



CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY PERFORMANCE: A STUDY OF UNILEVER NIGERIA PLC

SUNDAY KOBIRUO EDEGWA, PhD

Department of Business Administration
Faculty of Management Sciences
University of Lagos
sedegwa@unilag.edu.ng

PATRICK SUNDAY OKONJI, PhD

Department of Business Administration
Faculty of Management Sciences
University of Lagos

ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility has developed into a vital framework within modern business practices, gaining widespread recognition for its significant impact on enhancing business sustainability performance. This research examined the effect of corporate social responsibility on business sustainability performance. Business sustainability performance was measured across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Using a cross-sectional survey, data were collected from 107 managerial staff members at Unilever Nigeria Plc. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software, version 25. The results show a strong positive relationship between corporate social responsibility and business sustainability performance. This study concluded that corporate social responsibility has a positive and significant effect on business sustainability performance, confirming that it positively and significantly affects economic, social, and environmental sustainability within organizations. It was recommended that organizations embed corporate social responsibility initiatives into their core business strategies to ensure business sustainability.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Economic Sustainability Performance, Social Sustainability Performance, Environmental Sustainability Performance, Business Sustainability Performance

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly important in the global business landscape, as companies face mounting pressures to balance profitability with social and environmental responsibilities. However, the effectiveness of CSR in driving business sustainability, particularly in emerging markets like Nigeria, remains a subject of debate. In Nigeria, where socio-economic challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation are prevalent, integrating CSR as a company's corporate strategy and operations becomes necessary. It makes it an indispensable part of the business rather than trivialising it as a peripheral activity. This can be attained by harmonising CSR with the company's mission, vision, and values and integrating it into corporate programs and procedures.



Corporate social responsibility has evolved as a critical paradigm in contemporary business practices, increasingly recognized for its potential to influence business sustainability performance. CSR has transitioned from being a voluntary act of goodwill to a strategic imperative for businesses worldwide. As Carroll (2015) asserts, CSR is conceptualized as a multi-layered construct comprising economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. This hierarchical model of Carroll (2015) underscores the evolving expectations placed on businesses to balance profit-making with broader societal contributions. Corporate social responsibility is shaped by the interplay between business and society, where firms are expected to align their operations with societal expectations.

Business sustainability performance (BSP) refers to a firm's ability to manage its economic, social, and environmental impacts to ensure long-term success. The relationship between CSR and business sustainability performance has garnered significant academic attention, with numerous studies highlighting the positive impacts of CSR on various dimensions of sustainability, including economic, social, and environmental performance. Tai and Chuang (2014) assert that CSR practices contribute to business sustainability by enhancing corporate reputation, fostering stakeholder engagement, and driving innovation. In addition, clear and effective dissemination of CSR initiatives fosters confidence among stakeholders and improves the organization's perception of (Wan Afandi, Jamal & Mat Saad, 2021).

Nigeria presents an exceptional framework for studying the CSR and BSP relationship, as momentous economic, social, and environmental challenges, including poverty, inequality, corruption, and ecological degradation, the absence of robust regulatory settings and effective enforcement mechanisms bedevils the country. These challenges create both obstacles and opportunities for CSR. Businesses in emerging markets often face conflicting pressures to meet immediate financial targets while addressing long-term sustainability goals. This situates CSR as an optional or peripheral activity rather than a core corporate business strategy. Unilever Nigeria PLC provides a compelling case study for examining the influence of CSR on business sustainability performance through the implementation of robust CSR initiatives. Unilever has a long-standing commitment to CSR, with initiatives spanning several sectors, including health, education, social, environmental sustainability, and others. Unilever's CSR strategy is closely aligned with its corporate purpose of making sustainable living commonplace. The company's attitude to CSR is not only philanthropic but also strategic, focusing on creating shared value for both the business and society. This is evident in Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan, which aims to decouple the company's growth from its environmental footprint while improving its positive social impact.



