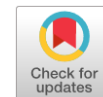


■ ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

Corporate Social Responsibility and Transition to Parenthood: Responsible Purchasing and Implications for Retail Performance



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Abstract

Purpose: Despite growing research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) in retail and an increasing body of work on consumer behaviour during major life transitions, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how the transition to parenthood shapes parents' perceptions of CSR and responsible purchasing decisions in the baby and children's products segment. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to determine how the transition to parenthood influences parents' perceptions of the CSR of manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products, and to analyse the existence of a gap between parents' environmental awareness and their actual purchasing behaviour. **Design/Methodology:** The research was conducted using a qualitative approach based on semi-structured in-depth interviews on a convenient sample of 30 current and prospective first-time parents who are in the transitional life phase and was analyzed by thematic analysis. **Findings:** The transition to parenthood leads to change in priorities, increased perceived risk, and more intensive information seeking before purchasing. Product safety and quality are dominant purchase motives and are perceived as the primary aspect of social responsibility towards consumers, while environmental responsibility plays a secondary but significant role. Parents rely heavily on recommendations from close friends and experts, while negative experiences from online sources have a stronger influence on purchasing behaviour decisions than positive recommendations. **Practical Implications:** The results suggest that manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products should prioritize communicating product safety and quality as the foundation of social responsibility, with transparent and credible information at the point of sale, which may contribute to stronger consumer trust and improved retail performance. **Originality/Value:** The study contributes to the existing literature by integrating CSR and life-transition perspectives, specifically the transition to parenthood, and by identifying

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how perceived product safety, trust, and financial constraints interact in shaping responsible purchasing decisions among first-time parents. By highlighting the specific motives, perceptions, and constraints associated with purchasing products for babies and children, the study provides actionable insights for manufacturers and retailers seeking to strengthen responsible consumption practices and improve retail performance.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; transition to parenthood; responsible purchasing; retail performance; baby products; qualitative research

JEL codes: M14, M31, L81

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Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics statement: This study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research. Participation was voluntary, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their inclusion in the study. The data were collected anonymously, no personally identifiable information was recorded, and all data were stored securely and used exclusively for research purposes, in compliance with applicable data protection regulations.

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1. Introduction

The transition to parenthood is one of the most significant life experiences for adults, marked by psychological, social, and identity changes that strongly influence behavior, including consumer habits (Nelson et al., 2014; Moschis, 2007). Taking on the parental role often leads to substantial shifts in priorities, values, and decision-making, with purchases for babies and toddlers carrying high perceived risk (Haws et al., 2014; Mitchell, 1999). In this context, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an important factor shaping the purchasing behavior of new parents, as it signals product safety, ethics, and environmental sustainability (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Peloza & Shang, 2011).

CSR in retail involves integrating economic, ethical, and environmental considerations into business activities and stakeholder relationships (Carroll, 1979, 1991; Elkington, 1997), making companies responsible not only for financial results but also for employees, consumers, suppliers, the local community, and the environment (Freeman, 1984; Öberseder et al., 2011). In the children's product segment, corporate responsibility is most prominently perceived through product safety and quality, while environmental aspects, though important, are secondary. At the same time, parents face the challenge of affording socially responsible products, leading to a gap between their environmental and moral beliefs and their actual purchasing behavior (Burningham et al., 2014; AbiGhannam & Atkinson, 2016).

Although CSR has been extensively examined in retail and consumer behavior literature, little attention has been given to how CSR perceptions change during major life transitions, particularly the transition to parenthood. Existing studies primarily focus on general consumer responses to CSR or on sustainability-related consumption during pregnancy and early parenthood, but do not sufficiently address how these perspectives intersect in specific purchasing contexts characterized by heightened perceived risk. This gap is especially relevant in the baby and children's products segment, where purchasing decisions are highly consequential, emotionally charged, and closely tied to safety, trust, and ethical expectations.

For conceptual clarity, CSR perception in this study refers to parents' evaluation of retailers' and manufacturers' social, ethical, and environmental practices; responsible purchasing refers to behavioral intentions and purchasing decisions aligned with these evaluations; and retail performance refers to expected relational and behavioral outcomes such as trust, loyalty, positive word of mouth, and repurchase intention.

