

Consumer Culpability and Boycott in China's Fast Fashion Industry: The Mediating Role of Consumer Perceived Ethicality and the Moderating Effect of Perceived Benefits

(Kesalahan Pengguna dan Boikot dalam Industri Fesyen Pantas China: Peranan Pengantara Etika yang Ditanggapi Pengguna dan Kesan Penyederhanaan Faedah yang Dirasai)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines consumer responses to Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSI) in the fast fashion industry, focusing on the roles of consumer culpability, consumer perceived ethicality (CPE), and boycott behaviour. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory and moral philosophy theory, the research investigates how consumers' recognition of moral responsibility influences their ethical judgments and behavioral responses. The study surveyed 324 Chinese consumers using purposive sampling and tested the model with PLS-SEM. The results reveal that consumer culpability negatively affects CPE, which in turn increases boycott behaviour. This relationship is moderated by perceived benefits, such that higher perceived personal benefits reduce the likelihood of boycott. The study highlights the importance of consumer moral agency in ethical consumption and suggests that enhancing consumer awareness and responsibility is critical for mitigating CSI in fast fashion markets.

Keywords: Corporate social irresponsibility (CSI); boycott; consumer culpability; fast fashion industry; perceived benefits; China

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menilai tindak balas pengguna terhadap Ketidakbertanggungjawaban Sosial Korporat (CSI) dalam industri fesyen pantas, memfokuskan pada peranan kesalahan pengguna, persepsi etika (CPE) dan tingkah laku boikot. Berdasarkan teori disonans kognitif dan teori falsafah moral, penyelidikan mengkaji pengiktirafan pengguna terhadap tanggungjawab moral mereka mempengaruhi pertimbangan dan tindakan etika mereka. Kajian ini meninjau 324 pengguna di China menggunakan pensampelan bertujuan dan menguji model menggunakan PLS-SEM. Hasilnya mendedahkan bahawa kesalahan pengguna memberi kesan negatif kepada CPE, yang seterusnya meningkatkan tingkah laku boikot. Faedah yang dirasakan menyederhanakan hubungan ini, mengurangkan boikot apabila faedah yang dirasakan peribadi adalah tinggi. Kajian itu menyerlahkan kepentingan agensi moral pengguna dalam penggunaan beretika dan mencadangkan bahawa menangani kesedaran dan tanggungjawab pengguna adalah penting untuk mengurangkan CSI dalam pasaran fesyen pantas.

Kata kunci: Ketidakbertanggungjawaban sosial korporat (CSI); boikot; kesalahan pengguna; industri fesyen pantas; faedah yang dirasakan; China

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Irresponsibility (CSI) captures corporate conduct, including omissions, that violates ethical norms and harms stakeholders (Clark et al. 2022; Iborra & Riera 2023). Unlike Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which emphasizes proactive efforts to generate social and environmental value, CSI highlights firms' failure to meet basic ethical and legal obligations (Valor et al. 2022). The fast fashion sector, characterised by rapid turnaround and affordability, has attracted increasing criticism for its association with CSI practices (Jimmy et al. 2024; McNeill & Moore 2015; Zhang et al. 2021). Its low-cost, trend-driven model compresses design-to-market timelines and scales production volume, creating structural pressures that diffuse CSI across multiple stakeholder domains, including environment (Igini 2023), labours (Bossavie et al. 2023; Cruchinho et al. 2024), animals (Simpliciano et al. 2024), public stakeholders (TheStandard 2024), and competitors (Ferrer 2022). Environmental degradation is among the most visible consequences. The fashion industry accounts for approximately 10% of global carbon emissions and generates 92 million tons of textile waste annually, a figure projected to rise to 134 million tons by 2030 (UNEP 2023). Animal welfare concerns also persist, as fur, down, leather and other animal-derived inputs are frequently sourced under weak welfare oversight within the fast

fashion industry (Simpliciano et al. 2024). Consumer-related harms further arise from deceptive marketing practices, low product durability, and overconsumption, with an estimated 40% of fast fashion items discarded after fewer than ten wears (Euromonitor 2022), reinforcing unsustainable consumption patterns (Joy et al. 2012). Among these forms of CSI however, labour exploitation remains the most pressing issue. An estimated 80% of global garment workers earn below a living wage, and over 60 million workers are employed under cost-pressure contracts in fashion supply chains (Anner 2020; Chu 2020; ILO 2022; Rege 2022; Silva 2024).

In China, as one of the largest producers and consumers of fast fashion, these concerns are particularly pronounced. Recent investigations report that over 1.2 million Uyghur and other Muslim minorities have been subjected to forced labour in Xinjiang (Xu et al. 2020) leading to the detention of more than US\$1.3 billion worth of apparel and textile shipments under the U.S. Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act (CBP 2023). Although Chinese labour regulations impose limits on overtime, fast fashion supply chains continue to depend on excessive working hours and unfair compensation, with numerous workers receiving wages below the legal minimum and lacking access to social security protections (ILO 2022).

