



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Consumer's response to CSR activities: Mediating role of brand image and brand attitude

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**Abstract**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a well-touted term in management disciplines that connects the business goals and societal values. CSR is used as a strategic approach that gives competitive differentiation through coagulation of both business and overarching societal goals. Organizations believe that goodwill created by CSR activities bestows the strategic competitive advantage and sustainable development. The objective of the study is to measure the impact of CSR activities on purchase intention either directly or indirectly; for this purpose, the study has administered a structured questionnaire and collected responses from Indian citizens purchasing products from FMCG companies topping the CSR spending list and used structural equation modeling to validate the results. The findings suggest that customers process CSR details unconsciously and may not remember the explicit detail, but they are more likely to include the brand in the consideration set evoked by positive attitudes trailing behind.

**KEYWORDS**

brand attitude, brand image, competitive advantage, CSR, FMCG, mediation, perceived quality, perception, purchase intention, SPSS process, strategy, sustainable development

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

A high degree of competition between corporate houses in today's world have paved the way for building strong and effective branding strategies for protecting loyal customers in terms of value maximization. With intensified levels of competitive pressures, managers are forced to adapt changing customer expectations (Ghodeswar, 2008). Generally, people evaluate brands on account of more than the product offering; apart from the functional values, they also look at the emotional and social values associated with the brand; the level of involvement with the brand goes up with the level of associations they make. Past studies have indicated that consumers are progressively becoming more concerned toward corporate social responsibility (CSR) and raising their expectations toward companies for maintaining social and ethical responsibility and are keen to know how firms handle CSR activities (Dawkins & Lewis, 2003; Schmeltz, 2012). Naturally, marketers started giving greater importance to CSR. With growing environmental awareness about social disparity and emerging

corporate scandals, there exists compulsion for companies to abide by legal guidelines and responsibility for solving these issues, which are far beyond financial aims. Similarly, social and environmental performance pose a significant element in corporate reputation ranking (Bebbington, Larrinaga-Gonzalez, & Moneva-Abadia, 2008).

Turker (2009) defined CSR as a responsibility beyond the business interest with a positive effect on the stakeholders. Most of the early researches define CSR as a panoply of charitable efforts; but the trend is changing and managers view CSR as strategic efforts directed toward value creation and value enabling for an organization (Staudt, Shao, Dubinsky, & Wilson, 2014). CSR has become the legal, legitimate, and critical endeavors for business leaders (Gelb & Strawser, 2001). The majority of the companies with an interest in public welfare commit themselves in business activities that bring changes to the society.

In order to enhance the focus on CSR and sustainable development, mastering CSR is vital to organizational authenticity (Johansen & Nielsen, 2012), evade critical brand harm, encourage positive

corporate reputation, and maintain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. (Polonsky & Jevons, 2006). Oberseder, Schlegelmilch, and Gruber (2011) in their qualitative research had found the attitude-behavior gap. Based on their study, customers have shown a positive attitude toward buying the products from socially responsible companies, but when it comes to the actual purchase decision, this effect is not transferred. Hur, Kim, and Park (2013) have also found a strong relationship between CSR and brand equity, mediated by corporate reputation and credibility, but the study could not find a direct impact of CSR on brand equity.

Few studies in the past claim and suggest that CSR has substantial effect when it comes to purchasing decision, brand choice, recommending the brand to others, or firm value (Boccia & Sarnacchiaro, 2017; Luffarelli & Awaysheh, 2018; Salmones, Crespo, & Bosque, 2005; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Werther Jr & Chandler, 2005). Contrary to these claims, some studies have established that CSR does not influencing the purchase decisions made by consumers (Castaldo, Perrini, Misani, & Tencati, 2009; Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010). There could be numerous other factors like culture, spending habits, choice of products, economic growth and liberty, price effects, awareness of the CSR activities by corporates, and real impact of the CSR activities, which contributes to this contradictory effect (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2015).

In India, with the Ministry of Corporate Affairs' mandate, CSR spending by Indian companies is no more philanthropic or volunteering. The companies qualifying a certain minimum criteria should contribute 2% of their profit in CSR activities. Although some companies go beyond the call of duty, not all companies spend or achieve the 2% goal given by Ministry of Corporate Affairs. The CSR spending is witnessing year-on-year growth, 22% growth in 2017 over 2016 (KPMG, 2018). The fiscal year 2017 has seen that bigger companies with deep pockets have started spending more on the CSR activities when compared to the previous financial years. Companies have spent toward child education, skill development, health care, rural development, and environmental sustainability initiatives. Apart from the mandate, companies go by the belief that CSR will usher in goodwill creating snowball effects in sales, strategic competitive advantage, and sustainability in business. CSR thus acts as a catalyst and business attempt to realize the various demands and expectations for better growth (Steurer, Martinuzzi, & Margula, 2012).

Although the research in CSR is vast in number, only very few studies focus on the impact of CSR on product or brand. Based on the understanding from the previous studies, the following research questions were framed:

1. Do CSR activities impact the purchase intention of consumers?
2. Is there any relationship between brand and perceived CSR awareness?