Despite these expectations, the relationship between CSR and business sustainability performance in the Nigerian context is erroneously contextualized, creating a critical gap in the literature. Most studies on CSR in Nigeria focus chiefly on financial performance, disclosure effects, share price, and profitability, not linked to long-term sustainability (economic, environmental, social) outcomes, specifically in fast-moving consumer foods (FMCG multinationals (Anyanwu & Obinna, 2022; Ogunleye, Udofia, Amodu, & Korubo, 2023); Ugonna, Ojeh, Chukwu, Nkwo, & Agu (2025)). This study focused on CSR's relationship with business sustainability performance (triple-bottom-line outcomes) in a major FMCG multinational (Unilever Nigeria), extending beyond financial analyses only. Existing literature indicates that CSR studies in Nigeria treat CSR practices as peripheral or philanthropic, optional, disconnected from integration into corporate sustainability strategy (Ayoola, 2017). Many organizations struggle to align CSR initiatives with corporate strategy and profitability objectives. This study examines whether CSR at Unilever Nigeria is deliberately entrenched and how such embedment affects sustainability performance, providing firm-level evidence. Also, CSR sustainability studies in Nigeria are sector-focused (e.g., oil & gas, financial services, telecommunications & broad multinational samples) or conceptual, with few single-firm empirical analyses in the FMCG sector. Studies highlight inconsistent CSR implementations and a lack of contextualised firm-specific analysis (Ogungbade, 2020; Adeyemi & Taiwo, 2020). By focusing on Unilever Nigeria Plc, this study provides detailed, contextual, firm-level evidence from the FMCG sector, an under-researched industry in Nigerian CSR sustainability literature. Hence, the study aims to examine the effect of corporate social responsibility on business sustainability performance in Unilever Nigeria PLC.

The relevance of this study cannot be overemphasized as the findings provided in-depth and valuable insights for policymakers, business leaders, and academics and contributed to the development of more effective CSR strategies that promote sustainable development in Nigeria and beyond. For MNCs operating in Nigeria, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of how CSR initiatives can influence business sustainability performance. By examining the relationship between CSR and sustainability, the study offers theoretical and practical insights into the effectiveness of CSR strategies in addressing socioeconomic and environmental challenges. Business leaders can leverage these findings to refine their CSR policies, ensuring that they are not only aligned with global standards but also responsive to local needs and conditions. Enhanced CSR strategies can lead to increased corporate reputation, stakeholder trust, and competitive advantage, thereby contributing to long-term business success and resilience in a challenging operating environment.



Policymakers and government agencies in Nigeria should advance the findings by formulating policies and regulations that are conducive to and favorable for business growth and stability. The research highlights the role of CSR in addressing critical issues like poverty, education, and environmental sustainability, which are central to Nigeria's socioeconomic development agenda. The insights provided can inform the design and implementation of policies that encourage corporate engagement in socially responsible practices, creating a conducive environment for CSR initiatives.

The study contributes to the academic discourse on CSR and business sustainability by providing empirical evidence specific to the Nigerian context. This research enriches the existing body of knowledge and provides a prospect for future research examining CSR in diverse regions and economic settings. For local communities in Nigeria, the study's insights into CSR practices offer an understanding of how corporate activities can contribute to societal well-being and environmental stewardship. By showcasing the benefits of CSR initiatives, such as improved education, healthcare, and environmental protection, the research underscores the positive impact that businesses can have on communities. This awareness can empower communities to engage with corporations and advocate for meaningful CSR activities that address their specific needs and challenges.

Investors and financial analysts can use the findings of this study to assess the sustainability and social impact of their investments in Nigerian MNCs, in investment decisions, risk management strategies, and corporate valuation. Companies with strong CSR practices are often viewed more favorably by investors who are increasingly prioritizing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria in their investment strategies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Corporate social responsibility

CSR is a critical concept that evolved to highlight and understand the link between business operations and societal expectations. This conceptual review explores the effect of CSR on business sustainability performance, drawing on a broad spectrum of literature and recent empirical findings. Carroll (2015, 2021) defines CSR as a business's commitment to act ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life for its workforce, their families, local communities, and society at large.

Tai and Chuang (2014) define CSR as an essential business practice that involves taking responsibility for the company's impact on society and the environment. They argue that CSR is no longer a voluntary or peripheral activity but a core component of business strategy necessary for survival and success in today's globalized world. According to Tai and Chuang, CSR requires a range of activities, from reducing environmental footprints to improving labor practices and community engagement. They emphasize that



businesses that fail to adopt CSR practices risk losing their competitive edge and facing backlash from consumers, regulators, and other stakeholders.

The understanding of CSR has evolved, moving from a narrow focus on philanthropy to a broader recognition of its strategic importance. This evolution reflects the growing recognition of CSR as a crucial driver of sustainability performance. Schwartz and Cragg (2017) expand on this by discussing the ethical dimensions of CSR, arguing that businesses have a moral obligation to act responsibly. They suggest that ethical CSR practices are not only beneficial for society but also enhance a company's long-term sustainability by building a strong ethical reputation.

