



Empathy in Action: Unravelling the Impact of Empathetic CSR on Sustainable Consumer Behavior through Customer-Company Identification

Angad Anand¹, N. Sundaram^{2*}, Ajay Kumar Sharma³

¹Department of Commerce, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore - 632014
Email: angad.anand2021@vitstudent.ac.in - ORCID: 0009-0004-0989-7093

²Department of Commerce, School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore - 632014
*Corresponding Author Email: nsundaram@vit.ac.in - ORCID: 0000-0002-0801-0428

³College of Economics and Business Administration, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Salalah, Oman
Email: ajay.sharma@utas.edu.om - ORCID: 0000-0001-5891-5156

Article Info:

DOI: 10.22399/ijcesn.1541

Received : 05 February 2025

Accepted : 31 March 2025

Keywords :

Corporate Social Responsibility,
Empathy,
Sustainable Consumer Behavior,
Customer-Company Identification.

Abstract:

As Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) evolves into a catalyst for social impact, the emotional responses it evokes play a crucial role in shaping consumer behavior. This study investigates the influence of empathetic CSR on sustainable consumer behavior through Customer-Company Identification (CCI). Specifically, it examines three key aspects: (1) whether empathetic CSR directly impacts sustainable consumer behavior, focusing on activism behavior and sustainable purchase behavior; (2) whether CSR-led empathy drives CCI, strengthening consumers' identification with the company; and (3) whether CCI mediates the relationship between empathetic CSR and sustainable consumer behavior. The study adopts the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to explore these relationships. A manipulation experiment was conducted with 267 customers of a fashion brand, and the data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modelling. The results reveal that empathetic CSR positively influences both activism and sustainable purchase behaviors, although the effect on sustainable purchase behavior is not statistically significant. Additionally, CSR-led empathy acts as a significant antecedent to CCI, fostering a stronger consumer attitude toward the brand. Lastly, CCI serves as a crucial bridge in translating empathetic emotional engagement into proactive and sustainable consumer actions. The findings contribute to the existing body of CSR literature by shedding light on the emotional pathways that drive sustainable consumer behavior and attitudes. For businesses, the study emphasizes that implementing empathetic CSR initiatives can encourage lasting sustainable actions while nurturing a deeper sense of identification between customers and the brand.

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has transcended its status as a mere buzzword. It has emerged as a strategic framework that significantly influences contemporary business practices and societal development.

In response to the growing pressures of the modern business landscape, companies have redefined their approach to CSR. Today, companies recognize that meaningful change is best achieved through active stakeholder engagement, which creates shared value for businesses, society, and stakeholders alike [1, 2]. The concept of stakeholder engagement within CSR has been widely explored in academic

literature. Companies engage stakeholders in diverse ways, tailoring their approaches to different groups, including customers and employees, to maximize social and economic impact.

Among the various stakeholder groups, employee engagement in CSR has garnered significant attention in the literature [3]. Employees play a crucial role in making CSR beneficial for businesses [4]. Their perceptions of CSR shape their attitudes and behaviors, deepening their identification with the company and driving their participation in initiatives, commitment to organizational goals, overall performance and engagement in pro-social behavior. In turn, this fosters a positive workplace environment and

contributes to the company's long-term economic sustainability [5].

Beyond employees, companies are now increasingly recognizing the importance of engaging customers as active participants in their CSR initiatives [6]. As a vital stakeholder group, customers' perceptions and behaviors significantly impact a company's success [7,8]. With rising social consciousness, modern consumers are increasingly factoring in a company's CSR efforts when making purchasing decisions [9,10]. This shift in consumer behavior has also positioned CSR as a key market differentiator, strengthening brand loyalty [11,12] and affecting advocacy behavior [13]. In this context, when consumers perceive a company's CSR efforts positively, they develop a favorable perception of the brand and stronger associations with its products [14]. This growing emphasis on corporate responsibility extends beyond transactional choices, as research highlights that customers actively seek out businesses that prioritize social and environmental sustainability, reinforcing the need for companies to integrate responsible practices into their core strategies [15]. To engage stakeholders effectively, companies adopt various approaches, including social media interventions that facilitate real-time interaction [16–18], collaborative online initiatives that encourage shared input and idea generation [19], strategic communication approaches designed to preempt skepticism [20], authentic CSR-driven engagements [21], as well as direct participation in CSR initiatives [22].

