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From Services to Customers to the Human Spirit – The Role of Corporate Social Responsibility in Promoting Harmony: A Case Study of Mercado Éxito in Colombia and the Economy of Love Framework. 🇨🇴

Master of Arts Harmony and Sustainability Dissertation

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

This research paper explores the multifaceted concept of Harmony as it relates to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in an emerging market context, specifically focusing on the perceptions of customers and employees at Mercado Exito in Colombia. It begins by defining Harmony through its social, environmental, and economic dimensions, emphasising their interconnectedness and the need for a holistic approach to achieve balance and well-being. The study investigates how CSR initiatives can promote this practical application of Harmony, while also addressing potential challenges such as greenwashing, cultural context, and the motivations behind CSR engagement. Through qualitative interviews with customers and employees, the research aims to assess the significance of the Economy of Love framework proposed by David Cadman in shaping perceptions of CSR. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of CSR's role in fostering social responsibility and community engagement in Colombia and provide actionable recommendations for enhancing CSR practices within Mercado Exito. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of integrating values-based approaches into corporate strategies to support sustainable business practices that resonate with stakeholders and drive societal transformation.

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List of Abbreviations

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility
EoL – Economy of Love
Exito – Mercado Exito Supermarket
IT – Information Technology
Marketing 1.0 – Focus on Product
Marketing 2.0 – Focus on Experience/Service
Marketing 3.0 – Focus on wider concerns (climate, poverty, etc.)
NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation
ROI – Return on Investment
WHO – World Health Organisation

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to Subject Area

The concept of Harmony, while multifaceted and culturally nuanced, generally refers to a state of balance, concord, and well-being encompassing social, environmental, and economic spheres. The following paragraphs analyse various scholarly perspectives on Harmony, its integration into CSR frameworks, and the evidence supporting or challenging the assertion that promoting CSR fosters the practical application of Harmony.

The definition of Harmony varies significantly across disciplines and cultural contexts. In the context of this introduction, Harmony is understood as a holistic concept encompassing several interconnected dimensions:

Social Harmony: This refers to peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and equitable relationships within and between communities (Sabarudin, 2024), (Pasha, 2022). It emphasises social justice, inclusivity, and the absence of conflict (Sabarudin, 2024). Promoting social harmony often involves addressing inequalities, fostering dialogue, and building trust among diverse groups (Pasha, 2022).

Environmental Harmony: This dimension centres on the sustainable management of natural resources and preserving ecological balance (Sarfraz, 2023), (Landrum, 2017). It emphasises minimising environmental impact, promoting biodiversity, and ensuring the long-term health of ecosystems (Emeka-Okoli, 2024). The concept of environmental harmony often involves responsible resource use and a commitment to reducing pollution (Sarfraz, 2023).

Economic Harmony: This aspect focuses on equitable economic development and the sustainable allocation of resources (Sarfraz, 2023), (Kochhar, 2014). It emphasises fair labour practices, economic opportunities for all stakeholders, and the avoidance of exploitative economic practices (Kochhar, 2014). Economic harmony often involves promoting inclusive growth and reducing economic disparities (Sarfraz, 2023).

These three dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Disruptions in one area can negatively impact the others. For example, environmental degradation can lead to economic instability and social unrest (Sarfraz, 2023), while economic inequality can exacerbate social tensions and hinder environmental protection (Kochhar, 2014). Achieving Harmony, therefore, requires a holistic approach that addresses all three dimensions simultaneously.

Different cultural perspectives offer unique interpretations of Harmony. In Chinese philosophy, Harmony (和, hé) is a central concept in Confucianism and Taoism,

emphasising balance, order, and social cohesion (Wang, NaN), (Zhu, 2009). In the context of CSR, this translates into a focus on interpersonal relationships, respect for nature, and the pursuit of collective well-being (Wang, NaN). Other cultures may emphasise different aspects of Harmony, but the underlying principle of balance and well-being remains consistent.

The relationship between CSR and the promotion of Harmony is complex and multifaceted. While many argue that CSR initiatives intrinsically promote Harmony by addressing social and environmental concerns, others caution against simplistic assumptions.

Despite the positive correlations, several challenges and limitations need to be considered:

Greenwashing: Some companies engage in "greenwashing," presenting a misleading image of environmental responsibility to enhance their public image without genuinely committing to sustainable practices (Dong, 2016). This undermines the credibility of CSR initiatives and hinders the achievement of environmental harmony. In China's mining sector, for example, while regulatory pressures have led to increased CSR disclosure, the quality of these disclosures remains a concern (Dong, 2016).

Motivations for CSR: Managers may engage in CSR for various reasons, ranging from a genuine commitment to social and environmental responsibility to strategic self-interest (Soltani, 2014), (Licandro, 2023). When driven primarily by self-interest, CSR initiatives may not effectively promote Harmony (Soltani, 2014). Studies examining managerial mindsets towards CSR reveal a range of motivations, highlighting the complexity of linking CSR with genuine commitment to Harmony (Soltani, 2014).

Cultural Context: The concept of Harmony and its practical application varies significantly across cultural contexts (Wang, NaN), (Zhu, 2009). CSR initiatives need to be tailored to the specific cultural values and expectations of the communities they aim to serve to be effective in promoting Harmony (Wang, NaN). The adaptation of Western CSR concepts to the Chinese market, for example, has proven problematic due to cultural differences (Wang, NaN).

Measuring Harmony: Defining and measuring Harmony is challenging. While various indicators exist for assessing social, environmental, and economic well-being, a comprehensive and universally accepted metric for Harmony remains elusive. This difficulty in measurement hinders the accurate assessment of CSR's impact on Harmony.

Short-Term vs. Long-Term Goals: Some CSR initiatives focus on short-term gains, such as improving public image, rather than long-term sustainable development

(Singh, 2016). This short-term focus can hinder the achievement of Harmony, which requires a long-term commitment to sustainable practices.

1.2 Research Question Aims and Objective

This research will contribute to the understanding of social perceptions of Social Corporate Responsibility (CSR) applied in an emerging country. It will show exemplary how, why and to what extent CSR is perceived by customers in Colombia and to what extent the Economy of Love framework proposed by David Cadman is reflected in the qualitative data aiming to answer the question: does the promotion of CSR promote the practical application of Harmony?

The main research question will be the following:

R1: How is CSR perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of one For-Profit supermarket called “Mercado Exito”?

The derived objectives are:

- Obj1: Examine the significance of the Economy of Love for Mercado Exito Customers
- Obj2: Establish the magnitude of the influence of the empowered customer towards Exito Colombia’s CSR activities and its brand impression change.
- Obj3: Establish how selected Exito Colombia stakeholders (employees) respond emotionally when asked about CSR activities towards its wider concerns and whether aspects of the Economy of Love are mentioned.
- Obj4: Recommend forward-looking marketing strategies that can support Exito Colombia to:
 - implement aspects of the Economy of Love into its CSR Agenda
 - minimise implementational challenges in future CSR projects
 - communicate CSR more effectively to the Colombian society
 - establish a deeper relationship with its customers through CSR.

In addition, the following hypotheses will be tested:

- H1: The Economy of Love can be a significant part of a CSR Agenda
- H2: Customers of Mercado Exito have not yet arrived at the higher level of Maslow’s hierarchy (1943), having wider concerns that can be addressed with CSR activities but are still on the basic needs level (personal safety/shelter/food).
- H3: Mercado Exito customers frequently use social media to express their feelings and opinions about their experience with the brand.

- H4: Employees of Mercado Exito have a high internal motivation towards its employer CSR Agenda
- H5: Customers of Mercado Exito have a deep demand for the Economy of Love
- H6: The promotion of CSR promotes the practical application of Harmony

The research project involves ten personal interviews in Colombia, comprised of customers entering one Mercado Exito in Bogota at different times and days. In addition, the process will include interviewing four selected employees working at one Mercado Exito Supermarket.

1.3 Conclusion

This study seeks to contribute to understanding how CSR is perceived in emerging economies, focusing on the Colombian retail sector. By examining the case of Mercado Exito, it explores customer and employee perceptions of CSR and evaluates the extent to which these align with David Cadman's Economy of Love framework and if the promotion of CSR promotes the practical application of Harmony. The research is driven by the central question of how CSR is perceived by Mercado Exito customers, supported by objectives that investigate the motivations, implementation, and impact of CSR initiatives, as well as the emotional responses of key stakeholders.

The hypotheses provide a structured basis for understanding the dynamics of CSR perceptions, including the role of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the influence of social media, and the alignment between stakeholder expectations and CSR principles. The findings aim to bridge theoretical concepts with real-world applications, offering strategic recommendations for Mercado Exito to enhance its CSR agenda while fostering more robust connections with its stakeholders.

This research not only highlights the significance of CSR in an emerging market context but also provides actionable insights for integrating values-based frameworks like the Economy of Love into corporate practices. It ultimately aims to support sustainable business strategies that resonate with both customers and employees, contributing to a broader understanding of CSR's role in driving societal and organisational transformation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In recent years, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility has gained substantial attention within both academic and practical spheres. The evolution of CSR reflects a significant shift in the expectations placed upon corporations (Maignan, 2004), particularly in the context of Marketing 3.0, as proposed by Kotler (2010). This shift embodies a broader understanding of the roles and responsibilities of businesses toward society and the environment. The literature on CSR has expanded to address various dimensions, including its definitions, historical developments, integration into marketing strategies, criticisms, and theoretical frameworks such as the Economy of Love proposed by David Cadman (2010). This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the literature on CSR, focusing on its evolution, especially in the context of emerging markets like Colombia, and the challenges companies face navigating the complexities of CSR.

2.2 Definition: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The definition of CSR has evolved over time, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the concept. At its core, CSR encompasses the voluntary actions taken by businesses to address social, environmental, and economic concerns that extend beyond the traditional profit-centric model (Dahlsrud, 2008). Various scholars have contributed to the discourse on CSR definitions, underscoring its complexity and the lack of consensus in the field.

In their review, Hamidu et al. (2015) emphasise that CSR involves stakeholder engagement, ethical business practices, and environmental protection, highlighting the importance of balancing economic goals with social responsibilities. They note that CSR is often framed within the context of the "triple bottom line," which encompasses the dimensions of people, planet, and profit (Hamidu, 2015). This framework encourages businesses to consider the broader impacts of their operations on society and the environment.

Furthermore, CSR is increasingly viewed as a management philosophy rather than merely a set of desirable behaviours. Licandro et al. (2023) propose a definition that focuses on the responsible management of operational externalities affecting stakeholders, society, and the environment, thus aligning CSR with corporate strategy (Licandro, 2023). This perspective situates CSR as a critical component of business strategy, emphasising the need for organisations to integrate social consciousness into their operations.

The lack of a unified definition remains a challenge within the CSR discourse, as indicated by Sarkar and Searcy (2016), who conducted a quantitative analysis of 110 definitions and identified key recurring dimensions such as economic, social, ethical, stakeholder engagement, sustainability, and voluntariness (Sarkar, 2016). Despite the definitional heterogeneity, these enduring dimensions suggest a foundational conceptual framework for understanding CSR's role in contemporary business practices.

2.3 History of CSR – Beginning and Developments

The historical evolution of CSR can be traced back to the 1950s, a period marked by a growing awareness of the social responsibilities of businesses (Bowen, 1953). Carroll (1999) provides a historical overview of CSR, highlighting key milestones that shaped its development. Initially, CSR was primarily associated with philanthropy and charitable contributions, reflecting a narrow understanding of business responsibilities. However, as societal expectations evolved, so too did the definitions of CSR.

The 1960s and 1970s saw an expansion of CSR awareness. During this time, scholars began to explore the ethical dimensions of corporate behaviour, suggesting that businesses have an obligation to consider the interests of various stakeholders, including employees, customers, and the community at large (Carroll, 1999).

The 1980s marked a turning point as empirical research on CSR gained momentum, leading to the emergence of alternative themes such as corporate social performance and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984). This period reflected a shift from theoretical discussions to practical applications of CSR, as companies began to recognise the strategic advantages of adopting socially responsible practices (Birch, 2003). The 1990s further transformed CSR into a core construct, with an emphasis on aligning corporate strategies with social and environmental objectives.

In contemporary discourse, CSR is increasingly viewed as a strategic imperative, particularly for corporations operating in emerging markets. Zumbansen (2008) argues that a comprehensive understanding of the corporation must consider its evolving roles within social, political, and economic contexts, reinforcing the relevance of CSR in today's business landscape (Zumbansen, 2008). The historical trajectory of CSR underscores its adaptability and relevance in addressing the challenges faced by businesses in a rapidly changing global environment.

2.4 CSR Development into Marketing

The integration of CSR into marketing strategies has gained prominence as companies recognise the potential of socially responsible initiatives to enhance their brand image and reputation. The concept of Marketing 3.0, as proposed by Kotler (2010), emphasises the importance of aligning marketing strategies with societal needs and values. This approach reflects a paradigm shift from traditional marketing, which primarily focuses on products and profits, to a more holistic view that considers social impact as shown in the table below.

Marketing 1.0	Marketing 2.0	Marketing 3.0
Focus on Product	Focus on Service/Experience	Focus on wider customer concerns

Table 1 Marketing CSR Development

Idowu (2017) notes that CSR has evolved from a defensive strategy to a more proactive and integrated approach, where companies leverage their CSR initiatives as marketing tools (Idowu, 2017). This transition is particularly relevant for businesses operating in emerging markets, where consumer expectations for ethical behaviour and transparency are rising. Companies that engage in CSR not only contribute to social good but also strengthen their competitive positioning in the market.