Business Sustainability Performance

Business sustainability performance has gained significant attention as organizations increasingly recognize the importance of integrating sustainability into their operations. BSP is a multidimensional concept encompassing economic, environmental, and social aspects, aiming to create long-term value for both businesses and their stakeholders. Ng and Rezaee (2015) define BSP as the pursuit of a balanced approach where companies seek to maximize financial performance while simultaneously addressing environmental stewardship and social equity. This definition emphasizes that BSP is not just about profitability but also about how a company conducts its business in ways that benefit society and the environment. Business Sustainability Performance refers to the ability of an organization to achieve long-term economic, environmental, and social outcomes through the effective application of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices that create sustainable value for stakeholders and support sustainable development (Ma et al., 2023; Sarfraz et al., 2023; Zhang & Hao, 2024).

The economic dimension of BSP focuses on the financial performance, which remains a critical aspect of sustainability. According to Ng and Rezaee (2020), sustainable businesses should aim to achieve financial growth and profitability while also considering the long-term economic impacts of their activities. This involves strategic investments in sustainable technologies and practices that can yield cost savings, increased efficiency, and enhanced competitiveness.

The environmental dimension of BSP involves management of a company's impact on the natural environment. Tahir and Darton (2010) highlight the importance of reducing carbon footprints, conserving natural resources, and minimizing waste as key elements of environmental performance. Businesses that excel in this dimension adopt practices such as recycling, using renewable energy, and designing products with lower environmental impacts.

The social dimension of BSP focuses on the impact a company has on its employees, customers, communities, and other stakeholders. Morioka and de Carvalho (2016) suggest that companies committed to social sustainability prioritize fair labor practices, community engagement, and ethical business



conduct. Social sustainability also involves creating societal value by addressing social issues such as inequality, education, and health. Bansal, Jain, and Garg (2022) emphasize that companies that engage in socially responsible activities can build stronger relationships with stakeholders, thereby increasing trust and long-term success.

Measuring BSP is complex due to the multidimensional nature of sustainability. Büyüközkan and Karabulut (2018) point out that traditional financial metrics are insufficient for capturing the full spectrum of sustainability performance. Instead, a combination of economic, environmental, and social indicators is necessary to assess BSP broadly. For instance, environmental performance can be measured with metrics such as greenhouse gas emissions and resource efficiency, while social performance can be evaluated by employee satisfaction and community impact. However, the lack of standardized measurement frameworks poses a challenge for businesses trying to benchmark their sustainability efforts.

Several empirical studies have demonstrated that CSR initiatives positively influence BSP by fostering long-term economic, environmental, and social benefits. Kraus, Rehman, and García (2020) highlights that, businesses engaging in CSR activities tend to experience improved financial performance and enhanced corporate reputation. This is because CSR initiatives often lead to better stakeholder relationships, increased customer loyalty, and a more motivated workforce, all of which contribute to sustainable business growth.

Zaman, Jain, Samara and Jamali (2022) examine how CSR practices influence sustainability performance and argue that companies with robust CSR strategies tend to outperform their peers in environmental and social metrics. This finding underestimates the significance of CSR in stimulating sustainable business outcomes. Similarly, García-Sánchez and García-Sánchez (2020) investigate the impact of CSR on innovation and sustainability, demonstrating that CSR initiatives can create new business opportunities and improved operational efficiencies. This aligns with the view that CSR is not just a cost but a strategic investment that can yield significant returns. Bacinello, Tontini, and Alberton (2020) also found that CSR practices are associated with increased innovation within organizations. Their study reveals that companies that prioritize social responsibility are more likely to invest in sustainable technologies and processes that enhance operational efficiency and reduce environmental impact. Malik, Mughal, Azam, Cao, Wan, and Zhu (2021) further emphasize the role of CSR in enhancing social sustainability. Their research emphasizes that CSR initiatives focused on community development, fair labor practices, and ethical governance contribute to social well-being and reduce social inequalities. Such initiatives are crucial for building a positive corporate image, fostering trust amongst stakeholders, and supporting the long-term sustainability of businesses.