Recently, emotions have been increasingly recognized as a crucial component of customer engagement in CSR [23,24]. Research indicates that positive emotions can drive prosocial behaviors, reinforcing consumers' moral obligation to act ethically [25]. Admiration, in particular, has been linked to increased advocacy behavior, encouraging customers to support and promote socially responsible brands [13]. Similarly, positive emotional responses influence green consumer behavior, motivating environmentally conscious choices [26]. Happiness and admiration further strengthen brand advocacy, fostering deeper consumer-brand relationships [27]. Additionally, moral emotions serve as a powerful force behind brand advocacy, emphasizing the ethical and value-driven aspects of consumer engagement with CSR [28].

However, existing research on emotions in CSR has primarily focused on select positive emotions, overlooking others that may play a crucial role in shaping consumer responses. One such emotion is moral empathy. CSR initiatives do more than activate consumers' moral identity—they also

evoke empathy, influencing brand perceptions and purchasing behavior [29]. Additionally, a strong perception of environmental CSR has been shown to cultivate environmental empathy in employees, which subsequently motivates them to adopt eco-friendly behaviors [30]. In the context of CSR, empathy is also associated with customer satisfaction and a sense of distinctiveness [31].

Despite these insights, the role of moral empathy in CSR remains underexplored. While emotions have the potential to enhance consumer engagement, organizations often struggle to align their CSR initiatives with consumer expectations, resulting in efforts that fail to generate meaningful impact [32]. This challenge is particularly relevant for CSR initiatives designed to evoke empathy, as their influence on consumer attitudes and behaviors is not yet fully understood [28]. Furthermore, while prior research has examined how CSR empathy shapes consumer perceptions and behavior, less attention has been given to how these emotional responses translate into sustained sustainable consumption actions. This research is important as small changes in favor of the environment can significantly cut down the impact without adding much to the expenses [33]. Moreover, corporations are encouraged to refine their empathetic CSR strategies to bridge the gap between corporate initiatives and consumer action [29].

Another key aspect of consumer engagement with CSR is Customer-Company Identification (CCI)—the extent to which consumers perceive a company's values as aligned with their own, building a strong bond with the brand [34]. Within CSR initiatives, a strong CCI has been linked to enhance marketing efforts [35], customer satisfaction [36] and trust [37]. Research also suggests that CCI not only strengthens direct consumer responses to CSR but also acts as a mediating mechanism that translates CSR efforts into enhanced loyalty [37,38] and satisfaction [34]. Beyond these benefits, CCI has also been identified as a key mediating mechanism in the relationship between CSR and customer citizenship behavior [38] and encouraging environmentally responsible actions [26]. Moreover, research indicates that CSR initiatives elicit positive emotional responses, which not only shape CCI but also influence consumers' green behavior [26]. This suggests that CSR initiatives designed to evoke moral emotions, such as empathy, may influence sustainable consumer behaviors more effectively when CCI strengthens the bond between consumers and the company. However, the mediating role of CCI in the relationship between empathy-driven CSR and long-term sustainable behaviors remains underexplored, necessitating further investigation.

Based upon the above gaps, this study utilizes the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework to investigate the role of CSR-led moral empathy in shaping sustainable consumer actions by addressing the following objectives:

1. To examine whether CSR-led moral empathy (stimulus) directly influences sustainable consumption behavior, specifically activism behavior and sustainable purchase behavior (response).
2. To assess whether CSR-led moral empathy drives CCI (organism), strengthening consumers' connection with the company.
3. To explore the mediating role of CCI in the relationship between CSR-induced moral empathy and sustainable consumption behavior, providing insights into how identification with a company translates emotional engagement into action.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the Literature Review. Section 3 outlines the Materials and Methods. Section 4 provides the Results and Discussion. Finally, Section 5 concludes the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Effects of CSR-Empathy on Sustainable Consumer Behavior

Empathy is a fundamental psychological construct that involves understanding others' conditions and mental states [39]. It encompasses emotional responses that depend on cognitive accuracy in perceiving and interpreting situations. These responses are shaped by top-down control processes that both distinguish and merge the concept of the self with others [40].

Cognitive and emotional empathy, though distinct constructs, complement each other in shaping empathetic behavior [41,42]. To actualize socially appropriate behavior, a balance between cognitive and emotional empathy is essential [43].

Empathy plays a crucial role in shaping moral awareness and conduct. It enhances moral judgment [44], fosters the adoption of ethical principles [39], and influences moral behavior [45].

