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Trust as the Missing Catalyst: How Environmental CSR Becomes Employee Eco-Behavior through Concern Activation

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ABSTRACT

Even though environmental agendas and ESG rhetoric have become highly visible across governments and firms, we still do not fully understand how an employee's perception of green CSR is internalized and eventually shows up as pro-environmental actions. Much has been said in policy speeches, but the internal psychological pipeline that runs from awareness to action has remained curiously underexplored. This study takes that pathway seriously. We propose that green CSR perception nudges environmental concern, which then shades into everyday eco-behavior; and that this linkage becomes stronger, or weaker, depending on whether employees believe their organization acts sincerely. To test this, survey data from 300 Korean employees were examined using PROCESS Model 7. Three domains of pro-environmental behavior—resource saving, eco-product choices, and green mobility—were analyzed. Results show that CSR perception does not directly translate into green practices; instead, it works mostly through the elevation of environmental concern. Moreover, this indirect link was only robust under conditions of high organizational trust. These findings suggest that corporate environmental messaging is insufficient without credible trust-building mechanisms. Practically speaking, CSR must be participatory, believable, and grounded in responsible governance. Policies that reinforce this alignment provide fertile ground for meaningful ecological behavior inside firms.

Keywords: Environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (E-CSR), Organizational Trust Dynamics, Environmental Concern Activation, Pro-Environmental Behavioral Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Academic conversations surrounding corporate responsibility often assume that if organizations behave ethically, favorable employee outcomes will naturally appear. Yet, as many practitioners quietly acknowledge, this assumption rarely behaves so neatly in practice. Employees do not automatically mimic sustainability narratives just because leadership invokes them. Instead, the effectiveness of CSR messaging unfolds through subtle psychological bridges — perceptions trust, and emotional belief — that influence whether responsibility rhetoric "lands" or evaporates unnoticed.

The present study walked into this tension. Rather than treating CSR as an action that directly begets desired behavior, this inquiry follows a more human-scale trajectory: CSR is *interpreted*, filtered through personal concern, and only then expressed behaviorally. This chain has been suggested in fragments across the literature but rarely assembled into a single explanatory pathway. Moreover, although earlier work highlights mediating mechanisms, the question of *when* CSR meaning is accepted or rejected — particularly under varying levels of organizational trust — remains relatively underdeveloped. Accordingly, this research tests whether CSR influences employee environmental behavior indirectly, via environmental concern, and whether trust modulates this interpretive step.

By positioning employees not as passive receivers but as evaluative agents, the study offers an alternative framing — one that complicates managerial assumptions that sustainability messaging is effective merely because it exists (Woo & Kang, 2020).

Beyond the formal boundaries of CSR and environmental behavior theories, it is worth acknowledging that employees' reactions to sustainability messages rarely unfold in a linear or perfectly rational manner. People absorb organizational cues unevenly: some notice minor symbolic actions and overinterpret them, while others ignore sweeping announcements until they feel a personal stake. This uneven perceptual terrain helps explain why CSR often struggles to gain traction inside organizations unless it is combined with moments that feel real moments where an individual senses, not merely reads, that the company means what it claims. In everyday practice, this might look like a supervisor casually modeling resource conservation without being prompted, or a small departmental initiative that unexpectedly creates shared ownership. These mundane gestures frequently anchor the very psychological states that large CSR campaigns hope to cultivate.

For this reason, considering the emotional textures of employee sense-making becomes integral to explaining why similar CSR programs thrive in one setting yet falter in another. Furthermore, the expanding societal conversation around ESG has created a backdrop where workers increasingly evaluate corporate actions through moral, relational, and even identity-driven lenses. CSR, in this environment, becomes a mirror that employees hold up to understand what kind of organization they belong to—and whether that membership feels compatible with their values. Therefore, any theoretical exploration of CSR's behavioral consequences benefits from acknowledging that sustainability messaging is always filtered through a subtle mix of personal aspirations, collective memory, workplace trust, and contextual pressures. These layered elements shape the early framing of this study and emphasize why trust and concern are not incidental variables but rather parts of the lived climate that makes CSR meaningful (Kim et al., 2024; Woo & Kang, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR as Perceived Rather than Performed

Corporate social responsibility, despite its surface clarity, is experienced very differently inside organizations than is presented externally. Classic definitions paint CSR as a multi-layered commitment to ethical, social, and environmental obligations (Carroll, 1979, 1999), and stakeholder theorists tell us that firms should answer to a wider moral community beyond shareholders (Freeman, 1984; Clarkson, 1995). Yet, employees rarely interact with CSR as an abstract ideal. Instead, they encounter it through ambiguous corporate communications, sporadic initiatives, and uneven managerial behaviors. How they interpret these signals — whether as genuine investment or theatrical compliance — tends to shape the downstream outcomes (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2022).

