# Gen Z's Engagement with CSR Types through Relevance


## Abstract

This study examines how Generation Z (Gen Z) responds to different types of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) messaging on social media. As a socially conscious and digitally native generation, Gen Z represents a critical audience for strategic CSR communication. Through a four-condition online experiment (N = 678), we investigated the effects of three CSR types—environmental, social, and economic—on participants' attitudes toward the company and their intention to engage with the brand on social media. Results show that all three CSR types positively influence both attitudes and engagement; however, environmental and social CSR initiatives generate significantly stronger engagement than economic CSR. Furthermore, the study identifies two distinct mediating mechanisms: perceived societal relevance more strongly predicts positive attitude change, while perceived personal relevance is a more powerful driver of engagement behaviors. By integrating both personal and societal relevance into the CSR-effect model, this study offers a nuanced explanation for Gen Z's varied responses to CSR campaigns. The findings provide practical implications for organizations seeking to enhance the effectiveness of CSR messaging: campaigns designed to build reputation may benefit from emphasizing societal relevance, while those aiming to increase visibility and interaction should highlight personally relevant themes.



*Keywords:* Generation Z, CSR type, societal and personal relevance, social media engagement

As the first generation grows up with the internet, Generation Z is emerging as a powerful force shaping the social, economic, and cultural landscape of our society. Known for their strong values around sustainability, justice, and inclusivity (Wandhe, 2024), Gen Z feels not only personally accountable for making a difference but also places high expectations on organizations to act responsibly. Many in this generation assert that corporations must lead efforts to address social and environmental challenges. Additionally, as Gen Z typically receives Corporation Social Responsibility (CSR) messages through digital platforms (Vo, 2019), communicating CSR online is likely to attract Gen Z and foster brand reputation.

While CSR communication on social media has been widely studied, much of the existing research has taken a broad approach or focused on millennials, often neglecting generational differences. There remains a noticeable lack of research focused explicitly on Gen Z, especially in the U.S. Given their distinctive values and media habits, Gen Z deserves targeted investigation in the CSR communication literature.

In today's digital world, brands can enhance their reputation by encouraging likes, comments, and shares (e.g. Constantinos et al., 2016; Dhaoui and Webster. 2020). Despite the critical role of social media engagement, particularly in promoting brands and products (AI-Haddad et al., 2022) as well as eWOM (Fatma et al., 2020), it is understudied in the context of CSR. Considering Gen Z's high levels of engagement on social media (Schaefer, 2025), it is likely that they are especially responsive to CSR messages shared through these platforms.

To better understand this dynamic, it is important to consider that CSR is not a monolithic concept, and different types of CSR may carry different meanings and implications for consumers. Although ample research has shown that CSR practices generally increase brands' reputation and purchase intention (e.g., David et al., 2005; Bianchi et al., 2019; Wang et

al., 2021), as a multidimensional concept, the effects of communicating CSR can vary depending on the type of CSR practices involved. Indeed, some scholars found that social CSR has the greatest influence on an individual's emotional value (i.e., the feelings or affective states generated by a product), while environmental CSR increases consumers' utilitarian value (i.e., performance/quality of a product; Currás-Pérez, et al., 2017). Other studies have shown that economic and legal CSR have no significant impact on individuals' purchase intention other than ethical and philanthropic CSR (Min et al., 2012).

Since Gen Z prioritizes values differently from other generations, a survey conducted by Gallup revealed that a majority of Gen Z believe in the importance of corporate engagement in sustainability and is inclined to join companies that make positive social impact (Gallup, 2024). Such results suggest Gen Z's responses to CSR may also vary across different types of CSR practices, which warrants further exploration. Furthermore, how Gen Z perceives different types of CSR may also influence their attitudes toward the company and their social media engagement. Particularly, scholars have noted that perceiving CSR as personally relevant can increase individuals' favorable attitudes toward a company (Lafferty, 2007; Zhang and Surujlal, 2015). As Gen Zers are highly concerned with social issues, understanding their perceptions of societal relevance is crucial in assessing how they respond to CSR.

The current study aims to explore how Gen Z responds to different types of CSR, with additional focus on the key variable of social media engagement. In addition, this study examines the mediating roles of both personal and societal relevance in shaping these responses.

## Literature Review

### *Gen Z and CSR*

Generation Z (Gen Z), generally defined as individuals born between the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2010s (Dimock, 2019; McCrindle, 2014), is an emerging generation of consumers showing a notable receptiveness to brands with strong CSR initiatives (Ahmad, 2020). While prior CSR research frequently groups Gen Z with Millennials due to shared digital fluency and support for social causes (e.g. Kim and Austin, 2020; Wandhe, 2024), growing evidence suggests that important generational distinctions may shape how CSR messages are processed and evaluated.

First, compared to Millennials and earlier generations, Gen Z is often characterized as more progressive, liberal, and inclusive (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; McDonald and Deckman, 2023; Wandhe, 2024). However, this value orientation coexists with a pragmatic outlook shaped by experiences of economic instability and social change (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Reinikainen et al., 2020). This combination suggests that although Gen Z may express normative support for CSR initiatives, their evaluations may involve both value-based considerations and practical assessments.

Second, Gen Z tends to exhibit heightened skepticism toward corporate-generated content and greater reliance on peer-generated information (Francis and Hoefel, 2018; Herrando et al., 2019). Their extensive exposure to digital information environments and heightened awareness of online privacy concerns (Bergh, 2016) may encourage more careful scrutiny of brand communications, including CSR messages. Rather than accepting CSR claims at face value, Gen Z may engage in a cognitive appraisal process that evaluates the credibility and relevance of CSR initiatives before forming attitudinal or behavioral responses.

Third, although Gen Z strongly endorses social and environmental values, some scholars argue that this cohort simultaneously prioritizes personal interests and self-oriented goals over

conventional social expectations (Twenge, 2017). This potential tension between moral endorsement and self-interest suggests that CSR effectiveness may depend on how individuals interpret the personal and societal implications of a given initiative. In other words, perceived personal and societal relevance may function as differentiated evaluative mechanisms linking CSR types to downstream outcomes.

Taken together, these generational characteristics indicate that examining Gen Z is not merely a demographic extension of prior CSR research but a theoretically meaningful context in which to investigate how CSR types activate distinct relevance appraisals, thereby shaping attitudinal and engagement responses.