While labour exploitation in the fast fashion sector has been widely documented, most studies have primarily concentrated on corporate misconduct, legal violations, and supply chain governance, leaving a significant gap in understanding the role of consumers in sustaining or challenging such practices (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020). Existing research on CSI spans diverse regional contexts. In Eastern manufacturing hubs such as Bangladesh and Cambodia, scholars have examined large-scale labour rights violations, unsafe factory conditions, and weak enforcement of labour laws (Bossavie et al. 2023; Lawreniuk et al. 2022; Salmivaara 2018). By contrast, research in Western contexts has often shifted attention from production to consumption. These studies investigate how CSI incidents affect corporate reputation (Bundy et al. 2021), brand equity (Husnain et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2020), and consumer trust (Leonidou et al. 2013), as well as how consumers engage in ethical decision-making (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020; Valor et al. 2022). Although this consumer-oriented perspective has yielded valuable insights into demand-side drivers of CSI, its applications beyond Western contexts remain limited. Reviews identify a strong Western bias (Jamali & Karam 2018), with empirical work concentrated in the United States and Western Europe (Ravi & Teitelbaum 2025; Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020; Skarmeas & Leonidou 2013; Sweetin et al. 2013).

In the Chinese context, fast fashion research has largely concentrated on CSR initiatives, sustainable supply chain management (Cheng et al. 2023), environmental governance (Liu et al. 2020), and the promotion of green consumption behaviours (Liu et al. 2016). While these studies enhance understanding corporate practices and sustainability efforts (Haberstroh et al. 2017; Kim et al. 2021; Niimimäki et al. 2020; Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020), there remains a scarcity of research that examines consumers' moral responsibility, ethical decision-making, and behavioral responses under CSI conditions. This geographical and thematic imbalance constrains our understanding of how regulatory frameworks, cultural values, and consumer attitudes in China influence the emergence and persistence of CSI. Addressing this gap, this study shifts focus to consumer culpability, recognizing that demand for low-cost, rapidly changing fashion trends can indirectly perpetuate exploitative labour conditions in China.

Fast fashion brands' low prices and rapid product turnover generate substantial benefits for consumers, thereby encouraging their continued consumption (Joy et al. 2012). This reflects a relationship between consumer participation and weak accountability within the enterprise society. To conceptualize this phenomenon, Scheidler and Edinger-Schons (2020) introduce the concept of "consumer culpability", defined as consumers' acknowledgement that their consumption behaviours partially contribute to irresponsible corporate conduct. This self-attribution of responsibility influences how consumers process the ethical implications of their purchases. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, some consumers, upon recognising their complicity, seek to restore their moral self-concept by engaging in boycott behaviour to reduce their dissonance and alleviate feelings of culpability (Deng 2015; Festinger 1957; Klein et al. 2004; Valor et al. 2022). Accordingly, this study examines whether perceived benefits moderate the relationship between consumer culpability and consumer boycotts of fast fashion brands in the context of labour-related CSI. In this study, "irresponsible brands" refer to brands that consumers perceive as irresponsible in a specific context, because these are portrayed as being involved in, associated with, or accused of labour-related CSI practices (Brown & Dacin 1997; Keller 1993).

Research on consumer response on corporate (ir)responsible behaviour has predominantly focused on reactions to CSR initiatives (Baskentli et al. 2019; Öberseder et al. 2011; Tsarenko & Tojib 2015), purchase intentions (Bianchi et al. 2019; Jung et al. 2024; Prakash et al. 2019), brand loyalty (Aldulaimi et al. 2025; Martínez & Del Bosque 2013), and consumer trust (Martínez & Del Bosque 2013; Neumann et al. 2021). Research on CSI, in contrast has largely concentrated on firms' unethical actions and their consequences for corporate reputation, stakeholder trust, and legitimacy (Leonidou et al. 2013; Lin et al. 2016; Mar García-de Los Salmones et al. 2021). Within this literature, consumers are commonly portrayed as passive recipients of corporate misconduct or as external critics who respond only when irresponsible behaviour becomes visible. Valor et al. (2022) highlight that, despite the growth of consumer ethics as a field, limited attention has been given to how consumers exercise moral agency in response to irresponsible corporate behaviour. In consequence, limited

scholarly attention has been paid to how consumers cognitively process and respond to CSI, particularly from the perspective of their moral self-concept and attribution of responsibility.

While Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) has been extensively examined as a determinant of consumer responses to CSR and CSI, prior studies have largely centred on its influence on brand evaluations, purchase intentions, and trust (Brunk 2012; Cheung & To 2021; Paschalidou et al. 2023). This literature largely assumes that consumers act as external evaluators of corporate behaviour, according to perceived ethical or unethical conduct without persona involvement in the wrongdoing. By contrast, very few studies have examined situations where consumers feel personally culpable for perpetuating CSI (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020). Similarly, research on perceived benefits has typically focused on their direct effects on consumer attitudes, purchase intentions, and loyalty, primarily within CSR or general consumption contexts (Al-Debei et al. 2015; Liu et al. 2013; Wang 2017). Although perceived benefits are sometimes recognised as barriers to ethical action, they are rarely integrated into models that examine moral judgment variables such as CPE (Azzopardi & Van Der Sluis 2024; Mathew & Spinelli 2025). Consequently, little is known about how perceived benefits interact with CPE in contexts characterised by consumer culpability (Arman & Mark-Herbert 2024).

