



**UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION (UniMAC)
INSTITUTE OF JOURNALISM**

**ASSESSING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGIC CSR
COMMUNICATION AND CUSTOMER TRUST BUILDING WITHIN
GHANA'S BOTTLED WATER AND BEVERAGE SUB-SECTOR.**

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DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

NOVEMBER, 2025

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BY

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DEGREE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS WITH MARKETING**

NOVEMBER 2025

DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of dissertation laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication-Institute of Journalism, UniMAC-IJ.

Dr. Ike Tandoh



10/12/2025

Supervisor

Signature

Date

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated first to God Almighty, whose grace, protection, and favour have carried me through every challenge and triumph. Without Him, none of this would have been possible.

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I express my deepest gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout this journey.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication influences stakeholder trust and perceptions of corporate accountability within Ghana's bottled water and beverage sub-sector. The study focuses on how CSR messages are framed by public relations practitioners and how stakeholders evaluate credibility and authenticity. Guided by Framing Theory and Source Credibility Theory, the study adopts a quantitative research design using a structured questionnaire administered to consumers, employees, distributors, community members, and advocacy actors. A total of 250 valid responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, reliability testing, and multiple regression. The findings show that CSR communication in the sector is primarily framed around community development, moral duty, environmental responsibility, and emotional appeal, with limited emphasis on shared value creation. Stakeholders generally perceived CSR communication as credible and sincere, particularly in relation to communicator professionalism and goodwill, although transparency and external verification were less robust. Regression results revealed that CSR communication significantly influenced stakeholder trust and corporate accountability, with credibility emerging as the strongest predictor, followed by authenticity and message framing. The study concludes that CSR communication functions as a strategic determinant of corporate reputation rather than a routine reporting practice.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, CSR communication, credibility, stakeholder trust, accountability.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APA – American Psychological Association

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

FMCG – Fast-Moving Consumer Goods

IBM – International Business Machines

KMO – Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

PR – Public Relations

RO – Research Objective

RQ – Research Question

SD – Standard Deviation

SPSS – Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication has become a central strategy for organisations to showcase their commitment to societal wellbeing (Schröder, 2021). Globally, companies frame CSR narratives to align with values such as sustainability, equity, and community development (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024; Suluo, 2024). Organisations like Microsoft, Starbucks, and Unilever have strategically promoted their CSR efforts to enhance brand reputation and build stakeholder trust (Kumar, 2024; Terchilă, 2024). These efforts are often accompanied by well-crafted public relations campaigns that spotlight social and environmental initiatives. However, such communications are not always positively received (Amo-Mensah, 2022; Schaefer et al., 2021). Critics have questioned the sincerity of CSR messaging, especially when corporate actions appear inconsistent with public claims, leading to accusations of 'greenwashing' or masking unethical practices (Bernardino, 2021; Zervoudi et al., 2025). According to Tandoh and Duffour (2023), these reactions highlight how the framing of CSR, what is included, emphasised, or omitted can significantly influence public perception.

CSR communication involves the strategic planning and dissemination of information about a company's social and environmental initiatives (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021). It includes tools such as press releases, digital storytelling, impact reports, and stakeholder forums. Public relations professionals play a key role in this process, shaping both the message and its delivery to target audiences (Fehrer et al., 2022; Osafo, 2023). Their work affects how stakeholders interpret the

authenticity and motives behind CSR claims, especially when there is a gap between corporate actions and communications. When messages are seen as aligned with real impact, they foster credibility and loyalty; when they appear misaligned, they risk triggering distrust and criticism (Pattanaik, 2024). As CSR becomes an embedded feature of corporate identity, understanding how it is communicated and received has become vital to maintaining stakeholder confidence.

In Ghana, CSR communication commonly centres on philanthropic contributions to sectors like health, education, and infrastructure (Fusheini & Salia, 2021). These efforts are typically disseminated through sponsored media content, press releases, and corporate campaigns. However, concerns have emerged regarding the limited visibility of long-term outcomes, lack of stakeholder involvement, and questions about the motives behind such communications (Bimpong & David, 2024; Forliano et al., 2025). As scrutiny of corporate behaviour increases, CSR messaging must go beyond promotion to build genuine engagement and credibility (Abukari et al., 2021; Amoako et al., 2024). Public relations professionals are pivotal in this process, framing CSR narratives in ways that influence how stakeholders perceive corporate values and intentions.

Within Ghana's Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) industry, particularly the bottled water and beverage sub-sector, CSR communication has become a visible avenue for demonstrating corporate commitment to social good. Brands such as Awake Purified Water and Verna Mineral Water have undertaken CSR initiatives related to health, community development, and environmental sustainability, often amplified through traditional and digital media campaigns. These efforts provide a context for assessing how CSR messages are crafted, publicised, and received by stakeholders, and how they shape perceptions of credibility and authenticity.

These trends align with global patterns, where organisations have used CSR messaging to reinforce reputational standing or manage public relations crises (Bandim, 2022; Nutsugah & Anani-Bossman, 2023). Yet, stakeholder reactions have not always been positive. In several cases, companies have been criticised for using CSR as a strategic shield rather than a tool for real impact, resulting in accusations of insincerity or greenwashing. This highlights the importance of how CSR is communicated, what is highlighted, downplayed, or omitted altogether. In this context, PR practitioners shape both the content and the reception of CSR efforts, making their role essential in fostering or weakening public trust. This study therefore examines how CSR messages are framed and received within Ghana's FMCG industry, focusing on bottled water and beverage companies. It explores how stakeholders interpret crafted CSR communications and how these relate to building credibility, authenticity, and accountability.

1.2 Problem Statement

There is growing concern that CSR communication is increasingly perceived as a strategic public relations tool rather than a reflection of authentic corporate values. Globally, scholars have noted that while companies often adopt CSR as part of their brand positioning, their messaging can appear disingenuous if not aligned with actual practices (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Dzikunoo (2024) adds that Stakeholders have expressed scepticism towards CSR communications, particularly when firms are seen to prioritise image over impact. Cases of greenwashing, selective disclosure, and cosmetic CSR messaging have emerged across contexts, prompting further scrutiny into the credibility of CSR narratives (Taufiq et al., 2024; Tench & Amo-Mensah, 2017). In Ghana, CSR practices are widespread especially in areas such as health, education, and infrastructure but public perceptions remain mixed (Tandoh & Duffour, 2023). Amo-Mensah (2022) identified challenges in CSR communication by

multinational corporations operating in Ghana, highlighting stakeholder expectations, trust issues, and the limitations of one-way messaging. Hinson et al. (2017) analysed CSR disclosures among Ghanaian banks and found that most firms struggled to translate CSR commitments into effective communication strategies. Similarly, Abugre and Nyuur (2015) noted that CSR in Ghana is often reduced to philanthropic gestures, with little emphasis on participatory or dialogic communication.

Although the strategic importance of public relations in CSR communication has been established, few studies have empirically examined how CSR messages are framed and how these influence stakeholder interpretations particularly in Ghana. Much of the existing literature has focused on CSR implementation or corporate reporting, often without linking it to how stakeholders perceive the motives, credibility, or authenticity of the messages disseminated. For instance, Tench and Amo-Mensah (2018) critique the use of transmission models in CSR communication and argue for more dialogic, stakeholder-inclusive approaches. Despite valuable scholarly contributions, there remains limited empirical evidence on how CSR messages are interpreted by stakeholders and how these interpretations shape trust and perceptions of authenticity within the FMCG space in Ghana. This study addresses that gap by examining how CSR communication is framed within Ghana's FMCG industry and how such framing influences stakeholder judgments of credibility and corporate accountability.

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore how CSR messages are framed by public relations practitioners and how stakeholders perceive these communications in terms of authenticity, trust, and credibility. Using a quantitative approach, it assesses how messaging strategies influence stakeholder interpretation and corporate reputation.

Specific Objectives

1. To explore how CSR messages are framed.
2. To evaluate stakeholder perceptions of the credibility and authenticity of CSR communication.
3. To determine the extent to which CSR communication influences stakeholder trust and judgments of corporate accountability.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How are CSR messages framed?
2. How do stakeholders perceive the credibility and authenticity of CSR communication?
3. To what extent does CSR communication influence stakeholder trust and perceptions of corporate accountability?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to ongoing academic discussions on authenticity, credibility, and accountability in corporate social responsibility communication. It highlights how the framing of CSR messages influences stakeholder trust and perceptions of corporate sincerity. While CSR has been widely researched, limited attention has been given to how communication practices shape stakeholder belief within Ghana's private sector. By providing evidence from the FMCG industry, this study adds context-specific understanding to existing literature.