### *CSR Type*

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a broad concept encompassing businesses' duties beyond immediate profitability (Gibson, 2019). It refers to a company's responsibility to society, stakeholders, and the environment (McWilliams, 2020). CSR has been shown to positively impact company reputation and consumer attitudes; however, as a multidimensional concept, its various dimensions may yield different effects on consumer perception and behavior (De Roeck and Maon, 2016; Fatma et al., 2020; Narayanan, 2022).

Researchers categorize CSR in different ways, highlighting its multidimensional nature. For example, Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) identify six dimensions of CSR: community support, diversity, employee support, environmental efforts, non-U.S. operations, and product focus.

Others use a four-dimensional model covering economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities (Maignan, 2001; Maignan and Ferrell, 2003), while additional frameworks include a moral-ethics, discretionary, and relational model (David et al., 2005) and a commercial, social, and environmental approach (Singh et al., 2007).

Empirical studies support the idea that CSR type influences young consumer responses in multiple countries (e.g. Kim and Austin 2019; Min et al., 2012; Thuy,Hai and Minh, 2020).

This study employs a widely used three-dimensional CSR categorization-social, economic, and environmental CSR-which is especially common in marketing research and easily understandable for consumers (Bigne et al., 2005; Torugsa et al., 2012; Alvarado-Herrera et al., 2015; Narayanan, 2022). The economic dimension involves societal expectations that a company will operate sustainably, provide stable employment, and efficiently deliver quality goods and services (Alvarado-Herrera et al., 2017). The social dimension encompasses a company's commitment to social causes, cultural alignment, and community support (Choi et al., 2011). Finally, the environmental dimension focuses on eco-friendly practices, such as resource conservation, waste management, and reducing environmental impact in production processes (Choi et al., 2011).

Existing research reveals that stakeholders, consumers, and employees perceive CSR dimensions differently. For instance, Currás-Pérez et al. (2018) found that while all three CSR types are associated with positive emotional responses, social and economic CSR correlate more strongly with utilitarian values, while social CSR alone connects with social values. In terms of social media engagement, studies show that social CSR posts and customer-oriented economic benefit posts generate more "likes" and comments compared to environmental CSR posts (Kim and Skepchenkova, 2020).

Gen Z, in particular, may perceive these CSR dimensions in unique ways. For example, a survey found that 88% of Gen Z respondents believe CSR should primarily benefit society and the environment (Vo, 2019). Additionally, studies outside the U.S. show that Gen Z in India values social and environmental CSR over economic CSR, with higher purchase intentions and stronger brand equity linked to these dimensions (Narayanan, 2022). Considering the cultural context and the limited studies focusing on U.S. Gen Z responses to CSR, this study seeks to re-examine how different CSR types impact American Gen Z's brand attitudes and social media engagement. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses and research questions:

***H1****: Environmental (a), social (b), and economic (c) CSR activities will increase positive attitudes toward the company among Gen Z.*

***H2****: Environmental (a), social (b), and economic (c) CSR activities will increase social media engagement among Gen Z.*

***RQ1****: How do environmental, social, and economic CSR activities differently affect Gen Z's attitudes and engagement?*

***Perceived Relevance as a Mediator***

To understand psychological mechanisms underlying the different effects of CSR initiatives, previous studies have identified several mediating factors that shape consumer responses to CSR communication, such as different forms of perceived fit between companies, CSR activities, and consumers (need citation). However, much of this research focuses on the alignment between CSR initiatives and brand-related characteristics, which heavily depend on peoples' understandings of the brand per se. and shift our study focus on the characteristics of CSR topics. To rule of the brand effect, we propose perceived relevance as a key mechanism explaining why different CSR topics generate different consumer responses.

Prior research on relevance has predominantly focused on personal relevance, which refers to the extent to which a message relates to an individual's own experiences, interests, or personal well-being (need citation). It has been found that higher personal relevance has been associated with more favorable evaluations of corporate initiatives and stronger consumer responses (need citation). However, two issues remain insufficiently addressed.

First, personal relevance has been conceptualized as a relatively stable individual trait, often discussed in terms of cause involvement or prior personal value (need citation). In such cases, relevance is typically treated as a moderator that strengthens or weakens message effects (need citation). However, relevance can also emerge as a cognitive evaluation triggered by exposure to a message. Consumers may not always hold well-formed prior attitudes toward every social issue, especially for younger audiences. Such an exposure to CSR communication may prompt individuals to reflect on whether the issue is meaningful or important to them. Prior studies that found economic benefits could increase purchase intention could be good examples of such a hypothesis (need citation). Therefore, in our study, perceived relevance is conceptualized as a post-exposure evaluation of the CSR message, capturing the extent to which consumers perceive the CSR topic as relevant after viewing the message.

Second, CSR communication often addresses issues that extend beyond individuals' direct personal interests and relate to broader societal concerns. Therefore, we propose another level of relevance, social relevance in this study, which refers to the perceived importance of the issue to society at large. These two forms of relevance do not necessarily coincide. In many cases, individuals may perceive certain social issues as highly important for society even if they do not directly affect their own personal lives. For example, a heterosexual individual may perceive homosexual marriage as a low personal relevant topic but high social relevant topic.

Therefore, distinguishing between these two forms of relevance may therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of how CSR topics influence consumer responses.

Building on this reasoning, the present study examines how perceived personal relevance and perceived social relevance shape Gen Z consumers' responses to different CSR topics. In particular, we investigate how these two forms of relevance influence both consumers' attitudes toward the company and their social media engagement with CSR-related content.

