

Generational Perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility: Comparing Youth and Adult Attitudes Toward Ethical Business Practices

Nishil Rana
rana09n@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on comparing how youth and adults perceive corporate social responsibility with respect to trust. The significance of the CSR perception and its influence on purchasing decisions. The total number of participants in this study was 102, who were divided into a youth and an adult group. Methods applied in the statistical analysis include Welch's unpaired t-test and Cohen's d.

The differences in the answers between youth and adult participants' answers were not as great as one could expect. Adults had greater results concerning the trust in CSR and its influence on an adult's purchasing decisions, but all the gaps were not statistically significant, and the effect size values indicated a negligible impact on CSR. Both age groups gave relatively equal responses to questions about CSR importance, meaning that the issue of sustainability is equally important to everyone.

Moreover, the current research has revealed some differences in how young individuals and adults perceive information related to CSR. According to the findings, young people get their opinions about CSR from social media, whereas adults have the possibility to verify the information and have a firsthand experience of CSR efforts.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become one of the most discussed concepts in modern business practice, broadly defined as the voluntary commitment of companies to operate ethically and contribute positively to society and the environment beyond their legal obligations (Carroll, 1991). As public scrutiny of corporate behavior increases, understanding how consumers perceive and respond to CSR has become increasingly important, not only for businesses seeking to build trust, but also for researchers seeking to understand how ethical consumerism is evolving across generations.

Aug 2026
Vol 10, No 1.

Although many studies have examined CSR and consumer trust, a critical gap remains: relatively few studies directly compare how youth consumers (high school and college students, broadly Generation Z) and adult consumers (Millennials and older generations) differ in the extent to which CSR shapes their trust in corporations. This distinction matters because Generation Z, defined in this study as individuals aged 15–24, represents the next group of consumers whose purchasing habits and brand loyalties are still in formation (Titko et al., 2021). If CSR shapes trust differently across age groups, this has meaningful implications for how businesses design and communicate their CSR initiatives.

Trust, as used in this study, refers to a consumer's willingness to rely on a corporation's behavior and decisions (Kraft et al., 2019). CSR perception refers to how individuals evaluate a company's social and ethical actions (Carroll, 1991). These definitions are adopted throughout the paper to ensure consistency.

This study makes two primary contributions. First, it provides empirical evidence on whether generational differences in CSR-driven trust exist or whether CSR has become a broadly shared societal value. Second, it examines whether the pathways through which trust is formed, social media and peer influence for youth versus formal verification and personal experience for adults, differ even when the underlying attitudes converge. Answering these questions helps researchers better understand ethical consumerism and helps clarify whether firms need generationally differentiated CSR communication strategies.

The paper is structured as follows: the Literature Review establishes the conceptual and theoretical foundations of CSR and trust, reviews generational differences in CSR perception, and identifies the research gap. The Methodology section details the research design, participants, instrumentation, and analytical approach. The Results section presents findings from Welch's unpaired t-tests and Cohen's d effect sizes across three constructs. The Discussion section interprets findings in relation to existing theory and sets out implications for research and practice.

The guiding research question is: To what extent do high school and university students' perceptions of corporate social responsibility influence their trust in corporations compared to adults?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Foundations of CSR

Corporate Social Responsibility has evolved considerably from its early conceptualizations as charitable giving into a multidimensional strategic framework. Carroll's (1991) Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility remains the foundational theoretical model in this field, organizing corporate obligations into four hierarchical tiers: economic (being profitable), legal (obeying the law), ethical (doing what is right beyond the law), and philanthropic (contributing to society). Crucially, Carroll's framework situates CSR not merely as helping others but as a balancing act between profitability and ethical responsibility,

establishing from the outset that CSR is both a business strategy and a moral signal.

Building on Carroll (1991), Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) provided early empirical evidence that CSR initiatives can strengthen consumer trust, but only when consumers perceive the CSR as genuine and aligned with their own values. This introduced a key theoretical tension: CSR functions as a signal of trustworthiness, but the signal fails when consumers detect inauthenticity or inconsistency. Kitzmüller and Shimshack (2012) further complicated this picture by framing CSR through an economic lens, arguing that firms may engage in CSR strategically to manage information asymmetries and cultivate trust, raising questions about whether observed CSR behavior reflects genuine values or calculated reputation management.

Authenticity emerges from this literature as the central moderating variable. Afzali and Kim (2021) identified perceived authenticity as the strongest predictor of whether CSR builds or erodes consumer trust, finding that skepticism about corporate motives substantially weakens the trust-building effect of CSR. Lee and Jeong (2022), studying Korean cosmetics consumers, similarly found that CSR congruence, the alignment between a company's stated values and its actual business practices, was critical for trust formation. Kraft et al. (2019) extended this by demonstrating that supply chain transparency increases trust across consumer groups, with particularly strong effects among younger consumers who are more sensitive to ethical inconsistency.

Together, these foundational works establish the theoretical framework underlying this study: CSR builds consumer trust, but this relationship is moderated by perceived authenticity, consistency, and transparency. The current study tests whether these dynamics operate similarly across age groups or whether youth and adults respond to CSR signals differently.

Generational Differences in CSR Perception

Many research suggests that generational cohort membership shapes how consumers evaluate and respond to CSR, though the picture is more nuanced than popular narratives suggest.

Moisescu and Gică (2020), comparing Generation X and Generation Y (Millennial) consumers, found that younger consumers held more positive attitudes toward social and environmental CSR programs and demonstrated higher brand loyalty toward socially responsible companies. This supports the idea that younger generations are more ethically oriented as consumers. Titko et al. (2021) extended this analysis to Generation Z, finding that while Gen Z members expressed stronger ethical values, they were simultaneously more skeptical of corporate CSR claims, a paradox suggesting that heightened awareness of CSR can coexist with lower trust in its authenticity. This tension between ethical orientation and skepticism is central to the present study's hypotheses.

Rank and Contreras (2021) further found that Millennials and younger generations integrate CSR into both consumption and career decisions, suggesting that ethical values are not confined to purchasing

behavior but reflect broader lifestyle orientations. This has practical significance: if younger consumers are evaluating employers as well as products through a CSR lens, the stakes of CSR communication are higher for this demographic.

