

## Consumer Perspectives On Csr Representations In Unilever Advertising: A Phenomenological Study

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### Abstract

This study aims to understand consumer perspectives on the representation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Unilever advertisements. The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach through in-depth interviews with ten informants who had watched Unilever CSR advertisements and used its products. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings show that CSR representation in advertisements is perceived as an effort to build a positive corporate image and gain public trust. CSR advertisements also create emotional closeness with consumers by addressing social issues related to everyday life. However, some consumers remain skeptical and perceive CSR messages as more image-building than genuine social concern. Nevertheless, consumers still view CSR as an important social responsibility that companies should carry out. This study indicates that CSR representation in advertising influences consumers' perceptions, experiences, and trust toward the company. Therefore, the effectiveness of CSR communication depends on the consistency between social messages in advertisements and the company's actual practices.

### Keywords

CSR, Advertising Representation, Consumer Perspective, Phenomenology, Unilever



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## INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a form of corporate social responsibility towards society and the environment that is gaining increasing attention in the modern business world. Companies are no longer solely focused on economic profit but are also required to demonstrate social awareness as part of business ethics and corporate sustainability. Over time, CSR has evolved beyond direct social activities to be demonstrated through corporate communication strategies, including advertising. CSR communication is seen as a crucial strategy for

building relationships between companies and consumers and shaping a positive public image (Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021).

In the modern era, advertising no longer merely serves as a means of product promotion but also serves as a means of establishing a company's social identity and image. Many companies use advertising to showcase social values such as environmental awareness, community empowerment, health, and sustainability to build emotional bonds with consumers. The representation of CSR in advertising is becoming increasingly important as modern consumers tend to consider a company's moral values and social responsibility when making their consumption choices. Research shows that CSR communication has a significant influence on consumer attitudes, brand trust, and even purchase intentions (Ishak, 2025).

One company that actively represents CSR values in its advertising is Unilever. This company is known for consistently highlighting social and environmental issues through its various product campaigns. Through its Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) program, Unilever demonstrates its commitment to public health, plastic waste reduction, environmental sustainability, and improving social welfare. Unilever's product advertisements also frequently feature messages about cleanliness, family health, environmental awareness, and sustainable lifestyles as part of the company's identity.

However, the representation of CSR in advertising is not always universally accepted by consumers. Some consumers view CSR messages as a manifestation of the company's genuine concern for society and the environment, while others view CSR in advertising as merely an image-building strategy to increase loyalty and product sales. Consumer perceptions of CSR are influenced by the level of message authenticity (CSR authenticity), the fit between the social message and the company's identity (CSR fit), and the consumer's personal experience with the brand (Alhouthi et al., 2016).

This phenomenon is becoming increasingly relevant in the digital age, when consumers have widespread access to information and are more easily able to critique corporate practices. Consumers not only assess product quality but also pay attention to the consistency between the social message conveyed through advertising and the company's actual practices. A mismatch between CSR representations and a company's reality can lead to consumer skepticism toward the company and the brand being advertised. Research shows that CSR communication strategies involving emotional engagement can influence consumer perceptions and responses to a company's brand (Du et al., 2010).

Previous research has largely addressed CSR from the perspective of marketing communications, brand image, consumer loyalty, and purchase intentions. However, research specifically exploring consumers' subjective experiences with CSR representations in advertising using a phenomenological approach is relatively limited. However, a phenomenological approach allows researchers to deeply understand the meaning of individual lived experiences regarding a social phenomenon (Collins et al., 2022). This study aims to address this gap in the literature by using a phenomenological approach that focuses on consumers' experiences and interpretations of CSR representations in Unilever advertising. This research is crucial for understanding how consumers interpret corporate social messages, their level of trust in CSR representations in advertising, and how these experiences influence their views of the company.

## **METHODS**

This research employed a qualitative approach using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method. This approach was chosen because the research focuses on understanding consumers' subjective experiences in interpreting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) representations displayed in Unilever advertisements. Through a phenomenological approach, researchers sought to explore the meaning of consumers' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the social and environmental messages conveyed by the company through advertising media. This approach is considered relevant because the phenomena studied are complex, contextual, and cannot be explained solely through numerical data (Moleong, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted in Makassar City and its surrounding areas from April to May 2026. Research informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which involves selecting informants based on specific criteria aligned with the research objectives. The informant criteria included: (1) consumers who had seen Unilever CSR advertisements on television, social media, or other digital platforms; (2) experience using Unilever products; and (3) willingness to provide open information regarding their views and experiences regarding CSR representations in advertisements. The number of informants in this study was nine and was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which occurs when the data obtained demonstrates recurring patterns of information and no significant new themes are identified (Guest et al., 2020).

Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide was developed based on theoretical

studies on CSR, legitimacy theory, media representation, and consumer perspectives on corporate CSR communications. Interviews were conducted both in-person and online, depending on the informant's circumstances, to obtain more in-depth data regarding their experiences and interpretations of Unilever's CSR advertising.

