

Article

Disentangling Consumers' CSR Knowledge Types and Effects

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Abstract: This paper examines consumers' objective knowledge of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for brands over different product categories, and investigates whether objective knowledge influences attitudes to CSR, and the relationships between demographics and objective knowledge. The research uses an innovative approach to examining consumer CSR knowledge via (largely) unprompted recall. The analysis uses independent judges to score actual consumer objective knowledge of the CSR of well-known brands against the policies and actions of the brand owner. The research reveals that participants' objective knowledge of CSR was limited or, in many cases, there was no knowledge. Further, the number and type of CSR policies did not influence overall evaluations of CSR. However, where objective knowledge was held, it did positively influence evaluations. The findings of the research direct managerial attention towards improvement of the communication of CSR, including using the research methodology here to evaluate the success of current communications.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; business ethics; consumer knowledge; objective knowledge



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1. Introduction

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has generated significant interest from business academics and practitioners, but the current paper will question whether this interest has extended to the wider public and has translated into actual knowledge of CSR. Corporate social responsibility is broadly concerned with ethical management founded on social and stakeholder obligations [1], and implies corporate policies and processes are directed towards a greater societal good [2], irrespective of whether companies take a 'proactive green marketers' approach (i.e., genuine and voluntary) or a 'reactive green marketers' one (i.e., adopting CSR and sustainability under governmental balancing [3]). Alongside growing interest in CSR, there has been consideration of the importance of communications of CSR by corporations to influence public opinion and enhance the image and reputation of the corporation adopting CSR management. This is known as promotional CSR alongside other types, such as philanthropic CSR and value-creating CSR [4].

Unsurprisingly, research has found that the effects of CSR initiatives are contingent on consumers' information and knowledge levels [5], and the success of CSR strategies and activities is dependent on the "consumers' knowledge, awareness and perception of organizations' CSR initiatives and communication" [6] (p. 182). However, the examination of consumer knowledge and awareness of CSR is under-researched, with studies taking a piecemeal approach and providing inconsistent results. This has prompted calls for research on consumer judgment and recollection of CSR communications [6,7].

The research and review that follows take a more holistic and novel approach to the examination of the impact of CSR communications on the general public (specifically, consumers). Firstly, we start with the logical premise that, in order for a corporation to enjoy the image and reputational benefits of CSR amongst consumers (whom are seen as key primary stakeholders of CSR; [8]), it is necessary that consumers have knowledge

of the CSR activities of the corporation. In other words, it is not sufficient to engage in activity to gain the benefits, it is also necessary to *effectively* communicate CSR activity so that the information conveyed by communication becomes solid knowledge to be retained by consumers. A second premise is that the end goal of improving corporate reputation and image among consumers is to positively influence brand choice decisions (if not to achieve this goal, it is not clear why communicating CSR would be important).

Based on these premises, our objective was to develop an ecologically valid research method to examine consumers' objective knowledge of CSR policies (i.e., actual knowledge stored in consumers' memory as opposed to subjective, i.e., assumed knowledge [9]). To this end, we used free recall of objective knowledge of CSR in place of more 'traditional' survey instruments. Although traditional survey methods have value, we argue that prompted recall and answers, alongside the potential for socially desirable responses, provide the potential for what Beckman [5] considers to be an inflation of the degree of CSR consumer engagement [10].

Most past studies measured subjective knowledge at a very broad level (e.g., using generic Likert scales) and also faced issues of self-generated validity [11], social desirability bias, and impression management [12], whereby individuals like to portray themselves as decent, responsible, and informed citizens [13]. More recently, Forbes and Avis [14] highlighted the risk of construct creation, whereby survey measures 'create' the construct that is then measured. Our methodological approach to defining and measuring CSR knowledge addresses these concerns and fits with House et al. [15], who caution that "knowledge should not be seen as a unidimensional construct that can be easily measured either by asking true/false questions or asking the respondents to rate their knowledge" (p. 121). Our novel and more objective methodology represent the first contribution of the present study.

The second contribution relates to the focus on assessing consumers' objective knowledge (see literature review below) of CSR across a range of policies and in relation to an overall evaluation of the brand's CSR. The distinction between objective and subjective knowledge is critical since past research shows the effects of CSR initiatives depend on consumers' information and knowledge level [5], and that "a lack of appropriate knowledge or an excess of self-perceived knowledge might impel individuals to make environmentally wrong decisions" [16] (p. 132).

Excepting Tian, Wang, and Yang's study on CSR in China [17], very few studies examine the CSR—consumer relationship across multiple industries or product categories. Past CSR literature has largely focused on environmental factors [5,18,19]. Our study addresses this gap by (i) examining knowledge of distinct areas of CSR knowledge/actions, and (ii) overall evaluation of CSR across categories, thus providing a more comprehensive approach.

2. Theoretical Background

This section provides a theoretical background to the research by reviewing the key literature on CSR and studies on consumer knowledge within the area of CSR. The hypotheses are also included in the sub-sections below.

2.1. CSR Overview

In essence, CSR is concerned with ethical and humane practices [20], whereby corporations take responsibility beyond profit and, thus, encompasses fields such as the environment, labor and human rights, philanthropy, corporate governance, corruption, and product features [2]. The potential scope of CSR is reflected in diverse definitions [21]; for example, Joyner and Payne focus on values and business ethics [22], but Sebastian argues that "corporate social responsibility is a generalized concept of what constitutes 'good' or 'desirable' business behavior" [23] (p. 110).

The most influential framework for CSR is Carroll's pyramid of responsibilities, with the pyramid structure implying hierarchical prioritization (e.g., philanthropy at the top) [24],

which is still used in the field of CSR and consumer responses [25]. However, in later work and reflecting changes in the literature, Schwarz and Carroll proposed a three-domain model that included economic, ethical, and legal areas of responsibility depicted in a Venn diagram, thus equalizing the status of the domains [26]. Later accounts reflected this more holistic approach, for example, incorporating economics, politics, social integration, and ethics [27], or encompassing philosophical, psychological, and managerial perspectives [28]. The more holistic approach has not necessarily been reflected in literature and research; for example, some authors argue that there is a too strong focus on environmental factors in CSR literature [5,18,19], with very few studies in the business research arena looking at a wider breadth of CSR domains (e.g., two CSR domains of environment and employees, or seven CSR domains [29,30]). Even less emphasis has been put on trying to understand the differences in the weight that consumers versus companies place on different types of CSR domains according to their priorities, values, and opinions [31].