(see Figure 1 for the proposed model):

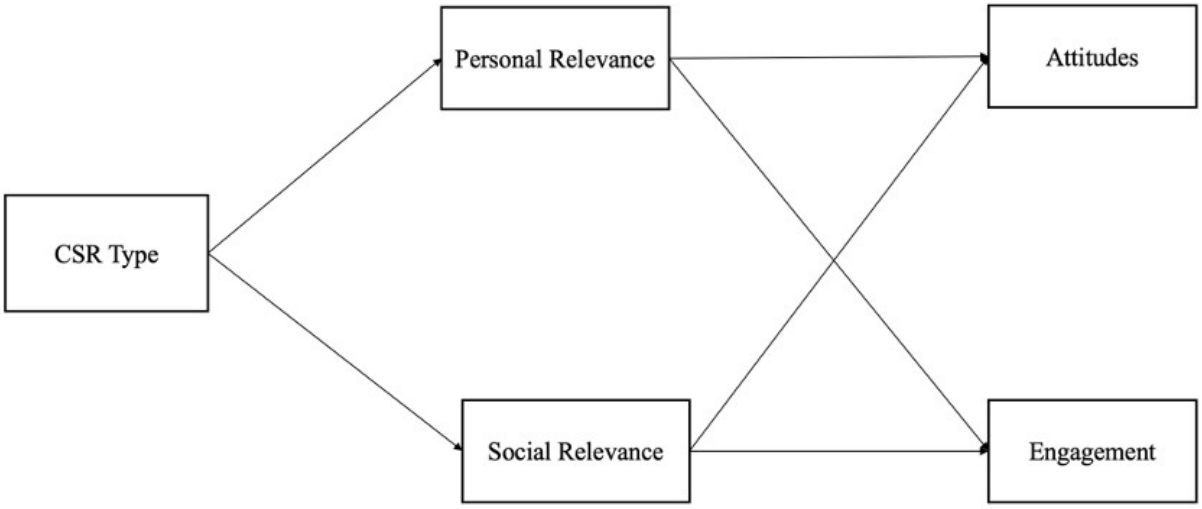
***H3****: The effect of CSR type on Gen Z's attitude is mediated by perceived(a)personal relevance and (b) societal relevance.*

***H4****: The effect of CSR type on Gen Z's social media engagement is mediated by perceived(a) personal relevance and (b) societal relevance.*

***RQ2****: How, if at all, do perceived personal and societal relevance mediate the effects of CSR on attitudes and social media engagement differently?*

**Figure 1**

*Proposed Model*




## Methods

### *Participants*

Participants born in/after 1997 (Gen Z) were recruited from Prolific, an online participant recruitment platform in October 2024. A total number of 678 respondents completed the survey and received $1.2 for participating in this study. Participants ranged from 18 to 27 years old ((*M* = 23.64, *SD* = 2.50). 50.5% of the participants were female. The medium household income was between $50,000- 74,999. The ethnic background was distributed as follows: White 55.3%, Black/African American 21.2%, Asian 13.2%, Hispanic/Latino 9.3%, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander .3%, Native American Indian/Alaskan Native .2%, Other .4%, and prefer not to answer .2%.

### *Design and Stimuli*

We created four mock-up Instagram posts from a hypothetical company as stimuli, as Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms among Gen Z (need citation). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups. Three conditions highlighted different aspects of CSR efforts. In the environmental condition, the post stated the company "has developed a community-based reforestation program." In the social condition, "a mental health support initiative" was highlighted. In the economic condition, messages addressed "local economic development programs." Each of these three posts not only highlighted the types of effort but also included messages related to the achievement and awards tied to the particular type of CSR. The messages in those posts were similar in length (See Appendix A). The control condition did not include any information related to CSR efforts. After reading the post, participants were directed to an online questionnaire.

***Manipulation check***

To assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, participants responded to a manipulation check question: "The company is _____ responsible," with response options coded as 1 = environmentally, 2 = economically, 3 = socially, and 4 = I didn't see any information related to this. A chi-square test revealed a significant difference between perceived type of corporate responsibility, $\chi 2$ (9, $N$ = 678) = 715.19, $p < .001$, indicating a successful manipulation. More specifically, 90.0% (n = 153) of participants in the environmental condition, 47.6% (n = 81) in the economic condition, 78.7% (n = 133) in the social condition, and 53.3% (n = 90) in the control condition correctly selected the option.

***Measures***

*Personal Relevance*. Adapting measures from existing research on relevance (Choi, et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2019; Tobin, et al., 2012), personal relevance was measured with 3 items on a

7-point scale. Participants were asked to rate how the content of the post was (1) irrelevant/ relevant, (2) not important/ important, and (3) insignificant /significant to *themselves* ($M$ = 3.14, $SD$ = 1.27, $\alpha$ = .95).

*Societal Relevance*. Using the same scale from personal relevance**,** participants were asked to evaluate how relevant the post was to *society*, based on the same three items: (1) irrelevant/relevant, (2) not important/important, and (3) insignificant/significant. ($M$ = 3.74, $SD$ = 1.06, $\alpha$ = .93).

*Attitude toward the company.* Using existing index (Zimand-Sheiner, and Lissitsa, 2024.), attitude was measured by asking participants to evaluate whether the company in the post is 1) Bad (1)/Good (5); 2) Unfavorable(1)/Favorable(5); 3) Unlikeable (1)/Likable (5); 4) Unappealing/Appealing; 5) Unpleasant (1)/Pleasant (5) ($M$ = 3.79, $SD$ = .88, $\alpha$ = .94)

*Social Media Engagement.* Adapting from existing research (Kim, et al., 2019), social media engagement was assessed with 3 items on a 5-point scale (1= extremely unlikely, 5= extremely likely). Participants were asked about the likelihood that they are going to “like,” “comment on,” and “share” the post ($M$ = 2.31, $SD$ = 1.20, $\alpha$ = .88).

*Control variables:*

**Results**

To examine H1, H2 and RQ1, two sets of One-way ANOVA test with post-hoc analyses were conducted. The results showed that seeing CSR activities significantly impact people’s attitude toward the company ($F(3, 674) = 22.52$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$) and their social media engagement ($F(3, 674) = 14.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .06$). The pairwise comparison revealed that exposure to all types of CSR (Environmental: $M$ = 4.02, $SD$ = .87, $p < .001$; Social: $M$ = 3.97, $SD$ = .79, $p < .001$; Economic: $M$ = 3.81, $SD$ = .89, $p < .001$) increased the positive attitude

compared to a control condition ($M$ = 3.35, $SD$ = .82). However, there were no significant differences in attitude across types of CSR. In addition, individuals were more likely to engage on social media reading the post about CSR practice on environmental ($M$ = 2.67, $SD$ = 1.22, $p_{econ}$<0.001; $p_{cotrl}$<0.001) and social topics ($M$ = 2.50, $SD$ = 1.16, $p_{econ}$=.03; $p_{cotrl}$<0.001) compared to economic ($M$ = 2.15, $SD$ = 1.19) and no efforts ($M$ = 1.91, $SD$ = 1.10).

