

LGBTQ+-supportive CSR in India: the influence of CSR levels and issue involvement on public responses

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines Indian citizens' responses to LGBTQ+-supportive corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. Drawing upon literature on levels of CSR and expectancy violation theory, this study examines the impact of different levels of CSR engagement on public attitudes and behavioral intentions. It also explores the moderating role of individuals' issue involvement and the mediating role of CSR authenticity.

Design/methodology/approach – A between-subjects experimental design was employed to analyze the impact of two levels of LGBTQ+-supportive CSR (proactive vs passive) on individuals' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward a company's LGBTQ+ CSR programs in India.

Findings – The results indicate that proactive LGBTQ+-supportive CSR efforts lead to more favorable consumer attitudes than passive approaches. This effect is mediated by the perceived authenticity of the company's efforts and holds true across both high and low levels of consumer issue involvement. However, under passive conditions, highly involved individuals exhibit amplified negative reactions, presenting a potential risk for corporations adopting such an approach.

Practical implications – The findings offer valuable insights for public relations professionals, guiding strategic decisions on implementing LGBTQ+-supportive CSR initiatives in a developing economy such as India.

Originality/value – This study is unique in its approach of examining the stigmatized issue in the non-Western context. Also, this study is novel in the area of international CSR by explaining the impact of varying CSR levels and issue involvement on individuals' CSR-supportive behaviors through CSR authenticity.

Keywords CSR authenticity, CSR levels, LGBTQ+, India, Issue involvement, CSR

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The evolution of LGBTQ+ rights in India has been a complex journey, marked by both significant advances and setbacks. The decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, with the overturning of the colonial-era Section 377, signaled a major victory for LGBTQ+ rights. However, this progress has been interspersed with ongoing challenges and ambiguities. The recognition of transgender individuals as a third gender in 2014, a landmark decision in itself, was subsequently amended in 2016. This amendment, while intending to further define rights and protections, introduced complexities and concerns regarding its impact on the transgender community. Furthermore, the Supreme Court's 2023 decision against legalizing same-sex marriage underscores the persistent hurdles within India's socio-political landscape (Deka and Singh, 2023). This intricate legal and social context presents corporations with the challenge of



determining the appropriate extent of their support for LGBTQ+ rights within their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) frameworks.

Following the 2014 recognition of the third gender, the LGBTQ+ community in India experienced increased visibility and legal recognition in societal and employment contexts. However, despite this progress, “open employment discrimination has run rampant because of the lack of workplace protections and discrimination laws that are not comprehensive or well-enforced” (UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog, 2018; para. 7). The Supreme Court’s 2017 affirmation of the Right to Privacy as a fundamental right, which includes the protection of LGBTQ+ individuals’ sexual orientation, provided a crucial safeguard against socio-economic discrimination (UAB Institute for Human Rights Blog, 2018). These landmark judicial pronouncements have motivated organizations to adopt LGBTQ+ supportive CSR practices.

While recent legal developments have fostered a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ individuals in India, the absence of established best practice guidelines has resulted in a wide range of corporate approaches to LGBTQ+ inclusive CSR, leading to uncertainty regarding their effectiveness and impact. Some organizations have taken a more passive approach, merely complying with legal rulings by amending corporate policies to remove clauses inquiring about employees’ sexual orientation. Others have adopted more proactive measures, going beyond legal requirements to actively hire LGBTQ+ individuals and establish platforms for them to raise concerns and advocate for their rights within the workplace (Bhalla and Kim, 2023). This variability stems from the fact that many corporations approach their support for LGBTQ+ rights in an ad hoc manner, relying on intuition and general assumptions rather than robust empirical data (Bhalla and Kim, 2023). This tendency towards intuitive decision-making, as opposed to an evidence-based strategy, carries inherent risks, particularly when navigating complex and sensitive societal issues such as LGBTQ+ rights (Kim and Bhalla, 2022). Such an approach may lead to misaligned CSR initiatives that fail to resonate with key stakeholders or, worse, generate negative public sentiment (Kim and Bhalla, 2022). Consequently, rigorous research that provides evidence-based insights is crucial for companies and public relations practitioners alike. Unfortunately, research on how Indian publics perceive and respond to varying levels of corporate support for LGBTQ+ rights remains very scarce. Despite increasing visibility and progress in legal rights, research on LGBTQ+ issues in India is generally limited compared to Western contexts (Dhanesh and Nekmat, 2019). Most studies on LGBTQ+ inclusive CSR focus on Western contexts, where legal protections and public sentiment differ significantly from those in emerging markets like India, limiting the generalizability of such findings. Consequently, scholars have called for increased research in emerging markets to address this gap and enhance the global understanding of LGBTQ+ rights, particularly in diverse socio-cultural contexts (Kim and Bhalla, 2022; Kim, 2022).

This study addresses this need by examining the impact of different levels of CSR engagement—specifically, active versus passive support for LGBTQ+ rights—on public attitudes and behavioral intentions towards companies operating in India. Several studies have explored the distinction between passive and proactive CSR, highlighting the importance of considering varying degrees of engagement and their impact on stakeholder responses (Kim, 2017, 2022; Kim and Bhalla, 2022; Torugsa *et al.*, 2013). Given the wide variation in CSR practices, not all CSR efforts can be regarded as equivalent. Kim (2017) defined passive CSR as a compliance-focused approach prioritizing shareholder value within legal limits, while proactive CSR involves voluntary efforts to promote sustainable development beyond legal requirements.