The findings also have practical value for policy and industry. Agencies such as the Ghana Standards Authority and the Ministry of Trade and Industry can draw on the results to strengthen regulatory frameworks that encourage transparent and responsible CSR

communication. Clearer standards may guide companies in designing CSR messages that align with actual practice and promote stakeholder inclusion.

For professional practice, the study offers insight to corporate communicators, marketing teams, and brand managers seeking to enhance credibility through CSR initiatives. It provides a basis for designing communication strategies that balance corporate image-building with genuine social impact. Stakeholders such as employees, consumers, NGOs, and community groups can also use the findings to better evaluate the authenticity of corporate responsibility claims.

Finally, the study serves as a foundation for further research. Future scholars can then build on its findings to compare CSR communication strategies across industries, track long-term shifts in stakeholder trust, or develop frameworks for assessing communication effectiveness in emerging markets like Ghana.

1.6 Scope of the Study

This study is situated within Ghana's private sector, focusing specifically on the bottled water and beverage sub-sector of the FMCG industry. It examines how CSR messages are strategically framed by public relations practitioners among leading brands such as Awake Purified Water, and Verna Mineral Water. These firms have gained public visibility for their CSR initiatives in health, community development, and environmental sustainability, which are actively publicised through media campaigns and digital communication channels. The study is limited to the communication and perception of CSR activities rather than their direct socio-economic outcomes. It therefore aligns with the study objectives. The study involves diverse stakeholder groups (eg. consumers, employees, distributors, and community members,

advocacy organisations) whose perspectives provide a balanced understanding of how CSR communication within this sub-sector affects brand reputation and public trust.

1.7 Organization of Chapters

The study follows five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study. It includes the background, problem statement, objectives, questions, significance, scope, and work organisation. Chapter Two reviews literature on CSR, public relations, stakeholder theory, and communication framing. It draws links between theory and past empirical findings. Chapter Three presents the methodology. It covers the research design, population, sampling, and data gathering tools. Chapter Four delivers the findings. It outlines how CSR messages are framed and how stakeholders interpret them. Chapter Five interprets the findings, discusses implications, and provides recommendations for communicators and policymakers. The chapter concludes with ideas for future research.

1.8 Chapter Summary

The chapter outlined the central concerns of the research. It presented the rationale for the study, introduced the research questions, and situated the problem within Ghana's corporate sector. The chapter also explained why the study matters and established its direction through well-defined objectives and scope.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature relevant to the study's focus on CSR communication, credibility, trust, and corporate accountability. It examines the theoretical foundations that explain how CSR messages are framed and how stakeholders interpret them. The chapter also reviews empirical studies that address CSR communication practices in both global and Ghanaian contexts. In addition, key concepts underlying CSR, communication framing, authenticity, and trust are discussed to situate the study within established scholarly work. The review provides a foundation for the conceptual framework and demonstrates how existing knowledge informed the research design and analytical approach.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Framing Theory

Framing Theory emerged from the works of Erving Goffman (1974), who introduced the concept of frames as interpretive schemas guiding how individuals perceive and communicate about social realities. Later, scholars such as Entman (1993), Tuchman (1978), and Gitlin (1980) expanded it within media and communication studies, arguing that framing influences how issues are presented and understood. It rests on the assumption that media and communicators shape meaning through selection and emphasis, thus structuring reality in ways that guide public perception (Scheufele, 1999). The theory highlights key concepts such as frame building, frame setting, and audience interpretation. These mechanisms underscore how

journalists and communicators use language and symbols to construct narratives that shape audience understanding. The purpose of Framing Theory is to explain how the presentation of information can affect public opinion, policymaking, and behavior across various contexts, including politics, marketing, and public relations (Entman, 2004).

Scholars praise the theory for its capacity to connect cognitive processes with media effects. It bridges sociological and psychological dimensions by explaining both how messages are constructed and how they are interpreted (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The model's flexibility allows application to issues from news reporting to strategic communication. However, critics point to conceptual ambiguity and inconsistent definitions as limitations (Reese, 2007). D'Angelo (2002) argues that the absence of a unified operational framework weakens its empirical validity. Furthermore, critics such as Carragee and Roefs (2004) note that framing research often neglects power dynamics and ideological influences that shape frame construction. Others, like Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2016), suggest that the theory sometimes overlaps with agenda-setting, blurring theoretical boundaries. Despite these criticisms, Framing Theory remains central to communication research because it provides a structured lens for examining how meaning is produced, contested, and circulated in mediated discourse.

2.2.2 Source Credibility Theory

Source Credibility Theory originated from the work of Hovland and Weiss (1951), who studied persuasion during World War II and established that message acceptance depends on the perceived credibility of the communicator. The theory's early focus was on the dimensions of expertise and trustworthiness, later expanded by McCroskey and Teven (1999) to include goodwill as a third element. These dimensions determine how audiences judge message

validity and reliability. The major assumption is that credible sources are more persuasive, leading audiences to adopt attitudes or behaviors aligned with the communicator's message. This principle has been widely applied in advertising, public relations, health communication, and political messaging (Ohanian, 1990; Pornpitakpan, 2004). The theory's purpose is to explain the conditions under which message effectiveness depends on source attributes, especially in contexts where audiences have limited direct knowledge of the subject matter.

Supporters highlight the theory's strength in providing measurable constructs for assessing communication effectiveness (Kelman & Hovland, 1953). It offers a predictive model linking communicator attributes to attitude change, enhancing understanding of persuasion dynamics. Yet critics such as McGuire (1985) and Petty and Cacioppo (1986) argue that credibility effects are often transient, influenced by audience involvement and situational context. More recent studies (Tseng & Fogg, 1999; Erdogan, 1999) reveal that credibility perceptions evolve with digital environments, where social media influencers, for example, derive authority from authenticity rather than institutional expertise. Critics also note that cultural variations challenge the universality of credibility dimensions (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Despite such limitations, Source Credibility Theory continues to serve as a foundational framework for understanding persuasion in both traditional and digital communication settings.

2.2.3 Relation to the Study

The theories provide critical interpretive foundations for understanding how CSR communication influences stakeholder perception and trust. Both theories illuminate how meaning is constructed and how message believability shapes audience interpretation within the context of public relations practice. First, the Framing Theory aligns directly with the objective of exploring how CSR messages are crafted to shape public understanding. It

underscores the idea that the selection and presentation of information influence what stakeholders perceive as important or authentic. This theoretical lens helps explain how corporations organise narratives around social responsibility, deciding what to emphasise and what to exclude. In the context of the FMCG sector, such framing determines whether stakeholders interpret CSR messages as genuine expressions of social commitment or as promotional rhetoric.

Additionally, Source Credibility Theory corresponds with the objectives concerned with evaluating perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and trust. The theory emphasises that message acceptance depends on the perceived trustworthiness and expertise of the communicator. It therefore provides a logical framework for examining how public relations practitioners, acting as corporate spokespersons, establish legitimacy through transparent and consistent messaging. This link allows for systematic analysis of how credibility, once achieved or lost, affects stakeholder trust and corporate accountability.

Together, these theories offer a coherent conceptual basis for interpreting the dynamics between message framing and stakeholder judgment. While Framing Theory explains how meaning is constructed through selective emphasis, Source Credibility Theory clarifies how the perceived reliability of the source determines message reception. Their complementarity lies in connecting communication construction with audience evaluation, thereby offering a comprehensive explanation of CSR communication processes.

In the Ghanaian FMCG context, where public scrutiny of corporate motives is increasing, these theories are particularly relevant. They facilitate an analytical approach to understanding how strategic message design and perceived source reliability jointly shape attitudes toward corporate responsibility. Their application enables the study to move beyond descriptive

analysis of CSR activities to interrogate the deeper communicative mechanisms that build or erode stakeholder trust.

2.3 Conceptual Review

2.3.1 Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) represents an organisation's commitment to act ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life for employees, local communities, and society (Carroll, 1999). The concept evolved from early philanthropic traditions to a strategic management approach integrated into corporate operations. Carroll's (1991) four-part model, thus, economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities remains foundational, highlighting that businesses must first be profitable before fulfilling their ethical and social obligations. Porter and Kramer (2006) extended this by linking CSR to shared value creation, where societal progress complements corporate competitiveness. Contemporary interpretations view CSR as a multidimensional construct that reflects accountability, transparency, and sustainability (Matten & Moon, 2008; Dahlsrud, 2008). Critics such as Friedman (1970) argue that social responsibility distracts from a firm's profit motive, while Banerjee (2008) cautions that CSR can become a corporate branding exercise devoid of substantive societal change. Despite divergent views, scholars such as Carroll and Brown (2018) maintain that CSR enhances legitimacy and trust, aligning corporate interests with societal well-being. The discourse, therefore, has shifted from philanthropy to responsibility embedded in governance and stakeholder relationships (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Visser, 2010).