By focusing on first-time parents in this transitional life stage, this study extends prior literature by examining how CSR perceptions translate into responsible purchasing intentions and how these processes may influence retail performance. In particular, it explores the gap between parents' environmental awareness and their ability or willingness to implement these values in actual purchases. The fundamental research questions are:

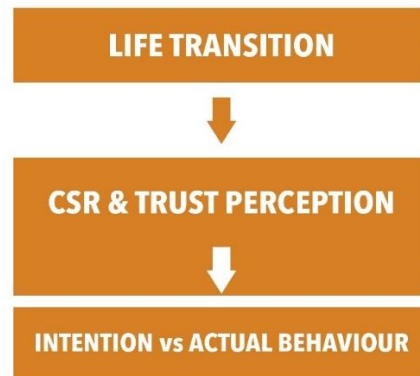
- RQ1: How does the transition to parenthood influence consumer priorities and purchasing behavior in the baby and children's products segment?
- RQ2: How do perceptions of corporate social responsibility influence new parents' purchasing decisions and trust in manufacturers and retailers?
- RQ3: Which barriers hinder the alignment between environmental values and actual purchasing behavior among new parents, and what implications do these barriers have for retail performance?

The conceptual framework connects perceptions of corporate social responsibility, responsible purchasing decisions, and the transition to parenthood, as shown in Figure 1. It highlights the key factors that shape parents' purchasing behavior in the baby and children's products segment and provides the basis for the empirical analysis.

The study employed qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews to provide a detailed and deeper understanding of respondents' experiences and attitudes. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with an abductive approach, enabling the identification of key patterns and the development of new theoretical insights.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of CSR Perceptions and Responsible Purchasing During the Transition To Parenthood



Note. Created by the authors.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it presents an overview of the relevant literature on CSR in retail and its connection to the transition to parenthood. Next, it describes the research methodology based on semi-structured in-depth interviews, analyzes the results, and discusses the findings. The paper concludes by integrating theoretical and empirical knowledge and offering practical implications for manufacturers and retailers of children's products, aiming to strengthen responsible purchasing and improve retail performance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Genesis of CSR in Retail

CSR is a key concept in modern management and marketing, referring to the voluntary integration of social, ethical, and environmental considerations into business activities and stakeholder relations. One of the most cited definitions of CSR is by Carroll (1979, 1991), who identifies four dimensions: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibility. This model remains foundational for understanding social responsibility across industries. Dahlsrud (2008) expanded Carroll's definition by proposing five dimensions: economic, societal, stakeholder, environmental, and voluntariness.

The modern understanding of CSR assumes that companies, in addition to economic responsibility, also have moral responsibilities toward the societies in which they operate. While rooted in economic responsibility, current market conditions require that ethical and discretionary responsibilities serve as key differentiators. The literature often links the concept to the Triple Bottom Line theory, popularized by Elkington (1997). According to this approach, a company's success is measured not only by financial results but also by the three "Ps": Profit, People, and Planet. In retail, this model means balancing sales growth, fair treatment of employees, and minimizing negative environmental impact (Elkington, 1998). Later authors further emphasize the strategic role of CSR, arguing that socially responsible business practices are not only morally required but also provide a competitive advantage (Porter & Kramer, 2006). For example, reducing packaging is both environmentally responsible and lowers logistics costs, benefiting both the company and the environment. In this context, CSR is seen as a mechanism for creating shared value for both the company and society, with consumers playing an increasingly important role in evaluating and rewarding socially responsible organizations.

The retail sector plays a unique role in implementing CSR because of its direct contact with end consumers. CSR in retail includes responsible sourcing, product safety, ethical working conditions in the supply chain, reducing environmental impact, and responsible

communication with consumers (Elg & Hultman, 2016). The literature describes retail as one of the most dynamic industries, with its "gatekeeper" position enabling it to influence the entire supply chain (Dawson, 2004). Retailers' social responsibility extends beyond in-store activities to ethical sourcing and requiring suppliers to respect human rights and environmental standards (Jones & Comfort, 2019).