In addition, this study examines the critical role of individuals’ issue involvement in shaping the outcomes of CSR initiatives related to LGBTQ+ rights in India, with CSR authenticity serving as a key mediator. Perceived CSR authenticity is defined as the consumer’s evaluation of how genuinely a company’s CSR activities mirror its fundamental values and show a true dedication to social and environmental welfare (Alhouti *et al.*, 2016).

While Indian and multinational corporations are increasingly demonstrating support for LGBTQ+ individuals, reflecting a shifting societal landscape (Bhalla and Kim, 2023), the complexities surrounding this issue persist. The Supreme Court's October 2023 decision against legalizing same-sex marriage, while a setback, has also fueled a sense of hope, with the court acknowledging LGBTQ+ struggles and the right to choose partners. This struggle resonates deeply not only with LGBTQ+ individuals themselves but also with a broader network of allies, including friends, families, activists, and non-profit organizations.

This complex landscape creates a dynamic where individuals highly involved with LGBTQ+ issues may hold nuanced and potentially divergent perspectives on corporate support. On one hand, they may view genuine efforts to advance LGBTQ+ rights through CSR initiatives favorably, recognizing corporations as important allies in the struggle for equality. Individuals deeply involved in LGBTQ+ issues often exhibit intense emotions and engage in more elaborate information processing, requiring nuanced communication strategies (Kim and Jin, 2016; Dhanesh and Nekmat, 2019; Petty and Cacioppo, 1979). This suggests that corporations seeking to engage this audience need to demonstrate a deep understanding of the issues and a genuine commitment to social change. On the other hand, highly involved individuals may be more discerning and critical of CSR efforts perceived as superficial or inadequate. This skepticism regarding the authenticity of CSR initiatives may be especially pronounced when they merely comply with legal requirements, as such efforts could be perceived as exploitative attempts to capitalize on sensitive social issues without demonstrating genuine commitment. This aligns with findings from Western contexts, where research suggests that highly engaged individuals are particularly likely to question the authenticity of superficial CSR efforts (Kim and Bhalla, 2022). As such, this potential divergence in perceptions underscores the challenge companies face in planning and implementing CSR initiatives that resonate with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, from passionate advocates to those holding more conservative viewpoints. Therefore, understanding the interplay of issue involvement within the Indian context and CSR authenticity is crucial for public relations professionals seeking to anticipate and manage public responses to varying levels of LGBTQ+ -supportive CSR.

To this end, drawing upon literature on levels of CSR and expectancy violation theory, this study seeks to provide insights into Indian citizens' responses to LGBTQ+ supportive CSR by examining the effects of varying levels of CSR engagement on public attitudes and behavioral intentions, while also considering the moderating role of individuals' issue involvement. Despite increasing visibility and progress in legal rights, research on LGBTQ+ issues in India remains limited compared to Western contexts (Dhanesh and Nekmat, 2019). This is particularly concerning given that India is home to an estimated 135 million individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ (Chakrapani *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, India represents one of the largest and fastest-growing markets in the world, with a GDP of approximately \$3.7tn (World Bank, 2023). Both Indian and multinational corporations operate within India's borders, making it a critical context for understanding CSR dynamics. For these companies to make informed decisions about their social responsibility initiatives and effectively engage with diverse stakeholders, a deeper understanding of public perceptions surrounding sensitive social issues like LGBTQ+ rights is essential.

Literature review

LGBTQ+ rights and CSR in India

Prior to India's independence, British colonial rule criminalized homosexuality through Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This law, which prohibited "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," effectively criminalized homosexuality and cast a long shadow over LGBTQ+ rights in India (Aaberg, 2022). However, on September 6, 2018, the Supreme Court of India (SCI) delivered a landmark ruling, striking down Section 377. This decriminalization, a result of decades of activism and advocacy, fueled renewed hope within the

LGBTQ+ community for safety, equality, and inclusion within the Indian corporate sector (Aaberg, 2022).

The 2018 decision presented a significant opportunity for multinational corporations (MNCs), many of which responded swiftly with symbolic gestures of support, such as rebranding company logos with rainbow colors and issuing public statements affirming their commitment to LGBTQ+ employees (Aaberg, 2022). However, Indian corporations faced greater scrutiny in navigating this shifting landscape, as the 2018 decision also coincided with evolving public opinion and persistent social challenges for the LGBTQ+ community (Aaberg, 2022; Bhalla and Kim, 2023). This legal and social shift placed increased pressure on HR and public relations professionals to implement LGBTQ+ inclusive policies in the workplace.

A couple of studies on LGBTQ+ rights in the Indian public sector, published prior to the 2018 judgment, highlighted the troubling state of LGBTQ+ community rights in the workplace. For instance, a 2016 study conducted by MINGLE (Mission for Indian Lesbian and Gay Empowerment), a Mumbai-based non-profit organization, surveyed 100 LGBTQ+ employees from three industries and found that 75% emphasized the importance of LGBTQ+-friendly policies in their employment decisions. Similarly, the 2016 report “Inclusion in India Inc,” published by Biz Divas Foundation and IIM Ahmedabad, revealed that only 2% of organizations, all of which were multinational corporations, actively addressed LGBTQ+ rights in the workplace (Singhal and Paul, 2018).