To examine the mediating role of personal and societal relevance (H2, H3 and RQ2), Mplus 8.3 was used with dummy coded CSR type as the independent variable, personal and societal relevance as two parallel mediators, and attitude toward the company and social media engagement as the final outcomes. First, the results showed that seeing all types of CSR increased perceived personal relevance (Environmental: $B$=1.30, $SE$=.11, $p$<.001; Social: $B$=1.01, $SE$=.12, $p$<.001; Economic: $B$=.46, $SE$=.13, $p$<.001) and societal (Environmental: $B$=1.05., $SE$=.11, $p$<.001; Social: $B$=.98, $SE$=.11, $p$<.001; Economic: $B$=.64, $SE$=.12, $p$<.001) (See Appendix B, Table 1). Model constraints were coded to compare the differences between the effects of three CSR practices. The results revealed that the effects of environmental (personal relevance: $B$=.84, $SE$=.13, $p$<.001; societal relevance: $B$=.39, $SE$=.10, $p$<.001) and social (personal relevance: $B$=.55, $SE$=.13, $p$<.001; societal relevance: $B$=.32, $SE$=.13, $p$<.001) CSR on both personal and societal relevance were stronger compared to an economic CSR. In addition, environmental CSR led to a greater increase in personal relevance compared to social CSR ($B$ =.29, $SE$=.12, $p$=.02).

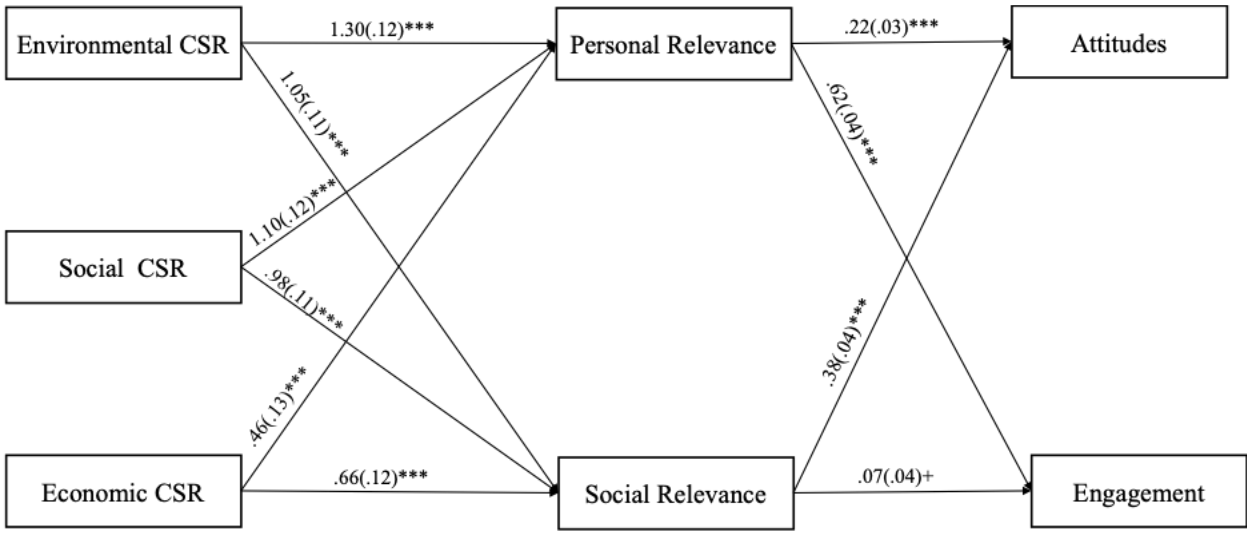
Additionally, both personal relevance and societal relevance positively mediated the CSR messages on attitude toward the company. However, only personal relevance mediated the CSR messages on individuals' social media engagement. The results showed type differences regarding the indirect effects. The increases in positive attitude via personal and societal

relevance from environmental (personal: *B*=.19, *SE*=.04, *p*<.001; social: *B*=.15, *SE*=.04, *p*=.001) and social CSR (personal: *B*=.13, *SE*=.03, *p*<.001; social: *B*=.12, *SE*=.04, *p*<.001) were significantly stronger than the economic CSR. The indirect effect on attitude via personal relevance from environmental CSR was also stronger than that from social CSR (*B*=.06, *SE*=.03, *p*=.03). As for social media engagement, the strongest effect was from seeing environmental CSR, followed by the social economic ones (Env vs. Soc: *B*=.18, *SE*=.07, *p*=.01; Env vs Econ: *B*=.52, *SE*=.08, *p*<.001; Soc vs. Econ: *B*=.34, *SE*=.08, *p*<.001) (See Appendix C, Table 2).

We conducted additional analyses by contrasting the differences between the two mediators. The results showed that societal relevance was a more potent mediator compared to personal relevance on changing attitudes when the messages are around social (*B*=.14, *SE*=.08, *p*=.05) and economic CSR (*B*=.15, *SE*=.08, *p*=.004). By contrast, personal relevance was the only significant mediator of the effects on social media engagement across three types of CSR (See Table 2). Finally, given that personal relevance mediated both attitudes and social media engagement, we examined how the effects on the two outcomes differed. The results showed that regardless of CSR type, the increases in positive attitudes toward the company were smaller than the increased social media engagement (Environmental: *B*=-.52, *SE*=.08, *p*<.001; Social: *B*=-.40, *SE*=.07, *p*<.001; Economic: *B*=-.18, *SE*=.06, *p*<.001).

**Figure 2**

*Path modeling results*




*Note.* The statistics represent unstandardized regression coefficients.

+$p$<.1,*$p$<.05,**$p$<.01,*$p$<.001.

**Discussion**

Utilizing an online experiment, this study examines the effects of different types of CSR initiatives on attitude change and social media engagement, highlighting the critical mediating roles of perceived personal relevance and societal relevance. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the nuances in Gen Z's perceptions and attitudes toward CSR, offering valuable insights for companies engaging in CSR initiatives and targeting the U.S. Gen Z population. Detailed results are discussed below.

First, regarding the effects of different types of CSR on attitudes toward the company, all three types of CSR (environmental, social, and economic) increased social media users' positive attitudes toward the company compared to those not exposed to any CSR initiatives. However, in terms of boosting engagement, only environmental CSR and social CSR directly increased the likelihood of social media users engaging on these platforms.

