderate correlation
0.70-0.89	Strong correlation
0.90-1.00	Very strong correlation

Source: Schober *et al.* (2018, 1765)

Table 15. illustrates the results of Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis. The correlation analysis shows a moderate relationship between BE and trust in CSR-S for H&M. The Pearson

Correlation Coefficient value of 0.599 indicates a strong moderate linear relationship between the two variables (Schober *et al.*, 2018). The significance, Sig. (2-tailed), is less than 0.001, which suggests that the correlation is statistically significant. A p-value less than or equal to 0.05 is considered statistically significant. This means that the results are likely to represent an actual relation rather than a random one. (McLeod, 2023) The positive correlation among the variables indicates that as a trust for H&M's CSR-S increases, brand equity also tends to increase, and vice versa. The results suggest a significant and moderate relationship between the variables.

Table 15. Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis on H&M, Zara, and Primark's brand equity and trust in CSR-S

Correlations			
		BE (H&M)	Trust (H&M)
BE (H&M)	Pearson Correlation	1	.599**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	104	104
Trust (H&M)	Pearson Correlation	.599**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	104	104
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			
		BE (Zara)	Trust (Zara)
BE (Zara)	Pearson Correlation	1	.370**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	104	104
Trust (Zara)	Pearson Correlation	.370**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	104	104
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			
		BE (Primark)	Trust (Primark)
BE (Primark)	Pearson Correlation	1	.204*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.038
	N	104	104
Trust (Primark)	Pearson Correlation	.204*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.038	
	N	104	104
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

Source: Author's calculations

The correlation analysis between brand equity and trust in CSR-S for Zara indicates a weak relationship. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient value of 0.370 indicates that as trust in CSR-S increases, brand equity also tends to increase, and vice versa (Schober *et al.*, 2018). However, the strength of the relationship is weak. The Correlation Coefficient value higher than 0.4 indicates a moderate correlation (Schober *et al.*, 2018). Hence, the correlation coefficient for Zara is relatively

close to moderate correlation. The significance, Sig. (2-tailed), is less than 0.001, which suggests that the correlation is also statistically significant (McLeod, 2023).

The correlation analysis between brand equity and trust in CSR-S for Primark shows a weak linear relationship between the two variables. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient value for Primark is 0.204. This indicates that as trust in CSR-S increases, brand equity may also increase, and vice versa. However, the correlation between the two variables is weak (Schober *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, the significance level is 0.038, which is still less than 0.05. This suggests that the correlation is significant at the 0.05 level. (McLeod, 2023) Nonetheless, the strength of the relationship is weak compared to the correlation coefficient values that were presented with H&M and Zara. Hence, it can be stated that the relationship is statistically significant but relatively weak.

The correlation analysis between brand equity and trust in CSR-S when looking at all brands presents a weak linear relationship between the two variables. Pearson Correlation Coefficient value is 0.318, with a significance level less than 0.001. This indicates that there is a statistically significant weak linear relationship between the two variables (Schober *et al.*, 2018; McLeod, 2023). Hence, based on these results, there might be a relationship between brand equity and consumers' trust in CSR-S within the fast fashion industry, if considering the fast fashion brands that were included in this study. This indicates that as consumers' trust in the fast fashion brands' CSR-S increases, brand equity also tends to increase. Table 16. presents the findings of the Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis conducted jointly for all brands.

Table 16. Pearson Correlation Coefficient analysis on all brands

Correlation (all brands together)			
		BE	Trust
BE	Pearson correlation	1	.318**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<.001
	N	104	104
Trust	Pearson Correlation	.318**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	
	N	104	104
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

Source: Author's calculations

As a final remark, it is worth mentioning that the results of this study cannot be generalized, and the sample of the study is too small to draw conclusions. In this study, the sample size was relatively small, and a non-probability sampling technique was utilized. Therefore, the results need

to be interpreted with caution as they may not be representative of a larger population. The results can only be generalized to the specific sample of this study.

2.4. Discussion and suggestions

To conclude the findings, the results for each research question are presented. The research questions this study aimed to answer were:

RQ1: What is the relationship between trust in CSR-S and brand equity within the fast fashion industry?