Moreover, the application of socially responsible marketing strategies is increasingly recognised as a means of fostering customer loyalty and trust. Research by Jhawar and Gupta (2017) highlights the significance of CSR in enhancing corporate reputation and consumer engagement, reinforcing the idea that socially responsible practices can drive customer preferences and purchasing behaviour (Jhawar, 2017). This dynamic interplay between CSR and marketing reflects a broader trend toward corporate accountability and responsiveness to consumer demands.

However, the effectiveness of CSR as a marketing tool is contingent upon genuine commitment and transparency. As noted by Fifka (2008), the perception of CSR initiatives as mere marketing ploys can lead to scepticism among consumers, underscoring the need for businesses to align their marketing strategies with authentic social responsibility (Fifka, 2008). The development of CSR into marketing not only enhances corporate identity but also addresses the growing demand for ethical conduct in business practices. One successful example can be seen in Avon, which supports campaigns against women's breast cancer, showing their leading customer group, women, we care too (Avon, 1992).

2.5 CSR Criticism and Concerns

Despite the growing recognition of CSR's importance, the concept is not without its criticisms and concerns. Key debates centre around the motivations behind corporate social responsibility initiatives, with critics arguing that many companies engage in CSR primarily for self-serving reasons, such as enhancing their public image or gaining competitive advantage. This perception raises questions about the authenticity of CSR efforts and their actual impact on social issues. One related example can be found in Volkswagen's Dieselgate scandal (BBC, 2015), which is a prime example of greenwashing. The company falsely marketed its diesel cars as eco-friendly, while secretly installing defeat devices to cheat emissions tests. In reality, the vehicles emitted up to 40 times the legal pollution limit. The scandal led to \$30 billion in fines, executive resignations, and severe reputational damage, proving that deceptive CSR can backfire.

Fifka (2008) identifies several core controversies surrounding CSR, including the tension between ethical and legal obligations, the debate over whether CSR should be voluntary or legally mandated, and the question of whether CSR initiatives are primarily altruistic or self-serving (Fifka, 2008). These controversies reflect the complexities inherent in defining and operationalising CSR, leading to scepticism regarding its effectiveness as a societal transformative force.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is predominantly implemented in developed countries, reflecting its inherent characteristics (Jamali, 2017). CSR initiatives require financial investment, which is feasible only when companies generate sufficient profits to support such expenditures. In contrast, companies in developing countries often prioritise survival, lacking the financial resources to allocate towards CSR programs. This disparity can be further understood through Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which suggests that consumers in developing economies primarily focus on fulfilling basic necessities such as food and shelter before considering other factors, including a company's engagement in CSR. Consequently, CSR has not evolved to the same extent in developing countries as it has in developed nations. This phenomenon raises concerns regarding the accessibility and inclusivity of CSR, as it may function primarily as a strategic marketing tool for companies in wealthier economies.

Additionally, the superficial implementation of CSR initiatives poses significant challenges. Research by Gupta (2016) indicates that many companies engage in CSR activities without a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand, resulting in superficial efforts that fail to produce meaningful social change (Jhawar, 2017).

This gap between intent and impact highlights the need for businesses to adopt a more strategic and informed approach to CSR.

The criticisms surrounding CSR also extend to its implementation in emerging markets, where challenges such as corruption, lack of regulatory enforcement, and limited understanding of CSR concepts can hinder effective practices. Wirba (2023) emphasises that the perception of CSR as primarily philanthropic in developing countries limits its potential to drive sustainable economic growth (Wirba, 2023). Addressing these concerns requires a nuanced understanding of the local context and the specific challenges faced by companies operating in such environments.

2.6 Economy of Love (David Cadman) Introduction & Supermercado Exitó CSR Strategy

The concept of the Economy of Love, as articulated by David Cadman, offers a compelling framework for understanding CSR's role in fostering social responsibility and community engagement (Cadman, 2020). Cadman posits that love, compassion, and empathy should underpin corporate practices, encouraging businesses to prioritise the well-being of stakeholders and the broader community (Thiago Jos de Chaves, 2020). This perspective challenges the traditional profit-centric view of business, advocating for a more humanistic approach to corporate responsibility.

Incorporating the Economy of Love into CSR practices encourages organisations to develop deeper relationships with their stakeholders, fostering trust and loyalty. This approach aligns with the increased emphasis on customer empowerment in contemporary markets, where consumers increasingly seek to engage with brands that reflect their values and contribute positively to society.

Research by Cook and Geldenhuys (2018) illustrates the transformative effects of employee participation in CSR initiatives, emphasising the role of love and compassion as primary motivators for engagement (Cook, 2018). This qualitative exploration highlights how CSR can cultivate a sense of fulfilment and joy among employees, ultimately contributing to a positive corporate identity and enhanced reputation.

Moreover, the Economy of Love framework underscores the importance of integrating social consciousness into business practices, especially in emerging markets where the need for sustainable development is paramount. By aligning CSR initiatives with the principles of love and compassion, corporations can effectively address social challenges while simultaneously enhancing their competitive positioning.

Based on those arguments, the Economy of love can be seen as either a fundament or a booster for achieving the three interconnected harmony dimensions introduced before.

The sociological dimension highlights that while Colombia remains a developing country, key factors such as education demonstrate significant progress towards becoming a developed nation. The growing emphasis on education also reflects a trend towards greater IT literacy among its population, a development further supported by the technological aspects discussed in the following chapter 2.7.

Supermercado Exito, a leading retail chain in Colombia, serves as a pertinent case study for examining the practical application of CSR in an emerging market context. The company's CSR strategy reflects a commitment to social responsibility, focusing on community engagement, sustainability, and ethical business practices. Exito's initiatives encompass various social and environmental dimensions, aligning with the broader principles of CSR (Exito, 2023).

In recent years, Exito has implemented several programs addressing local community needs, such as food security, education, and environmental sustainability. (Exito, 2023). The company's focus on community engagement is evident in its partnerships with local organisations and initiatives designed to empower vulnerable populations. By fostering a sense of community and social responsibility, Exito not only enhances its corporate identity but also contributes to the overall well-being of the regions it serves.

Furthermore, Exito's commitment to sustainability is reflected in its efforts to minimise environmental impact through responsible sourcing, waste reduction, and energy efficiency initiatives. These practices resonate with the growing consumer demand for ethical business conduct and underscore the importance of integrating CSR into marketing strategies. By aligning its business practices with societal values, Exito effectively positions itself as a socially responsible brand in the competitive retail landscape.

However, implementing CSR strategies in the Colombian context remains challenging. Rincón Quintero et al. (2018) highlighted that the effectiveness of CSR initiatives in Colombia is often hindered by systemic issues such as corruption and inadequate regulatory frameworks (Quintero, 2018). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from corporations and government entities to foster a more conducive environment for sustainable business practices.

2.7 PESTEL – Extract of Colombia (Sociological and Technological Dimension)

The Oxford University College of Marketing (2016) defines a PESTEL analysis as “a tool used to identify the macro (external) forces facing an organisation,” with the acronym representing Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal factors. In the context of this dissertation, which explores the perceptions of customers and employees regarding implementing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) with a focus on the Economy of Love, particular attention is given to analysing the empowered customer engagement with CSR activities. To address this, it is essential to concentrate on two key dimensions - sociological and technological forces - within the context of the developing country under study, Colombia.

2.7.1 Sociological

The sociological context in Colombia significantly influences the effectiveness of CSR initiatives. A growing educated population is likelier to be aware of and demand corporate social responsibility (Kotler, 2010). This increased awareness necessitates a more nuanced and responsive CSR strategy from companies operating in Colombia. Further research is needed to fully understand the correlation between education levels, consumer awareness, and expectations regarding CSR.

The published WHO report (WHO, 2018) shows that Colombia is sociologically classified in the group of the best nations in Latin America and is in 21st place on a global scale. Related sociological facts about the country can be found in the following figure:

- In Colombia, 75% of adults aged 25-64 have completed upper secondary **education**, more than the OECD average of 74%. (HDR 2018)
- In terms of **employment**, 58% of people in Colombia have a paid job, below the OECD employment average of 67%.
- **First place** in household spend capacity to health care (WHO 2018)
- In terms of health, **life expectancy** at birth in Colombia is around 75 years, five years lower than the OECD average of 80 years.
- Colombia's **health care** system was given 22nd place by the World Health Organization (WHO) In 2017 (WHO-STAT 2017)
- Religion: Roman Catholic: 90%, other: 10%
- The country's official language is Spanish.

Figure 1 WHO Colombia

The sociological dimension highlights that while Colombia remains a developing country, key factors such as education demonstrate significant progress toward becoming a developed nation. The growing emphasis on education also reflects a trend toward greater IT literacy among its population, a development further supported by the technological aspects discussed in the following section.

2.7.2 Technological

Technological advancements, particularly expanding internet access, impact CSR in Colombia. The increased availability of information allows for greater transparency and accountability, holding companies more responsible for their actions (Kotler, 2005). The internet also facilitates stakeholder engagement, providing direct communication and feedback regarding CSR initiatives. However, the digital divide in Colombia may limit the reach and effectiveness of such online engagement.

Colombia stands as the third-largest IT market in South America (IMD-TEC, 2018). Despite being classified as a developing country, it is witnessing substantial investments in modern IT infrastructure across both consumer and organisational sectors. In a global ranking of 90 countries, Colombia consistently ranks mid-range across most technological indicators. Evaluating its technological future readiness, it is evident that the country is in the implementation phase of several key advancements, as shown in the following Figures 2 and 3.

Technological framework	Rank
Communications technology	57
Mobile Broadband subscribers	52
Wireless broadband	58
Internet users	51
Internet bandwidth speed	61
High-tech exports (%)	39

Figure 2 Technological Dimension Colombia (Source: IMD-TEC 2018)

IT integration	Rank
E-Government	44
Public-private partnerships	41
Cyber security	59
Software piracy	41

Figure 3 IT Readiness (Source: IMD-TEC 2018)

The following two figures outline the situation of internet technology usage in Colombia as well as its development over time:

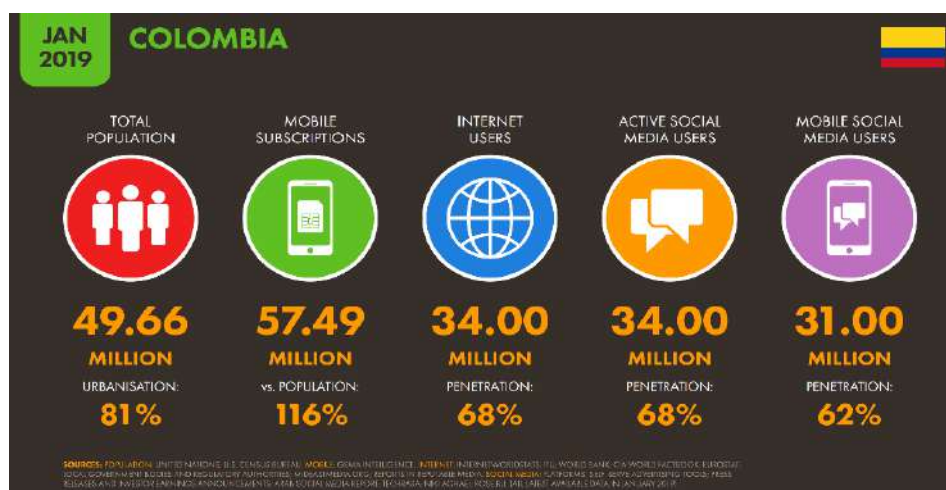


Figure 4 Colombia Internet Technology Usage (Source: United Nations 2019)

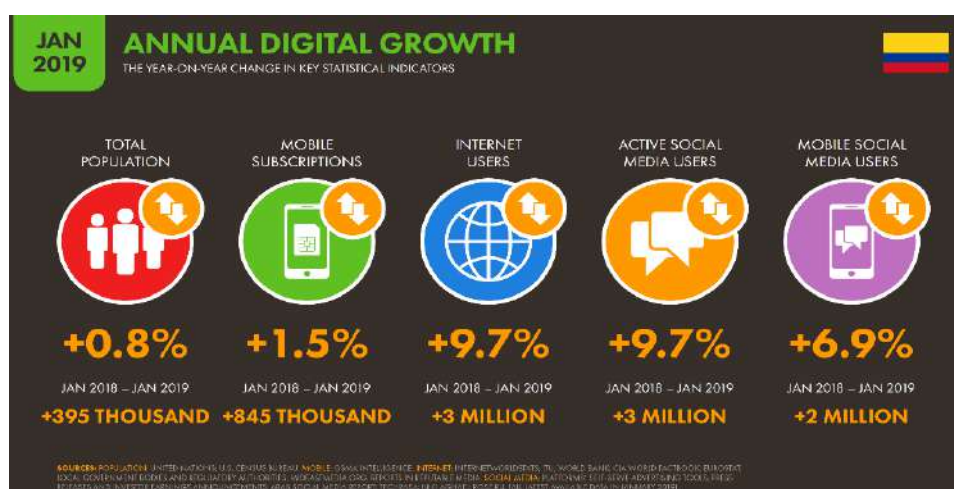


Figure 5 Colombia Internet Technology Growth (Source: United Nations 2019)

According to the data, 68% of Colombia's population actively uses social media, marking a nearly 10% growth compared to the previous year - a remarkably high increase. In contrast, Germany, a developed country, recorded only a 1.6% annual growth in social media usage during the same period (Statista 2019). This rapid growth in Colombia is primarily driven by advancements in technology infrastructure and the increasing demand for a more connected lifestyle among Colombians (Lacowise 2019).