Abbas (2020) provides evidence that CSR initiatives focused on environmental sustainability, such as reducing carbon emissions and minimizing waste, lead to cost savings and improved operational efficiency. These practices not only enhance environmental performance but also contribute to the financial sustainability of businesses. Moneva, Bonilla-Priego, and Ortiz-Martínez (2020) examine the social dimension of CSR and its effect on BSP. Their study shows that companies that engage in CSR activities, promote social equity and community development, are more likely to experience long-term success. By addressing social issues, businesses can create a positive impact on society while simultaneously building a loyal customer base and strengthening their market position. Sánchez-Hernández and Vázquez-Burguete (2021) emphasize the importance of integrating CSR into corporate governance to ensure its effectiveness in enhancing BSP. Their research reveals that companies with strong governance structures are better equipped to implement CSR strategies that align with their sustainability goals. Effective governance ensures that CSR initiatives are not only well-planned but also properly executed, leading to tangible improvements in sustainability performance.

Despite the positive effects of CSR on business sustainability performance, several challenges remain. Fatima and Elbanna (2023) discuss the difficulties in measuring the impact of CSR initiatives, noting that the lack of standardized metrics makes it challenging to assess their effectiveness correctly. This issue is further complicated by varying stakeholders' expectations, which can lead to conflicts and trade-offs. Moreover, Barauskaite and Streimikiene (2021) emphasize the need for businesses to adapt their CSR strategies to changing environmental and social conditions. They argue that CSR must be dynamic, evolving in response to new challenges and opportunities to remain effective in promoting sustainability.

Stakeholder Theory

The underlying theory is the stakeholders' theory, propounded by Freeman (1984). Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar and De Colle (2010) laid the groundwork for stakeholder theory, proposing that businesses must engage not only with shareholders but also with a broader set of stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, local communities, government agencies, and even the environment. This approach shifts the focus from profit maximization to value addition for all stakeholders, thereby fostering long-term business sustainability. Freeman et al. (2010) further developed this idea by exploring how stakeholder engagement contributes to the ethical foundation of business practices, arguing that a firm's success depends on its ability to balance the interests of various stakeholder groups. Mahajan, Lim, Sareen, and Kumar's (2023) study confirmed that firms that successfully engage stakeholders are more likely to achieve sustainable competitive positioning in the market.



Stakeholder theory is critically relevant to this study. Firstly, CSR as stakeholder engagement focuses on events deliberately orchestrated to involve and benefit stakeholders, such as the local community, employees, customers, and the environment. These activities are fundamental to maintaining positive relationships, ensuring the organization's success, and improving the firm's profitability. Second, reputation and trust building in Nigeria's CSR activities can enhance a company's reputation and foster trust among stakeholders. Stakeholder theory emphasizes that reputation is a vital asset that can earn competitive advantages, customer loyalty, and employee satisfaction. Thirdly, CSR activities reduce risk mitigation, encourage firms address social and environmental concerns by reducing conflicts or legal challenges from stakeholders. In Nigeria, where businesses face social and environmental challenges, engaging in CSR can help mitigate these risks, ensuring smoother operations and protecting profitability. But in the Niger Delta region, where Multinational oil companies (MOCs) operate, there are many risks and conflicts because MOCs' activities are inimical to most local stakeholders, who disrupt their operations. The MOCs' CSR activities are not commensurate with the negative impacts of their operations. They have to do more to dissuade the locals from disrupting their operations. Finally, according to stakeholder theory, firms that engage in CSR activities often create new market opportunities and meet the needs of different stakeholders. Companies can tap into new customer segments, enhance their brand image, increase sales, and finally boost profitability.

A critical review of the literature on CSR and BSP, a conceptual framework is designed to demonstrate the practical and theoretical relationships linking the variables.

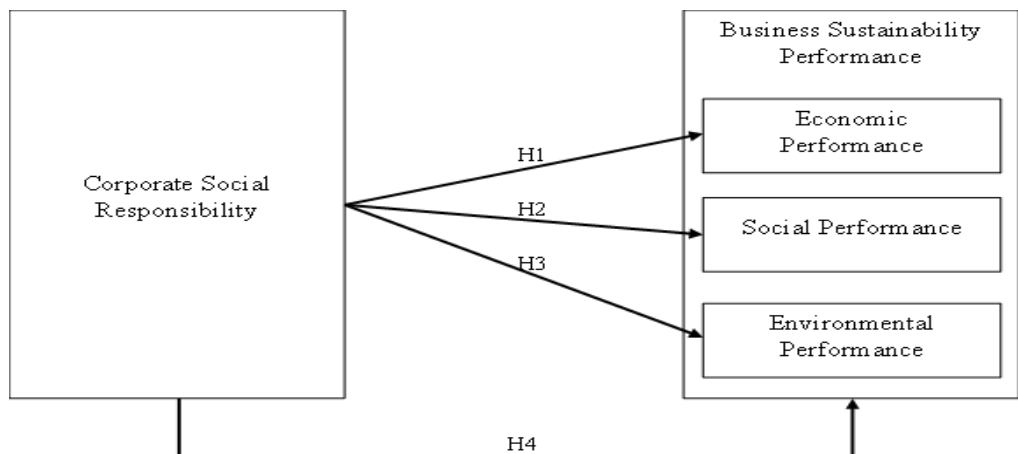


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
Source: Authors (2025)



METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted involving collecting data from a sample at a single point in time through a structured questionnaire to examine relationships among variables without manipulating them (Creswell, 2014; Babbie, 2010). The target population for this study comprises the top, middle, and lower-level management personnel of Unilever Nigeria Plc, totaling 768 employees. The study employed purposive sampling to select respondents from CSR, sustainability, and management units of Unilever Nigeria Plc. The study employed census sampling where the entire population was used. The respondents were stratified into management levels to ensure proportional representation. A self-structured 7-Point Likert scale questionnaire was utilized as the primary data collection tool, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), to measure the study constructs. Out of the 768 copies of the questionnaire distributed only 107 were filled, returned, and found usable for analysis, representing a response rate of 13.9%. Although relatively low, this rate is consistent with typical response levels in organizational and managerial surveys. This is justified by Baruch and Holtom (2008), who argued that response rates between 10% and 20% are common in studies involving corporate employees and managers. Therefore, the obtained response rate was considered acceptable for analysis.

This study employs face and construct validity to evaluate the research instrument. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient as presented in table 1.

Table 1: Reliability of Variables

S/N	Variables	Items	Cronbach Alpha
1	Corporate Social Responsibility	14	0.954
2	Business Sustainability Performance	17	0.949
3	Economic Sustainability Performance	5	0.927
4	Social Sustainability Performance	5	0.923
5	Environmental Sustainability Performance	7	0.933

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The reliability test, as indicated above shows that Cronbach's alpha values for all study constructs exceeded 0.90 maintaining high internal consistency.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis of Variables

The means and standard deviations of the variables are shown in Table 2. The average score for (CSR) is 5.6575, suggesting that respondents generally perceive a moderate to high level of CSR practices within their organization, with a standard deviation (SD) value of 1.4337, which shows some variability in the respondents' perceptions of CSR. Economic sustainability performance (ESP) has a mean score of 5.9533, the highest among the constructs. Indicating



a perceived high organization performance in economic sustainability, reflecting strong financial health, profitability, and long-term economic viability. The SD of value is 1.3983, revealing a moderate level of agreement among respondents. The average score for social sustainability performance (SSP) is 5.7215, indicating that respondents view their organization’s social sustainability efforts favorably. This reflects the organization's commitment to corporate social responsibility, such as employee welfare, community engagement, and ethical practices. The SD of 1.4660 is slightly higher than that for ESP, suggesting a broader range of opinions on the effectiveness of social sustainability initiatives. ENSP has a mean score of 5.9065, indicating that respondents believe their organization is performing well in environmental sustainability. This reflects efforts to minimize environmental impact, such as reducing carbon footprint, waste management, and sustainable resource use. The SD of 1.3959. Business sustainability performance (BSP), which aggregates the overall sustainability performance, has a mean score of 5.8604. This suggests that respondents view their organization as generally successful in integrating sustainability into business practices, balancing economic, social, and environmental aspects. The SD of 1.3598 indicates a moderate level of consensus among respondents, who perceived their organization’s business sustainability performance positively, but were doubtful about some practices.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Constructs

	Mean	Std. Deviation (SD)	N
CSR	5.6575	1.4337	107
ESP	5.9533	1.3983	107
SSP	5.7215	1.4660	107
ENSP	5.9065	1.3959	107
BSP	5.8604	1.3598	107

Source: Research computation (2025)

The relationships between CSR, ESP, SSP, ENSP, and BSP were examined using SPSS Version 25 employing linear regression.

Hypothesis Testing

H₀₁: Corporate social responsibility does not significantly affect the economic sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc.

Table 4.4 reveals that CSR has a significant positive coefficient r value of 0.770 and a p -value of $0.001 < 0.05$ on ESP. This indicates a strong, positive and significant effect of corporate social responsibility on ESP. The R^2 value is 0.594, indicating that approximately 59.4% of the variance in ESP can be explained by CSR. Thus, H_{01} , which states that corporate social responsibility does not significantly affect the economic sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc., is not supported.



