

The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Perception of Nigerian Companies

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bje.2013/vol13n12118138>

Published December 13, 2025

Citation: Igben H.G.O., and Akpalikpo A.C. (2025) The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Perception of Nigerian Companies, *British Journal of Education*, 13 (12), 118-138

Abstract: *This study examines the influence of corporate social responsibility on consumer perception of Nigerian companies in Delta State Senatorial Districts. The study was set to ascertain the specific CSR initiatives that have the most significant impact on consumer perception of Nigerian companies, the relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty towards Nigerian companies and the challenges militating against effective CSR influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies. The study adopted the Agenda Setting theory. The cross-sectional research design was adopted for the research. Out of the 300 copies of the questionnaire administered 233 copies of the questionnaire were correctly filled and returned. Using simple percentage mean to analyse the data, findings indicate that the specific CSR initiatives that have influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies are predominantly environmental sustainability, community development programmes and healthcare support initiatives. It was also established that there is significant relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty towards Nigerian companies. Other challenges militating against effective CSR influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies were most especially weak regulatory framework governing CSR practices and scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives. The study recommends that Nigerian companies should prioritize transparency and consistency in their CSR initiatives to build trust and credibility with consumers, Nigerian companies should involve local communities in the design and implementation of CSR initiatives to ensure relevance and effectiveness among others.*

Keywords: perception, corporate social responsibility, strategies, influence, consumer

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility has evolved from being an optional corporate initiative to a critical aspect of a company's identity and a key factor in consumer decision-making. In Nigeria, companies have adopted CSR practices in response to the growing demand from consumers, regulatory bodies, and international stakeholders for responsible business conduct. The concept of CSR in Nigeria is shaped by both local and global influences, with companies seeking to align their operations with global standards while addressing local socio-economic issues. Nigerian companies are increasingly engaging in CSR activities that range from environmental sustainability programmes to community development initiatives, healthcare support, and educational interventions (Aguinis & Glavas, 2022).

The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in the context of Nigerian companies. CSR refers to the voluntary efforts made by companies to improve social, environmental, and economic impacts of their operations (Kotler & Lee, 2020). In Nigeria, CSR has become an essential tool for companies to demonstrate their commitment to societal well-being and contribute to the country's sustainable development. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained significant attention in recent years as businesses increasingly recognize the need to integrate social and environmental concerns into their operations. CSR refers to the voluntary initiatives that companies undertake to contribute to societal well-being, beyond their legal obligations. These initiatives may include environmental sustainability programmes, philanthropic efforts, and ethical business practices. For Nigerian companies, CSR activities have become an important tool for shaping consumer perception, fostering loyalty, and improving brand reputation. As the Nigerian economy continues to grow and diversify, the role of CSR in influencing consumer behaviour has taken on greater importance (Aguinis & Glavas, 2022).

In today's competitive business environment, consumers are not only concerned with the quality of products and services but also with the values and ethics of the companies from which they purchase. As such, CSR has become a strategic mechanism for companies to differentiate themselves and establish stronger relationships with their customers. This is especially true in Nigeria, where socio-economic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and environmental degradation are prevalent. Consumers in Nigeria are increasingly expecting companies to contribute to the betterment of society through socially responsible practices. Thus, CSR is no longer seen as merely a marketing tactic but as a fundamental aspect of business strategy that can shape consumer perceptions and drive purchasing decisions (Amaeshi & Adi, 2020).

Research has shown that CSR initiatives can significantly influence consumer perception and behaviour (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2019). Consumers are increasingly expecting companies to demonstrate social responsibility and accountability (Mohr et al., 2021). In Nigeria, CSR initiatives have been linked to enhanced corporate reputation, customer loyalty, and brand image

(Amaeshi & Adi, 2020). Despite the growing importance of CSR in Nigeria, there is a scarcity of empirical research on its impact on consumer perception. Existing studies have primarily focused on the CSR practices of multinational corporations, neglecting the experiences of indigenous Nigerian companies (Eweje, 2020). This study aims to bridge this knowledge gap by investigating the influence of CSR on consumer perception of Nigerian companies. The Nigerian business environment presents a unique context for CSR research. The country's socio-economic challenges, such as poverty, infrastructure deficits, and environmental degradation, underscore the need for companies to prioritize social responsibility (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Moreover, Nigeria's cultural and social norms emphasize communal values and collective well-being, making CSR an essential aspect of business operations.

Given the growing importance of CSR in the Nigerian business environment, it is essential to explore how these corporate initiatives influence consumer perceptions. Studies suggest that when Nigerian companies actively engage in CSR, they not only improve their public image but also create a competitive advantage by aligning their values with those of socially conscious consumers. Consumers in Nigeria are becoming more aware of corporate ethics and are inclined to support companies that demonstrate a commitment to addressing social and environmental challenges. Thus, CSR has become a crucial factor in shaping consumer preferences and loyalty. The link between CSR and consumer perception is of particular interest in Nigeria because of the complex socio-economic environment in which businesses operate. With challenges such as income inequality, environmental degradation, and social unrest, consumers expect businesses to take a proactive role in addressing these issues. Companies that fail to do so risk damaging their reputation and losing consumer trust. Therefore, understanding the influence of CSR on consumer perception is critical for Nigerian companies seeking to remain competitive and relevant in the market.