When examining Colombia's most popular social media platforms, the data reveals that Facebook remains the leading application, holding a market share of over 72%, despite global privacy concerns raised in 2018. This dominance reflects Facebook's user-friendly design, accessibility, and its role in fostering connections with family and friends while encouraging deeper engagement (Carter 2019).

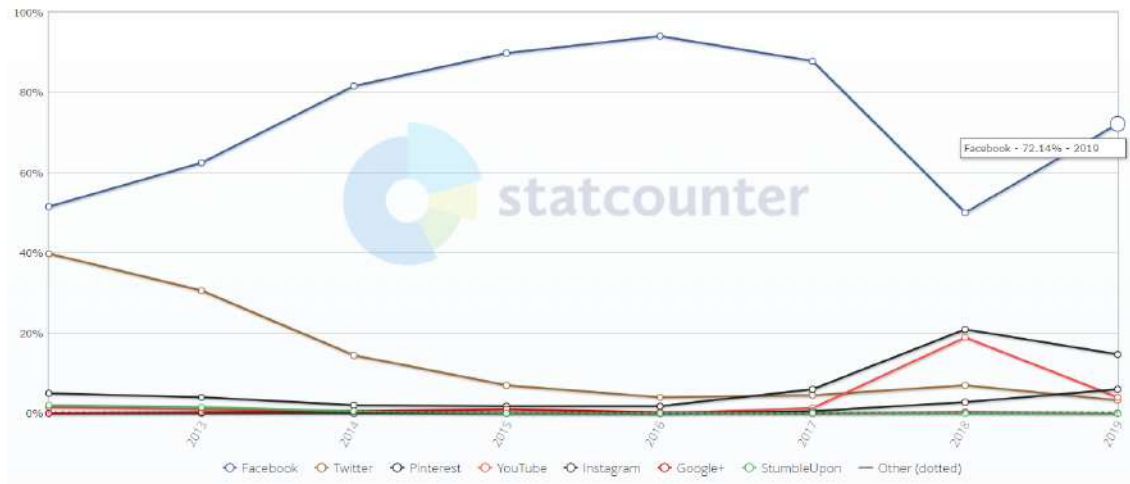


Figure 6 Social Media Annual Development (Source: Statcount 2019)

2.8 Missing Research

Research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in developing countries remains limited for the above reasons, yet it warrants greater focus. These nations are on the edge of transitioning into developed economies and present significant economic opportunities for organisations. As previously discussed, Colombia, a developing country, has made substantial progress toward fostering an empowered and connected consumer base. This is evidenced by notable advancements in technological infrastructure, which have underpinned the remarkable growth in social media usage over the past six years. Companies can no longer hide between walls but are watched like the fish in a fish tank, and information about acting against consumers' wider concerns can be spread in a fraction of time over the internet with possible significant damage to the brand and its business existence. Examples can be seen in Marlboro or BP Oil (Jarvis, 2024).

Despite the strengths outlined in Exito's CSR agenda, it remains questionable whether its customers and employees, as one of its primary stakeholders, perceive it as meeting their further demands. Related literature does not exist at the time of undergoing that project.

Qualitative insights of empowered customers and employees about their perceptions of Exito's CSR approach with an emphasis on Cadman's economy of Love approach could support Exito in adjusting its CSR agenda, possibly leading to even more significant success and three-dimensional harmony.

2.9. Conclusion

The literature on CSR reveals a complex and evolving landscape, reflecting the dynamic interplay between corporate practices and societal expectations. As organisations navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by CSR, it is essential to recognise the concept's multifaceted nature and implications for corporate identity and reputation. Integrating CSR into marketing strategies, coupled with a genuine commitment to social responsibility, can enhance corporate performance and contribute to positive societal change.

Furthermore, it has been found that further research would be beneficial towards analysing to what extent the Economy of Love framework provides a valuable lens through which to examine CSR, emphasising the importance of compassion and empathy in corporate practices.

By prioritising the well-being of stakeholders and communities, companies can foster deeper relationships and drive meaningful social impact. The case of Super Mercado Exito illustrates the practical application of CSR in an emerging market context, highlighting the potential for businesses to contribute positively to society while enhancing their competitive positioning.

As the discourse around CSR continues to evolve, further qualitative research is needed to explore its implications in developing countries like Colombia. Understanding the broader concerns of its customers and employees through a lens of the Economy of Love could elevate even well-developed CSR agendas like the one of Exito to a new level. The following chapter will focus on research methodology.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this qualitative case study, which involves conducting fourteen in-depth interviews. The study utilises a qualitative approach to gain a rich understanding of how CSR is perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of one supermarket called “Mercado Exito”. The methodology section will detail the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach, the research design, sampling framework, data collection methods, data analysis techniques, ethical considerations, reliability and validity measures, limitations, and overall conclusion. The structure will follow a systematic approach, ensuring transparency and rigor throughout the research process (Sullivan, 2011). Qualitative research is particularly suited to exploring complex social phenomena and

understanding subjective experiences (Lim, 2024), (Merriam, 1997), making it appropriate for this study's objectives. The choice of a qualitative case study design allows for in-depth exploration of the research topic within its specific context (Baxter, 2015), (Power, 1998).

3.2 Research Rationale

A qualitative approach was selected for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the research topic introduced before, providing rich, nuanced data that cannot be easily captured through quantitative methods (Lim, 2024). The focus is on understanding the participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations of how is CSR perceived by customers and employees of one For-Profit supermarket called “Mercado Exito” in Bogota, Colombia. Quantitative methods, while useful for measuring frequencies and correlations, often fail to capture the complexities and subtleties of human experience (LaDonna, 2021). Qualitative research, conversely, prioritises in-depth understanding and interpretation of the meaning participants ascribe to their experiences (Lim, 2024). This approach is crucial for investigating how CSR is perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of one For-Profit supermarket called “Mercado Exito” because it allows for the exploration of the underlying reasons and motivations behind participants' actions and beliefs (Choo, 2015). Furthermore, qualitative research is uniquely positioned to uncover unanticipated findings and generate new hypotheses (Berg, NaN).

3.3 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Agosto, 2006), specifically focusing on fourteen in-depth interviews. The case study approach is particularly appropriate for investigating a bounded system or phenomenon in detail (Creswell, 2018), (Njie, NaN). This allows for a rich understanding of the context surrounding the research topic (Baxter, 2015). The case study approach provides a holistic view of the phenomenon by considering the process, interaction, and meaning within the context of the interviews (Doody, 2013). The selection of in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method enables the researcher to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in detail (Protsiv, 2016), (Bryman, 2019). Semi-structured interviews, offering a balance between flexibility and structure, were chosen to facilitate open-ended responses while ensuring that key themes are addressed (Seetharaman, 2016). The semi-structured approach allows for probing and exploration of participants' responses, leading to richer and more nuanced data (Choo, 2015). This design allows

for flexibility in exploring unexpected themes that may emerge during the interviews (Patrick, 2022).

3.3.1 Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research method, specifically a case study approach, to explore how CSR is perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of one For-Profit supermarket called “Mercado Exito”. The qualitative method is chosen due to its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of participants’ perspectives, experiences, and social realities (Merriam, 1997). Unlike quantitative methods, which focus on numerical data and statistical generalisations, qualitative research is concerned with exploring meaning, context, and interpretation (Creswell, 2018), (Lim, 2024).

A case study approach is particularly suitable for this research because it allows for an intensive examination of a specific phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2014). The case study method enables a holistic exploration of the research topic, capturing the complexity of the subject matter by considering various influencing factors (Baxter, 2015). This approach provides flexibility in exploring participants’ lived experiences and the contextual elements that shape their perceptions and behaviours (Stake, 1995).

To gather data, the study will utilise fourteen semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews are selected because they strike a balance between structure and flexibility, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of key themes while providing space for participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words (Seetharaman, 2016). This method facilitates the emergence of unexpected insights, contributing to a richer understanding of the research problem (Choo, 2015). The research process will be iterative, meaning that data collection and analysis will occur simultaneously, allowing for continuous refinement of research questions and themes (Saldana, 2021). This iterative approach ensures that findings are grounded in the data, enhancing the credibility and depth of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Overall, the qualitative case study method, supported by semi-structured interviews, provides a robust framework for exploring how CSR is perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of one For-Profit supermarket called “Mercado Exito”. This approach ensures that the study captures nuanced insights, facilitating a deeper understanding of the subject matter within its specific context.

3.3.2 Data Collection

Data collection will primarily involve conducting fourteen semi-structured interviews. Each interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and facilitate detailed analysis. The interviews will be guided by a semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions designed to elicit rich and detailed information about how CSR is perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of one For-Profit supermarket called “Mercado Exito”. The interview guide will be piloted with a small group of participants to test its effectiveness and clarity before the main data collection phase (Berg, NaN). The use of audio recording allows for detailed transcription and review, minimising the risk of researcher bias in interpretation (Njie, NaN).

Furthermore, the verbatim transcription will ensure that the nuances and subtleties of participants' responses are preserved (Moss, 2013). Before each interview, informed consent will be obtained from each participant, ensuring that they understand the purpose of the study, their rights, and the confidentiality measures in place (Berg, NaN). The researcher will strive to build rapport with each participant to create a comfortable and trusting environment that encourages open and honest self-disclosure (Choo, 2015).

3.4 Sampling Framework Selection and Size

3.4.1 Sample Selection

Participants will be selected using a purposive sampling technique (Bryman, 2019), (Sargeant, 2012). This method is particularly appropriate for qualitative research because it allows the researcher to select participants who are most likely to provide rich and insightful data related to the research question (Mistry, 2024). The aim is to recruit participants who represent a diverse range of experiences and perspectives related to answering the research question introduced before. Purposive sampling allows for a targeted approach to participant recruitment, ensuring that the sample is rich in information and relevant to the research objectives (Merriam, 1997). It is also important to consider potential biases in sample selection and to strive for maximum variation within the sample to capture a broader range of perspectives (Guest, 2020).

3.4.2 Sample Size

The sample size for this study is fourteen participants, ten customers of Exito and four employees of one Exito store in Bogota, Colombia. In qualitative research, the sample size is not determined by statistical power calculations but rather by the principle of

data saturation (Bryman, 2019), (Patrick, 2022), (Snodgrass, 2020). Data saturation is reached when the researcher has collected sufficient data to identify all relevant themes and patterns related to the research question (Choo, 2015). While fourteen interviews may seem a small number, the in-depth nature of the interviews, combined with the purposive sampling strategy, will ensure that the data collected are rich enough to reach saturation (Anderson, NaN). The decision to limit the sample size to fourteen was made to ensure sufficient time and resources were available to conduct thorough interviews and rigorous data analysis (Toki, 2020). The iterative nature of qualitative research allows for flexibility in adjusting the sample size if necessary (Sullivan, 2011). If, during analysis, it becomes apparent that additional data are needed to achieve saturation, further interviews may be conducted (Mistry, 2024).

3.5 Data Analysis and Technique

The data collected from the interviews will be analysed using thematic analysis (Azeem, NaN). This approach involves a systematic process of identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns (themes) within the data (Alrehaily, 2021). Thematic analysis is an inductive approach that allows themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed by the researcher (Merriam, 1997). The analysis will involve several stages: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the report (Alrehaily, 2021). Thematic analysis is chosen because of its flexibility and its ability to accommodate both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis (Anderson, NaN). The use of qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo (Ameh, 2020), (Noor, 2008), will aid in the organisation and management of the large volume of data generated from the interviews (Shahnavazi, 2023). This software facilitates the coding process, allowing for efficient identification and categorisation of themes (Deterding, 2018). The iterative nature of thematic analysis allows for the refinement of themes and sub-themes as the analysis progresses (Perry, 1998). The analysis will be guided by existing literature and theoretical frameworks relevant to the research question.

3.6 Ethics, Reliability, Validity and Limitations

3.6.1 Ethics

Ethical considerations will be paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants before the commencement of each interview (Berg, NaN), (Anthony, 2009). Participants will be fully informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the confidentiality measures in place (Lim, 2024).

Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process, ensuring that participants' identities are protected (Njie, NaN). All data will be stored securely, and access will be restricted to the researcher (LaDonna, 2021). The researcher will be sensitive to the potential emotional impact of participating in the study and will take steps to ensure the well-being of all participants (LaDonna, 2021). Participants will be provided with information about support services if needed (Merriam, 1997).

3.6.2 Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the reliability and validity of qualitative research is crucial. Reliability refers to the consistency and dependability of the findings, while validity refers to the accuracy and trustworthiness of the interpretations (Mekarisce, 2020). Several strategies will be employed to enhance the reliability and validity of this study. First, the use of a semi-structured interview guide will ensure a degree of consistency across interviews (Alrehaily, 2021), (Bryman, 2019). Second, the audio recording and verbatim transcription of interviews will minimise the risk of researcher bias in data interpretation (Moss, 2013), (Berger, 2015). Third, the use of thematic analysis, a systematic and transparent approach to data analysis, will improve the credibility and confirmability of the findings (Merriam, 1997). Fourth, member checking, whereby participants are given the opportunity to review and comment on the analysis, will be used to enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretation (Clavarino, 1995). Fifth, triangulation, using multiple data sources and methods, will strengthen the validity of the findings (Njie, NaN). Finally, the detailed description of the research methods and the analysis process will enhance the transparency and replicability of the study (Perry, 1998). It is important to note that reliability and validity in qualitative research are not assessed solely through quantitative measures, but rather through demonstrating the rigor and trustworthiness of the research process (Coleman, 2021).