To address these research gaps, this study adopts a framework that integrates consumer culpability as the antecedent, CPE as the mediator, and perceived benefits as the moderator, thereby emphasizing consumers' recognition of their own responsibility in the context of CSI. Consumer culpability refers to consumers' acknowledgement of their role in sustaining unethical corporate practices through their consumption behaviour. CPE is conceptualised as the cognitive dimension of consumer moral agency, reflecting how consumers interpret and evaluate CSI. This approach moves beyond the traditional view of consumers as passive responders to fast fashion brands' actions and instead highlights their active role in moral judgment and ethical decision-making. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ₁ Does CPE mediate the relationship between consumer culpability and boycott behaviour towards fast fashion brands?

RQ₂ Does consumer culpability directly influence boycott behaviour towards fast fashion brands?

LITERATURE REVIEW

THEORY FOUNDATION

Moral philosophy theory provides a fundamental explanation of how individuals form ethical judgments and resolve moral dilemmas. This theory distinguishes two primary frameworks of ethical reasoning: *deontology* and *teleology* (Barnett et al. 2005; Forsyth 1980). Deontology emphasizes duties and moral principles irrespective of outcomes, whereas teleology evaluates actions based on their consequences (Brunk 2012; Crane & Matten 2007; Ronzoni 2010; Vitell et al. 2001). When applied to the present study, moral philosophy theory offers a lens through which to understand how consumers navigate ethical decision-making when confronted with CSI.

Based on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957), inconsistency between beliefs and behaviour creates discomfort that drives individuals to reestablish alignment, often by changing attitudes or actions. Perceived consumer culpability can often induce psychological discomfort, especially when such recognition conflicts with an individual's self-concept as ethical or responsible actor (Malle et al. 2014). This discomfort shapes consumers' interpretations of irresponsible corporate behaviour, their sense of personal involvement in supporting such practices, and their subsequent behavioural responses.

The framework is grounded in these two theories, which help specify the relationships among the study's main constructs.

CONSUMER CULPABILITY, PERCEIVED ETHICALITY, AND BOYCOTT

In consumer behaviour research, Schwartz (2017) defines "culpability" as the extent to which consumers perceive themselves as responsible for negative outcomes or unethical consumption behaviours. This concept serves as a theoretical basis for understanding the psychological discomfort experienced when consumers' actions conflict with their ethical self-image. When individuals recognize their role in causing harm, they experience psychological tension described as cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). This discomfort stems from the inconsistency between consumers' moral self-perceptions and their awareness of engaging in ethically questionable consumption (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones 2012). As such, culpability can be understood as a specific manifestation of cognitive dissonance that emerges when consumers perceive a misalignment between their moral values and their actual behaviour.

Scheidler and Edinger-Schons (2020) were the first to formally define "consumer culpability" as consumers' awareness that their consumption behaviours partially contribute to certain forms of CSI. However, their definition

primarily focuses on consumption habits and does not fully capture the broader impact of consumer demand and participation in sustaining CSI. As a result, the conceptualisation of consumer culpability remains underdeveloped and requires further refinement, especially with regard to its psychological mechanisms and behavioural consequences (Kim et al. 2024). Although only a few studies explicitly examine consumer culpability in CSI contexts, earlier research offers important theoretical insights. Antonetti and Maklan (2014), in their seminal study on moral emotions and sustainable consumption, show that consumers experience dissonance when they become aware of the harmful consequences of their consumption choices. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory, their research highlights the role of the moral self-concept and demonstrate how violations of this self-image generate emotional and psychological discomfort. While the authors do not use the term “consumer culpability,” their focus on self-attributed moral responsibility and its emotional consequences provides a critical conceptual foundation for understanding culpability as a dissonant psychological state that motivates consumer responses.

Overall, current studies tend to emphasise the acknowledgment of responsibility but pay limited attention to how this awareness influences the broader moral response process. Although recent research has examined consumer culpability (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020), ethical judgment (Brunk 2018; Xie & Bagozzi 2019), and activist responses (Khan et al. 2025), these elements have not been integrated into a coherent framework that explains how culpability shapes moral evaluation and subsequent responses.

CPE refers to the extent to which consumers subjectively evaluate a company’s actions, products, or overall business conduct as morally appropriate, fair, and consistent with social norms and ethical principles (Brunk 2012). Prior studies consistently show that CPE declines following exposure to unethical corporate practices, leading to reduced trust, loyalty, and purchase intention (Aldulaimi et al. 2025; Cheung & To 2021; Geng et al. 2022; Singh et al. 2012). Most of this literature assumes that consumers act as external evaluators of corporate behaviour, reacting to perceived ethical or unethical conduct without recognizing their own involvement in the wrongdoing. However, research in related ethical consumption contexts underscores the importance of individual perceptions in driving responsible behaviour. For example, Empirikal (2012) found that CPE, defined as the belief that one’s own actions can positively influence outcomes, was a stronger predictor of environmentally conscious behaviour than general concern for environmental issues. These findings suggest that heightened consumer culpability is likely to be associated with lower perception of corporate ethicality.