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Nowadays, CSR is used as a strategic approach that gives a competitive differentiation impetus acknowledged by both academicians and

managerial functions (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Simultaneously, CSR initiatives also consist of a wide range of activities, including cause promotion, societal marketing, corporate philanthropy, cause-related marketing, and community volunteering (Kim, Park, & Wier, 2012).

On the other side, customers buy products or services as a solution to their specific problem. Since so many products are available, they choose a brand after careful evaluations on the attributes (Laroche, Kim, & Zhou, 1996; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), favorable brand image (Shamma & Hassan, 2011), and favorable brand attitude (Shim, Eastlick, Lotz, & Warrington, 2001); they also react to advertisements and other stimulating factors (Wu & Wang, 2014). Moreover, when customers are aware about the CSR activities, the recognition of the brand goes up as well as the customer's attitude and it affects the purchase intention (De Wolf, Mejri, & Lamouchi, 2012).

Firms are increasingly found to integrate CSR programs into their business strategies for generating brand building benefits (Hoeffler, Bloom, & Keller, 2010). CSRs have been ubiquitous across a variety of businesses in diverse countries and industrial settings (Singh & Del Bosque, 2008). As discussed, past researchers and academicians have acknowledged CSR as a brand building element in today's business settings and have determined that CSR leads to brand loyalty, positive brand relations, and perceived quality contributing holistically toward the growth of brand equity (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002; Sprinkle & Maines, 2010; Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000).

Due to the increase in public demand for transparent CSR activities (Wang, Chen, Yu, & Hsiao, 2015), the majority of companies with an interest in public welfare commit themselves to business activities bringing changes to the society, and CSR has become as the legal, legitimate, and critical endeavors for business leaders (Gelb & Strawser, 2001). Customers will stick to the brand with more CSR-laden emotional values and are less likely to turn toward the competitive offerings (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2004). When evaluating two similar brands, customers may consider a brand with societal reputation (Hea & Laib, 2014). CSR activities on its spin will further, in the long run, create favorable attitude and behavior, purchase intention, and employment seeking, and it will also strengthen advocacy behavior of the stakeholders (Du et al., 2010).

### 2.1 | Hypothesis development

This section details on theoretical and empirical studies on CSR, brand image, brand attitude, perceived quality, and purchase intention. Based on the relationship accepted and available in the literature between these constructs, a theoretical model and hypotheses are proposed.

#### 2.1.1 | Effect of CSR on purchase intention

The CSR construct measures the respondents' awareness and their perception toward the CSR activities. There are a whole lot of studies supporting the impact of CSR on consumer behavior either directly or indirectly (Abdeen, Rajah, & Gaur, 2016; Amoroso & Roman, 2015; Lee & Lee, 2015; Lee & Shin, 2010; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Wong pitch, Minakan, Powpaka, & Laohavichien, 2015). Consumer behavior can be emotional, cognitive, or action-oriented like brand preference,

purchase intention, brand loyalty, or brand equity. This study focuses on the impact of CSR activities on purchase intention. The items under purchase intention capture respondents' willingness to purchase a specific brand and their willingness to repurchase it. By this, the following hypotheses are formed.

**H1.** *CSR has a direct positive relationship with purchase intention.*

### 2.1.2 | Impact of CSR on brand image

The expansion of a positive brand image and stakeholder engagement is connected with the notion of being accountable and transparent toward these by respecting the environment (Salmones et al., 2005), reducing the consumption of natural resources (Manaktola & Jauhari, 2007), engaging in social causes, and providing a fair treatment to employees (David, Kline, & Dai, 2005). A company's image is an asset that requires favorableness and familiarity as it creates an impact on customer perceptions about the operations of the firm (Kang & James, 2004). Hence, CSR perceptions play an important role in providing valuable contents toward brand image building.

Customers, while taking decisions for their purchases, are not only influenced by the tangible benefit it provides (quality and price) but intangible assets as well, such as brand image, brand association, or business reputation (Cretu & Brodie, 2007). Brands based on emotional values are considered to be more durable in nature and are less likely to undergo attrition from competitive actions (Lynch & De Chernatony, 2004). As a result, CSR becomes an important emotional characteristic of the brand image in order to sustain in a competitive market environment. By this token, the following hypothesis is formed.

**H2.** *CSR has a direct positive relationship with the brand image.*

### 2.1.3 | Impact of CSR on brand attitude

Brand attitude is the customers' reaction toward a brand and his liking to a brand, and it is useful in predicting the responses to the marketing activities (Howard, 1994). Brand attitude is determined by familiarity and confidence customers have on a brand; the more the familiarity and confidence, the more the purchase intention will be. Although brand attitude and purchase intentions are related, brand attitude is a summary evaluation made by the customer. Purchase intention is the behavioral attitude of the customer; it is not same feeling the customer has toward a brand, but the motivation or conscious plan for an action they are going to perform (Spears & Singh, 2004). Lii and Lee (2012) found that there is a strong relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention in the context of CSR. By this, the following hypothesis is formed.