As societal and environmental challenges evolve, the meaning and impact of empathy have undergone significant transformations [46]. Empathy can directly influence consumer behavior, driving the purchase of sustainable offerings such as ethically sourced palm oil [47]. Empathy contributes significantly to sustainability by fostering collaborative actions, enhancing awareness of environmental consequences, and nurturing a sense of interconnectedness beyond one's immediate surroundings [46]. It has been

identified as a key driver of pro-environmental behavior [48]. Notably, individuals with higher empathetic tendencies are more likely to donate time and resources to charitable causes [49], engage in energy-saving behaviors [50], and support environmentally friendly products, such as sustainable marine offerings [51]. Empathy also promotes generosity [52] and enhances pro-social engagement, including contributions to educational charities [53] and assistance to others [54].

Within the domain of sustainable consumption, empathy is the most frequently encountered value [55]. However, its role in shaping creative narratives around sustainability remains underexplored [46]. Despite the evident influence of empathy on consumer decision-making, it has yet to receive adequate attention in the literature [56]. Scholars also emphasize the need for more comprehensive research to better understand empathy's role in shaping environmental behavior [57]. In particular, empirical investigations are required to examine how empathy-driven messaging in retail and brand campaigns can effectively encourage sustainable consumption without overwhelming consumers emotionally [58]. More broadly, the intersection of empathy and sustainability remains an under-researched yet critical area of study [59].

CSR initiatives can serve as a powerful mechanism for fostering consumer empathy. Companies that actively engage in CSR efforts can induce feelings of empathy among its customers [29]. A well-established commitment to environmental CSR can nurture a sense of environmental empathy among employees, inspiring them to embrace eco-friendly practices in their daily actions [30].

Given that CSR can foster empathy and positively influence consumer behavior, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a. CSR-led empathy can positively affect activism behavior.

H1b. CSR-led empathy can positively affect sustainable purchase behavior.

2.2 Effects of CSR-Empathy on Customer-Company Identification

Customer-company identification reflects a customer's psychological connection with a business, capturing the depth of their sense of alignment and affiliation with the organization [60]. In the realm of CSR initiatives, a robust customer-company identification strengthens marketing strategies and augments their effectiveness [35]. Existing literature highlights two critical aspects of CSR's influence on CCI: (1) the antecedents that shape CCI within CSR-driven interactions and

(2) the role of emotions in reinforcing identification.

Research consistently shows that CSR acts as a primary determinant of CCI, with several key factors influencing the strength of this identification.

In the cruise industry, a company's CSR reputation plays a pivotal role in augmenting CCI [61]. Similarly, in banking, CSR image positively affects CCI [62]. Consumers' perceptions of CSR activities strongly correlate with CCI. Studies indicate that perceived CSR positively influences consumer identification in industries such as hospitality [34] and banking [24]. Likewise, in telecommunications, CSR efforts directed at societal and environmental concerns enhance CCI [37]. The credibility of a company's CSR initiatives determines the extent to which consumers identify with the company. Research suggests that when CSR credibility is high, the relationship between CSR perception and CCI strengthens significantly [63]. CSR activities that directly address consumer concerns and values contribute to stronger identification. For instance, in the banking industry, customer-centric CSR initiatives consistently enhance CCI [36]. Similarly, CSR efforts aimed at environmental and social welfare have been found to improve CCI in hotels [26].

Beyond the cognitive evaluation of CSR initiatives, emotional engagement plays a crucial role in reinforcing CCI. Emotional connections established early in a customer's relationship with a brand can also contribute to CCI [64]. CSR-related elements integrated into a brand's environment contribute to emotional engagement and, consequently, stronger CCI [62]. Emotional responses generated by CSR efforts, particularly positive emotions, serve as a powerful mechanism in strengthening the identification process, amplifying the depth of the consumer-company relationship [26].

Since CSR influences CCI and positive emotions further strengthen this identification, it is hypothesized that:

H2. CSR-led empathy drives CCI.

