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Consumers' Responses to Corporate Social Responsibility: The Mediating Role of CSR Authenticity

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Abstract: This study uses information processing and stakeholder theories as its conceptual foundation to explore the effect of authenticity on the relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities and three key customer responses: corporate evaluation, product association, and purchase intention. We conducted a survey in South Korea to test the hypotheses. The results of the analysis of our sample consisting of 417 individuals showed that perceived CSR was positively associated with corporate evaluation, product association, and purchase intention. In addition, the mediating test results indicated that CSR authenticity mediated the relationship between perceived CSR and the three CSR customers' responses to CSR. This study contributes to research on CSR authenticity and specifically adds to the conversation on the four CSR building blocks, namely, ethical codes, philanthropic contribution, organizational credibility, and resource accommodation in connection with CSR authenticity as a potentially valuable lens in the context of CSR. Managerial implications of these findings are also discussed.

Keywords: perceived CSR; CSR authenticity; corporate evaluation; product association; purchase intention

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1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is increasingly becoming an important strategic agenda for companies [1]. As evidence accumulated by various studies in support of effectiveness of CSR, strategic implementation of CSR is gradually replacing the old view of CSR, which simply considers it an act of charity [2–5]. Consequently, many companies attempt to communicate their CSR initiatives specifically to their customers who are among various stakeholders that can have significant impact on their performance [6,7].

However, companies who engage in CSR initiatives are not always rewarded by their customers. In the past few decades, pinkwashing, greenwashing, and other similarly insincere strategies have been employed by some managers to salvage corporate reputation [8]. As a result, it seems that skepticism of corporate motives has grown. This skepticism is reflected in a recent [9] survey in which only 20 percent of Americans rated business executives' honesty and ethics "high" or "very high". Research shows that customers have a hostile attitude towards companies whose CSR spending is viewed as hypocritical [10,11]. Depending on customers' perception of an industry, an ordinary CSR act can be counterproductive. The tobacco industry is an example of companies engage less in CSR activities due to concern about stakeholders' skepticism about their motives [12]. Although it is true that CSR is an important activity for the development of a society, the extent of companies' sincerity in their commitment is continuously questioned [13].

The academic community recognized the importance of CSR authenticity and began to form a stream of research [14,15]. In addition to progress in theoretical foundation of the concept of CSR authenticity, numerous empirical studies have been conducted to identify characteristics (or conditions) that are perceived inauthentic by external stakeholders. The key characteristics identified thus far are the distinctiveness of CSR activity [16],

fit [17–21], consistency [21], embeddedness [22], durability [23,24], and perception of motives [17,20,21].

CSR literature provides evidence for the effectiveness of the aforementioned characteristics, whereas the relationship among them have not been addressed adequately by researchers [18]. Recently, researchers have begun investigating the antecedents and outcomes of CSR authenticity. Alhouti et al. [25] found empirical evidence for CSR initiative as antecedent of CSR authenticity. The authors also showed that authenticity is negatively associated with boycott response and positively associated with purchase intent. Other researchers have asserted that every companies engage in deceitful CSR in early stages of implementation of their CSR initiatives [26]. Mazutis and Slawinski's [15] framework proposes are relationship between social connectedness and authenticity. However, to the authors' knowledge, there has been no study investigating the mediating impact of authenticity on the impact of perceived CSR through distinct CSR activities on consumers' responses. The findings of this research can fill the research gap and provide implications for managers to design and implement effective communication strategies with their consumers.

In accordance with the above discussions, this study focused on the mediating role of CSR authenticity to investigate the effect of customers' perceived CSR on customers' response. In order to understand the authenticity of CSR activities, individuals comprehensively consider various factors related to CSR [27]. Thus, we consider comprehensive CSR building blocks for perceived CSR ethical codes, organizational credibility, philanthropic contribution, and resource accommodation, proposed by Luo [28], in order to adequately capture dimensions of CSR most relevant to this study from the perspective of authenticity. Finally, we suggest theoretical and managerial implications for discussion of consumer judgments and evaluation criteria for CSR activities.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Development