**H3.** *CSR has a direct positive relationship with brand attitude.*

### 2.1.4 | Impact of CSR on perceived quality

Customers may consider a brand with societal reputation when evaluating two similar brands (Hea & Laib, 2014). CSR activities, in the long run, will create favorable attitude and behavior, purchase intention,

and employment seeking, and it will also strengthen advocacy behavior of the stakeholders (Du et al., 2010). Perceived quality is the customer's view or belief in the overall quality of the brand; for all the brands they know, customers will have an estimate of quality—the brand with superior estimated quality will be preferred for the purchase decision (Zeithaml, 1988). In most of the product categories, the perceived quality can be considered a key element in influencing the choice of brand for the purchase (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010; Kayaman & Arasli, 2007). By this, the following hypothesis is formed.

**H4.** *CSR has a direct positive relationship with perceived quality.*

### 2.1.5 | Mediating role of brand image

An ethical brand receives strong bonding with the society as well as where value-driven activities of the company become reinforced (Berry, 2000) and generates a distinctive character (Keller & Aaker, 1992) and value systems (Turban & Greening, 1997) germinating behavioral intention toward the company (Maignan, Ferrell, & Hult, 1999). If consumers perceive the brand as socially responsible, they tend to create meaningful associations; these consumers support the company's goals, protect its reputation, support the company's products, and they stay loyal to the organization (He & Li, 2011). By this, the following hypothesis is formed.

**H5.** *Brand image has a mediating effect on CSR and purchase intention relationship.*

### 2.1.6 | Mediating role of brand attitude

Brand attitude is an important element as it is being used to envisage customers buying preferences (Chaudhuri, 1999). Companies need to recognize their loyal buyers and hence further explore their brand likings. It points out to consumers' likes or dislikes; thus, it is a useful basis of consumers' buying willingness and brand loyalty (Burton, Lichtenstein, Netemeyer, & Garretson, 1998). Some studies indicate that consumers perceive CSR as an influencing criterion for holding their beliefs, attitude, and purchase intention (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). By this, the following hypothesis is formed.

**H6.** *Brand attitude has a mediating effect on CSR and purchase intention relationship.*

### 2.1.7 | Mediating role of perceived quality

Almost all the researchers accept the role of perceived quality in affecting the behavioral intention of the consumer (Carman, 1990; Gatti, Caruana, & Snehota, 2012; Zeithaml, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1996); Zeithaml (1988) claims that perceived quality is the consumer's imagination and evaluation toward the market offering, and it does not measure the actual quality of the product. Studies have found that usage of natural ingredients and environmental friendly practices can create positive associations with the brand as consumers evaluate the organization's ability (Poolthong & Mandhachitara, 2009). By this, the following hypothesis is formed.

**H7.** *Perceived quality has a mediating effect on CSR and purchase intention relationship.*

### 2.1.8 | Mediating role of brand image and brand attitude

Brand image is a combination of favorability, strength, and uniqueness of brand associations (Keller, 1993) by which it can create uniqueness and differentiate the brand from the competition (Wu & Wang, 2014). Brand image is formed in the customer's mind based on the knowledge and confidence/trust they have toward the brand (Howard & Sheth, 1969). CSR can be directed to build a better brand image (Porter & Kramer, 2006), and companies can use distinctive brand images to create positive feelings toward a brand (Wu & Wang, 2014). If the brand performs well, customers will be satisfied and they will create a positive attitude and eventually develop loyalty with a consistently good performance by the brand (Brandt, 1998). By this, the following hypothesis is formed.

**H8.** *Brand image and brand attitude have a sequential mediating effect on CSR and purchase intention relationship.*

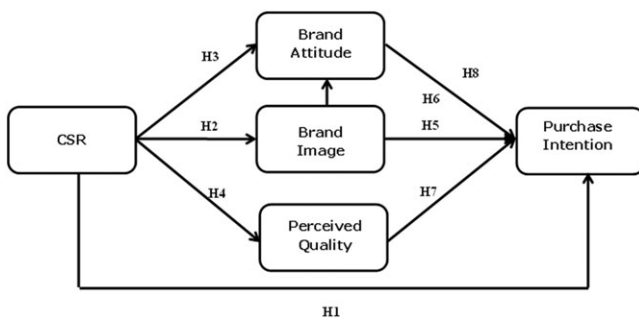
After careful analysis of the literature, a conceptual framework has been proposed. Literature gives the direct positive relationship of brand image, brand attitude, perceived quality, and CSR over purchase intention. When the price is a constant, consumers may favor a brand over others; once the price is introduced, consumer will look for the quality of the offering. This study focuses on testing the role of CSR on consumers' purchase intention. The conceptual framework is given in Figure 1.

## 3 | RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Descriptive research design is used in this study to empirically test the role of CSR in brand equity and its impact. Also, the mediation effect of brand image and brand attitude between CSR and brand equity was focused.