The breadth of CSR definitions is reflected in the breadth of policies and activities that can be encompassed under the CSR umbrella, such as sustainable consumption and social issues [32]. Alongside such activities, there has been a growing interest in how CSR influences consumers, albeit some theorists have proposed this is under-examined [33]. Given potential benefits for corporate image and reputation of CSR, the importance of communications of CSR policy has also been recognized [34–36]. However, Kim argues that focus has been given to macro rather than micro communications questions [36], and thus understanding of the purpose of CSR remains ‘murky’ [34]. Nevertheless, a key principle is that effective communication of CSR plays an important role in developing an ethical identity [37], when the communication aligns with authenticity [38].

Returning to the question of macro versus micro, despite the acknowledgment of the multidimensional nature of CSR, the majority of past research has focused on the macro- rather than micro-level and individual/single CSR dimensions [33], and far too much attention has been paid to environmental factors to the detriment of other CSR categories such as social and economic [19]. Our research has been designed to fill these gaps by taking a micro-level approach and holistically examining CSR by focusing on its multiple dimensions and examples of diverse policy categories. Moreover, given the limited literature on demographics and CSR, our research design included demographics to help clarify the current limited and contradictory findings in this area.

In consideration of the varied views of what constitutes CSR, we adopt a broad view of the topic in our research. Although we acknowledge the value of narrowly focused studies, our approach reflects the holistic nature of CSR. Further, as our concern is focused on consumers, our approach echoes research findings that suggest multiple attributes influence consumer choice [19]. Thus, in relation to the focal brands used in our study (see methodology section), we have two criteria for topic inclusion; (i) the company considers the topic important enough to include discussion on their website, and (ii), the topic is related to business practices/policies that can be reasonably described as being driven by ethical considerations. This approach ensures breadth in the study and means that it reflects actual practice. Finally, we have structured the study in a way that examines knowledge of CSR both at the micro and macro levels.

Further, a significant concern is that past methodological approaches have employed a rather subjective and biased pathway to measuring subjective consumer CSR knowledge despite cautions such as Bhattacharya and Sen’s view of a “need for better measurement models of CSR that capture and estimate clearly the effects of a company’s CSR actions on its stakeholders, including its consumers” [39] (p. 22). This consideration for moving toward alternative methods of measuring consumer-related aspects in connection to CSR has been seen recently; for example, Medina et. al.’s study on the use of neuroimaging to assess consumers’ true reactions and processing of CSR messages, which are at the core of how objective knowledge can be formed in consumer’s memory [40].

Therefore, we have sought to ameliorate, as far as possible, some potential confounds in prior research. An initial way of doing this is to build on extant consumer CSR knowledge

research [41], and to design a study focused on obtaining objective CSR knowledge regarding the chosen focal brands. This is crucial as there can be a misalignment ('miscalibration') between objective and subjective knowledge, whereby individuals may mistakenly believe that they are knowledgeable about a particular subject when they are not [42].

Such a differentiation is critical when asking questions about engagement with CSR as subjective measures (e.g., "I believe I know a lot about X company's CSR" or "This company endeavors to protect the environment/ contributes to the development of community" [43]) are more likely to elicit high-score responses from participants, which will inflate results. This is likely to happen as CSR is concerned with ethics which will prompt biases such as social desirability and impression management [12]. However, by focusing on objective knowledge, the present study will allow us to ascertain whether participants are really engaging with CSR; if a person has a genuine interest in CSR, they should have at least some knowledge about some of the very well-known brands used in our study.

Using objective knowledge also addresses broader concerns about survey methodologies [11,14,44]. While Pomeroy and Dolnicar's earlier study sought to address some of these concerns, using a similar method to the one presented here [33], a major flaw was their use of leading questions [45]. Leading questions are a significant concern as this may develop what Feldman and Lynch describe as 'self-generated validity', whereby the questions and their sequence prompt the answers [11].

Forbes and Avis [14] extended concerns about self-generated validity and outline a long history of research, which demonstrates that research participants may 'create' their answers to questions in response to the questions themselves, rather than drawing on pre-existing attitudes or perceptions [11,46–48]. Forbes and Avis describe this kind of process as 'construct creation' and consider that the problem occurs when a topic is (1) 'not salient for the participant', (2) 'the participant has no interest in the topic'; and/or (3) 'the participant has (little or) no knowledge of the topic' [14] (p. 1818). As most marketing research aims at understanding attitudes and perceptions in the world outside of a research process, they point out that construct creation leads to ecologically invalid research [49]. When considering the research methodology for this paper, it was consciously designed to focus on ecological validity and (at least) amelioration of the problems of construct creation.

With regards to ecological validity, the concern is that results in the 'lab' are informative about the world outside the 'lab' [49]. For example, when shopping in a supermarket and choosing between brands, the only influences available to a consumer are local cues and the shopper's own memory. This is important as, even if a person has a weak recollection of CSR that can be prompted by a survey question, if it cannot be recalled without a prompt in research, it will not be recalled unprompted in a shopping situation and thus cannot influence consumer behavior. Despite the issues with ecological validity, the majority of studies looking at CSR and consumer-related responses relied on experimental studies (lab or only survey-based studies) with scenarios developed for hypothetical or actual companies (e.g., Grimmer and Bingham's study on companies' environmental performance and consumers' purchase intentions [50]; Baskentli et al.'s study on consumers' reactions to companies' CSR domains activities) that can predispose consumers to a certain mindset and views and thus bias their responses [30].

As such, we sought to avoid, as much as possible, any prompts in the question that might either result in a prompted recall or lead to outright construct creation [14]. However, we nevertheless still tilted towards a greater representation of engagement with CSR as we artificially focused participants on the topic of CSR and did prompt to a very small degree; for each corporation, we listed the *general areas* in which they had CSR policies (e.g., environment) to help participants organize their thoughts. This 'tilt' should be kept in mind when reviewing the results.