When CSR is perceived as authentic, employees report stronger identification, commitment, and willingness to align with the firm's stated values (Brammer et al., 2007; Li, 2023). Conversely, when CSR feels performative or misaligned with lived reality, outcomes flip cynicism, distrust, disengagement, even moral fatigue surface (Walker & Wan, 2012; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). This tension gives CSR its paradoxical character — simultaneously celebrated in theory but fragile in practice.

Environmental Concern as the Psychological Relay

Environmental concern has long been framed as a precursor to ecological action, spanning cognitive recognition, emotional valuation, and behavioral intention (Dunlap & Jones, 2002; Schultz, 2001). Meta-studies consistently argue that individuals who care more about environmental problems are more likely to conserve energy, recycle, reduce consumption, and support green purchasing (Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Hines et al., 1987). But this relationship is rarely linear. Concern emerges through value internalization, identity processes, norms, and sometimes collective sentiment — meaning an organization's CSR messaging may "activate" environmental care only when employees are receptive to it.

More recent organizational research observes that CSR can serve as a framing device shaping employee ecological beliefs (Norton et al., 2015; Paillé et al., 2014). Through exposure, employees increasingly internalize sustainability concerns, interpreting them as workplace norms or shared moral obligations. In turn, concern can translate into green habits both inside and outside the organization (Boiral, 2009).

Trust as the Conditional Lens

The variable that complicates everything, however, is trust. Organizational trust functions less as a "nice to have" and more as the interpretive filter determining whether CSR messaging is believed or dismissed (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995). Without trust, CSR is easily seen as greenwashing, risk management, or opportunistic signaling rather than genuine contribution (Chen & Chang, 2013).

Studies confirm that trust amplifies the link between CSR perception and positive employee attitudes (Vlachos et al., 2009; Hasan et al., 2023). Conversely, low trust conditions disrupt the CSR-concern conversion pathway — employees may hear sustainability language but emotionally "block" it. Some research even suggests that CSR skepticism can intensify environmental resistance rather than motivation (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013; Musgrave et al., 2025).

Research Gap Emergence

Across this literature, three under-addressed issues stand out. First, empirical work often treats CSR as if it operates directly on behavior, marginalizing intermediary cognition. Second, environmental concern is acknowledged conceptually but rarely embedded in full explanatory models linking CSR to sustained behavior. Third, trust appears as either a control variable or correlative construct rather than an active boundary condition shaping how the process unfolds. Thus, these absences motivate a moderate mediation approach — one capable of illustrating CSR → concern → behavior pathways and demonstrating when they strengthen or dissolve

Summary of Current Literature

As literature continues to develop, it becomes clear that the conceptual boundaries around CSR, environmental concern, and pro-environmental behavior are far more porous than many earlier models assumed. Scholars often carve these constructions into separate analytical boxes, yet employees tend to experience them as overlapping impressions that accumulate over time. For instance, what an article defines as "CSR perception" may feel, to an employee, more like a vague sense of whether their organization is aligned with the world they want to live in. Similarly, environmental concern seldom emerges from a single source; it is shaped by home life, personal experiences, media exposure, workplace cues, and the subtle moral climate created by leaders.

This mixture makes it difficult for empirical studies to capture the full texture of psychological mediation, but it also reveals why traditional models sometimes underpredict sustainability-related behaviors. Moreover, the literature shows promising attempts to merge micro-level psychological explanations with macro-level institutional contexts. As this hybrid view gains traction, CSR begins to appear less as a policy choice and more as a social signal shaped jointly by corporate action and public expectations. That means environmental behavior cannot be understood solely by measuring individual attitudes must be interpreted as a relational response to how an organization constructs meaning around sustainability. In reviewing past scholarships, one sees that studies increasingly call for frameworks that treat employees not as passive recipients of CSR information but as active interpreters who constantly test, compare, and recalibrate their understanding of organizational sincerity. This interpretive flexibility reinforces why moderated mediation designs are so useful: they allow researchers to capture the subtle interplay between personal belief systems and workplace meaning-making processes, offering a more faithful representation of how sustainability behaviors take root.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL & HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Framing CSR as a Psychological Trigger Rather Than a Policy Artifact

Although CSR is conventionally presented as a corporate output, our working logic treats it as an input that triggers interpretive processes within employees. The more employees feel their organization sincerely invests in ecological stewardship, the more likely they are to internalize sustainability norms as personally relevant (Turker, 2009; Rupp et al., 2013). This internalization resembles Ajzen's (1991) conception of attitude formation — where beliefs, if believed credible, tilt motivation toward behavior. Thus, CSR perception is positioned as a "spark" that activates environmental concern — but only if employees are psychologically opens to it.