### 3.1 | Measurement items

To measure the role of CSR on purchase intention, a structured questionnaire with scaled items on CSR association measured by four items was adopted from Marin and Ruiz (2007). Brand attitude (five items) was drawn



**FIGURE 1** Conceptual framework Note: H1 gives the direct relationship between CSR and purchase intention; H2 gives CSR and brand image relationship; H3 gives CSR and brand attitude relationship; H4 gives CSR and perceived quality relationship; H5, H6, and H7 give the mediating roles of brand image, brand attitude, and perceived quality respectively in CSR and purchase intention relationship; and H8 gives the serial mediation of brand image and brand attitude on CSR and purchase intention relationship

from Erdem and Swait (2004) to measure the attitude toward trustworthiness of the brand. Perceived quality (four items) was drawn from Pappu, Quester, and Cooksey (2006), and to measure the purchase intention, the items were borrowed from Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal (1991) with seven items that measure the consumer's willingness to buy the product.

The sample units were Indian citizens purchasing products from top FMCG companies in CSR spending, selling products in India. An online questionnaire was used to collect the responses. In total, 232 samples were collected and after data cleaning 202 samples have taken for analysis (Table 1, descriptive statistics shows the percentage of respondents), which was within the accepted sample size of 200 for PLS SEM analysis (Kline, 2005). SPSS software was used in data cleaning, and Smart PLS was used in testing the hypotheses.

## 4 | ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The analysis part of the study is discussed in two stages (a) measurement model and (b) structural model. The measurement model represents the relationship between the measured variables and the latent variables, whereas the structural model embodies the relationship between the latent variables (Table 2).

### 4.1 | Measurement model

Structural equation modeling models are used to find the interdependencies among the underlying variables. Since all the scales were adopted from previous models, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to find the relationship between the factors and to identify their contribution on influencing the adoption (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Table 3 shows the Cronbach's value for CSR (0.85), brand image (0.81), brand attitude (0.84), perceived quality (0.89), and purchase intention (0.76). The values are well above the threshold value of 0.70 indicated by Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and William (2010), thus confirming the reliability of the scales to measure.

The composite reliability can be used to measure the internal consistency among the constructs. The composite reliability values range from 0.86 to 0.93 (Table 3, reliability and convergent validity check) well above the limit of 0.7 given by Bagozzi and Yi (1988), indicating that the scales were reliable in measuring internal consistency satisfactorily. The study adapted the constructs and measurements from previous studies, and enough support has also been taken from the theoretical and empirical studies conducted earlier, thus satisfying the problem of content and construct validity (Hair, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2011). To verify the face validity of the scale, the instrument was circulated to 30 students and their opinion on the statements was taken. Based on the feedback, the statements were slightly changed to suit the local requirements without changing the meaning.

To check the linear dependence of the indicators VIF values were calculated and the values were ranging from 1.82 to 4.00 which are within the limit of 5 indicated by Hair et al. (2010). Fornell and Larcker (1981) suggest that, to achieve discriminant validity the squared root of AVE in each latent variable should be larger than the correlation values of other latent variables. The table 4 (Discriminant Validity) shows that the model has achieved the discriminant validity.

**TABLE 1** Summary of studies done

References	Country	Industry	Data source	Method	Findings
Sanyal and Datta (2011)	Eastern India	Indian pharmaceutical industry	Survey	Two-way repeated measures ANOVA, regression	Branded generic drugs were consistently perceived to have higher quality than the branded drugs, the effects of information were substantially higher branded generics consistently perceived to have slightly lower quality than the branded drugs, when information characteristics effects were adjusted.
Salehzadeh, Khazaei Pool, and Jafari Najafabadi (2018)	Iran	Banking	Survey	Regression coefficient and <i>t</i> statistic	The results of this research showed that corporate social responsibility has a significant direct effect on brand image. Also, brand image has a significant direct effect on brand equity.
Singh and Verma (n>2017)	India	Multiple	Survey	Structural equation modeling (SEM)	CSR initiatives have a positive impact on brand value through mediating effects of enhanced brand image and brand loyalty.
Pratihari and uzma (2018)	India	Banking	Survey	Structural equation modeling (SEM)	Significant impact of CSR components (economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic) on corporate branding to enhance customer brand loyalty with the result of the direct and indirect model path analysis confirms that customers' BL can be enhanced more efficiently when CSR becomes an integral part of corporate branding.
Tingchi Liu, Anthony Wong, Shi, Chu, and Brock (2014)	China	Hotel	Survey	Regression	Customers' brand preference can be enhanced by CSR performance, impact of CSR on stakeholders has the strongest influence customers' brand preference, and perceived brand quality was found to be a mediator of the relationship between CSR performance and brand preference.
Martinez, Perez, and Del Bosque (2014)	Spain	Hotel	Survey	Structural equation modeling (SEM)	The role of CSR as a tool to generate both functional and affective brand image, and loyalty was confirmed with a greater influence on the affective dimension of brand image, whereas functional image has a greater influence on brand loyalty. Furthermore, CSR can be seen as having a direct positive effect on brand loyalty.

Source: Author compilation.