Statement of Problem

Despite the growing importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Nigeria, many companies struggle to effectively communicate their social responsibility initiatives to consumers, leading to a disconnect between CSR efforts and consumer perception. The lack of transparency and inconsistent implementation of CSR practices have resulted in scepticism among Nigerian consumers, questioning the authenticity of companies' social responsibility claims. Furthermore, the Nigerian business environment is characterized by numerous socio-economic challenges, including poverty, infrastructure deficits, and environmental degradation. In this context, companies' CSR initiatives are often viewed as inadequate or insincere, failing to address the pressing needs of the community. Existing research on CSR in Nigeria has primarily focused on the perspectives of companies, neglecting the consumer's voice. As a result, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on how Nigerian consumers perceive and respond to CSR initiatives. This knowledge gap hinders companies' ability to develop effective CSR strategies that resonate with their target audience. It is in line with the foregoing that this study seeks to examine the influence of corporate social responsibility on consumer perception of Nigerian companies.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to examine the influence of corporate social responsibility on consumer perception of Nigerian companies while the specific objectives are to;

1. Ascertain the specific CSR initiatives have the most significant impact on consumer perception of Nigerian companies
2. Examine the relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty towards Nigerian companies
3. Ascertain the challenges militating against effective CSR influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies

Research Questions

1. What specific CSR initiatives have the most significant impact on consumer perception of Nigerian companies?
2. What is the relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty towards Nigerian companies?
3. What are the challenges militating against effective CSR influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to the practice where businesses integrate social, environmental, and ethical considerations into their operational practices and decision-making processes. CSR is rooted in the understanding that businesses have a responsibility not only to generate profits but also to contribute positively to society. It reflects the recognition that businesses operate within a societal framework and have a duty to help address social and environmental issues.

CSR can be understood from multiple perspectives. From a legal standpoint, businesses are increasingly subject to regulations requiring them to adhere to environmental standards and labour laws. However, CSR extends beyond legal compliance to encompass voluntary actions aimed at benefiting stakeholders, including employees, customers, the environment, and the broader community. This proactive approach allows companies to demonstrate their commitment to social issues such as poverty alleviation, environmental sustainability, and human rights (Carroll, 2020).

One of the foundational theories in CSR is the *stakeholder theory*, which suggests that companies must account for the interests of all stakeholders, not just shareholders. Stakeholders include anyone affected by a company's actions, such as employees, customers, suppliers, and the local community (Freeman, 2018). By addressing the concerns of these groups, companies can build trust and foster long-term success. CSR initiatives like philanthropy, environmental sustainability, and ethical labour practices are examples of how businesses act responsibly toward stakeholders.

A significant driver of CSR is the growing public expectation that companies should contribute to solving global challenges. Issues like climate change, inequality, and human rights abuses have led consumers and governments to demand greater corporate accountability. As a result, many companies have adopted sustainable business practices, such as reducing carbon emissions, promoting diversity and inclusion, and ensuring ethical supply chains. These initiatives are designed not only to enhance corporate reputations but also to create a more sustainable and just world (Matten & Moon, 2018).

Moreover, CSR has been shown to bring tangible benefits to businesses. Companies that adopt socially responsible practices often enjoy enhanced brand loyalty, improved employee morale, and reduced regulatory scrutiny. In the long run, this can lead to better financial performance. Research indicates that consumers are more likely to support companies that are perceived as ethical and socially responsible, leading to a positive correlation between CSR and profitability (Porter & Kramer, 2021).

However, CSR is not without its critics. Some argue that it can be a form of "window dressing," where companies engage in socially responsible activities purely for public relations purposes rather than out of a genuine commitment to societal well-being. This concern is often directed at companies that publicize their CSR efforts but continue to engage in harmful practices elsewhere in their operations (Banerjee, 2018).

Concept of Consumer Perception

Consumer perception refers to the way consumers interpret and make sense of marketing stimuli and product information. It is a cognitive process that involves the selection, organization, and interpretation of sensory inputs, such as advertisements, packaging, and brand messages, to form an understanding of a product or service. This perception significantly influences purchasing decisions and brand loyalty, as consumers tend to rely on their interpretations of these inputs to evaluate the quality, value, and relevance of a product to their needs.

Perception begins with exposure, where consumers encounter marketing stimuli through various channels, such as television, social media, or retail environments. Attention is then directed toward specific aspects of these stimuli based on factors like relevance, novelty, or personal interest. Finally, the information is processed and interpreted, leading to a perceived image or understanding of the product. The interpretation of this information is highly subjective, shaped by the consumer's past experiences, cultural background, personal values, and expectations (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019).