Table 3: The Results of Regression Analysis of CSR on ESP

Path	Beta	t - value	p - value	R ²	Adj R ²
CSR-ESP	0.770	12.383	0.001	0.594	0.590

***significant at $p < 0.05$ level

H₀₂: Corporate social responsibility does not significantly affect the social sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc.

Table 4 shows that CSR has a significant positive coefficient (0.799; $p < 0.05$) on SSP. This suggests that corporate social responsibility has a strong, positive, and significant impact on social sustainability performance. The R² value is 0.638, indicating that 63.8% of SSP can be explained by CSR. Consequently, H₀₂, which states that corporate social responsibility does not significantly affect the social sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc, is not supported.

Table 4: The Results of Regression Analysis of CSR on SSP

Path	Beta	t - value	p - value	R ²	Adj R ²
CSR-SSP	0.799	13.602	0.001	0.638	0.634

***significant at $p < 0.05$ level

H₀₃: There is no significant effect of corporate social responsibility and the environmental sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc.

Table 5 reveals that CSR has a significant positive coefficient value of 0.763 and a p-value of 0.001 on ENSP, which is below the p-value threshold of 0.05. This indicates that the positive and significant effect of corporate social responsibility on environmental sustainability performance is strong. The R² value is 0.582, indicating that 58.2% of ENSP is explained by CSR. Thus, H₀₃, which states that there is no significant effect of corporate social responsibility and the environmental sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc, is not supported.

Table 5: The Results of Regression Analysis of CSR on ENSP

Path	Beta	t - value	p - value	R ²	Adj R ²
CSR ENSP	0.763	12.090	0.001	0.582	0.578

***significant at $p < 0.05$ level

H₀₄: There is no significant effect of corporate social responsibility on the business sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc.

Table 6 shows that CSR has a significant positive coefficient value of 0.812 and a p-value of 0.001 on BSP, which is below the p-value threshold of 0.05. This indicates that the positive and significant impact of corporate social responsibility on business sustainability in terms of collective economic, social, and environmental performance is strong. R² = 0.582: CSR explains 58.2% of the variance in BSP, demonstrating that CSR is a key driver of business sustainability across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Thus, H₀₄ states that there is no significant effect of corporate social responsibility on the business sustainability performance of Unilever Nigeria Plc, is not supported.



Table 6: The Results of Regression Analysis of CSR on BSP

Path	Beta	t – value	p - value	R ²	Adj R ²
CSR BSP	0.812	14.264	0.001	0.582	0.578

***significant at $p < 0.05$ level

Source: Field Survey (2025)

The results of each CSR dimension (ESP, SSP, and ENSP) explain a substantial portion of the variance in (BSP) when analysed individually. For instance, ESP alone explains $R^2 = 0.594$, SSP alone explains $R^2 = 0.638$, and ENSP alone explains $R^2 = 0.582$ of the variances in BSP. However, when all three dimensions are included simultaneously in the combined structural model, the aggregate R^2 for BSP decreases to $R^2 = 0.582$. This reduction in R^2 is expected and reflects the interrelated nature of BSP dimensions. When analysed individually, each BSP dimension captures both its unique variance and variance shared with other BSP dimensions in explaining CSR. In the combined model, the shared variance is partitioned among the predictors, leaving only the unique contribution of each BSP dimension. Consequently, the aggregate R^2 represents the total variance in BSP explained by the distinct, non-overlapping influence of all three BSP dimensions (Hair et al., 2019; Pedhazur, 1997; Gujarati & Porter, 2009). Furthermore, the decrease in aggregate R^2 underscores the conceptual and statistical overlap among BSP dimensions. High correlations among ESP, SSP, and ENSP reduce their incremental explanatory power in the joint model, even though each appears strongly predictive in isolation. This is consistent with multivariate and SEM principles, where bivariate R^2 values typically overestimate the independent predictive effect of correlated constructs relative to a full structural model (Hair, Hult, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2021).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that the adoption of CSR positively and significantly enhances the business sustainability performance of the multinational firm. CSR positively and significantly influences each dimension of BSP; namely, ESP, SSP, and ENSP, indicating that socially responsible practices contribute to improved environmental, social, and economic sustainability outcomes within the organization. This result supports stakeholder theory, which posits that firms that responded effectively to stakeholder expectations achieve superior long-term performance and acceptability. The positive CSR–BSP relationship examined suggests that CSR initiatives enhance corporate reputation, stakeholder trust, operational continuity, and employee commitment, which collectively improve sustainability performance. This aligns with prior studies in developing economies (Amaeshi, Adi, Ogbechie, & Amao, 2006; Idemudia, 2011). For Unilever Nigeria, CSR initiatives in community development, environmental stewardship, and social welfare appear to strengthen stakeholder relationships