The 2018 decriminalization of homosexuality marked a turning point, prompting Indian corporations to consider and implement anti-discrimination and LGBTQ+ supportive Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policies. The concept of CSR has evolved since the 1950s, with Carroll (1979, 1991) defining it as encompassing four key responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary. In the Indian context, CSR is often driven by a unique confluence of moral and economic considerations. Dhanesh (2015) argued that the key drivers of CSR in India are rooted in the ancient concept of *dharma*, which translates to “righteous duty” (p. 118). CSR is not a new concept in India. In 2014, the Indian government mandated CSR practices, requiring corporations to allocate at least 2% of their net profits towards social development initiatives, including “gender equality” (Ghuliani, 2013). However, diversity management within Indian corporations has largely been limited to the binary gender framework of men and women, primarily focusing on the empowerment of women in society (Batra and Reio, 2016). This underscores the need for empirical research to understand the various factors that influence the implementation and communication of LGBTQ+-supportive CSR activities in India.

Effects of CSR levels

CSR initiatives encompass a wide spectrum of engagement, from passive compliance with regulations to proactive, purpose-driven programs. While extensive research has explored the general relationship between CSR and its outcomes (Margolis *et al.*, 2007), the nuanced effects of varying levels of engagement warrant further investigation. As Torugsa *et al.* (2013) and Kim (2017) suggest, the diverse nature of CSR initiatives leads to a range of outcomes and stakeholder reactions. For instance, simply complying with non-discrimination policies differs significantly from actively championing LGBTQ+ rights. The latter demonstrates a deeper commitment to social responsibility, moving beyond legal obligations to embrace broader ethical considerations. Although both approaches fall under the umbrella of CSR, they carry distinct implications for impact and stakeholder perception. Therefore, a comprehensive evaluation of CSR effectiveness must account for these varying levels of engagement (Bhalla and Kim, 2023; Kim, 2017, 2022, 2023; Kim and Bhalla, 2022; Torugsa *et al.*, 2013).

Drawing upon Carroll’s (1979) comprehensive CSR framework, which encompasses economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities, Kim (2017) introduced the concept of CSR levels as a crucial factor in strategic CSR decision-making. Carroll’s model posits that

while the first two responsibilities (economic and legal) represent baseline obligations, the latter two (ethical and discretionary) extend beyond legal mandates, suggesting a more holistic and proactive approach to CSR (Carroll, 1979). Recognizing this multifaceted nature, Kim (2017) proposed two distinct levels of CSR engagement: passive and proactive. Passive CSR is characterized as responsible business conduct that prioritizes shareholder value within legal limits, aligning with Carroll's economic and legal responsibilities. In contrast, proactive CSR involves voluntary business practices that exceed legal requirements to foster sustainable development across economic, social, and environmental spheres (Kim, 2017). This approach incorporates ethical considerations and prioritizes the expectations of a wider range of stakeholders, potentially prioritizing long-term sustainability and social impact over short-term profit maximization (Kim, 2017). As Kim and Bhalla (2021) highlighted, while some companies strategically integrate CSR into their core operations, others may view it merely as a compliance requirement. Recognizing these different levels of CSR engagement offers more realistic insights into the diversity of CSR outcomes.

Recent empirical studies have increasingly used the CSR levels framework to assess public responses to corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives (Kim, 2023; Kim and Bhalla, 2022). Kim (2022) applied this framework to LGBTQ+ diversity, highlighting the varied perceptions and impacts associated with different levels of corporate commitment. Her research emphasized the uneven progression of corporate policies and practices related to LGBTQ+ inclusion. Despite legal mandates in the US, companies exhibit significant variation in their support for LGBTQ+ rights. Some are reluctant to extend their support beyond legal requirements, while others actively promote LGBTQ+ values through CSR efforts. These different levels of LGBTQ+ supportive CSR have led to varied consumer responses, influencing perceptions of CSR fit, corporate reputation, and purchase intentions. Similarly, research found that companies with proactive LGBTQ+ inclusive CSR practices are generally perceived more positively, with increased supportive communication, purchase intentions, and favorable corporate evaluations (Kim and Bhalla, 2022; Bhalla and Kim, 2023).

The positive outcomes of proactive CSR initiatives supporting LGBTQ+ rights can be understood through the lens of the Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT). According to EVT (Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon and Hale, 1988), when individuals experience behaviors that positively deviate from their expectations—such as profit-oriented companies engaging with socially sensitive topics based on moral principles—these actions are seen as positive violations, often leading to favorable consumer responses. In the context of CSR, these positive violations can significantly enhance consumer perceptions of the company, leading to improved attitudes toward its initiatives (Kim, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2021; Rim *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2020). This is because the unexpected alignment between corporate behavior and social values can reinforce perceptions of the company's authenticity and its moral commitment to social causes. CSR authenticity, defined as the extent to which consumers perceive a company's CSR efforts as deeply rooted in its core values and beliefs (Schaefer *et al.*, 2019; Kim, 2023), is a key mechanism through which positive violations affect outcomes. Positive violations can enhance perceived authenticity, which in turn leads to more favorable consumer reactions, such as improved corporate evaluations and increased purchase intent (Kim and Bhalla, 2022). Therefore, it is expected that proactive CSR initiatives will similarly evoke positive responses in different cultural contexts, including India.

Thus, we propose that proactive, LGBTQ+ supportive CSR initiatives can enhance the perception of CSR authenticity and also directly influence consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions.

- H1. Proactive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR initiatives enhance the perception of CSR authenticity compared to passive approaches.
- H2. Proactive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR initiatives cultivate more positive attitudes toward the company compared to passive approaches.