However, Luger et al. (2021) introduced an important qualification: younger consumers frequently report strong ethical values yet do not consistently act on them when cost and convenience are at stake. This attitude-behavior gap is a recurring challenge in generational CSR research and is particularly relevant to student populations, who may hold strong CSR values while facing budget constraints that limit their ability to act on these preferences. This gap is directly addressed in this study through the CSR Behavioral Influence construct.

Pelikánová and Hála (2021) identified another relevant generational phenomenon they term "unconscious CSR consumption" among Generation Z, a pattern in which young consumers gravitate toward ethical brands without actively deliberating about CSR, but react with disproportionate distrust when a company is perceived as dishonest. Sawicka and Marcinkowska (2023) corroborated this, finding that only sincere CSR initiatives influenced purchase intentions among younger consumers. In contrast, Moisescu and Gică (2020) found that adult consumers prioritized reliability over authenticity, preferring consistent, long-term corporate behavior to emotionally resonant CSR narratives.

CSR Skepticism and Its Relationship to Trust

Skepticism toward CSR is theoretically distinct from general distrust of corporations. Rim and Kim (2016) differentiated between attribution-based skepticism, doubt about the underlying motives driving a company's CSR activities, and message-based skepticism, doubt about the accuracy of CSR communications. Both forms can undermine the trust-building potential of CSR, even when the underlying activities are positive. This distinction is theoretically significant because it suggests that companies may need to address not only what they do but why they are perceived to be doing it.

Afzali and Kim (2021) demonstrated that perceived authenticity directly counteracts skepticism, functioning as a mediating variable between CSR exposure and trust outcomes. This provides the theoretical rationale for Hypothesis 3 in the present study: if younger consumers are simultaneously more ethically attuned and more skeptical (Titko et al., 2021), then authenticity perceptions should have a stronger moderating effect on their trust than for adults, whose trust is more anchored in accumulated experience and formal verification.

Gaps in Existing Research and the Present Study's Contribution

Despite considerable scholarly attention to generational CSR differences, several important gaps remain. First, most studies use brand loyalty or purchase intention as dependent variables (Moisescu & Gică, 2020; Titko et al., 2021) rather than trust itself, which, as this study argues, is a conceptually distinct outcome. Behavioral compliance does not imply genuine trust. Second, most studies rely on broad

generational categories (Gen X vs. Gen Y vs. Gen Z) rather than making the practically meaningful comparison between current students and working adults, groups that differ not only in values but in financial autonomy and access to information. Third, the comparative literature rarely addresses the pathways through which CSR perceptions are formed, distinguishing, for example, between social media-mediated CSR awareness among youth and experience-based evaluation among adults.

The present study addresses these gaps by directly comparing youth (ages 15–24) and adult (ages 25+) consumers on three CSR constructs, trust, behavioral influence, and perceived importance, using a consistent survey instrument adapted from validated prior measures (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Afzali & Kim, 2021; Moisescu & Gică, 2020). The study also explores qualitative differences in how CSR attitudes are formed across age groups, moving beyond the attitude-level comparison that dominates existing literature.

Hypotheses

Based on the research discussed above, three hypotheses are proposed:

H1: High school and university students' perceptions of CSR will have a stronger positive effect on corporate trust than those of adults, reflecting greater sensitivity to ethical signals among younger consumers (Titko et al., 2021; Moisescu & Gică, 2020).

H2: Adult consumers will rely more heavily on utilitarian trust cues, such as reliability, consistency, and formal verification, than on CSR values when forming corporate trust (Moisescu & Gică, 2020).

H3: Perceived authenticity of CSR will exert a stronger moderating influence on trust among youth consumers than among adults, consistent with generational differences in skepticism and ethical sensitivity (Afzali & Kim, 2021; Rim & Kim, 2016; Titko et al., 2021).

The independent variable in this study is age group (youth vs. adult). The dependent variables are CSR trust, CSR behavioral influence, and perceived CSR importance, each measured as a composite score derived from Likert-scale survey items. No control variables were manipulated; however, demographic variables including gender, education, income, and geographic region were collected for descriptive purposes.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional survey design to examine the research question: To what extent do high school and university students' perceptions of corporate social responsibility influence their trust in corporations compared to adults? A cross-sectional design was

selected because the study compares pre-existing attitudes across two age groups at a single point in time, rather than introducing an intervention or tracking changes longitudinally (Moisescu & Gică, 2020; Titko et al., 2021). Survey-based quantitative methods are well established in CSR research for measuring ideas that cannot be directly observed such as trust, authenticity, and behavioral intention (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Afzali & Kim, 2021), and this approach allowed for efficient, structured comparison across groups. The study is associative rather than causal in orientation. The analytical goal was to identify whether meaningful differences exist in CSR-related trust between youth and adult consumers, and to describe patterns in how those attitudes are formed, not to establish causal relationships between variables.

Three hypotheses guided the study:

H1: High school and university students' perceptions of CSR will have a stronger positive effect on corporate trust than those of adults.

H2: Adult consumers will rely more on utilitarian trust cues (e.g., reliability, consistency, and independent verification) than on CSR values when forming trust.

H3: Perceived authenticity of CSR will exert a stronger moderating influence on trust among youth consumers than among adults.

The independent variable is age group (youth: ages 15–24; adults: ages 25+). The dependent variables are three composite constructs: CSR Trust, CSR Behavioral Influence, and CSR Importance, each derived from averaged Likert-scale and multiple-choice survey items. Demographic characteristics (gender, education, income, region) were collected for descriptive purposes only and were not included in statistical analyses.

Participants

Participants were categorized into two groups based on age: youth (high school and college students, ages 15–24) and adults (ages 25 and above). This division follows the consumer development theory described by Titko et al. (2021) and Rank and Contreras (2021), which identifies late adolescence and early adulthood as a critical period in which consumer values and brand-related attitudes are formed. Including high school students alongside college students reflects the reality that members of Generation Z are active consumers and are already developing the purchasing habits that will persist into adulthood.

Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling approach between January 12, 2026 and February 10, 2026. Recruitment materials, including a brief study description and a QR code linked to the online survey, were distributed through school-approved announcements, flyers, and direct outreach across the United States. Participation was entirely voluntary; no compensation was offered.

To be eligible for inclusion, participants were required to: (1) be aged 15 years or older; (2) be proficient in English; and (3) provide informed consent (or parental consent where applicable for minors).

Responses were excluded if they were incomplete, displayed clear patterns of inattentive responding, or

referred to monopolies or government-controlled entities rather than corporations operating in competitive markets. This exclusion criterion follows Kitzmüller and Shimshack (2012), who emphasize that CSR is most meaningfully studied in competitive market contexts where it functions as a differentiating factor. A total of 105 responses were collected; after screening, 102 valid responses were retained (youth: $n = 78$; adults: $n = 24$).

It should be noted that the youth group was considerably larger than the adult group. This imbalance in sample sizes was an acknowledged limitation that may have affected statistical power and the ability to detect true differences between groups. Welch's unpaired t-test was selected in part because it accommodates unequal sample sizes without assuming equal variances (West, 2021).

Materials and Instrumentation

Data were collected via an anonymous online survey administered through Google Forms, comprising approximately 35 items and taking approximately 15 minutes to complete. All responses were self-reported.

Questionnaire Development

The survey instrument was developed through a systematic adaptation of validated measures from three prior studies in the CSR literature:

- Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) provided the foundational items for measuring CSR-related consumer attitudes and trust outcomes. Their attitudinal measurement logic was adapted for use in a non-experimental survey context.
- Moisescu and Gică (2020) contributed items addressing environmental and social responsibility perceptions and brand loyalty, which were modified to focus on trust rather than loyalty outcomes.
- Afzali and Kim (2021) informed the items measuring perceived CSR authenticity and its role as a mediating factor in the CSR–trust relationship.

Where necessary, item wording was slightly modified to ensure age-appropriateness and contextual relevance for both youth and adult respondents, without altering the underlying construct being measured. A definition of CSR was provided to all participants at the beginning of the survey to establish a shared interpretive frame and minimize conceptual variation across respondents: "CSR is the idea that businesses should act ethically and take responsibility for their impact on society and the environment. It means a company voluntarily contributes to a more sustainable and positive world through its operations, such as reducing its carbon footprint or supporting community initiatives."

Survey Structure

The instrument was organized into four sections:

Aug 2026
Vol 10, No 1.

1. Demographic Information: Age group, gender, ethnicity, educational level, primary occupation, industry (where applicable), region, and approximate household income. These variables were collected for descriptive purposes and group classification.
2. Core CSR and Trust Measures (all participants): Eleven Likert-scale items assessing CSR trust, perceived authenticity, and behavioral intention toward socially responsible companies (adapted from Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Afzali & Kim, 2021). Sample items included: "I am more likely to trust a company that publicly supports social or environmental causes" and "If a company's CSR seems insincere, it reduces my trust in that company."
3. Behavioral and Attitudinal Items (all participants): Items assessing CSR-influenced purchasing frequency, perceived importance of CSR in purchasing decisions, and the relative weight of independent verification, long-term commitment, outcome reporting, and community involvement in evaluating CSR credibility.
4. Age-Specific Modules:
 - Youth Module (ages 15–24): Items examining social media as a source of CSR information, peer influence on brand trust, and willingness to support student-led CSR campaigns or accept lower pay to work for a socially responsible employer.
 - Adult Module (ages 25+): Items examining personal experience with companies as a basis for CSR trust, reliance on independent audits and certifications, consideration of long-term environmental and labor impacts, and past avoidance of companies based on ethical concerns.

The separation of age-specific modules reflects the exploratory component of this study. While the core constructs (CSR Trust, Behavioral Influence, and Importance) were measured using identical or equivalent items across both groups to enable direct statistical comparison, the age-specific items were designed to capture the distinct social and experiential contexts through which youth and adult consumers form their CSR attitudes. This approach acknowledges a recognized limitation: the use of different supplementary indicators across groups limits strict comparability on those items, and findings from the age-specific modules are treated as descriptive rather than statistical.

Response Scale

All core and behavioral items used a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree). A forced-choice, even-numbered scale was used deliberately to eliminate a neutral midpoint, requiring respondents to indicate a directional leaning. This is consistent with prior CSR survey methodology (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) and was intended to reduce response bias toward socially desirable non-commitment. Multiple-choice items were recoded to an equivalent six-point range for composite scoring purposes.

Validity and Reliability Considerations

Aug 2026
Vol 10, No 1.

The survey instrument drew on validated items from established CSR studies, which provides a degree of content validity. However, formal psychometric testing, including internal consistency analysis (e.g., Cronbach's alpha) and confirmatory factor analysis, was not conducted prior to data collection due to the constraints of this study's scope and timeline. This represents a limitation of the current study. Future research replicating this design should conduct pilot testing and reliability analysis to confirm that composite scores accurately capture the intended constructs before large-scale data collection.

Procedure

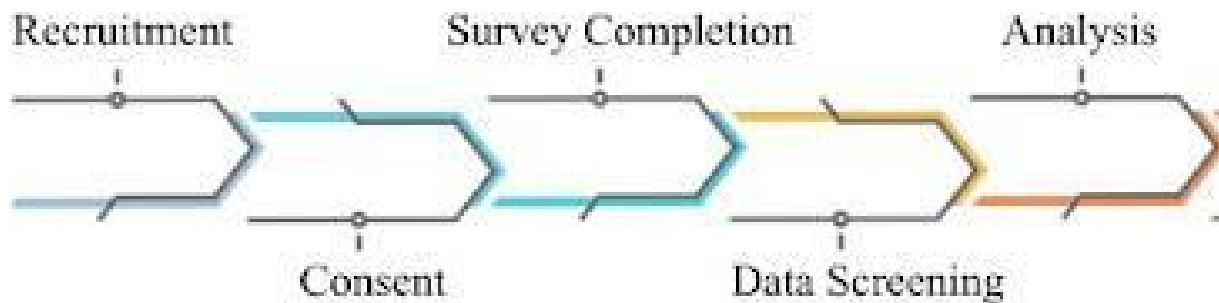
Data collection followed a standardized, documented sequence to ensure consistency across participants:

1. Recruitment: Materials were distributed through approved channels (school announcements, posted flyers, direct outreach) with no coercion or compensation.