3.7 Limitations

Several limitations may affect this study. The small sample size (fourteen interviews) may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations (Lim, 2024). The purposive sampling method, while appropriate for in-depth exploration, may introduce bias into the sample (Mistry, 2024). Researcher bias, although mitigated through the use of a systematic approach to data analysis and member checking, may still influence the interpretation of the data (Bryman, 2019). The reliance on self-reported data from interviews may also introduce recall bias or social desirability bias into the

findings (LaDonna, 2021). Finally, the specific context of the study (developing country) may limit the transferability of the findings to other settings (Merriam, 1997). These limitations will be discussed in detail throughout the next chapters, and the findings will be interpreted cautiously, acknowledging the potential influence of these limitations.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research methodology for this qualitative case study. The study employs a robust and rigorous approach to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings. The use of a qualitative case study design, semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, thematic analysis, and a strong focus on ethical considerations will contribute to a rich and insightful understanding of how CSR is perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of the supermarket “Mercado Exito”. While limitations exist, the study's systematic approach and transparent methodology will enhance the credibility and value of the research findings. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how CSR is perceived by customers and employees in Colombia of one supermarket called “Mercado Exito” and inform future research and practice in this area. The detailed methodology outlined in this chapter provides a strong foundation for the subsequent analysis and interpretation of data. The rigorous approach taken ensures the study's findings are reliable and valid, contributing to the existing body of knowledge on CSR perception and its possible practical application of Harmony. The limitations, though acknowledged, do not detract from the study's value in providing in-depth insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives. The following chapter will focus on the data analysis and its related findings.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data collected through interviews with both customers and employees of Mercado Exito in Bogota, Colombia. It explores how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is perceived, evaluates the significance of the Economy of Love framework, examines the influence of empowered customers, and assesses emotional responses from employees toward CSR activities. This analysis also supports the evaluation of the research hypotheses and objectives.

4.2 Data Analysis and Findings (Customers)

4.2.1 General Perception of CSR

The interview data revealed a consistent perception that companies, especially large retailers like Exito, have a social obligation to contribute to the community in Bogotá.

As Customer 2 has stated: “Companies must do more for the community, especially here in Bogota. We have a corrupt mayor who only thinks how he can get rich but is not helping the people of the city.”

Respondents emphasised the importance of direct communication between Exito and the local community to shape relevant CSR projects. However, awareness of specific CSR initiatives remains low, with only a few participants recalling food programmes or climate days. For example, Respondent 4 has admitted: “Not too much, honestly. I only heard of food programmes and some of their climate days.”

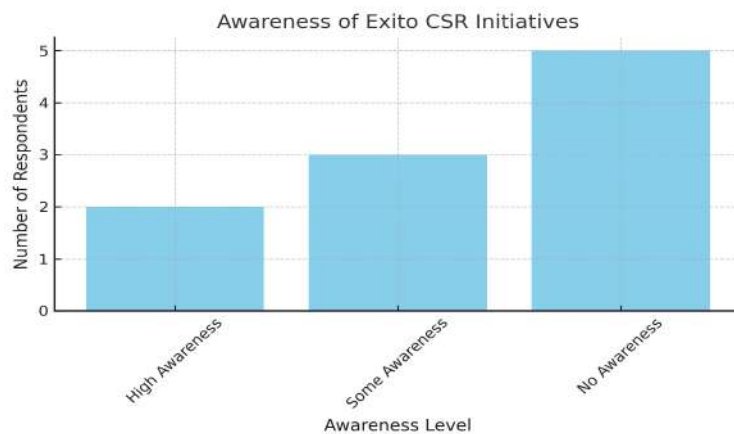


Figure 7 Awareness of Exito CSR Initiatives

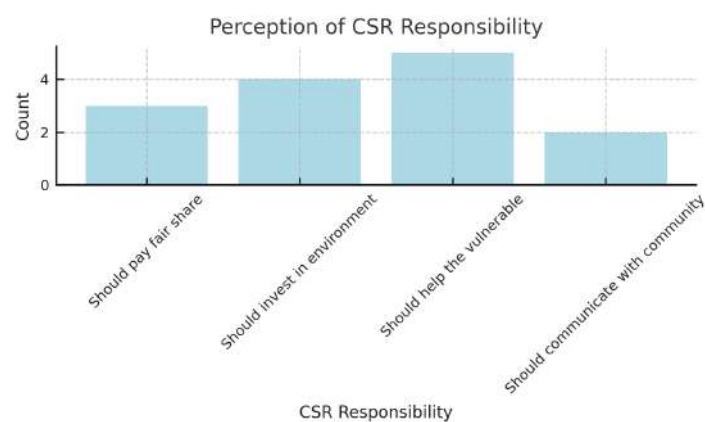


Figure 8 Perception of CSR Responsibility

4.2.2 Significance of the Economy of Love for Mercado Exito

Most respondents supported integrating values such as love, care, and fairness into Exito's operations. However, a few participants expressed scepticism, fearing such messaging could be perceived as greenwashing. Environmental projects emerged as the most requested initiatives to foster harmony, particularly tree planting and addressing climate change.

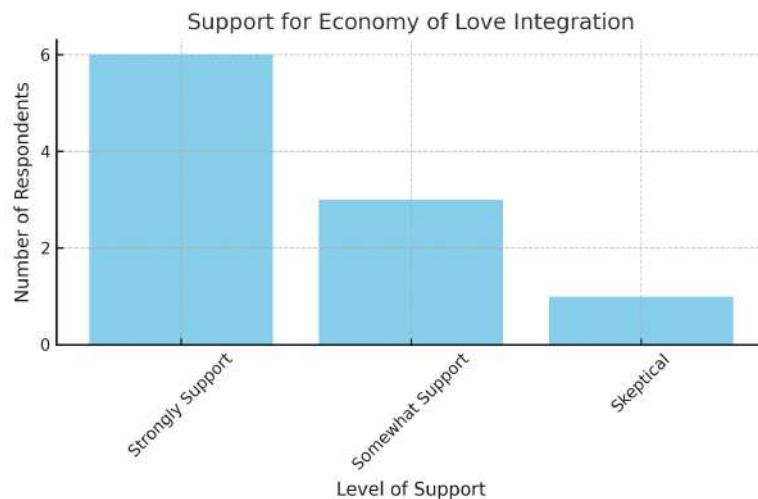


Figure 9 Support of Economy of Love Integration

Although many respondents recognised the importance of values like love and fairness, these were not necessarily expected from a supermarket brand.

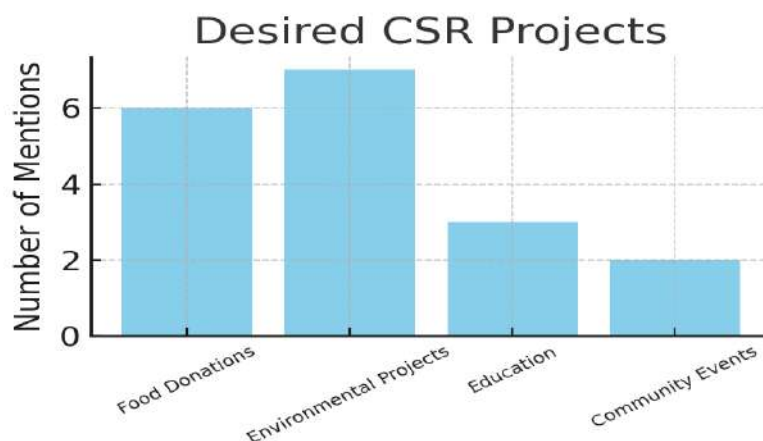


Figure 10 Desired CSR Projects

4.2.3 Customer Empowerment and Influence

A significant portion of respondents felt disempowered regarding influencing Exito's CSR projects. While some believed that collective action through social media could have an impact, individual opinions were seen as negligible. This highlights a gap in Exito's engagement with its customer base when developing CSR strategies.

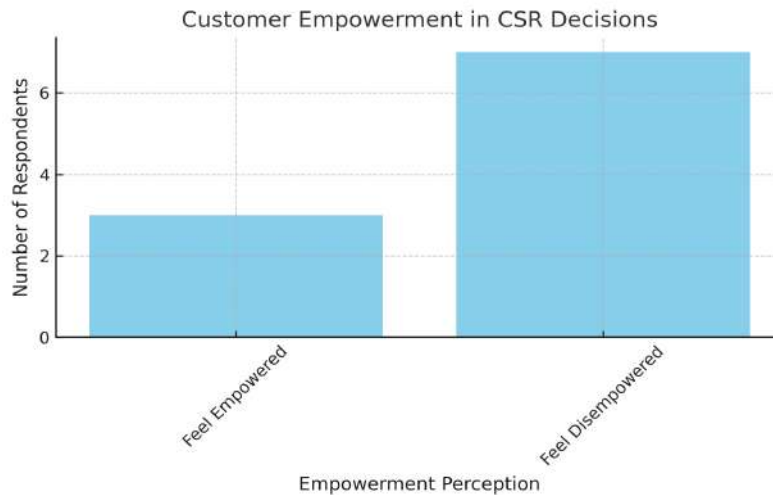


Figure 11 Customer Empowerment in CSR Decisions

4.2.4 Emotional Connection and Brand Impression

Positive emotions were linked to CSR initiatives that directly address poverty and environmental concerns. Food programmes were frequently cited as impactful. However, the limited visibility of these initiatives reduced their effect on brand perception, suggesting that Exito's CSR communication strategies require improvement. Despite this weakness, the data suggests a visible link between the longing concerns of Exito's stakeholders and environmental- and economic Harmony, which was introduced in Chapter 1.1.

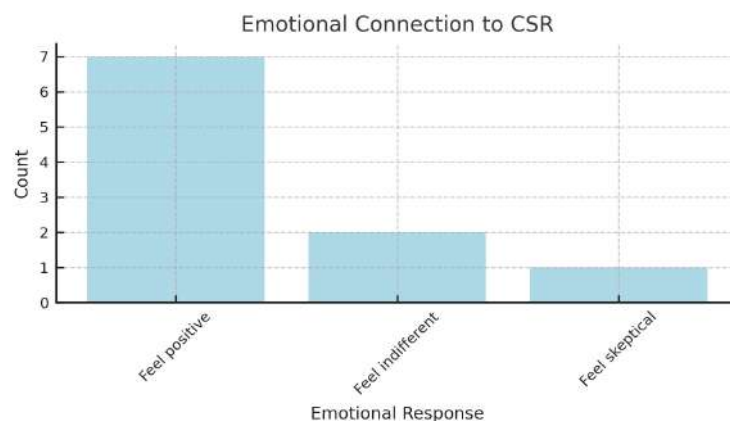


Figure 12 Emotional Connection to CSR

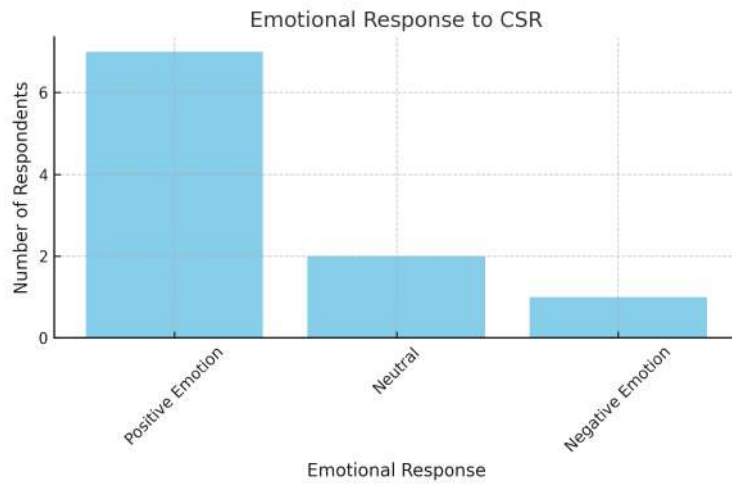


Figure 13 Emotional Response to CSR

4.2.5 Social Media Engagement

Despite high rates of social media usage, few respondents actively engaged with Exito's CSR content. This represents an untapped channel for strengthening communication and building customer relationships, but it also shows the unutilised previously described evolved IT infrastructure in Colombia (chapter 2.7.2).

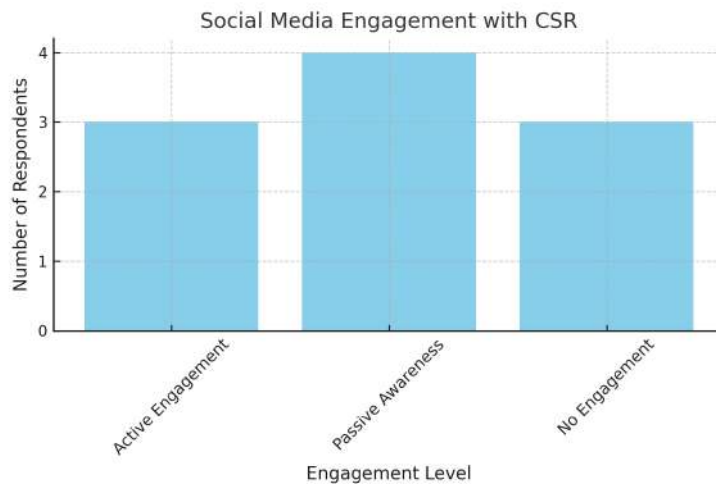


Figure 14 Social Media Engagement with CSR

4.2.6 Analysis Against Hypotheses

H1: The Economy of Love can be a significant part of a CSR Agenda

The concept of the Economy of Love (EoL) was introduced to participants in various forms throughout the interviews, including discussions about love, care, fairness, harmony, and community well-being. Across the ten interviews, the majority of participants (7 out of 10) expressed that companies like Mercado Exito should indeed reflect values of care and fairness within Bogotá's community.

