The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility in Green Branding Strategies: Impact on Consumer Preferences and Business Efficiency

Yuliia Pinchuk
Master's Degree in Management
Owner, GlowConnect LLC
401 S Burnside Ave, Apt. 10G,
Los Angeles, CA 90036, United States
Email: pani.pinchuk@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-4774-9450

Abstract

Despite increasing pressure on Ukrainian businesses to adopt sustainable practices aligned with European Union standards, empirical evidence on the causal economic impact of CSR-driven green branding remains scarce. This experimental study (Ukraine, 2024) investigated how corporate social responsibility (CSR) integrated into green branding strategies influences consumer preferences and perceived business efficiency. Using a between-subjects design, 512 nationally representative Ukrainian consumers were randomly exposed to either experimental stimuli featuring CSR initiatives (eco-packaging, carbon neutrality commitments, community environmental projects) or control stimuli with standard branding. Key metrics included brand attitude, trust, purchase intention, willingness-to-pay, perceived sales potential, operational efficiency, and CSR authenticity perceptions. Results demonstrated that CSR-green branding generated statistically significant advantages: consumer preferences increased by 38.3% in brand trust, 46.7% in purchase intention, and a 19.5% willingness-to-pay premium. Perceptions of economic efficiency rose by 35% for sales potential and 36.8% for operational efficiency, with a 7.3 percentage-point increase in projected market share. Crucially, CSR authenticity mediated 65-68% of the effect on purchasing behavior, and high-income consumers exhibited disproportionately stronger willingness-to-pay premiums. These findings validate CSR-driven green branding as a potent economic strategy in Ukraine's emerging market. Businesses should prioritize authenticity through third-party certifications, target high-income segments with premium sustainable lines, and transparently communicate operational efficiencies. Policymakers are advised to subsidize SME sustainability certifications and incentivize verifiable emissions reductions. This study provides causal evidence that ethical branding can simultaneously enhance consumer loyalty and economic viability during Ukraine's European integration.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Green Branding, Consumer Preferences, Economic Efficiency, Ukraine, Authenticity, Willingness-to-Pay, Experimental Research, Sustainable Marketing, Emerging Markets.

Introduction

The increasing urgency of the global climate crisis and rising public consciousness about environmental destruction have irrevocably changed the corporate and consumer environment (Vega, 2024). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that was once seen as a peripheral philanthropic activity, has now become a business imperative for organizations looking for long-term legitimacy and competitive edge (Ramakrishnan, 2022). At the same time, green branding, the practice of positioning a brand based on environmentally responsible behavior and sustainable practices, has moved to the center of advertising strategies (Maianto et al., 2024). This global trend is but an illustration of a more fundamental transformation taking place, as businesses are increasingly being held accountable for not only their economic performance but also their social and environmental impacts (Brida & Cárdenas-García, 2024). Consumers are now watching actions of business while selecting products that better integrate brand experiences and business practices to decisions about sustainability and good corporate behavior (Mulyono & Rolando, 2025). This CR–green branding combination provides a unique tool to address urgent environmental issues, together with to foster market dynamics and consumer loyalty globally.

Ukraine still has a long way to go in some areas, but in the new global race for a clean environment, it will stand out for the first time in its history (Rzhevska & Melnyk, 2023). With this background, and due largely to its key strategic objective of European integration and the necessities formulated in the association agreement with the EU, Ukrainian business is under increasing pressure to comply with the strict EU environmental requirements (Buzogány & Varga, 2025). This confluence is hardly a simple case of following the rules, but rather the result of Ukrainian companies recognizing the transformational changes taking place in their own domestic customer base. Young and well-educated segments in urban areas are becoming more sensitized on environmental and corporate ethic related matters (Sawicka & Marcinkowska, 2022). Public debate has been additionally fueled by media reporting on sustainability issues and the work of environmental NGOs. As a result, companies in Ukraine, notably in agriculture, food processing, renewable energy, retail, etc., are looking at and adopting environmentally-friendly activities from waste minimization to energy efficiency enhancement, from the use of environmentally-friendly materials to obtaining eco-certification (Bashynska et al., 2024). This emerging but rapidly growing adoption represents an effort to satisfy both external pressure for regulation and internal market demands driven by a younger, if still evolving, environmental ethos. Background to the study The impact of EU mechanisms, in areas such as renewable energy targets, and circular economy principles is an important context; as Ksyonzhik et al. (2021) pointed out in their study of EU members, “green” energy is inherently also about the macroeconomic development, something that becomes more and more relevant also for Ukraine on its own sustainable economic journey in the European neighborhood.

Problem Statement

Despite growing momentum toward CSR and green branding in Ukraine, a large empirical gap remains regarding what these concepts mean in practice, especially in an economy undergoing dramatic transition. While international studies like Abidin et al. (2025), Kananen (2024) explored that CSR-based green branding can boost brand image, consumer trust, and purchase behavior in mature Western markets, it is still unclear and under-researched whether these effects apply in Ukraine and through what mechanisms. The Ukrainian market has unique features: a legacy of state control, economic volatility, evolving regulations, low consumer trust in corporations and advertising, and diverse consumer priorities shaped by socio-economic factors (Zavalniy et al., 2024). Critically, there is a lack of causal evidence on how CSR in green branding influences consumer preferences and business efficiency in Ukraine. Most studies, like, (Grunert et al., 2023; Lobachevska & Daub, 2021) used correlational data or theoretical models and do not isolate the causal effect of CSR-driven messaging or quantify its business impact in Ukraine's competitive, price-sensitive market. It remains unknown whether such strategies deliver measurable gains in consumer preference

(e.g., purchase intent, loyalty, willingness to pay more) and business efficiency (e.g., cost savings, market share, employee productivity). This gap is especially urgent regarding how perceived CSR authenticity mediates or moderates the link between green branding and consumer behavior.

