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Embedding Corporate Social Responsibility in Retail Strategy: Strategic, Sustainable, and Localized Approaches to Building Brand Equity and Loyalty

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved from philanthropy to a strategic capability, but its role in recovering economies remains underexplored. This study examines how CSR strategies affect consumer perceptions in the Greek retail sector, where firms face fragile trust and constrained resources. Using survey data from 322 consumers, the research tested three drivers of CSR effectiveness: strategic integration into core business and community engagement, emphasis on sustainability-oriented initiatives, and localization to cultural and stakeholder expectations. Data were analyzed through exploratory factor analysis to validate the constructs, followed by hierarchical multiple regression to assess their influence on perceived CSR performance. Results showed that CSR embedded transparently into strategy had strong effects on consumers' overall evaluations of CSR effectiveness, sustainability-oriented actions emerged as the most powerful predictor of perceived CSR performance, and localized initiatives enhanced trust and authenticity by signaling responsiveness to community needs. Perceived CSR performance was conceptualized as an integrative construct, capturing outcomes such as brand equity, consumer engagement, and loyalty in a unified evaluative measure. These findings suggest that CSR is a credible driver of consumer value even during economic recovery and that its effectiveness depends on authenticity, environmental relevance, and cultural fit. The study offers theoretical contributions by contextualizing CSR in fragile markets and provides practical guidance for retailers seeking resilience through responsible, strategically aligned practices.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; strategic integration; consumer loyalty; retail strategy; brand equity



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1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved into a central feature of corporate strategy, reflecting growing societal demands for businesses to move beyond profit maximization and contribute to social and environmental well-being [1]. While extensive research documents the positive effects of CSR in mature markets, including its capacity to enhance brand equity, trust, and consumer loyalty [2–5], much less is known about how CSR is evaluated in fragile or recovering economies. In these contexts, consumer perceptions are shaped not only by global sustainability discourses but also by economic insecurity and skepticism toward corporate practices [6,7]. This gap is particularly salient

in Greece, where a prolonged financial crisis has eroded institutional trust and heightened the demand for authenticity in corporate communications. Understanding how CSR is interpreted in such an environment is critical, as firms may either rebuild consumer trust through meaningful engagement or risk reinforcing cynicism through superficial initiatives.

Generational change further complicates this landscape. Generation Z, the first cohort of true digital natives, are characterized by high socio-environmental awareness, fluency with digital platforms, and strong preferences for authenticity and transparency in brand communication [8]. Unlike older cohorts, Generation Z do not treat CSR as an optional add-on but as a central indicator of a company's legitimacy. Their consumption patterns reflect not only economic considerations but also ethical and environmental concerns [9–13]. Consequently, their responses to CSR initiatives provide unique insight into the future trajectory of consumer–firm relations, particularly in recovering economies where market trust is fragile.

The retail sector provides an especially relevant setting for analyzing these dynamics. Retailers interact with consumers at the most visible and immediate points of exchange, and their CSR practices—ranging from supply chain transparency to environmental packaging—are directly observable and therefore subject to intense scrutiny [14]. In Greece, retail firms are uniquely positioned to influence consumer trust and community engagement, making their CSR strategies central to both competitive advantage and social legitimacy [15]. Yet, despite this importance, empirical research on CSR perceptions in recovering economies remains scarce, leaving open questions about the extent to which theories developed in mature markets apply in fragile contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining how Generation Z consumers in Greece evaluate CSR practices in retail, with a focus on the differential impact of strategic integration, sustainability orientation, and localized CSR alignment.

2. Theoretical Background

CSR has been conceptualized through multiple theoretical lenses, each emphasizing different mechanisms by which firms create value and legitimacy [16,17]. The resource-based view highlights CSR as a dynamic capability that, when aligned with core organizational strategy, contributes to sustainable competitive advantage by building reputational capital and trust [18–25]. Stakeholder theory similarly argues that CSR effectiveness depends on firms' ability to balance and fulfill diverse stakeholder expectations, reinforcing the importance of transparency and accountability as drivers of legitimacy [26–35]. More recently, debates around authenticity and greenwashing have underscored that the credibility of CSR depends not only on what firms do but also on how consistently those actions align with their identity and values [36–41].

Within this broader literature, three CSR dimensions stand out as particularly salient for understanding consumer perceptions. The first is strategic CSR integration, which refers to the extent to which social and environmental concerns are embedded into a firm's governance structures and strategic orientation. Research demonstrates that when CSR is strategically integrated rather than pursued as an isolated philanthropic activity, consumers perceive it as more authentic and credible, leading to stronger trust and loyalty outcomes [42,43]. In fragile economies, where skepticism toward corporate behavior is widespread, integration is especially important as a signal of resilience and long-term commitment [7].