2.1. CSR Authenticity

Authenticity is widely discussed in the fields of developmental and social psychology, sociology, arts, and humanities. More recently, the concept has been discussed in business literature, primarily in marketing, brand, organization and leadership, and strategic communication (e.g., [15,29–31]). However, business ethics discourse on authenticity remains scant [32]. Scholars of the respective fields have proposed various definitions for the concept. Authenticity can be defined as acting in a consistent manner, reflecting internal and external consistency or values and beliefs [33,34], i.e., authenticity is being "true to oneself"; thus, in terms of relationship with others, a behavior inconsistent with the expressed values is perceived as inauthentic [34,35]. Taylor [34] asserted that authenticity at its core is a moral issue. A theme that permeates the multiple disciplines discussing authenticity is to differentiate one's self within a broader social environment.

In the areas of strategy and organization, in terms of matching values and actions, authenticity represents consistency between the values that an organization explicitly advertises and its actual practices [34,36]. In tourism, MacCannel [37] argued that tourist's gaze is aware of things that are not presented as they are. Kovács et al. [38] provided empirical evidence to show that customers value companies that are perceived authentic higher than those that are not. On the basis of evidence for cynicism over corporate actions and drawing from the existing literature, Kraatz and Block [39] proposed a conceptual framework for authenticity in the context of managerial decision making.

The application of the concept of authenticity to CSR is called CSR authenticity. CSR authenticity refers to the recognition of CSR activities as real corporate beliefs and actions towards society beyond legal obligations [35]. In this way, there is skepticism companies' CSR motives in the public. As a result, authenticity has emerged as an important factor in the context of CSR. Corporate social responsibility already implies contradiction because it is predicated on the idea that inherently profit-seeking organizations should perform non-profitable and public interest-seeking activities. In addition, a number of cases in

which companies perform social contribution activities (e.g., greenwashing) to build a positive corporate image or reputation, or to mitigate negative images and criticisms formed by their negligence, have led consumers to take a skeptical view of CSR. McShane and Conningham [22] showed that employee's perception of company image authenticity is associated with their assessment of the CSR program. Becker-Olsen et al. [17] argued that consumers' perception of an entity's CSR activities is more important than the CSR activities themselves because they can make a rather negative assessment if they consider them to be ingenuine. Therefore, a key factor determining the performance of CSR activities can be called perceived CSR authenticity. This calls for more in-depth study of authenticity in the context of CSR.

2.2. Customers' Attributions in Response to CSR

CSR is a dynamic concept because society's demands change over time. Researchers have offered different definitions for the concept that capture various aspects of corporate responsibility towards society. At its core, CSR refers to corporations' policies and practices that aim to improve conditions in the broader society [40]. CSR constitutes principles, policies, and programs that preserve and promote society's welfare while furthering corporate objectives [41,42]. CSR allows corporations to enhance their relationships with their key stakeholders through discretionary allocations of their resources [43]. The responsibility goes beyond responding to current society's needs. For corporations, having a fair trade-off between competitive pressures of the market and environmental degradation has become a critical business imperative. Hence, through allocation of resources and provision of ethical codes stressing environmental sustainability, companies signal their commitment to future generations [44].

With respect to corporation's CSR activities, this study adopts Luo's [28] four aspects of CSR, which include philanthropic contribution, ethical codes, organizational credibility, and resource accommodation. This classification is consistent with literature for recognizing CSR as heterogenous activities [23].

Philanthropic contribution refers to corporation's commitments to social and public needs such as education, healthcare, environment protection, or infrastructure that are typically in a form of charitable donation. Ethical codes are the extent to which explicit codes of conduct are formulated, disclosed, implemented, and monitored the corporation. Organizational credibility is the extent to which the corporation is perceived trustworthy by its key stakeholders as a result of their reputation. Finally, resource accommodation is evaluated by the extent of resource allocation by the corporation to economic and social development needs.

Many corporations invest their resources on social programs on the basis of the assumption that stakeholders will reward them. There have been numerous studies on the link between CSR and corporate performance [45]. Customers are a critical group among the stakeholders who respond to social initiatives. Drawing on information processing theory [46], Tian et al. [47] have shown that customers' response to CSR initiatives translates into enhanced corporate evaluation, product association, and purchase intention. In the current literature, these three variables are the most commonly employed dependent variables, and they are generally influenced by consumers' perceived level rather than the objective level of firm's CSR actions [17,43].