2. **Informed Consent:** All participants reviewed an informed consent statement prior to beginning the survey. For participants under 18, administrative consent from a school or organizational representative was also obtained.
3. **Survey Completion:** Participants completed the anonymous survey individually, at their own pace, with no time limit. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.
4. **Data Storage:** Completed responses were automatically stored in a password-protected Google account, accessible only to the researcher and faculty advisor. No follow-up contact occurred with any participant.

Figure 1.

Flowchart of Data Collection Procedure



Data Analysis

Raw survey data were exported from Google Forms to a spreadsheet for cleaning and analysis. Prior to statistical testing, responses were screened for completeness and internal consistency. Entries that were incomplete, showed clear patterns of inattentive responding, or referenced monopolies or government entities were removed, consistent with the construct validity rationale described above (Kitzmueller & Shimshack, 2012).

Composite Score Construction

For each of the three primary constructs (CSR Trust, CSR Behavioral Influence, and CSR Importance), a composite score was calculated by averaging responses across all related Likert-scale and multiple-choice items within that construct. Higher composite scores indicate stronger CSR perceptions, greater perceived authenticity, and higher trust in CSR-engaged companies. This aggregation method minimizes measurement error at the individual item level and is consistent with established practice in CSR survey research (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Afzali & Kim, 2021).

Multiple-choice items were recoded to an equivalent six-point numeric scale prior to inclusion in

composite scores. For example, a five-category importance item ("Not important at all" to "Very important") was linearly rescaled to the 1–6 range to maintain comparability with Likert items.

Table 1.
Planned Statistical Outputs by Construct and Age Group

Construct	Sample Survey Item	Response Scale	Age Groups Compared	Planned Analysis
CSR Importance Composite	"How important is CSR when making purchasing decisions?"	Multiple Choice: Not Important to Important	High school, college, adults	Comparative analysis across age groups
CSR Trust Composite	"I am more likely to trust a company that publicly supports social or environmental causes."	1 (Strongly Disagree) - 6 (Strongly Agree) Likert Scale	High school, college, adults	Descriptive and comparative analysis
CSR Behavioral Influence Trust Composite	"I would pay more for a product from a company I believe is socially responsible."	1 (Strongly Disagree) - 6 (Strongly Agree) Likert Scale	High school, college, adults	Pattern analysis by age group

Statistical Tests

Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were calculated for each construct within each age group to characterize group-level response patterns before statistical comparison.

To test for statistically significant differences between youth and adult composite scores, Welch's unpaired t-test was applied to each construct independently. Welch's t-test was selected over Student's t-test because it does not assume equal variances between groups and is more appropriate when group sample sizes are unequal, both conditions present in this study (West, 2021). Statistical significance was evaluated at the conventional threshold of $p < .05$: results with $p < .05$ were interpreted as statistically significant, and the

null hypothesis of no group difference was rejected; results with $p \geq .05$ were interpreted as non-significant, and the null hypothesis was retained.

Cohen's d was calculated for each construct as a measure of practical effect size, independent of sample size. Effect sizes were interpreted using standard conventions: $d = 0.2$ (small), $d = 0.5$ (medium), and $d = 0.8$ (large) (Diener, 2010). This allowed for assessment of whether observed group differences, even if not statistically significant, were of practical or theoretical relevance.

The analysis was associative rather than causal, identifying patterns of relationship between age group and CSR construct scores without inferring that age group causes differences in CSR attitudes.

Age-specific module findings were analyzed descriptively only, using means and standard deviations, and were interpreted alongside the statistical results to provide contextual depth.

Table 2.

Definitions of Statistical Tests

Cohen's D	"one of several statistics used to examine differences between means, as in the case of the difference in mean outcome between participants who received treatment X and participants who received treatment Y." (Diener 2010)
Welch's Unpaired t -test	A powerful, easy-to-interpret statistical tool used to determine if the average values of two groups differ significantly, typically requiring data to be normally distributed (West 2021)

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report, including respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Participation was voluntary, risks were minimal and no greater than those encountered in everyday life, and all participant data were kept anonymous throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and parental/administrative consent was secured for minor participants where required. All methods are reported in sufficient detail to allow for replication; the full survey instrument is provided in Appendix F.

RESULTS

Overview

This section presents the findings from the statistical analyses conducted to examine differences between youth (ages 15–24, $n = 78$) and adult (ages 25+, $n = 24$) participants across three CSR constructs: CSR Trust, CSR Behavioral Influence, and CSR Importance. For each construct, descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) are reported first, followed by the results of Welch's unpaired t-test and Cohen's d effect size. Age-specific descriptive findings are then reported separately. Results are interpreted against the three study hypotheses and the conventional significance threshold of $p < .05$.

Participant

A total of 105 participants completed the survey. After screening for incomplete responses and entries referencing monopolies or government-controlled entities, which were excluded on construct validity grounds (Kitzmueller & Shimshack, 2012), the final analytic sample comprised 102 participants : youth ($n = 78$) and adults ($n = 24$).

Table 4 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The mean age of youth participants was 15.96 years, while the mean age of adult participants was 42.46 years. Gender distribution was broadly comparable across groups, with male participants comprising the slight majority in both. A small proportion of youth participants selected "Other" or "Prefer not to say." Demographic variables were collected for descriptive purposes only and were not included in statistical analyses.

Table 3.
Participant Demographics

Variable	Age Categories	
	Youth ($n = 78$)	Adults ($n = 24$)
Mean (M) Age	15.96	42.46
Female (%)	44.88%	45.83%
Male (%)	52.56%	54.17%
Other/Prefer not to say (%)	2.56%	0%

Note: The collection of participant demographics were for the use of descriptive purposes. Demographics

such as gender were not included in any statistical or inferential testing. It should also be noted that the youth group was considerably larger than the adult group, which may have affected statistical power in the analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Composite scores for each construct were calculated by averaging participant responses across all related Likert-scale and recoded multiple-choice items within that construct, on a scale from 1 to 6. Higher scores indicate stronger CSR perceptions, greater trust in CSR initiatives, or greater perceived importance of CSR. Table 4 presents the group means and standard deviations for each construct.