**TABLE 2** Descriptive statistics

#	Details	Response	Respondents (%)
1	Gender	Male	52
		Female	48
2	Age	21–30	47
		31–40	33
		41–50	15
		>50	5
3	Brand preference	P&G	5
		ITC	15
		HUL	28
		Coca-Cola India	14
		Nestle India	10
	Dabur India	19	
	Patanjali Ayurved	9	

## 4.2 | Structural model

Figure 2 shows the effect of CSR, brand image, perceived quality, and brand attitude on purchase intention. The direct impact of the

endogenous variables are positive and significant except CSR ( $\beta = 0.03$ ;  $t = 0.95$ ). The extracted values from the boot strapping (Table 5, path coefficient values and *T* statistics values of direct effects) explain that brand image ( $\beta = 0.10$ ;  $t = 3.21$ ), brand attitude ( $\beta = 0.65$ ;  $t = 19.28$ ), and perceived quality ( $\beta = 0.07$ ;  $t = 1.963$ ) are having direct positive relationship with purchase intention with an  $R^2$  value of 0.65. The research shows that CSR is having direct positive impact on brand image ( $\beta = 0.60$ ,  $t = 22.34$ ), brand attitude ( $\beta = 0.30$ ;  $t = 10.26$ ), and perceived quality ( $\beta = 0.63$ ;  $t = 24.10$ ), thus leading to the acceptance of H2, H3, and H4.

## 4.3 | Estimation of mediation effect

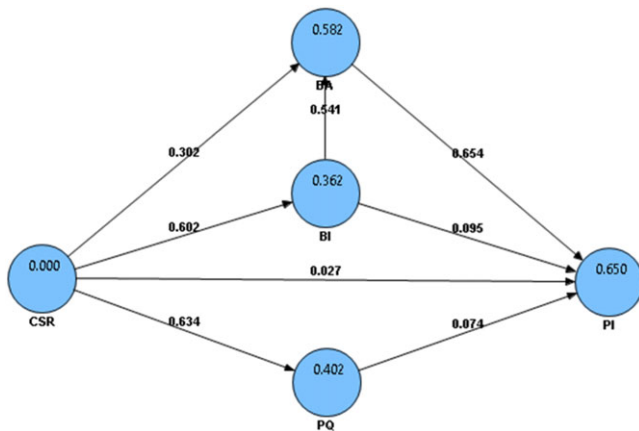
The mediation effect of a construct can be evaluated by measuring the “*t* value” before and after the introduction of the mediating variable in an existing relationship (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Figure 3 shows the mediating role of brand image on the CSR and purchase intention relationship. The direct relationship between CSR and purchase intention is direct positive relationship with significant *P* value ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ,  $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $t = 5.15$ ,  $P < .01$ ) before introducing the mediating variable brand image. The direct relationship between CSR and purchase intention becomes insignificant ( $\beta = 0.16$ ;  $t = 2.52$ ;  $P > .01$ ) with the mediating

**TABLE 3** Reliability and convergent validity check

	AVE	Composite reliability (CR)	Cronbach's alpha
BA	0.68	0.89	0.84
BI	0.72	0.88	0.81
CSR	0.87	0.93	0.85
PI	0.66	0.86	0.76
PQ	0.75	0.92	0.89

**TABLE 4** Discriminant validity

	BA	BI	CSR	PI	PQ
BA	0.82				
BI	0.73	0.85			
CSR	0.56	0.44	0.93		
PI	0.65	0.59	0.43	0.81	
PQ	0.81	0.80	0.56	0.62	0.87

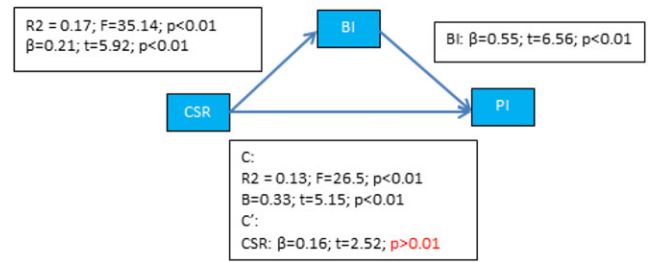
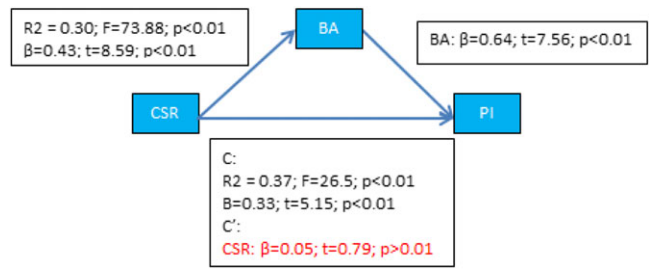
**FIGURE 2** Estimated model [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

path of CSR and brand image ( $\beta = 0.21$ ;  $t = 5.92$ ;  $P < .01$ ) and brand image and purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.55$ ;  $t = 6.56$ ;  $P < .01$ ) becomes significant and creates a full mediation thus leads to the acceptance of H5.