An essential element of consumer perception is the role of selective perception. Consumers are often exposed to a vast array of marketing messages, but they do not process all of them equally. Instead, they filter information through selective exposure, attention, and retention. Selective exposure refers to the tendency of consumers to engage with information that aligns with their beliefs or preferences, while avoiding messages that contradict them. Selective attention involves focusing on certain aspects of a marketing message while ignoring others. Selective retention

refers to the ability of consumers to remember information that supports their perceptions and attitudes about a product (Solomon, 2020).

Perception is also closely linked to brand image, which refers to the set of beliefs and attitudes consumers hold about a brand. A strong, positive brand image is often the result of favourable consumer perceptions that have been consistently reinforced through effective marketing and consumer experiences. Conversely, negative experiences or inconsistent marketing messages can lead to unfavourable perceptions, which may harm a brand's reputation and reduce consumer trust (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Consumer perception is also influenced by psychological factors such as motivation, emotion, and learning. Motivation drives consumers to pay attention to products that fulfil their needs or desires. For example, a consumer who is health-conscious is more likely to notice and positively perceive a product marketed as organic or healthy. Emotions can also affect perception by colouring the way consumers interpret a product. A product that elicits positive emotions, such as happiness or nostalgia, can be perceived more favourably. Learning from past experiences with a product, whether positive or negative, shapes future perceptions as well (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Additionally, cultural and social influences play a crucial role in shaping consumer perception. Cultural values, norms, and social contexts influence how consumers interpret marketing messages and form perceptions of products. For instance, a product marketed as eco-friendly may be perceived differently in societies where environmental sustainability is a strong cultural value compared to societies where this is less of a priority (Solomon, 2020).

In today's digital age, consumer perception is increasingly shaped by online interactions and social media. The rise of user-generated content, reviews, and influencer endorsements has created new sources of information that consumers use to form perceptions. Research shows that consumers often rely on online reviews and peer recommendations to form their opinions about products, which can significantly impact brand perception and purchasing behaviour (Kotler & Keller, 2021).

Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Perception of Nigerian Companies

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a critical factor in shaping consumer perception of companies, particularly in Nigeria, where socio-economic and environmental issues have led to increased public expectations of businesses. CSR encompasses efforts by companies to operate ethically, contribute to economic development, and improve the quality of life of the workforce and society at large. For Nigerian companies, CSR initiatives are increasingly influencing how consumers perceive their brand value, trustworthiness, and commitment to societal progress.

One of the significant ways in which CSR influences consumer perception is through the alignment of a company's social initiatives with the needs of local communities. In Nigeria, where poverty,

environmental degradation, and inadequate infrastructure are pressing issues, companies that engage in CSR projects aimed at addressing these challenges often enhance their public image. According to Adeyanju (2022), Nigerian consumers are more likely to have a favourable perception of companies that contribute to societal needs through initiatives like community development, healthcare provision, and education support. This positive perception, in turn, fosters consumer loyalty and brand trust.

Environmental sustainability is a particular aspect of CSR that has gained prominence in Nigeria, especially in industries such as oil and gas, where environmental impacts have been a concern. Nigerian consumers are increasingly aware of environmental issues, and they are more inclined to support companies that demonstrate commitment to reducing their carbon footprint, managing waste, and preserving natural resources. For example, oil companies like Shell and Chevron have undertaken environmental remediation projects in the Niger Delta region, which has significantly impacted local communities' perceptions of their brands. While these companies have been criticized in the past for environmental degradation, their CSR efforts in clean-up operations and community support have improved their public standing (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, & Amao, 2021).

Moreover, CSR initiatives centred around employee welfare and ethical business practices also shape consumer perceptions in Nigeria. Consumers tend to view companies that treat their employees fairly and adhere to ethical labour practices more positively. In a country with high unemployment rates and labour rights concerns, Nigerian consumers are particularly sensitive to how businesses engage with their workforce. CSR initiatives that promote fair wages, employee development, and workplace safety can improve consumer perceptions of a company's ethical standing, as these efforts reflect a broader commitment to social justice (Okafor, 2015).

However, there are challenges in ensuring that CSR initiatives translate into positive consumer perception. One significant issue is the authenticity of CSR practices. Some Nigerian companies engage in "greenwashing," where they publicize CSR initiatives that are either superficial or not implemented as effectively as advertised. This can lead to scepticism among consumers, who may view such companies as using CSR for mere public relations purposes without a genuine commitment to societal welfare (Uwuigbe, 2021). As a result, companies that fail to deliver on their CSR promises risk damaging their reputation and losing consumer trust.

The role of media and communication is also crucial in shaping how CSR influences consumer perception. Nigerian companies that effectively communicate their CSR activities, especially through digital platforms and social media, are more likely to be perceived positively by consumers. A well-structured communication strategy that highlights the impact of CSR efforts can build transparency and trust, leading to stronger consumer loyalty (Amaeshi et al., 2021). Additionally, companies that involve consumers in their CSR efforts, such as through charitable campaigns or social impact projects, tend to build stronger emotional connections with their target audience.