2.3 CCI as a Mediator Between CSR-Led Empathy and Sustainable Consumer Behavior

Extensive research highlights the mediating influence of CCI in the relationship between CSR and various marketing outcomes. Prior studies indicate that CCI serves as a crucial bridge, furthering the impact of CSR initiatives on consumer behavior. Empirical findings indicate that CCI mediates the effect of CSR on customer loyalty and word-of-mouth, suggesting that identification enhances consumers' inclination to

engage positively with the brand [35]. In the cruise industry, CSR reputation significantly influences brand loyalty, with CCI serving as a critical link between the two [61]. Similarly, in the banking sector, the relationship between consumer perceptions of CSR and customer citizenship behavior is mediated through CCI, underscoring its role in shaping responsible consumer actions [65]. Likewise, in the telecommunications industry, CCI acts as a mediator between CSR perception and customer loyalty, reinforcing the argument that identification fosters long-term consumer attachment [37]. The same effect has been observed among Korean bank customers, where CCI mediates the positive relationship between CSR perception and customer citizenship behavior [38]. Additionally, research on South Korean banking customers suggests that CCI partially mediates the link between CSR perception and CSR participation intention, highlighting its influence in driving consumer engagement in social causes [63]. In the hospitality sector, perceived CSR indirectly affects customer loyalty, with CCI acting as a crucial pathway through which hotels strengthen customer commitment [66].

Beyond its direct mediating function, CCI also plays a key role in an emotional process that influences socially positive consumer behavior. Research in the hospitality sector finds that CSR perceptions evoke positive emotional responses among customers, which in turn enhance identification with the company. This strengthened identification subsequently drives consumers' green actions [26].

CSR has the potential to evoke emotions that deepen customer-company identification, which, in turn, can positively influence consumers' social actions. Building on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a. CCI mediates the link between CSR-led empathy and activism behavior.

H3b. CCI mediates the link between CSR-led empathy and sustainable purchase behavior.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to develop an experimental scenario that would effectively demonstrate how CSR initiatives can evoke feelings of empathy. To ensure a well-rounded and impactful scenario, expert consultations were held with a marketing professor, a psychologist, a CSR professional, and the brand manager of a sustainable fashion brand in Vellore.

The final scenario portrayed a well-known Indian eco-friendly clothing brand launching a CSR initiative focused on supporting artisans from economically disadvantaged communities. The brand introduced a program where a percentage of the revenue from its eco-friendly clothing line was allocated to providing medical insurance, financial literacy workshops, and sustainable livelihood opportunities for traditional weavers and artisans. To amplify its social impact, the brand collaborated with grassroots organizations to create ethical employment opportunities, ensuring fair wages and safe working conditions.

This scenario was carefully designed to incorporate both cognitive (helping consumers understand the challenges faced by the artisans) and emotional empathy (evoking empathy through real-life narratives of artisans benefitting from the initiative).

A total of 56 participants, all customers of a sustainable fashion brand in Vellore, were recruited for the pilot study using systematic random sampling, where every second customer was selected. The fashion industry was chosen due to its significant environmental impact and the growing consumer awareness regarding ethical consumption. The pilot study confirmed that the developed scenario successfully elicited moderate feelings of empathy, validating its suitability for the main study (Mean = 5.09; Standard Deviation = 1.36).

3.2 Measures

To ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs, established scales from previous studies were utilized.

Activism behavior (AB) and sustainable purchase behavior (SPB) were measured using the scale developed by [67]. The activism behavior construct comprised five items, while sustainable purchase behavior was assessed using four items. Customer-company identification was measured with six items adapted from [68]. For empathy (EMP), five items were adopted from [69]. All variables were measured using a 7-point Likert scale.

3.3 Main Study

For the main study, the same protocol established during the pilot study was followed. A total of 329 potential respondents were intercepted outside the fashion brand's retail outlets, out of which 267 agreed to participate. Systematic random sampling was again employed to ensure representative data collection. To gather insights, an interview schedule was utilized, facilitating structured

responses from participants regarding their perceptions of CSR-led empathy, customer-company identification, and sustainable consumer behavior.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Measurement Model Evaluation

The model, illustrated in Figure 1, was assessed using SmartPLS 4. As presented in Table 1, all indicator loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.708, ensuring strong item reliability. Internal consistency was demonstrated through Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) values, both of which were above 0.70. Additionally, the model met the criteria for convergent validity, as Average Variance Extracted

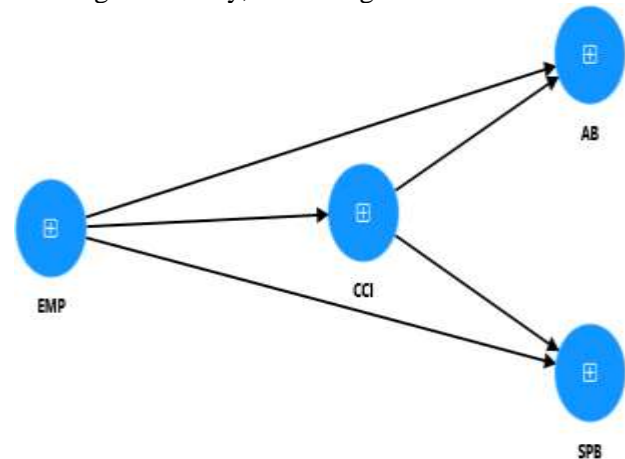


Figure 1. SEM Model.