Environmental Concern as a Relay Mechanism

Environmental concern behaves like a relational bridge. Rather than CSR directly dictating behavior, concern proposes a subtler logic: You adopt environmental behavior not because the firm asks you to, but because you come to care. Prior research has hinted at this conversion but often leaves it implicit rather than tested structurally (Norton et al., 2015). Our framework explicitly routes CSR effects through concern, arguing that concern is the translator that turns exposure to sustainability messaging into concrete actions (e.g., saving energy, choosing cleaner transport, or buying eco-friendly products). Hence, the first formal proposition is: CSR perception indirectly influences eco-behavior because it elevates employees' environmental concern.

Trust as a Context Gatekeeper

However, as earlier scholarship suggests, CSR does not operate on neutral ground — belief hinges on trust (Vlachos et al., 2009; Kim & Lee, 2022). Trust functions like a psychological amplifier. When employees feel organizations are fair, morally grounded, and transparent, CSR messages enter their cognition more easily and

without cynicism (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995). In contrast, low trust creates interpretive friction — CSR cues are seen as reputational performance, and concern fails to ignite. This asymmetry implies: CSR may matter only for those who trust their organization enough to treat CSR signals as genuine rather than manipulative. Therefore, we conceptualize trust not simply as a predictor but as a boundary condition that modulates whether CSR messages can slip into concern and behavior.

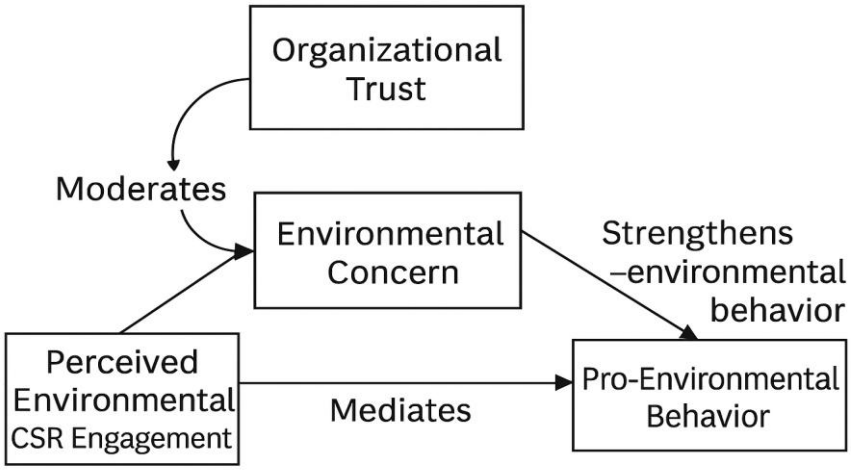

Figure 1: Proposed Theoretical Model within the Conceptual Framework

Interpreting Conditional Pathways in CSR-Behavior Models

Methodological reflection also reveals how difficult it is to measure internal sustainability processes with the precision they seem to demand. Even in studies that employ sophisticated statistical techniques, the constructs themselves contain natural fluidity; concern fluctuates, trust builds and erodes, and pro-environmental behavior can shift depending on context, workload, or even the social atmosphere of a particular week. These realities introduce a kind of soft variability that is not noise but a reflection of human experience. In designing the present methodology, the aim was not to freeze these constructions in time but to capture a reasonably stable snapshot of patterns that continuously evolve. Recognizing this helps avoid overstating the certainty of any directional pathway. At the same time, using a structured analytical method helps reveal broad tendencies that hold across individuals, even if their moment-to-moment experiences differ (Nantharath et al., 2016; Kang et al., 2020).

This tension between human fluidity and methodological structure is a central feature of research in organizational psychology, particularly within sustainability studies where attitudes interact with moral reflection and social identity. By situating the analysis within a moderated mediation framework, the study acknowledges that no single pathway explains all behaviors. Instead, it lets conditional processes come to the surface and invites readers to see sustainability behavior not as an automatic product of CSR but as a negotiated outcome shaped by personal meaning-making, social trust, and contextual cues. This interpretive openness also serves as a reminder that quantitative designs, even when statistically elegant, are ultimately approximations of lived patterns. Good methodology, therefore, does not promise a perfect mirror; rather, it provides a structured vantage point from which complex behavioral dynamics can be inferred with reasonable confidence.