Specific CSR Initiatives that have Influence on Consumer Perception of Nigerian companies

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in Nigeria have evolved to meet the social, economic, and environmental needs of the country. Nigerian companies have implemented various CSR strategies to address issues such as poverty, education, environmental sustainability, and healthcare, which have significantly shaped consumer perception. Effective CSR initiatives foster positive consumer views by demonstrating a company's commitment to societal well-being, thereby enhancing brand loyalty and reputation. Some specific CSR initiatives in Nigeria that have influenced consumer perception include environmental sustainability projects, community development programmes, healthcare support, and education initiatives.

One of the most impactful CSR initiatives in Nigeria is environmental sustainability, especially in industries with significant environmental footprints, such as oil and gas. Companies like Shell and Chevron have invested in environmental remediation projects aimed at mitigating the environmental damage caused by their operations in the Niger Delta. These initiatives include pollution clean-up operations, biodiversity preservation efforts, and the reduction of gas flaring. The positive impact of these programmes has influenced consumer perception by demonstrating that these companies are taking responsibility for their environmental impact and working to improve the quality of life for affected communities (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, & Amao, 2021). Consumers tend to view these companies more favourably because of these environmentally responsible practices, enhancing their overall brand image.

Community development programmes have also been a key CSR initiative among Nigerian companies. For example, the Dangote Group, one of the largest conglomerates in Nigeria, has implemented various projects aimed at improving the livelihoods of local communities. These initiatives include the construction of infrastructure such as roads, schools, and water supply systems, as well as supporting agricultural development programmes. By addressing the infrastructural needs of communities, the Dangote Group has been able to strengthen its relationship with consumers, particularly in rural areas where government services are often inadequate. These efforts have created a positive perception of the company as one that is genuinely committed to social and economic development (Ojo, 2021).

Healthcare support initiatives by Nigerian companies have also significantly influenced consumer perception. For instance, MTN Nigeria, a leading telecommunications company, established the MTN Foundation, which has been instrumental in providing healthcare services to underserved communities. The foundation has funded medical outreach programmes, built health centers, and provided medical equipment to hospitals across the country. These healthcare initiatives have enhanced consumer trust and loyalty toward MTN, as they are seen as making meaningful contributions to public health, particularly in a country where healthcare infrastructure is often lacking (Uzonwanne, 2015).

Another prominent CSR initiative that has shaped consumer perception is the focus on education and youth empowerment. Nigerian companies have invested heavily in educational programmes

designed to support academic excellence and provide scholarships to underprivileged students. These programmes also include the funding of educational infrastructure, teacher training, and digital literacy programmes aimed at equipping Nigerian youths with relevant skills for the modern workforce. The positive impact of these educational initiatives has been substantial, as consumers tend to perceive companies that invest in the future of Nigerian youths as socially responsible and committed to national development (Okafor, 2015). This fosters a strong connection between the companies and their consumers, who are more likely to support brands that contribute to improving the country's education system.

Despite the positive influence of these CSR initiatives, companies face challenges in ensuring that their efforts are perceived as authentic and not merely for public relations purposes. For instance, companies that consistently align their CSR strategies with the genuine needs of local communities tend to enjoy stronger consumer loyalty than those whose initiatives are perceived as superficial or insincere. Authentic CSR efforts create a lasting impact on consumer perception by fostering long-term engagement and trust (Adeyanju, 2022).

Relationship between CSR Communication Strategies and Consumer Loyalty towards Nigerian Companies

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a strategic tool for companies in Nigeria seeking to build consumer loyalty and enhance their public image. However, the effectiveness of CSR initiatives in fostering consumer loyalty depends largely on how well these efforts are communicated to the public. CSR communication strategies play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and, subsequently, their loyalty to a brand. In Nigeria, where consumers are increasingly concerned with the ethical and social impacts of businesses, effective communication of CSR initiatives helps bridge the gap between corporate actions and consumer expectations. The relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty is thus intertwined, as well-executed communication builds trust, enhances transparency, and promotes a deeper emotional connection with the company.

Effective CSR communication creates awareness among consumers about a company's social and environmental contributions, which can positively influence consumer loyalty. When companies clearly communicate their CSR activities, consumers are more likely to understand the company's commitment to societal welfare, leading to enhanced trust and emotional engagement. This communication can take various forms, including social media campaigns, annual CSR reports, press releases, and advertisements. In Nigeria, telecommunications companies like MTN and Globacom, for example, have effectively used their platforms to communicate their CSR activities, such as sponsoring education and healthcare programmes (Adeyanju, 2022). By doing so, they have built a sense of goodwill and loyalty among consumers, who feel that supporting these companies also supports broader societal causes.

Moreover, transparency in CSR communication fosters consumer trust, which is a key driver of loyalty. Nigerian consumers are increasingly sceptical of companies that make grand CSR claims but fail to deliver substantive results. In response, many companies have adopted transparent

communication strategies that not only highlight their successes but also acknowledge areas for improvement. This kind of openness reassures consumers that the company is genuinely committed to making a positive impact rather than engaging in CSR for mere public relations purposes. For example, Nigerian Breweries has been known for its honest and transparent communication of its environmental sustainability programmes, which has helped to solidify consumer trust and loyalty over time (Okafor, 2015).