Concerning the mediation model, this study finds that all three types of CSR initiatives successfully increased both perceived personal relevance and societal relevance. In addition, our

analyses of indirect effects revealed some interesting results. First, perceived personal relevance effectively mediates the relationship between CSR initiatives and both attitude and social media engagement, with a stronger impact observed on social media engagement. In contrast, societal relevance only has a positive effect on attitude change, but not on social media engagement. Moreover, among the different types of CSR, the mediating effect of societal relevance was stronger for environmental and social topics compared to economic ones.

### *Theoretical Implications*

The current study contributes to a more comprehensive CSR effect that differentiates between environmental, social, and economic initiatives and their varying impacts on consumer attitudes and engagement behaviors among U.S. Gen Z through perceived personal and societal relevance.

First of all, this study offers insights into the nuanced ways in which U.S. Gen Z consumers respond to and engage with various CSR types through perceived relevance. Previous literature reports mixed findings: some studies suggest that social and economic CSR initiatives receive more favorable responses than environmental topics (e.g., Kim and Skepchenkova, 2020), whereas others indicate a Gen Z preference for environmental issues over economic ones (e.g., Narayanan, 2022). This study helps reconcile these differences by considering the mediating effects of perceived personal and societal relevance.

While previous studies have predominantly focused on personal relevance, only some have suggested the importance of societal relevance. Expanding our understanding of perceived relevance in the context of CSR, this study includes both dimensions of relevance. Adding to earlier findings that Gen Z shows a stronger intention to purchase from companies when they perceive direct financial benefits (Modreanu and Andrişan, 2022), our results suggest that CSR

strategies that connect personal relevance are also successful in driving social media engagement. In contrast, CSR initiatives with a strong societal emphasis are generally more effective at shaping positive attitudes and increasing favorability.

This study also offers potential explanations for previously mixed findings regarding CSR campaigns on different topics and Gen Z preferences. For instance, economic-focused CSR initiatives may not be as favorable to Gen Z to engage on social media. However, a clear emphasis on personal benefits could reduce the challenges of reaching this demographic. Indeed, cause-related marketing literature points to the critical role of personal relevance playing in fostering positive consumer reactions to socially responsible campaigns (Zhang and Surujlal, 2015; Lafferty, 2007).

Secondly, although Gen Z is the predominant group using social media to access information and build social relationships (Gottfried, 2024), and is, therefore, most likely to encounter CSR campaigns on these platforms. Previous research on CSR effects has primarily focused on purchase intention and attitudes toward the company rather than social media engagement. This study addresses this gap by demonstrating that CSR initiatives can also increase Gen Z's engagement on social media, with the effects varying across different topics and message strategies.

Additionally, the current study suggests that attitude change may not always align with social media engagement behaviors, such as sharing or liking. This finding is consistent with the Hierarchy of Effects Model (Wijaya, 2012; Barry and Howard, 1990). For a message or campaign to succeed, consumers need to be motivated to take action through increased attention and changes in perceptions. The greatest attitude change observed in this study comes from the perceived societal relevance, which does not activate behavioral intention. In contrast, social

media engagement is driven by perceived personal relevance, which serves as a motivational factor. Thus, while one's favorability toward a company could be increased after reading CSR initiatives, it does not necessarily go hand in hand with measurable, visible engagement.

### *Practical Implications*

The current findings provide practical implications for tailored CSR strategies targeting the U.S. Gen Z population. Given the differences between perceived personal and societal relevance in their mediating roles on attitudes and social media engagement, companies should consider various strategies based on their campaign goals. More specifically, if the campaign aims to increase the reach of CSR message on platforms by encouraging consumer engagement, marketing and communication strategies should emphasize the relevancy and benefits to consumers, thereby fostering stronger connections. In contrast, if the campaign intends to develop and build brand reputation among Gen Z, strategies should highlight the benefits to the broader community and society (e.g., sustainability initiatives and community outreach programs) to resonate with Gen Z values.

The distinct effects of different CSR topics on attitude and engagement through two different routes - personal and societal relevance - also offer insights for practitioners. When communicating CSR initiatives with a focus on environmental issues, brands can effectively appeal to Gen Z's values and boost social media interaction. Addressing social and consumer benefits are likely to drive maximum social media engagement. In addition, when delivering social CSR, such as cultural alignment, companies can emphasize their commitment to societal well-being, in order to foster a positive attitude shift within the Gen Z demographic and drive long-term belief change. By aligning the campaign with issues of societal relevance, companies can strengthen Gen Z's perception of the brand's authenticity and dedication to shared values.

Conversely, CSR campaigns around economic topics should emphasize the direct economic benefits to consumers to better engage Gen Z on social media. For example, companies can consider discussing savings passed on to consumers through innovative and cost-efficient techniques that lower production costs while maintaining quality.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The current study has several limitations. First, it did not examine the cultural and political differences within the U.S. Gen Z population, which might influence how CSR initiatives are perceived. As noted in previous research (e.g., Jasinenko et al., 2020; Jung et al., 2017), consumers with more conservative views may be less favorable toward CSR initiatives and less likely to engage with companies. Future studies should consider the role of cultural and political differences and how they interact with different types of CSR to influence American Gen Z's perceptions of companies and their behavioral intentions.

Additionally, this study focused only on three types of CSR: environmental, social, and economic. However, other dimensions, such as employee support, non-U.S. operations, and ethical labor practices (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Maignan, 2001), may also significantly influence attitudes and engagement. These factors could differ in their effects compared to the types examined in this study. Future research could explore these additional aspects to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how Gen Z engages with CSR initiatives.

Last but not least, future studies may implement a longitudinal approach to examine the long-term effects of CSR initiatives targeting Gen Z on their attitudes and engagement and explore the cumulative effects of multiple CSR campaigns on Gen Z, assessing whether repeated exposure to CSR messaging leads to increased loyalty and brand affinity.

## Declarations

**Funding**
This research received support from an institutional start-up grant. The funder had no role in the study design, data collection, analysis, or manuscript preparation.

**Disclosure Statement**
The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

**Data Availability Statement**
Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## References

Al-Haddad, Shafig, Abdel-Aziz Ahmad Sharabati, Mohammad Al-Khasawneh, Rand Maraqa, and Raya Hashem. 2022. "The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Purchase Intention: The Mediating Role of Consumer Engagement via Social Media" *Sustainability* 14, no. 11: 6771. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14116771

Alvarado-Herrera, Alejandro, Enrique Bigne, Joaquín Aldas-Manzano, and Rafael Curras-Perez. 2015. “A Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility Following the Sustainable Development Paradigm.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 140, no. 2 : 243–62. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2654-9.