RQ2: What dimensions can shape consumers' trust in CSR-S?

RQ3: To what extent do consumers trust CSR communication of fast fashion brands in social media?

To explore the relationship between consumers' trust in CSR-S and brand equity within the fast fashion industry a correlation analysis was conducted. Based on the results, a varying degree of correlation between brand equity and trust in CSR-S was found. For H&M the results indicated a moderate correlation, whereas for Zara and Primark the results displayed a weak correlation. For all, the correlation was statistically significant. When examining all brands together, the data revealed a statistically significant weak correlation. Therefore, higher trust in CSR-S may be associated with higher brand equity in the fast fashion industry. Thus, trust may have an important role in effective CSR-S. This is also supported by previous research (Fatma *et al.*, 2015; Hur *et al.*, 2014; Kim *et al.*, 2015; Khan & Fatma, 2023). Moreover, it can have a significant impact on overall performance through higher brand equity. Nonetheless, according to this study, the relationship found is weak. Additionally, this study was based on three brands, and the sample size was relatively small. Therefore, a more comprehensive study would be needed to verify and generalize the results to a larger population.

For RQ2 the results suggest that ability, benevolence, problem-solving orientation, and integrity may all be significant factors in shaping consumers' trust in CSR-S. The mean score for all dimensions was high. This indicates that all dimensions may influence the likeliness to trust a company's social responsibility messages on social media. Integrity and benevolence received the highest average scores. Hence, these dimensions may be more significant in shaping consumers'

trust than ability and problem-solving orientation. The data suggests that consumers may be more likely to trust a company's CSR-S if they consider the company as high in integrity and well-meaning. Moreover, consumers may be more likely to trust a company's CSR-S if they assume that the company can execute tasks efficiently and is problem-solving-oriented. By considering these dimensions, especially high integrity and well-meaning, businesses may be able to build higher trust among consumers. These findings are also supported by previous research, which has identified these dimensions as constructs of consumer trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Sirdeshmukh *et al.* 2002).

To demonstrate consumers' overall trust in the CSR communication of fast fashion brands on social media the average trust score was calculated. The average trust score suggested a moderate level of trust and respondents leaning toward distrust in CSR-S. Thus, the results indicate that consumer trust in CSR-S for H&M, Zara, and Primark is generally low. This aligns with the previous research that suggested that consumers tend to be sceptical of CSR communication conducted by fashion companies (de Freitas Netto *et al.*, 2020). There are minor variations across the brands. The results for Zara show a slightly more positive perception than for H&M and Primark. Nonetheless, overall respondents seem to be distrustful and sceptical towards all three brands. Descriptive statistics show a low variance in responses, which indicates a common consciousness among respondents. Hence, this lack of trust revealed a significant area of improvement for the fast fashion brands.

These empirical findings provide new insights into the relationship between CSR and brand equity within the fast fashion industry. The findings suggest that consumer trust in CSR-S has a relationship with brand equity, although it is weak. This indicates that greater trust in CSR-S can lead to enhanced brand equity in the fast fashion industry. The findings also verified the sentiment that consumers' trust in fast fashion brands' CSR-S is in general relatively low. Previous research has identified that consumer scepticism and mistrust are key challenges for CSR communication (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010; Hyosun & Tae, 2018).

The results suggest that if fast fashion labels can cultivate greater trustworthiness in their CSR-S, they may enjoy added benefits. Greater trust can be cultivated by considering the dimensions that may influence consumers' trust. These dimensions are ability, benevolence, integrity, and problem-solving orientation. According to this study, integrity and benevolence showed the highest impact. Hence, especially these two dimensions should be acknowledged when

implementing CSR-S. Fast fashion labels may be able to improve trust in CSR-S by communicating CSR efforts genuinely, and authentically. Further, the trust may be improved by showing genuine interest in the well-being of social communities and the environment.