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), is central to theoretical analysis. This theory holds that a company is responsible to all groups that can influence its goals or are affected by them. In retail, key stakeholders include customers, employees, suppliers, and the community. Responsibility to customers involves product safety and privacy protection (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004); responsibility to employees focuses on quality of work life and equal opportunities (Wood, 1991); responsibility to suppliers is reflected in ethical cooperation and fair trade principles (Amaeshi et al., 2008); and responsibility to the community is demonstrated through philanthropy and reducing local environmental impact (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

Research in retail shows that consumers' perceptions of socially responsible behavior by retailers positively affect trust and "consumer civic behavior," such as positive word-of-mouth and long-term loyalty. In retail, CSR is often perceived more directly than in other sectors because it is visible through practices like environmentally friendly packaging, certified products, and transparent information. Research confirms that consumers view CSR activities as signals of a company's ethics and reliability, directly influencing their attitudes toward the brand and purchase intentions (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Du et al., 2007). This relationship is especially strong in industries related to the health, safety, and well-being of vulnerable groups, such as children. Numerous empirical studies confirm a positive relationship between the perception of CSR and consumer behavior. A meta-analysis by Peloza and Shang (2011) shows that CSR activities strongly impact brand trust, loyalty, and willingness to purchase, particularly when perceived as authentic and aligned with the company's core business.

Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) note that the impact of CSR on consumers depends on personal relevance and values. Consumers who perceive a strong alignment between their own moral beliefs and a company's CSR activities show higher brand identification and are more likely to purchase. This identification is especially strong among consumers in life stages with increased responsibility, such as parenthood. Additionally, Du et al. (2007) highlight trust as a key mediator between CSR and consumer behavior. Transparently communicated and consistently implemented CSR activities enhance brand credibility and reduce perceived risk in purchase decisions.

2.2. CSR in the Context of Parenthood

Retailing baby and children's products is a niche where safety, quality, and ethical standards are paramount. Parents often view purchasing children's products as a high-risk decision, prompting them to seek additional signals of trustworthiness, such as the company's CSR activities (Soucie et al., 2024). Empirical research indicates that parents are more sensitive to issues of sustainability, ethical production, and social responsibility regarding children's products than other consumer goods (Paiker et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2002). In this context, CSR serves not only as a marketing tool but also reduces perceived risk and enhances the moral correctness of the purchase.

The transition to parenthood is one of the most significant life changes in adulthood, marked by simultaneous psychological, social, and identity transformations. Entering the parenting role requires adjusting to new responsibilities, redefining personal values, and changing priorities, which directly affects decision-making patterns, including consumer behavior (Nelson et al., 2014). This period is characterized by increased concern for the health, safety, and future of the child, which also influences purchasing patterns (John, 1999).

Theoretically, the transition to parenthood is often viewed through the lens of consumer life cycle theory, which posits that consumers' needs, preferences, and behaviors change in response to key life events, such as marriage, childbirth, or changes in employment (Moschis, 2007). Childbirth marks the beginning of a new life cycle phase when parents become primary decision-makers for another person, increasing their sense of responsibility and perceived risk in purchasing.

Empirical research shows that parents, especially in the early stages of parenthood, express heightened concern for the health, safety, and long-term well-being of their children (Haws et al., 2014). This increased sensitivity leads to a greater tendency to seek information, compare products, and rely on external signals of quality and reliability, including certifications, brand reputation, and corporate social responsibility. The transition to parenthood also involves a change in identity, as personal identity is complemented or redefined by parental identity. This transformation is often associated with strengthened prosocial and altruistic values, including greater concern for society and the environment (White et al., 2019). Parents increasingly view their consumer decisions as morally significant, connecting them to the impact on their child's future and the wider community. In this context, consumption becomes a moral choice, with products and brands that communicate concern for children's safety, ethical production, and sustainability being preferred. A company's CSR activities serve as symbolic indicators of values with which parents can identify, strengthening the emotional connection between parent-consumers and the brand (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

