

Does corporate social responsibility contribute to strengthen brand equity? An empirical study

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Abstract Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is one of the most vital component in this modern, competitive and complex business arena, contributing highly towards economic, social and environmental sustainability. Now, this is a quandary thought whether CSR act would be just performed philanthropically or would it be performing the role as a serious strategic move for enhanced brand equity. Present research is a sincere effort to explore the interrelation among CSR, social identity of the brand and social transformation with the purpose of explaining brand engagement and brand social linkages for the creation of CSR led sustainable brand equity. The research is based on 386 empirical samples collected from different stakeholders across India using stratified sampling. Structural equation modeling and path analysis have been used for data analysis. The current research contributes in the domain of CSR and branding. The findings show how CSR significantly contributes towards social transformation along with building of the social identity of the brands by generating brand social linkages and consumer engagement for higher brand equity.

Keywords CSR · Branding · Social brand identity · Brand -social linkages · Consumer brand engagement · Brand equity

1 Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can be understood as the sincere responsibilities and actions of corporate bodies towards the society. The corporate houses are artificial persons constituted under the legal framework having definite mission and henceforth they enjoy few privileges and have definite responsibilities for their society. As the size

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of the business expands, the expectation of the society increases too and there is a trustworthy relationship which is built between the business and the society. Few of the researchers have defined CSR as follows: “CSR not only benefits the corporate brand but also the society at large” (Vallester et al. 2012). “Community wellbeing is enhanced via discretionary business practices which has been a commitment of Corporate Social Responsibility” (Kotler and Lee 2005, as cited by Kraus and Britzelmaier 2012). European CSR activities are more structured and impactful as compared to Indian CSR. As per CSR Europe (a European business network for Corporate Social Responsibility), CSR in European countries promote “sustainability,” “responsible business conduct” or “business and human rights” and also creates the environment where CSR activities can embed the social commitment and responsibility within the DNA of the companies. CSR in India has never been the voluntary obligation of the Indian companies though few of the business houses were doing it to get the social support. Observing this the Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India informed through Section 135 and Schedule Seven of the Indian Companies Act 2013, all companies in India, which either has a net worth of rupees five hundred crore or more or a turnover of rupees one thousand crore or more or net profit of rupees five crores, are supposed to spend at least 2 % of their average net profit for the immediately preceding three financial years on CSR activities. In India there is a restriction to project CSR contributions directly for the sake of brand communication. But in producing higher brand value, most of the contemporary business organisations incorporating CSR initiatives as the strong part of their overall corporate strategies (Hoeffler and Keller 2002). It has been observed that brand attitudes and perceptions of the potential customers (Kim et al. 2015; Mueller 2014; Öberseder et al. 2013) get influenced by CSR led social value addition and social development programmes (Kolodinsky et al. 2010). A well accepted fact is that business is not only supposed to produce and manage customers but also they must be dedicated to retain the customer for lifetime, consequently the CSR has become the significant topic for research (Tsai et al. 2010). Across the globe there is the challenge to engage the customer in a better way for generating higher level of consumer association and strong consumer-brand connection (Blombäck and Scandellius 2013; Moon et al. 2015; Popoli 2011; Rangan et al. 2012; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014). It has been observed that the consumers’ brand love, brand respect and brand recall helps in achieving enhanced corporate brand equity.

This research article has attempted to explain how CSR can be strategically linked with the branding initiatives in generating the enhanced brand equity in terms of consumers’ brand love (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Huber et al. 2015; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014; Wallace et al. 2014), brand respect (Blombäck and Scandellius 2013; Khojastehpour and Johns 2014; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014) and brand recall (Adis and Jun 2013; Du et al. 2010; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014) through confirmation of proper brand-social linkages and better consumer brand engagement. The objective of the current research revolves around the key question “Does Corporate Social Responsibility contribute to strengthen Brand equity?” and tries to investigate the threadbare detail connections among CSR, social transformation, brand-social linkages, and consumer brand engagement for generating enhanced brand equity with empirical evidences. Initially a unique and multi-layered hypotheses based structure model (see Figure-1) was developed then it was tested to validate the influence of CSR on brand equity. The

current research paper contributes in the domain of CSR led brand equity by examining the pivotal roles of CSR led consumer engagement and CSR led brand-social linkage critically.

2 Related literature

The rapid growth of the global economy, brand equity and the overall status of a corporate body has become very essential (Hsu 2011; Leone et al. 2006; Nam et al. 2011). Different researchers have studied the role of CSR in this context of branding (Polonsky and Jevons 2009; Popoli 2011; Rangan et al. 2012; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014; Vallester et al. 2012). In the present age, CSR is not only restricted within the social wellbeing (Dobers 2009; Kitchin 2003), but also acts as the strong agent to create strong corporate reputation (Khojastehpour and Johns 2014; Middlemiss 2003; Pérez 2015). It has been seen that there is strong intrinsic association between CSR, customer-brand fit and brand loyalty (Peloza and Shang 2011). Researchers have established that CSR acts as a big push for the business corporations building up social reputation and ethical identity (Knox and Maklan 2004; Weber 2008). CSR helps in accumulating unique competitive advantage in sustainable basis (Porter and Kramer 2006; Smith 2007). Across the globe, big brands are trying to incorporate CSR as the indispensable part of their overall corporate strategy in order to connect deeper with the society at large to be more successful as the ethical, committed and trustworthy brand (Hillestad et al. 2010; Werther and Chandler 2005). The competent brands that are responsible towards the social value addition are smart to display the ethicality and vows of those brands within the potential buyers' community and it is true that customers' satisfactions are highly impacted with the CSR led social trust and brand-social linkage (Blombäck and Scandeliu 2013; Kapferer 2008; Kim et al. 2015; Mueller 2014; Singh et al. 2012).