The second dimension is sustainability orientation, which reflects firms' commitment to addressing environmental challenges such as climate change, waste reduction, and resource efficiency [44–46]. Numerous studies have shown that sustainability-focused CSR initiatives resonate more strongly with consumers than philanthropic or generic

programs, as they align with pressing global concerns and demonstrate substantive commitment [47–52]. Generation Z, in particular, are attuned to issues of sustainability, and their purchasing decisions often reflect an expectation that firms actively contribute to environmental stewardship [53]. From a psychological perspective, sustainability orientation triggers mechanisms such as warm-glow effects and consumer identification with responsible brands, further enhancing engagement [9,13].

The third dimension is localized CSR alignment, which emphasizes the cultural and contextual fit of corporate initiatives [54]. Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive meaning and trust from organizations that reflect their values and community identities [55]. Empirical studies confirm that CSR programs tailored to local needs are more likely to foster emotional attachment and loyalty than standardized, globally oriented initiatives [56–59]. In recovering economies, where social and economic vulnerabilities are heightened, localized CSR alignment signals responsiveness and empathy, thereby mitigating skepticism and strengthening brand–community relations [60].

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that CSR effectiveness is multidimensional, operating simultaneously through strategic governance, environmental stewardship, and cultural resonance. However, the relative weight of these dimensions may differ across contexts. Evidence from stable economies consistently highlights sustainability as a major driver of consumer engagement, but it remains unclear whether this pattern holds in recovering economies where economic pressures and trust deficits may alter consumer priorities [61–63]. By analyzing the interplay of strategic integration, sustainability orientation, and localized CSR alignment in the perceptions of Generation Z consumers in Greece, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature and provides new insights into the contextual contingencies of CSR effectiveness.

Hypothesis Development

Building on the theoretical perspectives discussed, the study proposes that CSR effectiveness among Generation Z consumers is shaped by three interrelated but distinct dimensions: strategic integration, sustainability orientation, and localized CSR alignment. Each of these dimensions is expected to exert a positive influence on perceived CSR performance, though with varying strength.

When CSR is strategically integrated into organizational governance and operations, it communicates long-term commitment and reduces perceptions of opportunism. This structural embedding is theorized to enhance credibility and consumer trust [64]. In fragile economic contexts where skepticism is heightened, strategic integration is expected to play a stabilizing role by signaling that CSR is not a peripheral or symbolic activity. Therefore,

H1. *Strategic CSR integration has a positive effect on Generation Z consumers' perceptions of CSR performance.*

A sustainability orientation emphasizes environmental stewardship, which resonates strongly with younger generations [65]. Studies consistently show that sustainability-focused initiatives are perceived as more authentic and impactful than philanthropy-driven activities, particularly among Generation Z, who are highly attuned to ecological challenges [50,53]. From both theoretical and empirical perspectives, sustainability is expected to emerge as the most influential predictor of CSR perceptions. Thus,

H2. *Sustainability orientation has a positive effect on Generation Z consumers' perceptions of CSR performance.*

Finally, localized CSR alignment reflects the importance of tailoring initiatives to community and cultural values. According to social identity theory, consumers are more likely to trust and engage with organizations that mirror their cultural context and social identity [55,57]. Local responsiveness is particularly critical in fragile economies, where legitimacy is closely tied to addressing immediate community needs [66]. Consequently:

H3. *Localized CSR alignment has a positive effect on Generation Z consumers' perceptions of CSR performance.*

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Approach

The research design was developed to examine the relationship between CSR strategies and Generation Z consumers' perceptions through a structured, questionnaire-based survey. Generation Z was selected as the focal population because of their heightened socio-environmental awareness and their intensive use of digital media, which makes them both highly exposed to CSR communication and uniquely sensitive to issues of authenticity and transparency [38]. By studying their perceptions, the analysis captures not only how CSR is received but also how it shapes consumer trust, loyalty, and engagement in fragile economies. Although this study applied a quantitative design through a structured questionnaire, we note that qualitative approaches (e.g., interviews or focus groups) could offer valuable future insights into the nuanced interpretations of CSR among Generation Z consumers.

The study employed a quantitative approach based on a structured questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice items measured on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). This method allowed for standardized data collection, enabling robust statistical analysis of constructs such as CSR awareness, authenticity, consumer trust, and ethical purchasing intentions.

3.2. Population and Sample

The survey was conducted between October 2023 and June 2024 using online distribution channels, including Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook. These platforms were chosen to maximize accessibility and engagement with Generation Z respondents. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to target individuals born between 1995 and 2010, while also ensuring diversity in gender, socioeconomic background, and geographic location. Screening questions at the beginning of the questionnaire ensured eligibility, and efforts were made to include participants across education levels and income brackets to strengthen representativeness.

3.3. Reliability and Validity

The data were analyzed using SPSS. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was applied to assess the dimensionality of the constructs, followed by multiple regression analysis to test the research hypotheses. Cronbach's alpha values for all multi-item constructs exceeded the 0.70 threshold [67], confirming satisfactory internal consistency.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided consent prior to participation. The survey was anonymous, and no personally identifiable information was collected.