Digital platforms, especially social media, have become vital in CSR communication, allowing for real-time interaction and feedback between companies and consumers. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have enabled Nigerian companies to engage directly with consumers, showcase their CSR initiatives, and respond to inquiries or concerns. The interactive nature of these platforms allows consumers to feel more connected to the CSR efforts of the company, fostering a sense of participation and loyalty. Uzonwanne (2015) notes that consumer loyalty is enhanced when companies use digital platforms not only to inform but also to engage their audience, creating a two-way communication flow that builds a stronger emotional connection with the brand.

Additionally, well-executed CSR communication strategies can also lead to positive word-of-mouth marketing, which further strengthens consumer loyalty. In Nigeria, where social networks and community ties play a significant role in shaping consumer behaviour, individuals who are impressed by a company's CSR efforts are likely to share their positive experiences with others. This word-of-mouth marketing is amplified by effective communication strategies that clearly outline the impact of CSR initiatives. When consumers feel proud to be associated with a socially responsible company, they become brand advocates, promoting the company to their peers and, in turn, boosting consumer loyalty (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, & Amao, 2021).

However, it is important to note that CSR communication strategies must be authentic and consistent. Nigerian consumers are becoming more discerning and can easily detect when a company is engaging in "CSR-washing" — the practice of exaggerating or fabricating CSR efforts to enhance its image. Companies that use CSR merely as a marketing tool without genuine commitment to societal development risk alienating consumers and eroding loyalty. According to Uwuigbe (2021), consumers are quick to turn against companies they perceive as insincere in their CSR efforts, leading to negative brand perceptions and diminished loyalty.

Challenges Militating against Effective CSR Influence on Consumer Perception of Nigerian Companies

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a significant aspect of modern business practices, often used to improve the perception of companies among consumers. In Nigeria, many companies have embraced CSR initiatives as part of their operational strategies, aiming to enhance their corporate image and build consumer loyalty. However, despite these efforts, several challenges hinder the effectiveness of CSR in positively influencing consumer perception. These challenges include lack

of awareness, inconsistency in CSR initiatives, weak regulatory frameworks, financial constraints, and scepticism about the authenticity of CSR activities.

One of the primary challenges militating against the effectiveness of CSR in shaping consumer perception is the lack of awareness. Many consumers in Nigeria are unaware of the CSR initiatives undertaken by companies, which significantly limits the positive impact these initiatives could have on public perception. Companies often fail to adequately communicate their CSR activities to the public, leading to a disconnect between their efforts and consumer understanding. According to Okoye (2022), inadequate communication strategies prevent companies from effectively conveying their CSR efforts to their target audience, reducing the overall impact on consumer loyalty and trust. When consumers are not aware of a company's social contributions, they cannot factor these initiatives into their buying decisions, thereby diminishing the potential positive influence on perception.

Inconsistency in CSR initiatives is another significant challenge affecting the influence of CSR on consumer perception. Many Nigerian companies lack a coherent and long-term strategy for their CSR activities, resulting in sporadic or one-off initiatives that fail to make a lasting impact. Companies that are inconsistent in their CSR efforts are often perceived as being insincere, leading to consumer scepticism. For instance, companies that engage in CSR only during crises or for short-term gains are less likely to foster lasting consumer trust. Adeyanju (2022) highlights that the inconsistency in CSR practices among Nigerian companies makes it difficult for consumers to build an emotional connection with the brand, as they are uncertain about the company's long-term commitment to societal development.

Another challenge is the weak regulatory framework governing CSR practices in Nigeria. The absence of a robust legal framework to guide and enforce CSR activities results in a lack of standardization and accountability among companies. While some organizations voluntarily implement CSR practices, many others engage in superficial CSR just to meet societal expectations without making significant contributions. The weak regulatory environment allows companies to get away with CSR practices that are purely cosmetic or designed for public relations purposes. Uwuigbe (2021) notes that without clear regulations, there is no assurance that companies will consistently pursue meaningful CSR activities, which undermines consumer trust and the potential for a positive shift in perception.

Financial constraints also play a crucial role in limiting the effectiveness of CSR in shaping consumer perception. Many Nigerian companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), struggle to allocate sufficient resources to meaningful CSR activities due to financial pressures. Given the economic challenges faced by businesses in Nigeria, including high operational costs and a fluctuating economy, some companies may prioritize short-term profitability over long-term social investments. According to Ojo (2021), the lack of financial capacity among smaller firms limits their ability to engage in impactful CSR initiatives, reducing the potential for these activities to positively influence consumer perception.

Scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives is another major hurdle. Nigerian consumers are increasingly aware of the possibility of “greenwashing,” where companies engage in CSR activities primarily to enhance their public image without genuinely committing to societal development. This scepticism is heightened by the prevalence of CSR practices that are designed more for publicity than for making a tangible impact on communities. Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, and Amao (2021) argue that consumers are quick to detect insincere CSR efforts, particularly when companies prioritize self-promotion over substantive change. When CSR is perceived as a marketing ploy rather than a genuine effort to address societal challenges, it fails to improve consumer perception and can even damage a company’s reputation.