Table 4.
CSR Composite Scored by Age Group

Construct	Youth (M)	Youth (SD)	Adult (M)	Adult (SD)
CSR Trust	4.061431624	1.224174092	4.189236111	1.210173797

Construct	Youth (M)	Youth (SD)	Adult (M)	Adult (SD)
CSR Behavioral Influence	3.442307692	1.265791028	3.830729167	1.310388984
CSR Importance	4.126068376	1.336194447	4.135416667	1.234293064

Across all three constructs, both groups scored in the moderate-to-high range (between 3.44 and 4.19 on a six-point scale), suggesting broadly positive but not uncritical orientations toward CSR among both youth and adult participants. Adults scored marginally higher than youth on CSR Trust and CSR Behavioral Influence, while scores on CSR Importance were nearly identical across groups. No construct showed a large absolute difference between groups at the descriptive level, though the behavioral influence gap (0.39 points) was the most pronounced of the three.

CSR Trust

A Welch's unpaired t-test was conducted to compare CSR Trust composite scores between youth and adult participants. Adults ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.21$) scored marginally higher than youth ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.22$), a difference of 0.13 points on the six-point scale.

This difference was not statistically significant , $t(38) = 0.45$, $p = .65$. Because $p > .05$, the null hypothesis of no group difference on CSR Trust is retained . The effect size, Cohen's $d = 0.10$, falls below the conventional threshold for a small effect ($d = 0.20$), indicating that the observed group difference is negligible in practical terms.

Table 5.

Results from a Welch's Unpaired t-test Comparing Youth and Adults on CSR Trust

Test Statistics	Value
t (df = 38)	0.45
p-value	0.65
Cohen's d	0.10

These results do not support hypothesis 1, which predicted that youth consumers would show a stronger positive relationship between CSR perceptions and trust than adults. Instead, both groups reported comparable levels of CSR-influenced trust, clustering in the moderate range of the scale.

CSR Behavioral Influence

A second Welch's unpaired t-test compared CSR Behavioral Influence composite scores between groups. Adults ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.31$) reported modestly higher CSR-influenced purchasing behavior than youth ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.27$), a difference of 0.39 points, the largest mean difference observed across the three constructs.

This difference was nonetheless not statistically significant , $t(100) = 1.29$, $p = .21$. Because $p > .05$, the null hypothesis of no group difference on CSR Behavioral Influence is retained . Cohen's $d = 0.30$ falls in the small effect range, suggesting a modest but non-significant practical difference between groups.

Table 6.

Results from a Welch's Unpaired t-test Comparing Youth and Adults on CSR Behavioral Influence

Test Statistics	Value
t (df = 100)	1.28
p-value	0.21
Cohen's d	0.30

These findings partially relate to hypothesis 2, which predicted that adults would rely more on utilitarian cues than CSR values when forming trust. While adults did report slightly higher CSR-influenced purchasing behavior, contrary to hypothesis 2's implied expectation that CSR would be less salient for adults, the difference was not statistically significant. The direction of this effect, with adults scoring higher rather than lower on CSR behavioral influence, is discussed further in the Discussion section.

CSR Importance

A third Welch's unpaired t-test compared perceived CSR Importance between groups. Youth ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.34$) and adults ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.23$) reported virtually identical composite scores, differing by less than 0.01 points.

This difference was not statistically significant, $t(40) = 0.03$, $p = .97$. Because $p > .05$, the null hypothesis of no group difference on CSR Importance is retained. Cohen's $d = 0.01$ is negligible, indicating no meaningful practical difference between groups on this construct.

Table 7.

Results from a Welch's Unpaired t-test Comparing Youth and Adults on CSR Importance

Test Statistics	Value
t (df = 40)	0.03
p-value	0.97

Cohen's d	0.01
-----------	------

These results suggest that CSR is perceived as broadly equally important by both youth and adult consumers in this sample, providing no support for the view that ethical consumerism is uniquely or disproportionately a youth-driven phenomenon.

Summary of Statistical Findings

Across all three constructs, no statistically significant differences were found between youth and adult participants, and effect sizes ranged from negligible ($d = 0.01$ for CSR Importance) to small ($d = 0.30$ for CSR Behavioral Influence). Table 9 provides a consolidated summary of all statistical results.

None of the three hypotheses were statistically supported. However, the pattern of means across constructs, with adults scoring modestly higher on trust and behavioral influence, and both groups scoring nearly identically on importance, suggests a substantive similarity in CSR attitudes across generations that is itself a meaningful finding, as discussed in the following section.

Age Specific Descriptive Findings

In addition to the core constructs, age-specific survey modules were administered to each group to explore how CSR attitudes are formed and evaluated. These items used different indicators across groups and are therefore reported descriptively rather than statistically. They provide contextual depth to the core quantitative findings.

Youth-Specific Findings

Among youth participants, 31% reported social media (Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X) as their primary source of information about companies' CSR activities, the most frequently cited source in this group. Mean agreement with the statement that peer opinions influence their trust in a brand's ethics was $M = 3.72$ ($SD = 1.52$), suggesting moderate peer influence on CSR-related trust among youth.

Support for student-led campaigns pressuring companies to act more responsibly averaged $M = 3.36$ ($SD = 1.53$), and willingness to work for a socially responsible company at a lower salary averaged $M = 3.30$ ($SD = 1.41$). Both items fell in the moderate range, indicating ambivalence rather than strong endorsement among youth participants. Taken together, these findings suggest that while social media and peer influence shape the channel through which youth encounter CSR, their behavioral commitment

to acting on CSR values remains moderate, consistent with the attitude-behavior gap identified in the literature (Luger et al., 2021).