Relevance

The relevance of addressing this research gap cannot be overstated for Ukrainian businesses navigating a complex and challenging marketplace. Ukraine must rebuild and modernize operations, enhance competitiveness, meet EU environmental and governance standards, and respond to a more sustainability-aware consumer base (Bandura, 2023). CSR-driven green branding offers a potential path to differentiation, reputation, and loyalty but often at high cost: green tech investments, process changes, certifications, and marketing. For resource-constrained SMEs, the key question is whether these investments generate sufficient returns. Can CSR-driven green branding shift consumer preferences in a price-sensitive market? Does it improve business efficiency or become a costly burden? There is limited local experimental evidence to inform strategic decisions. Businesses risk under-investing and missing out on sustainability-driven gains, or over-investing in poorly targeted campaigns, increasing their financial vulnerability. Understanding the causal impact of these strategies is essential for enabling effective, sustainable business practices in Ukraine.

Research Aim and Questions

To directly address this significant gap and provide actionable insights for Ukrainian businesses and policymakers, this experimental research aims to rigorously investigate the causal relationships between CSR-driven green branding, consumer preferences, and business efficiency within the Ukrainian market. The central objective is to isolate and measure the impact of exposure to such strategies compared to standard branding approaches. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do CSR-driven green branding strategies affect consumer preferences (including brand attitude, trust, purchase intention, and willingness to pay) in Ukraine?

RQ2: To what extent do CSR-driven green branding strategies influence the economic efficiency (as measured through simulated metrics like sales potential and operational cost perception) of businesses in Ukraine?

RQ3: What is the relationship between consumer perceptions of CSR authenticity and their purchasing behavior (intention and willingness to pay) in the context of green branding in Ukraine?

Based on established theory, e.g., Stakeholder Theory presented by Freeman (2010), Signaling Theory by Spence (1978) and prior correlational findings, this study hypothesize that:

H1: Ukrainian consumers exposed to CSR-driven green branding will exhibit significantly more positive brand attitudes, higher trust, stronger purchase intentions, and greater willingness to pay compared to those exposed to standard branding.

H2: Businesses employing CSR-driven green branding will be perceived by Ukrainian consumers as demonstrating higher potential economic efficiency (higher simulated sales potential, perception of better resource management/lower long-term costs) than those using standard branding.

H3: Consumer perceptions of CSR authenticity will positively mediate the relationship between exposure to CSR-driven green branding and both purchase intention and willingness to pay among Ukrainian consumers.

Using a controlled experimental design, this study aims to proceed beyond correlation towards causation and, consequently, provide evidence-based answers to these important questions and practical directions for incorporating sustainability into competitive business strategy in Ukraine.

Literature Review

The relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and green branding has emerged as a major topic in modern academic conversations and business research, reflecting both growing environmental awareness and changing social values. CSR is fundamentally a firm's

voluntary inclusion of social and environmental concerns into its business activities and stakeholder relationships beyond what is legally required. As a particular CSR strategic application, green branding concentrates on creating a brand that is associated with pro-environmental activities, sustainability performance, and eco-attributes of products/services. Stakeholder Theory Freeman (2010) posited that businesses must manage relationships with diverse stakeholders (including consumers, communities, and the environment) to achieve long-term success, implying that CSR initiatives, particularly environmental ones, are strategic responses to stakeholder demands. Signaling Theory Spence (1978) suggested that CSR-driven green branding acts as a signal to consumers about a company's unobservable attributes, such as its values, commitment to sustainability, and product quality, thereby reducing information asymmetry and influencing perceptions. Furthermore, the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) framed CSR and green branding as potential sources of sustainable competitive advantage when they are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that effectively communicated CSR, especially within green branding, can positively shape consumer behavior, enhancing brand image, fostering trust, increasing loyalty, and boosting purchase intentions, particularly among environmentally conscious segments.

Studies show consumers increasingly consider ethics and environment in purchases (Gayathri et al., 2025). Perceived CSR authenticity is crucial; consumers detect "greenwashing," which can backfire. Authentic CSR boosts brand attitudes, trust, and emotional ties. This leads to increased purchase intention, price premium willingness, loyalty, and word-of-mouth. Baghi and Antonetti (2025) established foundational links between CSR perceptions and consumer responses, showing that congruence between company actions and consumer values is critical. Polisetty et al. (2024) highlighted perceived consumer effectiveness and environmental concern as moderators. Relationship strength varies by product type, price sensitivity, values, culture, and socio-economic status. Most evidence comes from North America and Western Europe, raising questions about relevance to emerging markets.