and organizational resilience. This corroborates the studies by Malik et al. (2021), Moneva et al. (2020), and Kraus et al. (2020), which reported similar outcomes. Furthermore, the study demonstrates a significant positive relationship between corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability performance, consistent with Abbas (2020), who found that CSR initiatives focused on environmental sustainability, such as reducing carbon emissions and minimizing waste, enhance firms' ecological sustainability. These results collectively underscore the interdependence of enterprises' sustainability practices, suggesting that improvements in sustainability performance not only enhance business sustainability but also elevate the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of business organizations in a developing economy like Nigeria.

The strength of the CSR-BSP relationship identified in this study is best understood within the Nigerian institutional and socio-economic context and dynamism. Nigeria is characterised by regulatory gaps, socio-economic challenges, and strong community expectations, which shape stakeholder responses to corporate social responsibility initiatives. These circumstantial conditions strengthen the strategic importance of CSR for firms operating in the country. First, weak regulatory enforcement increases reliance on corporate self-regulation and community accountability. Stakeholders, particularly host communities, often assume quasi-regulatory roles by pressuring firms to bring social and environmental benefits. Firms, therefore, engage more actively in CSR to secure acceptability and maintain their social licence to operate (Amaeshi et al., 2006; Idemudia, 2011). This institutional reality strengthens the linkage between CSR and sustainability outcomes for Unilever Nigeria. Second, the Nigerian socio-economic environment equally heightened the community's importance as a primary stakeholder group. High poverty, unemployment, and infrastructure deficits create expectations that corporations contribute directly to community welfare. This is prevalent in the Niger Delta communities, where oil exploration has disrupted the ecosystems. Stakeholder salience theory (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) assumes that stakeholders' ownership of power, legitimacy, and perseverance exerts a strong influence on firms. CSR initiatives targeting education, health, livelihoods, and sanitation, therefore, generate stronger stakeholder reciprocity and sustainability benefits (Eweje, 2007; Idemudia & Ite, 2006).

Thirdly, inadequate provision of social infrastructure in Nigeria places an additional burden on corporate organizations. Firms are repeatedly expected to provide community support where government capacity is inhibited or proven ineffective (Idemudia, 2014). This replacement effect increases the visibility and influence of CSR initiatives on stakeholder relations and sustainability performance. Thus, the important CSR–BSP relationship examined reflects both organizational strategy and context-dependent stakeholder expectations.



CONCLUSION

The study concludes that corporate social responsibility is a critical driver of overall business sustainability in Unilever Nigeria Plc. CSR initiatives that focused on community development, environmental stewardship, and social welfare strengthen stakeholder trust, legitimacy, and organizational resilience, thus improving sustainability outcomes. The Nigerian institutional and socio-economic environment further magnifies this relationship by increasing stakeholder expectations and the strategic relevance of CSR. Overall, CSR emerges not simply as a voluntary ethical responsibility but as a sustainability strategy in developing economy contexts such as Nigeria.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes important theoretical contributions to CSR and sustainability literature, particularly in the context of developing economies.

First, the findings underpin and extend stakeholder theory by empirically demonstrating that CSR enhances sustainability performance through strengthened stakeholder relationships. Stakeholder theory postulates that firms create value by addressing stakeholder expectations (Freeman, 1984). This study shows that CSR initiatives directed toward community welfare and environmental stewardship translate into improved organizational sustainability outcomes in Nigeria. Corroborative evidence that stakeholder-oriented strategies are performance-enhancing in developing economies.

Second, the study contributes to institutional theory by demonstrating that the CSR–performance relationship is context-dependent. In weak institutional environments such as Nigeria, CSR assumes legitimacy-building and quasi-governance functions (Amaeshi et al., 2006; Idemudia, 2011). The strong CSR–BSP linkage examined, therefore, confirmed that institutional voids intensify stakeholder expectations and amplify CSR’s performance relevance.