2.3.2 CSR Communication

CSR communication involves the transmission of messages that inform stakeholders about a company's ethical initiatives, environmental actions, and community engagement (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). It serves as both a relational and reputational mechanism, shaping perceptions of corporate sincerity and accountability. Theoretical models emphasise dialogue, transparency, and consistency between actions and messages (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Through media releases, social media, sustainability reports, and direct engagement, organisations seek to manage stakeholder interpretations and expectations (Podnar, 2008). The credibility of CSR communication depends on authenticity and the perceived fit between the firm's core operations and its social initiatives (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). Overly promotional messages risk scepticism and accusations of greenwashing (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen (2008) propose a stakeholder involvement model, suggesting that communication should be two-way, co-created, and reflective of shared values. Recent research underscores that strategic CSR communication enhances trust, loyalty, and brand equity when stakeholders perceive actions as genuine and long-term (Golob et al., 2013; Capriotti, 2011). Ultimately, effective CSR communication transforms passive information dissemination into participatory engagement that strengthens corporate legitimacy and social capital.

2.3.3 Framing of CSR Messages

Framing in corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication represents a strategic process where organisations shape how stakeholders interpret CSR activities through selected cues, symbols, and linguistic constructions. Originating from Goffman's (1974) sociological conception, framing guides perception by emphasising specific aspects of information while

omitting others, thereby influencing public understanding and evaluation of CSR initiatives. Entman (1993) described framing as the process of selecting and highlighting elements of perceived reality to promote particular problem definitions, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. Within CSR, framing thus operates as a communicative lens that defines corporate intent, legitimises actions, and strengthens alignment between corporate values and societal expectations (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Ihlen, 2021).

Empirical research indicates that the framing of CSR messages significantly determines stakeholder reception and behavioural responses. Positive framing, such as highlighting shared value or sustainability, tends to enhance organisational legitimacy and stakeholder goodwill (Chaudhri, 2016; Golob et al., 2023). In contrast, defensive or self-promotional framing may lead to scepticism, particularly when stakeholders perceive exaggeration or misrepresentation of social impact (Elving, 2013; Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Strategic framing also extends to emotional and moral dimensions, where companies may emphasise empathy, responsibility, or community impact to evoke affective engagement (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). Studies further show that cultural contexts shape framing efficacy, as message resonance often depends on the congruence between CSR frames and local socio-cultural values (Zhao, 2020; Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

The integration of digital media has expanded the dynamics of CSR framing. Social platforms enable organisations to experiment with dialogic and participatory frames that foster interactive engagement rather than unilateral dissemination (Kent & Taylor, 2016; Etter et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the overreliance on marketing-oriented frames risks undermining authenticity and may intensify public distrust (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012; Illia et al., 2022). The framing of CSR communication must therefore balance persuasion and transparency. Effective CSR framing thus relies on consistency, cultural sensitivity, and stakeholder involvement to sustain trust and credibility over time.

2.3.4 Credibility and Authenticity of CSR Communication

Credibility and authenticity constitute the foundation of effective CSR communication. Credibility concerns the perceived truthfulness, reliability, and expertise of the communicator (Hovland & Weiss, 1951), while authenticity pertains to the perceived alignment between organisational values and CSR actions (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). The convergence of these constructs determines whether stakeholders accept CSR narratives as genuine or dismiss them as symbolic gestures. Research underscores that CSR credibility arises when messages are consistent with corporate history, stakeholder expectations, and verifiable outcomes (Du et al., 2010; Elving, 2013). Authenticity, on the other hand, derives from perceived sincerity and congruence between words and deeds (Pomering & Johnson, 2009; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005).

Several studies reveal that stakeholders increasingly differentiate between substantive CSR and performative efforts. Greenwashing and impression management practices have been shown to erode public trust, particularly when corporate claims lack tangible evidence of impact (Walker & Wan, 2012; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). The credibility of CSR communication improves when organisations provide measurable indicators, third-party validations, and transparent reporting (Kim & Ferguson, 2019; Etter et al., 2019). Such evidence-based communication enables stakeholders to evaluate authenticity and fosters long-term relational trust (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009). Furthermore, the source of CSR messages significantly affects perceived credibility; messages delivered by independent or external actors often carry greater weight than those communicated directly by corporate entities (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Du et al., 2010).

Digitalisation has intensified scrutiny of CSR claims, as online audiences rapidly detect inconsistencies or ethical contradictions (Etter et al., 2019; Illia et al., 2022). To counter

scepticism, scholars recommend transparent storytelling and participatory engagement as mechanisms to enhance credibility (Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Pompper, 2021). Authentic CSR communication must therefore exhibit coherence between intent and impact, consistency across platforms, and responsiveness to stakeholder concerns (Podnar, 2021; Chaudhri, 2016). By aligning authentic narratives with credible data, CSR communication can reinforce organisational reputation and strengthen the moral legitimacy of corporate action.

2.3.5 CSR Communication, Trust, and Corporate Accountability

Trust and corporate accountability represent the moral and relational dimensions underpinning CSR communication. Trust arises when stakeholders believe that an organisation's CSR activities are motivated by integrity and benevolence rather than self-interest (Mayer et al., 1995; Colleoni, 2013). Accountability, meanwhile, entails a commitment to ethical transparency, disclosure, and responsibility for outcomes (Christensen et al., 2020). Both elements intersect through CSR communication, which serves as the medium through which companies demonstrate reliability, responsiveness, and commitment to societal welfare (Golob et al., 2023; Podnar, 2021). The establishment of trust depends on communicative consistency, responsiveness to stakeholder feedback, and evidence of sustained CSR practice (Du et al., 2010; Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

Academic literature consistently demonstrates that transparent CSR communication fosters both cognitive and affective trust. Stakeholders tend to trust firms that provide accessible, verifiable, and balanced information rather than selectively highlighting achievements (Moreno & Capriotti, 2009; Pompper, 2021). Accountability mechanisms, including social reporting, audits, and stakeholder dialogues, enhance perceived integrity and reinforce the legitimacy of CSR claims (Christensen et al., 2020; Illia et al., 2022). Conversely, Coombs and

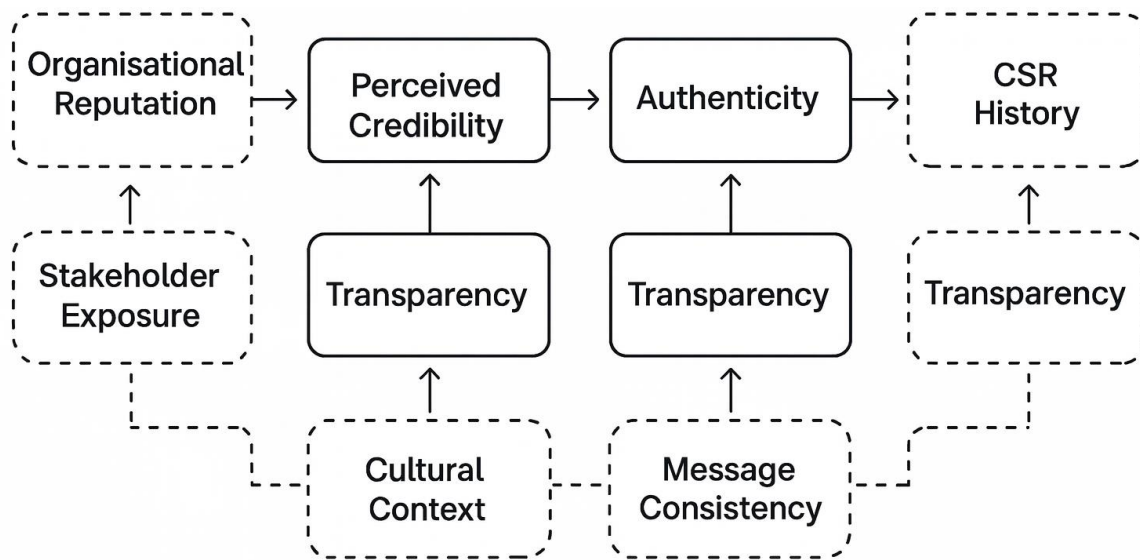
Holladay (2015) intimate that failure to disclose CSR shortcomings can diminish credibility and provoke reputational damage. Corporate accountability thus functions not only as a moral obligation but also as a communicative strategy that sustains stakeholder relationships over time (Ihlen, 2021; Kent & Taylor, 2016).