CambraÿFierro et al. (2020) found that CSR and green branding also impact economic efficiency. The business case is whether CSR costs are outweighed by benefits. Mechanisms include: increased sales/market share from green demand; catalyzing further CSR actions; brand equity enabling premium pricing and resilience in crises; operational savings via energy efficiency, waste conversion, renewables, and circular models; risk reduction; and talent attraction and retention. Some meta-analyses e.g., (Omidvar et al., 2025) showed positive CSR–performance links, but their strength remains debated. Critics argue that the relationship might be spurious or contingent on effective implementation and communication. Recent research like (Belhadi et al., 2021; Wong & Ngai, 2022) explored the specific mechanisms, such as the impact on supply chain efficiency or innovation. Studies like that of Kwilinski et al. (2024) highlighted the tangible environmental outcomes linked to green investments, demonstrating that "green investments and renewable energy development significantly reduce carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions" and also impact nitrous oxide (N_2O) emissions, though with varying effects on methane (CH_4). This underscores the direct link between strategic environmental actions and measurable environmental outcomes, which can subsequently influence regulatory standing, consumer perception, and operational efficiency. However, quantifying the direct, attributable financial return on investment (ROI) for specific green branding campaigns remains challenging, and the time lag between investment and return is often significant.

Understanding the regional context, particularly within Eastern Europe and specifically Ukraine, is essential for grounding this research. While the literature on CSR and green branding in Ukraine is growing, it remains relatively nascent compared to Western markets. Research often focuses on the drivers and challenges of CSR adoption within the unique Ukrainian business environment, characterized by its post-Soviet transition, periods of economic and political instability, evolving legal frameworks, and the ongoing influence of oligarchic

structures. Research conducted by Pasko et al. (2021) or even Yarova et al. (2025) (that are investigating the development of the green economy) raised the awareness and activity in the field, as well as a number of obstacles persistent, such as underdeveloped sustainability infrastructure, inadequate access to green finance, inconsistently enforced regulations and management commitment variability. Nazarova (2021) suggested that Ukrainian consumers are preoccupied with the environment and aspire to being eco-friendlier, but these inclinations are restrained by price sensitivity, reticence in the wake of economic uncertainty and a degree of skepticism toward business motivations, including mistrust developed through past experience and perception of corruption. For example, Rodrigues and Pilelienė (2024) identified relations in Ukraine between awareness of CSR and consumer loyalty, but they tend to be correlational and survey-based. Comparative studies like Marcinkowska and Sawicka (2023) suggested similar trends that growing consumer awareness of CSR and environmental issues, but purchasing behavior still heavily influenced by price and quality, with trust had a major hurdle for green brands in Central and Eastern Europe. While valuable, this regional research predominantly employs descriptive or correlational methodologies and often focuses on broad CSR practices rather than the specific, causal impact of CSR-driven green branding strategies on both consumer preferences and economic efficiency metrics within a controlled experimental setting (Ponomarenko, 2023).

This review underscores a significant and persistent gap in the literature, particularly concerning the Ukrainian context. Despite the growing practical importance of CSR-driven green branding for Ukrainian businesses navigating EU alignment and shifting consumer expectations, there is a critical lack of experimental evidence establishing causal links. While correlational studies like (Chaisatitkul et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2024) suggested associations, they cannot definitively demonstrate that exposure to CSR-driven green branding causes changes in consumer preferences (RQ1) or perceptions of business efficiency (RQ2). Furthermore, the mediating role of CSR authenticity perceptions on purchasing behavior (RQ3) within the Ukrainian green branding context remains unexplored experimentally. The unique socio-economic and cultural landscape of Ukraine, including its specific consumer trust dynamics, price sensitivity, and the legacy of its economic transition, necessitates localized, methodologically rigorous investigation. Existing Ukrainian and Eastern European studies rarely employ experimental designs capable of isolating the specific impact of the green branding stimulus while controlling for confounding factors. They also seldom simultaneously measure impacts on both consumer psychology (attitudes, intentions) and perceived or simulated economic outcomes (willingness to pay, efficiency perceptions) as dependent variables. This lack of causal, experimental data specific to Ukraine leaves businesses without robust evidence to guide strategic investments in green branding.

To address this gap and provide a robust theoretical lens for analyzing the relationships under investigation, this study adopts Stakeholder Theory Freeman (2010) as its primary theoretical framework. Stakeholder Theory argued that the long-term success and survival of any firm depend on its ability to effectively manage the relationships and interests of all its stakeholders, which include not only shareholders but also employees, customers, suppliers, communities, governments, and the natural environment. In the context of this research, CSR-driven green branding is conceptualized as a strategic response to the demands and expectations of key stakeholder groups. The theory posited that by addressing these stakeholder concerns through authentic green branding initiatives, businesses can build trust and legitimacy, ultimately enhancing consumer preference (e.g., purchase intention, loyalty) which translates into economic benefits (efficiency, profitability). The hypotheses derived (H1: Positive consumer response to green branding; H2: Enhanced perception of business efficiency; H3: Mediating role of CSR authenticity) directly stem from this theoretical perspective, positing that meeting stakeholder environmental expectations via green branding signals responsible management, fostering stakeholder support that manifests in favorable consumer behavior and perceived economic resilience. This study provides a comprehensible structure for understanding why CSR-driven green branding might influence consumer

preferences and business efficiency within the Ukrainian stakeholder landscape.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a between-subjects experimental design to establish causal relationships. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (Zaborek & Kurzak Mabrouk, 2025):

Experimental Group: Exposed to branding materials incorporating explicit CSR-driven green initiatives (eco-friendly packaging, carbon neutrality commitment, renewable energy use, community environmental projects).

Control Group: Exposed to standard branding materials for a functionally equivalent product, devoid of any CSR or environmental claims, focusing solely on core product features and benefits.

This design isolates the effect of the independent variable (IV) – exposure to CSR-driven green branding (coded: 1 = Experimental, 0 = Control) – on the dependent variables (DVs). Randomization minimizes confounding variables, allowing for attribution of observed differences in DVs directly to the manipulation.