3.5. Conceptual Framework

The study examined the influence of three independent variables—strategic CSR integration, sustainability-oriented CSR, and localized CSR alignment—on one dependent

variable, perceived CSR performance. Strategic CSR integration reflects the extent to which CSR is embedded in a company's governance structures and long-term strategy, signaling commitment and resilience. Sustainability orientation captures the firm's emphasis on environmental stewardship, including practices such as waste reduction, climate-conscious initiatives, and resource efficiency, which have been shown to resonate strongly with younger consumer cohorts. Localized CSR alignment highlights the importance of tailoring CSR initiatives to the cultural values and community-specific needs of stakeholders, thereby enhancing authenticity and trust in fragile economic contexts.

Perceived CSR performance was conceptualized as a holistic outcome variable representing consumers' overall evaluation of CSR effectiveness. This construct integrates dimensions often treated separately in prior research, such as brand equity, consumer engagement, and loyalty, into a single evaluative measure. By adopting this approach, the study sought to capture the multidimensional nature of CSR outcomes in a manner consistent with the hierarchical regression analysis, where perceived CSR performance functions as the dependent variable.

To ensure that the constructs were conceptually robust and empirically validated, survey items were derived from established CSR and consumer behavior frameworks, including resource-based theory, stakeholder theory, and social identity perspectives. For example, items measuring strategic CSR integration were adapted from studies emphasizing CSR as a dynamic capability aligned with organizational competitiveness, while sustainability items were grounded in the literature on environmental responsibility and consumer engagement. Measures of localization drew upon research emphasizing the cultural and contextual fit of CSR practices. The dependent construct of perceived CSR performance integrated elements from brand equity, ethical consumer behavior, and loyalty research, ensuring theoretical and empirical coherence.

Finally, to strengthen transparency and reproducibility, the details of the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), including factor coefficients and item structures, are reported in the online supplement. This provides readers with full insight into the validation process and supports confidence in the robustness of the measurement model.

4. Results

4.1. Sample Demographics

In the context of the present research, descriptive statistics were applied to provide a comprehensive view of sample demographics, particularly using percentiles and frequencies.

Most study participants were male (53%), female respondents made up 45%, and 2% identified as "Other", as presented in the following Figure 1. This shows a balanced gender representation among Generation Z consumers in the retail sector, with some inclusion of non-binary identities. These demographics offer valuable insight into young consumers' views on CSR.

This focus is further justified because Generation Z, as digital natives, are not only highly exposed to CSR communication through social and digital media, but also represent an emerging dominant consumer group whose purchasing behaviors are shaping future retail trends. Their ethical consumption tendencies and heightened expectations for authenticity make them uniquely positioned to reveal both the opportunities and risks of CSR strategies in fragile economies.

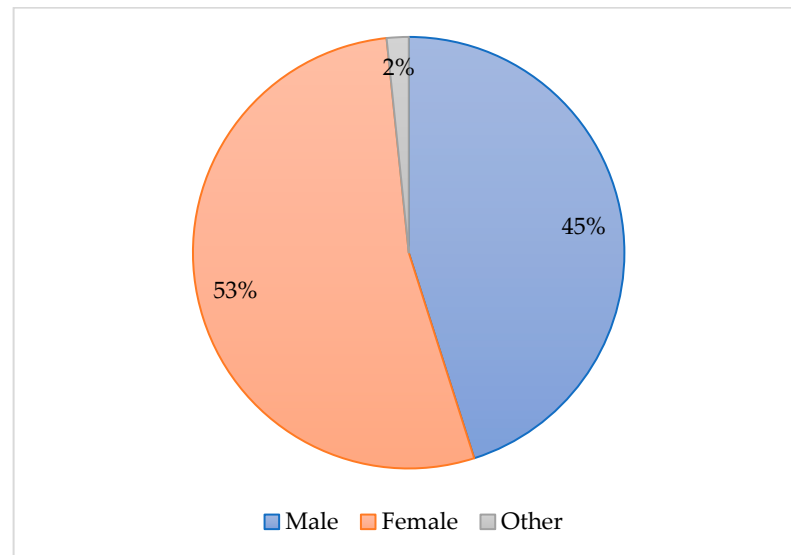


Figure 1. Respondents' gender.

The study's age distribution shows that most Generation Z participants were 18–20 years old (73.77%), with smaller groups aged 21–23 (7.38%) and 24–26 (3.28%), and a notable 15.57% aged 27–29 as presented in the following Figure 2. This indicates strong representation from younger Gen Z consumers, with additional insights from those approaching 30, highlighting early trends in CSR attitudes within this demographic.