The interaction between trust and accountability extends into digital CSR communication, where social media platforms create opportunities for continuous dialogue but also expose inconsistencies (Etter et al., 2019; Zhao, 2020). Firms that engage in open exchanges, address criticism promptly, and share verifiable results cultivate durable trust (Kim & Ferguson, 2019; Golob et al., 2023). This approach positions CSR communication as a dynamic process that links ethical responsibility to communicative transparency and institutional legitimacy. Ultimately, CSR communication that integrates trust-building and accountability frameworks reinforces social contracts between corporations and stakeholders, establishing enduring legitimacy in the broader context of ethical corporate governance.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a framework titled “*The Credibility–Framing–Trust Pathway*” (see Figure 2.1), which illustrates how strategic CSR communication influences stakeholder perceptions of authenticity, trust, and corporate accountability. The framework integrates key insights from *Framing Theory* and *Source Credibility Theory*, combining message design and communicator credibility to explain how meaning is constructed and received in public relations practice. It proposes that the way CSR messages are framed and the degree of credibility attached to their source jointly determine how stakeholders form judgments about a company’s social responsibility claims. Through this connection, the framework bridges the process of message creation with the outcome of stakeholder trust, highlighting communication as both a persuasive and relational tool in corporate–public interaction.

Figure 2.1: The Credibility–Framing–Trust Pathway



Source: Author’s Own Construct (2025)

At the heart of the framework lies the assumption that *framing* operates as the starting point of strategic CSR communication. Drawing from Goffman (1974) and Entman (1993), framing refers to the selective emphasis of certain elements within a message to shape audience interpretation. In CSR communication, framing allows organisations to highlight specific moral, philanthropic, or environmental concerns that reflect their corporate identity. When these frames resonate with stakeholder values, they enhance understanding and emotional connection. Conversely, misaligned or self-promotional frames may evoke scepticism and diminish perceived sincerity. Thus, the framework positions message framing as the initial determinant of how audiences make sense of CSR narratives and evaluate organisational intent.

The next element of the framework focuses on *source credibility*, which operates as the mediating mechanism linking message construction to audience perception. Rooted in the work of Hovland and Weiss (1951), credibility encompasses the communicator’s perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and goodwill. In CSR communication, credibility extends beyond the spokesperson to include the organisation itself, its reputation, transparency, and track record

in delivering social impact. The framework therefore assumes that when CSR messages come from credible sources, they are more likely to be interpreted as authentic. Conversely, weak credibility can distort even well-crafted messages, reducing their influence and reinforcing public doubts about corporate motives.

The mediating construct of *authenticity* reinforces this relationship. Authenticity is presented as the perceived alignment between what a company says and what it does (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). It reflects stakeholder assessment of whether CSR initiatives are genuinely driven by social concern or by image management. Within the framework, authenticity bridges message framing and trust formation by filtering stakeholder interpretation through perceived sincerity and value congruence. When CSR communication is transparent, consistent, and verifiable, it strengthens authenticity, which in turn reinforces credibility.

These processes converge on the outcomes of *trust* and *corporate accountability*, which constitute the dependent variables of the study. Trust arises when stakeholders believe that a company's actions are guided by integrity and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995), while accountability refers to the organisation's willingness to disclose and justify its CSR decisions (Christensen et al., 2020). The framework assumes that credible and authentically framed CSR messages cultivate both relational and moral trust, which strengthen perceptions of accountability. In essence, stakeholders do not merely respond to what organisations say, but to how consistently communication reflects action and ethical commitment.

Figure 2.1 visually depicts the *Credibility–Framing–Trust Pathway*, showing directional arrows from *CSR Message Framing* (independent variable) to *Perceived Credibility and Authenticity* (mediating variables), and finally to *Stakeholder Trust and Corporate Accountability* (dependent variables). The framework also recognises that contextual factors—

such as prior stakeholder exposure and organisational reputation—may influence the strength of these relationships, though they are not tested directly.

Overall, this conceptual framework functions as both a theoretical and analytical guide for the study. It connects abstract principles from communication theory with empirical realities within Ghana's FMCG industry, particularly the bottled water and beverage sub-sector. It shows that CSR communication is not merely an act of information dissemination but a strategic process where framing and credibility intersect to produce trust and transparency. The framework therefore provides a coherent pathway through which the study examines how public relations practitioners design CSR messages that move beyond publicity to build enduring legitimacy and accountability among stakeholders.

2.5 Chapter Summary

The chapter provided a comprehensive review of literature and theoretical foundations guiding the study. It examined the framing of CSR communication, the role of credibility and authenticity in message reception, and the relationship between CSR communication and stakeholder trust. Through the application of Framing Theory and Source Credibility Theory, the review established how message construction and communicator reliability jointly shape audience interpretation and trust formation. The conceptual framework developed from this review outlined the expected relationships between the study variables. Overall, the chapter created a foundation for the subsequent methodological approach by identifying the empirical and theoretical gaps that the research seeks to address.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological procedures adopted to achieve the research objectives. It presents the research design, population, sampling methods, data collection instruments, and analytical techniques employed in the study. The approach is guided by the need to ensure validity, reliability, and replicability. The methodological choices are justified in relation to the study's objectives.

3.2 Research Approach

A research approach represents the overall strategy that integrates the assumptions, data collection, and analytical procedures guiding a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It determines whether the investigation is rooted in qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method logic, depending on the nature of the research problem. Quantitative research is grounded in the positivist paradigm, which emphasises measurement, objectivity, and the testing of hypotheses through numerical data (Bryman, 2016). This approach allows the researcher to describe, explain, and predict relationships among variables using statistical techniques. As Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) explain, a quantitative approach seeks to uncover patterns that can be generalised to larger populations by systematically gathering data that can be quantified and compared. In communication research, it is particularly valuable for identifying trends and testing theoretical relationships such as those between message framing, credibility, and trust.

In contrast, qualitative approaches aim to explore meanings and experiences in depth, while mixed-method designs combine both paradigms to enhance interpretive richness and

robustness (Saunders et al., 2019). The quantitative approach was deemed appropriate for this study because it aligns with the objective of examining measurable relationships among key constructs derived from Framing Theory and Source Credibility Theory. It facilitates empirical testing of how CSR message framing influences stakeholder perceptions of authenticity, credibility, and trust within the FMCG sector. Through the use of standardised instruments and statistical analysis, the quantitative approach ensures that results are reliable, replicable, and objectively derived from observable data.

Overall, the quantitative approach was chosen because the study seeks to assess relationships among defined variables rather than explore subjective experiences. Given the focus on determining the extent to which CSR communication framing influences stakeholder trust and corporate accountability, quantifiable indicators are essential. The approach enables statistical analysis and hypothesis testing, ensuring empirical evidence that supports generalisation across stakeholder groups.

3.2.1 Research Design

A research design provides the structural framework that connects the research problem to data collection and analysis procedures (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). It defines the blueprint for how empirical evidence will be gathered and interpreted to answer the research questions. Among the several types of designs, the *survey design* is most suitable when the objective is to describe characteristics of a population, measure variables, and test theoretical relationships (Saunders et al., 2019). A survey involves collecting data from a sample that represents a larger population, typically through questionnaires or structured interviews (Fink, 2017). In communication and public relations research, the survey design is useful for examining

attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours of stakeholders toward organisational practices such as CSR communication.

Surveys may be cross-sectional or longitudinal depending on whether data are collected at one point in time or over an extended period. A cross-sectional design, which gathers data from respondents simultaneously, is particularly efficient for identifying correlations among variables without manipulating them (Babbie, 2020). The design allows for statistical description of how framing, credibility, and trust coexist within stakeholder perceptions of CSR communication. It is also cost-effective, flexible, and suited to large populations such as consumers and employees in the FMCG industry. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), survey designs are most effective when the researcher seeks to generalise findings to a population and verify theoretical propositions through numerical data.

3.3 Population of the Study

According to Bryman (2016), the population represents the entire group to which a researcher intends to generalise the findings, while a sample is a subset selected from that population to facilitate practical data collection and analysis. Defining the population in these terms provided clarity on the target respondents and ensured that all major stakeholder perspectives relevant to CSR communication were captured. That said, the population of this study comprised individuals who interact directly or indirectly with the CSR initiatives of leading bottled water and beverage brands within FMCG sector, specifically Awake Purified Water and Verna Mineral Water. The population included consumers, distributors, marketers, and advocacy actors who have observed or benefited from these companies' CSR interventions.

3.4 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A stratified purposive sampling technique was adopted for this study. Stratification was applied to categorise the population into four key stakeholder groups. This method allowed for

balanced representation of diverse perspectives while ensuring that each subgroup was adequately included in the data collection process (Saunders et al., 2019). Within each stratum, purposive sampling was employed to select individuals with direct experience or awareness of CSR communication practices implemented by Awake or Verna. This approach was appropriate for a study seeking informed insights from participants familiar with CSR campaigns and their communicative effects (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

The determination of sample size followed the Yamane (1967) formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

where n is the sample size, N is the estimated population, and e represents the margin of error. Given the scale of the stakeholder network, a confidence level of 95% and a 5% margin of error were adopted. However, due to practical considerations such as time and resource constraints, the final sample size was set at 250 respondents. This number provided an adequate representation for quantitative analysis while maintaining data manageability (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The sample was distributed proportionally across the stakeholder groups to ensure analytical balance and reduce potential sampling bias.