More than the 50 % of top global managers and entrepreneurs of contemporary age have universally accepted CSR as one of the top priority of the present business activities to ensure the sustainability (Crook 2005). Implementation of the proper CSR strategies might be helpful in creation of credulous association among the brands and their stakeholders to a great extent and could help of the brands in reaping the benefits for the long run in relation to consumers' loyalty (Garbarino and Johnson 1999; Maignan and Ferrell 2004; Sen et al. 2006). CSR benefits in inspiring the employee and the internal stakeholders to contribute more (Agudo-Valiente et al. 2013; Albinger and Freeman 2000; Kang et al. 2010). CSR acts the one of the vital components of modern business to generate confidence, respect and trust for a brand within the consumers' community (Delgado-Ballester and Munuera-Aleman 2001). CSR effects in business performance, particularly for those businesses which are founded on the strong brand images (Werther and Chandler 2005) that also by and large helps in snowballing brand equity (Knox and Maklan 2004; Linthicum et al. 2010) and also offers the enhanced level of brand value security (Polonsky et al. 2011).

It is understood that the brand is customer-centric whereas the reputation and the uniqueness of the brand essentially rotates around the company (Ettenson and Knowles 2008). CSR helps in generating the sustainable brand value (Brady 2003; Middlemiss 2003) and it also contributes towards the formation of positive brand attitudes within

the consumer groups (Barone et al. 2000) that supports the consumers' final brand selection and purchases (Webb and Mohr 1998). CSR-centric publicity and marketing communications are frequently contemplated as the serious attempt for spreading consciousness across the consumers (Ellen et al. 2006) that in turn exhibitions a strong brand influence on consumer community. For instance, social-cause based marketing communication activity by Tata Tea, "Jaago Re! (Wake Up)" campaign promotions have amazingly encouraged the movement against corruption in India. CSR activities display the competence of the corporate bodies in transferring the economic welfare and non-economic values to the society at large which might be extremely noticeable in public and social domain (Husted and Allen 2007) which in turn improves the firm's financial rewards through higher consumers' brand attachment, brand advocacy, and in terms of brand adaptability within the potential consumers (Marin and Ruiz 2007).

CSR related programme and its implementation directly or indirectly influences prospective consumer and functions as one of the most significant elements that support in formation of the buying intentions, brand allegiance and positive WOM in long-run basis (Du et al. 2010). A hedonic purchasing behaviour and intention guides the customers to select a brand that is categorised upon the capacity ensure the consumer enjoyment, contentment, pleasure and positive sensory encouragement (Babin et al. 1994) and those actually work in marketing (Arnold and Reynolds 2003). CSR produces the privilege for the consumer segment in sharing the happiness and transferring value towards the society through the consumption of the product (Chomvilailuk and Butcher 2013; Karaosmanoglu et al. 2016; Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque 2014; Manning 2013).

When the customers hold an optimistic view about the brand, it creates a positive scope for the brands to motivate the potential customer to buy their products or services (Wu et al. 2011). Customer's final brand selection judgement is generally less influenced with the basic human wants and requirement or the core value of the products or services but more influenced with psychological and perceptual components associated with the brands (Werther and Chandler 2005). The modern global brands distinguish their uniqueness or identity not only via the foundation benefits, but they put more effort on the relationship building and emotional benefits sharing (Werther and Chandler 2005).

Numerous academicians have argued that customers and the overall buying community are directly or indirectly inspired and motivated with the CSR activities executed by the different brands that create a huge emotional impact on the consumer (Castaldo et al. 2009; Luo and Bhattacharya 2006) that leads towards better consumer engagement (Marquina Feldman and Vasquez-Parraga 2013; O'Riordan and Fairbrass 2014; Öberseder et al. 2013; Plewa et al. 2014; Wang and Chaudhri 2009). The consumers' optimistic brand attitudes and perception usually effects the customers' positive brand relatedness (Kim et al. 2015; Mueller 2014; Öberseder et al. 2013; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014) and involvement (Knox and Maklan 2004). This actually results in achieving greater social support (Vlachos et al. 2009; Vlachos et al. 2010), this further contributes in the process of brand adaptability (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006; Lee et al. 2012; Vlachos et al. 2009) as well as improved brand recall (Adis and Jun 2013; Du et al. 2010; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014). Moreover, Park *et al.* (2014) demonstrated that the ethical and charitable or humanitarian CSR acts create trustworthy brand relation with the potential and existing customer, this also creates positive consumer

precipitation and projects the ethical identity of the brand within the society (Balmer et al. 2007; Fan 2005; Karaosmanoglu et al. 2016).