H3. Proactive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR initiatives cultivate stronger purchase intentions compared to passive approaches.

Issue involvement

Another focal point of this study lies in understanding how issue involvement moderates the impact of CSR levels on consumer outcomes. Borrowing from the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), issue involvement refers to the extent to which an attitudinal issue holds personal importance for an individual (Petty and Cacioppo, 1979, p. 1915). Issue involvement has been identified as a significant moderating factor in CSR research, influencing how individuals process information and form judgments about corporate social responsibility initiatives (Dhanesh and Nekmat, 2019). Individuals with higher issue involvement, particularly those for whom the issue has personal relevance, are more likely to engage in systematic processing of CSR messages. This means they critically evaluate the information presented, scrutinize the company's motives, and consider the broader implications of the CSR initiatives. Consequently, they are less susceptible to persuasive attempts and form attitudes based on a deeper understanding of the issue (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). Highly involved individuals tend to dedicate more time and consideration to analyzing CSR messages related to the issue (Celsi and Olson, 1988; Chen and Lin, 2020). On the other hand, less involved individuals tend to rely on heuristic processing strategies, making them more easily persuaded by CSR messages (Chaiken, 1980). For instance, individuals highly involved in environmental sustainability are more likely to critically analyze a company's CSR report, scrutinize its motives, and benchmark its environmental commitments against industry best practices. This active engagement with the information reflects their heightened concern and knowledge regarding the issue. Conversely, those with lower involvement may form opinions based on superficial impressions.

The importance of considering issue involvement in CSR research is underscored by its potential to influence the effectiveness of CSR communication and consumer responses. Indeed, in their review of the evolution of CSR research, Pelozo *et al.* (2023) emphasized that identifying stakeholder involvement is a key factor in understanding consumer responses to CSR initiatives. This perspective is echoed in numerous empirical studies. For example, Lee *et al.* (2021) demonstrated how consumer issue involvement strongly moderates the relationship between CSR and consumer–company identification, with highly involved individuals being more sensitive to perceived corporate hypocrisy and reacting negatively to inauthentic CSR initiatives. This highlights the crucial role of authenticity, especially when communicating with highly involved consumers. Chen and Lin (2020) found that issue involvement can moderate the relationship between message persuasion and CSR perceptions, with highly involved individuals being more discerning and harder to persuade. Mohr and Webb (2005) further demonstrated that consumer issue involvement directly influences consumer attribution tendencies, subsequently affecting their responses. In the context of LGBTQ+ CSR, Kim and Bhalla (2022) examined this potential moderating effect in the context of perceived corporate support for LGBTQ+ rights. They found that highly involved individuals are less skeptical of LGBTQ+ supportive CSR initiatives only when they perceive the company to be genuinely supportive. However, when perceived corporate support is at a superficial level, highly involved individuals tend to view these initiatives as less authentic and are more skeptical, implying possible backlash effects.

In the case of LGBTQ+ issues, involvement can be influenced by a variety of factors. While personal relevance, such as identifying as LGBTQ+ or having close relationships with LGBTQ+ individuals, can certainly increase involvement, the relationship is not always straightforward. Ramirez-Valles *et al.* (2014) highlight the complexity of involvement within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly for Latino gay men. Their research demonstrates that involvement is not solely determined by identity or experiences of discrimination. For instance, individuals who have internalized negative societal attitudes towards homosexuality

might be less inclined to support LGBTQ+ rights, even if they identify as LGBTQ+ or have experienced discrimination (Ramirez-Valles *et al.*, 2014). This internalized homophobia can act as a barrier to active participation in the movement. Conversely, a strong sense of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community can foster a deeper sense of involvement, encouraging individuals to actively support LGBTQ+ supportive CSR initiatives. Given the complex nature of issue involvement in the case of LGBTQ+ issues, particularly within emerging markets such as India where social and cultural contexts can significantly influence attitudes and behaviors, the topic deserves greater scholarly attention (Bhalla and Kim, 2023). Prior research has shown that highly involved individuals exhibit strong reactions to perceived corporate support for LGBTQ+ rights (Kim and Bhalla, 2022). They demonstrate amplified positive reactions when CSR initiatives are perceived as proactive and genuine, but significantly more negative responses when CSR efforts appear shallow or insincere. Based on these findings, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4. Issue involvement with the topic of LGBTQ+ right significantly moderates the impact of CSR levels on perceive CSR authenticity.

H4-1. Specifically, individuals with higher issue involvement will perceive the authenticity of passive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR as significantly lower compared to those with low issue involvement.

H4-2. Individuals with higher issue involvement will perceive the authenticity of proactive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR as significantly more positive compared to those with low issue involvement.