Despite this, few studies consider situations in which consumers feel personally culpable for perpetuating CSI (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020). This omission is notable, as consumers’ ethical perceptions not only inform their evaluations of corporate misconduct but also guide their subsequent behavioral responses. This study accordingly proposes that feelings of culpability prompt consumers to re-evaluate the ethicality of corporate conduct. CPE thus serves as the cognitive dimension of consumer moral agency, mediating the link between consumer culpability and consumer responses.

Based on cognitive dissonance theory, when individuals recognize that their consumption behaviour supports unethical corporate actions, they experience a conflict between their moral values and actual behaviour (Hinojosa et al. 2017). This inconsistency results in psychological discomfort, motivating consumers to seek ways to restore cognitive alignment (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones 2012). One common strategy, particularly when consumers feel culpable for contributing to a CSI incident, is by reassessing their ethical judgment of the firm involved (Saranya & Joji Alex 2024; Valor et al. 2022). Sweeney et al. (2000) further argue that dissonance intensifies when behavior contradicts deeply held moral beliefs. As such, consumers with higher ethical awareness are more likely to experience dissonance upon recognizing their involvement in unethical consumption and to perceive the firm as morally deficient (Brunk 2012). Based on this reasoning, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁ Consumer culpability negatively influences Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE).

Prior research identifies self-enhancement as a key driver of boycott behaviour, suggesting that boycotting enables consumers to reinforce their self-image as morally responsible individuals by aligning with ethical causes (Klein et al. 2004). In the context of CSI, consumers may engage in boycotts to compensate for their own complicity and to restore their moral identity (Klein et al. 2004; Kozinets & Handelman 1998). Scheidler and Edinger-Schons (2020) earlier introduced the relationship between consumer culpability and boycott attitudes, highlighting how feelings of responsibility influence moral evaluations of unethical firms. While the study examined attitudes, it did not fully capture how consumer culpability may lead to boycott behaviour. The current study therefore investigates boycott behaviour as a behavioural response to consumer culpability.

Consistent with the cognitive dissonance theory, when consumers feel responsible for supporting unethical business practices, they experience psychological discomfort arising from the inconsistency between their actions and moral values (Harmon-Jones & Mills 2019; Malter et al. 2021). To alleviate this dissonance, consumers are likely to engage in corrective actions, with boycott behaviour serving as a direct means of restoring their moral alignment and reducing internal conflict (Xie & Bagozzi 2019). We accordingly propose the following hypothesis:

H₂ Consumer culpability positively influences consumers’ boycott behaviour.

PERCEIVED ETHICALITY AND BOYCOTT

When consumers view a company as unethical and associated with CSI, they perceive it as having violated their ethical expectations (Skarmeas & Leonidou 2013). This perception strongly influences consumer responses, particularly through increasing the likelihood of punitive behaviours (Keskin et al. 2024). Boycotting represents a form of consumer activism, where individuals deliberately cease purchasing from a firm to express their disapproval (Klein et al. 2004; Shin & Yoon 2018). Prior research consistently shows that lower perceived ethicality increases consumers' intention to boycott, as firms are viewed as morally irresponsible and deserving of sanction (Brunk & De Boer 2020). In contrast, when a company is perceived as ethically responsible, as reflected in a high CPE, consumers are less likely to engage in boycotts, as its actions are not seen as deserving punishment. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₃ Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) negatively influences consumers' boycott behaviour.

MEDIATING EFFECT OF PERCEIVED ETHICALITY

CPE functions as a key mediating mechanism linking consumer culpability to boycott behaviour. When consumers acknowledge personal responsibility for supporting unethical corporate practices, they tend to reassess the firm's ethical standing more negatively, which in turn heightens their likelihood of engaging in boycotts (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020). Empirical evidence supports this mediating pathway. Grappi et al. (2013) demonstrate that perceptions of corporate unethicality strengthen the relationship between feelings of guilt and boycott intentions, demonstrating how perceived ethicality transforms moral discomfort into action. In the fast fashion context, when consumers realise their complicity in labour exploitation, they report lower perceived ethicality and stronger intentions to boycott (Bossavie et al. 2023). By contrast, consumers who psychologically distance themselves from culpability tend to maintain positive ethical perceptions of firms, thereby reducing the boycott participation (Brunk & De Boer 2020). On this basis, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H₄ Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) mediates the relationship between consumer culpability and boycott behaviour.

MODERATING EFFECT OF CONSUMER PERCEIVED BENEFITS

Perceived benefits refer to the positive outcomes consumers believe they receive from brands, including product quality price savings, convenience, and social approval (Peloza & Shang 2011). These benefits shape the extent consumers act on their ethical concerns. When products provide substantial personal benefits, consumers are less likely to participate in boycotts, since doing so would involve sacrificing valued benefits and incurring personal costs (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020). High personal value also encourages consumers to justify non-participation by minimizing the severity of the CSI incidents or questioning the effectiveness of boycotts (Klein et al. 2004).