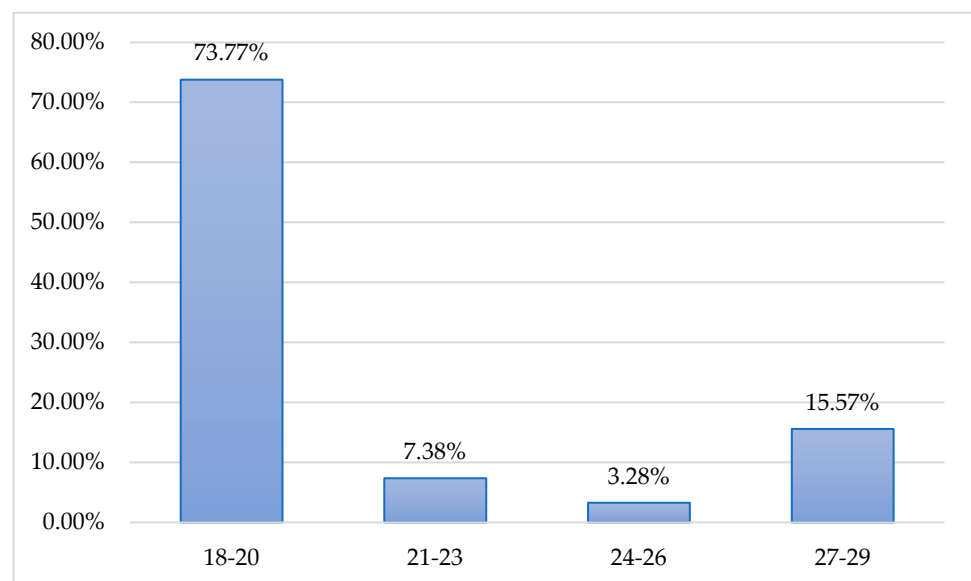


Figure 2. Respondents' age groups.

The study's educational breakdown presented in the following Figure 3 shows that 37.70% of participants hold a university degree, 36.07% have secondary education, and 18.03% are pursuing but have not completed higher education. A smaller group (8.20%) holds a master's degree, while none reported a doctorate.

Based on the following Figure 4, the study's income data shows most participants (about 70%) earn less than EUR 10,000 annually, reflecting a largely student or early-career group. About 20% earn EUR 10,000–EUR 25,000, 5% earn EUR 25,000–EUR 35,000, and only 2.5% fall into each of the EUR 35,000–EUR 50,000 and above EUR 50,000 brackets. This income distribution is crucial for understanding the economic backgrounds influencing

perceptions and expectations regarding CSR practices, particularly as income level can impact consumer behavior and attitudes towards corporate responsibility. The predominance of lower-income brackets may suggest a particular sensitivity to CSR practices that address economic and social issues relevant to these groups.

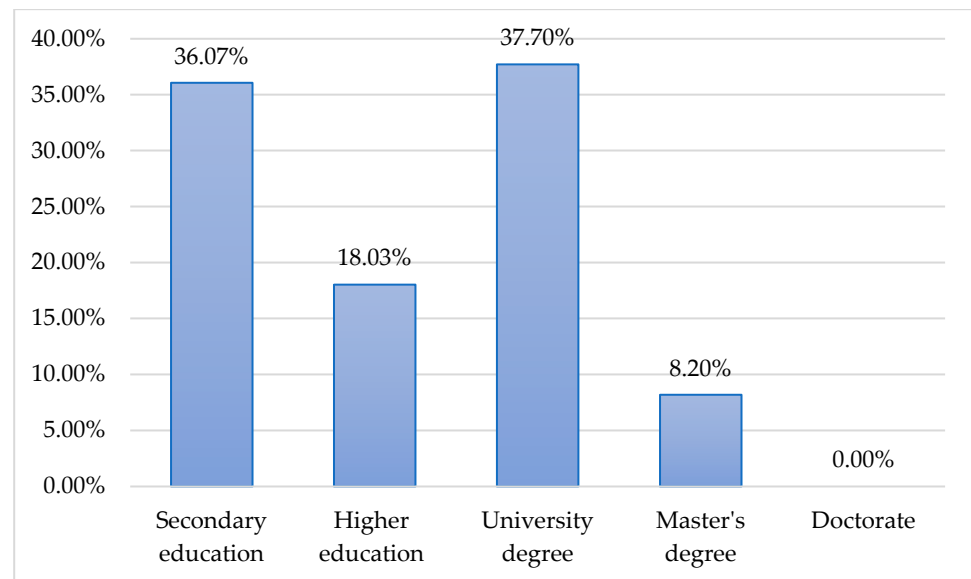


Figure 3. Respondents' educational level.