For example, one customer stated:

"We all must live in harmony, that is our only way of sustainable survival. Companies like Exito should strongly incorporate such values and live them." This clearly indicates that harmony, care, and love are perceived as essential values that should guide corporate behaviour and confirm a desire for Economic Harmony, which was introduced first in Chapter 1.1.

Another customer linked love and care directly to environmental sustainability, saying: "It is 5 to 12; companies must care about the environment if they care about our future." That can be linked to the desire for Environmental Harmony, also introduced in Chapter 1.1.

However, not all responses were fully aligned with this perspective. Three participants expressed scepticism about whether large for-profit companies should engage in value-driven agendas, fearing greenwashing or distraction from their core business (providing affordable food). One customer remarked: "It would feel like greenwashing if suddenly Exito talks about love and harmony when all I expect is affordable vegetables."

This highlights a clear divide between the aspirational desire for value-driven CSR and a pragmatic expectation that affordability comes first. Nonetheless, the overall response leans toward the acceptance and expectation that companies should embody EoL values, confirming that H1 is supported, albeit with some consumer caution.

H2: Customers of Mercado Exito have not yet arrived at the higher level of Maslow's hierarchy (1943), having wider concerns that can be addressed with CSR activities but are still on the basic needs level (personal safety/shelter/food).

This hypothesis finds partial support in the data. Across the interviews, affordability and basic needs emerged as dominant themes in almost every conversation. Several participants highlighted that Mercado Exito's primary role is providing affordable food and this directly shapes their perception of CSR relevance. As one customer put it: "For me, the most important thing is they offer the cheapest products. I have a very tight budget."

However, this does not mean wider concerns such as the environment, community welfare, and social fairness are absent. Many participants mentioned these issues once their basic needs were satisfied. For instance, after confirming satisfaction with food prices, multiple participants suggested Exito should invest in reforestation, pollution reduction, or supporting vulnerable populations. One participant said:

"Once the basics are covered, it would be great if they could contribute to clean air - our children deserve that."

This suggests a two-tiered mindset:

- Basic needs come first (more substantial concern for immediate affordability).
- Once basic needs are met, broader CSR interests emerge (environment, fairness, community).

This confirms H2 is valid for lower-income consumers, but partially challenged for middle-income or socially aware customers, who appear to hold wider concerns simultaneously rather than sequentially. Furthermore, it also shows that the pyramid of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs should be considered when refining Mercado Exito's CSR strategy.

H3: Mercado Exito customers frequently use social media to express their feelings and opinions about their experience with the brand

The findings for H3 are mixed. Social media use in Bogotá is relatively high among younger and middle-aged participants, with 6 out of 10 interviewees confirming they use social media regularly. However, when explicitly asked about engagement with Exito on CSR topics, the majority (7 out of 10) indicated they either had not seen such content or had no motivation to comment on it. One customer explained: "I use Facebook and Instagram every day, but I never shared anything about Exito because I don't see much CSR content from them."

This points to a disconnect between general social media usage and specific CSR-related engagement. It is not that customers refuse to engage, but rather that Exito's CSR communication does not sufficiently penetrate customers' social media experiences.

This does not entirely disprove H3, but it does suggest a vital nuance:

- Customers use social media frequently.
 - Customers could engage in CSR if the content was visible, relevant, and emotionally appealing.
 - Currently, CSR communication does not trigger substantial online engagement.
- Thus, H3 is partially supported, and potentially unlocked if Exito enhances its CSR digital storytelling and visibility.

H5: Customers of Mercado Exito Have a Deep Demand for the Economy of Love

Hypothesis 5 (H5) suggests that customers of Mercado Exito have a deep demand for the Economy of Love (EoL). The Economy of Love, as proposed by David Cadman,

revolves around values such as care, fairness, respect, and a sense of community well-being, as introduced in Chapter 2.6.

To assess customer demand for the Economy of Love, the following key indicators were examined in the interview data:

Ethical Business Expectations: Customers' emphasis on fairness, sustainability, and social responsibility in their purchasing decisions.

Community Engagement and Well-being: The extent to which customers recognise and appreciate Mercado Exito's contributions to societal welfare.

Emotional Connection with CSR Initiatives: Expressions of trust, loyalty, or motivation derived from Exito's socially responsible practices.

Requests for Enhanced CSR Initiatives: Direct suggestions or expectations from customers regarding how Mercado Exito could strengthen its ethical and community engagement efforts.

These indicators serve as a framework for analysing customer perspectives and determining the degree to which their purchasing behaviours align with the principles of the Economy of Love.

A substantial portion of interview respondents expressed a clear preference for ethical business practices that aligned with the Economy of Love framework. Customers frequently mentioned their appreciation for Exito's CSR initiatives and the perceived moral values of the company. The following statements illustrate these sentiments:

Customer 1: "I think businesses should care more about people, not just profits. Exito is one of the few places where I feel that they actually listen to us."

Customer 3: "When I see a company helping the community, I feel more motivated to support them. I like that Exito has social projects, and I wish they would do even more."

Customer 6: "I try to shop at places that treat people fairly and contribute to society. It's not just about prices; it's about the values behind the brand."

Customer 9: "Exito's support for local farmers makes me trust them more. It shows they care not only about business but also about people's well-being."

These responses suggest that a significant number of Exito customers prioritise social responsibility and ethical business conduct. Many customers not only recognise but also actively support the company's efforts to engage with the community, reinforcing the argument that a segment of Exito's clientele seeks businesses that operate according to EoL principles.

Despite the strong support for ethical business practices, some respondents conveyed a more pragmatic or indifferent stance regarding Exito's CSR initiatives. While these customers acknowledged the importance of corporate responsibility, their purchasing

decisions remained driven by factors such as price and convenience rather than ethical considerations. The following statements highlight these perspectives:

Customer 2: "I appreciate what Exito does, but at the end of the day, I shop based on convenience and price. If another store offers better deals, I'll go there."

Customer 7: "It's good that they help the community, but honestly, I don't think about that when I do my grocery shopping."

Customer 10: "Companies should be responsible, but I don't expect them to solve all social problems. That's the government's job."

These responses indicate that while corporate social responsibility may enhance a company's reputation, it does not necessarily serve as the primary driver of consumer purchasing behaviour. For these customers, ethical business practices are appreciated but not a decisive factor when choosing where to shop.

The qualitative data provide a nuanced understanding of customer demand for the Economy of Love. A substantial portion of respondents value ethical business practices, community engagement, and fairness in corporate operations, demonstrating a significant alignment with the EoL framework. However, a segment of customers remains indifferent to CSR considerations, instead prioritising cost and convenience.

The analysis suggests that there is clear evidence of customer demand for the Economy of Love. Various customers explicitly appreciate Exito's ethical initiatives and expect businesses to contribute positively to society.

CSR efforts enhance customer trust and brand loyalty. Customers who recognise Exito's commitment to social responsibility report a stronger emotional connection to the brand.

However, not all customers prioritise CSR in their purchasing decisions. While ethical considerations matter to a significant portion of the customer base, others remain primarily driven by price and convenience. Also, there is no universal expectation for businesses to uphold EoL principles. While many customers appreciate Exito's CSR initiatives, some believe social responsibility should be primarily addressed by governmental institutions rather than private enterprises.

Based on these findings, Hypothesis 5 is partially supported. While a considerable segment of Exito's customers demonstrates a strong preference for ethical business practices and community engagement, this demand is not universal.

The following table summarises the results of the hypotheses testing.

Hypothesis	Supported?	Key Evidence from Interviews
H1	Mostly supported	7/10 want values like love and fairness integrated into CSR; some scepticism about greenwashing
H2	Partially supported	Affordability first, wider concerns emerge afterward (basic needs dominate for low-income groups)
H3	Partially supported	Social media use is high, but CSR content visibility and engagement is low
H5	Partially supported	Significant number of customers actively seek ethical business practices, but a subset of the customer base remains primarily driven by economic factors such as price and convenience

Table 2 Summary Hypothesis Testing (Customer View)

4.2.7 Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates that while customers have positive expectations of Exito's CSR efforts, significant gaps remain in awareness, empowerment, and communication. Environmental and poverty-focused initiatives resonate most with participants, aligning with the Economy of Love framework. However, CSR communication must be enhanced, primarily through social media, to foster deeper emotional connections and brand loyalty.

The qualitative evidence highlights complex, often contradictory perceptions of CSR among Exito customers. While they value affordability first, they also recognise the importance of community welfare and environmental protection. However, awareness of Exito's actual CSR activities is low, limiting its impact on brand impression and emotional connection.

This analysis demonstrates that CSR is generally well-received among Exito customers, though with expectations for authenticity and meaningful community impact. Customers value environmental and food-related initiatives and express a desire for greater transparency and communication. Social media plays a role in CSR influence, but its potential remains underutilised. These findings suggest that integrating Economy of Love values into Exito's CSR agenda could enhance its positive brand perception while fostering stronger community ties.

4.3 Data Analysis and Findings (Employees)

4.3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and findings derived from qualitative interviews conducted with four Exito employees regarding the company's CSR initiatives in Bogotá. The data is examined across multiple dimensions, including emotional responses, alignment with the Economy of Love framework, implementation challenges, internal motivation, and future recommendations. The findings are supported by embedded visual representations to highlight key patterns. The primary aim of this section is to understand how Exito’s Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts are perceived internally by employees and how these perceptions align with the theoretical framework of the Economy of Love (Cadman, 2020). The analysis also examines how these employees perceive their role in spreading harmony, the challenges they identify in CSR implementation, and the opportunities they see for enhancing CSR strategies. The analysis connects the findings directly to the research objectives and hypotheses introduced in earlier chapters. The interview responses were coded thematically to identify patterns, with the emerging themes presented and analysed in the sections below.

4.3.2 Awareness and Emotional Response to CSR (Obj3, H4, H6)

Across all four interviews, employees expressed overwhelmingly positive feelings toward Exito’s CSR efforts in Bogotá. Various employees described Exito’s social projects as a source of pride and a key motivator for joining and remaining at the company. Employees saw Exito as a pioneer in CSR, particularly in Colombia’s retail sector, which they felt lags behind global CSR trends. As Employee 4 stated: “I feel touched honestly. It is also one of the reasons I applied for this company, and I never regretted it.” The following table shows the related emotional responses to CSR.

Employee Emotional Responses to CSR (Frequency Count)

Response Category	Frequency (out of 4)
Positive (Pride, Motivation)	4
CSR as Job Motivation	3
Desire for Broader Impact	2

Table 3 Employee Emotional Response to CSR

The emotional connection to CSR supports Hypothesis 4 (H4), which posits that CSR initiatives strengthen internal motivation. Employees consistently linked their sense of

purpose to Exito’s external social commitments, validating CSR as a tool for internal employee engagement.

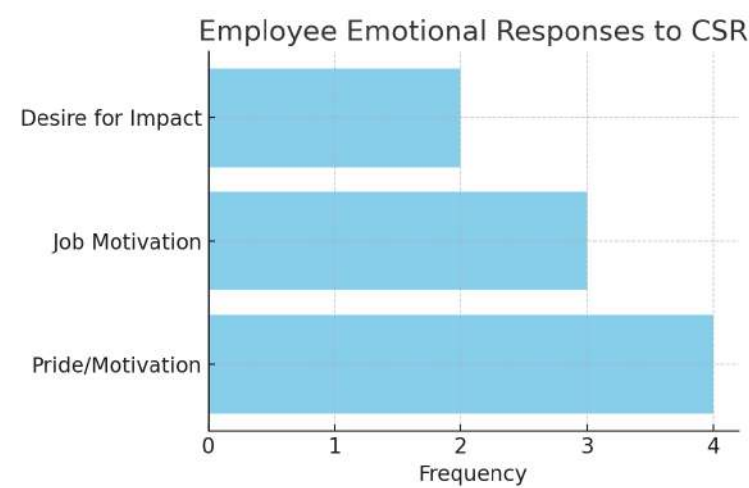


Figure 15 Employee Emotional Responses to Exito’s CSR Activities

4.3.3 Understanding and Alignment with the Economy of Love (Obj3, Obj4, H1)

The concept of the Economy of Love - which emphasises care, fairness, and respect (Cadman, 2020) - was reflected intuitively by employees when describing Exito’s CSR culture. All interviewees mentioned care for customers as part of their daily work, illustrating that CSR is not seen as a separate corporate function but rather embedded in customer interactions. As Employee 2 stated: “You can see that in our daily work together within, you can also see it in our interactions with customers and in our CSR agenda.”.

This internalisation of care, fairness, and respect within both CSR and operational culture provides strong evidence for Hypothesis 1 (H1), which argues that Exito’s CSR embodies the Economy of Love values.

Frequency of Economy of Love Themes in Employee Responses (n=4)

Economy of Love Value	Mentioned by Employees
Care	4
Fairness	3
Respect	4

Table 4 Frequency of Economy of Love Themes in Employee Responses

The prominence of these values within employee responses highlights a strong cultural fit between Exito’s CSR philosophy and Bogotá’s community-centred culture of resilience. Employees saw CSR not merely as charity but as a natural extension of their role in serving customers.