METHODS & RESULTS

Research Context and Sampling Logic

To examine our theorized chain, we collected survey data from full-time employees working in Korean corporations — a site where environmental rhetoric has intensified under ESG-aligned government expectations (Park, 2022; Lee, 2023). A contracted research agency distributed the online questionnaire; 300 usable responses remained after excluding incomplete entries. The sample intentionally balanced gender and age to mute demographic noise and reflect population diversity. Industry spread leaned toward service sectors, mirroring Korea's employment structure — an unplanned but realistic feature. Tenure variety was wide, ranging from early-career to senior employees, allowing concern formation processes to be observed across experience levels.

Instruments and Measurement Assembly

Measures were chosen selectively from validated scholarship but modified to sound natural in Korean workplace language — an approach common in applied organizational research (Turker, 2009; Mayer et al., 1995; Dunlap & Van Liere, 1978).

1. **CSR Perception:** seven items adapted from Turker (2009) and Maignan & Ferrell (2001).
2. **Organizational Trust:** five items reflecting belief in fairness, competence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995).
3. **Environmental Concern:** a five-item cognitive-affective measure (Dunlap & Jones, 2002).
4. **Pro-Environmental Behaviors:** three domains (energy/resource saving, green purchasing, eco-mobility) drawn from prior behavior taxonomies (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Kaiser & Wilson, 2004).

All were anchored on five-point Likert scales to ease comprehension. Exploratory factor methods confirmed items behaved coherently rather than scattered — high KMO values suggested the dataset was dense enough to justify latent extraction. Cronbach's alphas ranged from .78 to .92, above minimum reliability conventions.

Analysis Strategy

To probe whether CSR mattered indirectly, not directly, we applied Hayes' PROCESS Macro Model 7 (Hayes, 2018) — a specification suitable for moderated mediation. Bootstrapping logic was adopted to estimate indirect effects with fewer distributional assumptions, echoing modern behavioral statistics (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The present author first inspected correlations. Expected patterns held: CSR strongly correlated with trust, modestly with concern, and concern showed meaningful ties to all three behavior domains.

Key Findings

CSR → Concern Link Is Contingent

On its own, CSR did not uniformly ignite concern. Surprisingly, a mild negative direct coefficient surfaced. However — and this nuance matters — when CSR interacted with trust, the suppression reversed significantly. Put differently, *CSR only "registers" as meaningful when filtered through belief in the organization's sincerity.*

Concern Drives Behavior More Than CSR Does

CSR exerted almost no direct pull-on practices such as conserving energy, buying green products, or choosing cleaner mobility. Instead, concern was the behavioral motor. High concern predicted strong engagement, consistent with meta-analytic observations (Bamberg & Möser, 2007).

CSR → Concern → Behavior Pathway Strengthens Under High Trust

Conditional indirect effect tests verified amplification:

- Under low trust, the chain was non-significant and muddy.
- Under average trust, the chain turned clear.
- Under high trust, the indirect link intensified sharply.

This pattern replicates arguments that CSR operates as "soft influence" — but only where trust disarms skepticism (Vlachos et al., 2009; Hasan et al., 2023).

Interpretation Style Aligned to Human Reasoning

The story, once numbers settle, reads like this: organizations may shout sustainability loudly, but employees respond mainly when they feel the voice is credible. Concern is not triggered by messaging alone — it emerges through trusted relationships. That psychological sequencing ultimately shapes whether sustainability rhetoric travels past inboxes and into daily habits.

The patterns suggest that employees do not respond to CSR through a singular interpretive lens. Instead, their reactions unfold like a layered conversation between what the organization claims, what it demonstrates, and how credible those demonstrations feel within everyday work life. This helps explain why environmental concern emerges as such a powerful conduit: it translates the abstract notion of corporate responsibility into something personally resonant. When employees feel the organization's sustainability efforts align with their own sense of environmental responsibility, behavioral intentions become more coherent. But the opposite is also true—when actions feel symbolic or poorly integrated, concern diminishes or drifts into indifference.

The role of organizational trust becomes particularly visible here, acting almost like an emotional amplifier that can strengthen or mute the entire sequence. High trust environments allow CSR messages to land softly and be interpreted generously; low trust settings invite doubt, second-guessing, or emotional distance. What stands out is that behavior seems less about employees calculating whether sustainability is "worth doing" and more about whether they believe the organization stands behind the values it promotes. In this sense, the moderated mediation pattern is not simply a statistical artifact—it reflects how individuals navigate moral consistency in the workplace.