Barry, Thomas E., and Daniel J. Howard. 1990. “A Review and Critique of the Hierarchy of Effects in Advertising.” *International Journal of Advertising* 9, no. 2: 121–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.1990.11107138.

Bhattacharya, C.B., and Sankar Sen. 2003. “Consumer–Company Identification: A Framework for Understanding Consumers’ Relationships with Companies.” *Journal of Marketing* 67, no. 2: 76–88. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.67.2.76.18609.

Bhattacharya, C.B., and Sankar Sen. 2004. “Doing Better at Doing Good: When, Why, and How Consumers Respond to Corporate Social Initiatives.” *California Management Review* 47, no. 1: 9–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/41166284.

Bianchi, Enrique, Juan Manuel Bruno, and Francisco J. Sarabia-Sanchez. 2019 .“The Impact of Perceived CSR on Corporate Reputation and Purchase Intention.” *European Journal of Management and Business Economics* 28, no. 3: 206–21. https://doi.org/10.1108/ejmbe-12-2017-0068.

Bigné, Enrique, Rubén Chumpitaz, Luisa Andreu, and Valerie Swaen. 2005. “Percepción de la responsabilidad social corporativa: Un análisis cross-cultural.” *Universia Business Review* 5: 14–27.

Bigné-Alcañiz, Enrique, Rafael Currás-Pérez, Carla Ruiz-Mafé, and Silvia Sanz-Blas. 2010. “Consumer Behavioural Intentions in Cause-Related Marketing. The Role of Identification and Social Cause Involvement.” *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing* 7, no. 2: 127–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12208-010-0053-6.

Carroll, Archie B. 1979 .“A Three-Dimensional Conceptual Model of Corporate Performance.” *The Academy of Management Review* 4, no. 4: 497. https://doi.org/10.2307/257850.

Choi, Jungsil, Kiljae Lee, and Yong-Yeon Ji. 2012. “What Type of Framing Message Is More Appropriate with Nine-Ending Pricing?” *Marketing Letters* 23, no. 3: 603–14. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11002-012-9164-7.

Choi, Sungchul, and Alex Ng. 2011. “Environmental and Economic Dimensions of Sustainability and Price Effects on Consumer Responses.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 104, no. 2: 269–82. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-011-0908-8.

Colleoni, Elanor. 2013. “CSR Communication Strategies for Organizational Legitimacy in Social Media.” Edited by Urša Golob. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 18, no. 2: 228–48. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563281311319508.

Coursaris, Constantinos K., Wietske Van Osch, and Brigitte A. Balogh. 2016. Do Facebook likes lead to shares or sales? Exploring the empirical links between social media content, brand equity, purchase intention, and engagement. In *2016 49th Hawaii international conference on system sciences (HICSS)* (pp. 3546-3555). IEEE. https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2016.444

Currás-Pérez, Rafael, Consuelo Dolz-Dolz, María J. Miquel-Romero, and Isabel Sánchez-García. 2018. “How Social, Environmental, and Economic CSR Affects Consumer-perceived Value: Does Perceived Consumer Effectiveness Make a Difference?” *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* 25, no. 5: 733–47. https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.1490.

Dabija, Dan-Cristian, Brânduşa Mariana Bejan, and Vasile Dinu. 2019. “How Sustainability Oriented Is Generation Z in Retail? A Literature Review.” *Transformations in Business & Economics* 18 (2): 20–36.

David, Prabu, Susan Kline, and Yang Dai. 2005. “Corporate Social Responsibility Practices, Corporate Identity, and Purchase Intention: A Dual-Process Model.” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 17, no. 3: 291–313. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjprr1703_4.

De Roeck, Kenneth, and François Maon. 2016. “Building the Theoretical Puzzle of Employees’ Reactions to Corporate Social Responsibility: An Integrative Conceptual Framework and Research Agenda.” Journal of Business Ethics 149, no. 3: 609–25. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-016-3081-2.

Dhaoui, Chedia, and Cynthia M. Webster. 2021. Brand and consumer engagement behaviors on Facebook brand pages: Let's have a (positive) conversation. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *38*(1), 155-175. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.06.005

Dimock, Michael. 2019. “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins.” *Pew Research Center*. Accessed October 29, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/.

Du, Shuili, C.B. Bhattacharya, and Sankar Sen. 2010. “Maximizing Business Returns to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): The Role of CSR Communication.” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 12, no. 1: 8–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00276.x.

Dunn, Katherine, and David Harness. 2018. “Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility in a Social World: The Effects of Company-Generated and User-Generated Social Media Content on CSR Attributions and Scepticism.” *Journal of Marketing Management* 34, no. 17–18: 1503–29. https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2018.1536675.

Francis, Tracy, and Fernanda Hoefel. 2018. “’True Gen’: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies.” *McKinsey & Company*. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies

Fatma, Mobin, Imran Khan, Zillur Rahman, and Andrea Pérez. 2020. “The Sharing Economy: The Influence of Perceived Corporate Social Responsibility on Brand Commitment.” J*ournal of Product & Brand Management* 30, no. 7: 964–75. https://doi.org/10.1108/jpbm-04-2020-2862.

Fatma, Mobin, Andrea Perez Ruiz, Imran Khan, and Zillur Rahman. 2020. “The Effect of CSR Engagement on EWOM on Social Media.” *International Journal of Organizational Analysis* 28, no. 4: 941–56. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijoa-10-2019-1895.

Gottfried, Jeffrey. 2024. “Americans’ Social Media Use.” *Pew Research Center*. Accessed November 23, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2024/01/31/americans-social-media-use/.

Gupta, Shruti, and Julie Pirsch. 2006. “The Company-cause-customer Fit Decision in Cause -related Marketing.” *Journal of Consumer Marketing 23*, no. 6: 314–26. https://doi.org/10.1108/07363760610701850.

Herrando, Carolina, Julio Jimenez-Martinez, and M.J. Martin-De Hoyos. 2019. “Tell Me Your Age and I Tell You What You Trust: The Moderating Effect of Generations.” *Internet Research* 29, no. 4: 799–817. https://doi.org/10.1108/intr-03-2017-0135.