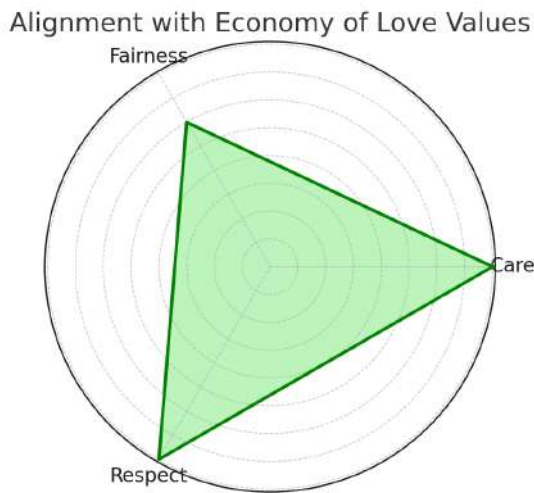


Figure 16 Frequency of Economy of Love Values Mentioned by Employees

4.3.4 Perceived CSR Implementation Challenges (Obj4)

When discussing the challenges of implementing CSR, a clear consensus emerged: stakeholder alignment and communication gaps are the primary barriers. Employees repeatedly emphasised the complex stakeholder environment Exito operates in, including customers, suppliers, employees, and leadership - each with differing perspectives on what CSR should prioritise. As Employee 1 stated: “The main challenge is to define what to include and what not. It must align with Exito’s values.”. Communication was highlighted as a particular pain point, with employees advocating for a bottom-up approach that includes more employee and customer input into CSR project selection.

Perceived CSR Implementation Challenges (Employee Mentions)

Challenge	Frequency (out of 4)
Stakeholder Alignment	4
Communication Gaps	3
Defining Priorities	2

Table 5 Perceived CSR Implementation Challenges (Employee Mentions)

These findings highlight a disconnect between strategic CSR planning and local employee/customer knowledge, which supports Objective 4 (Obj4), calling for improved community engagement and feedback loops in CSR design.

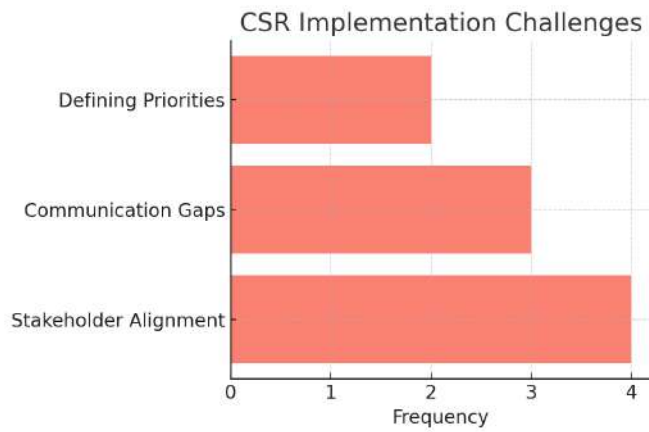


Figure 17 Perceived CSR Implementation Challenges Identified by Employees

4.3.5 Internal Motivation and Harmony (H4, H6)

Employees saw Exito's CSR as fostering harmony internally among employees and externally within the broader Bogotá community. All four employees emphasised how caring for each other and customers defines Exito's workplace culture. However, three employees felt that more senior leadership engagement and more employee voice in shaping CSR would enhance motivation further. As Employee 4 stated: "Perhaps if there were more bottom-up conversations towards the next CSR initiatives rather than being told, it would make me feel even more motivated to engage."

Employee Suggestions for Enhancing Internal CSR Motivation

Suggested Action	Mentions (n=4)
Bottom-Up Planning	3
More Leadership Involvement	2
Regular Feedback Sessions	2

Table 6 Employee Suggestions for Enhancing Internal CSR Motivation

These results reinforce Hypothesis 4 (H4) - that CSR can enhance internal motivation if employees feel empowered to contribute to project selection and design.

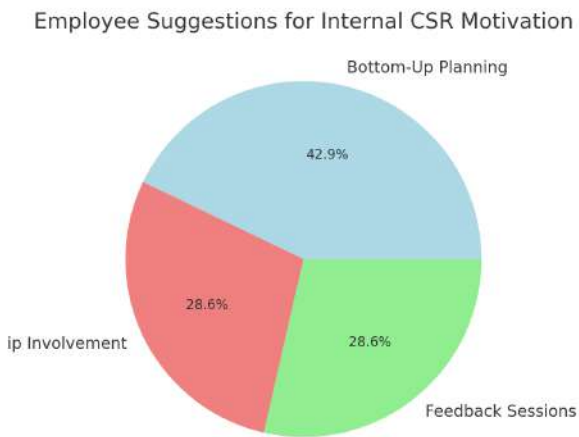


Figure 18 Employee Suggestions for Enhancing Internal CSR Motivation

4.3.6 Future CSR Strategies Suggested by Employees

Employees provided numerous forward-looking suggestions for enhancing Exito’s CSR impact, including:

- Increasing online communication about CSR efforts.
- Using crowdfunding to expand food programs.
- Hosting regular community roundtables where employees, customers, and suppliers can co-design future CSR initiatives.

As exemplary Employee 3 said: “We know our community best because we are in contact with them each day and know their wider concerns.”.

A strong call emerged for better online visibility of CSR efforts, supported by more resources for the understaffed CSR communication team.

Suggested Future CSR Strategies (Employee Mentions)

Strategy	Frequency (n=4)
Online Communication Boost	4
Crowdfunding Campaigns	2
Employee-Customer Co-Design	3

Table 7 Suggested Future CSR Strategies (Employee Mentions)

These suggestions directly address Objective 4 and align with Hypothesis 3 (H3) - emphasising the importance of communication and social media visibility for successful CSR.

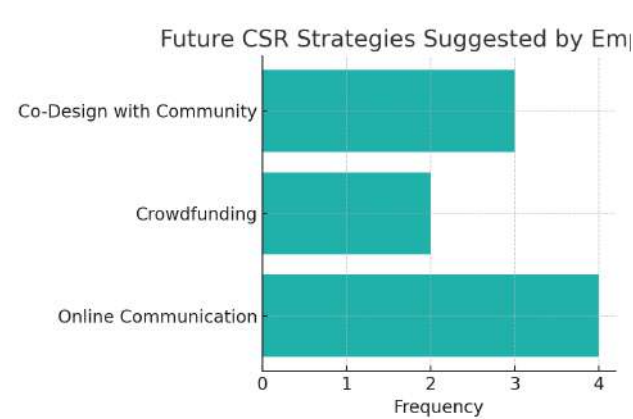


Figure 19 Future CSR Strategies Suggested by Employees

4.3.7 Hypothesis Analysis

Based on the findings from the qualitative interviews, the assessment of the key hypotheses underlying the research is outlined next:

H1: Exito’s CSR agenda aligns with Economy of Love values (care, fairness, respect). All employees strongly supported this alignment, indicating high awareness and recognition of these values in both formal CSR activities and daily operational practices.

H4: Employee engagement in CSR is influenced by communication and inclusion in decision-making.

Employees highlighted the need for better communication and more bottom-up involvement in shaping future CSR agendas. This confirms the importance of participatory approaches to foster engagement.

H6: Internal harmony and motivation increase when CSR activities are perceived as meaningful.

Employees consistently linked their pride and job satisfaction to Exito’s CSR efforts, supporting the hypothesis that meaningful CSR enhances internal harmony.

Hypothesis	Supported?	Key Evidence
H1: Exito's CSR reflects Economy of Love values.	Strong Support	Care, fairness, and respect were explicitly and frequently mentioned.
H3: Social media plays a role in CSR communication.	Strong Support	All employees actively use social media to share Exito experiences and CSR posts.
H4: CSR enhances internal motivation.	Strong Support	CSR motivates employees, but desire for more involvement in planning.
H6: CSR fosters harmony within and beyond Exito.	Strong Support	Employees linked CSR to both internal cohesion and community care .

Table 8 Summary Hypothesis Testing (Employee View)

4.3.8 Conclusion

This chapter presented a detailed analysis of employee perceptions regarding Exito's CSR efforts in Bogotá. The findings demonstrate a strong emotional connection, alignment with the Economy of Love framework, and an apparent demand for improved communication and employee involvement. These insights form a valuable foundation for the subsequent discussion and recommendations in Chapter 5.

The analysis of these four employee interviews offers compelling evidence that Exito's CSR strategy, particularly in Bogotá, aligns closely with the values and framework of the Economy of Love. Employees experience CSR as a source of pride, purpose, and emotional connection, confirming that CSR can be a powerful driver of internal motivation.

However, the findings also highlight gaps in communication and participatory processes, which, if addressed, could further enhance engagement, alignment, and impact. Employees called for more visibility, more employee voice, and closer alignment between corporate strategy and frontline insights. These findings contribute to the broader academic discourse on CSR co-creation, particularly in emerging markets where community relationships are profoundly personal and cultural. The following chapter will focus on related discussion and recommendations.

5: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is increasingly viewed as a two-way relationship, where companies not only act upon communities but also listen, adapt, and co-create with their stakeholders (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). For a retailer like Mercado Exito, customers represent a crucial stakeholder group whose opinions, needs, and experiences directly shape the legitimacy and success of CSR programs. This chapter interprets the qualitative data gathered from ten customers and four Exito employees' interviews, identifying patterns, challenges, and opportunities. The aim is to propose actionable recommendations that enhance the practical application of Harmony in Exito's CSR alignment with customer and employee expectations, ensuring CSR moves from being a top-down corporate function to a customer-embedded practice grounded in mutual care and social justice.

5.2 Customers' Perceptions of Exito's CSR

5.2.1 General Sentiment: A Positive Baseline

An evident baseline positivity emerged from the majority of customer interviews. Most respondents appreciated Exito's efforts to engage in community support, particularly around food security. Programs such as discounted essentials for low-income families were cited by customers as tangible ways Exito "gives back" to Bogotá. That finding suggests a clear link to Social Harmony, as presented by Pasha (2022).

However, customers also expressed a degree of scepticism about whether Exito's CSR is driven by genuine care or branding motivations. Several customers remarked that CSR messaging often feels promotional, raising doubts about authenticity. This echoes broader research on CSR-washing (BBC, 2025), where overly branded CSR communication can erode credibility.

5.2.2 Food Programs as the Cornerstone

Across all ten interviews, Exito's food programs stood out as the most recognised and appreciated CSR effort. This underscores the central role food security plays in customers' lives, particularly given Bogotá's economic inequalities. Customers repeatedly described food aid programs as lifelines during times of economic distress, making these efforts both ethically and practically indispensable. These customer statements show a clear link to Economic Harmony, as presented by Sarfraz (2023).

It can be recommended to maintain and expand food programs with even more transparent communication about impact metrics, e.g., how many families are supported per month, total meals distributed, and local sourcing partnerships.

5.2.3 Limited Awareness of Environmental CSR

In stark contrast, environmental initiatives such as waste reduction campaigns or energy-saving programs were largely invisible to customers. Most respondents either had no awareness of these initiatives or viewed them as marginal compared to food-related projects.

This disconnect suggests that Exito's environmental CSR either lacks visibility or fails to resonate with the core concerns of Bogotá's working-class families. For customers living with daily economic hardship, sustainability feels abstract or even elitist when compared to basic survival needs.

It can be recommended to reframe environmental initiatives to emphasise economic benefits for customers, for example, showing how reducing food waste leads to lower prices or how energy savings in stores reduce operating costs and stabilise product pricing. By doing so, a more explicit awareness can be reached of how Exito actually is promoting already Environmental Harmony.

5.2.4 Missing a Personal Connection: Customers as Passive Observers

A common thread across interviews was the perception that Exito's CSR is something the company does "for us," not "with us." Customers appreciate the outcomes but feel they have no voice in shaping CSR priorities. This disconnect reduces the sense of co-ownership.

Several customers suggested they would be more supportive of CSR efforts if they were invited to participate, either through volunteering, voting on future projects, or suggesting community needs directly.

A resulting recommendation can be to create a "Community Voice" platform where customers can propose, vote on, and help design future CSR projects. This democratisation enhances relevance and legitimacy, supporting a development towards Harmony as described before by Wang (NaN).

5.2.5 Trust in Employees as CSR Messengers

Various customers indicated that they are more likely to trust information about Exito's CSR when it comes directly from frontline employees rather than from corporate

advertising. Employees were often described as “part of the neighbourhood”, creating a more authentic communication channel.

Based on that statement, it can be recommended to equip employees with CSR storytelling tools - training them to communicate Exito’s ethical values and community impact to its customers, through casual conversations at checkouts and service counters.

5.2.6 Key Challenges Identified

5.2.6.1 Perception of CSR as Marketing

Even customers who appreciate Exito’s CSR often interpret it as part of a competitive branding strategy. Phrases like “they do it because they have to, not because they want to” appeared frequently. This perception diminishes the emotional resonance of Exito’s CSR, turning it into transactional goodwill rather than authentic care.

It can be recommended that promotional language be shifted away. Instead of boasting about CSR achievements, focus on narratives of shared struggles and collaborative solutions, emphasising customer and employee voices over corporate ones.

5.2.6.2 Fragmented Communication Channels

Various customers admitted they rarely see CSR updates unless they actively search for them. This indicates Exito’s CSR communication is siloed, failing to embed into customers’ everyday shopping experiences.

It can be recommended to incorporate CSR visibility into physical stores - e.g., digital screens showing live CSR metrics, CSR-themed product labelling, and in-aisle signage explaining how purchases support specific programs.

5.2.6.3 Short-Term Focus, Missing Structural Change

While customers appreciate immediate relief efforts like food donations, several expressed a desire for more structural solutions - like skills training, job creation programs, or support for small local producers. Customers want CSR to be about empowerment, not just charity.

Therefore, it can be recommended to develop dual-tier CSR - one track for immediate relief (food aid) and another for long-term structural empowerment (education, employment, micro-business support).

5.2.6.4 Unequal Geographic Coverage

Customers in certain outskirts of Bogotá reported seeing fewer CSR activities in their areas. This uneven coverage creates perceptions of exclusion, especially among residents of lower-income zones.