The rationale for adopting stratified purposive sampling stemmed from the heterogeneous nature of the study population and the need to capture variations in CSR perception among different stakeholder types. Consumers reflected the external audience whose trust and purchase intentions are influenced by CSR messages. Employees provided insights into the internal alignment of CSR narratives with corporate values. Distributors contributed to understanding the reputational and commercial dimensions of CSR communication, while community members provided grounded evaluations of CSR impact and accountability. This sampling structure enhanced both the validity and representativeness of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Bryman, 2016).

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

The study employed a structured questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. This approach was appropriate for capturing measurable insights on how CSR communication framing influences stakeholder perceptions of credibility, authenticity, trust, and accountability within the FMCG sector. The instrument was designed to operationalise key constructs derived from the study's theoretical foundations (Framing Theory and Source Credibility Theory) ensuring that each section corresponded with a specific research objective.

The questionnaire was divided into four major sections. The first section gathered demographic information, including age, gender, stakeholder role, level of education, and exposure to CSR campaigns. These variables were essential for describing the sample and analysing group-based differences in perception patterns.

The second section focused on CSR message framing. Items in this section assessed how respondents interpreted the structure, emphasis, and focus of corporate CSR messages. Statements captured aspects such as moral, environmental, and philanthropic framing, reflecting the constructs derived from Framing Theory. Responses were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The third section examined perceptions of message credibility and authenticity, grounded in Source Credibility Theory. Items evaluated the extent to which respondents viewed corporate communicators as trustworthy, knowledgeable, and sincere in their CSR messaging. This section linked directly to the objective of determining how stakeholders perceive the credibility and authenticity of CSR communication.

The fourth section addressed trust and corporate accountability. Items measured stakeholder confidence in the company's CSR commitments and the degree to which CSR actions were perceived as transparent and responsible. These questions connected to the final objective of

assessing the influence of CSR communication on stakeholder trust and perceptions of accountability.

Each questionnaire item was carefully worded to reflect theoretical constructs and empirical indicators established in previous CSR communication research. The use of a Likert-type scale allowed for the quantification of attitudes and facilitated statistical analysis of relationships among framing, credibility, and trust. The structured format ensured consistency, comparability, and efficient data processing across all respondent categories.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

The study ensured validity and reliability through rigorous instrument design and testing procedures. To establish content validity, the questionnaire was subjected to expert review by academics in communication and public relations, as well as practitioners familiar with CSR communication. Their feedback guided revisions to ensure that each item accurately reflected the study's objectives and theoretical constructs. Ambiguities were corrected, and questions were refined to enhance clarity and relevance.

A pilot test was subsequently conducted among a small group of respondents who were not part of the main sample. The pre-test assessed question comprehension, flow, and consistency of responses. Findings from this stage informed adjustments that improved the instrument's precision and usability. Additionally, reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to determine internal consistency among related items. The test measured the degree to which responses to different items within the same construct were correlated. A Cronbach's alpha value of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable, indicating strong internal reliability. These procedures ensured that the data collection instrument generated dependable and valid results aligned with the research objectives.

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data was gathered through a hybrid survey strategy to maximise coverage of key stakeholder groups within the FMCG bottled water and beverage sub-sector. An online questionnaire was administered using a secure form platform to reach consumers, distributors, marketers, and advocacy actors with reliable internet access. A parallel paper-based version was distributed at selected retail outlets, community centres, and distribution hubs to capture stakeholders with limited digital access. This dual pathway ensured inclusivity and reduced selection bias (Dillman et al., 2014).

Instrument administration followed a standardised sequence to maintain procedural consistency. Enumerators received training on item wording, skip patterns, and ethical protocols. Screening questions confirmed stakeholder category and eligibility. A brief preamble explained study purpose, estimated completion time, and contact details for queries. Each session began with informed consent, after which participants proceeded to the main sections on CSR framing, credibility and authenticity, trust, and accountability. Average completion time remained within 12–15 minutes to limit respondent fatigue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Also, ethical safeguards were applied at every stage. Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to fieldwork. Participation remained voluntary without incentives that might unduly influence decisions. Consent forms highlighted the right to decline any item or withdraw without consequence. No personal identifiers were recorded; responses were coded and stored on password-protected drives with limited access. Completed paper questionnaires were sealed daily, transported in locked folders, and digitised within forty-eight hours. All data handling complied with institutional policies on confidentiality and data protection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Quality control procedures strengthened data integrity. Real-time checks flagged incomplete submissions online. Paper forms underwent double entry to reduce transcription errors. Daily debriefs with enumerators addressed ambiguous items and contextual challenges observed in the field. A rolling review of response distributions enabled early detection of patterned responding and straight-lining. These safeguards improved completeness and reliability prior to analysis.

3.8 Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis used IBM SPSS Statistics for data cleaning, coding, and inferential testing. Initial routines examined missingness, outliers, and normality. Categorical variables were recoded to consistent formats. Composite indices were computed for framing, credibility, authenticity, trust, and accountability after confirming internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha. Assumption testing covered multicollinearity, linearity, and homoscedasticity to ensure model adequacy (Field, 2018).

Descriptive statistics addressed the objective on how CSR messages are framed (RO1). Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarised the prevalence and intensity of identified frames across stakeholder categories. Cross-tabulations compared frame salience by demographic and role characteristics. Where appropriate, exploratory factor analysis assessed the underlying structure of framing indicators to support construct validity and parsimony (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019).

Bivariate correlation addressed the objective on perceptions of credibility and authenticity (RO2). Pearson's r quantified associations between framing indices and perceived credibility and authenticity. Confidence intervals and effect sizes provided interpretive depth beyond p -values. Where non-normality persisted, robustness checks used Spearman's ρ . These steps established the directional tendencies needed for subsequent modelling (Field, 2018).

Multiple regression addressed the objective on the influence of CSR communication on trust and accountability (RO3). Hierarchical models entered framing variables first, followed by credibility and authenticity as potential mediating channels. Controls such as age, gender, stakeholder role, and exposure to brand communications were included where theoretically justified. Model diagnostics examined residual behaviour and variance inflation. Standardised coefficients, partial R^2 , and incremental F-tests supported interpretation of practical significance (Hair et al., 2019).

Alignment with research objectives was explicit. RO1 relied on descriptive statistics and factor-analytic checks to characterise framing patterns. RO2 relied on correlation analysis to evaluate linkages between framing and perceived credibility and authenticity. RO3 relied on regression modelling to estimate the predictive contribution of framing, credibility, and authenticity to trust and accountability while adjusting for relevant covariates. This sequence moved from description to association and then to prediction in a coherent analytic pathway (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2019).

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were integrated throughout the research process to ensure credibility and respect for participants. Approval was obtained from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Informed consent forms were distributed and signed before any data were collected. To preserve confidentiality, no identifying information such as names or organisations was recorded, and all responses were coded for anonymity. Data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. The research avoided any form of coercion, bias, or misrepresentation, and participants were assured that findings would be used solely for

academic purposes. Ethical compliance therefore enhanced trustworthiness and safeguarded the integrity of the study.

3.10 Chapter Summary

The chapter detailed the research methodology designed to address the objectives of the study. It described the research design, population, sampling strategy, data collection tools, and analysis procedures. Ethical protocols were also outlined to ensure data integrity and participant protection. The methodological framework positions the study to generate credible, evidence-based insights into how CSR communication framing and source credibility shape stakeholder trust and perceptions of authenticity within the Ghanaian FMCG industry.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of data collected for the study. The objective is to assess how CSR communication is framed and how it influences stakeholder perceptions of credibility, authenticity, trust, and accountability. The chapter begins with response rate reporting and data screening. It then presents respondent demographics. Analysis based on the research objectives follows. The chapter concludes with a discussion of key findings.

4.1.1 Response Rate and Data Screening

A total of 280 questionnaires were administered, of which 258 were returned, and 250 were retained after screening for completeness and consistency, yielding a response rate of 89.3 percent that was sufficient for quantitative analysis. Eight questionnaires were excluded due to incomplete data, while none were discarded for patterned answering. Missing values were minimal and did not exceed five percent on any item, and listwise deletion was applied where required. Data were verified for accuracy through checks on coding and recoding of reverse-scored items, after which preliminary examination confirmed the absence of extreme outliers and acceptable distribution patterns, indicating the dataset was suitable for statistical analysis.