Data analysis in this study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) stages, including: repeatedly reading and understanding interview transcripts, making initial notes on key informant statements, developing emergent themes, exploring relationships between themes, identifying thematic patterns among informants, and developing a comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of informants' experiences. The analysis process was conducted interpretively, emphasizing understanding consumers' subjective experiences in interpreting CSR messages conveyed by companies through advertising. The validity of the data in this study was maintained through source triangulation, member checking, and researcher reflexivity. Triangulation was conducted by comparing interview results between informants to ensure data consistency. Member checking was conducted by asking informants to review their interpretations of the interviews to ensure they aligned with their intended experiences. Furthermore, the researcher employed reflexivity to maintain objectivity and minimize bias throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### **Theme 1: CSR Understood as a Company Effort to Build a Positive Image**

Interview results indicate that most informants view Unilever's CSR advertisements as a form of the company's effort to build a positive image in the eyes of the public. Informants believe that the social messages displayed in the advertisements, such as environmental cleanliness, family health, and social awareness, convey the impression that the company is responsible for the community. I-01 (Rina) revealed that the Lifebuoy product advertisement, which featured the theme of family health, made her feel that the company truly cares about public cleanliness and health. She believes the messages conveyed resonate with everyday life because they directly relate to people's health habits.

I-05 (Nabila) expressed a similar view. She believes that Unilever appears more active than other companies in conveying social messages through advertisements. She believes that the presence of CSR messages in advertisements makes the company appear more responsible and concerned about the environment, rather than solely focused on selling products. However, several informants believe that the representation of CSR in advertisements is also related to the company's business

interests. I-02 (Aldi) stated that currently, almost all large companies use CSR as part of their marketing strategy to attract consumer sympathy. He believes that social messages in advertisements can indeed build a positive image, but also aim to increase consumer trust in the company's brand.

This finding indicates that consumers understand CSR not only as a form of social responsibility, but also as a corporate strategy to gain legitimacy and build a positive reputation within the community.

### **Theme 2: CSR Advertisements Generate Emotional Closeness for Consumers**

The second theme indicates that the representation of CSR in Unilever advertisements can create an emotional response in consumers. Informants admitted to being more attracted to advertisements that showcase humanitarian and social values than those that solely focus on product promotion. I-03 (Sinta) explained that Dove advertisements that discuss women's self-confidence made her feel more valued. She felt that the message in the advertisements not only sold beauty products but also conveyed positive values about self-acceptance and confidence in women's daily lives.

Furthermore, I-08 (Fajar) stated that CSR advertisements that showcase social activities or concern for the environment felt more touching than typical product advertisements. According to him, such advertisements are more memorable because they contain stories that are close to the social realities of society. Emotional experiences also arise because informants feel that the issues raised in the advertisements align with conditions they frequently encounter in their local communities, such as cleanliness, health, and social awareness. This suggests that an emotional approach to CSR communication can build a closer relationship between companies and consumers. However, this emotional connection does not always lead to consumers' complete trust in the company. Some informants question whether the social messages conveyed are truly translated into actual company practices.

### **Theme 3: Emerging Skepticism About the Authenticity of CSR**

In addition to positive responses, several informants also expressed skepticism about the representation of CSR in Unilever's advertisements. This attitude arises because consumers feel that the company sometimes overemphasizes the social side in its advertisements, while the reality on the ground doesn't necessarily fully align with the message conveyed. I-04 (Wahyu) stated that CSR advertisements often appear positive in the media, but the public doesn't necessarily know how the company's social programs are actually implemented. He believes that today's

consumers are more critical and less likely to believe just what they see in advertisements.

I-06 (Ardi) expressed a similar opinion. He believes that some CSR advertisements appear to be companies trying to build public sympathy to improve their brand image. He believes that companies should not only present social messages in their advertisements but also demonstrate concrete evidence of their CSR activities. I-09 (Sarah) also stated that companies need to be more transparent in demonstrating the impact of their social programs on society. He believes that consumers will be more trusting if companies demonstrate concrete actions that are consistent with the messages conveyed in their advertisements. These findings indicate that modern consumers do not simply passively receive advertising messages but also critically evaluate the alignment between CSR representations and real-life company practices.

#### **Theme 4: CSR Interpreted as Corporate Social Responsibility**

The final theme indicates that most informants continue to view CSR as an important form of social responsibility for large companies. They believe that companies should not solely focus on economic profit but also have an obligation to make positive contributions to society and the environment. I-07 (Dini) stated that large companies like Unilever should indeed help solve social problems in society because they possess significant influence and resources. She believes that CSR can benefit society if implemented consistently and not simply for promotional purposes.

Furthermore, I-10 (Benny) believes that CSR advertising can also raise public awareness of health and environmental issues. She feels that some messages in advertisements can provide simple education about the importance of maintaining family hygiene and health in everyday life. This study found that consumers' experiences and interpretations of CSR are strongly influenced by personal experiences, their social environment, and their level of trust in the company. Therefore, the representation of CSR in Unilever's advertising generates a variety of views, ranging from feelings of trust and emotional closeness to the emergence of skepticism towards the authenticity of the company's social message.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research shows that consumers interpret Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) representations in Unilever advertisements differently based on their experiences and social perspectives. Consumers view CSR advertisements not only as a means of product promotion but also as a form of corporate social communication with the community.

The research findings identified four key findings. First, CSR in advertisements is viewed as a company's effort to build a positive image and gain public trust. Second, social messages in advertisements can create emotional connection because they relate to consumers' daily lives. Third, some consumers expressed skepticism, viewing CSR in advertisements as sometimes more of a publicity stunt than a genuine social concern. Fourth, consumers still view CSR as an important social responsibility that large companies must fulfill towards society and the environment.

This research demonstrates that CSR representations in advertisements can influence consumers' perceptions, experiences, and levels of trust in a company. The success of CSR communication is determined not only by the content of the advertisements but also by the company's consistency in implementing its social responsibility. The limitations of this research lie in the limited number of informants and the focus of the study, which focused solely on Unilever's CSR advertisements. Further research is recommended to involve more informants, compare several companies, and examine the influence of digital media on consumer perceptions of CSR.

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