In the fast fashion industry, brands frequently reduce labour costs across supply chains to lower production expenses, making affordable fashion widely accessible to consumers (James 2022). This creates a situation where consumers benefit directly from the unethical practices, enjoying low-cost, trendy clothing while disregarding associated labour exploitation (Chu 2020). Prior studies show that perceived personal benefits often outweigh moral concerns, enabling consumers to rationalize unethical consumption and disengage from responsibility (Bian et al. 2016; Loh & Hassan 2022). As a result, high perceived benefits reduce moral conflict and facilitate continued consumption without ethical discomfort. Consequently, firms that deliver strong consumer benefits are less likely to face large-scale boycotts, even when linked to unethical conduct. Thus, we propose:

H₅ Consumer perceived benefits moderate the relationship between consumer culpability and boycott behaviour, such that consumers are less (more) likely to engage in boycotts when perceived benefits are high (low), and more likely to do so when perceived benefits are low, even when culpability is felt.

Based on moral philosophy theory and cognitive dissonance theory, this study identifies four key variables: consumer culpability (CCP), consumer perceived ethicality (CPE), boycott behaviour (BYC), and perceived benefits (PCB). The proposed theoretical framework (Figure 1) presents the conceptual model and associated hypotheses.

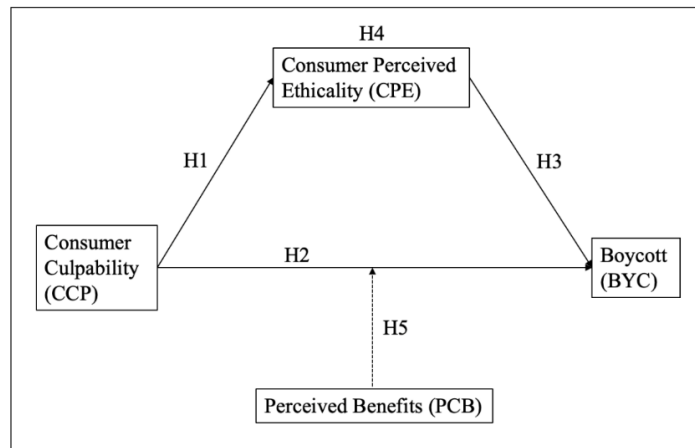


FIGURE 1. Theoretical framework

METHODOLOGY

QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationships among consumer culpability, perceived ethicality, perceived benefits, and boycott behavior in response to CSI within China’s fast fashion industry. The target population comprises individuals who have purchased fast fashion brands and are aware of labour-related irresponsibility issues in China. Based on estimates of fast fashion consumptions in China (Statista (2025); Wyman (2019) and levels of awareness of labour-related issues (Koty 2022), the population size is estimated to range between 80 and 100 million consumers. Given the study’s emphasis on consumer responses to CSI, purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all respondents possessed relevant experience and awareness of labour-related CSI, thereby enabling the collection of informed and meaningful data (Baltes & Ralph 2022). Thus, the unit of analysis is the individual consumer, specifically adult fast fashion consumers in China who are aware of its labour-exploitation issues.

A quantitative approach was adopted, with primary data collected in China via Wenjuanxing (Changsha Ranxing Information Technology Co., Ltd., Hunan, China). Ethical approval was obtained by the Research Ethics Committee, The National University of Malaysia (RECUKM) (Approval No: JEP-2024-970). The measurement of scales for all variables are provided in the Appendix. All constructs in this study were specified as reflective, consistent with their conceptualization in prior literature (Hair 2014).

A power analysis conducted using G*Power indicated that a minimum sample size of 85 respondents was required ($f^2 = 0.15$, $\alpha = 0.05$, $1-\beta = 0.80$, predictors = 4), in line with established guidelines in behavioural research (Maroufkhani et al. 2022).

Two screening questions were used to confirm that respondents had purchased fast fashion products and were aware of labour-related issues. Those who failed either criterion was automatically disqualified, and the survey was terminated. Eligible respondents then completed the measurement questions for each construct, followed by closed-ended questions capturing demographic information. After screening out invalid responses, a total of 324 questionnaires were retained for analysis.

MEASUREMENTS

A five-point Likert scale was used for all constructs in the questionnaire, with measurement items adapted from established studies. Consumer culpability was measured using items adapted from Scheidler and Edinger-Schons (2020). Perceived benefits were evaluated using eight items sourced from Bian and Moutinho (2009). CPE was measured using items from Brunk (2012). Boycott behaviour was operationalised using the scale developed by Klein et al. (2004). Lastly, the marker variable items were adopted from Miller and Simmering (2023).

COMMON METHOD BIAS

Common method bias (CMB), was assessed using the marker variable technique (Miller & Simmering 2023). Path coefficients were compared before and after the inclusion of the marker variable, revealing only minimal changes. The results confirm that CMB did not significantly influence the findings or threaten the validity of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data were analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software to estimate the measurement model and test the proposed hypotheses. Additionally, SPSS version 29 was employed to analyse and report respondents' demographic characteristics.

Descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS software provided insights into consumers' fast fashion purchasing behaviour. Of the 324 respondents, 58.3% were female and 41.7% were male. The largest age group was 35–44 (33.0%) and the most common income category was RMB 50,000 – 100,000 (28.4%). Fast fashion consumption was prevalent within the sample, with Shein (19.4%), H&M (18.8%), and Uniqlo (16.0%) identified as the most frequently purchased brands, indicating their widespread market acceptance. In terms of purchase frequency, 39.8% of respondents reported purchasing fast fashion products every two to three months, while an additional 23.1% indicated purchasing once a month or more frequently.

Following data collection and preliminary screening, SmartPLS 4.0 was used as the primary analytical tool to test the proposed research model and hypotheses. As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory measurement properties. Specifically, all outer loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 indicating strong item reliability (Hair et al. 2019). Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values for all constructs were well above the 0.70 benchmark, confirming internal consistency (Hair et al. 2017). Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for all constructs exceeded the 0.50 threshold, supporting convergent validity (Ramayah et al. 2018). Overall, these results confirm that the measurement scales are reliable and valid.

TABLE 1. Results of the measurement model's analysis (n=324)

Construct	Item	Outer Loadings	Cronbach Alpha	AVE	CR
Consumer Culpability (CCP)	CCP1	0.819	0.910	0.649	0.928
	CCP2	0.864			
	CCP3	0.833			
	CCP4	0.841			
Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE)	CPE1	0.793	0.860	0.705	0.905
	CPE2	0.793			
	CPE3	0.811			
	CPE4	0.805			
	CPE5	0.798			
	CPE6	0.819			
Boycott (BYC)	BYC1	0.835	0.890	0.645	0.916
	BYC2	0.812			
	BYC3	0.797			
	BYC4	0.790			
	BYC5	0.793			
	BYC6	0.804			
	BYC7	0.807			
Perceived Benefits (PCB)	PCB1	0.839	0.938	0.696	0.948
	PCB2	0.823			
	PCB3	0.846			
	PCB4	0.822			
	PCB5	0.865			
	PCB6	0.825			
	PCB7	0.820			
	PCB8	0.833			

Table 2 presents the results of the Fornell-Larcker criterion. For all constructs, the square root of the AVE exceeds the inter-construct correlations, indicating satisfactory discriminant validity and confirming that each construct captures distinct conceptual variance (Hair et al. 2017). Table 3 reports the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) values, a more stringent test of discriminant validity (Hair et al. 2017). All HTMT values are well below the recommended threshold of 0.85, further supporting construct distinctiveness. In sum, results from both Fornell-Larcker and HTMT assessments demonstrate adequate discriminant validity, confirming the robustness of the measurement model.

TABLE 2. Discriminant validity analysis via Fornell Larcker criterion

	BYC	CCP	CPE	PCB
BYC	0.806			
CCP	0.381	0.839		
CPE	-0.410	-0.525	0.803	
PCB	0.424	0.225	-0.372	0.834

TABLE 3. Discriminant validity assessment operating Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio method (HTMT)

	BYC	CCP	CPE	PCB
BYC				
CCP	0.429			
CPE	0.455	0.595		
PCB	0.456	0.245	0.405	

Path analysis was performed to assess the links among the constructs, with the structural model results reported in Table 4.

Specifically, CCP had a significant negative effect on CPE ($\beta = -0.525, t = 12.836, p < 0.001$). As noted by Skarmas and Leonidou (2013), consumer ethical evaluations are highly sensitive to perceived violations of moral expectation. Accordingly, H₁ is supported: higher levels of consumer culpability are associated with lower perceptions of corporate ethicality. In other words, when consumers perceive themselves as complicit in a company's actions, they evaluate the company more harshly.

The analysis also confirms that CCP plays a significant role in shaping consumer responses to CSI. CCP has a positive direct effect on BYC ($\beta = 0.236, t = 4.578, p < 0.01$), consistent with prior research showing that feelings of complicity and moral responsibility increase consumers' willingness to punish irresponsible firms through boycotts (Jedicke et al. 2025; Keskin et al. 2024; Sweetin et al. 2013). Moreover, Scheidler and Edinger-Schons (2020) similarly argue that a sense of responsibility motivates active protest rather than passive avoidance. Thus, H₂ is supported.

In addition, CPE negatively influenced BYC ($\beta = -0.179, t = 3.177, p < 0.001$). This finding is consistent with prior research showing that low CPE increases boycott intentions, whereas high perceived ethicality reduces the perceived need for punitive action (Brunk & De Boer 2020). Therefore, the H₃ is supported.

Regarding mediation, Preacher and Hayes (2008) state that a mediation effect is significant when the confidence interval does not include zero. In this study, the indirect effect of CCP on BYC through CPE met this criterion ($\beta = 0.110, t = 3.849, p < 0.001$), confirming H₄. In other words, when consumers feel partly responsible for corporate wrongdoing, they judge the firm as less ethical, which in turn increases their likelihood of engaging in boycott behaviour. This finding supports prior evidence that ethical judgments play a key role in resorting to boycott behavior (Brunk 2018; Xie & Bagozzi 2019) and extends the work of Scheidler and Edinger-Schons (2020) on culpability-driven consumer activism.