Effects of CSR authenticity

Previous studies consistently indicate that public skepticism or suspicion regarding CSR practices poses significant challenges for companies engaged in social responsibility efforts (Kim and Ferguson, 2019; Kim and Choi, 2012; Kim, 2014). Drawing on attribution theory (Kelley, 1973), research suggests that the public's perception of CSR motives is a critical factor influencing CSR outcomes (Ellen *et al.*, 2006; Kim, 2014; Kim and Ferguson, 2019; Rifon *et al.*, 2004). Suspicion arises when CSR practices are perceived as superficial attempts to enhance corporate image rather than genuine efforts to address social issues. Such perceptions can be detrimental, potentially triggering a negative backlash against the company (Kim and Ferguson, 2019). To mitigate these negative effects, companies must ensure their CSR initiatives align with their core values and are driven by genuine concern for the social issues they address. Enhancing the public perception of CSR authenticity is crucial in this regard (Joo *et al.*, 2019; Moehl and Friedman, 2022; Schaefer *et al.*, 2019; Kim, 2023). Authenticity, in its broadest sense, refers to evaluations and judgments of how genuine or real something is perceived to be (Beckman *et al.*, 2009; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). This concept has been extensively explored across various disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, and consumer research. Within the specific domain of CSR, Alhouti *et al.* (2016, p. 1243) define CSR authenticity as "the perception of a company's CSR actions as a genuine and true expression of the company's beliefs and behavior toward society that extend beyond legal requirements." That is, authentic CSR initiatives are viewed as a reflection of the company's genuine commitment to social good, rather than merely a strategic maneuver to enhance its reputation or comply with regulations.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that CSR authenticity leads to greater public acceptance of CSR initiatives. For instance, Kim (2023) showed that perceived authenticity in diversity and equity communication positively influences relational outcomes, both directly and indirectly, fostering trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality. This suggests that when companies communicate authentically about their commitment to diversity and equity, consumers are more likely to develop positive relationships with those companies.

Afzali and Kim (2021) further examined the mediating role of CSR authenticity between perceived CSR and consumer responses such as corporate evaluation and purchase intention. They argued that “authenticity recognition plays a key role” (p. 9) in driving positive consumer attitudes and behaviors. This means that consumers’ recognition of authentic CSR efforts can lead to more favorable evaluations of the company and a greater willingness to purchase its products or services. Therefore, it is plausible that perceived authenticity, influenced by both the level of CSR engagement and consumers’ issue involvement, can affect consumer responses, including their attitudes towards the company and their purchase intentions. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H5. Higher perceived CSR authenticity leads to more positive attitudes toward the company.

H6. Higher perceived CSR authenticity leads to greater purchase intentions.

The conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Method

This study employed a between-subjects experimental design, focusing on the two levels of CSR (LGBTQ+ supportive CSR level: proactive vs. passive).

Stimulus material

The topic of anti-discrimination corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives regarding LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace was selected due to the increasing prevalence of corporate changes supporting LGBTQ+ rights, ranging from basic anti-discrimination practices to more proactive initiatives, particularly following the 2018 Supreme Court decision in India. Two news releases were created to manipulate levels of LGBTQ+ supportive CSR (i.e. active and passive conditions). The stimuli were adapted from published news articles on the subject. Both news articles referenced India’s 2018 Supreme Court decision, which decriminalized homosexuality, ruling Section 377 unconstitutional. For the development of the stimuli, we intentionally selected a real company from India to minimize the artificiality of the experiment. HCL Technologies Limited, an Indian multinational IT services and consulting company headquartered in India, was chosen due to its prominence and relatively neutral reputation, as reported in the Global Reputation Report (Reputation Institute, 2023). Given that prior research emphasizes how a company’s distinct reputation, whether positive or negative, can influence CSR outcomes (Kim and Ferguson, 2019; Yoon *et al.*, 2006), we selected a company with a neutral reputation to minimize any potential confounding effects stemming from pre-existing perceptions of the company.

For both conditions, the news articles began with a brief description of the corporation’s response to the Supreme Court decision. In the active LGBTQ+ supportive CSR condition, the company was described as receiving a high score on the Corporate Equality Index (CEI) due to its active involvement in promoting LGBTQ+ equality in the workplace. In the passive condition, the company was depicted as complying with the Supreme Court ruling by

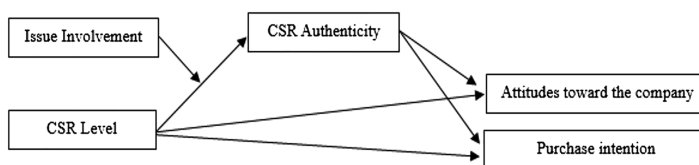


Figure 1. Conceptual model

amending its policies to ensure that current and future employees are not asked about their sexual orientation. Aside from the manipulation, all other elements of the news releases such as length, word count, and datelines were consistent across conditions.

To test the manipulation of CSR levels, a pre-test was conducted with 65 panelists in India, managed by Qualtrics. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. After reading the news release corresponding to their assigned condition, they answered a manipulation check question. This question asked them to report their perception of whether the company was taking an active or passive stance in protecting LGBTQ+ rights in the workplace. The manipulation was successful, showing a significant difference between the groups ($M = 6.27$ vs. 5.20 , $F(1, 221) = 239.29$, $p < 0.001$).

Participants

The target population for this study consists of Indian citizens aged 18 and older who reside in India, which was approved by the university's institutional review board. Participants were recruited through the Qualtrics panel service. A total of 222 respondents participated in the experiment (proactive: $n = 122$, 55%; passive: $n = 100$, 45%). Out of 222 participants, 126 (56.8%) were reported as male, and 96 (43.2%) as female. The average age of the participants was approximately 36 years ($SD = 13.7$). Regarding their region, 51 (22.9%) respondents reported being from Maharashtra/Pune, 25 (11.3%) from Delhi, and 22 (9.9%) from Karnataka, with the remainder spread throughout India. In terms of religion, 160 (72.1%) reported Hinduism, 39 (17.6%) Islam, and 15 (6.8%) Christianity.