Corporate evaluation refers to customers' overall evaluation of the company. Among other factors, it is affected by company's engagement in CSR. Marin et al. [48] propose that a CSR program that is perceived as consistent with the general image and is central to corporate strategy and also is communicated effectively will positively affect corporate evaluation.

Product association refers to a company's ability to make quality products. Consumers' reactions to a company's CSR efforts are likely to depend on the extent to which they believe that such CSR efforts detract (in terms of available resources) or reinforce its company's capability development [49].

Purchase intension is a key activity in the consumer's decision-making process for purchasing behavior, as consumers are willing to make purchases. In particular, the intention of purchase means the possibility of consumers' beliefs or attitudes being transferred to action [50], which can be seen as an important yardstick to understand the practical influence of CSR activities on consumers.

On the basis of this prior study, three hypotheses were established:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Perceived CSR has a positive impact on corporate evaluation.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Perceived CSR has a positive impact on product association.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Perceived CSR has a positive impact on purchase intention.*

2.3. Mediating Role of Authenticity

Perception of authenticity is generally known as a key variable that has a positive effect on consumers' attitudes to their respective enterprises and products [30,51,52]. Studies have also shown that recognition of CSR activities by consumers as genuine can lead to positive responses such as trust and support for those activities and businesses, favorable attitudes, and intention to purchase them [14]. In particular, McShane and Cunningham [53] noted that when consumers recognize CSR authenticity, the entity gains confidence from consumers and benefits, whereas the actual CSR performance is determined by the recognition of authenticity, arguing that non-sincere CSR can cause serious harm to the entity. As consumers' perception of CSR authenticity improves, they respond favorably by positively evaluating the values and beliefs about CSR. Hence, consumers' perception of CSR authenticity may be expected to have a positive effect on their assessment of the entity or on their intention to purchase the product or service.

On the other hand, the impact of CSR activities on consumer behavioral responses leads to the process of perception and inference based on phenomena and information, and to post-reaction behavior, creating a mechanism that is virtually indistinguishable. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to identify the overall flow of CSR activity information and consumer behavior in the causal relationship. Ellen et al. [4] argued that whether an entity's CSR activities would have positive or negative outcomes depends on what intermediary process it goes through. Yoon et al. [53] focused on the authenticity of the motivation and explained that the impact of an entity's CSR activities on the entity's assessment could be mediated by its authenticity and confidence in its efforts. In particular, Alhouti et al. [25] empirically demonstrated that CSR authenticity has a mediated effect on key consumer-related variables such as intent to purchase, brand loyalty, etc. In addition, several researchers have demonstrated empirically that CSR authenticity has the effect of fully or partially mediating in the relationship between variables related to CSR characteristics and attitude toward the enterprise. This perception of CSR authenticity can be expected to serve as a key factor in the series of processes in which consumer responses to CSR activities performed by companies. On the basis of the above discussion, the following hypotheses were established:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *CSR authenticity mediates the relationship between perceived CSR and corporate evaluation.*

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *CSR authenticity mediates the relationship between perceived CSR and product association.*

Hypothesis 6 (H6). *CSR authenticity mediates the relationship between perceived CSR and purchase intention.*

By aggregating the above hypotheses, we present the research model of this study in Figure 1.