One of the key characteristics of consumer behavior during the transition to parenthood is increased perceived risk, especially when purchasing products for babies and young children. This perceived risk includes functional, health, social, and moral aspects, and parents often lack prior experience with children's products, which further increases uncertainty (Mitchell, 1999). The transition to parenthood is a significant turning point for many consumers, with profound psychological, physical, social, and financial implications for new parents. Faced with responsibility for another human being, future parents experience uncertainty and the need to build a new identity. Expecting a first child is often accompanied by challenges. Expectant mothers and fathers are under pressure to make the right decisions in unfamiliar situations and to purchase products they have never used, while also wanting to belong to certain social groups, making many prone to anxiety (Martens et al., 2004). In these circumstances, parents rely on heuristics and trust signals to simplify decision-making. Corporate social responsibility, including transparent communication, safety certifications, environmentally friendly production, and social initiatives aimed at children and families, can significantly reduce perceived risk and increase parents' sense of control (Peloza & Shang, 2011). Research shows that in the early stages of parenthood, parents often rely on recommendations and prefer brands that demonstrate social responsibility and concern for their children's well-being (Haws et al., 2014). In this context, CSR becomes an important heuristic signal that facilitates decision-making under uncertainty and emotional stress.

During the transition to parenthood, the importance of social information sources also increases. Parents rely more on recommendations from other parents, experts such as pediatricians and midwives, and online communities and social networks. In this context, a company's reputation for social responsibility can play a crucial role in shaping positive word-of-mouth and online reputation. Common ways of coping with the changes and challenges that accompany pregnancy and expecting a first child include shopping (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; VOICE Group, 2010) and rituals (Afflerback et al., 2014). In acquiring a new parental role, purchased goods serve as an extension of the consumer in creating a new identity (Belk et al., 1989). By purchasing necessary baby items, future parents gradually prepare for their new role, reducing insecurities associated with the change in identity. Often, shopping as a medium of transition occurs before the child's birth, during pregnancy or the expecting phase (VOICE Group, 2010). The most common rituals related to the transition to parenthood are nesting and gift-giving, which are also most frequently represented in scientific research

(Sevin & Ladwein, 2008; Afflerback et al., 2014). Nesting and gift-giving aim to achieve three goals: to suppress fear of the unknown and attempt to control the transition process, to align decisions with the child's gender, and to harmonize the needs of the mother and child (Afflerback et al., 2014).

The transition to parenthood brings changes in purchasing behavior. Parents' shopping habits shift, as do the people involved in purchasing decisions (Burningham et al., 2014). These changes are reflected in parents' financial situations and their awareness of ecological and social issues. Burningham et al. (2014) identify two types of consumer habits: good and bad. Good consumer habits involve planned purchases made according to a pre-made list within a set budget, while bad consumer habits involve excessive and disorganized purchases. Research shows that the transition to parenthood is marked by a shift from bad to good consumer habits (Burningham et al., 2014). With new responsibility for another person, parents strive to be as responsible as possible and buy only necessary products. This is especially true for middle-income mothers aged 25 to 48. Other money-saving purchasing strategies mentioned in the literature include buying multifunctional products and making decisions based on utility and price (Buckingham & Kehily, 2014).