It has been observed that many consumers formulate their final brand choice on the basis of the brand's responsibilities towards the social development and commitments towards environmental protection (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Grimmer and Bingham 2013; Sprinkle and Maines 2010; Zhou et al. 2012). These attitudes and inclination of the customer boost the corporate brand equity positively (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Brown and Dacin 1997; Klein and Darwar 2004).

Numerous brands across the globe are dedicatedly putting their effort to be associated with the consumer and the society at large. CSR has become one of the major platforms to communicate with the prospective buyer by highlighting the greatness of the brand's social commitments, value additions and its honest contributions is social transformations. The following sets of real-time corporate cases possibly highlight the aspects of CSR led social identity of the brand through social transformation CSR initiatives for higher brand image.

McDonald's is trying to ensure low fat oil based ingredients with the mission of providing healthy food. The company is dedicated to acquire raw materials specifically from the poor and less developed countries and it is also ensuring the bio-degradable packing material for greater environmental commitments. At present McDonald's is creating employment opportunity in more than 100 countries through various ways. A specific portion of income on each billion is being spent by the company for social development purpose throughout the globe. However, this can be understood as complete CSR programme, but it noiselessly is touching the hearts of the millions of people in terms of McDonald's brand-social responsibilities, honesty and ethicality which is really becoming helpful for accumulating higher brand value.

Coca-Cola India has achieved the "coveted golden peacock" honour for its eminent contribution in community welfare programmes with a proper emphasis on water conservation, literacy program and support in public health care.

ITC strongly believes that their business performance necessarily be measured with its contribution towards Triple Bottom Line contribution. ITC's strategic CSR initiative "e-Choupal" is a renowned rural market-led business model intended to improve the competitiveness of the Indian agriculture for the betterment of the economic prosperity for the Indian rural agriculturalists.

Proctor and Gamble's leading CSR program in India is "Shiksha" which can be considered as an essential part of PandG's global social development programme – "Live, Learn and thrive" that encourages and supports the basic primary education for the children of underprivileged society in rural India. Another CSR initiative of PandG named "Parivartan" has been honestly supporting millions of Indian teen-age girls from getting trapped in age-old traditional practices relating to sanitary protection.

Lifebuoy brand of Hindustan Unilever is engaged in encouraging health awareness programme with "healthy hand washing" campaign. In the year 2016, the brand Hindustan Unilever has aims to uphold the health conscious behaviour among more than one billion Indian customers by endorsing the benefits of using soap as hand sanitizer and germs cleaner.

Colgate's leading CSR led health awareness agenda and free of cost dental check-up initiative has supported in building the awareness among 750 million children in over 80 countries through "Bright smiles, Bright futures" campaign.

3 Research gap and objectives of the study

Though the aforementioned researches have examined the diverse perspectives and contributions of the CSR activities in generating the competitive business advantages (Porter and Kramer 2006; Smith 2007), brand image (Brown and Dacin 1997; Klein and Darwar 2004), stakeholders' engagement as well as social support (Albinger and Freeman 2000; Kang et al. 2010), enhanced brand value (Knox and Maklan 2004; Linthicum et al. 2010), brand adaptability (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006; Lee et al. 2012; Marin and Ruiz 2007; Vlachos et al. 2009), optimistic externalities and advocacy (Ellen et al. 2006; Fombrun and Shanley 1990; Orlitzky et al. 2003; Yoon et al. 2006), sustainable community connexions (Bohdanowicz and Zientara 2009; Orlitzky et al. 2003; Oh and Durden 2007), customers' positive attitude and purchase intention (Ricks 2005; Sprinkle and Maines 2010; Wu et al. 2011).

But there are fewer evidences which can explain how CSR can contribute in consumer brand engagement and in brand social linkages for achieving improved brand equity.

These gaps have inspired and motivated me to develop the following research outlines:

- To identify the diverse components that may originate from CSR activates relating to brand engagement, brand social linkages and brand equity.
- To examine the interrelation among CSR, social identity of the brand and social transformation to explain brand engagement and brand social linkages a better way.
- To evaluate or to measure the contributions of CSR in generating brand equity.

The present research is a unique effort to theorise conceptual model and testing the conceptual model (see Figs. 1 and 2), Which would explicate how CSR could be linked better with the branding initiatives in engendering the improved brand equity in terms of higher consumers' brand love, greater brand respect and enhanced brand recall through confirmation of proper brand -social linkages and better consumer brand engagement.

4 Hypotheses development and conceptual framework

Several studies have demonstrated that there is a deep-rooted connection among the CSR and social change that creates equal benefits for both the society and the business organisations (Aguilera et al. 2007; Amaladoss and Manohar 2013; Campbell 2007; Hinson and Ndhlovu 2011; Montiel 2008). Revelation of the facts and figures related to social development and commitments for social value addition related to the specific brands motivates the potential buyers that may lead to an enhanced customer-brand association on sustainable basis (Öberseder et al. 2013). This idea has been quite motivational to support the following hypothesis.

H1: CSR and Social Transformation are positively related.