Considering the average degree of trust in CSR messaging on social media among all labels, it's clear that there is room for growth in this area. This includes not only the communication of CSR efforts but the actual efforts as well. Consumers are expecting the industry to take responsibility for their actions. Moreover, consumers expect fast fashion labels to communicate these efforts authentically and genuinely. Not only can these efforts help our environment and societies but enhance the brand equity of fast fashion brands as well. Hence, building consumer trust through authentic CSR communication may create a win-win situation for both the businesses and the environment.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research aimed to identify dimensions that can shape consumers' trust in CSR-S, investigate whether consumers trust fast fashion brands' CSR-S, and demonstrate if there is a relationship between this trust and brand equity. The problem this research tried to address was the gap in understanding how consumers' trust in CSR-S shapes the brand equity of fast fashion labels and what factors may shape this trust.

The results suggest that there is a relationship between consumers' trust in CSR-S and brand equity, although the relationship found is weak. Moreover, the results suggest that the dimensions that can shape consumers' trust in CSR-S are ability, benevolence, integrity, and problem-solving orientation. Integrity and benevolence showed the greatest impact. Lastly, the study revealed that consumers' trust in CSR-S is in general relatively low. The overall trust score showed a moderate level of trust in CSR-S, which indicates that most of the respondents lean towards distrust and scepticism. Still, due to the relatively small sample size and a non-probability sampling technique that was used, the results may not be representative of a larger population.

The findings demonstrate a significant, albeit variable, relationship between consumers' trust in CSR-S and brand equity in the fast fashion industry. The relationship between CSR and brand equity has been identified in the previous literature as well. Hence, the results support previous findings. The findings indicate that fast fashion labels have the potential to improve their brand value by fostering increased trust in their CSR initiatives on social media platforms. However, business managers in the industry ought to keep in mind that the relationship between consumer trust in CSR-S and brand equity may vary across labels. Hence, CSR communication strategies need to be tailored to the specific expectations of consumers and to the identity of each brand to gain strategic benefits. Overall, building higher trust in CSR-S may show significant benefits through higher brand equity for brands in the fast fashion industry. Thus, trust is a vital element for businesses to consider when implementing CSR communication strategies in social media.

Previous research has identified trust as a pivotal factor governing CSR impacts on preferred business results.

Proposition 1: Business managers in the fast fashion industry should regard trust as an important factor when planning and implementing CSR communication strategies in social media, as it may influence their brand equity.

It is crucial to consider the factors that influence consumer trust when establishing trustworthiness in CSR messaging on social media. Especially, integrity and benevolence, which displayed a relatively high impact on consumers' trust in CSR-S should be carefully considered. Authentic, transparent, and genuine communication of CSR efforts as well as showing consumers that the company is well-intentioned can enhance consumers' trust in CSR-S. Business managers should keep in mind these aspects when implementing CSR-S. Furthermore, businesses need to understand that these dimensions are not only abstract concepts but should be reflected in daily actions and business communication. A key aspect for businesses to consider could be maintaining a high standard of integrity by ensuring that all claims are verifiable and that the company acts upon its CSR promises. This can have a significant impact on consumers' trust.

Proposition 2: Authentic, transparent, and genuine communication of CSR efforts as well as showing consumers that the company is well-intentioned can enhance consumers' trust in CSR-S. These efforts can involve regular updates on CSR initiatives, consumer engagement, and commitment to sustainability programs.

Proposition 3: By maintaining a high standard of integrity and by ensuring that all claims are verifiable consumers might be more likely to trust CSR-S. This includes the removal of information that might mislead consumer and communicating openly regarding the issues the industry is facing.

The general skepticism in CSR-S highlighted by this study is troubling, though it aligns with the expectations set by the fast fashion sector's reputation and previous research. Previous research has identified that consumers tend to be sceptical of fast fashion brands CSR initiatives. Enhancing this trust is a significant aspect for all businesses to consider. The whole fast fashion industry is currently under inspection due to the environmental and social harm associated with the industry. According to these findings, businesses could enhance the distrust by transparent and authentic

CSR-S. Moreover, the focus should not be on trying to hide the real consequences of the industry, but rather on talking openly about the issues the industry is facing. By being open and transparent regarding the issues the industry is facing, consumer trust can be built upon.