Many prospective parents use the transition to parenthood as an opportunity to change their consumption habits toward more sustainable and conscious choices (Burningham & Venn, 2025). Over time, consumers have shifted their attitudes and begun to prefer green products over conventional alternatives. Existing literature has examined the effects of various socioeconomic and individual characteristics on green purchasing, showing that education, social status, and other factors may encourage virtuous behaviors, but has paid little attention to parenthood and the presence of children (Migheli, 2021). The sense of responsibility for another person prompts future parents to realize they are no longer the priority, fostering selflessness and encouraging more moral thinking, decision-making, shopping, and consumption (Verplanken, 2006; Sevón, 2007; Ray, 2011). Many women adopt sustainable practices in their lifestyles and shopping habits during pregnancy. They abandon negative hedonistic habits, stop smoking and drinking alcohol, take greater care with their diets, and buy organic products (Sevin & Ladwein, 2008). They also want the best for their child, as shown by the increase in sales of organic baby and child food (LeBeaux et al., 2009). These changes in purchasing behavior are especially visible among young parents and those with higher levels of education (Schäfer et al., 2010). Environmental and social awareness intensifies after childbirth. Common concerns for the environment are reflected in actions such as controlling water consumption, recycling, joining local associations, and using public transport (Heath et al., 2016). Some parents choose cloth over disposable diapers (Uzzell & Leach, 2003), buy organically produced foods, and avoid plastic products containing BPA (Thompson et al., 2011). Similarly, awareness of nutrition quality has become increasingly important in recent years, as seen in the rising sales and consumption of organic products (Hansmann et al., 2020), especially in the baby and children's food segment. Today's parents are more concerned with safety and health than previous generations and consider it their responsibility to raise a healthy child and protect them from harmful additives and chemicals (Cairns et al., 2013).

On one hand, the transition phase encourages sustainability; on the other, some parents must compromise between a sustainable lifestyle and caring for their child. They are often influenced by financial circumstances, as organic products are generally more expensive (Burningham et al., 2014), and by the convenience of disposable products such as diapers, paper towels, and wet wipes. Additionally, because public transport often fails to meet the needs of parents with young children, they are compelled to use their own cars, which negatively impacts the environment (Thompson et al., 2011). Parents also experience stress if they cannot afford organic and ethical products for their children (AbiGhannam & Atkinson, 2016),

which can be counterproductive and lead them to share negative experiences with other parents, potentially resulting in a boycott. Thompson and Glaser (2001) note that organic baby and child food is a highly price-sensitive category, suggesting significant market potential if prices are reduced even slightly.

Therefore, manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products should incorporate the concerns, needs, and demands of both future and current parents into their socially responsible activities, aligning the company's mission and vision with consumers' lifestyles (Öberseder et al., 2011). New parents are often overwhelmed by the large amount of information and advice they receive. As they encounter new situations daily, they tend to focus on their child's current state and are unable to plan far ahead for the child's development (Thompson et al., 2011). Due to the excessive influx of new information, financial obligations, and health concerns, manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products are advised to avoid using the term "sustainability" in their communication with parents. Instead, they should emphasize the advantages and benefits of their products, such as organization, cost reduction, and well-being (Burningham et al., 2014). The key to successful socially responsible activities is the degree of alignment between the company's core values and its socially responsible initiatives. Only CSR initiatives consistent with company values ensure the credibility of a company's CSR. Moreover, positive CSR initiatives that are not aligned with the company's core business, although beneficial to society, can negatively affect consumer perception and trust (Handelman & Arnold, 1999). In other words, consumers will recognize and penalize socially responsible activities that do not reflect the company's values. Research shows that CSR activities increase the likelihood of positive word-of-mouth and recommendations, further strengthening their indirect influence on parent-consumer decisions (Du et al., 2007). This positions CSR not only as a signal of trust but also as a socially validated choice criterion.

While previous studies consistently report a positive association between CSR and consumer trust, findings are less conclusive regarding how consumers prioritize different CSR dimensions when purchasing high-involvement products. In particular, studies differ on whether environmental responsibility independently drives purchasing decisions or primarily reinforces perceptions of product quality and trustworthiness. This unresolved distinction is especially relevant for baby and children's products, where safety concerns may outweigh broader sustainability considerations. Integrating these theoretical and empirical insights, it can be concluded that the transition to parenthood increases consumers' sensitivity to socially responsible business practices. Increased responsibility, identity changes, and perceived risk make parents more inclined toward brands and retailers that transparently and consistently implement CSR activities, especially in areas related to child safety, health, and sustainability. The perception of socially responsible business practices strengthens trust in the brand, reduces perceived risk, and increases parents' moral satisfaction when shopping. Consumer behavior models suggest that CSR in this context operates through mediators such as trust, brand identification, and perceived product safety, which ultimately increase purchase intention and loyalty (Du et al., 2007; Pelozo & Shang, 2011). This provides a strong theoretical justification for investigating the impact of CSR on purchasing decisions for babies and children, taking into account the specificities of the transition to parenthood.