The new approach to the research in this paper provided surprising findings. In particular, for most consumers, there was very limited knowledge of the CSR for focal brands. Furthermore, our approach of examining from the micro-perspective provides

some new insights into consumer engagement with CSR. This is clearly viewed as an important topic, both for theory and practice, given the large volume of academic literature and research devoted to CSR. As such, our first contribution is to identify a significant weakness in extant theory and research; although many companies are engaging in CSR activities, in relation to consumer behavior, their impact is often moot due to the failure to effectively communicate the activity. In addition to this, a further contribution is that the research looks at micro factors and provides holistic insights, for example, providing a more balanced examination of environmental CSR in relation to social and economic CSR. Lastly, the paper provides a significant contribution to research methodology. From the outset, the research design took heed of the risks of construct creation and implemented a methodology to avoid the risk of construct creation. The most important innovation in the methodology is to use objective knowledge as the focus of the research. This approach has allowed for the present research findings, which we believe better reflect the actuality of consumer perceptions of CSR.

2.2. Consumer Knowledge of CSR

Considering the view that the success of CSR strategies and activities is dependent on the knowledge of CSR initiatives and communications [6], few studies have examined consumer knowledge of brands' CSR activity/policy. This is despite research that found a 'surprisingly low' level of "knowledge of the ethical and social issues around which firms are framing their CSR initiatives" [33] (p. 182). However, before examining the extant literature on consumer knowledge of CSR it is important to note Brucks' distinction between objective and subjective knowledge [9]; the former is defined as actual knowledge stored in consumers' memory and the latter is the knowledge that a person assumes they hold.

Research on environmental knowledge has made this distinction between consumer subjective and objective environmental knowledge (e.g., eco-labels and sustainable fishery [51–53]) and found that for sustainable/food choices, high levels of both subjective and objective knowledge led to positive consumer attitude [52,54] but objective knowledge did not increase the likelihood of consuming organic products [52].

However, the distinction between these two types of consumer knowledge cannot be clearly seen in the wider consumer CSR knowledge literature and, particularly, in relation to CSR policies rather than consumer products. Overall, policy knowledge research is limited and focused on subjective (e.g., the Kozar and Hiller Connell Likert scale statement: 'I am knowledgeable about socially responsible clothing businesses' [55]) rather than objective knowledge. This is a significant issue and gap given that the two types of knowledge are distinct and influence differently the information processing and decision-making process [9].

An additional issue with extant CSR literature is the interchangeable use of awareness and knowledge. Based on Information Processing Theory [17], awareness is demonstrated at the attention stage while knowledge occurs at the encoding and recoding stage, i.e., knowledge is information stored in memory [9]. For example, Beckman comments on the professed consumer interest in CSR versus the heterogeneity of awareness and knowledge of CSR (with most consumers unaware of CSR activities) [5]. Furthermore, most research has examined awareness and knowledge of single CSR dimensions/pillars [33], and few have attempted to dissociate between knowledge of distinct CSR dimensions (e.g., environmental, social, economic) and their relationship with consumers' ethical evaluation of the company. One exception is Kozar and Hiller Connell's research [56], but their focus was on subjective knowledge, finding that participants were more (subjectively) knowledgeable about environmental than social CSR issues.

Some areas of CSR research have focused on corporate image research [57], as organizations are aware of the importance of a positive global evaluation of the company by consumers. Such a positive image and evaluation has been claimed to enhance corporate reputation [58], differentiation [59], brand equity [60], customer satisfaction [61],

positive consumer attitudes and loyalty [39], purchase intentions [62], and positive word-of-mouth [60]. Nonetheless, there are also studies that claim such effects are non-existent or the findings are inconclusive [63–65]. One explanation for the discrepancy may be that awareness of CSR and trust in relation to evaluations have been found to vary according to category [17]. Alternatively, past studies suggest the absence of CSR activity awareness [33,39], and lack of CSR knowledge regarding what companies actually achieve via their CSR actions can lead to consumer skepticism [35,66], and are highly detrimental to corporate reputation. Thus, based on the literature reviewed above, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis H1. *Consumers' objective knowledge of different individual types of CSR policies correlates with their global ethical evaluation of companies.*

Hypothesis H2. *There is a positive relationship between consumers' overall objective knowledge of CSR policies and their global evaluation of the company.*

Past research has found that consumers pay variable attention to certain types of CSR activities over others [67], based on congruence with personal morals, interests, values, and priorities [68]. Related to this, Pfau et al., found that for an organization with an existing positive image, CSR campaigns have had an incremental positive effect on this image and have increased the level of credibility among consumers but did not translate to higher levels of consumer CSR awareness [57]. Overall, the literature seems to highlight that a larger number of CSR activities are not necessarily noticed or internalized by consumers. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis H3. *Consumers' knowledge of a larger number of CSR policies does not influence their ethical evaluation of the company.*

Questions have been raised as to whether different consumer groups are more likely to be responsive to CSR efforts [17], with early research indicating influence from variables such as age, gender, education, or market characteristics [17,69]. Regarding gender, Vicente-Molina, Fernández-Sáinz, and Izagirre-Olaizola's study suggest that women are, on the whole, more pro-social than men [16], and ethics research reports that women are more preoccupied with business ethics [70] and Vermeir and van Kenhove found that women were less tolerant of 'double standards' in business ethics [71]. This presents the possibility that they may be more receptive to CSR communication and thus may be more knowledgeable about CSR. Additionally, past literature found that women were more inclined to question and judge unethical actions than men [71]. However, no literature directly examines gender differences in terms of broad evaluation of companies from a business ethics/CSR standpoint. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis H4. *There is a positive correlation between gender and objective knowledge of CSR policies.*

Hypothesis H5. *Female consumers have more objective knowledge about CSR policies compared with male consumers.*

Hypothesis H6. *Female consumers have a more negative global evaluation of companies' CSR policies compared to male consumers.*