Third, the study advances the concept of embedded CSR in African contexts. The effectiveness of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Nigeria is influenced by societal values, prevailing socio-economic conditions, and cultural expectations that organizations should demonstrate benevolence toward their host communities. This supports the embedded CSR perspective (Amaeshi et al., 2006), which conceptualises CSR in Africa as rooted in community development and social reciprocity. The study, hence, contributes to context-sensitive CSR theory reflecting non-Western socio-cultural realities. Fourth, the research contributes to sustainability performance theory by empirically linking CSR to multidimensional sustainability outcomes (social, environmental, and economic) within an emerging market firm. This supports theoretical integration of CSR and sustainability performance as mutually reinforcing constructs rather than separate domains.

Finally, the study corroborated stakeholder salience theory (Mitchell et al., 1997), which posits that stakeholder power, legitimacy, and earnestness are



influenced by the national institutional framework and socio-economic environment. The Nigerian environment heightens stakeholder responsiveness to CSR, making stakeholder dynamics a key mechanism through which CSR generates sustainability outcomes.

Practical Implications

The findings provide important managerial implications for Unilever Nigeria and similar firms operating in emerging economies.

CSR should be treated as a strategic sustainability investment rather than merely philanthropic expenditure, as community-oriented CSR directly enhances stakeholder trust and operational stability in Nigeria.

Organizations operating in weak institutional environments can use CSR to secure legitimacy, manage stakeholder risk, and strengthen long-term competitiveness.

Aligning CSR initiatives with local socio-economic priorities increases their effectiveness and sustainability impact on the communities.

Embedding CSR within core business strategy improves organizational resilience and long-term performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for Unilever Nigeria Plc:

- i. Deepen community-centred CSR programmes by expanding investments in education, livelihoods, sanitation, and women empowerment initiatives aligned with community needs.
- ii. Integrate CSR with core business strategy by embedding sustainability practices in product development, sourcing, and environmental management systems.
- iii. Strengthen stakeholder engagement, initiating institutionalised structured dialogue with communities, employees, NGOs, and regulators to align CSR with stakeholder expectations, by establishing a well-funded unit within the company to manage CSR activities.
- iv. Increase CSR transparency and reporting. Strengthen sustainability disclosure to enhance corporate legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and reputation.
- v. Future studies should employ longitudinal or panel data to establish causal direction between CSR and BSP. Multi-firm or cross-industry studies in Nigeria would enhance generalizability. Researchers may also examine moderating variables such as corporate governance quality, institutional strength, or industry characteristics in the CSR-BSP relationship.

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APPENDIX SECTION A

Instruction: Please tick as appropriate

<p>Consider your opinion using these rating scales: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, Slightly Disagree = 3, 4 = Neutral, 5 = Slightly Agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly Agree.</p>	
<p>Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)</p>	
1	My company's CSR initiatives positively impact the local community.
2	My company's CSR activities enhance employee engagement and satisfaction.
3	My company promote high ethical standards in business.
4	My company pays taxes and respects the legal framework of the business environment in which it operates.
5	My company provides conducive working conditions for employees.
6	My company promote consumer protection and rights.
7	My company monitors closely environmentally friendly promotional actions.
8	My company focuses on research and development to increase product quality and safety.
9	My company is involved in charities and supports charitable events in the community.
10	One of my company's main principles is to provide high-quality products to its customers.
11	We comply with national and international standards.
12	Customer satisfaction is highly important to my company.
13	My company avoids unfair competition
14	My company has the necessary equipment to reduce the harmful effects of its operations on the environment.
<p>Business Sustainability</p>	
<p>Economic Sustainability Performance (ESP)</p>	
15	My company's CSR initiatives have positively impacted our financial performance
16	My company has achieved cost savings as a result of its sustainability practices
17	Our CSR practices have contributed to increased revenue for the company
18	My company's sustainability initiatives have enhanced its market share.
19	Investment in CSR has resulted in long-term economic benefits for the company
<p>Social Sustainability Performance (SSP)</p>	
20	My company's CSR activities have improved employee satisfaction and engagement.
21	Our CSR initiatives have strengthened relationships with the local community.
22	My company is perceived as a socially responsible organization by stakeholders.



23	Our CSR efforts have contributed to better working conditions within the company.
24	My company's CSR initiatives have enhanced its reputation in society.
Environmental Sustainability Performance (ENSP)	
25	My company actively reduces its environmental footprint through CSR practices.
26	Environmental sustainability is prioritized in my company's decision-making processes.
27	My company's CSR initiatives include efforts to minimize waste and resource consumption.
28	My company's environmental CSR practices have led to compliance with international standards.
29	Our CSR initiatives have contributed to reducing the company's carbon emissions.
30	My company's focus on environmental sustainability has improved its overall performance.