Table 1. Measurement Model Evaluation.

Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
AB1	0.839	0.905	0.929	0.724
AB2	0.848			
AB3	0.840			
AB4	0.848			
AB5	0.879			
CCI1	0.871	0.934	0.948	0.751
CCI2	0.885			
CCI3	0.868			
CCI4	0.874			
CCI5	0.888			
CCI6	0.813			
EMP1	0.881	0.920	0.940	0.758
EMP2	0.881			
EMP3	0.865			
EMP4	0.857			
EMP5	0.868			
SPB1	0.846	0.869	0.910	0.717
SPB2	0.863			
SPB3	0.846			
SPB4	0.833			

(AVE) values were greater than 0.50. These results confirm the robustness and reliability of the measurement model [70]. Furthermore, the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, detailed in Table 2, ranged from 0.460 to 0.740, remaining well below the 0.90 threshold [70], reinforcing the robustness of the model's reliability and validity.

Table 2. HTMT Ratios.

Pairs	Ratio
CCI <-> AB	0.548
EMP <-> AB	0.482
EMP <-> CCI	0.740
SPB <-> AB	0.466
SPB <-> CCI	0.517
SPB <-> EMP	0.460

4.2 Structural Model Evaluation

Once the model's validity and reliability were confirmed, the structural model underwent further evaluation to check for collinearity. The Variance Inflation Factor values ranged from 1 to 1.890, remaining well below the acceptable threshold of 3, indicating that collinearity was not a concern [70]. Next, path analysis was conducted using the Bias-Corrected and Accelerated Bootstrap method with 10,000 samples. The results, presented in Table 3, provide insights into the significant relationships between the hypothesized associations. EMP exhibited a positive and significant effect on AB ($\beta = 0.177$, 95% CI [0.013, 0.355]), supporting H1a. Similarly, the influence of EMP on SPB was positive but marginally non-significant ($\beta = 0.173$, 95% CI [-0.001, 0.340]), indicating limited support for H1b. However, EMP showed a robust and significant impact on CCI ($\beta = 0.686$, 95% CI [0.596, 0.761]), confirming H2. Moreover, the mediation analysis revealed that CCI effectively mediated the relationship between EMP and AB ($\beta = 0.265$, 95% CI [0.151, 0.379]), providing support for H3a. Additionally, CCI mediated the relationship between EMP and SPB ($\beta = 0.239$, 95% CI [0.113, 0.377]), supporting H3b. To assess the model's explanatory power, an R-square analysis was conducted. The analysis indicated high explanatory power for CCI at 47.1%. Additionally, AB and SPB demonstrated moderate explanatory power, values of 27.5% and 23.5%.

Table 3. Path Associations.

Hypothesis	β	2.5%	97.5%
H1a. EMP -> AB	0.177	0.013	0.355
H1b. EMP -> SPB	0.173	-0.001	0.340
H2. EMP -> CCI	0.686	0.596	0.761
H3a. EMP -> CCI -> AB	0.265	0.151	0.379
H3b. EMP -> CCI -> SPB	0.239	0.113	0.377

4.3 Interpretation of Findings

This study provides significant insights into the role of empathy-driven CSR initiatives in shaping consumer behavior and attitude, contributing to the existing body of research. While prior studies, such as [30], demonstrated how CSR initiatives foster empathy among employees, leading to environmental citizenship behavior, our findings extend this perspective to consumers. By establishing that CSR-induced empathy can directly influence consumer activism and sustainable purchase behavior, this study broadens the understanding of empathy's role in consumer decision-making. Moreover, while research like [29] identified empathy as a mediator shaping consumer responses through moral identity, our study highlights empathy's direct impact on consumer behavior. Rather than serving solely as a pathway for other psychological processes, empathy itself emerges as a powerful driver of consumer advocacy and sustainable choices in the context of CSR initiatives. Similarly, the findings from [28] positioned empathy as a moderating factor influencing consumers' positive word-of-mouth and investment intentions. However, our results indicate that empathy can directly inspire advocacy behavior without relying on a moderating role. By demonstrating the independent influence of empathy on consumer actions, this study enriches the understanding of how CSR initiatives can engage consumers in meaningful social and environmental contributions. Overall, these findings provide a more comprehensive perspective on the emotional and behavioral mechanisms underlying CSR's impact on consumers. The significant effect of CSR-induced empathy on activism behavior underscores the potential of empathetic initiatives to drive consumers toward advocacy for social and environmental causes.