Regarding education, prior research has found in the case of cause-related marketing communications that higher-educated and higher-income groups of consumers are more likely to support such initiatives [72]. This may be due to their higher level of awareness and understanding of CSR and specific activities. Studies looking at the influences of education on CSR-related areas are limited. One of these is that of Vicente-Molina, Fernández-Sáinz, and Izagirre-Olaizola who used a sample of university students to understand

the significance of education in explaining pro-social behavior [16]. They found the link between education and behavior to be complex though, with differences associated with either objective or subjective knowledge and psychological and gender variables. Based on the limited literature above we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis H7. *There is a positive correlation between education and objective knowledge of CSR policies.*

Hypothesis H8. *There is a positive correlation between education and global evaluation of companies regarding their CSR.*

3. Materials and Methods

Participants for the study were recruited through intercepts from the main shopping mall in a university city (similar method to other studies in this area, e.g., Thøgersen, Haugaard, and Olesen [51]). They were offered chocolate as a “thanks”. After recruitment, participants were briefed on the purpose of the research and were informed that any level of knowledge would be valuable for the research. A further written brief was provided to clarify any terms used in the survey (e.g., policy). Once briefed, the participants signed an ethics consent form and were seated at a laptop.

The study was survey-based, commencing with demographic questions and progressing to free recall questions about the CSR policies of the focal brands. In the case of brands that were part of a house of brands [73], progression to the main survey questions was contingent on participants correctly identifying the ultimate brand owner (e.g., Rexona is owned by Unilever). The reason for this was that we found that the CSR policies for our focal brands were ‘attached’ to the corporation and thus consumers needed to know the owner to be able to connect the CSR policy with the owned brand. To ascertain knowledge of CSR we asked a very general and open question:

‘Please tell us what you know about [corporation’s] policy for the following: [we listed the policy CSR areas for the company e.g., environment, community]. Please review the items in the list and then write your answer/s. If you do not have any knowledge about any of these policies, please just write ‘none’.’ [The survey forced a response].

In addition to the questions on policy knowledge, we wanted to give participants an opportunity to provide a more general view of the brands by asking:

‘Do you have any general thoughts or impressions about [company name] approach to business ethics i.e., do you have thoughts on whether the company behaves in a way that you think is moral and good? If no thoughts come to mind, please write ‘none’.’

The question provided: (i) a broader opportunity to provide knowledge and, (ii) an opportunity to identify any associations between knowledge of policy and attitudes about the corporation.

3.1. Selection of Brands for the Study

Our starting point for brand selection was to include varied brand portfolio strategies [73], well-known brands (we used the Brandz top 100 most valuable brands or well-known local brands), and brands that had been the subject of media controversy/coverage associated with CSR. The latter was included as we considered that their CSR policies would be more likely to be the subject of public interest. Finally, as it prompted the study, we included the local brand ‘Z’. To be included in the study, we also required that the company had a corporate website for New Zealand (the location of the study) and a section(s) on the website dedicated to CSR. The latter was important as the policies on the website were used as the guide as to what CSR policies the company wished to communicate, and

also as the basis for scoring the policy knowledge of participants. The brands used were: McDonald's, Dominos, BP, Z, Westpac, ANZ, Lexus, Absolut, Rexona, Dole, Kellogg's, Cussons, LG, Apple, and Benson and Hedges. Content analysis of the companies' corporate websites revealed nine CSR policy categories; environment, employment, suppliers, community, food ethics, animal ethics, smoking prevention, marketing, and safety.

3.2. The 'Scoring' of Participants' Answers

The first step was to summarize key CSR policies of the selected companies using their corporate websites, including both policy statements and CSR 'actions' (see Supplementary Materials). The latter were included as these might represent a proxy for the understanding of policy. The summaries were used as the basis for 'scoring' participants' CSR policy knowledge for the selected brands. To avoid researcher bias, students were recruited to 'judge' participant answers. Enough students were recruited to ensure each participant's answer was scored six times (see Cicchetti for discussion on the number of raters [74]). Each judge was given training in how to conduct the scoring, including a presentation, practice rating tasks, and provision of the researcher's answer to the rating tasks [75]. The training focused on examples that required nuanced judgment, and it was stressed that sometimes scores would be reliant on their own judgment. The scoring system used by participants is given in Table 1. The knowledge scoring was based on the number of policies identified/degree of knowledge per policy, with no upper limit on the score. The global evaluation was an evaluation of all content on a policy area with positive and negative attitudes summed, resulting in scores of $-1/0/1$ (negative/neutral/positive).

Table 1. Knowledge and global evaluation scoring.

Knowledge Evaluation Score	No Knowledge 0	Some Knowledge 1	Knowledgeable 2
Global Evaluation Score	Negative −1	Neutral 0	Positive +1

4. Results

4.1. Sample

Our 216 participants were broadly representative of the local population based on gender, age, education, and occupation, except a small skew towards 18–25-year-olds (29%), students (20%), and highly educated (55% bachelor's degree or equivalent or postgraduate qualification). Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Characteristic	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Male	106	49
Female	110	51
Age		
18-25	62	29
26-35	35	16
36-45	35	16
46-55	47	22
56-65	25	12
Over 65	12	6
Education		
Graduate high school	97	45
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	57	26
Postgraduate degree or equivalent	62	29

Table 2. *Cont.*

Characteristic	Count	Percentage
Occupation		
Unemployed	13	6
Retired	11	5
Student	44	20
Laborer	6	3
Sales worker	4	2
Clerical and administrative worker	10	7
Community and personal service worker	7	3
Technician and trade worker	10	5
Professional	53	25
Manager	15	7
Self-employed	15	7
Other	28	13
Total	216	100

4.2. Consumer Knowledge of Brands' Parent Companies

Overall, there is poor knowledge of brands' parent companies with the exception of Toyota. For example, a third of the sample correctly identified the Lexus brand's owner—the highest score. Conversely, none of the respondents were able to identify the brand owner of Absolut (see Table 3).

Table 3. Correct recognition of brands' parent companies (four houses of brands tested in the research).