Figure 4 shows the mediation effect of brand attitude in the CSR and purchase intention relationship. As indicated earlier, the CS–purchase intention direct relationship is positive and significant before introducing the mediating variable brand attitude. The direct path

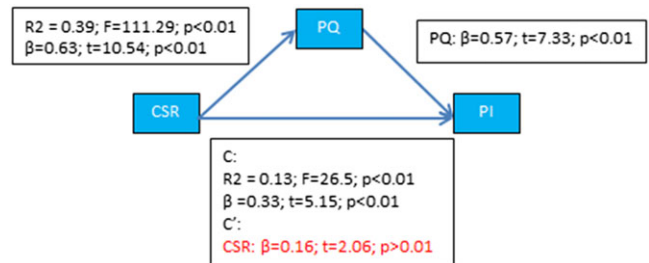
**TABLE 5** Path coefficient values and T statistics values of direct effects

	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	Standard error (STERR)	T statistics ( O/STERR )
BA → PI	0.65	0.65	0.03	0.03	19.28
BI → BA	0.54	0.54	0.03	0.03	19.89
BI → PI	0.10	0.10	0.03	0.03	3.21
CSR → BA	0.30	0.30	0.03	0.03	10.26
CSR → BI	0.60	0.60	0.03	0.03	22.34
CSR → PI	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.95
CSR → PQ	0.63	0.63	0.03	0.03	24.10
PQ → PI	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.04	1.96

**FIGURE 3** Mediation effect CSR → BI → PI demonstrating full mediation [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]**FIGURE 4** Mediation effect of CSR → BA → PI demonstrating full mediation [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

becomes insignificant with the mediating path of CSR and brand attitude ( $\beta = 0.43$ ;  $t = 8.59$ ;  $P < .01$ ); brand attitude and purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.64$ ;  $t = 7.56$ ;  $P < .01$ ) become significant and demonstrate full mediation, thus leading to the acceptance of H6.

Figure 5 shows the mediating role of perceived quality on the CSR and purchase intention relationship. The direct relationship between CSR and purchase intention is direct positive relationship with significant P value ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ,  $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $t = 5.15$ ,  $P < .01$ ) before

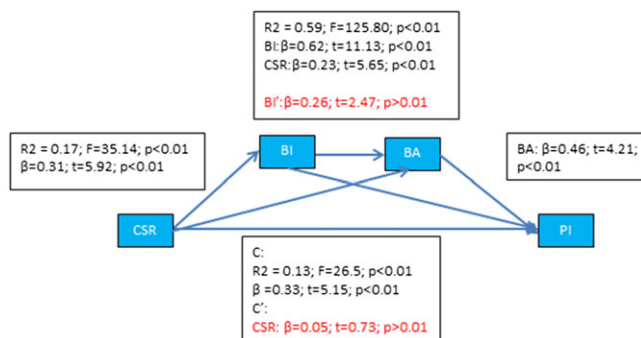
**FIGURE 5** Serial mediation effect of CSR → PQ → PI demonstrating full mediation [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

introducing the mediating variable perceived quality. The direct relationship between CSR and purchase intention becomes insignificant ( $\beta = 0.16$ ;  $t = 2.06$ ;  $P > .01$ ) with the mediating path of CSR and perceived quality ( $\beta = 0.63$ ;  $t = 10.54$ ;  $P < .01$ ), and perceived quality and purchase intention ( $\beta = 0.57$ ;  $t = 7.33$ ;  $P < .01$ ) path becomes significant and creates a full mediation, thus leading to the acceptance of H7.

Brand image is the perceptual belief about the brand's attributes and benefit association; although it is normally considered the basis of overall evaluation of a brand, it is essential to understand that brand image is a holistic construct formed from overall brand associations, whereas brand attitude is the overall evaluation of the brand that requires cognitive and affects fit that leads to the behavioral intention (Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001). So brand image is considered an antecedent to the brand attitude. As per Hayes (2017) to get a serial mediation, the direct path should become insignificant after introducing the mediating variables, and indirect path 1 should also be insignificant with indirect path 2 as significant.

Figure 6 shows that before introducing the mediators, the CSR–purchase intention relationship was positive and significant. After introducing the mediating variables brand image and brand attitude, the relationship became insignificant ( $\beta = 0.05$ ;  $t = 0.73$ ;  $P > .01$ ) and also the indirect path 1 of CSR, brand image, and purchase intention is insignificant ( $\beta = 0.26$ ;  $t = 2.47$ ;  $P > .01$ ) and the indirect path of CSR, brand image, brand attitude, and purchase intention was significant ( $\beta = 0.46$ ;  $t = 4.21$ ;  $P < .01$ ) and demonstrates full mediation, thus leading to the acceptance of H8.

Table 6 shows the summary of *T* statistics and the acceptance of hypotheses. Except the CSR and purchase intention relationship (H1),



**FIGURE 6** Serial mediation effect of CSR → BI → BA → PI demonstrating full mediation [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

**TABLE 6** Summary of *T* statistics and acceptance of hypothesis

Hypothesis	Construct	<i>T</i> statistics ( O/STERR )	Status
H1	CSR → PI	0.95	Not accepted
H2	CSR → BI	22.34	Accepted
H3	CSR → BA	10.26	Accepted
H4	CSR → PQ	24.10	Accepted
H5	CSR → BI → PI	6.56	Accepted
H6	CSR → BA → PI	7.56	Accepted
H7	CSR → PQ → PI	2.63	Accepted
H8	CSR → BI → BA → PI	4.21	Accepted

all the other hypotheses were statistically significant, and henceforth, they are accepted.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of the study is to measure the impact of CSR activities either directly or indirectly on purchase intention. A theoretical model was developed from literature review, and the same was tested empirically.