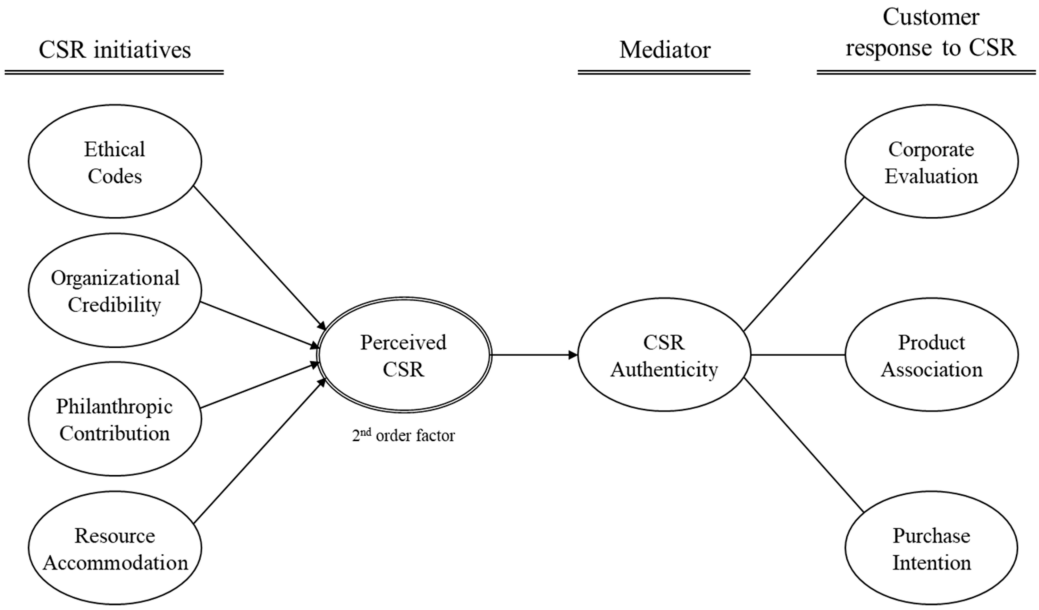

Figure 1. Research model.

3. Methods

3.1. Measures

We chose our measurement items after close review of the literature. First, the perceived CSR was established as a secondary factor consisting of 4 CSR building blocks—philanthropic contribution, ethical codes, organizational credibility, and resource authentication—proposed by Luo [28], and measured with a 7-point scale each.

The perceived CSR authenticity refers to consumers recognizing CSR activities for the purpose of purely promoting social welfare and contributing to the community, rather than having other hidden intentions, such as improving the image of CSR activities and seeking publicity effects. In this study, 7 CSR authenticity measurement items presented by Alhouti et al. [25] were measured on a 7-point scale.

The three customers' responses—corporate evaluation, product association, and purchase intension—were measured by items presented in Tian et al.'s [47] study, consisting of 3, 8, and 3 items on a 7-point scale, respectively.

Consumers' perceptions and responses to an entity's CSR activities may be affected by demographic characteristics. Therefore, the respondents' genders, ages, education, and income were measured and used as control variables [47,54].

Thus, the questionnaire was composed of a total of 33 questionnaires and 4 demographic items. The questionnaire items used in this study are shown in Table 1.

3.2. Data Collection

To verify the hypotheses proposed in this study, we targeted participants from 4642 panels owned by South Korean survey agents. In the first step, we presented them with a summary of the values, missions, sprit, vision, and CSR activities of a mid-sized cosmetic company in South Korea. In the second step, we asked the respondents to answer the survey items specifically selected for this study. A survey was conducted for a week, and 422 adults aged 19 or older accepted to participate (return rate: 9%). Excluding 5 invalid responses, 417 of the participants' responses were finally used in the analysis. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents.

In the next section, validity and reliability test was performed first, and then hierarchical regression was performed using SPSS 21.0.

Table 1. Characteristics of the respondents (N = 417).

Type		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	214	51.3
	Female	203	48.7
Age	20s	84	20.1
	30s	82	19.7
	40s	79	18.9
	50s	97	23.3
	60s or above	75	18.0
Education	High school	104	24.9
	Undergraduate	279	66.9
	Graduate	34	8.2
Income	Under KRW 1 million	59	14.1
	KRW 1–2 million	69	16.5
	KRW 2–3 million	107	25.7
	KRW 3–4 million	68	16.3
	KRW 4–5 million	45	10.8
	KRW 5 million or above	69	16.5

4. Analyses and Results

4.1. Validity and Reliability Testing

In this study, we first performed factor analysis, and three items (PA2, PA5, PA6) whose factor loadings were less than 0.6 were removed. The significance of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was then 0.93, and the Bartlett test for sphericality was $p < 0.001$, indicating that the results of this factor analysis were reasonable. As for convergent and discriminant validity, the factor analysis results showed acceptable loadings and significant corresponding t-values. Furthermore, the value of Cronbach's α for each variable was 0.7, the composite reliability was 0.7, and the average variance extraction was above 0.5, giving both reliability and convergent validity. Finally, result of a confirmatory factor analysis showed that the model fit was not problematic either (χ^2 = 608.65, df = 363 (degrees of freedom), p = 0.000; CFI = 0.97 (comparative fit index); NFI = 0.94 (normed fit index); AGFI = 0.88 (adjusted goodness-of-fit-index); TLI = 0.97 (Turker-Lewis index); RMSEA = 0.04 (root mean square error of approximation)). The result of validity and reliability tests are presented in Table 2. Correlation, mean, and standard deviation between variables are shown in Table 3.