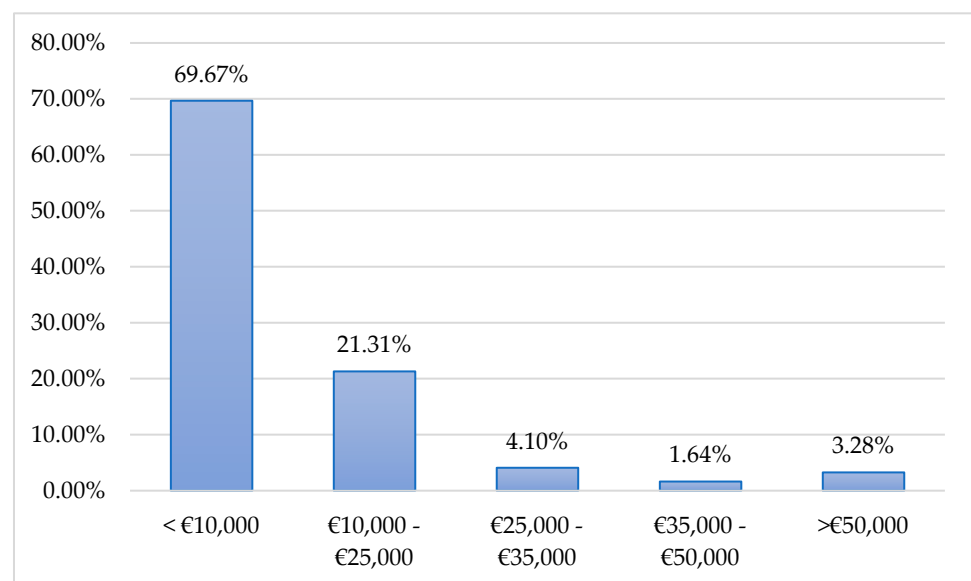


Figure 4. Respondents' annual income.

4.2. Principal Components Analysis

Before testing the research hypotheses, the dimensionality and reliability of the CSR measures were assessed through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) using principal components extraction. Sampling adequacy was confirmed by a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value of 0.860, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 1794.9$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the data were suitable for factor analysis.

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was employed not as a post hoc grouping of arbitrary items, but as a systematic tool to confirm the dimensionality of theoretically derived constructs. A total of 29 attitudinal items, adapted from validated CSR scales [26,39,57], were included. These items covered domains such as transparency, strategic integration,

sustainability/environmental responsibility, social impact, and consumer advocacy. Following Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and Bartlett’s tests confirming adequacy, items were subjected to principal components extraction with varimax rotation. Items with factor loadings below 0.50 were removed, ensuring only theoretically meaningful and statistically robust indicators remained. For instance, items assessing transparency, such as ‘CSR activities should be openly communicated’ and ‘Transparency in CSR builds trust in companies’, consistently loaded with items on impact perception, validating their integration under the construct of strategic CSR. Items addressing environmental practices, such as ‘Companies should reduce resource consumption’ and ‘CSR should focus on environmental sustainability’, clustered under the sustainability focus, while items on local responsiveness, such as ‘CSR initiatives should reflect community needs’ and ‘CSR should align with cultural values’, defined the localization factor. Dependent variable items similarly loaded as expected, with brand equity items (e.g., ‘CSR enhances brand strength’), consumer engagement (e.g., ‘I am more likely to purchase sustainable products’), and loyalty (e.g., ‘I remain committed to brands that are socially responsible’) emerging as distinct, reliable dimensions. The resulting six-component structure closely aligned with the study’s conceptual framework, confirming that theoretical expectations were empirically validated rather than imposed post hoc.

The rotated solution produced six interpretable components that corresponded closely with the study’s conceptual framework: impact and perception of CSR, consumer engagement and advocacy in CSR, CSR awareness and education, impact evaluation on social issues, societal expectations and transparency, and perceived societal and environmental impact. All six factors demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach’s alpha values ranging from 0.665 to 0.861. Five of the six exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended for exploratory research, and the transparency component was retained given its theoretical importance.

These validated factors form the basis for the variables used in this study. CSR strategic integration was primarily derived from the impact/perception and transparency factors, CSR sustainability focus from the sustainability/environmental impact and transparency dimensions, and localized CSR alignment from transparency and social impact factors. For the dependent variables, CSR brand–financial impact was captured through the impact and perception factor, ethical consumerism through the engagement and advocacy dimension, and CSR loyalty through advocacy and loyalty items. Factor scores were then computed and used in subsequent regression analyses.

4.3. Descriptive Analysis

The descriptive statistics provide an initial overview of how Generation Z consumers evaluate different dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and their associated outcomes. Among the independent variables, sustainability orientation received the highest mean score ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.65$), indicating that respondents strongly value environmental initiatives and view them as central to CSR credibility. The relatively low standard deviation suggests that this perception was broadly shared across the sample, reinforcing the notion that sustainability is a near-universal expectation among Generation Z. Strategic CSR integration also scored highly ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.72$), reflecting consistent recognition that embedding CSR into governance and operations is important for authenticity and trustworthiness. Localized CSR alignment, by contrast, was rated lower ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.81$), with a slightly larger dispersion, implying more variation in how respondents perceive the importance of cultural and community-specific initiatives. This suggests that while local responsiveness enhances CSR resonance, it is evaluated less uniformly than sustainability or integration.

Turning to the dependent variables, consumer engagement and ethical consumerism achieved the highest mean score ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.74$), indicating that CSR practices strongly shape behavioral intentions and ethical purchasing patterns among Generation Z. Brand equity and financial impact were also rated positively ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.69$), underscoring the perceived strategic benefits of CSR for corporate reputation and competitiveness. CSR loyalty ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 0.71$) showed slightly lower average scores, but the consistency of responses suggests that socially responsible practices do foster enduring relationships with consumers, even if loyalty develops more gradually than engagement or immediate brand evaluations.