Aforementioned examples of the global brands have shown the diverse characteristics of CSR initiatives. It is noticeable that when the society as a whole enjoys the

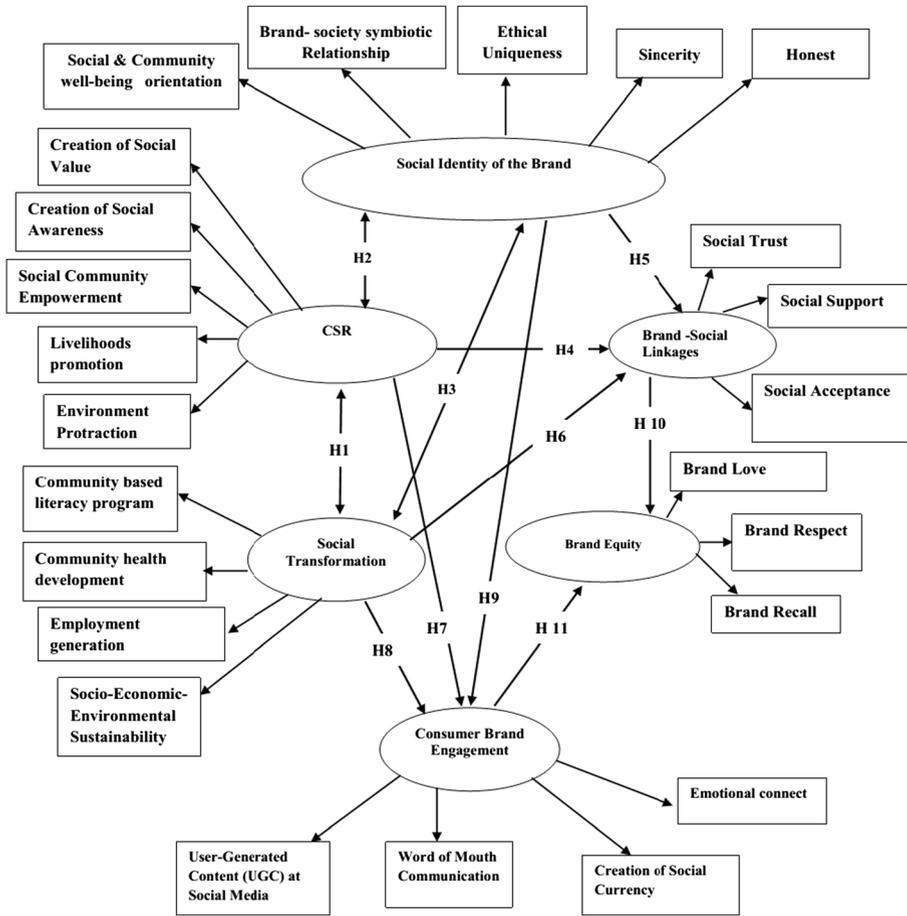


Fig. 1 Hypotheses-based model

advantages from CSR led development programmes, it generates and spreads the positive word of mouth (Pai et al. 2015; Sallam 2014; Wallace et al. 2014), this helps the brands to acquire social identity (Blombäck and Scandeliuss 2013; He et al. 2012; Lai et al. 2010; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Verboven 2011) and higher degree of social support (Ramasamy et al. 2010; See 2009). This social commitment motivates the customers to adopt the brand happily (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Brown and Dacin 1997; Klein and Darwar 2004). This has led to develop the following hypothesis.

H2: CSR and Social Identity of the Brand are positively associated.

CSR led social development and positive transformation always support the corporate brand to have positive image (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Cha et al. 2015; Popoli 2011; Rangan et al. 2012). It is true that social identity of the brand always has a strong effect on consumer brand selection (He et al. 2012; Lai et al. 2010; Popoli 2011). It strengthens the consumer brand fit (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Cha et al. 2015; Lai et al. 2010; Popoli 2011;