4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

This section presents the background profile of respondents. The information is based on Section A of the questionnaire. As depicted in Table 4.1, the data provides context for the analysis that follows.

Table 4.1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	147	58.8
	Female	103	41.2
Age Group	18–25	64	25.6
	26–35	92	36.8
	36–45	61	24.4
	46 and above	33	13.2
Education	SHS	52	20.8
	Diploma	61	24.4
	Degree	92	36.8
	Master’s	38	15.2
	PhD	7	2.8
Stakeholder Role	Consumer	98	39.2
	Employee	54	21.6
	Distributor	38	15.2
	Community Member	42	16.8
	NGO/Advocacy Actor	18	7.2
Brand Familiarity	Awake Water	97	38.8
	Verna Water	88	35.2
	Both	65	26
CSR Exposure	Occasionally	86	34.4
	Often	108	43.2
	Very Often	56	22.4

Source: Field Survey (2025)

4.2.1 Gender Distribution

Male respondents constituted the majority of the sample at 58.8 percent, while female respondents accounted for 41.2 percent. This distribution suggests stronger male representation

within commercial and distribution roles in the FMCG sector, where physical distribution and sales networks are typically male-dominated. At the same time, the substantial proportion of female participants strengthens analytical balance and reflects their growing involvement in marketing, retail, and consumer decision-making. The presence of both groups in meaningful proportions enhances the reliability of perception-based analysis and reduces single-category bias.

4.2.2 Age Distribution

Respondents aged 26–35 constituted the largest group at 36.8 percent. This was followed by those aged 18–25 at 25.6 percent. Participants between 36 and 45 accounted for 24.4 percent, while those aged 46 and above formed 13.2 percent. The pattern indicates a youthful and economically active sample. This group is more exposed to media platforms and corporate messaging. Their responses therefore offer relevant insights into CSR interpretation.

4.2.3 Educational Level

Degree holders formed the largest category at 36.8 percent. Diploma holders followed at 24.4 percent. Senior High School graduates made up 20.8 percent. Respondents with postgraduate education formed 18 percent combined. This indicates a generally literate sample. Respondents were likely capable of making informed judgements about corporate messaging. Education level therefore strengthens response quality and interpretive credibility.

4.2.4 Stakeholder Category

Consumers represented the largest group at 39.2 percent. Employees followed at 21.6 percent. Community members represented 16.8 percent, while distributors accounted for 15.2 percent. Advocacy groups formed the smallest category at 7.2 percent. The distribution shows dominance of market-facing stakeholders. However, internal and community voices were sufficiently captured. This structure supports comparative understanding of trust formation.

4.2.5 Brand Familiarity

Respondents familiar with Awake Purified Water formed 38.8 percent. Verna Mineral Water accounted for 35.2 percent. Those familiar with both brands represented 26 percent. This indicates balanced brand visibility. It also supports fair comparison across firms. Familiarity suggests exposure to CSR campaigns rather than speculative judgment.

4.2.6 Exposure to CSR Communication

Participants who reported frequent exposure ('often' and 'very often') formed 65.6 percent of the sample. Occasional exposure accounted for 34.4 percent. This suggests high campaign visibility. Frequent exposure improves recall accuracy. It also increases confidence in perception-based analysis.

4.3 Analysis Based on Research Objectives

This section presents empirical findings in line with the research objectives. The analysis follows the structure of the questionnaire and is grounded in Framing Theory and Source Credibility Theory as outlined in Chapters Two and Three.

4.3.1 RO1: How CSR Messages Are Framed

The first objective sought to examine how CSR messages are framed within the bottled water and beverage sub-sector of Ghana's FMCG industry. Section B of the questionnaire measured the extent to which respondents perceived community, environmental, moral, emotional, shared value, and self-promotional frames in corporate CSR communication.

Framing Theory argues that communicators shape meaning through selection and emphasis. Frames guide audiences toward particular interpretations by drawing attention to some elements of reality while downplaying others (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). In CSR communication, this means that how companies talk about their interventions is as important as what they actually do (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). The results in this section therefore show the dominant frames that stakeholders recognise in the CSR narratives of Awake Purified Water and Verna Mineral Water.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics on CSR Message Framing

Item	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	CSR messages emphasise community development	4.12	0.73
2	CSR messages highlight environmental responsibility	3.98	0.81
3	CSR messages show moral responsibility	3.89	0.85
4	CSR messages focus on shared value creation	3.76	0.9
5	CSR communication is more about promotion than impact (R)	2.31	1.01
6	CSR messages appeal to emotion	4.05	0.77

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The results in Table 4.2 show that community development is the most prominent frame in CSR communication (M = 4.12, SD = 0.73). Respondents largely agree that CSR messages from these brands emphasise support for communities. This confirms the philanthropic orientation of CSR practice in Ghana, where firms often highlight donations to health, education, and local infrastructure (Abugre & Nyuur, 2015; Fusheini & Salia, 2021). In framing

terms, companies appear to present themselves as community partners whose CSR identity is built around local welfare. Such emphasis can position the organisation as socially embedded and caring, which is a strategic way to cultivate goodwill and legitimacy (Carroll & Brown, 2018).

Building on the community frame, environmental responsibility also scores highly ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.81$). Respondents perceive that CSR communication frequently mentions environmental issues, such as plastic waste, water protection, or sustainability. This pattern aligns with global CSR communication trends, where environmental discourse is central to corporate narratives (Castillo-Abdul et al., 2024). However, the presence of environmental framing alone does not guarantee that actions match claims. Scholars warn that strong environmental language without demonstrable performance may slide into greenwashing (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015; Forliano et al., 2025). Thus, while environmental emphasis suggests awareness of sustainability expectations, it also raises the need for transparency and verifiable evidence.

The moral responsibility frame records a mean of 3.89 ($SD = 0.85$), indicating that respondents generally believe CSR messages present corporate action as an ethical obligation. This implies that companies try to frame CSR as the “right thing to do,” not only as a strategic advantage. Such moral framing is consistent with Entman’s (1993) argument that frames assign moral evaluation to issues. It also fits broader CSR literature that positions responsibility as a matter of corporate integrity rather than optional charity (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). By framing CSR in moral terms, communicators seek to align corporate identity with societal values, which can strengthen the basis for trust if stakeholders see actions that match the claims.

The results further show a moderate level of shared value framing ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.90$). Respondents somewhat agree that CSR messages describe benefits for both company and

society. This suggests that while brands communicate some link between CSR and business objectives, this link is not as dominant as community or moral framing. Porter and Kramer (2006) propose that shared value framing is important because it connects CSR to core strategy rather than peripheral philanthropy. The moderate mean here may indicate that firms still present CSR more as giving back than as integrated strategy. This has implications for how stakeholders understand long-term corporate commitment to responsibility.

The reverse-coded item on self-promotion ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.01$) is particularly revealing. Lower scores indicate that respondents generally disagree that CSR communication is mainly about showcasing company achievements rather than real impact. In other words, stakeholders do not strongly perceive these CSR messages as purely promotional. This finding is important in the Ghanaian context, where some studies have raised concerns about symbolic CSR and impression management (Amo-Mensah, 2022; Tandoh & Duffour, 2023). In this sample, however, stakeholders appear to grant companies some benefit of the doubt. They may see the messages as sincere attempts at social contribution, although this perception remains subject to how consistent communication is with observable outcomes.

Emotional framing also emerges as a strong feature ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.77$). Respondents agree that CSR messages appeal to feelings such as empathy, hope, or compassion. Emotional storytelling is a recognised strategy in CSR communication, as it can make abstract issues more relatable and engaging (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). From a framing perspective, emotional cues help simplify complex social problems and invite audiences to respond affectively rather than only analytically (Chaudhri, 2016). Nonetheless, scholars caution that emotional appeal must be balanced with factual disclosure. If emotional stories are not supported by credible evidence of impact, they can trigger scepticism, especially in an era of heightened public scrutiny (Elving, 2013; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012).

The data here corresponds with Framing Theory's view that communicators actively construct reality by highlighting certain aspects and omitting others (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). In this study, the frames selected by organisations seem designed to project sincerity, benevolence, and social integration. However, the effectiveness of these frames in building trust cannot be assessed by content alone. It depends on how stakeholders evaluate the credibility and authenticity of the messages, which is the focus of the next section on perceived credibility and authenticity.

4.3.2 RO3: Stakeholder Perceptions of Credibility and Authenticity

The second objective examined how stakeholders perceive the credibility and authenticity of CSR communication within the bottled water and beverage sub-sector. This objective is central because message framing alone does not determine trust. Rather, what matters is whether stakeholders believe the message source, and whether the company's actions align with its claims (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). The Source Credibility Theory explains that persuasive impact depends on how trustworthy, knowledgeable, and well-intentioned a communicator is perceived to be (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Authenticity, in turn, reflects the extent to which CSR communication appears sincere and consistent with observable behaviour (Pomering & Johnson, 2009). Together, credibility and authenticity serve as filters through which CSR framing is judged.