Overall, the pattern of results highlights a hierarchy in CSR perceptions as shown in Table 1. Sustainability orientation clearly stands out as the most salient driver, both in terms of absolute ratings and the consensus it commands across respondents. Integration follows closely, demonstrating that structural commitment is widely recognized as a marker of authenticity. Localization, although still positively evaluated, appears to function more as a contextual moderator, with its influence contingent on individual and cultural differences within the sample. On the outcome side, the data suggest that CSR exerts its strongest influence on shaping ethical consumer behavior, followed by brand strength and loyalty, which develop as downstream consequences of sustained responsible practices.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of CSR constructs.

Construct	Mean	Std. Dev.
Strategic CSR Integration	3.85	0.72
Sustainability Orientation	4.12	0.65
Localized CSR Alignment	3.67	0.81
Brand Equity/Financial Impact	3.94	0.69
Consumer Engagement/Ethical Consumerism	4.05	0.74
CSR Loyalty	3.88	0.71

4.4. Regression Analysis

To evaluate the relative and combined influence of CSR dimensions on perceived CSR performance, a hierarchical multiple regression approach was employed. Unlike separate regression models, this method provides incremental insight into how each predictor contributes above and beyond those already included, thereby offering a more robust assessment of explanatory power. The regression models are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression of CSR predictors on perceived CSR performance.

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p	VIF
Model 1						
Strategic CSR Integration	0.82	0.08	0.31	10.02	<0.001	1.32
Model 2						
Strategic CSR Integration	0.76	0.07	0.27	9.14	<0.01	1.44
Sustainability Orientation	0.41	0.10	0.41	4.08	<0.001	1.67
Model 3						
Strategic CSR Integration	0.75	0.07	0.27	9.02	<0.01	1.55
Sustainability Orientation	0.39	0.09	0.39	4.03	<0.001	1.83
Localized CSR Alignment	0.57	0.06	0.22	10.14	<0.05	2.11

In Model 1, strategic CSR integration was entered as the sole predictor. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 320) = 100.45$, $p < 0.001$, and explained 28% of the variance in perceived CSR performance ($R^2 = 0.28$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.27$). Strategic integration exerted a strong effect ($B = 0.82$, $SE = 0.08$, $\beta = 0.31$, $t = 10.02$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that embedding

CSR within organizational governance and long-term strategy strongly shapes consumer perceptions of CSR credibility.

In Model 2, sustainability orientation was added. The model remained statistically significant, $F(2, 319) = 58.29, p < 0.001$, explaining 41% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.13, p < 0.001$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.40$). Sustainability orientation emerged as the strongest predictor ($B = 0.41, SE = 0.10, \beta = 0.41, t = 4.08, p < 0.001$), while strategic integration remained significant ($B = 0.76, SE = 0.07, \beta = 0.27, t = 9.14, p < 0.01$). This result demonstrates that environmental responsibility exerts an independent and powerful influence on perceptions of CSR, even after accounting for strategic integration.

In Model 3, localized CSR alignment was introduced. The final model was significant, $F(3, 318) = 45.83, p < 0.001$, explaining 46% of the variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05, p < 0.01$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.45$). Localized alignment contributed incrementally and significantly ($B = 0.57, SE = 0.06, \beta = 0.22, t = 10.14, p < 0.05$), alongside sustainability ($B = 0.39, SE = 0.09, \beta = 0.39, t = 4.03, p < 0.001$) and integration ($B = 0.75, SE = 0.07, \beta = 0.27, t = 9.02, p < 0.01$).

Diagnostic analyses confirmed that regression assumptions were met. Standardized residuals followed a normal distribution, scatterplots showed no evidence of heteroskedasticity, and the Durbin–Watson statistic (1.95) indicated independence of errors. Variance inflation factors confirmed the absence of problematic multicollinearity, with values well below accepted thresholds (VIFs ranged from 1.32 to 2.11 across models).

Taken together, the hierarchical regression demonstrates that the three CSR dimensions are complementary rather than interchangeable. Strategic integration provides a strong baseline of perceived authenticity, sustainability orientation exerts the most powerful and distinctive effect, and localized CSR alignment, though smaller in magnitude, enhances explanatory power by embedding CSR in specific cultural and community contexts.

5. Discussion

The present study offers compelling evidence that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies exert significant influence on Generation Z consumers' evaluations of perceived CSR performance in the retail sector of a recovering economy [68]. By employing hierarchical regression, the analysis moved beyond isolated associations and revealed the incremental and cumulative contributions of three theoretically grounded CSR dimensions: sustainability orientation, strategic integration, and localized CSR alignment. This methodological choice provided sharper insight into how these dimensions interact, both independently and jointly, to shape consumer perceptions.

