

Corporate Social Responsibility, Greenwashing Concerns, and Consumer Trust among Vietnamese University Students

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ABSTRACT: Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an important factor shaping consumer perceptions, especially among young consumers who increasingly expect firms to act responsibly toward society and the environment. At the same time, growing concerns about greenwashing have made consumers more cautious when evaluating corporate sustainability claims. This study examines how CSR awareness influences brand trust and green purchase intention among Vietnamese university students, while also exploring students' concerns about greenwashing and responsible CSR communication. Following a mixed-methods questionnaire design, data were collected from an illustrative sample of 150 university students who had experience evaluating brands or purchasing products influenced by CSR-related information. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency and percentage calculations, while open-ended responses were examined through thematic analysis. The findings indicate that most students are aware of CSR and pay attention to environmental protection, community support, employee welfare, product safety, and ethical business practices. CSR is perceived to strengthen brand trust when it is transparent, consistent, and connected to real corporate actions. Students also report that CSR can increase their intention to buy green products, although price, product quality, and perceived authenticity remain important conditions. The study identifies several concerns, including exaggerated environmental claims, lack of evidence, selective disclosure, and the use of CSR mainly for marketing purposes. The study concludes that CSR can be a meaningful tool for building consumer trust and encouraging sustainable consumption among young consumers, but only when companies communicate responsibly and avoid greenwashing. Practical implications are provided for businesses, universities, and policymakers seeking to promote ethical CSR communication and sustainable consumption in Vietnam.

KEYWORDS: corporate social responsibility; greenwashing; brand trust; green purchase intention; Vietnamese students; sustainable consumption

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a central issue in contemporary business and consumer research. Firms are no longer evaluated only by product quality, price, and service performance, but also by how they treat employees, protect the environment, support communities, and communicate honestly with stakeholders. The classical view of CSR emphasizes that firms have economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities toward society (Carroll, 1991). More recent research has shown that CSR can shape consumer evaluations, strengthen corporate associations, and influence purchase behavior when consumers perceive corporate actions as genuine and relevant (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

The growing importance of sustainability has also changed the behavior of young consumers. University students are often exposed to environmental campaigns, social media discussions, sustainable product labels, and brand activism. They may prefer companies that demonstrate responsibility toward the environment and society. However, young consumers may also become skeptical when firms communicate CSR in a vague, exaggerated, or inconsistent way. In this context, CSR is not only a communication tool but also a credibility test for corporate behavior.

Brand trust is one of the most important outcomes of CSR. When students believe that a firm acts ethically and contributes positively to society, they may develop greater confidence in the brand. Trust becomes particularly important in markets where consumers cannot easily verify all production processes, environmental impacts, or labor conditions. CSR can reduce uncertainty by signaling that the firm respects social and environmental values. However, this positive effect depends on perceived authenticity. If consumers believe that CSR is used only to improve image without real action, trust may decline.

Green purchase intention is another important outcome. Green purchase intention refers to consumers' willingness to buy products that are environmentally friendly, socially responsible, or produced in a sustainable way. CSR may encourage green purchase intention by increasing students' awareness of environmental problems and by creating positive associations with responsible brands.

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Nevertheless, students may not always convert positive attitudes into actual purchase intention. Price sensitivity, product quality, limited income, and distrust of CSR claims may weaken the link between CSR and green purchasing.

Greenwashing has become a major concern in CSR communication. Greenwashing occurs when firms mislead consumers about their environmental performance or exaggerate the environmental benefits of products or services (Delmas & Burbano, 2011). Previous studies have shown that greenwashing can reduce green trust and create confusion or perceived risk among consumers (Chen & Chang, 2013). Therefore, understanding students' concerns about greenwashing is important for both companies and educational institutions.

In Vietnam, CSR communication has become more visible through corporate sustainability reports, social media campaigns, environmental programs, charity activities, and green product promotions. However, the level of consumer understanding and critical evaluation of CSR remains uneven. Many students may recognize CSR messages, but they may not always know how to evaluate whether these messages are credible. Therefore, this study focuses on Vietnamese university students as young consumers who are both potential buyers and future employees, managers, and citizens.

This study aims to examine the relationship between CSR awareness, consumer trust, green purchase intention, and greenwashing concerns among Vietnamese university students. Specifically, it explores how students understand CSR, which CSR activities they notice, how CSR affects brand trust and green purchase intention, what concerns they have about greenwashing, and what suggestions they provide for responsible CSR communication.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How aware are university students of corporate social responsibility activities?

RQ2. What types of CSR activities do students pay most attention to?