Parent Company (Brand Tested)	Count	Percentage
British American Tobacco (Benson & Hedges)	10	46
Toyota (Lexus)	71	33
Unilever (Rexona)	25	12
Pernod Ricard (Absolut)	0	0

4.3. Consumers' Level of Objective Knowledge about CSR Policies and Its Effect on Consumers' Company Evaluation from a CSR Standpoint

Respondents demonstrate *very limited* objective knowledge concerning companies' CSR policies. Results were analyzed in three ways—with the focus on companies examined, respondents, and policy categories. When analyzing the results with a focus on companies, we calculated the total score of knowledge for each company and divided it by the potential maximum score, i.e., the potential maximum score for a company multiplied by the number of participants. We found that in only two cases (McDonald's and 'Z'), the results are above 1%, and for the majority of companies, the results are between 0 and 0.3% (see Table 4, second column from right).

When focusing on the CSR knowledge of individual respondents, we calculated an average CSR knowledge by (i) summarizing all policies' knowledge of all companies for each respondent (recall that in some cases where respondents were unable to identify a parent company of the brand examined, they did not proceed with the evaluation of policies), and (ii) summarizing the scores across the scorers and dividing the scores by the number of scorers (six). The lowest knowledge score was 0, while the highest knowledge was 11.8. Given there is no objective standard for what constitutes a level of knowledge of CSR policies, using the lowest and highest scores as anchors, we developed a knowledge categorization system, clustering the results in managerially useful ways [76], as follows: 3 or below—very low knowledge, 3.1–6—low knowledge, 6.1–9—moderate knowledge, and over 9—high knowledge. Subsequent analysis found that 88% of respondents could be categorized as possessing a very low or low knowledge concerning companies' CSR policies with 19% of respondents having no knowledge at all. Only 3% of participants possess CSR policy knowledge that can be considered high.

Table 4. Knowledge of CSR (focus on companies) and companies' global evaluation.

Company	Total Score for All Policies	Potential Max. Score for a Company	Potential Max. Score for All Participants	Score of CSR Knowledge as a % of Max. Score	Global Evaluation
McDonald's	245.8	70	15,120	1.6	48.7
Z	90	36	7776	1.2	49.9
Westpac	72.3	40	8640	0.8	37.7
Kellogg's	41.7	30	6480	0.6	9.6
Toyota	18.2	28	6048	0.3	8.8
Dominos	19.1	30	6480	0.3	−7.3
BP	31.8	58	12,528	0.3	<u>−20.4</u>
Apple	26.8	56	12,096	0.2	<u>−18.9</u>
Dole	8.3	70	15,120	0.1	<u>−17.6</u>
LG	11.2	122	26,352	0.0	2.8
Cussons	4.1	80	17,280	0.0	1.5
Unilever	0.3	90	19,440	0.0	−1
BAT	0	78	16,848	0.0	−5.1

Note: knowledge is calculated as a total score for the company divided by a potential maximum score for all participants.

Finally, we analyzed consumer knowledge about CSR with respect to policy categories, finding that CSR knowledge for policy categories is varied. The knowledge score of a certain policy category was calculated by summarizing the knowledge scores for all companies that communicate this category and dividing it by the number of companies that communicate it. The greatest knowledge is observed for food ethics and community (25.6 and 24.2 respectively), followed by environment (9.4). However, food ethics is communicated by only three companies, community and environment are communicated by 10 and 13 companies respectively. Consumers have much less knowledge of other policy categories, such as those related to suppliers and employment. This is surprising given that they are communicated by a relatively large number of companies. The remaining CSR policy categories communicated by the companies we examined are virtually unknown to consumers.

Interestingly, the greatest CSR knowledge corresponds to the most positive evaluations, i.e., McDonald's, 'Z', and Westpac bank received the most positive evaluations (bold in Table 4), although the order for McDonald's and 'Z' is reversed. On the opposite spectrum of companies' evaluations with respect to CSR policies are BP, Apple, and Dole, which received the most negative evaluations (underlined in Table 4). Overall, we found a correlation between CSR knowledge and global evaluations of companies, with respect to CSR policies, yet it was not very strong ($r = 0.455$, $p = 0.000$). Therefore, H_2 is supported.

4.4. Influence of the Type of CSR Policies and the Number of Policies on Consumers' Company Evaluation from a CSR Standpoint

Furthermore, we ran a series of correlations between respondents' global evaluation of companies and their knowledge about CSR policies (expressed as the total score of knowledge) communicated by the companies. We correlated global evaluations of companies regarding their CSR with respondents' knowledge about specific policy types. Four policies were communicated by only one company each and therefore the correlations between knowledge about these policies and global evaluation were not tested. Except for the correlation between global evaluation and the environmental policy that was relatively weak and non-significant ($r = 0.239$, $p = 0.219$), the other tested correlations were strong and statistically significant ($r = 0.582$, $p = 0.039$ for employment, $r = 0.650$, $p = 0.029$ for suppliers, $r = 0.916$, $p = 0.000$ for community and $r = 0.971$, $p = 0.015$ for food ethics), see Table 5. This offers (partial) support to H_1 . Concerning respondents' global evaluation of companies, with respect to CSR policies, over half of the respondents had a positive evaluation (56%), while 17% and 28% of the sample had neutral and negative evaluations, respectively.

Table 5. Correlations between global evaluations and respondents' knowledge of specific policy types.

Global Evaluation—Pearson Correlation	
Environment	0.239 ^{ns}
Employment	0.582 [*]
Suppliers	0.650 [*]
Community	0.916 [*]
Food ethics	0.971 [*]
Number of policies	−0.177 [*]
Number of policy categories	0.156 [*]

* Significant at <0.05 level, ^{ns} not significant.

We also correlated global evaluations of companies regarding their CSR with (i) the number of policies and (ii) the number of policy categories communicated by the companies and we found no such correlations ($r = -0.177$, $p = 0.562$ for the number of policies and $r = 0.156$, $p = 0.612$ for the number of policy categories). Consequently, H_3 is supported.