Jasinenko, Anna, Fabian Christandl, and Timo Meynhardt. 2020. “Justified by Ideology: Why Conservatives Care Less about Corporate Social Irresponsibility.” *Academy of Management Proceedings* 2020, no. 1: 17657. https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2020.17657abstract.

Jung, Kiju, Ellen Garbarino, Donnel A Briley, and Jesse Wynhausen. 2017. “Blue and Red Voices: Effects of Political Ideology on Consumers’ Complaining and Disputing Behavior.” Edited by Vicki Morwitz and Praveen Kopalle. *Journal of Consumer Research* 44, no. 3: 477–99. https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx037.

Kim, Antino, Patricia L. Moravec, and Alan R. Dennis. 2019.“Combating Fake News on Social Media with Source Ratings: The Effects of User and Expert Reputation Ratings.” *Journal of Management Information Systems* 36, no. 3: 931–68. https://doi.org/10.1080/07421222.2019.1628921.

Kim, Sora, and Hyejoon Rim. 2019. “The Role of Public Skepticism and Distrust in the Process of CSR Communication.” *International Journal of Business Communication* 61, no. 2: 198–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329488419866888.

Kim, Minseong, and Svetlana Stepchenkova. 2020. “Do Consumers Care about CSR Activities of Their Favorite Restaurant Brands? Evidence from Engagement on Social Networks.”

*Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management* 30, no. 3: 305–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/19368623.2020.1817223.

Kucukusta, Deniz, Mariia Perelygina, and Wing Sze Lam. 2019. "CSR Communication Strategies and Stakeholder Engagement of Upscale Hotels in Social Media." *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 31, no. 5: 2129–48. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijchm-06-2018-0484.

Lafferty, Barbara A. 2007. "The Relevance of Fit in a Cause–Brand Alliance When Consumers Evaluate Corporate Credibility." *Journal of Business Research* 60, no. 5: 447–53. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2006.09.030.

Maignan, Isabelle. 2001. "Consumers' Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibilities: A Cross-Cultural Comparison." *Journal of Business Ethics* 30 (1): 57–72. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006433928640.

Maignan, Isabelle, and O. C. Ferrell. 2003. "Nature of Corporate Responsibilities: Perspectives from American, French, and German Consumers." *Journal of Business Research* 56 (1): 55–67. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0148-2963(01)00222-3.

McCrindle, Mark, and Emily Wolfinger. 2009. *The ABC of XYZ: Understanding the Global Generations*. Sydney: The ABC of XYZ.

McDonald, Jared, and Melissa Deckman. 2021. "New Voters, New Attitudes: How Gen Z Americans Rate Candidates with Respect to Generation, Gender, and Race." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 11, no. 2: 345–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2021.1962372.

Min, C. M., Jian Ai Yeow, Audrey C. P. Choo, Wah W. P., and Yang Y. C. 2012. "A Study of the Effect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Towards Consumer Buying

Behaviour." *Paper presented at the International Conference of Management*, Economics and Finance, Sarawak, Malaysia. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249649009_A_Study_Of_The_Effect_of_Corporate_Social_Responsibility_CSR_towards_Consumer_Buying_Behaviour.pdf

Modreanu, Andra, and Gabriela Nicoleta Andrișan. 2022. "The Perceptions of Generation Z Regarding CSR Practices in Developing Countries: An Analysis Among Romanian Post-Millennials Students." *Annals of "Constantin Brâncuşi" University of Târgu-Jiu. Economy Series* 4: 263–72.

Parker, Kim, Nicole Graf, and Richard Igielnik. 2019. "Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues." *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/.

Reinikainen, Hanna, Jaana T. Kari, and Vilma Luoma-aho. 2020. "Generation Z and Organizational Listening on Social Media." *Media and Communication* 8, no. 2: 185–96. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.2772.

Schaefer, Aubree. 2025. "Gen Z social media trends and usage". *Sprout Social.* https://sproutsocial.com/insights/gen-z-social-media/

Singh, Jaywant, Maria del Mar Garcia de los Salmones Sanchez, and Igancio Rodriguez del Bosque. 2007. "Understanding Corporate Social Responsibility and Product Perceptions in Consumer Markets: A Cross-Cultural Evaluation." *Journal of Business Ethics* 80, no. 3 : 597–611. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9457-6.

Thuy, Ho Thi Hai, and Ha Hien Minh. 2020. “The Impact of CSR on Brand Image: A Survey amongst Gen Z Consumers´ Perception toward a Supermarket Chain in Viet Nam.” Trendy v Podnikání 10, no. 1: 31–44. https://doi.org/10.24132/jbt.2020.10.1.31_44.

Tobin, Daniel, Joan Thomson, and Luke LaBorde. 2012. “Consumer Perceptions of Produce Safety: A Study of Pennsylvania.” *Food Control* 26, no. 2: 305–12. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodcont.2012.01.031.

Torugsa, Nuttaneeya Ann, Wayne O’Donohue, and Rob Hecker. 2012. “Proactive CSR: An Empirical Analysis of the Role of Its Economic, Social and Environmental Dimensions on the Association between Capabilities and Performance.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 115, no. 2: 383–402. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1405-4.

Twenge, Jean M. 2017. *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy, and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Wandhe, Dr. Priyanka. 2024. “The New Generation: Understanding Millennials and Gen Z.” SSRN *Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4716585.

Wang, Shu, Ying-Kai Liao, Wann-Yih Wu, and Khanh Bao Ho Le. 2021. “The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility Perceptions in Brand Equity, Brand Credibility, Brand Reputation, and Purchase Intentions.” *Sustainability* 13, no. 21: 11975. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132111975.

Wijaya, Bambang Sukma. 2012.“The Development of Hierarchy of Effects Model in Advertising.” *International Research Journal of Business Studies* 5, no. 1: 73–85. https://doi.org/10.21632/irjbs.5.1.73-85.