In this study, perceived CSR performance was conceptualized as a holistic construct that integrates outcomes often examined separately in previous research, including brand equity, consumer engagement, and loyalty [69]. By treating these interrelated dimensions as part of a single evaluative measure, the analysis ensured consistency with the regression design while still capturing the broader strategic, behavioral, and relational implications of CSR.

The findings establish sustainability orientation as the most influential predictor of perceived CSR performance. This result is analytically important because it highlights the primacy of environmental responsibility over other CSR dimensions in the evaluative schema of Generation Z. Prior research has suggested that younger consumers are particularly sensitive to sustainability claims [50,53], but the present study demonstrates not only that sustainability matters, but that it carries disproportionate explanatory power even when other CSR strategies are considered simultaneously. This suggests that Generation Z interpret sustainability as a non-negotiable baseline for corporate responsibility, and that failure to deliver on environmental performance may undermine even otherwise well-integrated CSR initiatives. The strength of this predictor underscores the degree to which

environmental commitments function as a diagnostic cue of authenticity and corporate accountability in fragile economic contexts.

Strategic CSR integration also exerted a strong and consistent effect across all models, reinforcing theoretical perspectives that CSR generates the greatest impact when embedded within corporate governance and operational frameworks [21,26]. Unlike sustainability, which signals external responsiveness to global challenges, integration communicates internal alignment and long-term commitment. Analytically, its significance suggests that Generation Z consumers differentiate between superficial, ad hoc initiatives and those that are structurally institutionalized. In recovering economies, where skepticism toward corporate behavior is heightened, strategic integration appears to act as a stabilizing signal that enhances trust and mitigates concerns about opportunism or greenwashing.

The contribution of localized CSR alignment, although smaller in magnitude, remains conceptually meaningful. Its significance in the final model demonstrates that CSR strategies cannot rely solely on global sustainability narratives or governance integration; they must also resonate with local cultural and community expectations [57,58]. The incremental explanatory power of this dimension reflects the importance of contextual specificity, showing that CSR effectiveness is contingent not only on what firms do but also on how well those actions connect to the immediate sociocultural environment. This is particularly salient in Greece, where a prolonged economic crisis has eroded consumer trust, making responsiveness to local concerns a critical element of CSR authenticity.

An important implication of the findings relates to the issue of CSR authenticity and the risk of greenwashing. While sustainability orientation emerged as the strongest predictor of perceived CSR performance among Generation Z, the prominence of environmental claims also heightens the risk that consumers may question their credibility if they are not consistently backed by transparent practices. Focus group participants noted that sustainability initiatives are often scrutinized for signs of tokenism or opportunism, and failure to demonstrate measurable impact can quickly erode trust. In this sense, strategic CSR integration plays a critical role as a safeguard against greenwashing, signaling that sustainability is embedded in governance and operations rather than being used as a promotional device. Localized CSR alignment further reinforces authenticity by anchoring corporate responsibility in community realities rather than global rhetoric. Taken together, these findings suggest that sustainability offers a powerful driver of consumer engagement, but only when firms manage it with consistency, transparency, and cultural responsiveness to avoid the reputational backlash associated with perceived greenwashing.

An additional dimension shaping these dynamics is the role of digital and social media. As digital natives, Generation Z consumers encounter CSR messages primarily through online platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn, where brand claims are instantly subject to peer commentary, influencer mediation, and viral dissemination. This environment amplifies both authenticity and greenwashing: genuine initiatives can rapidly build trust and engagement, while inconsistent or symbolic actions are quickly exposed and criticized. The interactive nature of digital media also empowers consumers to co-create brand narratives, mobilize collective action, and hold firms accountable for measurable impact. For retailers, this highlights that CSR is not only a matter of governance and strategy but also a communicative practice in which transparency, dialogic engagement, and responsiveness across digital platforms are essential to sustaining loyalty among Generation Z.

Taken together, the results underscore the multidimensional but asymmetrical nature of CSR effectiveness. Sustainability orientation emerged as the dominant driver, integration as a reinforcing governance mechanism, and localization as a contextual moderator that enhances authenticity. The hierarchical regression results indicate that the combination

of these dimensions maximizes explanatory power, suggesting that integrated, layered CSR strategies are more effective than isolated initiatives. Theoretically, this supports a configurational rather than additive view of CSR, in which distinct dimensions interact to shape perceptions in complementary ways.

From a methodological standpoint, the hierarchical design provides a stronger analytic lens than separate regressions. By demonstrating the incremental variance explained at each step, the study makes visible the relative weight of each CSR dimension and avoids overstating isolated effects. Diagnostic tests further confirmed the robustness of the model, strengthening confidence in the validity of the findings. Nonetheless, hierarchical regression cannot fully capture interdependencies or potential mediating pathways among constructs. Future research should therefore employ structural equation modeling or path analysis to test complex relational models, such as whether strategic integration amplifies the credibility of sustainability initiatives, or whether localized CSR alignment mediates the relationship between CSR orientation and consumer loyalty.