Adult-Specific Findings

Among adult participants, trust in CSR claims backed by independent audits or certifications was notably high, $M = 4.63$ ($SD = 1.01$), the highest mean score recorded across any age-specific item in either group. This suggests that formal verification is a particularly salient trust signal for adult consumers, consistent with hypothesis 2's prediction that adults rely more on utilitarian and evidence-based trust cues.

By contrast, avoidance of companies based on ethical reputation was relatively low among adults, $M = 2.88$ ($SD = 1.22$), while consideration of long-term environmental and labor impacts in purchasing decisions was moderate, $M = 3.83$ ($SD = 1.17$). This pattern suggests that while adults are attuned to CSR as a trust-relevant signal, ethical concerns do not consistently translate into active avoidance behavior, a finding that parallels the attitude-behavior gap observed among youth, though for different reasons.

Hypothesis Summary

- H1 (youth CSR perceptions more strongly predict trust than adults'): Not supported. No statistically significant difference in CSR Trust was found; both groups reported comparable moderate trust levels.
- H2 (adults rely more on utilitarian trust cues): Partially supported descriptively, not statistically. Adults' higher reliance on independent audits ($M = 4.63$) was consistent with these hypotheses, but adult CSR Behavioral Influence scores were also modestly higher than youth scores, contrary to the hypotheses's implied prediction that CSR would be less behaviorally influential for adults.
- H3 (authenticity moderates trust more strongly for youth): Not directly testable with the current composite scoring approach, as authenticity was embedded within the CSR Trust composite rather than analyzed as a separate mediating variable. This represents a methodological limitation addressed in the Discussion.

DISCUSSION

Overview

This study investigated whether youth consumers (ages 15–24) and adult consumers (ages 25+) differ meaningfully in how their perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) influence their trust in corporations. Three constructs were examined: CSR Trust, CSR Behavioral Influence, and CSR Importance. Across all three, Welch's unpaired t-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between groups, and Cohen's d effect sizes ranged from negligible to small. These findings run counter to

the dominant narrative in the existing literature, that younger consumers are more ethically oriented and more responsive to CSR than older generations (Moisescu & Gică, 2020; Titko et al., 2021), and thus require further explanation

The discussion that follows engages with three key questions raised by the findings: (1) Why did the expected generational differences in CSR trust not emerge? (2) What do the descriptive differences in how CSR attitudes are formed reveal about generational experience, even when attitudes become similar? (3) What does the unexpected direction of the behavioral influence finding, with adults scoring modestly higher than youth, suggest about the barriers to ethical consumerism?

The Convergence of CSR Trust Across Generations

The most striking finding of this study is not what differed between youth and adult participants, but what did not. Both groups reported moderate CSR Trust scores (youth: $M = 4.06$; adults: $M = 4.19$) that were statistically indistinguishable, with a negligible effect size ($d = 0.10$). This directly contradicts hypothesis 1, which predicted stronger CSR-driven trust among youth, drawing on Titko et al.'s (2021) finding that Generation Z expresses stronger ethical values than older cohorts.

One theoretical explanation for this convergence lies in the growing acceptance CSR norms across the broader consumer culture. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) argued that CSR builds trust most effectively when it aligns with consumers' pre-existing values, but if CSR awareness has become sufficiently widespread through media, education, and marketing that both youth and adults now share a common evaluative framework for CSR, generational differences in outcome may diminish even as the pathways to those outcomes differ. The near-identical CSR Importance scores ($d = 0.01$) are consistent with this interpretation: if both groups assign similar importance to CSR, similar trust outcomes are to be expected.

A second explanation involves response convergence due to social desirability bias. Self-reported surveys on ethically charged topics are susceptible to respondents presenting themselves as more ethically minded than their actual behavior reflects (Luger et al., 2021). If both youth and adult participants inflated their reported CSR trust scores in ways that reflect social norms rather than genuine attitudes, this would artificially compress group differences. This does not invalidate the finding, but it does suggest caution in interpreting the convergence as evidence of genuine attitudinal equivalence rather than equivalent social desirability effects across groups.

A third possibility is methodological: the relatively small adult sample ($n = 24$) compared to the youth sample ($n = 78$) reduced statistical power, potentially obscuring real differences that a larger, more balanced sample would have detected. This limitation is discussed further below.

How CSR Attitudes Are Formed

While the statistical findings show similar attitudes, the descriptive findings from the age-specific modules reveal meaningful differences in the processes through which youth and adult consumers arrive at their CSR attitudes, a distinction that has important implications for CSR communication strategy even when outcome-level differences are small.

Among youth participants, social media emerged as the dominant channel through which CSR information is encountered, with 31% identifying platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter/X as their primary CSR information source. Peer influence on brand trust was moderate ($M = 3.72$), suggesting that youth consumers' CSR attitudes are shaped substantially by their digital and social environments rather than by direct experience with companies. This is consistent with Pelikánová and Hála's (2021) concept of "unconscious CSR consumption", whereby younger consumers absorb CSR-relevant signals through everyday social media exposure rather than deliberate evaluation, and with Sawicka and Marcinkowska's (2023) finding that only authentic, socially visible CSR resonates with Generation Z.

Among adult participants, by contrast, independent verification emerged as the most trusted signal of CSR authenticity, with mean agreement for trusting audit-backed CSR claims reaching $M = 4.63$, the highest mean score observed across any age-specific item in either group. This aligns with Moisescu and Gică's (2020) finding that adult consumers prioritize reliability and consistency over emotional resonance when evaluating CSR, and with Lee and Jeong's (2022) emphasis on CSR congruence as a trust driver. Adults, drawing on accumulated experience with brands and greater familiarity with formal verification mechanisms, appear to apply a more systematic evaluative framework to CSR claims.

Taken together, these findings suggest a distinction that existing literature has not fully articulated: generational differences in CSR may be less about the outcomes of trust and more about the ways people develop trust. Youth arrive at moderate CSR trust through digital exposure and peer signaling; adults arrive at similar trust levels through formal evidence and personal experience. This pattern has direct implications for how scholars model CSR perception and how practitioners design communication strategies, as discussed below.