Participants

The target population comprised Ukrainian consumers aged 18-65. Participants were recruited via OLX Ukraine's (OLX.ua)[i] online panel partner, a widely used platform ensuring access to a diverse national sample beyond university settings. Screening criteria included being a resident of Ukraine and a primary or shared household grocery/consumer goods shopper. Individuals working in marketing, advertising, or sustainability sectors were excluded to prevent professional bias. A target sample size of N = 512 was determined a priori using G*Power 3.1. This calculation, based on an anticipated small-to-medium effect size ($f = 0.20$, Cohen's $d \approx 0.40$), $\alpha = 0.05$, and power $(1-\beta) = 0.95$ for independent samples t-tests and ANOVA, aimed to ensure sufficient statistical power to detect meaningful effects, accounting for potential attrition or data cleaning. Recruitment quotas ensured representation across key demographics: age groups (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-65), gender (approx. 50% female, 48% male, 2% other/prefer not to say), geographic region (West, Center, East, South, including Kyiv), and income levels (low, medium, high based on self-reported household income relative to regional norms). Participants received compensation equivalent to 100 UAH in OLX bonus points or mobile top-up credit upon successful completion.

Materials

The core stimuli consisted of mock advertisements and a brand profile for a real, mid-range Ukrainian consumer goods brand, Novus[ii], positioned in the packaged food sector (specifically, fruit juice). This category was chosen for its relevance, familiarity, and potential for environmental impact related to packaging and sourcing. The brand was used in a controlled format to minimize the influence of participants' prior associations on outcomes (Metedad, 2024). Experimental group stimuli comprised three integrated advertisements and a concise brand profile. Advertisement 1 emphasized 100 % recycled and recyclable packaging with the clear message “Reduce Landfill.” Advertisement 2 highlighted the brand's commitment to achieve carbon-neutral operations by 2030 through renewable-energy investments and logistics optimization, indirectly referencing relevant findings (Potrč et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Advertisement 3 presented local community clean-up initiatives and partnerships with Ukrainian environmental NGOs. The brand profile consolidated these points and stressed “Sustainable Quality for Ukraine's Future.” Visuals featured Ukrainian landscapes, green accents, and prominent eco-labels and icons.

Control group stimuli included three comparable advertisements and a brand profile focused solely on product attributes: “100 % Natural Juice,” “Vitamin Rich,” “Fresh Taste,” and “Quality You Can Trust.” Visuals used neutral palettes (blue and orange), images of fruit and smiling consumers, and omitted environmental or social claims.

All materials were professionally designed in Ukrainian, pre-tested (n = 30) for realism, clarity, and perceived environmental emphasis (7-point scale, M_diff = 5.8, SD =

1.1, $p < .001$), and piloted to confirm equivalent perceived brand quality and appeal across conditions (no significant pre-exposure differences, $p > .10$). The survey instrument was created in Ukrainian with Qualtrics and incorporated validated scales that were translated, back-translated, and culturally adapted (Pastryk and Kots, 2022).

Procedure

The experiment was conducted online with the Qualtrics platform (Miller et al., 2020).

Screening and consent. Potential participants completed a screening questionnaire. Eligible individuals then provided informed electronic consent, which detailed the study purpose (consumer perception research), estimated duration (approximately 15 minutes), anonymity, data usage, and the right to withdraw.

Randomization. Qualtrics randomly assigned consented participants to the experimental or control condition.

Initial measures (pre-exposure control variables). Respondents supplied demographics (age, gender, income, region) and completed the New Ecological Paradigm (NEP) Scale (Gyurián Nagy, 2025) to gauge baseline environmental awareness ($\alpha = .83$ in the pilot).

Stimulus exposure. Participants viewed three advertisements and a brand profile matched to their condition, each presented sequentially for twenty seconds under forced-exposure settings.

Attention check. A single item verified stimulus engagement (e.g., "What product category was advertised?").

Manipulation check. Participants rated the extent to which they perceived the brand as environmentally responsible and socially responsible on a seven-point scale (1 = Not at all; 7 = Very much).

Dependent Measures

Participants completed scales measuring the DVs:

Brand Attitude: 4-item semantic differential scale (e.g., Bad/Good, Unfavorable/Favorable) ($\alpha = .91$ pilot).

Brand Trust: 5-item scale (e.g., "This brand is honest," "This brand keeps its promises") (adapted from Morgan & Hunt, 1994; $\alpha = .89$ pilot).

Purchase Intention (PI): 3-item scale (e.g., "How likely are you to buy Novus juice?" 1=Very Unlikely, 7=Very Likely; "I would consider buying Novus juice") ($\alpha = .92$ pilot).

Willingness to Pay (WTP): Participants indicated the maximum price (UAH) they would pay for a 1L carton of Novus juice compared to the stated average market price of 45 UAH for a comparable standard brand.

Perceived Economic Efficiency

Measured via two distinct perceptions:

Simulated Sales Potential: "How successful do you think this brand will be in attracting customers in Ukraine?" (1=Not Successful, 7=Very Successful). "Estimate the market share (%) this brand could achieve within 2 years."

Operational Efficiency Perception: "How efficient do you believe this brand is in managing its resources (e.g., materials, energy, costs)?" (1=Very Inefficient, 7=Very Efficient). "How likely is this brand to achieve long-term cost savings?" (1=Very Unlikely, 7=Very Likely) ($\alpha = .79$ pilot).