The study considered seven different brands and measured the perceived CSR awareness, and the ANOVA result ( $F = 0.89$ ;  $P = .5 > .05$ ) reveals that all the brands do not differ from each other; the result is similar to the study carried out by Türkeli, Uzunoğlu, Kaplan, and Vural (2016). Although most of the past research in the CSR area claims the direct impact of CSR activities on business outcomes, this study could not find any direct impact on the purchase intention ( $t = 0.95$ ); this leads to the nonacceptance of H1. There could be multiple reasons for this effect; although the organization spends huge amount of money, the effectiveness of the CSR activities should be communicated to the consumers. Maybe if this communication is lacking or if it is ineffective, the CSR activities cannot form or influence the purchase intention. On the other hand, there can be an effect of cultural differences that contributes to the effect. The findings of the study are in line with the results found by Kim and Bae (2016); they have found a favorable relationship between perceived CSR and purchase intention for Korean consumers, whereas with American consumers, they do not find a favorable relationship.

In alignment with the previous studies, the study found a direct positive relationship of CSR with brand image ( $t = 22.34$ ; Hea & Laib, 2014), brand attitude ( $t = 10.26$ ; Ho, 2017; Pino, Amatulli, Angelis, & Peluso, 2016), and perceived quality ( $t = 24.10$ ; Poolthong & Mandhachitara, 2009); this leads to the acceptance of H2, H3, and H4. The brand is the result of firm's values, strategies, and competences, which is consciously communicated in all marketing activities. The customer tries to associate all this, and they create a brand image when they have trust in the ability and reputation of the firm (Popoli, 2011); this brand image provides a competitive edge and leads to the favorable behavioral intentions. Here the brand image acts as an intervening variable (mediator) and connects the CSR awareness and purchase intention; the study has found that brand image acts as an intervening variable, the results are significant ( $t = 6.56$ ), and the H5 was accepted.

When the consumer believes that CSR is the right thing to do and when they observe an organization involved in their intended way, they tend to create favorable attitude. Since consumers are aware about the organization's CSR activities and its brands, it is possible to form attitudinal responses to both firm's CSR and brand (Wong pitch et al., 2015). The result of the study found similar effect, and the mediating role of brand attitude ( $t = 7.56$ ) in the CSR and purchase intention relationship is significant and leads to the acceptance of H6. Similarly, the study found the mediating role of perceived quality ( $t = 2.63$ ) in the CSR and purchase intention relationship, which leads to the acceptance of H7.

According to the social exchange theory, the humans form relationships based on the cost–benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives. When consumer encounters a brand involved in CSR

activities, they tend to see more value with the brand provided the consumer patronizes the ethical behavior. This creates positive brand image, and consumers evaluate the brand better than the alternatives available; this perception of fairness leads to the favorable brand associations, and the consumer creates feelings with the brand, which leads to the brand engagement or purchase intention. The result of the study found similar effect, and the mediating role of brand image and brand attitude in the CSR and purchase intention was significant ( $t = 4.21$ ), which leads to the acceptance of H8.

## 5.1 | Theoretical implications

The impact of CSR on business is a topic long debated one. Most of the studies measure the impact by evaluating different financial outcomes such as brand preference, purchase intention, brand equity, and financial performances. The conceptual model is built after a careful analysis on available literature and was duly tested empirically. A vast majority of empirical studies clearly and emphatically tells us that CSR is having a direct impact on business outcomes. Studies conducted by Sen and Bhattacharya (2001), Salmones et al. (2005), Werther Jr and Chandler (2005), Martínez and Bosque (2013), Hur, Kim, and Woo (2013), Lee and Lee (2015), Pino et al. (2016), Kim and Bae (2016), Boccia and Sarnacchiaro (2017), and Luffarelli and Awaysheh (2018) provide strong evidence to the above fact. Also, a considerable number of studies strongly provide evidence that CSR does not have a direct positive relationship with business outcome (Pai, Lai, Chiu, & Yang, 2015; Wong pitch et al., 2015; Wu & Lin, 2014). However, a consumer cuts across several stages in his purchase behavior, and the significant stages are the cognitive, affective, and cognitive components leading to purchase intention. The study tries to explore whether CSR has an impact on the purchase behavior and specifically the purchase intention of the customer. The purchase intention is a complex factor that includes an array of variables that directly and indirectly contribute to the actual purchase. In this context, this study tries to find out whether or not the subvariable CSR has a compounding impact on purchase intention. Also, this study tries to explore whether CSR as a singular variable has a direct impact on purchase intention.