Since this study collected questionnaire data from the same respondents, a common method bias test is needed. Harman's single factor analysis [55] was performed, and no factor was found to exceed half of the total variance, indicating that the risk of common method bias was not significant.

4.2. Hypotheses Testing

We conducted a hierarchical regression analysis using SPSS 20.0 to test the hypotheses. Table 4 contains the regression results of direct effect and mediating effect. In Models 1 and 2, CSR authenticity is the dependent variable, and we entered the control variables (gender, age, education, and income) in the first model, and perceived CSR in the second model. As shown in Model 2, perceived CSR significantly affect CSR authenticity (b = 0.89, $p < 0.001$). The dependent variable is corporate evaluation in Models 3 to 5, product association in Models 6 to 8, and purchase intention in Models 9 to 11. We entered the control variables in the first model, perceived CSR in the second model, and perceived CSR authenticity as a mediator with CSR in the third model. In support of H1, H2, and H3, the results in Models 4, 7, and 10 indicate perceived CSR had significant effect on all

corporate evaluation (b = 0.91, $p < 0.001$), product association (b = 0.73, $p < 0.001$), and purchase intention (b = 0.72, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Reliability and validity of construct measurements.

Variables and Item Description	Loadings
Ethical codes (EC) (α = 0.86, CR = 0.91, AVE = 0.78)	
The company X establishes a set of transparent, comprehensive, and strict code of conduct to combat bribery, corruption, and other illegal activities.	0.84
The company X's code of conduct applies to all management and employees throughout the company.	0.90
The company X has operational capabilities to effectively improve and address training and enforcement of the code of conduct.	0.87
Organizational credibility (OC) (α = 0.78, CR = 0.87, AVE = 0.70)	
The company X is always taking practical steps to give the best value and enhance its corporate image and reputation.	0.81
The company X always respects its commitment to delivering products and services and does its best to adapt to consumer needs.	0.86
The company X has maintained stable and good relationships with suppliers, distributors, and other business partners on the basis of honesty and trust.	0.83
Philanthropic contribution (PC) (α = 0.89, CR = 0.93, AVE = 0.83)	
The company X annually contributes part of its retained earnings to charity.	0.91
The company X recognizes social responsibility and participates in school building, supporting poor areas, improving local hygiene, and other regional requirements.	0.93
The company X spends part of its annual retained earnings on improving community infrastructure (e.g., transportation and communications) and environmental protection.	0.89
Resource accommodation (RA) (α = 0.84, CR = 0.90, AVE = 0.76)	
The resources invested by the company X (e.g., technology, capital, equipment) are complementary to the national economic development needs.	0.88
The resources invested by the company X (e.g., technology, capital, equipment) are complementary to the government's requests and preferences.	0.86
The resources that the company X invests in (e.g., technology, capital, equipment) help improve the technology and management levels of the national industry.	0.87
CSR authenticity (AU) (α = 0.93, CR = 0.94, AVE = 0.70)	
The company X's CSR is genuine.	0.84
The company X's CSR action captures what makes the company unique to me.	0.78
The company X's CSR action is in accordance with the company's values and beliefs.	0.85
The company X is being true to itself with its CSR actions.	0.87
The company X is standing up for it believes in.	0.84
The company X is a socially responsible company.	0.84
The company X is concerned about improving the well-being of society.	0.83
Corporate evaluation (CE) (α = 0.84, CR = 0.90, AVE = 0.76)	
X is a successful company.	0.84
X is a trustworthy company.	0.90
X is an honorable company that benefits society.	0.87
Product association (PA) (α = 0.85, CR = 0.89, AVE = 0.63)	
Socially responsible behavior detracts from companies' ability to provide the best possible products. (R)	0.79
Socially responsible behavior by a firm is often a cover-up for inferior product offerings. (R) (*)	-
Socially responsible firms produce worse products than do firms that do not worry about social responsibility. (*R*)	0.71
A company can be both socially responsible and manufacture products of high value.	0.80
Resources devoted to social responsibility come at the expense of improved product offerings. (R) (*)	-
Corporate environmental behavior may reduce the quality of products, such as recycling some raw materials. (*R*) (*)	-
Products produced by firms that actively engaged in charitable programs tend to be more reliable.	0.81
Those firms applying environmental technology can produce better products.	0.84
Purchase intention (PI) (α = 0.87, CR = 0.92, AVE = 0.79)	
If I am planning to buy a product of this type, I will choose this product.	0.90
There is a great possibility that I will buy this product.	0.89
I am willing to pay a little more for this product	0.87