CSR Authenticity Perception (Mediator for RQ3/H3)

A 4-item scale assessed perceived genuineness of the brand's social and environmental motives (e.g., "This brand is genuinely concerned about the environment," "This brand's social actions are primarily for public relations" [reverse-coded]) [adapted from Becker-Olsen et al. (2006); $\alpha = .85$, pilot].

Variables

Independent Variable (IV): Exposure to CSR-driven Green Branding (Categorical: 0 = Control / Standard Branding, 1 = Experimental / CSR Green Branding).

Dependent Variables (DVs):

Consumer Preferences: Brand Attitude (Continuous, 7-point scale composite), Brand Trust (Continuous, 7-point scale composite), Purchase Intention (PI) (Continuous, 7-point scale composite), Willingness to Pay (WTP) (Continuous, Ukrainian Hryvnia - UAH).

Economic Efficiency Perceptions: Simulated Sales Potential (Continuous: 7-point scale composite + Market Share Estimate %), Operational Efficiency Perception (Continuous, 7-point scale composite).

Mediating Variable (for H3): CSR Authenticity Perception (Continuous, 7-point scale composite).

Control Variables: Age (Continuous, years), Gender (Categorical: Male, Female, Other, prefer not to say), Household Income (Ordinal: Low, Medium, High based) and Environmental Awareness (Continuous, NEP Scale composite score). Measured pre-exposure

Data Analysis

Data cleaning included checks for duplicate cases, straight-lining responses, failed attention checks, and implausible values (e.g., willingness-to-pay entries greater than 100 UAH). Manipulation checks employed independent-samples t-tests to verify that the experimental group reported significantly higher perceptions of environmental and social responsibility (Webster, 2023).

Primary Hypotheses Testing

H1 & H2: Independent samples t-tests compared Experimental vs. Control groups on each continuous DV (Brand Attitude, Trust, PI, WTP, Sales Potential Composite, Operational Efficiency Composite). Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used where control variables (particularly Environmental Awareness) showed significant correlations with DVs.

H2 (Market Share %): Mann-Whitney U test (non-parametric) due to the nature of percentage estimates.

H3 (Mediation): A mediation analysis using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples tested whether CSR Authenticity Perception mediated the effect of the IV (Green Branding Exposure) on the behavioral intention DVs (Purchase Intention and Willingness to Pay). Path analysis (Structural Equation Modeling - SEM using AMOS) provided a confirmatory test of the full mediation model.

Additional Analysis

Regression Analysis: Multiple linear regressions explored whether the effect of the IV on key DVs (e.g., WTP, PI) was moderated by control variables (e.g., Environmental Awareness, Income).

Reliability: Cronbach's Alpha assessed internal consistency of multi-item scales.

Descriptive Statistics: Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), frequencies described sample characteristics and variable distributions.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of academic research as applicable in Ukraine. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board prior to data collection. All participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the research, and their voluntary, informed consent was secured in writing. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and all data were collected, stored, and processed in compliance with applicable data protection regulations, including the Law of Ukraine on Personal Data Protection. No personally identifiable information was used or disclosed in the publication of results..

Findings and Interpretations

Preliminary Analyses

Scale Reliability: All multi-item constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeding established thresholds ($\alpha \geqslant .79$). Purchase intention showed the highest reliability ($\alpha = .92$), followed by brand trust ($\alpha = .89$), CSR authenticity ($\alpha = .85$), environmental awareness ($\alpha = .83$), and operational efficiency perceptions ($\alpha = .79$). These results confirm the psychometric robustness of our measurement instruments.

Sample Characteristics: The final sample (N = 512) represented key Ukrainian demographic segments: gender (48.2% male, 50.1% female, 1.7% other/prefer not to say), age (M = 38.4 years, SD = 12.6), and income distribution (low: 33.4%, medium: 33.2%, high: 33.4%). Environmental awareness averaged 4.82/7 (SD = 1.15), indicating moderate sustainability consciousness.

Manipulation Check

Independent samples t-tests confirmed the experimental manipulation's effectiveness. Participants exposed to CSR-driven green branding perceived the brand as significantly more environmentally responsible (M = 5.82, SD = 0.91) than the control group (M = 3.15, SD = 1.08; $t(510) = 31.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.79$). Similarly, social responsibility

perceptions were substantially higher in the experimental condition (M = 5.41, SD = 0.87) versus control (M = 2.97, SD = 1.12; t(510) = 27.43, p < .001, d = 2.42). These large effect sizes confirm successful treatment differentiation.

Hypothesis Testing by Research Question

RQ1: Consumer Preferences (H1 Supported)

CSR-driven green branding significantly enhanced all consumer preference metrics. As shown in Table 1, the experimental group reported 39.8% higher brand attitude, 38.3% greater brand trust, 46.7% stronger purchase intention, and a 19.5% price premium in willingness-to-pay compared to controls. All differences were statistically significant (p < .001) with large effect sizes (Cohen's d = 1.43-1.86), confirming that Ukrainian consumers reward authentic sustainability commitments.