In addition, there is a cultural dimension to the challenges facing CSR in Nigeria. The notion of corporate responsibility is relatively new in many parts of the country, and consumers may not place as much emphasis on CSR when making purchasing decisions. While there is a growing middle class that is becoming more socially conscious, a large proportion of the population is still primarily concerned with affordability and accessibility rather than the ethical practices of companies. This cultural context reduces the overall impact of CSR on consumer perception, as many consumers may not prioritize a company’s social and environmental contributions when choosing products or services.

Theoretical Framework (Agenda Setting Theory)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an integral aspect of modern business practices, significantly influencing consumer perceptions, particularly in Nigeria. As Nigerian companies increasingly adopt CSR strategies to address socio-economic and environmental issues, understanding how these initiatives impact consumer perception is crucial. The Communication Theory that best explains this influence is the **Agenda-Setting Theory**. This theory, primarily developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that media and communication channels play a significant role in shaping public perception by highlighting certain issues and thereby influencing the public agenda.

The Agenda-Setting Theory is pertinent in explaining the influence of CSR on consumer perception in Nigeria because it underscores how the communication of CSR activities affects consumer views and brand reputation. According to the theory, media and communication strategies can set the agenda by emphasizing specific topics, thereby guiding public attention and shaping opinions (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the context of CSR, this theory suggests that companies that effectively communicate their CSR efforts through various media channels can influence consumer perceptions by drawing attention to their positive contributions to society.

In Nigeria, where socio-economic and environmental challenges are prevalent, CSR initiatives are often communicated through media campaigns, social media, and corporate reports. These communication strategies play a crucial role in setting the public agenda regarding corporate behaviour and social responsibility. For instance, companies like Shell and Chevron, which have

historically faced criticism for environmental degradation, have utilized CSR communication to improve their public image. By highlighting their environmental remediation projects and community development efforts, these companies have sought to shift public perception and enhance their reputation (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, & Amao, 2006). The Agenda-Setting Theory helps to understand how these communication efforts shape consumer views by placing emphasis on the positive impacts of CSR initiatives.

Furthermore, the Agenda-Setting Theory also explains how the transparency and authenticity of CSR communication affect consumer trust and loyalty. When companies communicate their CSR activities transparently and authentically, they set a positive agenda that can enhance consumer trust. Transparency in CSR reporting, such as disclosing the impact of environmental sustainability projects or community development programmes, helps build credibility and aligns with consumer expectations (Okafor, 2015). Conversely, companies engaging in "greenwashing" or insincere CSR practices may undermine consumer trust, as the agenda set by their communication strategies can be perceived as misleading or superficial (Uwuigbe, 2011). The theory thus highlights the importance of genuine and consistent communication in maintaining positive consumer perceptions.

The role of digital platforms, including social media, in CSR communication is also well-explained by the Agenda-Setting Theory. Digital media allow companies to engage directly with consumers and shape the agenda by disseminating information about their CSR efforts in real-time. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provide a space for companies to showcase their social contributions and interact with their audience, thereby influencing public perception (Uzonwanne, 2015). The interactive nature of digital platforms enables companies to set a positive agenda by actively engaging consumers and responding to their concerns, which can strengthen consumer loyalty and brand image.

The Agenda-Setting Theory effectively explains the influence of CSR on consumer perception of Nigerian companies by emphasizing the role of communication strategies in shaping public views. By setting the agenda through media and communication channels, companies can highlight their CSR initiatives and influence consumer perceptions positively. However, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on the authenticity and transparency of the communication efforts. As Nigerian companies continue to leverage CSR to enhance their brand image and build consumer trust, understanding and applying the principles of Agenda-Setting Theory can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of consumer perception and corporate reputation.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the cross-sectional research design with survey research method. The cross-sectional research design is typically used in an investigation that gives detailed guidance for research processes (Creswell 2014). The researcher meticulously constructed this study to serve as a guide during the study's execution. The survey approach was chosen because it required direct

interaction between the researcher and the subjects, who answered the questions posed by the researcher. The study population comprises all the branches of Eco Bank and Zenith Bank Nigeria Plc in Delta State Senatorial Districts (Delta South, Delta North and Delta Central) with an estimated staff strength of 1200 personnel both on the field and in the office, and its form the figure that the sample size of the study will be drawn. The study population is made up of male and female staff, age bracket 18 and above as well as their religious affiliation and of which a sample of 300 was drawn using Taro Yamane formula. The purposive sampling approach, also known as the judgemental sampling technique, was used for this investigation. Purposive sampling is a sampling approach in which the researcher chooses individuals of the population to participate in the study based on his or her own assessment. The researcher used this sampling technique because the sampling units were chosen subjectively to match the subject matter of the research. To obtain the samples required for the study, the researcher will approach staff at the various banks in the study area and politely ask if they would like to participate in the research. Three hundred (300) staff of the respective banks sampled will be included in the sample if they agree to supply relevant information that is delimited to subject matter of this research. The questionnaire as the only instrument of data collection was distributed to the respondents. There will be clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaire and respond to the interview questions. Information privacy will be guaranteed. But in terms of scoring the responses, the scale of the questionnaire will have 5 items to gauge the elements. The scale items are graded on a 5-point Likert scale, with 'Strongly Agree' receiving a score of 4, and 'Disagree' receiving a score of 0. After data collection, simple percentage mean was used to analyse the research questions.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The display and analysis of the field data are the main topics of this chapter. The data analysis method included a straightforward statistical explanation using simple percentage mean to answer the stipulated research questions. During this study, 300 copies of the questionnaire were distributed, and 233 copies of the questionnaire were received from respondents.