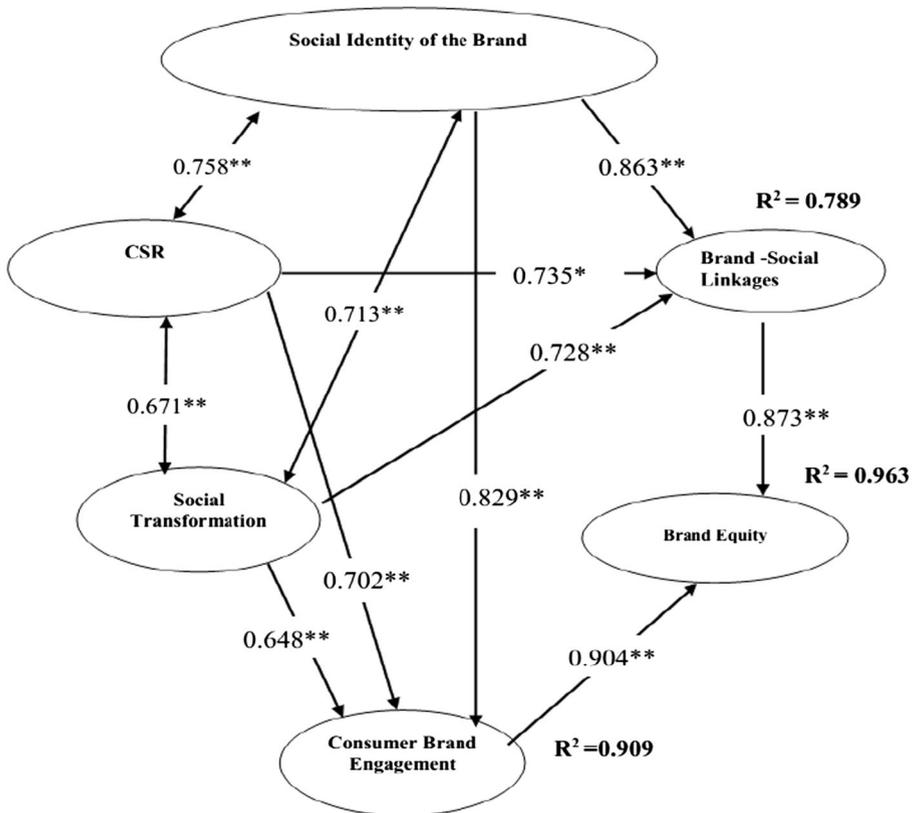


Fig. 2 Standardized model with path coefficients (**: $p < 0.05$; *: $p < 0.01$)

Pelozo and Shang 2011). This has helped the current research to conceive the following hypothesis.

H3: *Social Transformation and Social Identity of the Brand are positively connected.*

CSR is one of the most vital strategy of the modern business that has the pivotal role in strengthening the brand value (Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Cha et al. 2015; Lai et al. 2010; Popoli 2011; Pelozo and Shang 2011). Brand which is socially linked has the higher value and acceptance within the buyers' community (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Cha et al. 2015; Popoli 2011). Social identity of the brand that is, how a brand is so responsible towards the society that it always grabs attention of the potential buyers (Brady 2003; Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Middlemiss 2003; Webb and Mohr 1998; Berné-Manero et al. 2016). It happens because of the positive commitments of the corporate house towards the social development through systematic implementation of CSR initiatives (Amaladoss and Manohar 2013; Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Campbell 2007; Hinson and Ndhlovu 2011; Montiel 2008). These thoughts have helped the current research to formulate following the hypotheses.

H4: *CSR is having a significant positive impact on the Brand -Social Linkages.*

H5: *Social Identity of the Brand has a strong positive influence on the Brand - Social Linkages.*

H6: *Social Transformation significantly effects Brand -Social Linkages.*

Existing literatures have significantly demonstrated the various angle of CSR based branding and the consumer-brand affinity (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Khojastehpour and Johns 2014; Lai et al. 2010; Middlemiss 2003; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014). CSR generates the platform for the potential customers to contribute to the positive social change and environmental sustainability through the purchase and use of the product (Chomvilailuk and Butcher 2013; Karaosmanoglu et al. 2016; Manning 2013; Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque 2014). But there is an absence of serious research work to explain the impact of CSR on consumer brand engagement. These views have assisted the present research article to frame the following hypotheses.

H7: *CSR is having a significant positive impact on Consumer Brand Engagement.*

H8: *Social Transformation significantly influences the Consumer Brand Engagement.*

H9: *Social Identity of the Brand has a strong positive effect on the Consumer Brand Engagement.*

CSR initiatives carried out by the diverse brands may produce a good amount of emotional influence on the prospective buyer communities (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Bhattacharya and Kaursar 2016; Castaldo et al. 2009; Cha et al. 2015; Luo and Bhattacharya 2006), which directs towards the higher level of consumer engagement (Marquina Feldman and Vasquez-Parraga 2013; O’Riordan and Fairbrass 2014; Öberseder et al. 2013; Plewa et al. 2014; Wang and Chaudhri 2009). This consumer engagement benefits the brands to accumulate positive consumer connections (Kim et al. 2015; Knox and Maklan 2004; Mueller 2014; Öberseder et al. 2013; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014). Kuvykaite and Piligrimiene (2014) have established that consumer brand engagement helps in developing higher brand equity, with the growing popularity of online social media; consumer brand engagement is reaching its highest momentum, which is really helping the modern brands to generate higher brand equity with higher social linkage. In the field of branding and marketing there are less evidences, which can explain the contribution of CSR in forming consumer engagement and brand - social linkages to optimise the brand equity. These understandings have been too supportive to construct the following hypotheses.

H10: *Consumer Brand Engagement positively influences Brand Equity.*

H11: *Brand -Social Linkages positively impacts Brand Equity.*

5 Methodology

The present research is based on the exhaustive literature review in finding the components directly and indirectly related to the proposed model. The research is based on 386

empirical samples, collected from different stakeholders across India, where targeted population was consisting of corporate individuals (middle level managers), managers in NGOs and block level government administrative officials and consumers. Stratified sampling procedure (Ding et al. 1998; Laine and Karras 2011; Meng 2013) has been followed and a structured questionnaire has been used as the tools of data collection. The responses were recorded using five-point Likert scale having values from 1 (completely agree) to 5 (completely disagree). The similar questionnaire was used to get the sample responses from the diverse group as mention above. The main intention behind the use of five-point Likert-type scale is to collect the viewpoints of the respondents and to measure the implication of each item uniformly (Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque 2013; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014; Turker 2009; Wu and Wang 2014). The present research is very much particular about the test of reliability and validity. We have conducted structural equation modeling and path analysis (Hair et al. 2008) using AMOS (version 20) to test the hypotheses-based model. All factor loadings in the current research were having higher value (0.50 and above, Hair et al. 2008) and are significant at the 0.01 level indicating convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Kline 1998).