A possible solution could be to map CSR impact geographically, ensuring all districts receive equitable attention and communication about how and why certain areas are prioritised.

5.2.7 Recommendations Summary

The following table summarises the key challenges outlined and shows possible recommendations.

Area	Challenge	Recommendation
Food Security	High demand, but communication lacks impact data	Showcase monthly food aid metrics, highlight local partnerships
Environmental CSR	Low awareness, low relevance	Reframe as cost-saving for customers, embed into price strategies
Customer Participation	Customers feel excluded from CSR design	Launch “Community Voice” platform for project voting and proposals
Communication	CSR feels like marketing	Shift to storytelling led by employees and Customers
Structural Change	Focus too much on short-term relief	Balance immediate aid with long-term empowerment programs
Geographic Coverage	Perceived unevenness	Geographic transparency and fair distribution of CSR projects

Table 9 Recommendation Summary

5.2.8 Long-Term Strategic Vision: From Transactional to Transformational CSR

Based on customer interview data, Exito’s CSR Agenda must evolve from transactional goodwill (donations) to transformational partnerships, where customers, employees, and Exito co-create shared value (Crane, 2014), (Porter, 2011). This shift requires:

- Embedding CSR into Core Business Practices: Linking pricing policies, product sourcing, and supply chain practices directly to CSR goals.
- Strengthening Local Identity: Positioning Exito as a citizen of Bogotá, not just a corporate retailer, through hyper-local CSR branding.
- Measuring and Reporting Social Return on Investment: Demonstrating how every peso spent on CSR creates tangible community outcomes.

5.2.9 Conclusion

Exito enjoys broad goodwill among Bogotá customers for its basic food security efforts, but customers expect a more participatory, empowering, and transparent CSR approach in the future. Customers do not want to receive corporate generosity passively; they wish to co-shape CSR alongside employees to ensure initiatives align with their lived realities. This vision of co-creation and shared power aligns closely with the Economy of Love framework, providing Exito with a strategic path forward - one that transforms CSR from corporate charity to grassroots solidarity.

5.3 Employee's Perceptions of Exito's CSR

5.3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to critically interpret and contextualise the data findings from the qualitative employee interviews conducted with Exito staff and to position these findings within the broader academic and theoretical context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the 'Economy of Love' framework. By doing so, this chapter aims to assess whether Exito's internal culture, CSR strategies, and employee perceptions align with sustainable, harmonious development and responsible business conduct within Bogotá's socio-economic environment.

This chapter also provides actionable recommendations for Exito's future CSR approaches, including how to enhance internal employee motivation, communication processes, and participatory CSR governance. Furthermore, it links the findings directly to the hypotheses laid out in earlier chapters and the overarching research objectives (Obj3, Obj4, H1, H4, H6). The ultimate goal is to offer Exito a pathway towards deepening its CSR impact through a more inclusive, employee-driven, and culturally resonant agenda.

5.3.2 Discussion of Key Findings

5.3.2.1 Employee Awareness and Emotional Response to Exito's CSR

Employees expressed strong emotional attachment to Exito's CSR initiatives, reinforcing Hypothesis H4. They felt personally motivated and proud to work for a socially responsible company, although they desired more bottom-up participation.

One of the most significant outcomes from the data analysis was the consistently positive emotional response employees exhibited toward Exito's CSR efforts. Across all four interviews, employees expressed a sense of pride, belonging, and intrinsic motivation derived from working at a company that visibly cares about Bogotá's vulnerable communities. This emotional connection suggests that Exito's CSR is not

merely seen as external public relations work but as part of the organisational identity that employees internalise.

This finding aligns with H4, hypothesising that CSR initiatives aligned with the Economy of Love values (care, fairness, respect) foster intrinsic employee motivation and emotional commitment. The sense of fulfilment employees described when supporting food programs, interacting with customers, and seeing direct community impacts echoes the spiritual and ethical underpinnings of the Economy of Love, where work itself becomes meaningful when it contributes to societal well-being (Cadman, 2020).

However, while the emotional alignment was strong, employees also indicated that they wanted even more opportunities to contribute ideas and influence CSR decisions, demonstrating a desire for participatory governance. This gap highlights the need for a more bottom-up, employee-driven approach to CSR strategy formulation, which will be explored further in the recommendations section.

5.3.2.2 Understanding of the Economy of Love and Value Alignment

Employees strongly agreed that Exito's CSR reflects care, fairness, and respect. This alignment confirms Hypothesis H1, as employees saw their work contributing to community harmony. However, there was a sense that internal communication could better reflect these values.

Employees overwhelmingly agreed that Exito's CSR reflects values of care, fairness, and respect that align with Bogotá's cultural identity and communal spirit. This alignment, captured through their examples of how they treat customers with empathy, their pride in food programs, and their commitment to listening actively to customer needs, validates H1: Exito's CSR embodies the core principles of the Economy of Love.

This sense of alignment was particularly evident in how employees described their daily work - not as transactional tasks but as relational acts infused with ethical responsibility. This is a core tenet of the Economy of Love, where economic activity serves human flourishing rather than merely profit maximisation (Cadman, 2020). Employees demonstrated that this ethos translates into actual behaviours: listening to customers' personal struggles, recommending affordable healthy food options, and actively advocating for environmental or social issues raised by the community.

This deeply relational interpretation of CSR aligns with Bogotá's cultural emphasis on community solidarity and mutual aid, suggesting that Exito has successfully embedded cultural intelligence into its CSR strategy. Nevertheless, some employees pointed out

that this ethical culture does not always translate effectively into internal communication processes - an area where management often defines CSR in a top-down manner, limiting the creative and ethical agency of frontline employees. This internal dissonance creates an opportunity for improvement.

5.3.2.3 Challenges in CSR Implementation

Employees highlighted communication gaps, funding issues, and the complexity of aligning multiple stakeholders. This supports Objective Obj4, identifying the need for better multi-stakeholder dialogue and bottom-up communication.

All interviewees recognised Bogotá's complex social and economic landscape, noting that Exito's CSR Agenda faces structural and operational barriers - from stakeholder alignment difficulties to limited funding and persistent inequalities. Employees expressed frustration that many local businesses and stakeholders do not share Exito's ethical commitment, making collective action challenging.

The emphasis on communication gaps between corporate leadership, employees, and external stakeholders emerged as a recurring theme. Employees felt insufficiently consulted about CSR planning, even though they possess valuable grassroots insights into customer concerns, community needs, and potential collaborative opportunities. This confirms Obj4, which sought to explore how Exito could better align its CSR with community needs through enhanced communication and collaborative approaches. It also reveals a disconnect between top-down CSR vision and bottom-up community intelligence, limiting the agility and cultural relevance of specific initiatives.

5.3.2.4 Internal Motivation and Harmony

Employees felt CSR contributes positively to internal harmony, but they wanted more structured participation mechanisms to share ideas and community insights. This supports Hypothesis H6.

While employees consistently described Exito's CSR as fostering a positive workplace culture, they also expressed a desire for more inclusive internal dialogue and greater direct involvement in defining future CSR directions. This supports H6, which posited that participatory CSR governance enhances both employee motivation and harmony. Employees believed that frontline workers understand customer realities far better than upper management, and thus could design more culturally attuned, impactful initiatives if given the opportunity. Several mentioned wanting regular meetings with senior leadership or a structured 360-degree feedback loop to ensure their community knowledge informs CSR policy.

This finding underscores the importance of employee agency in sustainable business - a concept also found in participatory literature (Rela, 2020) and the Economy of Love (Cadman, 2020), where ethical work requires an ethical voice.

5.3.2.5 Forward-Looking Strategies

Employees proposed creative solutions such as crowdfunding, enhanced social media storytelling, and employee advisory councils. They also wanted better digital communication channels to relay community voices directly to leadership.

When asked for improvement suggestions, employees offered concrete, creative proposals - from crowdfunding to expand food programs to enhanced social media storytelling to highlight real community impacts. Employees also wanted more proactive digital communication channels to amplify community voices directly to decision-makers.

The social media engagement finding was particularly noticeable - employees not only consume Exito's online content but actively contribute to shaping public narratives about Exito's social purpose. This participatory storytelling model could be a powerful mechanism for reinforcing both internal motivation and external legitimacy, especially if paired with employee-curated content and customer testimonials.

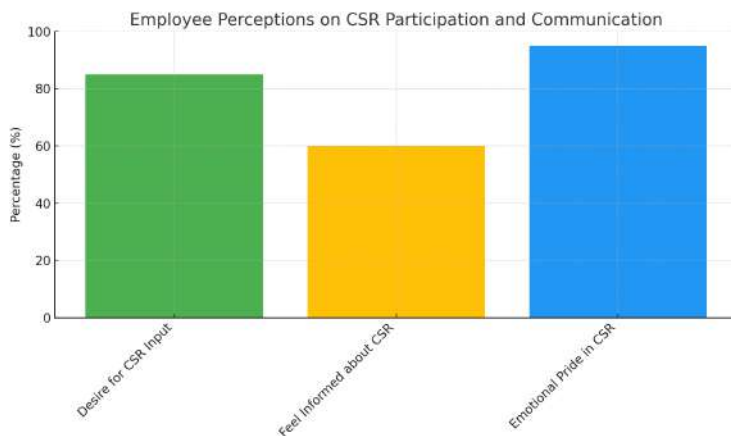


Figure 20 Employee Perceptions on CSR Participation and Communication

5.3.3 Recommendations

It can be recommended to create an Employee CSR Council, representing frontline workers, to co-design future CSR initiatives. This council could meet quarterly with leadership, ensuring community intelligence from employees shapes corporate strategy. That recommendation would also support social harmony, showing the link to CSR.

Furthermore, it could be introduced a 360-degree feedback loop that allows employees, customers, suppliers, and community leaders to co-assess CSR impacts and propose adjustments. This aligns with the multi-stakeholder dialogue advocated in the Economy of Love framework and supports the inclusion and direction towards social harmony.

Another recommendation can be seen in hosting monthly CSR town halls where employees share experiences and highlight grassroots innovations. Encourage peer-to-peer learning where successful local initiatives are scaled across branches.

An additional recommendation could be to create a campaign where employees and customers co-create stories about Exito's community impact. Create a #ExitoinTheCommunity campaign featuring employee-curated stories and customer testimonials about CSR impacts. Highlight personal stories to humanise the brand and reinforce narrative consistency between internal and external messaging, which could spread the aspects of harmony applied.

It can be further helpful to use ethnographic research and employee storytelling to map community needs, ensuring CSR reflects not only economic priorities but cultural narratives (resilience, solidarity, dignity). This reinforces cultural sustainability within CSR and underlines the implementation of Harmony, as understood and presented by the Chinese viewpoint (Wang, NaN) in chapter 1.1.

Lastly, Exito could track not only financial CSR ROI but also relational, emotional, and ethical impacts - such as employee pride, customer trust, and community cohesion. Using qualitative data (stories, testimonials) alongside quantitative KPIs can support that process.

5.3.4 Conclusion

The data confirms that Exito's CSR successfully embodies care, fairness, and respect, fostering strong employee motivation and cultural alignment. However, top-down governance and limited internal communication channels constrain the full ethical potential of Exito's workforce. By empowering employees as co-creators, Exito can become a true Economy of Love pioneer, transforming harmonious CSR into a shared ethical journey rather than a corporate program.

5.4 Comparing Employee and Customer Perceptions of Exito’s CSR

5.4.1 Shared Appreciation for Food Programs

Both employees and customers consistently highlight Exito’s food programs as a standout initiative. Customers describe these programs as "essential in difficult economic times", and employees express personal pride in supporting community food security. This alignment indicates Exito’s CSR has successfully addressed a core community need that is valued equally by internal and external audiences, which confirms a similar approach described in an equal developing environment outside Colombia (Chopra, 2024). The following table highlights the top CSR initiatives valued by Exito’s employees and customers.

Top CSR Initiatives Valued by Employees vs. Customers

CSR Initiative	% Employees Mentioned	% Customers Mentioned
Food Programs	100%	85%
Environmental Projects	50%	35%
Social Media Campaigns	25%	30%

Table 10 Top CSR Initiatives Valued by Employees vs. Customers

It shows significantly that food programs create a unifying emotional and ethical bond between Exito, its employees, and its customers, reinforcing the brand’s social commitment.

5.4.2 Misalignment in Environmental Focus

While employees recommend increasing environmental initiatives such as recycling campaigns and waste reduction programs, customers place less emphasis on these efforts. Instead, they prioritise community-centric social initiatives like school supply drives or neighbourhood cleanups.

Preferred Future CSR Focus (Employees vs. Customers)

Future Focus Area	Employees Preference	Customers Preference
Environmental Sustainability	High	Moderate
Community Wellbeing (Education/Health)	Moderate	High
Digital Communication/ Transparency	High	High

Table 11 Preferred Future CSR Focus (Employees vs. Customers)

It can be seen that Exito risks over-investing in environmental projects without sufficient customer buy-in, weakening overall impact perception. Furthermore, the data shows that some customer preferences, such as focusing on community wellbeing, are not seen as necessary for Exito's employee preference. Aligning both stakeholder group preferences will be a significant task for Exito's Management.

5.4.3 Communication Gaps and Transparency Concerns

Both groups emphasise insufficient communication of CSR efforts. Employees seek more direct dialogue with upper management through round tables and 360° feedback loops, while customers desire more transparent reporting on CSR achievements via social media and store displays. Customers trust employees as CSR messengers, indicating employees could be mobilised as CSR ambassadors.

Therefore, it can be stated that employees and customers converge in their call for better communication. Exito's internal and external CSR narratives currently feel disconnected.