Analysis of Demographic data of respondents

Table 4.1: Gender distribution of respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	130	55.8
Female	103	44.2
Total	233	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

The above table distribution shows that 130(55.8%) of the total respondents constitute the largest who are males, while 103(44.2%) of the respondents who are females are the lowest.

Table 4.2: Age distribution of respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
20 – 25yrs	45	19.3
26 – 30 yrs	100	42.9
26 above	88	37.8
Total	233	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

The above table distribution shows that 100(42.9%) of the total respondents constitute the largest in the age bracket of 26 – 30 yrs, while 45(19.3%) of the respondents who are within the age bracket of 20-25 are the lowest.

Table 4.3: Marital Status Distribution of Respondents

Marital Status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Married	79	33.9
Divorced	13	5.8
Single	141	60.5
Total	233	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

The distribution above shows the marital status distribution of respondents. It reveals that 141(60.5%) of the total respondents are Single, 79(33.9%) of the respondents are married, while 13(5.8%) of the respondents are divorced.

Table 4.4: Working Experience of Respondents

Working Experience	Frequency	Percentage (%)
0-5 yrs	132	56.7
6-10 yrs	66	28.3
21-30 yrs	23	9.9
31 and above	12	5.2
Total	233	100

Source: Fieldwork, 2024

The distribution above shows that 132(56.7%) of the total respondents have 0-5 working experience which constitute the highest of the respondents while 12(5.2%) of the respondents who have 31 years above working experience constitute the lowest.

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Question 1: What specific CSR initiatives have the most significant impact on consumer perception of Nigerian companies?

Table 4.5: Analysis of Research Question 1

S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Environmental sustainability	165 660	26 78	18 36	24 24	233 785	3.40	Agreed
2	Community development programmes	158 632	19 57	44 88	12 12	233 789	3.40	Agreed
3	Healthcare support initiatives	141 564	48 144	32 64	12 12	233 784	3.40	Agreed
4	Access to subsidised education	78 312	71 213	58 116	26 26	233 667	2.90	Agreed
5	Youth empowerment	132 528	39 117	47 94	15 15	233 754	3.23	Agreed
Grand Mean = 3.27								

Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Table 4.5 showed that respondents agreed to environmental sustainability, community development programmes and healthcare support initiatives with mean scores of 3.40 each. Respondents also agreed to access to subsidised education with mean score of 2.90. Respondents further agreed to youth empowerment with mean score of 2.3.23. Based on the grand mean of 3.27, it can be inferred therefore that the specific CSR initiatives that have influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies are predominantly environmental sustainability, community development programmes and healthcare support initiatives.

Research Questions 2: What is the relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty towards Nigerian companies?

Table 4.6: Analysis of Research Question 2

S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	Mean	Decision
1	Effective CSR communication enhances customer loyalty	113 452	21 63	55 110	44 44	233 669	2.90	Agreed
2	CSR initiatives influence customer retention	133 532	21 63	67 134	12 12	233 741	3.20	Agreed
3	CSR reports effectively inform customers about our social and environmental commitments	83 332	71 213	67 134	12 12	233 691	2.97	Agreed
4	Regular updates on CSR activities through internal communications increase employee pride and customer loyalty	233 932	-	-	-	233 932	4.00	Agreed
5	Transparency in CSR communication is crucial for building trust and loyalty among customers	233 932	-	-	-	233 932	4.00	Agreed
Grand Mean = 3.41								

Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Table 4.6 showed that respondents agreed to effective CSR communication enhances customer loyalty with mean score of 2.90. Respondents agreed CSR initiatives influence customer retention; CSR reports effectively inform customers about our social and environmental commitments; regular updates on CSR activities through internal communications increase employee pride and customer loyalty as well as transparency in CSR communication is crucial for building trust and loyalty among customers with mean scores of 3.20, 2.97, 4.00 & 4.00 respectively. Based on the grand mean of 3.41, it can be inferred therefore that there is significant relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty towards Nigerian companies.

Research Questions 3: What are the challenges militating against effective CSR influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies?