RQ3. How does CSR influence students' trust in brands?

RQ4. How does CSR affect students' green purchase intention?

RQ5. What concerns do students have about CSR practices and greenwashing?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Sample

The illustrative sample consisted of 150 university students in Vietnam who had experience noticing CSR activities, sustainability messages, or green product communication from companies. The participants were mainly second-year, third-year, and fourth-year students because these groups are more likely to participate in consumer decision-making, online shopping, brand evaluation, and sustainability-related academic activities.

A purposive sampling method was used to select students who had at least basic awareness of CSR or had previously encountered CSR-related communication. This sampling approach was appropriate because the study focused on students' perceptions and experiences rather than generalizing to all Vietnamese consumers.

Among the 150 respondents, 60.0% were female and 40.0% were male. Regarding year of study, 25.3% were second-year students, 42.0% were third-year students, and 32.7% were fourth-year students. The respondents came from several academic fields, including business administration, economics, marketing, environmental studies, social sciences, and information technology. This diversity helped capture different perceptions of CSR and greenwashing across academic backgrounds.

2.2. Data Collection and Research Instrument

Data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire designed via Google Forms. The questionnaire included both closed-ended and open-ended questions. This mixed-methods design allowed the study to combine quantitative patterns with qualitative insights into students' views on CSR, brand trust, green purchase intention, and greenwashing.

The questionnaire consisted of 13 items. The closed-ended questions measured awareness of CSR, frequency of noticing CSR communication, types of CSR activities noticed, perceived effect of CSR on brand trust, perceived effect of CSR on green purchase intention, and concerns about greenwashing. The open-ended questions asked students to describe how CSR affected their trust in a brand, what CSR activities they considered most convincing, what signs made them suspect greenwashing, and what companies should do to communicate CSR responsibly.

The main questionnaire items included:

1. Have you heard of corporate social responsibility?
2. How often do you notice CSR or sustainability messages from companies?
3. What types of CSR activities do you pay attention to?
4. To what extent does CSR increase your trust in a brand?
5. To what extent does CSR influence your intention to buy green or sustainable products?
6. What factors make CSR communication credible to you?

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7. What concerns do you have about greenwashing?

8. What suggestions do you have for responsible CSR communication?

2.3. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage calculations. This method was suitable because the study aimed to describe students' awareness, perceptions, and concerns rather than test a complex causal model. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, the analysis involved reading responses, identifying initial codes, grouping similar codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, and interpreting the findings. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns in students' views on CSR authenticity, consumer trust, green purchase intention, and greenwashing concerns.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Awareness of CSR among Students

The results show that CSR is relatively familiar to Vietnamese university students. Out of 150 respondents, 128 students, equivalent to 85.3%, reported that they had heard of CSR or similar concepts such as business ethics, sustainability, environmental responsibility, or community contribution. Only 22 students, or 14.7%, stated that they had not clearly heard of CSR before.

Regarding the frequency of noticing CSR communication, 18.0% of students noticed CSR messages very often, 40.7% noticed them often, 28.0% noticed them sometimes, 10.0% rarely noticed them, and 3.3% never noticed such messages. These findings suggest that CSR communication has become visible to young consumers through advertising, social media, packaging, brand websites, and university-related discussions.

Table 1. Frequency of noticing CSR communication

Frequency of noticing CSR messages	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	27	18.0%
Often	61	40.7%
Sometimes	42	28.0%
Rarely	15	10.0%
Never	5	3.3%
Total	150	100%

3.2. Types of CSR Activities Noticed by Students

Students paid attention to several types of CSR activities. The most frequently noticed activity was environmental protection, reported by 74.0% of respondents. This included recycling programs, reducing plastic use, saving energy, using green packaging, and supporting climate-related campaigns. Community support was the second most common category, reported by 66.0% of students. This included charity programs, scholarships, disaster relief, and support for disadvantaged groups.

Employee welfare was noticed by 51.3% of respondents, while product safety and consumer protection were mentioned by 58.7%. Ethical business practices, including honesty in advertising and responsible sourcing, were reported by 46.0% of students. These results suggest that students understand CSR not only as environmental responsibility but also as a broader set of social, ethical, and stakeholder-oriented responsibilities.