The results of the study reveal interesting facts. Although marketers consider CSR as a strategic tool, will it serve the purpose for them? An one-way ANOVA test for the data shows that the respondents feel that no company is different when it comes to CSR activities ( $F = 0.89$ ;  $P = .5 > .05$ ). The result shows that the CSR is not acting as a significant differentiator, and it does not provide the strategic advantage which the marketers expect. This result is also similar to the outcome of study conducted by Boccia and Sarnacchiaro (2017). They found that even good and important CSR activities may not have impact due to the consumer's lack of knowledge toward those activities. This problem can be solved by communicating the CSR activities (by including them in advertisement, research reports, corporate announcements, or in other marketing communications like websites and social media) to the customers.

This study could not find a direct impact of CSR on purchase intention, similar to the outcome from the studies conducted by Castaldo et al. (2009) and Chomvilailuk and Butcher (2010). The study was successful in finding the direct impact of CSR on brand image

(Salehzadeh et al., 2018), Brand attitude (Wong pitch et al., 2015), and perceived quality (Tingchi Liu et al., 2014).

Aaker (1996) defines perceived quality as the overall perception of customers about brilliance and quality of products or services in comparing with the rival offerings. Research states that quality of the product is different from perceived quality because the perceived quality is the buyer's subjective appraisal of the product Erenkol and Duygun (2010). So, perceived quality cannot necessarily be fairly determined (Aaker & Equity, 1991; Zeithaml, 1988). CSR inflicts on perceived quality, and the strength of the path is given by the beta value of 0.40. It is significant and concurs with our understanding of the association between CSR and perceived quality of brands.

Brand image creates brand attitudes subsequently forming associations, and the resultant brand attitudes spark off purchase intentions or intention to rebuy. Brand attitude can be defined as a consumers' overall evaluation of a brand. This can be positive or negative depending on knowledge experience or reflective experience. CSR and image building leading to attitude formation does not simply go by the brand in question, but also by the other competing brands in choice sets. There CSR yardstick becomes the norm and final. Upon exposure to CSR and associated brand image, consumers experience priming caused by implicit memory and build a more favorable attitude toward a particular brand regardless of the levels of attention they paid to marketing communication.

Marketing relies heavily on these attitude formations to stimulate purchase intentions. According to the self-expansion theory, people are yearning to integrate with others (in this case "brands"). The bond that connects self with an entity or notions of CSR would become closer if more of that CSR conception were included in the self. This bonding, in turn, bolsters brand image paving the way for favorable brand attitudes leading to favorable behavior. The outcome of the study suggests that customers process CSR details unconsciously and may not remember the explicit detail, but they are more likely to include the CSR brand in the consideration set illuminated by positive attitudes trailing behind. The findings attained partially answer the objectives of the study. Although CSR does not influence the purchase intention, it is creating a long-term impact on the customer's mind. Still, the effect is not strong enough to create the differentiation and provide the strategic advantage which marketers look for, and this needs further exploration.

## 5.2 | Practical implications

The crucial insight that any marketer can extract from this study is that the corporations should give importance to CSR activities, implement, advertise, and effectively communicate to the society at large. Whether large, medium, or small organizations "the CSR activities" as singular variable if strongly driven by the organizations would have an impact on the purchase behavior. Since, organizations do not spend a largely considerable amount of financial resources on CSR activities and further not communicating down below to a large population that the CSR activities are being implemented by them. The researcher strongly recommends that corporation as a concept exists only when there is a strong emphasis on CSR activities, which has been emphatically revealed by Peter Drucker in his book "The Concept of the Corporation."

Brands here call for creative transformation of ideas rather than creative application of brand attributes. Effective transformation will



be possible only if an effective framework of harnessing and utilizing as many ideas will be available in the marketplace. This can be christened “imaginative intensity” that creates a marketplace advantage. It can be “co-creation” of brands to facilitate imaginative intensity. Taking the CSR into the vision and mission of the organization and communicating it in their activities will help the organization to gain more positive response from the consumers.

The serial mediation analysis provides useful insights to the organizations; changing the consumer perception, forming a positive brand identity, and creating favorable attitude for the brands are an elaborate process. It needs relevant and persistent communication from the organizations. Organizations can focus on outcomes that are closer like creating favorable brand image or creating favorable perception toward the brands. Keeping “CSR” in mind, organizations should design and develop marketing communications, campaigns, and other activities; the effectiveness of CSR activities and communicating it to the consumers can help the organization to achieve its goal. Corporate managers will be advised to grope further into the attitude-association crossover and single out the drivers of repeat buying or intention to purchase the brand. In all, CSR is effective through the routes of brand image and brand attitude as enunciated.

### 5.3 | Limitations and further research

The result of the study gives enough opportunities for future research. The study considered only one product category (FMCG companies), and the samples were collected from respondents belongs to the same country; this limits the generalizability of the study. Conducting the same with multiple product categories can generate different results. The study could not find the direct impact of CSR on purchase intention. Future research with longitudinal data can shed more light on the facets of brand attitude and associated customer experiences, as to which factor precedes the other. Future studies can incorporate qualitative dimensions and bring out new scales for development.

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