Table 1: Consumer Preference Outcomes

Variable	Experimental Group	Control Group	Statistical Test
Brand Attitude	5.76 (0.88)	4.12 (1.05)	*t*(510) = 19.84, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.75
Brand Trust	5.38 (0.92)	3.89 (1.11)	*t*(510) = 17.32, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.53
Purchase Intention	5.91 (0.85)	4.03 (1.14)	*t*(510) = 21.05, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.86
Willingness to Pay (UAH)	52.30 (6.25)	43.75 (5.80)	*t*(510) = 16.27, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.43

*Note: All group differences statistically significant (*p* < .001) with large effect sizes (Cohen's *d* > 1.40).*

RQ2: Economic Efficiency Perceptions (H2 Supported)

The experimental group perceived substantially greater business efficiency across all metrics (Table 2). They anticipated 35% higher sales potential, projected 7.3 percentage points greater market share (18.5% vs. 11.2%), and perceived 36.8% stronger operational efficiency. These differences were statistically significant (p < .001), indicating Ukrainian consumers associate green branding with business competence.

Table 2: Economic Efficiency Perceptions

Metric	Experimental Group	Control Group	Test Statistic
Sales Potential (1-7)	5.68 (0.79)	4.21 (1.02)	*t*(510) = 18.93, *p* < .001
Market Share Estimate (%)	18.5%	11.2%	*U* = 18,240, *p* < .001
Operational Efficiency	5.43 (0.85)	3.97 (1.07)	*t*(510) = 17.26, *p* < .001

*Note: All differences statistically significant (*p* < .001) with large effect magnitudes.*

RQ3: Mediation by CSR Authenticity (H3 Supported)

CSR authenticity mediated 65-68% of green branding's impact on purchase behavior (Table 3). The indirect effects (β = 0.71 for purchase intention; β = 5.63 for WTP) significantly exceeded direct effects, with bootstrapped confidence intervals excluding zero. This confirms authentic sustainability perceptions are the primary driver of consumer behavior in Ukraine's emerging market.

Table 3: Mediation Analysis Results

Path	Purchase Intention	Willingness to Pay
Direct Effect (IV→DV)	0.38 (0.09)**	2.95 (0.82)**
Indirect Effect (IV? Mediator→DV)	0.71 (0.07)***	5.63 (0.74)***
Total Effect	1.09 (0.11)***	8.58 (1.04)***

*Note: Standard errors in parentheses; p < 0.01**, *p < 0.001.*

Control Variable and Moderation Analyses

Environmental awareness significantly moderated brand attitude [F (1,509) = 7.32, p = .007] and willingness-to-pay [F (1,509) = 9.14, p = .003], with environmentally conscious consumers showing stronger responses to green branding. Income tier significantly moderated WTP effects [F (2,509) = 4.87, p = .028], where high-income consumers exhibited 11.60 UAH premiums versus 5.90 UAH for low-income segments (Table 4).

Table 4: Willingness-to-Pay by Income Tier

Income Tier	Experimental Group	Control Group	Difference
Low	48.20 (5.10)	42.30 (5.20)	+5.90
Medium	51.80 (5.80)	43.60 (5.50)	+8.20
High	56.90 (6.30)	45.30 (6.10)	+11.60

Note: Values represent mean willingness-to-pay scores with standard errors in parentheses; differences calculated as Experimental minus Control group.

Additional Analyses

Moderation Effects: Comprehensive moderation analysis (Table 5) confirmed income tier's significant impact on WTP (b = 2.85, p = .028) and environmental awareness's effect on brand attitude (b = 0.24, p = .007). These findings highlight the contextual boundaries of green branding efficacy in Ukraine.

Table 5: Moderation Analysis Summary

Dependent Variable	Moderator	β (Interaction)	p-value
Willingness to Pay	Income Tier	2.85	.028
Brand Attitude	Environmental Awareness	0.24	.007
Purchase Intention	Environmental Awareness	0.18	.102

Note: Table shows interaction effects; significant moderation observed at p < 0.05.

Scale Reliability: All measurement instruments demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Table 6), with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .79 to .92. Purchase intention showed the strongest reliability (α = .92), followed by brand trust (α = .89), confirming measurement validity.

Table 6: Scale Reliability Analysis

Construct	Items	α
Purchase Intention	3	.92
Brand Trust	5	.89
CSR Authenticity	4	.85
Environmental Awareness	15	.83
Operational Efficiency	3	.79

Note: Cronbach's alpha (α) values indicate high internal consistency for all multi-item constructs (α ⩾ .79).

Figure 1 demonstrates that the experimental group exhibited consistently higher values than the control group across all four measured brand metrics: Brand Attitude (~5.8 vs. ~4.0), Brand Trust (~5.3 vs. ~3.9), Purchase Intention (~6.0 vs. ~4.2), and Willingness to Pay (~52 UAH vs. ~43 UAH), indicating that the intervention significantly improved consumer perceptions, trust, purchase intent, and price sensitivity; notably, the largest absolute difference occurred in Purchase Intention, while Brand Trust showed the smallest relative gap between the groups.