The Behavioral Influence Finding

The CSR Behavioral Influence construct produced the most theoretically interesting finding in this study. Adults scored modestly higher than youth ($M = 3.83$ vs. $M = 3.44$, $d = 0.30$), suggesting that CSR had a slightly greater self-reported influence on adults' purchasing behavior than on youths', a direction opposite to what hypothesis 2 and much of the generational CSR literature would predict (Moisescu & Gică, 2020; Rank & Contreras, 2021).

This finding is best understood through the lens of financial autonomy and structural constraint. Luger et al. (2021) documented a well-established attitude-behavior gap in younger consumers, noting that while youth frequently report strong ethical values, these values are often overridden by cost and convenience

considerations. High school and college students, who comprised the youth group in this study, typically have limited disposable income and reduced decision-making power over household purchases. A youth participant may genuinely value CSR while being structurally unable to act on that value at the point of purchase. Adult consumers, with greater financial independence, face fewer such constraints and may therefore be better positioned to translate CSR attitudes into purchasing behavior.

This interpretation reframes the behavioral influence finding not as evidence that adults care more about CSR than youth, but as evidence that adults are better positioned structurally to act on CSR values they may hold with equal or lesser intensity. This has implications for how the attitude-behavior gap is understood across generations: the gap may be narrower for adults not because their values are stronger, but because their circumstances permit greater behavioral expression of those values.

Engagement with Surrounding Ideas

The findings of this study contribute to two ongoing debates in the CSR literature.

The first concerns whether CSR is a generationally specific or broadly societal value. The dominant framing in popular discourse and much academic literature positions ethical consumerism as a distinctively youthful phenomenon (Rank & Contreras, 2021; Titko et al., 2021). The present findings challenge this framing: if youth and adults report statistically equivalent levels of CSR trust and importance, then CSR may have matured from a generational marker into a broadly shared consumer norm, one that transcends cohort boundaries even if it is expressed and communicated differently across age groups. This is consistent with Carroll's (1991) foundational argument that ethical and philanthropic responsibilities are not generationally bounded but reflect broader societal expectations of business.

The second debate concerns the role of authenticity in CSR-trust relationships. Afzali and Kim (2021) and Rim and Kim (2016) both emphasize authenticity and skepticism as critical moderating variables in CSR's effect on trust. The present study embedded authenticity items within the broader CSR Trust composite rather than testing it as a standalone mediating variable, which limits the ability to directly test hypothesis 3. However, the descriptive finding that youth consumers are more reliant on socially mediated CSR signals, which are less formally verifiable than audit certifications, is consistent with the theoretical prediction that authenticity perceptions operate differently across age groups. Youth consumers, lacking access to formal verification mechanisms and relying on peer signals, may be simultaneously more vulnerable to CSR inauthenticity and more reactive when inauthenticity is perceived, consistent with Pelikánová and Hála's (2021) finding that Generation Z reacts aggressively to perceived corporate dishonesty.

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the CSR and ethical consumerism literature in two primary ways. First, it provides empirical evidence that challenges the assumption of strong generational divergence in CSR attitudes, suggesting instead that CSR trust and importance may be converging across age cohorts as CSR norms diffuse throughout consumer culture. Future theoretical models of CSR perception should account for the possibility that generational differences are more pronounced at the level of information processing and attitude formation than at the level of attitudinal outcomes.

Second, the distinction between similar results but different reasons, documented here through the contrast between youth social media reliance and adult preference for formal verification, suggests a need for more nuanced models of CSR trust formation that incorporate information source, verification access, and social influence as moderating variables alongside the authenticity and skepticism dimensions identified by Afzali and Kim (2021) and Rim and Kim (2016).

Practical Implications

For businesses and CSR practitioners, the findings carry three actionable implications.

First, the finding that both age groups assign similar importance to CSR suggests that CSR communication should be treated as a universal strategic priority rather than a niche strategy aimed primarily at younger consumers. Companies that treat CSR as a tool for youth engagement risk underinvesting in CSR communication toward adult consumers who are equally attentive, and, as this study suggests, may be more behaviorally responsive.

Second, the divergence in information channels suggests that generationally differentiated communication strategies are warranted even when attitudinal targets are similar. For youth consumers, authentic CSR communication through social media, co-created with or endorsed by peers rather than broadcast by the company, is likely to be more trust-building than formal reports. For adult consumers, third-party verification, certification, and long-term consistency in CSR activity are the most credible trust signals, consistent with their higher reliance on audit-backed claims ($M = 4.63$).

Third, the behavioral influence gap, with adults more likely to translate CSR values into purchasing behavior, suggests that CSR messaging aimed at driving purchase behavior (as opposed to building brand trust) may be more immediately effective among adult consumer segments. For youth consumers, CSR engagement may be better cultivated through channels that reduce the structural barriers between values and behavior, such as accessible pricing, student discounts on ethical products, or participatory CSR initiatives that do not require purchasing power to engage with.

Limitations

Several limitations constrain the interpretive scope of this study and should be considered when evaluating its findings.

Sample size and composition. The most significant methodological limitation is the imbalance between the youth ($n = 78$) and adult ($n = 24$) samples. This disparity reduced statistical power in the statistical analyses, increasing the likelihood of Type II error, failing to detect a true difference between groups. It is possible that statistically significant generational differences exist in the broader population but were undetectable with the current adult sample size. Additionally, the convenience sampling approach, centered on school-approved recruitment channels, likely overrepresented students and underrepresented adults from diverse socioeconomic and occupational backgrounds, limiting generalizability.

Self-report bias. All data were self-reported, and CSR is a socially desirable topic. Participants may have reported stronger CSR values and higher trust than their actual behavior reflects, a limitation consistent with the attitude-behavior gap documented by Luger et al. (2021). Survey-based research cannot capture the gap between stated values and real purchasing decisions, particularly when cost, convenience, and habit are not directly measured.

Cross-sectional design. Because data were collected at a single point in time, it is not possible to determine whether observed similarities between youth and adult attitudes reflect a genuine convergence of values across generations or whether today's youth will develop different CSR attitudes as they age and gain financial autonomy. A longitudinal design tracking the same participants over time would be needed to answer this question.