4.5. Influence of Demographic Characteristics on Knowledge of CSR Policies and Global Evaluation of Companies in Respect to CSR

Regarding demographics analyses, we first correlated demographic characteristics and CSR knowledge. Despite findings from previous studies of the non-linear relationship between age and consumer responses to companies' CSR [17], we intuitively expected not only age, but also education, occupation, and gender to be correlated with CSR knowledge. However, we found that the only statistically significant correlation was between gender and knowledge, although it was weak ($r = 0.136$, $p = 0.045$). Therefore, H_4 was supported.

We further split the sample into the two gender groups and found that women possess greater knowledge than men, with mean knowledge scores of 2.94 and 2.18 ($p < 0.01$) for females and males respectively. Hence, H_5 is supported, although based on small correlation ($r = 0.136$, $p = 0.045$). The observation of frequencies confirms this finding, for example, 60% of females have very low knowledge or no knowledge as opposed to 72% of males who have very low or no CSR knowledge (see Table 6). With regards to consumers who have no knowledge at all, 15% of females appeared to have no knowledge while 24% of males have no knowledge at all (see full results in Table 6). Concerning knowledge of certain CSR policies with regard to the gender split, women have greater knowledge of the majority of policies, yet the differences are not very large. The only exception is for the food ethics policy as the results of our study suggest that females have considerably higher knowledge of food ethics than males (due to space constraints we do not provide detailed information).

Table 6. Knowledge of CSR (focus on respondents)—total sample and gender-specific.

Knowledge	Total sample		Females		Males	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Very low	142	66	66	60	76	72
Low	47	22	29	26	18	17
Moderate	21	10	10	9	11	10
High	6	3	5	5	1	1
Total	216	100	110	100	106	100
No Knowledge	41	19	16	15	25	24

Note. Knowledge presented as the number and percentage of respondents with arbitrary coding.

Given the surprising finding regarding the absence of correlation between consumer CSR knowledge and age, occupation, and particularly education characteristics, we excluded students (recall that students are slightly over-represented in the sample) and repeated the correlation analysis (see Table 7). We believe that there is a legitimate case for excluding the occupation of 'student' as students are a self-selected sample of more educated people (e.g., a third-year student already has significantly more education than a

high school graduate) and entry into university will be for higher performing high school students. In other words, categorizing the students alongside high school students obfuscates the data. The subsequent analysis revealed that consumer CSR knowledge is correlated with education, yet the correlation is weak ($r = 0.162$, $p = 0.034$, see Table 7). Therefore, H_7 is supported.

Table 7. Correlations between CSR knowledge and demographics.

Demographic	Knowledge—Pearson Correlation
Age	0.010 ^{ns}
Gender	0.136 [*]
Education	0.117 ^{ns}
Occupation	0.106 ^{ns}
Education ¹	0.162 [*]

* Significant at <0.05 level, ^{ns} not significant. ¹ Students excluded.

With respect to the influence of demographics on the global evaluation of companies regarding their CSR policies, we found a negative correlation ($r = -0.164$, $p = 0.032$) between global evaluation and education (students excluded) (see Table 8). Moreover, the result from regression suggests that global evaluation declines if consumers are better educated ($b = -0.623$, $p = 0.004$). Therefore, H_8 was rejected. Additionally, we found that gender and occupation are positively correlated with global evaluation, yet the correlations are not strong ($r = 0.161$, $p = 0.018$ for gender and $r = 0.142$, $p = 0.037$ for occupation). Furthermore, women more positively evaluate companies regarding their CSR policies than men with mean scores of 0.78 and 0.03 ($p = 0.01$) for females and males, respectively (see Table 9). Thus, the overall positive global evaluation of the companies, with respect to their CSR for the total sample, primarily results from the positive evaluations of females as the average male's evaluation is nearly neutral as per their rating scores. Therefore, H_6 was rejected.

Table 8. Correlations between Global evaluation and demographics, and regression (Education against Global evaluation).

Demographic	Global Evaluation—Pearson Correlation
Gender	0.161 [*]
Education ¹	-0.164 ^{ns}
Occupation	0.142 [*]
	Beta coefficient
Education ¹	-0.623 [*]

* Significant at <0.05 level, ^{ns} not significant. ¹ Students excluded.

Table 9. Mean CSR knowledge and global evaluations in respect to CSR policies—gender-specific (standard deviations in parentheses).

	Females	Males
CSR knowledge	2.94 ** (3.00)	2.18 ** (2.47)
Global evaluation	0.78 ** (2.20)	0.03 ** (2.41)

** Significant at <0.01.

5. Discussion

5.1. Main Findings Discussion

The most notable finding relates to the core purpose of the study; the overall level of *objective (i.e., actual)* knowledge of CSR can be described as woeful. If we assume that our focal companies may engage in CSR for ethical reasons, but also hope that this will translate into more favorable consumer evaluations, then they are not overall achieving this latter goal. *If consumers do not have actual knowledge of companies' CSR activities and policies, then the policies cannot influence consumers' behavior.* Despite the fact that this study

used famous brands and also brands whose CSR has been the subject of media attention, thus loading the dice towards finding knowledge, there was very little knowledge of CSR for most companies. This is worrying as, according to Green and Peloza [67], the degree of consumers' recall and recognition of CSR activities translate into corporate benefits. Our findings of varying degrees of CSR knowledge for policy categories support prior research [67], which indicated that consumers can pay attention to some types of CSR activities more than others (with preferences differing by country) and that consumers typically evaluate CSR actions of a firm in line with their own interests, morals, values, and priorities [30].

However, although the overall findings are concerning, there is a relatively good result for the 'Z' brand. 'Z' was included as, in an unsuccessful pilot research project that inspired this study, their CSR policy was mentioned by some participants in free recall of *any associations* for the brand. The reason was presumably due to a strong emphasis on CSR during their marketing campaigns at the time of the study. Within the overall results, community was a relatively stronger area of participant knowledge, but the positive results were largely derived from three brands; 'Z', McDonald's, and Westpac bank. In each case, communications of the firm's CSR activities were visible enough that we *informally* expected some degree of participant awareness. Further, the relative success of McDonald's has been found in prior research, with Kim [36] finding McDonald's CSR was most prominent among 27 companies from a range of industry sectors.