Table 4.7: Analysis of Research Question 3

S/N	Items	SA 4	A 3	SD 2	D 1	Total	Mean	Decision
1	The effectiveness of CSR in shaping consumer perception	58 232	71 213	50 100	54 54	233 599	2.57	Agreed
2	Inconsistency in CSR initiatives	61 244	50 150	69 139	50 50	233 583	2.50	Agreed
3	Weak regulatory framework governing CSR practices	233 932	-	-	-	233 932	4.00	Agreed
4	Financial constraints	73 292	50 150	57 114	50 50	233 606	2.60	Agreed
5	Scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives	233 932	-	-	-	233 932	4.00	Agreed
Grand Mean = 3.13								

Source: Field Survey Data, 2024

Table 4.7 showed that respondents agreed to the effectiveness of CSR in shaping consumer perception; inconsistency in CSR initiatives; weak regulatory framework governing CSR practices; financial constraints as well as scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives, with mean scores of 2.57, 2.50, 4.00, 2.67 & 4.00. Based on the grand mean of 3.13, it can be inferred therefore that there are numerous challenges militating against effective CSR influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies most especially weak regulatory framework governing CSR practices and scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first analysis revealed that the specific CSR initiatives that have influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies are predominantly environmental sustainability, community development programmes and healthcare support initiatives. This agrees with Amaeshi, Adi,

Ogbechie and Amao (2021) who opined that the positive impact of these programmes has influenced consumer perception by demonstrating that these companies are taking responsibility for their environmental impact and working to improve the quality of life for affected communities. Also, Ojo (2021) noted that community development programmes have also been a key CSR initiative among Nigerian companies. These initiatives include the construction of infrastructure such as roads, schools, and water supply systems, as well as supporting agricultural development programmes. Healthcare support initiatives by Nigerian companies have also significantly influenced consumer perception. These healthcare initiatives have enhanced consumer trust and loyalty toward MTN, as they are seen as making meaningful contributions to public health, particularly in a country where healthcare infrastructure is often lacking (Uzonwanne, 2015).

The second analysis revealed that there is significant relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty towards Nigerian companies. This finding agrees with Adeyanju (2022) who noted that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a strategic tool for companies in Nigeria seeking to build consumer loyalty and enhance their public image. However, the effectiveness of CSR initiatives in fostering consumer loyalty depends largely on how well these efforts are communicated to the public. CSR communication strategies play a pivotal role in shaping consumer perceptions and, subsequently, their loyalty to a brand. In Nigeria, where consumers are increasingly concerned with the ethical and social impacts of businesses, effective communication of CSR initiatives helps bridge the gap between corporate actions and consumer expectations. The relationship between CSR communication strategies and consumer loyalty is thus intertwined, as well-executed communication builds trust, enhances transparency, and promotes a deeper emotional connection with the company.

The third analysis revealed that there are numerous challenges militating against effective CSR influence on consumer perception of Nigerian companies most especially weak regulatory framework governing CSR practices and scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives. This finding agrees with This finding agrees with Uwuigbe (2021) who noted that while some organizations voluntarily implement CSR practices, many others engage in superficial CSR just to meet societal expectations without making significant contributions. The weak regulatory environment allows companies to get away with CSR practices that are purely cosmetic or designed for public relations purposes. Uwuigbe (2021) further asserted that without clear regulations, there is no assurance that companies will consistently pursue meaningful CSR activities, which undermines consumer trust and the potential for a positive shift in perception. Also, scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives is another major hurdle. Nigerian consumers are increasingly aware of the possibility of “greenwashing,” where companies engage in CSR activities primarily to enhance their public image without genuinely committing to societal development. This scepticism is heightened by the prevalence of CSR practices that are designed more for publicity than for making a tangible impact on communities (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, and Amao, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the influence of corporate social responsibility on consumer perception of Nigerian companies. It is evident that Nigerian companies can enhance consumer perception through environmental sustainability, community development programs, and healthcare support initiatives. Additionally, effective communication of CSR initiatives significantly impacts consumer loyalty. However, several challenges hinder the effectiveness of CSR, including a weak regulatory framework governing CSR practices and consumer scepticism about the authenticity of CSR initiatives. Addressing these challenges is crucial for Nigerian companies to leverage CSR and build trust, reputation, and loyalty among their customers.

Recommendations

From the conclusions, the following recommendations were suggested.

- Nigerian companies should prioritize transparency and consistency in their CSR initiatives to build trust and credibility with consumers. This can be achieved through regular reporting and disclosure of CSR activities, outcomes, and impact.
- Companies operating in Nigeria should engage in CSR initiatives that address the country's specific socio-economic challenges, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure development. This will demonstrate their commitment to the well-being of Nigerian citizens and contribute to the country's sustainable development.
- Nigerian companies should involve local communities in the design and implementation of CSR initiatives to ensure relevance and effectiveness. This collaborative approach will foster a sense of ownership and enhance consumer perception of the company's social responsibility.
- To enhance authenticity, Nigerian companies should align their CSR initiatives with their core business operations. This will demonstrate a genuine commitment to social responsibility and reduce perceptions of CSR as mere publicity.
- Companies in Nigeria should leverage social media platforms to communicate their CSR initiatives and outcomes to a wider audience. This will increase visibility, build brand awareness, and foster positive consumer perception.
- Nigerian companies should integrate CSR into their corporate strategy and decision-making processes, rather than treating it as a standalone initiative. This will ensure that social responsibility is embedded in the company's culture and operations, leading to long-term benefits for both the business and society.

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