6 Data analysis and findings

Structural model comprises of set of dependence associations involving the constructs in the proposed model. On one hand hypothesized model projected the positive Associations among *CSR, social transformation, social identity of the brand*. On the other hand, SEM has illustrated that the *CSR, social transformation, social identity of the brand* is having a significant positive impacts *brand -social linkages* and on *consumer brand engagement*. Finally, structural equation modeling path analysis has revealed that *brand -social linkages* and *consumer brand engagement* is having strong joint effects on *brand equity*. Present research has tried to validate the proposed model strongly with CFA outcomes; we have considered 24 independent variables or items. Each factor or the constructs had a minimum of three items and maintained the minimum requirement for structural equation modelling (Hair et al. 2008). The sample size of present study falls within the suggested number of 150–400, which is basic minimum criteria of conducting structural equation modelling (Hair et al. 2008). The proposed structural equation modelling was tested (with AMOS, version – 20) using covariance matrix of the relevant indicators as input with maximum likelihood estimation method. All item loadings were having were greater than 0.50 (Hair et al. 2008; Nunnally, 1978) and are significant at the 0.01 level indicating convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Kline 1998), all the items with factor loadings less than 0.50 were removed from the scale. In the current research testing of significant impact has been done through t-test and *p*-values.

6.1 Reliability analysis

In the present research we have used maximum likelihood estimation (Ladhari 2007) in analysing the structural equation modeling which is claimed to be robust to non-normality (Joreskog and Sorbom 1993; Ladhari 2007) situations. From Table 1 it is evident all item loadings were having higher value greater than 0.50 (Hair et al. 2008;

Nunnally 1978) and are significant at the 0.01 level indicating convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Kline 1998). From Table 1 it is also evident that all the Cronbach's α coefficients of the scale dimensions were 0.730, 0.692, 0.729, 0.781, 0.716 and 0.703 for *CSR*, *social transformation*, *brand-social linkages*, *social identity of the brand*, *consumer brand engagement* and *brand equity*. The Cronbach's α coefficients met the minimum level of 0.70 (Fornell and Larcker 1981; Hair et al. 2008; Nunnally 1978) which is confirming the reliability of the model dimensions.

6.2 Construct validity

All factor loadings in the current research were having higher value (0.50 and above, Hair et al. 2008) and are significant at the 0.01 level indicating convergent validity (Anderson and Gerbing 1988; Hair et al. 2008; Kline 1998). From Table 1 it can be said that composite reliability (CR) values are meeting the minimum standard (with values 0.70 and above, Hair et al. 2008; Bagozzi and Yi 1988) which approves the internal consistency of the model constructs. The composite reliability of all factors or dimensions are: 0.837 (CSR), 0.829 (social transformation), 0.806 (brand -social linkages), 0.854 (social identity of the brand), 0.804 (consumer brand engagement) and 0.791 (brand equity). The AVE of all construct is: 0.507 (CSR), 0.548 (social transformation), 0.580 (brand -social linkages), 0.506 (social identity of the brand), 0.506 (consumer brand engagement) and 0.559 (brand equity). From Table 1 it is also visible that all construct maintained the minimum criteria of convergent (AVE = 0.50, Hair et al. 2008; Fornell and Larcker 1981).

6.3 Structural equation modeling (SEM) procedures

The outcomes revealed significant positive impacts parting to the proposed model (Tables 2 and 3). Statistical outcomes have demonstrated that CSR and social transformation are having significantly positive connotation (Correlations = 0.671, Path Coefficient = 0.103, $t = 5.734$, p -value <0.01), CSR and social identity of the brand are positively associated (Correlations = 0.758, Path Coefficient = 0.216, $t = 6.937$, p -value <0.01) and social transformation and social identity of the Brand are positively linked (Correlations = 0.713, Path Coefficient = 0.187, $t = 5.852$, p -value <0.01).

SEM outcome has demonstrated that CSR is having a significant positive influence on the Brand -social linkages (Path Coefficient = 0.735, $t = 7.828$, p -value <0.05), social transformation association is having a substantial positive impact on brand -social linkages (Path Coefficient = 0.728, $t = 6.823$, p -value <0.01) and social identity of the brand is having a strong positive effect on brand -social linkages (Path Coefficient = 0.863, $t = 8.147$, p -value <0.05).

SEM outcome has demonstrated that CSR is having a significant positive influence on the consumer brand engagement (Path Coefficient = 0.702, $t = 6.490$, p -value <0.01), social transformation association is having a substantial positive impact on consumer brand engagement (Path Coefficient = 0.648, $t = 5.649$, p -value <0.01) and social identity of the brand is having a strong positive effect on consumer brand engagement (Path Coefficient = 0.829, $t = 7.538$, p -value <0.01).