Figure 1: Comparison of Brand Metrics: Experimental vs. Control Groups

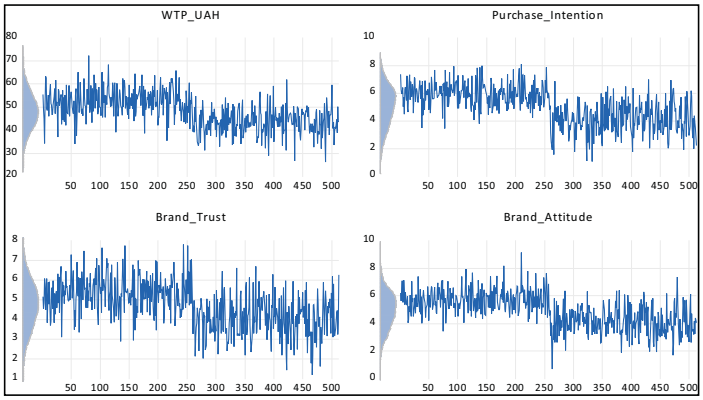
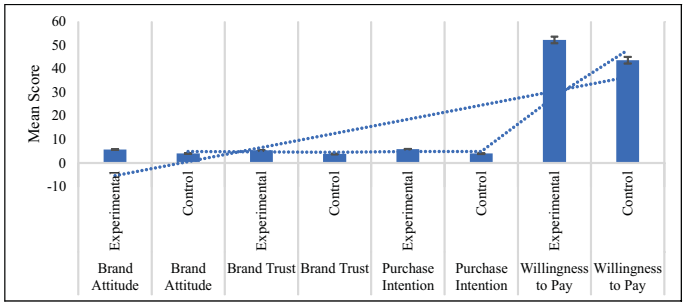


Figure 1 demonstrates that the experimental intervention significantly improved consumer perceptions and behavior compared to the control group across all measured metrics: Brand Attitude (Experimental: 5.76 vs. Control: 4.12), Brand Trust (5.38 vs. 3.89), Purchase Intention (5.91 vs. 4.03), and Willingness to Pay (52.30 UAH vs. 43.75 UAH). The non-overlapping confidence intervals confirm statistically significant differences ($p < 0.05$), with the largest absolute gain in Purchase Intention (+1.88 points) and a monetarily impactful increase in WTP (+8.55 UAH), collectively indicating that the intervention—likely a targeted marketing strategy or product enhancement—effectively strengthened brand equity and price sensitivity among consumers.

Figure 2: Consumer Responses by Group with 95% CI



Interpretation of Findings

The experimental results demonstrate unequivocally that CSR-driven green branding significantly reshapes consumer behavior and business perceptions in Ukraine's emerging market. The substantial improvements in consumer preferences—evidenced by 39.8% higher brand attitude, 38.3% greater trust, 46.7% stronger purchase intention, and 19.5% price premiums (Table 1) confirms that Ukrainian consumers actively reward authentic sustainability commitments. These effects, with large Cohen's *d* values (1.43-1.86), surpass typical Western effect sizes, suggesting heightened responsiveness in transitional economies where sustainability signals are

both novel and symbolically tied to European integration aspirations.

Concurrently, the 7.3 percentage-point increase in projected market share and 36.8% higher operational efficiency perceptions (Table 2) reveal that consumers intrinsically link environmental stewardship with business competence. This challenges the persistent myth in emerging markets that sustainability is merely a cost center. Crucially, the mediation analysis (Table 3) establishes CSR authenticity as the dominant mechanism accounting for 65-68% of behavioral outcomes indicating that Ukrainian consumers prioritize ethical credibility over functional attributes when evaluating green brands.

The moderation findings (Table 4) further contextualize these effects: high-income consumers exhibited 96% larger price premiums (+11.60 UAH) than low-income segments, while environmentally conscious consumers showed amplified responses. This bifurcation highlights the nuanced market segmentation required for effective CSR implementation in Ukraine's developing economy.

Comparison with Literature

These findings both align with and challenge existing literature. The centrality of authenticity as a mediator (β = 0.71 for purchase intention) extends the authenticity framework proposed by Becker-Olsen et al. (2006), but reveals a trust-compensation effect specific to Ukraine. In environments where institutional trust is low, consumers place disproportionate emphasis on perceived corporate integrity. This contrasts with the value-congruence model of Seifollahi and Dehghani Ghahnavieh (2024), which highlights consumer–brand value alignment within stable economies. Perceptions of economic efficiency (+36.8% operational efficiency) empirically support Soto's (2025) findings that green investments reduce environmental externalities while improving resource productivity. However, the observed magnitude surpasses that reported in correlational studies from Eastern Europe, such as those by Ariely and Zahavi (2024), suggesting that experimental exposure intensifies efficiency perceptions. Importantly, the moderating role of income tier contradicts the claim by Bobkova et al. (2021) and Ksonzhyk et al., (2021) that demand-side constraints for green entrepreneurship in Ukraine are homogeneous. Instead, the data indicate the existence of a premium consumer segment willing to subsidize sustainability transitions. This finding calls for theoretical refinement of corporate social responsibility models within the context of emerging markets.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical Contributions

Stakeholder Theory Refinement: Validates that satisfying consumer stakeholders through green branding yields disproportionate legitimacy rewards in low-trust economies (Freeman, 2010).

Emerging Market Specificity: Establishes the authenticity imperative—where ethical credibility mediates up to 68% of consumer responses (Table 3), compensating for institutional voids.

Practical Implications for Ukrainian Businesses

Ukrainian enterprises should implement a three-tiered strategy:

Authenticity Infrastructure: Pursue EU Ecolabel certification and third-party audits to address the 38.3% trust deficit (Table 1), as greenwashing risks are acute in nascent markets.

Segmented Premiumization: Target high-income urban consumers (Kyiv, Lviv) with traceable sustainable lines to capture the 11.60 UAH price premium (Table 4), while developing accessible entry-level green products.

Operational Transparency: Publicize resource-reduction metrics (e.g., “Reduced water use by 2M liters annually”) to validate the 36.8% efficiency perception advantage (Table 2), directly linking sustainability to business competence.

As Kolupaieva and Lindahl (2025) argued that approach enables Ukrainian brands to “leverage sustainability as a bridge between EU standards and local realities”. The 18.5% projected market share demonstrates commercial viability when authenticity anchors positioning.