(a) Descriptive Statistics on Credibility and Authenticity

Table 4.3 presents mean responses for the items measuring accuracy, transparency, verifiability, consistency, sincerity, and goodwill.

Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics on Perceived Credibility and Authenticity

Item	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
13	CSR information is accurate	3.94	0.76
14	CSR information is verifiable	3.82	0.83
15	CSR communication is consistent with past behaviour	3.71	0.89
16	Company is transparent about CSR outcomes	3.66	0.92
17	CSR claims match actual performance	3.73	0.88
18	Company engages in CSR out of genuine concern	3.79	0.85
19	CSR communicators appear trustworthy	3.96	0.72
20	CSR communication reflects goodwill	4.01	0.69

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Respondents generally rated credibility items above the scale midpoint, suggesting moderate confidence in the information shared by the companies. The highest mean score relates to goodwill (M = 4.01) and communicator trustworthiness (M = 3.96). This indicates that respondents see CSR teams as professional and well-disposed towards stakeholders. From the perspective of Source Credibility Theory, this suggests effective communicator attributes, particularly in the dimension of goodwill and trustworthiness (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). When audiences perceive communicators as caring and morally upright, message acceptance becomes more likely.

Accuracy also received a high score (M = 3.94), implying that stakeholders believe CSR information is largely truthful. Truthfulness is critical for credibility formation (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). Without perceived accuracy, CSR communication quickly loses persuasive power. However, perceived verifiability was slightly lower (M = 3.82). This suggests that while information may appear accurate, stakeholders may find it difficult to independently confirm

claims. This result is consistent with Du et al. (2010), who argue that CSR credibility is stronger when stakeholders can verify claims through external validation.

Moving from credibility to authenticity, respondents moderately agreed that CSR messages match company behaviour ($M = 3.73$) and reflect genuine concern ($M = 3.79$). These scores suggest cautious confidence. Stakeholders do not appear fully sceptical, but neither are they completely convinced. Authenticity requires consistency over time (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). When CSR actions change or messaging shifts abruptly, doubts intensify. The findings imply reasonable alignment, but also indicate that CSR claims are still evaluated critically.

Transparency recorded one of the lowest means ($M = 3.66$). This suggests that while companies may communicate successes, respondents are less convinced about openness concerning failures, limitations, or challenges. Several scholars have argued that selective disclosure undermines CSR credibility (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Illia et al., 2022). Stakeholders increasingly expect complete narratives, not only achievement-driven communication. Without such balance, CSR narratives risk being interpreted as image management rather than accountability.

Overall, Table 4.3 reveals a communication environment that is viewed as largely credible but not fully transparent. Trust exists, but it remains conditional. Authenticity is perceived, but under scrutiny. These findings suggest that stakeholders distinguish between surface believability and deep sincerity.

(b) Reliability Analysis

Before assessing relationships, internal consistency of the scales was tested using Cronbach's alpha. This test ensures that items within each construct measure the same concept.

Table 4.4: Reliability Test Results

Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Framing	6	0.82
Credibility and Authenticity	8	0.87
Trust and Accountability	7	0.85

Source: Field Survey (2025)

Table 4.4 indicates strong scale reliability. All constructs recorded alpha values above 0.80. According to Field (2018), values above 0.70 indicate acceptable consistency, while values above 0.80 reflect strong internal reliability. This confirms that the questionnaire items were coherent and reliable indicators of each construct. The high reliability supports confidence in subsequent correlation and regression analysis.

(c) Correlation Between Framing and Credibility and Authenticity

This subsection evaluates whether how CSR messages are framed is related to how credible and authentic those messages are perceived to be.

Table 4.5: Correlation Results

Variables	Pearson r	Sig. (p-value)
Framing ↔ Credibility	0.64	< 0.001
Framing ↔ Authenticity	0.59	< 0.001

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The correlation results in Table 4.5 show strong, positive, and statistically significant relationships between message framing and both credibility and authenticity. The relationship between framing and credibility ($r = 0.64$) demonstrates that as the quality and clarity of framing increase, perceptions of credibility also improve. This confirms the theoretical claim that how messages are structured shapes how believable they appear (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2007).

Likewise, the positive correlation between framing and authenticity ($r = 0.59$) suggests that better framing is associated with greater perceived sincerity. When CSR messages emphasise real community outcomes, environmental responsibility, and moral purpose, stakeholders are more likely to judge companies as genuine. This aligns with findings by Kim and Ferguson (2018), who argue that message clarity and value alignment enhance authentic perception.

The statistical significance of both relationships ($p < 0.001$) indicates that these patterns are unlikely to be due to chance. The implications are clear. CSR communication strategy is not neutral. Frames actively mediate how stakeholders evaluate corporate intent.

In all, the findings confirm that CSR credibility and authenticity are closely tied to communication structure. Corporate goodwill, professionalism, and perceived honesty matter. However, transparency remains a relative weakness. Moreover, credibility does not emerge independently of framing. Rather, presentation style and content emphasis shape how trustworthy and sincere CSR communication appears.

4.4 Discussion of Findings

4.4.1 RQ1: How Are CSR Messages Framed?

The findings show that CSR communication in Ghana's bottled water and beverage sector is dominated by community development, emotional appeal, environmental sensitivity, and moral positioning, with limited emphasis on shared value and corporate self-interest. This pattern reflects a philanthropic style of CSR communication that aligns with Ghanaian CSR traditions described by Abugre and Nyuur (2015) and Fusheini and Salia (2021). From the perspective of Framing Theory, this indicates deliberate emphasis on socially agreeable narratives to guide stakeholder interpretation toward benevolence rather than calculation (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). By privileging morality and emotion over strategy and

measurement, organisations construct an image of social embeddedness, yet this approach limits stakeholder understanding of CSR as a sustainable business model in the sense articulated by Porter and Kramer (2006). Although respondents did not strongly perceive CSR communication as self-serving, the weak presence of shared value framing suggests that responsibility is still communicated more as charity than as operational commitment, which could constrain long-term credibility.

4.4.2 RQ2: How Do Stakeholders Perceive Credibility and Authenticity?

Stakeholders generally perceive CSR communication as credible, particularly in terms of communicator trustworthiness and goodwill, yet perceptions of transparency and verification remain weaker. This reflects Source Credibility Theory's emphasis on trustworthiness as a central determinant of belief (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCroskey & Teven, 1999), but it also highlights the fragility of trust when disclosure appears selective. Authenticity is present but conditional. Respondents believe organisations care about society, but they remain cautious about the alignment between communication and action. This aligns with Becker-Olsen et al.'s (2006) argument that sincerity is tested through consistency rather than declared intent. The positive relationship between framing and credibility reinforces the view that message structure influences belief formation (Reese, 2007), yet the relatively lower transparency scores support prior warnings that CSR credibility weakens when organisations avoid balanced reporting (Illia et al., 2022; Coombs & Holladay, 2015).

4.4.3 RQ3: To What Extent Does CSR Communication Influence Trust and Accountability?

Findings show that CSR communication significantly predicts stakeholder trust and perceptions of accountability, with credibility exerting the strongest effect, followed by authenticity and framing. This confirms that trust is driven primarily by perceived reliability and integrity rather than message exposure alone, as suggested by Mayer et al. (1995). CSR communication enhanced brand trust, yet accountability outcomes were weaker, reflecting stakeholder uncertainty about disclosure completeness and responsiveness. This gap is consistent with Christensen et al.'s (2020) position that accountability emerges from openness rather than goodwill. While CSR messages contributed positively to organisational reputation, failures in transparent reporting limited deeper accountability judgements. These results also support Kent and Taylor's (2016) argument that corporate legitimacy depends on responsive communication rather than controlled narratives. CSR communication therefore functions less as symbolic messaging and more as a structure that shapes institutional trust dynamics.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined CSR communication in Ghana's bottled water and beverage sub-sector, focusing on message framing, perceived credibility and authenticity, and their influence on trust and accountability. Findings showed that CSR communication prioritises community support, moral positioning, and emotional appeal more than shared value and strategic integration. Stakeholders generally viewed CSR messages as credible and sincere, particularly in relation to communicator professionalism, although transparency and verifiability were weaker. CSR communication significantly influenced trust and accountability, with credibility exerting the strongest effect. Trust outcomes were stronger than accountability outcomes, reflecting gaps in disclosure practices. The chapter therefore establishes CSR communication

as a key driver of corporate reputation and stakeholder confidence, setting the stage for recommendations and future research in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together the findings of the study and presents conclusions based on the evidence reported from the field data. It restates the purpose of the research and outlines the implications arising from the results. The chapter also introduces recommendations for public relations practice and directions for further inquiry. The presentation follows the structure of the research questions and study objectives to ensure analytical continuity.