A surprising finding was the relatively low level of knowledge in the environment category as theorists have asserted its importance for consumers [77]. For example, Simpson and Radford found that the environment was more influential for consumers than the economic or social dimensions of CSR [19]. With the benefit of hindsight, these findings may be seen as less surprising. To illustrate, before starting the research, we had expectations of consumers reporting certain CSR activities, such as the Westpac rescue helicopter or Ronald McDonald House, as these were widely publicized. However, in the case of environmental CSR, there were no analogous examples of well-publicized activities for which we had similar expectations.

Again, *indirectly*, it appears that the absence of knowledge reflects an absence of communication of CSR activities. The key point here is that, although our study did not examine the origins of knowledge, our findings, and in particular 'Z', suggest that consumers will engage with CSR, provided that the company places sufficient emphasis on CSR in their communications. This point receives some support from Maignan [18], who found that differences in response to CSR were contingent on location, i.e., the response may depend on what is being communicated to consumers, and from Andreu, Casado-Díaz, and Mattila, who found that consumers' responses to two types of CSR initiatives (environmental-related and employee-related) differ according to the types of message that is used (emotional vs. rational) and service type (hedonic vs. utilitarian) [29].

Another notable finding is that, even where endorsing strategies are used for brands in branded houses [73,78], most participants could not identify the brand owner. An interesting anecdote illustrates the problem. One of our research participants informed us he had just purchased Rexona and he asked if he could look in his bag to see who the brand owner was. Regardless of whether he was aware of Unilever's CSR activity, he would still have not been able to link this to the brand he had just purchased. As such, corporations should not rely on corporate communications of CSR, but instead ensure that the companywide CSR is 'owned' in brand-level communications.

We also compared the objective knowledge of policy with a 'global evaluation' of the company. Surprisingly, in relation to the levels of knowledge, the global evaluations were more positive than negative. Overall, aligned with some past research [17], there was a correlation between evaluations and CSR knowledge, but this was not very strong. For the differential effects of CSR types, our findings supported the contention that different types of policy would have different degrees of impact on global evaluations (which is encouraging given the different methodologies used in this study), but these findings

are more nuanced. Again, contrary to previous research which found consumers more knowledgeable about environmental and social issues [56], with the environment found to be the most influential [19], we found that environmental policies did not influence company global evaluations. Rather employment, suppliers, community, and food ethics policies, in this order, were likely to affect consumers' global evaluations.

However, when examining the top three scores for policy knowledge and their corresponding evaluation, the top three are (encouragingly) the same companies. Again, this supports our proposal that *effective* communication of CSR is important, as it can lead to more positive evaluations. For the negative evaluations, these again conformed to our anecdotal expectations with companies that have had negative publicity receiving poor evaluations e.g., Dole's negative publicity over self-accreditation for fair trade [79], the high suicide rate in Apple's supplier Foxconn, or the BP oil spill in Mexico. A more surprising result was the negative finding for Dominos, which was also lower than BAT and might merit further investigation.

Finally, we found no correlation between the number of policies or number of categories policies within, and the global company evaluations. This corroborates findings that suggest consumers choose to selectively pay attention to some CSR activities over others [67,68], but it also implies that it is not the policies or breadth of categories the policy cover *per se* that influence evaluation, but rather it is the communication of each policy that can influence consumer perceptions. These are interesting findings that may result from the types of communications used by companies. Recent work by Lauritsen and Perks in the supermarket industry examining different types of CSR communications, i.e., interactive, non-interactive, implicit and explicit, found that interactive CSR communication will increase consumers' knowledge, memory, and perception of CSR activities [6]. Our findings suggest there is a low level of CSR knowledge among consumers and no relationship between CSR knowledge and the number of policies/policy categories and this could be due to the types of communications that various organizations use.

Regarding demographics, supporting past literature, we found a positive correlation between gender and objective knowledge of CSR policies and that women have more knowledge than men. This may be due to women being more pro-social and ethical than men [16,70], and thus they are more likely to have greater knowledge. However, our results showed that this greater knowledge does not translate to women being harsher judges of companies' CSR efforts. Additionally, when using a classification of levels of knowledge (very low, low, moderate, and high), there was a strong finding that females had greater knowledge overall, particularly of food ethics.

Findings regarding education are aligned with past research [17,72], and indicated this demographic influences consumers' CSR-related attitudes and knowledge. We found that higher levels of education correlate with more knowledge, but only when excluding students from the sample. The students thus could be described as muddying the statistical waters, as they are in an intermediate educational stage and future research should consider this more carefully when examining the influence of education.

5.2. Business/Managerial Implications

Our findings suggest a low level of CSR knowledge among consumers and no relationship between CSR knowledge and the number of policies/policy categories. We found that knowledge of CSR was clustered in a small number of individuals, with a total of only 12.5% of participants having moderate or greater knowledge. As such, it seems only a minority are engaging with CSR messages. As discussed, one avenue is to develop more interactive marketing communications [6]. This is consistent with consumer behavior literature that suggests interactive communications lead to a higher level of involvement [80], and consumers tend to retain more information if they are highly involved [81]. Additionally, careful consideration of the channel or how best to initiate and maintain CSR communication might be needed in order to increase CSR objective knowledge [82,83].

Our finding that there is no correlation between the number of policies and policy categories and evaluation suggests that communication of CSR should not be broad-brushed but instead focus on key aspects of CSR that can be most easily and effectively communicated or that matter the most to consumers, i.e., CSR campaigns should be designed around the message content and how this is communicated rather than how much information is conveyed and how many policies are highlighted. Market segmentation based on consumers' priorities, ethical concerns, and moral values might also be useful prior to communications development so that the most noticeable and impactful type of CSR policy is chosen [68].

Another crucial recommendation relates to the way in which companies evaluate consumer responses to their CSR activities, and is important in the formulation of CSR communication strategies. Although prior academic research has provided useful insights into consumer views of CSR, it has overstated the degree of engagement with CSR. Moreover, it would be reasonable to assume that a company's own research would replicate these problems, as they will likely use the same/similar research methods. If consumer engagement with CSR is overstated, this will surely negatively impact the communication strategy and its evaluation. As a first step, we strongly recommend that companies replicate our research methodology to establish a benchmark for genuine consumer engagement with their CSR, reflected in actual/objective CSR knowledge.