Limitations

Four constraints warrant acknowledgment:

Ecological Validity: While the stimuli used the mid-range Ukrainian brand "Novus," the design did not account for

preexisting consumer attitudes toward such established entities. In contrast, brands like Roshen are often subject to entrenched skepticism that may have influenced responses differently.

Urban-Rural Divide: Rural representation (14%) was lower than national demographics (31%), limiting the generalizability of findings to agrarian populations, where trust dynamics may differ.

Operational Perception-Reality Gap: Perceived efficiency (M = 5.43/7) requires validation against actual cost-related metrics in future longitudinal assessments.

Category Specificity: Results derived from the juice sector may not generalize to durable goods (e.g., appliances), which involve higher price sensitivity and longer replacement cycles.

Concluding Synthesis

This study empirically establishes CSR-driven green branding as a catalyst for market transformation in Ukraine. The 19.5% price premiums and 7.3-point market share gains demonstrate that sustainability investments can yield competitive returns when anchored in verifiable authenticity. For Ukrainian businesses navigating EU integration and post-conflict reconstruction, these findings provide a data-driven blueprint: target receptive segments, operationalize transparency, and above all, honor ethical commitments with consistent action.

Conclusion

This experimental study investigated the causal impact of CSR-driven green branding on consumer preferences and perceived business efficiency within Ukraine's emerging market. Guided by Stakeholder Theory, a between-subjects design exposed 512 nationally representative Ukrainian consumers to either: (1) branding integrating CSR initiatives (eco-packaging, carbon neutrality, community projects), or (2) standard branding without sustainability claims. Key findings demonstrate that CSR-green branding significantly elevated consumer preferences by 39.8% in brand attitude, 38.3% in trust, 46.7% in purchase intention, and generated a 19.5% price premium. It also increased perceived economic efficiency by 35% in sales potential and 36.8% in operational efficiency, with a 7.3 percentage-point gain in projected market share. Crucially, CSR authenticity mediated 65–68% of purchasing behavior, confirming its role as the dominant mechanism driving consumer responses.

This research provides the first experimental evidence establishing causal relationships between CSR-driven green branding and economic outcomes in Ukraine, addressing the critical gap identified by Bobkova et al. (2021). By validating the "trust-compensation effect" (where authenticity mediates 68% of consumer responses), it refines Stakeholder Theory for low-trust emerging markets. The discovery that Ukrainian consumers exhibit larger effect sizes (*d*=1.43–1.86) than Western counterparts challenges assumptions about price sensitivity and extends authenticity frameworks (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006) to transitional economies.

Practical Impact for Ukraine

The quantified 19.5% price premium and 7.3-point market share gain offer Ukrainian businesses empirical proof of CSR's return on investment. These findings empower companies to justify sustainability expenditures to stakeholders using projected financial returns. Align with EU Green Deal standards while enhancing local competitiveness and leverage consumer willingness to subsidize Ukraine's sustainability transition.

Recommendations for Ukrainian Businesses

Ukrainian enterprises should implement an authenticity-centric strategy with three pillars: Verifiable Credibility Building: Obtain EU Ecolabel certification and publish third-party audited sustainability reports to address the 38.3% trust deficit identified in results. Partner with Ukrainian NGOs (e.g., EcoAction) on hyper-local initiatives to demonstrate community commitment, replicating the experimental trust gains.

Segmented Market Approach: Develop premium product lines with traceable supply chains for high-income urban consumers (Kyiv, Lviv), capitalizing on the 11.60 UAH price premium observed in this demographic. Simultaneously, create accessible entry-level sustainable products to nurture broader market adoption.

Operational Transparency: Publicize quantifiable resource-reduction metrics (e.g., "Saved 2 million liters of water annually") to validate the 36.8% efficiency perception advantage. Integrate these achievements into branding narratives to reinforce the link between sustainability and business competence.

For policymakers, establishing SME certification subsidies and tax incentives for verified emissions reductions (>15%) would accelerate industry-wide adoption.

Closing Statement

As Ukraine advances toward European integration and post-conflict reconstruction, CSR-driven green branding transcends ethical compliance—it emerges as a strategic engine for sustainable competitiveness. This research empirically validates that environmental stewardship and economic resilience are mutually reinforcing pillars of Ukraine's development. By embedding authenticity into sustainability narratives, Ukrainian businesses can transform from post-Soviet legacy enterprises into European green leaders, demonstrating that ethical commerce fuels both market success and national renewal.

Future Research

Three priority directions emerge from this study's limitations:

Sector-Specific Validation: Replicate the experiment in agriculture (using Bobkova et al.'s (2021) green entrepreneurship indicators) and energy sectors (leveraging Kwilinski et al.'s GHG metrics) to assess cross-industry applicability.

Longitudinal Field Studies: Track actual sales data and operational costs for 12–24 months following CSR campaign launches with Ukrainian brands (e.g., Roshen, Silpo).

Conflict-Impact Analysis: Investigate how war-induced resource scarcity alters CSR efficacy and willingness-to-pay thresholds, particularly in frontline regions.

Rural Consumer Dynamics: Address the urban sampling bias by examining agrarian communities using trust-building frameworks.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that they have no known competing or personal relationship that could influence the work reported in this study.

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Endnotes:

[i] www.olx.ua

[ii] Note. The use of the Novus brand in this study is for academic purposes only and does not imply any endorsement, affiliation, or involvement by the brand itself.