Table 2. Types of CSR activities noticed by students

CSR activity	Frequency	Percentage
Environmental protection	111	74.0%
Community support and charity	99	66.0%
Product safety and consumer protection	88	58.7%
Employee welfare	77	51.3%
Ethical business practices	69	46.0%
Responsible supply chain	52	34.7%
Diversity and inclusion	38	25.3%

3.3. Perceived Benefits of CSR for Brand Trust

Most students perceived CSR as a factor that can strengthen brand trust. Approximately 80.0% agreed or strongly agreed that responsible corporate behavior makes them trust a brand more. Students explained that CSR signals that a company is not only profit-oriented but also cares about society, customers, and the environment. However, they also emphasized that CSR must be supported by evidence and consistent behavior.

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Thematic analysis of open-ended responses identified four major ways in which CSR increases brand trust: perceived honesty, social contribution, environmental responsibility, and long-term consistency. Students were more likely to trust companies that communicate specific actions, provide transparent evidence, and maintain CSR activities over time rather than using one-time campaigns.

Table 3. Perceived benefits of CSR for brand trust

Thematic category	Frequency	Example response
Perceived honesty	64	A company that shows real evidence of CSR seems more trustworthy.
Social contribution	58	I trust brands that support communities and not only focus on profit.
Environmental responsibility	55	If a company reduces plastic and pollution, I feel better about the brand.
Long-term consistency	42	CSR should be done regularly, not only when the company wants attention.

3.4. CSR and Green Purchase Intention

The findings show that CSR can influence students' green purchase intention, but the effect is conditional. About 52.0% of respondents stated that CSR clearly increased their intention to purchase green or sustainable products, while 32.7% said that CSR had some influence but depended on other factors. Approximately 15.3% indicated that CSR had little or no effect on their purchase intention.

Students who were positively influenced by CSR explained that they wanted to support responsible companies and reduce negative environmental impacts. However, several students noted that their purchase intention still depended on price, product quality, convenience, and the credibility of CSR claims. This finding is important because it shows that CSR alone may not be sufficient to create green purchasing behavior if products are too expensive or if students doubt the sincerity of the company.

Table 4. Perceived influence of CSR on green purchase intention

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
CSR clearly increases purchase intention	78	52.0%
CSR has some influence depending on other factors	49	32.7%
CSR has little or no influence	23	15.3%
Total	150	100%

3.5. Conditions that Make CSR Communication Credible

Students identified several conditions that make CSR communication credible. The most important condition was transparency, reported by 68.7% of respondents. Students wanted companies to provide clear information, measurable outcomes, and verifiable evidence. The second condition was consistency between CSR messages and actual business practices, reported by 62.0% of students. For example, a company promoting environmental protection should also reduce waste in packaging and production.

Third-party verification was mentioned by 41.3% of respondents. Students trusted CSR claims more when they were supported by certifications, independent reports, or credible organizations. Specific data and examples were also important, as vague statements such as “eco-friendly” or “responsible brand” were perceived as less convincing.

Table 5. Conditions that make CSR communication credible

Credibility condition	Frequency	Percentage
Transparency and evidence	103	68.7%
Consistency between words and actions	93	62.0%
Specific data and examples	76	50.7%
Third-party verification	62	41.3%
Long-term CSR commitment	59	39.3%
Open response to criticism	35	23.3%

3.6. Concerns about Greenwashing

Greenwashing was one of the most important concerns identified in this study. The largest group of students, 64.0%, expressed concern that companies may exaggerate environmental benefits. About 57.3% were concerned about a lack of evidence behind CSR

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claims. In addition, 48.7% worried that firms may use CSR mainly for advertising purposes, while 38.0% were concerned about selective disclosure, where companies show positive actions but hide negative impacts.

Open-ended responses further showed that students were not always able to distinguish genuine CSR from greenwashing. Some students believed that using green colors, nature images, or broad sustainability slogans could make a product appear responsible even when the company provides little proof. This finding supports the argument that CSR communication should be transparent, specific, and verifiable.

Table 6. Main concerns about CSR and greenwashing

Concern	Frequency	Percentage
Exaggerated environmental claims	96	64.0%
Lack of evidence	86	57.3%
CSR used mainly for advertising	73	48.7%
Selective disclosure of information	57	38.0%
Confusing eco-labels or vague slogans	51	34.0%
Higher price without real sustainability	45	30.0%

3.7. Suggestions for Responsible CSR Communication

Students provided several suggestions for responsible CSR communication. The most frequent suggestion was that companies should provide clear evidence of CSR activities. Another common suggestion was that firms should avoid exaggerated claims and communicate both achievements and limitations. Students also recommended that universities should educate students about CSR, greenwashing, and sustainable consumption so that they can make more informed decisions.

The results suggest that students do not reject CSR communication. Instead, they want companies to communicate CSR in a more honest, specific, and evidence-based way. This is important for businesses because poorly designed CSR communication may create skepticism rather than trust.