5.2 Summary of the Study

The study examined how CSR communication influences stakeholder trust and perceptions of accountability within Ghana's bottled water and beverage sub-sector. It focused on how CSR messages are framed by corporate communicators and how stakeholders assess credibility, authenticity, and corporate responsibility. A quantitative approach was adopted using a structured questionnaire administered to multiple stakeholder groups. Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential techniques. The study was grounded in Framing Theory and Source Credibility Theory, which guided the development of the conceptual framework and the analytical model. The research addressed three questions concerning message framing, perceived credibility and authenticity, and influence on trust and accountability.

5.3.1 RQ1: CSR Message Framing

Findings showed that CSR communication in the sector is framed mainly around community development, moral responsibility, environmental concern, and emotional appeal. Shared value

framing was present but less dominant. This indicates that CSR is communicated more as social support than as business-integrated responsibility. The results reflect a philanthropic communication orientation rather than a sustainability-focused strategy. Overt promotional framing was limited, suggesting that companies attempt to present CSR as purposeful rather than self-serving.

5.3.2 RQ2: Credibility and Authenticity

Stakeholders generally perceived CSR communication as believable and sincere, especially in relation to communicator professionalism and goodwill. However, perceptions of transparency and external verification were weaker. This indicates that trust in CSR communication is present but not unqualified. Authenticity judgments were shaped by perceived consistency between message and behaviour. Stakeholders therefore evaluated CSR communication not only by content but also by credibility of source and clarity of disclosure.

5.3.3 RQ3: Trust and Corporate Accountability

CSR communication significantly influenced stakeholder trust and perceptions of accountability. Credibility emerged as the strongest influence, followed by authenticity and message framing. CSR communication improved brand trust but had a weaker effect on accountability. This suggests that while CSR messaging strengthens confidence, it does not automatically secure perceptions of responsibility. Accountability depends more on transparency and responsiveness than on message design alone.

5.4 Conclusions

This study concludes that CSR communication within Ghana's bottled water and beverage sector operates as a strategic public relations function rather than a routine disclosure activity. The manner in which CSR messages are framed directly shapes how stakeholders interpret corporate intent. Credibility largely determines whether those messages are accepted, while authenticity sustains confidence over time. The findings confirm that CSR communication is not neutral. It is an active mechanism that constructs meaning and guides stakeholder judgement. Organisations that design CSR messages around community engagement, moral obligation, and environmental sensitivity succeed in projecting social commitment. However, this projection remains effective only when supported by credibility and consistency.

The study further concludes that CSR communication strengthens trust more readily than it establishes accountability. Stakeholders were more inclined to express confidence in corporate motives than in corporate openness. This indicates that goodwill is easier to build than responsibility perception. Credibility emerged as the strongest influence on both trust and accountability, suggesting that message believability outweighs message visibility. Transparency remained the weakest dimension. Where disclosure appeared limited, confidence in accountability declined. Organisations that communicate results openly, allow verification, and acknowledge limitations demonstrate stronger institutional legitimacy. CSR communication therefore functions as a governance signal. When communication matches action, it builds reputation. When communication exceeds action, it weakens corporate standing.

5.5 Implications of the Study

The findings show that message framing shapes interpretation, credibility determines belief, and authenticity sustains trust, confirming the relevance of both Framing Theory and Source Credibility Theory in CSR communication. Framing was shown to influence how stakeholders

assign meaning and intention, while credibility explained why some messages gained acceptance and others did not. The strong effect of credibility on trust and accountability reaffirms that communication success depends less on exposure and more on perceived reliability and sincerity. In practical terms, the results show that CSR communication must move beyond publicity into accountability and disclosure. Organisations should prioritise verifiable information over emotional appeal, while practitioners must balance ethical narratives with measurable outcomes. Regulators and industry bodies should encourage transparency standards rather than celebratory reporting alone. CSR communication must therefore be treated as a reputational architecture rather than an image exercise.

5.6 Recommendations

The recommendations presented in this section arise directly from the study findings. They are structured to address weaknesses observed in transparency, verification, and accountability, while consolidating strengths in framing and credibility.

First, organisations should transition from emotionally driven CSR narratives to impact-focused communication. CSR messages should prioritise measurable outcomes and clearly stated objectives. CSR reports should include performance indicators, time-bound targets, and external verification. Communication units should collaborate with operations departments to ensure that CSR content reflects actual programme outcomes. Digital platforms should be used to publish methodological detail rather than publicity summaries. This will enable stakeholders to judge performance, not merely intention.

Second, as credibility emerged as the strongest influence on trust, organisations should institutionalise disclosure systems rather than rely on spokesperson reliability alone. CSR records should be centrally archived and publicly accessible. Independent evaluation should be incorporated into annual reporting. Internal communication teams should receive training in

analytical reporting and documentation. These measures would transform CSR communication from narrative control into evidence-based accountability.

Third, organisations should restructure stakeholder engagement from episodic outreach into continuous communication systems. Feedback channels should move beyond hotlines and social media comments into structured consultation forums. Companies should publish responses to stakeholder concerns and document resolution actions. Community engagement units should be empowered to collect evaluation data and relay impact outcomes. This approach strengthens trust continuity rather than message repetition and anchors business legitimacy to responsiveness rather than publicity.

5.7 Limitations of the Study

The study focused on a specific FMCG sub-sector, which may limit generalisation to other industries; however, this was addressed through careful justification of sector relevance and detailed context description. The study relied on self-reported data, which can introduce perception bias; this was minimised through anonymity and neutral item design. Cross-sectional data limited long-term inference, but this was managed by grounding analysis in theory and using regression testing. Quantitative design restricted contextual depth, but breadth was prioritised through a diverse stakeholder sample. These considerations were anticipated and addressed without compromising analytical integrity.

5.8 Suggestions for Further Research

Future research should examine CSR communication in other industries for comparison. Longitudinal designs should be used to observe trust patterns over time. Qualitative studies could explore meaning interpretation in greater depth. Media-based studies could examine platform effects. Comparative regional studies could deepen contextual understanding. Future research may also investigate leadership influence on CSR credibility.

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

Section A: Demographic Information

(Please tick or circle the most appropriate response)

1. Gender: Male Female Other
2. Age: 18–25 26–35 36–45 46 and above
3. Educational Level: SHS Diploma Degree Master's PhD Other (specify) _____
4. Stakeholder Category: Consumer Employee Distributor Community Member NGO/Advocacy Actor
5. Which brand's CSR activities are you most familiar with? Awake Purified Water Verna Mineral Water Both
6. How frequently have you come across CSR campaigns by these brands?
 Occasionally Often Very Often

Section B: CSR Message Framing

(This section assesses how CSR messages are presented. Indicate your level of agreement.)

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
7	The company's CSR messages emphasise community development and wellbeing.					
8	CSR messages highlight the company's concern for the environment.					
9	CSR campaigns show moral responsibility rather than self-promotion.					
10	CSR messages focus on shared value creation between company and society.					
11	CSR communication is more about the company's achievements than real community impact. (Reverse-coded)					
12	CSR stories are framed to appeal to emotions such as empathy and hope.					
<i>Variables derived from Framing Theory (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999).</i>						

Section C: Perceived Credibility and Authenticity

(This section measures how credible and genuine respondents find CSR communication.)

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
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13	The company provides accurate information about its CSR activities.					
14	The company's CSR information can be verified from reliable sources.					
15	CSR messages are consistent with the company's past behaviour.					
16	The company is transparent about the outcomes of its CSR projects.					
17	The company's CSR messages match its actual social and environmental performance.					
18	I believe the company engages in CSR because it genuinely cares about society.					
19	The CSR communicator (e.g., PR or brand team) appears trustworthy and professional.					
20	CSR communication reflects goodwill toward stakeholders.					
<i>Variables derived from Source Credibility Theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; McCroskey & Teven, 1999).</i>						

Section D: Stakeholder Trust and Corporate Accountability

(This section evaluates the effect of CSR communication on trust and perceived accountability.)

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
21	I trust the company to act responsibly in its dealings with society.					
22	I have confidence in the company's CSR commitments.					
23	The company responds promptly to community concerns about its CSR.					
24	The company discloses both successes and challenges in its CSR activities.					
25	I believe the company is accountable to its stakeholders for its CSR performance.					
26	The company's CSR communication strengthens my trust in its brand.					
27	I would recommend the company to others based on its CSR practices.					
<i>Variables linked to stakeholder trust and accountability (Mayer et al., 1995; Christensen et al., 2020).</i>						

Thank You