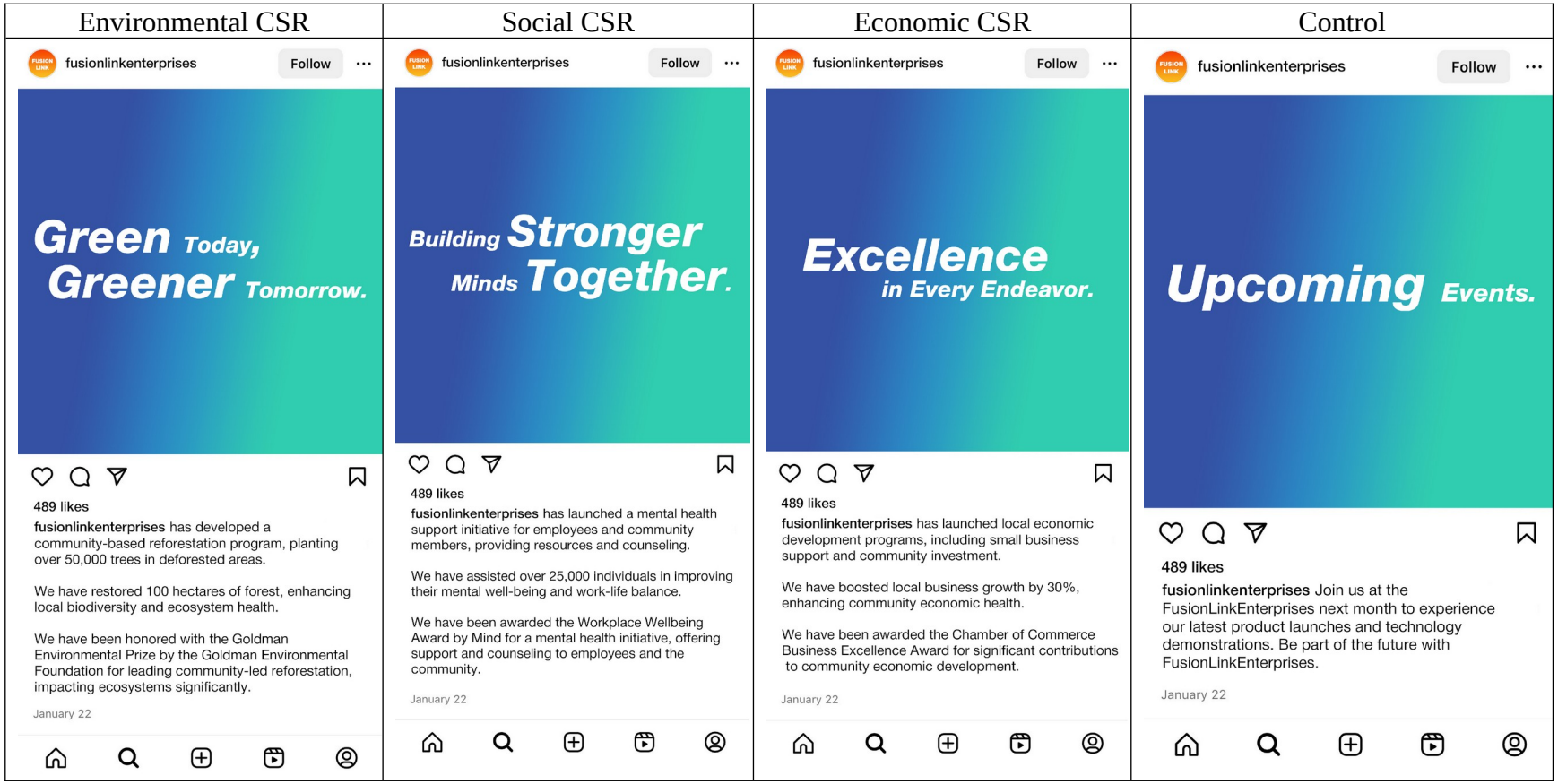
Zhang, Zhu, and Jhalukpreya Surujlal. 2015. “Willingness of Sport Fans to Participate in Socially Responsible Community Programmes of Professional Sport Organisations.” *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation* 37 (3): 185–97.

Zimand-Sheiner, Dorit, and Sabina Lissitsa. 2024. “Generation Z - Factors Predicting Decline in Purchase Intentions after Receiving Negative Environmental Information: Fast Fashion Brand SHEIN as a Case Study.” *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 81: 103999. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2024.103999.

# Appendix A

## Figure 1

*Stimuli in environmental, social, and economic and control conditions.*



## Appendix B

**Table 1**

*Indirect effects on attitudes and social media engagement.*

| | Attitude | | Social Media Engagement | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate (SE) | 95% CI | Estimate (SE) | 95% CI |
| Env Personal Relevance | **.29(.05)** | **[.20, .41]** | **.80(.09)** | **[.63, .99]** |
| Soc Personal Relevance | **.22(.05)** | **[.15, .33]** | **.63(.08)** | **[.47, .80]** |
| Econ Personal Relevance | **.10(.03)** | **[.04, .18]** | **.28(.08)** | **[.12, .45]** |
| Env societal relevance | **.40(.06)** | **[.29, .53]** | .08(.04) | [-.003, .17] |
| Soc societal relevance | **.37(.06)** | **[.27, .50]** | .07(.04) | [-.003, .15] |
| Econ societal relevance | **.25(.05)** | **[.16, .36]** | .05(.03) | [-.001, .11] |

*Note*. CSR type was dummy coded into three variables- Env, Soc, and Econ- with the control condition as the reference group. Env: Environmental CSR; Soc: Social CSR; Econ: Economy CSR.

## Appendix C

**Table 2**

*The contrast of indirect effects across three types of CSR.*

| Mediator | | Outcomes | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Attitude | | Social Media Engagement | |
| | | Estimate (SE) | 95%CI | Estimate (SE) | 95%CI |
| Env vs.Social | | **.06(.03)** | **[.01,.13]** | **.18(.07)** | **[.03,.32]** |
| Env vs.Econ | Personal relevance | **.19(.04)** | **[.12,.27]** | **.51(.08)** | **[.36,.68]** |
| Social vs.Econ | | **.12(.03)** | **[.06,.20]** | **.34(.08)** | **[.18,.50]** |
| Env vs. Social | | .03(.04) | [-.04,.01] | .01(.01) | [-.01,.03] |
| Env vs. Econ | Societal relevance | **.15(.04)** | **[.07,.24]** | **.03(.02)** | **[.001,.06]** |
| Social vs. Econ | | **.12(.04)** | **[.04,.21]** | **.02(.02)** | **[.001,.07]** |

*Note.* CSR type was dummy coded into three variables- Env, Soc, and Econ- with the control condition as the reference group. Env: Environmental CSR; Soc: Social CSR; Econ: Economy CSR.