People tend to align their actions with environments that feel coherent. Thus, when CSR, trust, and concern reinforce one another, pro-environmental behavior emerges not as compliance but as a natural extension of how employees see themselves within the organization. These subtle interpretive dynamics highlight why simple "more CSR → more behavior" models often miss the deeper psychological choreography guiding sustainability actions.

DISCUSSIONS

Across the analyses, a subtle but robust psychological choreography emerged. CSR messaging alone did not directly create greener habits; instead, employees behaved sustainably only when two conditions aligned: CSR was interpreted as genuine, and that interpretation was accompanied by a personal sense of concern for the environment. In this respect, the findings echo and extend prior signals that CSR works more as "trust-activated meaning" than as persuasion (Hasan et al., 2023). Environmental concern acted as the bridging mechanism — a quiet attitudinal conversion point that translates corporate rhetoric into internal motivation (Ajzen, 1991; Bamberg & Möser, 2007). The moderated mediation pattern deepens a practical message: trust is not just helpful—it sets the ignition threshold. Without trust, CSR reads as greenwashing or corporate PR noise; with trust, it morphs into shared mission and ownership.

When CSR is treated as something employees can actively experience rather than merely observe, it becomes far more influential in shaping how they think and behave. Programs that allow workers to participate directly—whether through internal initiatives, feedback channels, or employee-driven projects—tend to generate a more genuine sense of environmental concern. Yet the findings also imply that CSR cannot succeed on its own; it must be supported by deliberate investments in organizational trust. Transparent communication, ethical decision-making, and consistent follow-through are essential, because without these elements the behavioral impact of CSR quickly weakens, a pattern echoed in earlier empirical work (Vlachos et al., 2009; Kim & Lee, 2022). External forces may reinforce these internal dynamics as well. When government ESG policies or incentives push firms toward accountable practices, employees often interpret CSR as more sincere and less symbolic, which indirectly strengthens their trust in the organization. Taken together, the evidence suggests that CSR and HR strategy cannot function in separate silos—within a systemic perspective, they operate as one interconnected mechanism shaping employee perception and pro-environmental behavior.

This study's theoretical contribution lies in reframing CSR effects as conditional rather than universally experienced, extending the argument made by Rupp et al. (2013) that employees interpret CSR through attributional filters. By positioning environmental concern as the intrapersonal engine that carries CSR's influence into behavior, the study also addresses more recent calls for integrating psychological mediators into sustainability scholarship (Tian, 2022), while advancing a moderated-mediation logic that resonates with but moves beyond evidence reported in Li (2023). At the same time, several limitations temper the interpretations that can be drawn. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference and calls for longitudinal or intervention-based approaches; the Korean corporate context may reflect cultural trust norms not shared elsewhere, making cross-national replication necessary; and additional psychological mechanisms—such as green identity or moral elevation—could further enrich explanatory power if incorporated in future models.

Moving forward, studies using time-lagged analysis, organizational experiments, or mixed-method designs may help capture CSR reception as a lived process rather than a static survey sentiment. Ultimately, the accumulated evidence points to a deceptively simple conclusion: CSR itself rarely persuades; trust is the condition that allows CSR to matter, and environmental concern is the psychological channel through which that meaning becomes action. For organizations genuinely pursuing sustainability, the implication is clear—credibility and psychological ownership must be cultivated alongside programs. If ESG frameworks are to achieve social benefit beyond symbolic compliance, the future likely depends on designing CSR not as branding, but as relational infrastructure embedded in the daily experience of employees.

Reflecting on the larger narrative arc of this study, one realizes that CSR's behavioral influence depends far less on the content of sustainability programs and far more on the relational climate in which they are delivered. Employees do not calibrate their actions based on the technical sophistication of an initiative; they tune into whether the organization appears sincere, whether leadership behaves consistently, and whether their own values feel acknowledged in daily routines. In that sense, trust is not merely a moderating variable—it is the emotional backdrop against which meaning is assigned. Environmental concern, likewise, becomes the psychological bridge that helps people translate organizational cues into personal action.

The concluding insights therefore invite a broader reimagining of sustainability management: CSR should not be treated as a corporate messaging platform but as an ecosystem of relational practices that collectively shape how workers interpret their place in a larger environmental narrative. Moving forward, organizations that hope to deepen pro-environmental engagement may find themselves needing to invest not only in technical ESG initiatives

but also in cultural rituals, conversational spaces, and leadership habits that reinforce sincerity. These softer elements, though difficult to quantify, appear essential for embedding sustainability into the lived experience of employees. Ultimately, the findings suggest that environmental behavior in organizations grows at the intersection of structural initiatives and subjective meaning-making, a reminder that sustainability is always both a managerial strategy and a human story.

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