The literature review of this study highlighted the potential for CSR communication to enhance brand equity through trust-building. Consistent with prior research, the findings in this study suggest that higher trust in CSR-S may be associated with higher brand equity. Moreover, in this research scepticism emerged as a significant challenge for fast fashion labels. This aligns with previous studies that have identified consumer scepticism as a key challenge for CSR communication. Further, the research verified the sentiment that consumers tend to be sceptical of fast fashion brands' CSR-S. This is likely influenced by the industry's history of greenwashing. Generally, the findings were aligned with the previous research findings.

Although this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between CSR-S and brand equity within the fast fashion industry, this study has its limitations. A significant limitation of the study is the use of a non-probability sampling technique. This technique was used because it allowed the author to contact people who were easily accessible. Nevertheless, the results can be biased, and the results cannot be generalized due to the sampling technique that was utilized. Hence, the results may not be representative of a broader consumer base. Moreover, the sample size of 104 is relatively small and may not capture all consumer perceptions and attitudes. The fast fashion industry is a massive global industry, and a larger sample size would be needed to capture a full range of perceptions. Additionally, this study was limited to only three fast fashion brands. To gain a deeper understanding of the whole industry a more comprehensive study with multiple fast fashion brands could be beneficial.

For future research, this study offers a starting point to explore consumers' trust in CSR-S more profoundly. In the future, the research can be done with a larger sample size and with the utilization of a probability-based sampling technique. This would shed more profound results and allow the generalization of the results. Furthermore, by including more fast fashion brands in the study, a more comprehensive analysis can be obtained. Conducting a long-term study to track changes in consumer trust and its impact on brand equity over time could also be a potential avenue for future research.

In the era where CSR is not just valued but expected, this research emphasizes the interplay between consumer trust in CSR-S and brand equity within the fast fashion industry. This study encourages business managers in the industry towards more ethical engagement and highlights the role of trust in sustainable business practices. In the end, the change toward more sustainable business practices is dependent on our collective willingness to embrace the change and the industry's readiness to involve sustainable business models in their operations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Questionnaire with the results

Opening letter of the survey:

Dear reader,

I am a master's degree student from Tallinn University of Technology, and I am conducting this survey as part of my thesis research. Your participation is extremely valuable and will provide important insights.

The data collected will be used solely for research purposes and all responses will remain confidential. Personal information will not be disclosed. The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

Thank you for taking the time to contribute!

Demographics (Q1-5)			
1.Age (open question)			
	Male	Female	Total
2.Gender	46,2	53,8	100,0
	Finland	Estonia	
3.Country of residence	90,4	9,6	100,0
	Yes	No	
4.Have you purchased fast fashion within last 24 months?	91,3	8,7	100,0
5.Do you use social media platforms daily?	100,0	0,0	100,0

Brand equity (Q6-16)	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	total
	%	%	%	%	%	%
6. I can recognise this brand among other competing brands						
H&M	0,0	2,9	1,9	50,0	45,2	100
Zara	0,0	1,9	1,9	55,8	40,4	100
Primark	4,8	9,6	13,5	46,2	26,0	100