Finally, the tested model has strongly depicted consumer brand engagement is having a significant positive influence on the brand equity (Path Coefficient = 0.904,

Table 1 Measurement model fit indices (construct wise)

| Factors/items | Standardized factor loading | AVE | CR | Cronbach's Alpha |
|--|-----------------------------|-------|-------|------------------|
| CSR | | 0.507 | 0.837 | 0.73 |
| Creation of social value | 0.682 | | | |
| Creation of social awareness | 0.677 | | | |
| Social community empowerment | 0.735 | | | |
| Livelihoods promotion | 0.736 | | | |
| Environment protraction | 0.727 | | | |
| Social transformation | | 0.548 | 0.829 | 0.692 |
| Community based literacy program | 0.744 | | | |
| Community health development program | 0.743 | | | |
| Employment generation | 0.746 | | | |
| Socio-economic-environmental sustainability | 0.729 | | | |
| Brand -social linkages | | 0.580 | 0.806 | 0.729 |
| Social trust | 0.753 | | | |
| Social support | 0.758 | | | |
| Social acceptance | 0.774 | | | |
| Social identity of the brand | | 0.541 | 0.854 | 0.781 |
| Social and community well-being orientation | 0.697 | | | |
| Brand- society symbiotic relationship | 0.657 | | | |
| Sincerity | 0.739 | | | |
| Honest | 0.753 | | | |
| Ethical uniqueness | 0.818 | | | |
| Consumer brand engagement | | 0.506 | 0.804 | 0.716 |
| Creation of social currency | 0.697 | | | |
| Word of mouth communication | 0.737 | | | |
| Emotional connect | 0.692 | | | |
| User-Generated Content (UGC) at social media | 0.719 | | | |
| Brand equity | | 0.559 | 0.791 | 0.703 |
| Brand respect | 0.751 | | | |
| Brand love | 0.738 | | | |
| Brand recall | 0.753 | | | |

$t = 8.279$, p -value < 0.01) brand -social linkages is having a substantial positive effect on the brand equity (Path Coefficient = 0.873, $t = 9.014$, p -value < 0.01).

6.4 Goodness-of-fit indexes for measurement model

The model fit indices also provide a reasonable model fit for the structural model. Chi-square statistic is 596.516 (Probability level = .000), $\chi^2 / d. f.$ is 2.475, The Normed Fit Index (NFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), and Relative Fit Index (RFI) are 0.926, 0.942, 0.932, 0.904 respectively. RMSEA is 0.0538 and

Table 2 Testing of hypotheses

| | Estimate | S.E. | C.R. | P value | Correlations |
|--|---------------------------------------|-------------|----------------|----------|--------------|
| Covariances | | | | | |
| CSR <-> social transformation | 0.103** | 0.027 | 5.734 | .000 | 0.671** |
| CSR <-> Social identity of the brand | 0.216** | 0.049 | 6.937 | .000 | 0.758** |
| Social Transformation <-> Social identity of the brand | 0.187** | 0.032 | 5.852 | .003 | 0.713** |
| Hypothesis | Standardized Path coefficients | S.E. | t-value | P | |
| CSR --> Consumer brand engagement | 0.702** | 0.317 | 6.490 | 0.008 | |
| Social transformation --> Consumer brand engagement | 0.648** | 0.129 | 5.649 | 0 | |
| Social Identity of the brand --> Consumer brand engagement | 0.829** | 0.472 | 7.538 | 0.007 | |
| CSR --> Brand -social linkages | 0.735* | 0.317 | 6.968 | 0.03 | |
| Social transformation --> Brand -social linkages | 0.728** | 0.352 | 6.823 | 0.00 | |
| Social identity of the brand --> Brand -social linkages | 0.863** | 0.347 | 8.147 | 0.02 | |
| Consumer brand engagement--> Brand equity | 0.904** | 0.485 | 8.279 | 0.000 | |
| Brand -social linkages--> Brand equity | 0.873** | 0.502 | 9.014 | 0.000 | |

(*: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$)

Table 3 Projection of squared multiple correlations

| Squared multiple correlations (R^2) | Estimate |
|---|----------|
| Consumer brand engagement | 0.909 |
| Brand -social linkages | 0.789 |
| Brand equity | 0.963 |

PCLOSE is 0.00. Hence it is concluded that the proposed research model fits the data reasonably (Byrne 2010; Hair et al. 2008; Kline 2005).

7 Conclusion and prospects

The statistical outcomes have significantly demonstrated that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Social Identity of the Brand and Social transformation, are having strong correlation with each other, which emphasizes that, if the CSR initiatives such as social value creation, creation of social awareness, community empowerment, livelihood promotion and environmental protection are implemented effectively, social transformation, in the form of literacy success, community health development, employment generation and socio environmental sustainability will definitely ensue.