Table 7. Suggestions for responsible CSR communication

Thematic category	Frequency	Example response
Provide clear evidence	71	Companies should show numbers, reports, or real activities, not only slogans.
Avoid exaggerated claims	55	Brands should not say they are green if only one small part is green.
Use third-party verification	43	Certificates or independent organizations make CSR more believable.
Educate consumers	39	Students need to learn how to identify greenwashing.
Connect CSR with real products	36	CSR should match product quality, packaging, and business practices.

4. DISCUSSION

This study examined CSR awareness, greenwashing concerns, brand trust, and green purchase intention among Vietnamese university students. The findings show that CSR is visible to many students and is associated with positive brand evaluations. Students paid particular attention to environmental protection, community support, product safety, employee welfare, and ethical business practices. This indicates that young consumers understand CSR as a multidimensional concept rather than a narrow environmental slogan.

The first important finding is that CSR can strengthen brand trust. Students reported that they were more likely to trust companies that demonstrate social and environmental responsibility. This finding is consistent with the view that CSR can create favorable corporate associations and improve consumer responses (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). However, the findings also show that trust is not automatic. CSR must be perceived as authentic, transparent, and consistent. If students believe that CSR is used only as a marketing tactic, trust may decrease.

The second important finding concerns green purchase intention. CSR can encourage students to support green or sustainable products, especially when they believe that their purchase contributes to environmental protection or social improvement. However, students remain practical consumers. Price, quality, convenience, and credibility still matter. This suggests that businesses should not rely on CSR messages alone; they must also ensure that green products are accessible, reliable, and competitively positioned.

The third important finding relates to greenwashing. Students expressed strong concerns about exaggerated environmental claims, lack of evidence, and vague sustainability messages. These concerns are consistent with previous research showing that greenwashing can reduce green trust and increase consumer confusion (Chen & Chang, 2013). In the Vietnamese context, where

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CSR communication is becoming more common, companies must be careful not to overstate their achievements or use symbolic messages without substantive action.

The findings also have implications for CSR communication. Firms should communicate CSR in a way that is specific, evidence-based, and understandable. General slogans such as “green”, “sustainable”, or “responsible” are less persuasive when they are not supported by measurable actions. Companies should provide concrete information such as reduced plastic volume, energy savings, supplier standards, employee welfare policies, community beneficiaries, or independent certification. This approach can help reduce skepticism and strengthen consumer trust.

The study also has implications for universities. Since students are future consumers, employees, managers, and citizens, universities can play an important role in developing CSR literacy. Courses in business ethics, marketing, management, and sustainability should help students evaluate CSR claims critically. Students should be able to distinguish genuine CSR from greenwashing, understand the role of stakeholders, and make responsible consumption decisions.

Finally, policymakers and consumer protection agencies may support responsible CSR communication by encouraging clearer environmental claims, standardized labels, and stronger monitoring of misleading advertising. When CSR communication is credible, it can support sustainable consumption. When it is misleading, it may damage consumer trust and reduce the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated corporate social responsibility, greenwashing concerns, brand trust, and green purchase intention among Vietnamese university students. The findings show that students are generally aware of CSR and pay attention to environmental protection, community support, product safety, employee welfare, and ethical business practices. CSR can improve brand trust and encourage green purchase intention, especially when students perceive corporate actions as transparent, consistent, and authentic. The study also identifies significant concerns about greenwashing. Students are worried about exaggerated environmental claims, lack of evidence, selective disclosure, confusing eco-labels, and CSR campaigns used mainly for advertising purposes. These concerns suggest that CSR communication must be carefully designed. Companies should avoid vague slogans and provide clear evidence of their social and environmental contributions.

Based on the findings, the study proposes several recommendations. First, companies should communicate CSR through specific and verifiable information rather than broad claims. Second, CSR activities should be consistent with actual business practices, including product design, packaging, supply chain management, and employee treatment. Third, third-party verification and transparent reporting should be used to strengthen credibility. Fourth, universities should improve CSR and sustainability literacy among students so that young consumers can evaluate corporate claims critically. Finally, future research should use larger samples, compare different consumer groups, and apply more advanced methods such as regression analysis or structural equation modeling to test the relationships among CSR awareness, perceived authenticity, brand trust, greenwashing concern, and green purchase intention.

Although this study provides useful insights, it has limitations. The current manuscript uses illustrative survey results and should be validated with actual empirical data before formal journal or conference submission. Future studies should collect data from multiple universities and examine whether the effects of CSR differ across gender, academic discipline, income level, and product category.

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