Data collection procedures

Participants were first presented with the informed consent form. Those who consented were asked to report their perceived issue involvement levels and were then randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions. The stimuli, which were news releases, were presented in both Hindi and English. After viewing the stimuli, participants completed a post-test questionnaire that included manipulation checks for the stimuli, key study measurements, and various demographic questions.

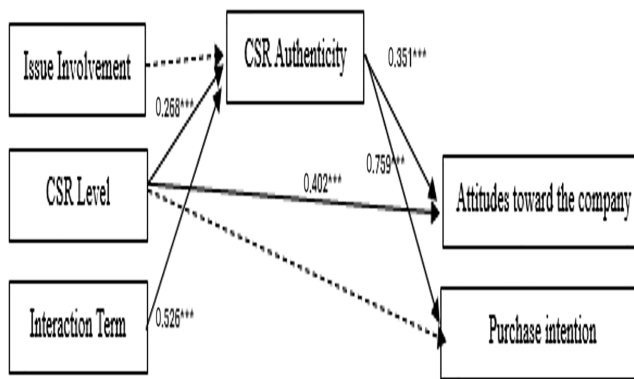
Measurements: Respondents' attitudes toward HCL were measured using four items (MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989). Participants indicated their overall impressions of the company on a seven-point semantic differential scale with the following indicators: Negative/Positive, Bad/Good, Unpleasant/Pleasant, and Unfavorable/Favorable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$). Perceived authenticity of the company's CSR efforts was measured using seven items (Alhouthi et al., 2016; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$). Purchase intention was measured using four items (Brown and Dacin, 1997; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$). LGBTQ+ issue involvement was measured using a three-item Likert scale (Leippe and Elkin, 1987; Yoon and Tinkham, 2013; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$), asking participants how critical, personally relevant, and involving the issue appeared to be (ranging from "not at all" to "very much").

Manipulation check

Before testing the hypothesis, we conducted a test to confirm the manipulation of perceived CSR levels, which was successful as the results aligned with expectations ($M = 6.32$, 4.71 , 2.62 ; $F(1, 761) = 356.89$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.49$).

Results

To test the proposed hypotheses, a path analysis was conducted using AMOS 28. The CSR level was dummy-coded, with proactive CSR as 1 and passive CSR as 0. An interaction term combining issue involvement and CSR level was also included. The analysis revealed an excellent model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.5$, CFI = 0.998, TLI = 0.987, NFI = 0.997, RMSEA = 0.051). Coefficient scores are presented in Figure 2.



Note. Solid lines represent statistically significant paths; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 1.5$, CFI = 0.998, TLI = 0.987, NFI = 0.997, RMSEA = 0.051

Figure 2. Coefficient scores

H1 suggested that proactive CSR leads to a greater perception of CSR authenticity compared to passive CSR. The results showed a positive influence of CSR levels on perceptions of authenticity (0.268, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. H2 and H3 predicted that proactive CSR would lead to more positive attitudes towards the company and higher purchase intentions. A significant positive path from CSR levels to company attitudes (0.402, $p < 0.001$) was observed, supporting H2. However, the path from CSR levels to purchase intentions was not statistically significant. H3 was not supported. H4 posited interaction effects between CSR level and issue involvement on perceived CSR authenticity. A significantly positive impact was observed (0.526, $p < 0.001$). More specifically, the interaction hypotheses were divided into two sub-hypotheses. H4-1 predicted that individuals with higher issue involvement would perceive the authenticity of passive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR as significantly lower compared to those with low issue involvement. H4-2 predicted that individuals with higher issue involvement would perceive the authenticity of proactive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR as significantly more positive compared to those with low issue involvement. While the interaction effects were statistically significant, a follow-up test was conducted to explore these effects in greater detail. The two-way interaction effects were plotted, as shown in Figure 3. Overall, individuals with low issue involvement displayed higher perceived CSR authenticity compared to those with high involvement. In the case of passive CSR, less involved individuals perceived it as more authentic than their more involved counterparts. The significant interaction effects arose from these differences, thereby supporting H4-1. However, for proactive CSR, perceptions of authenticity remained consistently high across all levels of involvement, meaning H4-2 was not supported. Lastly, H5 and H6 proposed a positive impact of perceived CSR authenticity on attitudes and purchase intentions. The results showed a significant positive path from CSR authenticity perceptions to both company attitudes (0.351, $p < 0.001$) and purchase intentions (0.759, $p < 0.001$). In addition, the mediating effects of perceived authenticity were tested using bootstrapping, and significant mediating effects were found. Thus, H5 and H6 were supported.

Discussions

Reflecting recent political shifts concerning LGBTQ+ rights in India, this study provides valuable insights specific to the Indian context, enabling companies to make informed