It is also true that CSR and Social transformation are strongly associated with social identity of the Brand, i.e. how the brand is positioned in the society, which can be measured with scales like Social community wellbeing orientation, brand society symbiotic relationship, sincerity, honesty and ethical uniqueness of the brand. The structure equation modeling path analysis have identified that CSR, Social transformation and social identity of the brand are very crucial factors in generating the Brand equity via creation of Brand social linkages and consumer brand engagement. The outcomes of the current research have critically demonstrated that CSR, social transformation and social identity of brand are having strong impact on social linkages and consumer engagement. In the entire process, social identity of the brand, functions as the most powerful agent. Here consumer brand engagement is highly contributed by user generated content on social media (Colleoni 2013; Kent and Taylor 2016; Kesavan et al. 2013), word of mouth (Kesavan et al. 2013; Lee et al. 2013; Nwagbara and Reid 2013; Pai et al. 2015; Palka et al. 2009; Sallam 2014; Wallace et al. 2014;), emotional connect with the brand and creation of social currency (Berger 2013; Graves 2011; Lobschat et al. 2013), which actually indicates how Brand information is transferred very fast to different prospective buyers. Here in the model, brand social linkages are connected with social trust, social support and brand related positive stories.

Finally, the model has shown that brand equity is the concluding outcome, which is highly contributed by brand love, brand respect and brand recall. Here in the model, brand social linkages and consumer brand engagement is jointly influencing the overall Brand Equity.

As inference it can be said that the strategic implementation of CSR initiatives leads to social transformation and helps in creation of social identity of the brand. It is very true that generating brand equity with the help of CSR is a very complex and integrated process. Here two components are quite relevant which are brand social linkages and

consumer brand engagement. Brand social linkages show how the brand is generating social trust, social support and how the society is generating positive stories about the brand. Consumer brand engagement can be viewed as how Brand is becoming the topic for discussion within the society in terms of UGC (user generated content) at social media, word of mouth, and how the brand is able to generate social currency with the consumer community and emotional connect with the brand. Brand social linkage and consumer engagement jointly support the brand for enhanced brand equity through brand love, respect, and recall.

The current research indicates diverse issues relating to CSR led brand management and critically explains the role and influences of CSR in catapulting the brand equity by encouraging the consumer engagement and by creation of brand social linkages. CSR has become a major issue of modern business and it is not restricted merely to the responsibilities towards the society or with regards social development. It creates huge impact in the society in transformation and upliftment on sustainable basis. This is immensely helping the modern brands in accumulating social identity. The positioning of the brand as sincere, honest and socially responsible helps in highlighting ethical identity of the brand (Berné-Manero et al. 2016; Bhattacharya and Kaurisar 2016; Cha et al. 2015; Popoli 2011; Rangan et al. 2012). In the age of digital communication and social networking, brand image is viral very quickly (Camarero and San José 2011; Ho and Dempsey 2010; Palka et al. 2009) with the help of user generated content (Arnhold 2010; Goh et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2012), word of mouth (Kesavan et al. 2013; Lee et al. 2013; Nwagbara and Reid 2013; Pai et al. 2015; Palka et al. 2009; Sallam 2014; Wallace et al. 2014) and stories at social media. It creates social currency (Berger 2013; Graves 2011; Lobschat et al. 2013) and emotional connect (Berger 2013; Grisaffe and Nguyen 2011; Loureiro et al. 2012; Patwardhan and Balasubramanian 2011; Patwardhan and Balasubramanian 2013). It is true that the brand which is strategically incorporating CSR in their business activity is significantly contributing in social transformation that helps in boosting the social identity of the brand (Blombäck and Scandelius 2013; He et al. 2012; Lai et al. 2010; Sen and Bhattacharya 2001; Verboven 2011), which in turn creates better brand social linkages as well as social trust (Blombäck and Scandelius 2013; Kapferer 2008; Kim et al. 2015; Mueller 2014; Singh et al. 2012), social support and social acceptance (Ramasaamy et al. 2010; See 2009). The consumer engagement and social linkages jointly have a strong impact in promotion of brand love and respect within the consumer community. This also enhances the recall value of the brand with socio-emotional linkages. Brand love (Batra et al. 2012; Patwardhan and Balasubramanian 2013), brand respect (Blombäck and Scandelius 2013; Khojastehpour and Johns 2014; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014) and brand recall (Adis and Jun 2013; Du et al. 2010; Tingchi Liu et al. 2014) have always been very rich topics in all existing literature in the domain of brand management, but there is little mention of the instrumentality of CSR in boosting brand love, brand respect and brand recall value.

This current research article can be seen as one of the first empirically verified evidence in explaining how CSR can strategically be connected in supporting consumer brand engagement and brand social linkages for enhanced brand equity.

The outcome of this paper would help the brand managers in linking CSR activities with branding initiatives, to engage the consumer with the socio- emotional connects, supported by digitized social networking environment that would rather generate brand

social linkages and enhanced brand equity, where the brand recall will be having the blend of love and respect, for enhanced level of consumer brand connection.

This research article is limited to the samples collected from diverse CSR related stakeholders from different parts of India. This piece of work is restricted within the boundary of CSR led branding and CSR based brand equity aspect only. The model proposed and verified in the present research article seems to be correct, but statistical outcomes might get changed with the different sample size. The future study may be executed with a view to evaluate the idea of the present research article to explore how the results vary in the different countries. The different factors or the variables that are considered in the present research do not claim to be fully exhaustive. Hence, future researchers can examine how a different set of additional variables can be linked with the model discussed in the present research article.

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