Furthermore, the moderating effect of PCB on the relationship between CCP and BYC was also significant ($\beta = -0.136, t = 2.218, p < 0.05$), suggesting that higher perceived benefits weaken the positive relationship between consumer culpability and boycott behaviour. This aligns with prior literature suggesting that perceived benefits often act as barriers to ethical action, as consumers weigh personal gains against collective moral outcomes (Scheidler & Edinger-Schons 2020). Figure 2 illustrates this moderating effect: when PCB is low, the relationship between CCP and BYC is stronger, whereas when PCB is high, the relationship becomes weaker. Thus, H₅ is supported: when consumers feel they benefit, they're less likely to resort to boycott behaviors.

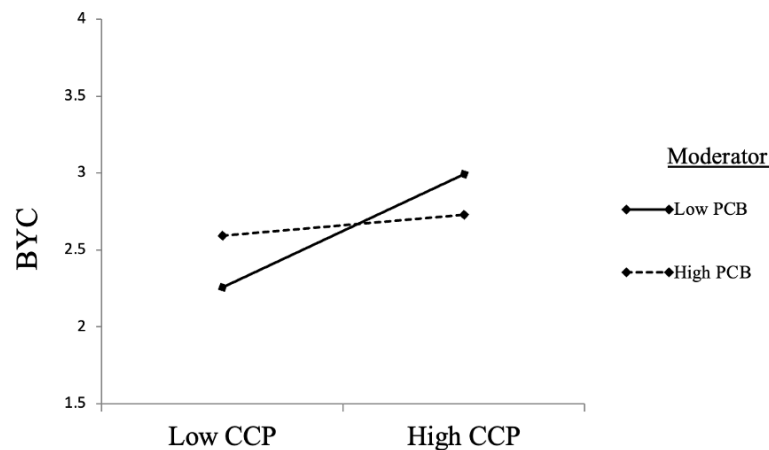


FIGURE 2. PCB moderation between CCP and BYC

Finally, Figure 3 presents the structural model output generated by SmartPLS 4.0, illustrating the relationships among the key constructs. All constructs are modelled reflectively, with circles representing latent variables and rectangles indicating observed indicators. PCB interacts with consumer culpability, moderating the relationship with BYC, as indicated by the dotted path. All outer loadings exceed 0.8, indicating satisfactory measurement validity.

TABLE 4. Assessment of the structural model

Estimated Path	Original Sample (β)	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value	Decision
H ₁ : CCP → CPE	-0.525	0.041	12.836	0.000	Supported
H ₂ : CCP → BYC	0.236	0.052	4.578	0.000	Supported
H ₃ : CPE → BYC	-0.179	0.056	3.177	0.001	Supported
H ₄ : CCP → CPE → BYC	0.094	0.031	3.015	0.003	Supported
H ₅ : PCB × CCP → BYC	-0.171	0.043	3.973	0.000	Supported

Note: CCP = Consumer Culpability; CPE = Consumer Perceived Ethicality; BYC = Boycott; PCB = Perceived Benefits