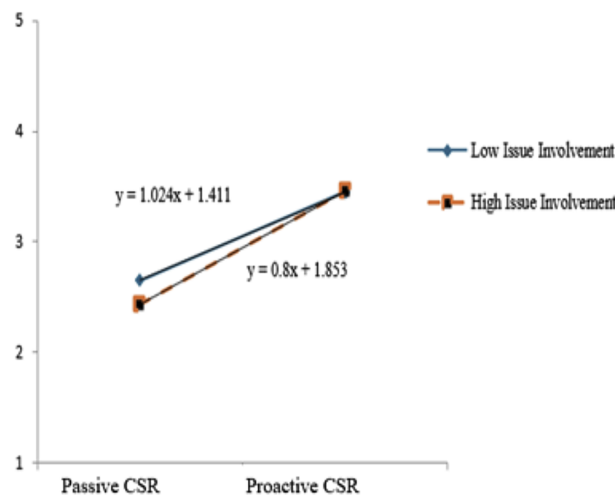


Figure 3. Interaction effects of issue involvement and CSR levels on perceived CSR authenticity

decisions regarding LGBTQ+-supportive CSR programs. Drawing on expectancy violation theory and attribution theory, this study examines how two critical factors—the level of CSR engagement and the issue involvement of Indian individuals—shape Indian consumers’ attitudes toward the company and influence their purchase intentions, with perceived CSR authenticity as a mediating factor. An online between-subjects experiment was conducted with Indian citizens residing in India. The key findings of this study are discussed below, followed by the theoretical and practical implications.

The findings of this study revealed that proactive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR initiatives generated more favorable consumer attitudes toward a company compared to passive approaches. Proactive initiatives directly enhanced positive attitudes, suggesting that consumers were more receptive to companies actively supporting LGBTQ+ rights. However, contrary to expectations, this proactive stance did not translate into increased purchase intentions. This differed from previous studies in Western contexts (Kim, 2017; Kim and Bhalla, 2021, 2022), which consistently showed that proactive CSR had a strong positive effect on both consumer attitudes and behavioral intentions, compared to passive CSR. This suggested that in the Indian context, the direct, positive effects of proactive CSR might be more limited than in Western countries. The somewhat limited direct effects of proactive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR on purchase intentions in India may have stemmed from the nascent stage of LGBTQ+ rights in the country, and the corresponding lower levels of social support (Bhalla and Kim, 2023). Compared to Western cultures, where significant progress has been made towards LGBTQ+ rights, India’s journey was still unfolding. The issue had yet to reach a level of maturity characterized by widespread institutional changes and strong social consensus. This highlights the importance of considering issue maturity when selecting CSR topics and determining the extent of a company’s involvement, as emphasized in prior research (Kim, 2024a, b). Several prior studies suggest that understanding issue maturity in CSR offers valuable guidance for public relations practitioners, helping them maximize opportunities and avoid potential backlash.

Although proactive CSR initiatives may not directly increase purchase intentions, however, they do so indirectly by enhancing the perceived authenticity of the company’s efforts. When consumers perceived a company’s support for LGBTQ+ rights as genuine and sincere, it fostered more positive attitudes toward the company and led to greater purchase intentions. This finding highlighted the crucial role of perceived authenticity in driving

consumer responses to LGBTQ+ supportive CSR. The mediating role of perceived authenticity, along with the moderating effect of issue involvement, is further explored below.

This study highlighted the important moderating effects of issue involvement on consumer perceptions of CSR authenticity in LGBTQ+ -supportive CSR. Individuals highly involved in LGBTQ+ issues demonstrated greater discernment when evaluating CSR initiatives, perceiving passive efforts as less authentic compared to those with lower involvement. Individuals highly involved with LGBTQ+ issues are likely to have strong emotional responses to LGBTQ+ -supportive CSR (Celsi and Olson, 1988; Chen and Lin, 2020). Thus, they exhibit a heightened perception of inauthenticity toward passive CSR, perceiving it as superficial support, consistent with findings in Western contexts (Kim and Bhalla, 2022; Kim, 2023). The amplified negative reactions to passive CSR among highly involved individuals highlighted the risks of such approaches, as reduced perceptions of CSR authenticity could significantly impair CSR outcomes (Afzali and Kim, 2021; Wagner *et al.*, 2009). Specifically, passive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR carried a risk of backlash from consumers with higher issue involvement. Interestingly, regarding proactive CSR initiatives, findings indicated that their positive effect on perceived authenticity was consistent across both high and low levels of consumer involvement. While prior studies suggested that highly involved individuals tended to exhibit amplified reactions (more positive for proactive CSR, more negative for passive CSR), this study observed only the heightened negative reactions to passive CSR. This suggests that companies actively championing LGBTQ+ rights are more likely to be perceived as genuinely supportive, regardless of consumers' level of issue involvement.

Indian consumers' perceived authenticity in LGBTQ+ supportive CSR, shaped by the interaction effects of CSR levels with issue involvement, subsequently influenced consumer responses. In proactive CSR cases, Indian consumers generally perceived authenticity as higher, leading to more favorable outcomes regardless of their level of issue involvement. Conversely, in passive CSR cases, highly involved individuals did not view such CSR efforts as authentic, resulting in amplified negative outcomes and indicating backlash effects.

This study offers important theoretical implications. While our findings generally support the utility of expectancy violation theory (EVT) in explaining the positive impact of proactive versus passive LGBTQ+ supportive CSR, they also reveal a critical nuance. Specifically, the expectancy threshold may vary depending on individuals' issue involvement. This means that proactive CSR for LGBTQ+ rights may not always be perceived as a positive expectancy violation, and conversely, passive CSR may not always be viewed as falling short of expectations. Therefore, individual factors such as issue involvement are crucial for understanding the complex dynamics of expectancy violation in the context of LGBTQ+ -supportive CSR. This is particularly relevant in India, where public discourse on LGBTQ+ issues is often limited due to low social acceptance (Bhalla and Kim, 2023), yet individuals with high involvement in the issue may actively advocate for LGBTQ+ rights within their own circles (Ramirez-Valles *et al.*, 2014).