Note: α = Cronbach's α, CR = composite reliability, AVE = average variance extracted; *(R)* stands for reverse item; (*) stands for deleted items.

Next, we applied a bootstrapping method to test the mediating effect of CSR authenticity by using SPSS PROCESS 3.1 [56]. The bootstrapping results in Table 5 show that the mediation index of the effect of the perceived CSR on corporate evaluation via CSR authenticity was 0.46 and significant (95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.34, 0.58]). Thus, H4 was supported. By the same method, the mediation index of the effect of the perceived CSR on product association (Index = 0.29, [95%CI] = [0.14, 0.44]) and purchase intention (Index = 0.50, [95%CI] = [0.33, 0.66]) via CSR authenticity were both significant, in support of H5

and H6. Therefore, we could conclude that the CSR authenticity mediated the relationship between the perceived CSR and the three CSR performances (i.e., corporate evaluation, product association, and purchase intention).

Table 3. Pearson of correlation.

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
(1) EC	1.00											
(2) OC	0.69 **	1.00										
(3) PC	0.63 **	0.61 **	1.00									
(4) RA	0.59 **	0.63 **	0.72 **	1.00								
(5) AU	0.70 **	0.78 **	0.68 **	0.67 **	1.00							
(6) CE	0.67 **	0.80 **	0.64 **	0.64 **	0.81 **	1.00						
(7) PA	0.59 **	0.68 **	0.64 **	0.63 **	0.72 **	0.72 **	1.00					
(8) PI	0.59 **	0.63 **	0.51 **	0.53 **	0.71 **	0.70 **	0.58 **	1.00				
(9) Gender	0.02	0.07	0.02	0.01	0.09	0.13	0.08	0.06	1.00			
(10) Age	0.06	0.10 *	0.09	0.13 **	0.13 **	0.09	0.11 *	0.14 **	−0.01	1.00		
(11) Education	0.08	0.01	0.15 **	0.12 *	0.10	0.05	0.09	0.16 **	−0.16 **	0.05	1.00	
(12) Income	0.01	−0.07	0.02	0.00	−0.02	−0.07	−0.02	0.03	−0.24 **	0.31 **	0.45 **	1.00
Mean	4.93	5.23	4.98	5.06	5.13	5.36	5.37	5.15	1.49	44.07	3.44	3.43
SD	1.06	0.95	1.09	1.01	0.96	1.01	0.89	0.99	0.50	13.76	0.98	0.98

Note: N = 417; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed test).

Table 4. Hierarchical multiple regression results.