Reliability and validity. Formal testing reliability and validity of the survey instrument, including Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency and confirmatory factor analysis, was not conducted prior to data collection. While the instrument drew on validated items from established prior studies, the absence of pilot testing means that the reliability of the composite scores cannot be formally confirmed within this study.

Age-specific module comparability. The use of different survey items in the youth and adult modules limits direct statistical comparison on those items. Age-specific findings are reported descriptively, but the use of distinct indicators introduces a degree of construct inequivalence that constrains cross-group interpretation.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should address these limitations through several design enhancements. A larger and more balanced sample, with equal or near-equal representation of youth and adult participants, would

substantially improve statistical power and allow for more confident detection of group differences.

Incorporating observational measures of actual purchasing behavior, such as purchasing records or behavioral experiments, would reduce reliance on self-report and better capture the attitude-behavior relationship. A longitudinal design tracking CSR attitudes across the transition from youth to adulthood would illuminate whether generational differences are stable or developmental in nature. Finally, testing CSR authenticity as a standalone mediating variable, rather than embedding it within a broader trust composite, would allow for direct testing of hypotheses three and a more rigorous examination of the role of skepticism and authenticity in shaping generational CSR trust.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine whether and how high school and university students differ from adult consumers in the extent to which CSR perceptions shape their corporate trust. The findings, while not statistically significant, offer a substantive contribution to the debate surrounding generational differences in ethical consumerism. Contrary to the expectation that youth consumers would show stronger CSR-driven trust, the data suggest that both groups hold broadly similar CSR attitudes, characterized by moderate trust, moderate behavioral influence, and nearly identical perceived importance of CSR.

The more theoretically interesting finding lies not in the outcomes but in the pathways: youth consumers form CSR attitudes through social media and peer influence, while adults rely on formal verification and accumulated experience with brands. This divergence in formation pathways, despite convergence in attitudinal outcomes, suggests that CSR has become a broadly shared consumer value whose expression is shaped by the sources of information and structural circumstances of different age groups rather than by fundamentally different ethical orientations.

For researchers, this points toward a more nuanced model of generational CSR perception, one that distinguishes between attitude formation processes and attitudinal outcomes, and that takes seriously the structural constraints that mediate the translation of CSR values into consumer behavior. For practitioners, it underscores the need for generationally differentiated CSR communication strategies even when the ultimate trust-building goal is shared across consumer segments.

This study is necessarily limited by its sample size, cross-sectional design, and self-report methodology. Future research employing larger, more balanced samples, longitudinal tracking, and behavioral measures would build substantially on these findings. What the present study begins to establish, that CSR is neither exclusively a youth concern nor a domain of strong generational division, is itself a meaningful contribution to a literature that has too often assumed generational divergence rather than empirically tested for it.

REFERENCES

- Afzali, H., & Kim, S. S. (2021). Consumers' responses to corporate social responsibility: The mediating role of CSR authenticity. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 2224. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/4/2224>
- Carroll, A. B. (1991). The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders. *Business Horizons*, 34(4), 39–48. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/4883660>
- Chatzopoulou, E., & De Kiewiet, A. (2021). Millennials' evaluation of corporate social responsibility: The wants and needs of the largest and most ethical generation. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 20(3), 521–534. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1882>
- Diener, M. (2010). Cohen's d. In I. B. Weiner & W. E. Craighead (Eds.), *The Corsini encyclopedia of psychology*. Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0200>
- Goel, M., & Ramanathan, P. (2014). Business ethics and corporate social responsibility – Is there a dividing line? *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 11, 49–59. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671\(14\)00175-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(14)00175-0)
- Kitzmueller, M., & Shimshack, J. (2012). Economic perspectives on corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 50(1), 51–84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23269969>
- Kraft, T., et al. (2019). Consumer trust in social responsibility communications: The role of supply chain visibility [Working paper]. SSRN. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3407617
- Kurniawan, M. A., & Munandar, A. (2025). Corporate social responsibility, reputation, and financial performance. *Journal of Syntax Literate*, 10(4), 3770–3783. <https://doi.org/10.36418/syntax-literate.v10i4.56789>
- Le, T. T. (2023). Corporate social responsibility, authenticity and firm performance in an emerging market. *Dalat University Journal of Science*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376552265>
- Lee, S.-H., & Jeong, G.-Y. (2022). The effect of corporate social responsibility compatibility and authenticity on brand trust and corporate sustainability management: For Korean cosmetics companies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 895823. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.895823>
- Luger, M., et al. (2021). Support for corporate social responsibility among generation Y consumers in advanced versus emerging markets. *International Business Review*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354057866>
- Moisescu, O. I., & Gică, O. A. (2020). The impact of environmental and social responsibility on customer

- loyalty: A multigroup analysis among generations X and Y. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344153775>
- Pelikánová, R. M., & Hála, M. (2021). CSR unconscious consumption by generation Z in the COVID-19 era—Responsible heretics not paying CSR bonus? *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 14(8), 390. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jrfm14080390>
- Rank, S., & Contreras, F. (2021). Do millennials pay attention to corporate social responsibility in comparison to previous generations? Are they motivated to lead in times of transformation? A qualitative review of generations, CSR and work motivation. *Journal of Sustainable Business*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40991-020-00058-y>
- Rim, H., & Kim, S. (2016). Dimensions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) skepticism and their impacts on public evaluations toward CSR. *Journal of Public Relations Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2016.1261702>
- Sawicka, J., & Marcinkowska, E. (2023). Environmental CSR and the purchase declarations of generation Z consumers. *Sustainability*, 15(17), 12759. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151712759>
- Sen, S., & Bhattacharya, C. B. (2001). Does doing good always lead to doing better? Consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 38(2), 225–243. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.38.2.225.18838>
- Titko, J., et al. (2021). Differences in attitude to corporate social responsibility among generations. *Sustainability*, 13(19), 10944. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910944>
- West, R. M. (2021). Best practice in statistics: Use the Welch t-test when testing the difference between two groups. *Annals of Clinical Biochemistry*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0004563221992088>