Prior studies have emphasized the importance of CSR authenticity as a critical mediator, and this study provides further support for this notion. In particular, we found that consumers are willing to reward a company with positive behavioral intentions only when they perceive its CSR initiatives as authentic. While many prior studies, drawing on attribution theory, have highlighted the role of perceived motives (altruistic vs. egoistic) in driving consumer responses to CSR, the concept of CSR authenticity offers a more holistic perspective. It moves beyond the simplistic dichotomy of motives and encompasses a wider range of factors that contribute to consumer perceptions (Alhouti *et al.*, 2016; Beckman *et al.*, 2009; Grayson and Martinec, 2004). This study demonstrates that perceived CSR authenticity is a valuable lens through which to understand the underlying mechanisms by which varying levels of LGBTQ+ supportive CSR affect consumer outcomes.

Although there has been a growing body of literature related to stigmatized issues, there are few empirical studies in the context of CSR. In general, LGBTQ+ CSR studies have focused on institutional and organizational perspectives, and little attention has been given to CSR

from customers' perspectives. Even if a fragment of studies paid attention to consumers' responses to LGBTQ CSR programs, they are based on the Western context. This study made an effort to bridge this gap by collecting responses from Indian individuals. India is the fifth largest economy with a nominal GDP of \$3.4tn and is poised to become the world's largest economy by 2027 by surpassing Japan and Germany (Laker, 2024). With the growing sensitivities towards LGBTQ+ communities and their issues in India, this paper explores consumer responses to varying levels of LGBTQ+ related to CSR initiatives in India.

This study's findings carry significant implications as one of the few focused on the Indian context regarding LGBTQ+-related CSR. India, an emerging and substantial market, has been largely overlooked in previous research on this topic. By gathering responses from Indian consumers, this study helps bridge that gap. Currently the fifth-largest economy with a nominal GDP of \$3.4tn, India is projected to become one of the world's largest economies by 2027 (Laker, 2024). As attention and sensitivity toward LGBTQ+ communities grow in India, both international and Indian companies are increasingly expected to demonstrate their commitment to this issue. Thus, understanding consumer responses to varying levels of LGBTQ+-related CSR initiatives is essential for companies aiming to make informed decisions.

This study offers crucial practical implications for public relations professionals navigating the strategic implementation of LGBTQ+-supportive CSR. Prior research has underscored the challenges posed by the limited social acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in India, complicating PR professionals' decisions regarding the optimal approach to implement and communicate such CSR initiatives to key audiences (Bhalla and Kim, 2023). The public relations team's strategic managerial and communication roles are **critical** when CSR initiatives address potentially controversial or sensitive sociopolitical issues, such as LGBTQ+ support (Kim, 2024c; Kim and Meganck, 2024). This research provides compelling empirical evidence, demonstrating that proactive engagement in LGBTQ+ supportive CSR is perceived as more authentic and significantly enhances positive attitudes and purchase intentions. These positive impacts of proactive CSR are likely to appear regardless of individuals' issue involvement, simplifying the task for PR practitioners compared to managing passive CSR. However, it should also be acknowledged that passive CSR requires significantly less coordination and fewer resources to implement, which may make it an appealing option for some. If this approach is chosen, the study's findings indicate that practitioners should exercise caution when targeting consumers with high involvement in the issue, as backlash is likely. One potential strategy to mitigate skepticism about CSR authenticity is to employ strategic communication, as some studies have shown that effectively communicating motives can positively influence people's attribution tendencies toward CSR initiatives (Kim, 2014). These findings also encourage corporations and PR professionals to conduct preliminary research to understand and segment their target publics based on issue involvement before communicating LGBTQ+ supportive CSR practices.

The study has several limitations. First, in India, various cultural factors, such as religious views and levels of social acceptance, may significantly influence the effects of LGBTQ+-supportive CSR initiatives. This study did not focus on these cultural and religious factors, as its scope was limited to examining the impact of CSR levels and issue involvement. Future studies are encouraged to explore these unique cultural aspects in greater depth. Second, this study used an experimental design, which inherently presents challenges to external validity. Although efforts were made to enhance external validity by carefully selecting a real company for the stimuli, a survey approach could yield more generalizable results. Lastly, although the study was translated into both Hindi and English, the sample from the Qualtrics panel may not fully represent the Indian population, as participants are likely to have slightly higher education levels and better access to technology. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted cautiously, considering these limitations.

Conclusions

Despite India's prominence in the global economy, scholarly attention to LGBTQ+-related corporate social responsibility (CSR) remains limited. This research contributes by conducting an online experiment involving Indian citizens, offering valuable insights for companies seeking to implement effective LGBTQ+-supportive CSR programs. Utilizing expectancy violation theory and attribution theory, we explore how CSR engagement and individual issue involvement influence consumer attitudes and purchase intentions, mediated by perceived CSR authenticity. The empirical results highlight the necessity of active LGBTQ+ rights advocacy for companies to establish genuine support. Furthermore, these findings also encourage corporations and PR professionals to conduct preliminary research to understand and segment their target publics based on their issue involvement before communicating LGBTQ+ supportive CSR practices. Given that highly involved individuals exhibit amplified negative reactions to passive CSR, companies must exercise caution. To mitigate this risk, preliminary public segmentation based on issue involvement is strongly recommended for corporations and public relations professionals, enabling targeted and effective communication of LGBTQ+-supportive CSR practices.

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