Variable	CSR Authenticity		Corporate Evaluation			Product Association			Purchase Intention		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11
Constant	4.09 *** (0.28)	0.24 (0.21)	4.45 *** (0.29)	0.53 * (0.23)	0.41 (0.21)	4.54 *** (0.26)	1.38 *** (0.23)	1.30 *** (0.22)	3.90 *** (0.28)	0.79 ** (0.28)	0.67 * (0.26)
Controls											
Gender	0.17 (0.10)	0.12 * (0.06)	0.24 * (0.10)	0.19 ** (0.06)	0.12 * (0.06)	0.13 (0.09)	0.09 (0.06)	0.05 (0.06)	0.15 (0.10)	0.11 (0.08)	0.04 (0.07)
Age	0.01 ** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.010 * (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 ** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 ** (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Education	0.15 ** (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	0.13 * (0.06)	0.00 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.03)	0.130 ** (0.05)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	0.21 *** (0.06)	0.11 ** (0.04)	0.10 * (0.04)
Income	−0.07 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.08 * (0.04)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.06 * (0.03)	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.06 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)	−0.01 (0.03)
Main effect											
Perceived CSR		0.89 *** (0.03)		0.91 *** (0.03)	0.47 *** (0.05)		0.73 *** (0.03)	0.46 *** (0.06)		0.72 *** (0.04)	0.23 *** (0.07)
Mediator											
CSR authenticity					0.50 *** (0.05)			0.31 *** (0.05)			0.53 *** (0.06)
R^2	0.05	0.69	0.04	0.65	0.72	0.04	0.55	0.59	0.06	0.45	0.53
DR^2	0.05 **	0.64 ***	0.04 **	0.60 ***	0.07 ***	0.04 **	0.51 ***	0.04 ***	0.06 ***	0.39 ***	0.08 ***
F	5.02 **	179.86 ***	4.53 **	149.15 ***	171.45 ***	3.98 **	100.43 ***	96.67 ***	6.46 ***	67.11 ***	77.98 ***

Note: N = 417. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported (with standard errors in parentheses); * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-tailed test).

Table 5. PROCESS regression results of the mediation test.

Independent Variable	Mediator	Dependent Variable	Index	Boot SE	Boot 95% CI	
					LLCI	ULCI
Perceived CSR	CSR authenticity	Corporate evaluation	0.46	0.06	0.34	0.58
		Product association	0.29	0.08	0.14	0.44
		Purchase intention	0.50	0.08	0.33	0.66

Note: Bootstrap resample = 5000; SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; LLCI = the lower limit of confidence interval; ULCI = the upper limit of confidence interval.

5. Discussion

The analysis of 422 samples of adult individuals in South Korea generally supported the proposed propositions. The results of our analysis may have certain theoretical implications for CSR research that are discussed in the section.

According to information theory, individuals process the information they receive from the external environment. Hence, companies need to carefully communicate with their customers, taking into account different potential interpretations of their messages [46]. With the growing awareness of corporate social responsibility, most companies are actively implementing CSR activities today. At the same time, however, the discovery of unethical and irresponsible acts by companies has also led to growing skepticism among consumers about the social responsibility activities they are carrying out [57,58]. The divide has grown partially due to the increasing emphasis companies put on their CSR programs when some of them do not appear to be genuine [15]. Consumers' doubts about the motivation for CSR activities, regardless of the company's actual invention and action, can lead to negative and unfavorable responses to the entity's CSR activities and adversely impact CSR performance [59,60].

In other words, CSR performance is affected by consumers' perception of the company's motivation. This study set out to verify consumers' responses to CSR, showing that there is generally a positive association between perceived CSR and consumers' evaluation, product association, and purchase intention, which generally support recent research findings (e.g., [17,47,49,61–64]). This means that in order to explore customer's response to CSR initiatives, it is critical to consider customers' attributions about companies' motives in engaging in CSR.

5.1. Implications

This study supports the previous research findings in the literature indicating a positive association between CSR programs and three key customers' responses: corporate evaluation, product association, and product purchase. Furthermore, the results show mediating effect of authenticity. This study has important theoretical contributions.

First, although there has been a growing body of research about customers' responses, there is a few empirical studies of the concept in the context of CSR. In general, the research has been primarily focused on CSR from institutional and organizational perspectives, however, little attention has been given to CSR from customers' perspectives. This study is an effort to mend this gap. The data was collected in South Korea, which is the world's 11th largest economy with a dynamic and highly competitive market. With the growing sensitivity and awareness towards businesses' impact on society, where CSR studies remain inconclusive, this paper set out to explore customers' responses to CSR programs in South Korea.

Second, we included perceived CSR authenticity as a mediator in our research model to examine its impact on CSR performance from customers' perspectives. To explore the effect of perceived CSR on customers' response, this study employed Luo's [30] four CSR building blocks, namely, philanthropic contributions, ethical codes, organizational credibility, and resource accommodation. We tried to explain the inconsistency in results of the existing studies on consumer responses to CSRs by employing authenticity as a mediating variable, and empirically demonstrated that authenticity recognition plays a key role. This can be said to be a result of supporting the recent trend of research that calls for a focus on consumers' psychological mechanisms to identify CSR performance. Furthermore, the concept of authenticity that has garnered sustained interest of marketing researchers has been more recently emphasized in the context of CSR. Empirical analysis of the effect of authenticity on customers' responses to CSR is a theoretical contribution of this work.