Although the influence on sustainable purchase behavior was marginally significant, this suggests that additional factors may moderate or mediate the purchasing decision process, warranting further investigation. Furthermore, the role of empathy in strengthening customer-company identification is supported by prior evidence from [31]. While that study demonstrated empathy's role in driving customer identification with a firm, the current research extends these insights by showing how identification further mediates the link between empathy and consumer sustainable actions.

4.4 Managerial Implications

Managers often face challenges in designing effective CSR initiatives, particularly those aimed

at evoking empathy, as their influence on consumer attitudes and behaviors is not yet fully understood [28]. This highlights the need for careful planning and execution when incorporating empathetic elements into CSR campaigns. By developing authentic and relatable narratives, managers can better connect with consumers on an emotional level. While previous research in emotional-CSR has predominantly encouraged managers to leverage emotions like happiness [71], admiration [72], moral emotions [28] in their initiatives, our findings suggest that empathy is an equally powerful yet underutilized emotion.

We recommend that managers incorporate empathy-driven narratives into CSR campaigns to influence both sustainable consumer behaviors and positive brand attitudes.

Contrary to existing insights suggesting that emotions in the fashion sector can deter sustainable actions [73], our findings challenge this perspective. We propose that managers in the fashion industry harness the empathetic potential of CSR initiatives to inspire consumers toward more sustainable choices.

Traditional CSR managerial strategies often emphasize rational models that prioritize cognitive decision-making processes [74]. However, as these approaches increasingly fall short in capturing the emotional dimensions of consumer behavior, we recommend that managers explore emotions, particularly empathy, as a strategic tool to drive consumer engagement in sustainable actions.

Our study further validates the tentative proposition presented by [75] regarding the role of empathy in influencing sustainable actions. Therefore, we encourage managers to integrate empathy as a core component in their CSR campaigns, fostering a ripple effect where consumers are not only inspired to act sustainably but also become advocates for the brand's purpose-driven initiatives. Finally, we present evidence that emotional CSR strategies can simultaneously influence both consumer attitudes and behaviors. This challenges the conventional view that emotional CSR efforts predominantly impact either attitudes or behaviors. Managers are advised to adopt a holistic approach that considers the dual impact of emotional CSR, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of their sustainability-driven initiatives.

4.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study focuses solely on consumers of a fashion brand in Vellore, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other industries or regions. Additionally, the research adopts a cross-

sectional design, capturing consumer responses at a single point in time. This approach does not account for how long-term exposure to empathetic CSR campaigns may influence sustainable behavior. Future research could explore these relationships across diverse industries and geographical contexts using longitudinal designs to gain a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of empathetic CSR initiatives.

5. Conclusions

This study underscores that empathy-driven CSR is far more than a peripheral embellishment – it is a transformative force that redefines how companies connect with their consumers. Our findings demonstrate that initiatives which evoke moral empathy not only spur consumer activism and sustainable purchasing decisions but also fortify the emotional bond between customers and brands through enhanced CCI. This connection, in turn, channels the emotional resonance of CSR efforts into tangible, sustainable consumer actions. Although the direct influence of empathetic CSR on sustainable purchase behavior was less pronounced, the mediating role of customer identification highlights a vital pathway for converting emotional engagement into enduring behavioral change. In an era where consumers increasingly demand authenticity and social responsibility, our research provides compelling evidence that integrating empathy into CSR strategies can yield significant dividends. By adopting empathetic narratives, companies can align a deeper, more meaningful connection with their audience – one that goes beyond transactional relationships to foster long-term brand advocacy and sustainable consumption patterns. Ultimately, this work paves the way for a new paradigm in CSR, where the fusion of emotion and identification becomes the cornerstone of sustainable consumer engagement in today's conscientious marketplace.

Author Statements:

- **Ethical approval:** The conducted research is not related to either human or animal use.
- **Conflict of interest:** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper
- **Acknowledgement:** The authors declare that they have nobody or no-company to acknowledge.

- **Author contributions:** The authors declare that they have equal right on this paper.
- **Funding information:** The authors declare that there is no funding to be acknowledged.
- **Data availability statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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