7. I can quickly recall (i.e. remember or retrieve from memory) the symbol or logo of this brand						
H&M	0,0	1,00	1,00	45,2	52,9	100
Zara	1,0	2,9	1,9	50,0	44,2	100
Primark	10,6	14,4	17,3	36,5	21,2	100
8. This brand is different from competing brands						
H&M	14,4	48,1	30,8	6,7	0,0	100
Zara	6,7	32,7	34,6	23,1	2,9	100
Primark	6,7	32,7	34,6	23,1	2,9	100
9. Some characteristics of this brand come to my mind quickly						
H&M	0,0	3,8	15,4	62,5	18,3	100
Zara	1,0	2,9	12,5	69,2	14,4	100
Primark	5,8	15,4	26,0	43,3	9,6	100
10. The organisation associated with this brand has credibility						
H&M	22,1	30,8	33,7	13,5	0,0	100
Zara	8,7	36,5	37,5	16,3	1,0	100
Primark	17,3	35,6	40,4	6,7	0,0	100
11. The likely quality of this brand is high						
H&M	17,3	59,6	16,3	6,7	0,0	100
Zara	9,6	30,8	39,4	20,2	0,0	100
Primark	30,8	42,3	24,0	2,9	0,0	100
12. In comparison to alternative fast fashion brand's, this brand has high quality						
H&M	12,5	39,4	33,7	12,5	1,9	100
Zara	2,9	14,4	30,8	43,3	8,7	100
Primark	31,7	36,5	29,8	1,9	0,0	100
13. In my opinion, this brand is growing in popularity						
H&M	10,6	30,8	40,4	18,3	0,0	100
Zara	7,7	19,2	36,5	33,7	2,9	100
Primark	8,7	22,1	49,0	20,2	0,0	100
14. This brand would be my first choice among other fast fashion brands						
H&M	14,4	49,0	19,2	14,4	2,9	100
Zara	8,7	10,6	21,2	48,1	11,5	100
Primark	22,1	36,5	28,8	11,5	1,0	100
15. I would be willing to pay more for this brand in comparison to alternative fast fashion brand						
H&M	32,7	51,0	13,5	1,9	1,00	100
Zara	13,5	23,1	22,1	34,6	6,7	100
Primark	44,2	44,2	9,6	1,9	0,0	100
16. I would recommend this brand to others						
H&M	14,4	35,6	41,3	8,7	0,0	100
Zara	13,5	22,1	31,7	27,9	4,8	100
Primark	13,5	33,7	39,4	13,5	0,0	100

Trust in CSR communication on social media Q17-20
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17. If I came across this brand's CSR messages on social media, I would find them trustworthy						
H&M	34,6	32,7	22,1	10,6	0,0	100
Zara	19,2	44,2	27,9	8,7	0,0	100
Primark	33,7	43,3	19,2	3,8	0,0	100
18. I would view this brand's CSR messages on social media as having high integrity						
H&M	23,1	45,2	26,0	5,8	0,0	100
Zara	13,5	39,4	40,4	6,7	0,0	100
Primark	23,1	47,1	26,9	2,9	0,0	100
19. I believe this brand is very responsive to consumers in social media						
H&M	21,2	28,8	39,4	10,6	0,0	100
Zara	8,7	28,8	50,0	12,5	0,0	100
Primark	16,3	33,7	45,2	4,8	0,0	100
20. This brand is competent in what they do						
H&M	16,3	29,8	28,8	24,0	1,0	100
Zara	6,7	20,2	43,3	28,8	1,0	100
Primark	20,2	27,9	35,6	16,3	0,0	100

21. How sceptical are you about the truthfulness of this brand's CSR efforts when communicated through social media? (n=104)

	extremely sceptical	sceptical	neutral	slightly sceptical	not sceptical at all	total
	%	%	%	%	%	%
H&M	44,2	32,7	12,5	9,6	1,0	100
Zara	21,2	49,0	20,2	9,6	0,0	100
Primark	39,4	39,4	12,5	8,7	0,0	100

22. I am more likely to believe and trust social responsibility messages from a company on social media if the company... (n=104)

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	total
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Has the right skills, knowledge, and capability to get things done	0,0	5,8	27,9	62,5	3,9	100
Prioritises the consumer's interests over one's own	1,0	7,7	19,2	44,23	28,9	100
Is motivated to solve problems that may occur during and after a service exchange	0,0	7,7	30,8	44,2	17,3	100
Follows a set of moral or ethical rules that I agree with	1,0	1,0	23,0	50,0	25,0	100

23. I am more likely to believe and trust social responsibility messages from a company on social media if the company... (n=104)

	strongly disagree	disagree	neutral	agree	strongly agree	total
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	%	%	%	%	%	%
Is able to execute tasks efficiently	0,0	3,9	25,0	44,2	26,9	100
Has policies that indicate respect for the customer	0,0	2,9	22,1	53,9	21,2	100
Is willing to bend company policies to help address customer needs	0,0	8,7	39,4	46,2	5,8	100
Acts in a way that aligns with their words	1,0	1,0	14,4	40,4	44,2	100

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