This study has important implications for managers. Managerial implications of this study are generally to improve decision making about CSR and improve effectiveness in communicating CSR programs to customers. Our findings underscore the importance of match between values and practices. This study, which was conducted in South Korea, shows that unlike the Western developed economies, CSR is relatively a new practice, and authentic CSR activities are effective in drawing positive customers' responses.

First, the results show that customers' attributions about CSR activities translate into customers' responses. Thus, managers should prioritize customers' attributions about their

CSR programs. The results indicate that customers are likely to reward the company when they perceive their CSR programs to be authentic. Positive attributions improve corporate evaluation, product association, and purchase intention. Future studies may examine the effect of CSR authenticity on direct measures of corporate performance.

Second, it is necessary to consider consumers' perception of authenticity in the strategic objectives and direction of CSR activities. It is generally common for companies to expect favorable responses from consumers to CSR activities. However, the results of this study suggest that CSR activities may help consumers build a positive corporate image and attitude but may reduce their effectiveness if they are not perceived as authentic. Thus, in order to improve CSR performance, companies need to identify factors that may affect consumers' perception of authenticity and carry out CSR activities more strategically.

Although this study provides empirical evidence for managers in the context of CSR in the South Korean consumer market that customers' attributions about their CSR activities affect their responses, it is likely that CSR strategy does not affect customers' behavior to the same extent in other industries. Therefore, careful interpretation is needed. Further studies in other markets also could provide better understanding of the extent to which these results may be generalizable. The following section presents several more limitations of this work and makes suggestions for future research.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Despite these significant implications, the study also has several limitations. It is necessary to supplement these in the future so that more systematic research can be done.

First, in this study, we looked at perceived CSR based on specific CSR activities, but some existing studies show that the characteristics of beneficiaries may affect individual perception of the company's CSR activities. As suggested by other researchers, people's evaluation and response to CSR activities may vary depending on the target of the CSR activities [65,66]. Thus, in future studies, it is necessary to understand the mechanisms that work on the basis of how beneficiary characteristics affect the individual's perception and evaluation of CSR activities, resulting in discriminative responses.

Second, it is necessary to extend the study to samples of various nationalities to generalize the results. In other words, it is impossible to rule out the possibility that the results of this study only for South Korean consumers will not be the same if they are for consumers in other countries, and thus it is necessary to conduct research on consumers of various nationalities in the future to confirm the results.

Third, in conducting our survey, we revealed the brand to capture the potential perceived brand influence on customers' responses towards CSR activities. We presented the survey participants a summarized information of a mid-sized South Korean cosmetics company as a sample. However, the scope of this study that is focused on one company due to the specific image of the company may limit the finding's generalizability. There are studies that presented a fictitious company's CSR information, but that approach has its own shortcomings [42]. For future research, broader samples of companies across one industry can amend this problem. Moreover, it may be implications for the industry by identifying companies in various industries.

6. Conclusions

First, this paper's findings add to the ongoing research on corporate responsibility towards the broader society. South Korean companies have adopted their CSR practices as a result of globalization. As a result of this change, endorsing sustainable policies and responsible behavior towards the broader community is now expect of corporations. The results of this study further clarify CSR outcome in the context of the South Korean market. It is critical to understand the extent to which these practices influence customers' behavior.

Second, this research by connecting stakeholder and information processing theories mends the gap in the research and contribute to our understanding of the effect of authenticity on the customers' attributions about CSR activities. The findings underscore

the importance of effective communication and implementation of the companies' values and practices and the potential negative consequences in the case of a mismatch between promoted value and actual practices. Managers should note that perceived inauthenticity in CSR initiatives from customers' perspective could be punished by negative responses.

More specifically, the study indicates that South Korean customers positively respond to authenticity as opposed to being exclusively result-oriented. It should be noted that consumers' responses to authenticity are company-, country-, context-specific, and thus it is important to test the proposed relationship of this study in other countries and industries.

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