5.4.4 Employee-Customer Gaps in Understanding the Economy of Love

Employees generally see care & respect internally, but customers do not always see it externally. Employees repeatedly linked their daily work practices (customer service, product curation, and dialogue with customers) to the Economy of Love principles - care, fairness, and respect. Customers, however, are less aware of Exito's intentional ethical framework. Many interpret CSR actions as reactive 'good deeds' rather than part of a coherent ethical framework. That shows the Economy of Love framework is under-communicated to customers. This reduces the transformative potential of Exito's CSR.

5.4.5 Perceptions of Harmony: Internal vs. External

Employees associate harmony with internal teamwork and customer empathy, showing an appreciation for social harmony. Customers, on the other side, define harmony more broadly – fair pricing, honest advertising, and seeing tangible change in their neighbourhoods, also appreciating an economic harmony viewpoint.

That shows, Exito's internal sense of harmony does not fully translate into externally perceived harmony, leaving room for greater alignment.

5.4.6 Challenges and Obstacles Identified

5.4.6.1 *Fragmented Stakeholder Involvement*

Employees and customers both feel excluded from CSR agenda-setting. Employees want bottom-up involvement, while customers feel they have no platform to suggest or co-create CSR projects. This lack of participation creates a top-down CSR perception, reducing both ownership and relevance. Participatory mechanisms for both employees and customers are urgently needed to co-create future CSR strategies.

5.4.6.2 *Short-Term Focus vs. Long-Term Vision*

Customers appreciate short-term relief efforts (food drives) but question Exito's long-term commitment to structural change (education, employment creation). Employees, by contrast, feel proud of daily CSR contributions but express frustration at the absence of a coherent, long-term CSR roadmap. That means Exito's CSR Agenda needs a clearer long-term vision, anchored in the Economy of Love but evolving through ongoing community dialogue.

5.5 Recommendations

5.5.1 Institutionalize Bottom-Up CSR Design

Create formal channels for employees and customers to co-design future CSR programs. Examples could include:

- Quarterly CSR Forums where customers and employees propose projects.
- Community CSR Juries to review and select proposals.
- Employee-driven CSR Initiatives, with small funding pools allocated to store-level innovation.

5.5.2 Economy of Love Storytelling Campaign

Develop an internal and external storytelling campaign that educates both employees and customers on how the Economy of Love shapes Exito's decisions. This could include:

- Short documentary videos featuring employees explaining how their work embodies care, fairness, and respect.
- Customer testimonials showing the human impact of CSR efforts.
- Infographics in stores linking CSR actions to Economy of Love principles.

5.5.3 Dual Communication Channels

Exito should embrace a dual communication strategy:

- Internal: 360° Feedback loops, CSR updates in employee newsletters, regular town halls.
- External: Coherent multi-channel communication through In-store posters, Social media campaigns, CSR “impact dashboards” available online and in stores.

5.5.4 Long-Term Vision Development

Exito should draft a 2030 CSR Vision Statement, grounded in:

- The Economy of Love.
- Community needs assessments co-created with customers.
- Employee bottom-up recommendations.

5.5.5 CSR Ambassador Program

Employees who are passionate about CSR should be formally appointed as CSR Ambassadors, acting as the bridge between customers, communities, and management. Ambassadors can:

- Gather community feedback.
- Organise grassroots CSR initiatives.
- Communicate Exito’s CSR vision to customers.

5.5.6 Funding Diversification

Customers suggest innovative funding mechanisms, such as:

- Micro-donation options at checkout.
- Crowdfunding campaigns for specific initiatives.
- Partnering with local businesses for co-funded community projects.

5.6 Conclusion

This extended discussion highlights that Exito’s CSR has strong emotional resonance with both employees and customers, particularly around food programs. However, communication gaps, limited participatory design, and unclear long-term vision weaken the transformative potential of its CSR efforts. By embedding the Economy of Love into both strategy and storytelling and by leveraging employees and customers as co-creators, Exito can transform its CSR into a genuine vehicle for social - and economic harmony in Bogotá.

6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This study examined the intersection between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and stakeholder engagement within the context of Exito's operations in Bogotá. By focusing on two key stakeholder groups - customers and employees - the research aimed to uncover how CSR initiatives are perceived, experienced, and shaped by those most directly affected. Through qualitative interviews with ten customers and four employees, this research explored how Exito's CSR efforts align with both stakeholder group expectations and the broader cultural and economic realities of Bogotá.

This concluding chapter synthesises the key findings from Chapters 4 and 5, highlighting significant insights, addressing the study's contributions and limitations, and proposing a future agenda for harmonious CSR innovation at Exito and beyond.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

6.2.1 Employees: Internal Stakeholders in a Caring Economy

The conducted Interviews with employees revealed a deep emotional connection between Exito's CSR efforts and their personal sense of purpose at work. Employees viewed Exito's CSR not as a corporate obligation but as a genuine extension of the company's values - particularly care, fairness, and respect. Many employees saw their daily work as contributing directly to harmony and social cohesion within Bogotá.

However, the research also highlights a disconnect between strategic CSR planning at senior management levels and operational-level engagement. Both employees and customers called for more participatory processes - what could be termed a "bottom-up CSR strategy." This aligns with broader literature (Duarte, 2010; Jamali, 2007), which emphasises that authentic CSR in developing countries requires direct input from community members and frontline employees who have intimate knowledge of local needs.

The research further reinforces the relevance of cultural context, as outlined by Hofstede Insights (2024), in shaping stakeholder expectations. In a collectivist culture such as Colombia's, CSR is not seen as mere philanthropy but as an essential corporate responsibility woven into daily business practices. This reinforces the importance of two-way communication and visible, accessible initiatives. However, employees also voiced structural frustrations, particularly regarding top-down CSR planning. They felt excluded from decision-making processes and

emphasised that their frontline knowledge of customer needs is underutilised when designing CSR projects. This disconnect between top management and frontline reality weakens internal alignment and reduces employee motivation to fully champion CSR initiatives.

The key message is that employees want to be more than implementers; they want to be co-creators of CSR strategy.

6.2.2 Customers: External Stakeholders Seeking Tangible, Relevant Impact

While most customers appreciated Exito's community support programs - especially around food security - they saw CSR as something done for them, not with them. This perception of passive recipient status limits their sense of engagement and weakens their emotional connection to Exito's ethical identity.

Applying the Economy of Love framework, the research underscores the importance of care, fairness, and respect as pillars of effective CSR. Customers see Exito as a caring corporate citizen who actively contributes to Bogotá's social fabric. Employees, similarly, experience Exito's CSR work as a reflection of shared values, enhancing organisational pride and harmony. Moreover, customers expressed low awareness of environmental initiatives, limited understanding of the broader CSR strategy, and some suspicion of CSR's authenticity, perceiving it as partly a marketing exercise. This indicates that CSR communication gaps and branding overreach can erode customer trust, even when initiatives themselves are valued.

The key message can be seen as customers appreciate practical benefits like food aid, but want more voice in shaping CSR and more transparency about impact and intentions.

6.2.3 Common Ground: Trust and Authenticity Through Participation

Despite their differing vantage points, both employees and customers highlighted trust, authenticity, and participation as essential to Exito's CSR legitimacy. Both groups wanted more two-way communication, with employees acting as community connectors and customers having a say in defining priorities. This shared desire for co-creation aligns strongly with the Economy of Love framework, which calls for relational, participatory, and values-driven economic practices (Cadman, 2020). In other words, both customers and employees crave a CSR system that listens as much as it speaks, shares power, and grounds corporate care in lived community realities.

6.3 Contributions to Academic and Practical Debates

6.3.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes a theoretical contribution by linking stakeholder theory, CSR communication, and the Economy of Love into a unified analytical lens. Traditional CSR frameworks often treat stakeholders as either internal implementers (employees) or external beneficiaries (customers), but this research challenges such segmentation. Instead, both groups are positioned as co-creators and moral agents within the CSR ecosystem.

This participatory approach advances relational CSR theory (Maessen, 2007), emphasising ethical dialogue, mutual accountability, and shared power between firms and their communities. By incorporating the Economy of Love, the research also brings in cultural and emotional dimensions, demonstrating that in a context like Bogotá, CSR is not just a matter of metrics and impact reports but also of emotional connection, cultural resonance, and community healing, showing the approach towards social-, environmental- and economic harmony.

6.3.2 Practical Contributions

For Exito, the findings offer practical insights into how CSR can evolve from corporate giving to community partnership. The key lessons include:

- Empowering employees to become CSR ambassadors and community advocates.
- Shifting CSR messaging from corporate boasts to shared storytelling.
- Creating mechanisms for customer participation - from voting on projects to co-designing initiatives.
- Balancing short-term relief (food aid) with long-term structural solutions (education, local sourcing, micro-entrepreneurship support).

These recommendations offer Exito a roadmap to transition from CSR as corporate charity to CSR as social solidarity, fostering deeper brand loyalty and employee engagement in the process.

6.4 Reflections on Methodology

6.4.1 Value of Qualitative Approaches

The use of semi-structured interviews proved highly effective in capturing the nuanced, emotional, and contextual dimensions of stakeholder perceptions. Both employees and customers spoke not just about program details, but about how CSR makes them feel, a layer of insight often missed in survey-based CSR research.

6.4.2 Limitations

The limitations were the sample size and the social desirability bias.

While fourteen interviews (ten customers and four employees) offer rich qualitative data, they cannot claim to fully represent Mercado Exito's vast customer base or employee population.

Both interview groups may have overstated their positive feelings toward Exito due to the interviewer's presence and the implicit association with the company. Therefore, further research is needed to confirm or refute the results of this study. It would also be beneficial to undertake additional related research in other developing countries to compare the results and to receive more insights into how CSR promotes the practical application of Harmony.

6.5 Towards a Participatory CSR Model for Exito

This research underscores the strategic value of participatory CSR - not just for ethical legitimacy - but for business sustainability. In the long term, Exito's success will depend on its ability to:

- Embed CSR into everyday business operations (pricing, product selection, local sourcing).
- Treat employees and customers as knowledge partners rather than passive recipients.
- Measure success not just by CSR spend, but by social return on investment - how much community resilience, trust, and empowerment are generated.
- Communicate CSR through everyday touchpoints (store signage, employee conversations, packaging), not just corporate reports.

6.6 Final Reflections

CSR, in the context of Bogotá's social and economic landscape, cannot be a corporate veneer applied to an otherwise profit-driven operation. For Exito, authentic CSR requires a cultural shift - from viewing itself as a retailer who helps to a neighbour who cares. This cultural shift is not merely about corporate image; it's about earning the moral license to operate within a community that expects its economic anchors to also be ethical anchors.

Employees and customers alike expressed a desire for Exito to become a more human, listening, and learning organisation - one that shares power and shares stories, one that understands that care is not a project but a relationship.

This conclusion, rooted in authentic voices, offers a profound challenge to Exito's leadership: CSR is not about looking good. It's about being good - together.

The research further reinforces the relevance of cultural context, as outlined by Hofstede Insights (2024), in shaping stakeholder expectations. In a collectivist culture such as Colombia's, CSR is not seen as mere philanthropy but as an essential corporate responsibility woven into daily business practices. This reinforces the importance of two-way communication and visible, accessible initiatives.

6.7 Final Recommendations

To close, the research outcome recommends that Mercado Exito:

1. Create a biannual CSR assembly where customers and employees co-design future initiatives.
2. Launch a grassroots CSR communication strategy using employee ambassadors as primary messengers.
3. Establish a public CSR impact dashboard showing both financial inputs and social outcomes.
4. Formalize employee CSR innovation teams, empowering frontline staff to propose and lead projects.
5. Transition from top-down charity to bottom-up empowerment, shifting focus from giving to enabling.

To enhance the impact and authenticity of its CSR efforts, Exito should further consider the following aspects:

1. Adopt a participatory CSR model that actively engages employees and customers in agenda-setting.
2. Develop a robust internal communication strategy to ensure all employees are aware of current CSR projects and their intended impacts.
3. Increase the use of digital platforms and social media to enhance transparency and visibility, responding to customer calls for more direct communication.
4. Develop impact assessments that clearly measure the success of initiatives and share these results with both internal and external stakeholders.
5. Build partnerships with local NGOs, community leaders, and other businesses to enhance the scale and impact of CSR efforts, leveraging collective action to address Bogotá's complex challenges.

6.8 Closing Thought

In a city like Bogotá, where every economic action has profound social consequences, companies like Mercado Exito are not just economic actors. They are moral citizens. The future of CSR at Exito will be defined not by how much it gives but by how deeply it listens, how bravely it shares power, and how humbly it walks alongside the communities it serves. Overall, this study demonstrates that both customers and employees appreciate Exito's CSR work and largely aligns with the Economy of Love framework. However, to fully realise the potential of CSR as a driver of shared value, Exito must evolve from a primarily top-down model to a more collaborative and transparent approach. By doing so, Exito can strengthen its role as a responsible corporate citizen and further contribute to Bogotá's social and economic development and support the alignment of Harmony not just between stakeholders and Exito but even more between humanity and the planet, needed to guarantee a sustainable future.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1



Master's Degrees Dissertation

Declaration Form.

1. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.
2. This dissertation is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of : MA Harmony and Sustainability: Theory and Practice
3. This dissertation is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. A reference list is appended.
4. Please Choose one of the following statements
 - a. I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment. I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work. I confirm I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.
5. I hereby give consent for my dissertation, if accepted, to be available for photocopying, inter- library loan, and for deposit in the University's digital repository

Signed (candidate).....

Date.....25.03.2025.....

Supervisor's Declaration.

I am satisfied that this work is the result of the student's own efforts.

Signed (Supervisor).....

Date.....