6. Conclusions

This study investigated how three interrelated dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility—strategic integration, sustainability orientation, and localized CSR alignment—influence Generation Z consumers' perceptions of CSR performance within the retail sector of a recovering economy. By employing hierarchical regression, the analysis not only confirmed that all three dimensions are significant but also revealed that their explanatory power is asymmetrical, with sustainability orientation emerging as the dominant driver.

The primacy of sustainability orientation demonstrates that environmental responsibility functions as a central evaluative criterion for Generation Z. This generation's heightened sensitivity to global ecological challenges translates into a demand for corporate practices that extend beyond symbolic gestures and are embedded in core operations. Analytically, this finding underscores that sustainability is not merely one dimension among others, but rather a threshold condition: without credible and visible environmental commitments, firms risk undermining the perceived authenticity of their broader CSR agendas. For practitioners, the implication is clear—sustainability must be treated as a strategic imperative that defines corporate credibility and trustworthiness.

The consistent significance of strategic CSR integration further highlights the role of governance and internal alignment in shaping consumer perceptions. Integration signals that CSR is not an afterthought but a core organizational priority. In fragile economic contexts such as Greece, where consumer skepticism toward corporations is elevated, integration operates as a trust-building mechanism, communicating resilience, transparency, and long-term commitment. Theoretically, this finding reinforces stakeholder theory's emphasis on embedding social responsibility into organizational DNA rather than framing it as an externalized or philanthropic activity.

Although localized CSR alignment exerted the weakest effect, its incremental contribution is analytically meaningful. The result suggests that CSR initiatives tailored to local cultural values and community needs function as legitimacy-enhancing mechanisms that complement broader sustainability and integration strategies. This highlights the importance of contextual embeddedness: CSR effectiveness is not only about "what" companies do globally but also "how" they connect to local environments. In fragile economies, this local responsiveness can serve as a vital authenticity cue that mitigates consumer distrust.

Taken together, these results support a configurational view of CSR effectiveness. Rather than treating sustainability, integration, and localization as interchangeable levers, the study demonstrates that their combination produces the most robust consumer evaluations. Sustainability provides the foundational driver, integration communicates or-

ganizational commitment, and localization ensures contextual resonance. The evidence suggests that firms adopting an integrated CSR strategy—one that combines global sustainability imperatives with structural integration and local adaptation—are best positioned to strengthen consumer trust and brand credibility.

From a methodological standpoint, the use of hierarchical regression provided a powerful means to disentangle the incremental contributions of each dimension. By quantifying variance explained at each stage, the analysis offered a more nuanced picture than separate regression models could deliver. Nevertheless, the study also recognizes the limitations of this approach. Future research should employ structural equation modeling or path analysis to capture the potential mediating and moderating pathways among CSR dimensions, authenticity perceptions, and long-term loyalty behaviors. Such approaches would advance the theoretical understanding of CSR by modeling its multidimensionality as an interdependent system rather than a set of additive factors.

Finally, the findings highlight that digital and social media act as critical arenas where CSR authenticity is evaluated and contested. For practitioners, this means that effective CSR is not only about embedding sustainability and governance alignment but also about communicating transparently and interactively in online environments where Generation Z consumers form, share, and amplify their judgments of corporate responsibility.

7. Future Research and Limitations

This study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing Generation Z consumers' perceptions of CSR at a single point in time. While this approach provides valuable insights into the relationships between CSR dimensions and consumer evaluations, it limits the ability to draw conclusions about causality or the stability of these perceptions over time. A longitudinal design would enable researchers to track how consumer attitudes toward CSR evolve as Generation Z matures, as firms adjust their CSR strategies, and as broader economic conditions shift.

Another methodological limitation concerns the reliance on self-reported survey data, which is subject to potential biases such as social desirability effects, common method variance, and the tendency of respondents to overstate pro-social attitudes. Future studies could address these limitations through methodological triangulation, for example, by combining surveys with behavioral data (e.g., actual purchasing choices, social media engagement) or experimental designs that test consumer responses to controlled CSR messages [70]. Incorporating social desirability scales or statistical remedies such as marker variables and Harman's single-factor test would further mitigate common method bias. Moreover, the inclusion of multiple data sources—such as employee perspectives, CSR disclosures, or independent sustainability ratings—could validate consumer self-reports and provide a more comprehensive assessment of CSR authenticity and impact.

In addition, while the present study relied exclusively on a quantitative survey design, future research could apply qualitative approaches such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic methods. These methods would provide deeper insights into the meanings, narratives, and lived experiences that shape Generation Z's perceptions of CSR authenticity. A mixed-methods approach could therefore enrich the findings by combining the statistical robustness of quantitative analysis with the contextual depth of qualitative inquiry.

By adopting longitudinal, multi-method, and multi-source research designs, future studies will be better positioned to overcome self-report limitations, enhance the validity of findings, and provide stronger causal evidence on the role of CSR authenticity in shaping consumer trust and loyalty.

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