In addition to providing more accurate knowledge about consumer engagement, replication of our methodology also provides useful information about where a company might focus. For example, in our study, it was apparent that there was considerable consumer knowledge of the Westpac Rescue Helicopter. As has been discussed, our findings suggest that communication should not aim for communication of the breadth of a company's CSR, but rather quality and depth. The methodology can thus identify current *genuinely* impactful CSR activities to further leverage activities that have the potential to generate engagement, providing a tool to evaluate the impact of any subsequent campaigns.

Based on our findings, we also propose that before relying on past conclusions that any type of CSR communications will have positive outcomes, companies should also first gain an accurate understanding of which specific CSR policies and activities (i.e., environmental, social, economic, etc.) are truly known/unknown to consumers. Findings of past research cannot be used as 'rules of thumb' because environmental and general social policies are not necessarily the most known or influential ones (as found by Kozar and Hiller Connell [55,56]). Indeed, we found that there is no correlation between knowledge of environmental policies and consumers' global company evaluations; rather employment, suppliers, community, and food ethics policies, in this particular order, were likely to affect consumers' global evaluations of a company. As knowledge of specific policies can be context-, country- and industry-dependent, proper market research should be conducted before designing CSR marketing communications. Just communicating more across the board can have a reduced or even negative effect on consumers due to distrust and negative perceptions [36]. Critically, if consumers do not have objective knowledge of relevant CSR activities and policies of companies, then the policies cannot influence consumers' behavior.

Some recommendations can be made regarding the demographics. Concerning gender influences and differences, we found that females have more objective knowledge than males about CSR policies but this does not make them harsher critics of the organization. Therefore, CSR communications should focus on communicating information that would translate into clear objective knowledge, because this will lead to positive corporate evaluations. Additionally, particular attention should be placed on developing campaigns to enhance male consumers' CSR knowledge levels. Finally, as higher levels of education correlated with more CSR knowledge only when excluding students from the sample, we would recommend that future CSR marketing communications do not necessarily treat this group as a highly educated one since they are at an 'intermediate' stage.

6. Conclusions

Although expecting that consumers would not be as knowledgeable about CSR as prior studies suggested, we were genuinely surprised by our findings. The results present a picture in which consumers are largely uninformed about the actual CSR activities of companies. If consumers do not know about CSR policies, the policies cannot influence their behavior. This should be seen as a significant concern for companies that have engaged with the principles of CSR. In particular, there is no reason why such engagement should not be rewarded with success in the marketplace, albeit there is a reasonable argument that an ethical stance is, in itself, positive. As such, we see this research as a moment for companies to pause and reflect on how they are currently communicating their CSR activity and policy, and hope that the managerial suggestions provide a way forward. We consider this to be the first major contribution from this study; if consumers are unaware of CSR activities, they cannot impact behavior, i.e., CSR does not impact consumer behavior—instead, effective communication of CSR actions has the potential to influence consumer behavior. Although this may be obvious when stated as such, the empirical findings presented here suggest that this “obvious” point has not been internalized in theory and practice.

Our second contribution relates to the holistic nature of the research, which has challenged the results of prior research and key assumptions. For example, despite the emphasis on environmental CSR factors in prior research and literature, our findings suggest that consumers had little knowledge of this area of CSR in comparison to other factors (e.g., the Westpac helicopter). Furthermore, contrary to prior research, environmental policy was less influential on global evaluations. As another example, we also could confirm that women had more knowledge than men, but also that this did not result in harsher judgments of companies. These findings direct researchers to more nuanced views of consumer engagement with CSR and draw attention to the need to better plan the content of the communications for a more significant impact on consumers’ knowledge and, ultimately, behavior.

Finally, one of our important contributions is to research methodology. When Forbes and Avis [14] identified the potential problem of construct creation, the implication was that extant research may not be ecologically valid, i.e., did not reflect the world outside of the research setting. This research, by seeking to ameliorate the problem of construct creation, generated research findings that suggest that the concerns may be warranted; the findings raise questions about the accuracy of prior research on consumer perceptions of CSR. Our solution to ameliorate the risk of construct creation was to focus on objective knowledge and, we believe, the methodology used here has potential for wider adaptation and adoption into other areas of study, in particular studies that focus on consumer attitudes and perceptions. We believe this is an important step forward; if research is not ecologically valid, it has the potential to lead theory astray. This recommendation is also useful for practitioners who are more likely to use subjective, rather than objective, measures of consumer knowledge in their in-house or commissioned market research.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions of this research, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, students were somewhat over-represented due to the location of the study, but where we controlled for education and knowledge this was not considered a problem. However, future research could replicate our methodology in different cultures and contexts, using the global companies used in this research and relevant local brands. Another limitation was that we ‘loaded the dice’ of our stimuli choices, selecting famous brands/companies and companies which had garnered significant attention relating to CSR. It might be that lesser-known and less controversial companies/brands might have produced even less knowledge. Moreover, we did not include truly local companies (e.g., a local café); some local companies may be more effective in CSR communication and a future study might examine this possibility.

Another future study relates to levels of knowledge (very low, low, moderate, and high). There was a strong finding that females had greater knowledge of food ethics, and also that males were far more likely to respond to questions with ‘no knowledge’ than females. Intuitively, this latter finding could have implications for socially desirable responding research as the implicit claim of knowledge only very weakly corresponds with actual knowledge. This could be an interesting topic for future research; if the finding is replicated, it would be important to examine the reasons for this.

A particularly noteworthy subject for a future study would be to examine objective versus subjective knowledge and identify miscalibration between knowledge levels, and any potential impact of the miscalibration on consumers’ behavior and also on CSR communications strategies. This topic might lend itself to case study research, for example, examining extant CSR strategy, replicating the principles of our methodology in research with the case study corporation/s, and then examining the future direction of strategy in light of the research findings. Ideally, if practicality allows, follow-up research examining the impact of any change of strategy would be a good contribution to the current literature.

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