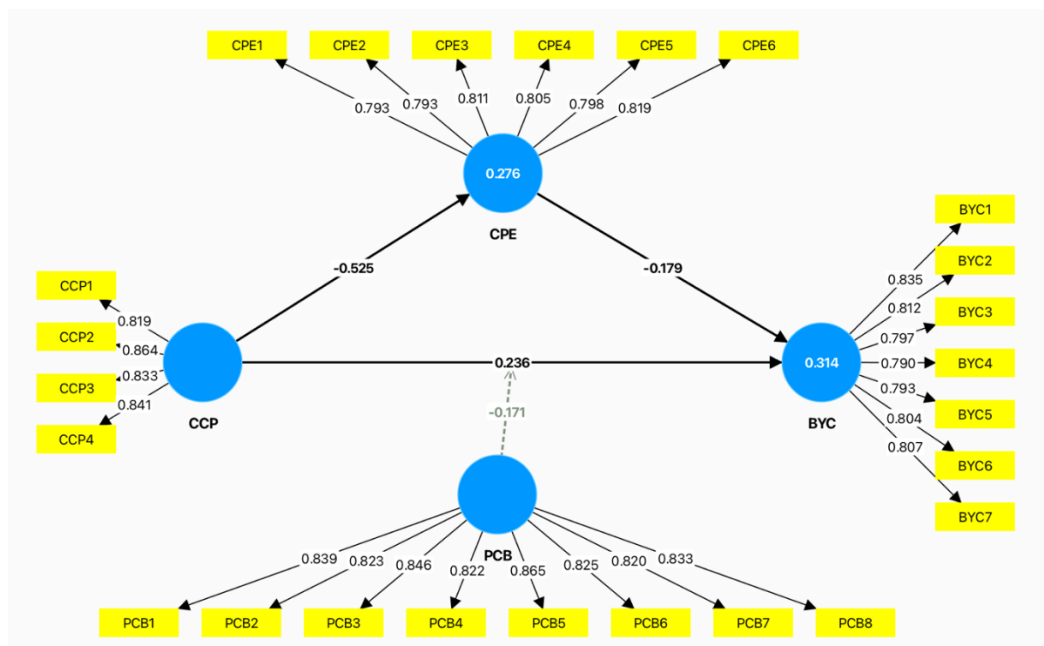


FIGURE 3. Smart-PLS 4 output without bootstrapping

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides both theoretical and managerial implications that advance the understanding of consumer culpability in the fast fashion industry. By integrating cognitive dissonance theory with moral philosophy theory, the findings enrich academic discourse while offering practical guidance for managers and policymakers.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enhances the understanding of consumer moral agency by demonstrating how consumer culpability activates ethical evaluations and behavioral responses in the CSI context. Importantly, the findings show that combining cognitive dissonance theory with moral philosophy theory yields a more comprehensive explanation of consumer decision-making. Moral philosophy theory provides a normative framework for ethical judgement based on outcomes (*teleology*) or duty-based reasoning (*deontology*), but on its own offers limited insight into how such judgements translate into observable consumer behavior.

By contrast, cognitive dissonance theory addresses this limitation by focusing on the psychological discomfort that arises when consumers' purchasing behaviour conflicts with their ethical beliefs. The findings demonstrate that consumers seek to reduce such dissonance through compensatory behavioral responses, notably boycotts, thereby operationalizing abstract moral reasoning. In other words, while moral philosophy theory clarifies why consumers judge a firm as ethical or unethical, cognitive dissonance theory explains how those judgments are transformed into action. Their integration therefore provides a more empirically grounded explanation of ethical consumer behaviour.

The findings also provide important managerial insights for the fast fashion industry, particularly in the Chinese market. The results show that consumer boycotts are driven not only by perceptions of corporate misconduct but also by consumer culpability. This implies that brands should adopt proactive ethical communication strategies, that increase consumer awareness of their role in responsible consumption. Additionally, the moderating effect of perceived benefits indicates that affordability and trend-driven appeal may temporarily reduce consumer backlash, but they do not resolve the underlying ethical conflict. Accordingly, a combination of low prices and rapid trend adoption is not a sustainable defense against CSI; brands must address structural labour issues rather than rely on short-term consumer appeal.

In light of these insights, brands, policymakers, and NGOs in China should priorities strategies that: (1) develop consumer-facing transparency tools, such as QR-code supply chain tracing, to clearly illustrate show how pricing and speed affect labour conditions and thereby moral detachment in consumption; (2) enhance transparency in sourcing and labour practices; and (3) design educational and marketing initiatives that support ethical, and informed consumer decision-making. Aligning communication with these mechanisms may help mitigate labour-related CSI and promote responsible consumption.

CONCLUSION

This study offers empirical evidence on consumer responses to CSI in China's fast fashion market by integrating consumer culpability, CPE, and boycott behaviour, with perceived benefits tested as a moderating factor. The results indicate that consumer culpability influences boycott behaviour both directly and indirectly through CPE: when consumers recognise their role in enabling unethical practices, they develop more negative ethical evaluations of the brand.

Negative ethical perceptions significantly increase boycott behaviour, confirming the mediating role of CPE in translating moral recognition into active resistance to CSI. In addition, perceived benefits significantly moderate this relationship. When consumers perceive high value in fast fashion products, their likelihood of boycotting decreases even when they feel culpable. This highlights the complexity of ethical decision-making in contexts where affordability and trend appeal remain strong incentives.

Descriptive findings show that fast fashion consumption in China remains frequent, while ethical awareness relatively low. Most consumers rarely consider labour exploitation in their purchasing decisions, indicating that affordability, convenience, and trend appeal outweigh moral concerns. Overall, this study advances understanding of consumer moral agency in CSI contexts by demonstrating that boycott behaviour is shaped not only by evaluations of corporate misconduct, but also by consumers' own sense of personal responsibility and benefit-based rationalisation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is subjected to several limitations that suggest directions for future research. First, the focus on the fast fashion industry, while appropriate for studying CSI, limits the generalizability of the findings to other sectors. Future research could broaden the analysis to industries such as technology, finance, or extractives, where irresponsible practices manifest in different forms and may elicit distinct consumer responses. Secondly, the study concentrates on labour rights violations within the supply chain, excluding other critical dimensions of CSI, such as environmental harm, product safety, and deceptive marketing. Examining consumer responses to other forms of misconduct would broaden understanding of CSI and enable cross issue comparisons. Third, the study examines boycott as the primary form of consumer response. While boycotting is an important ethical action, consumers may also respond through alternative behaviours, including positive activism, online advocacy, support for regulatory reform, or moral decoupling despite recognizing corporate misconduct. Future research should therefore incorporate a broader spectrum of consumer responses to better capture the full complexity of ethical decision-making. In summary, future research would benefit from extending the analysis beyond fast fashion, incorporating multiple CSI domains, diversifying consumer response measures, and adopting longitudinal and multi-method research designs. These approaches would contribute to a more nuanced, generalizable, and theoretically robust understanding of consumer behaviour in the context of corporate irresponsibility.

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