3. Method and Instrument

The research was conducted using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a convenience sample of 30 participants. The sample included expectant mothers and fathers expecting their first child within the next six months, as well as first-time parents whose child was born within the past twelve months. Limiting the sample to the pregnancy period and the age of the first-born child ensured that all participants were in the transitional life stage. Many authors argue that convenience sampling in purpose-driven research is particularly suitable for

qualitative interviews, as the sample size is typically insufficient to achieve statistical significance. Therefore, the goal of this research is not broad representativeness, but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences through rich and detailed insights (Small, 2009).

The interview protocol included 14 questions and a series of sub-questions. Respondents were first given the opportunity to provide their own answers, followed by more detailed, guided follow-up questions and further discussion. The structure of the interview prompts was designed according to the recommendations of Knott et al. (2022), who state that a smaller number of broad topics, usually three to five, is appropriate for semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with each thematic group of questions forming the basis of the conversation between the researcher and the respondents. The questions were thematically divided into four groups. The first group asked respondents to briefly introduce themselves and describe their relationships with friends and family. The purpose of these questions was to help respondents relax and create a comfortable, friendly environment that would encourage them to respond without shame, fear, or hesitation. The second group of questions focused on the purchase of baby and children's products. Respondents were presented with specific product categories and asked whether they had purchased them, where they purchased them, and why. They were also asked how they obtain information about products before purchasing and how their experience of buying products for babies and children compares to buying for themselves. These questions aimed to identify which factors motivate respondents to purchase specific baby products and which factors serve as limitations. The questions also sought to determine how expected or actual parenthood influences their purchasing processes and whether their priorities in making purchasing decisions have changed. This group of questions also allowed for the assessment of whether respondents consider elements of social responsibility in their purchasing decisions, without asking them directly. The third group of questions directly addressed the social responsibility of manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products. Social responsibility is considered a complex construct comprising responsibility toward consumers, employees, suppliers, the local community, society, the environment, and shareholders (Öberseder et al., 2014). Figure 2 served as the conceptual basis for both the interview design and the subsequent coding framework. In the interview phase, the framework guided the development of semi-structured interview questions by identifying key dimensions relevant to the transition to parenthood and perceptions of corporate social responsibility in the context of baby and children's products. Specifically, the interview questions focused on participants' purchasing motives, perceptions of product safety and quality, environmental responsibility, trust in manufacturers and retailers, and perceived financial constraints. During data analysis, the same conceptual dimensions informed the initial coding structure and supported the identification of broader themes and subthemes through iterative comparison of interview transcripts. While the framework provided the initial analytical direction, the coding process remained open to emerging insights from the data, allowing inductive refinement of themes when participants introduced perspectives not fully anticipated by the conceptual model.

Responsibility toward consumers includes fair pricing, clear and accurate product labeling, and providing safe, high-quality products. Responsibility toward employees covers working conditions, non-discrimination, and employee compensation. Responsibility toward the environment involves reducing energy consumption, waste, and emissions of harmful substances and gases. Responsibility toward suppliers includes fair terms and conditions of cooperation, supplier selection, and auditing operations. Responsibility toward the local community addresses economic issues such as creating jobs for local residents, engaging local suppliers, and contributing to the region's economic development. Responsibility toward shareholders includes publishing financial and non-financial reports, focusing on sustainable

development, and making responsible investments. Responsibility toward society as a whole includes donations to social activities, employing people with disabilities, and supporting social projects. The fourth group of questions addressed the respondents' own social responsibility, asking whether they participate in humanitarian actions and how they care for the environment. The purpose of these questions was to gain insight into the general behavior and attitudes of the respondents and to determine whether these are connected to their understanding of the social responsibility of manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products.

Figure 2

Social Responsibility is the Responsibility of Companies or their Impact on Society



Note. Created by the authors.

A total of 30 interviews were conducted, which is considered a large sample given that a homogeneous group of respondents was qualitatively investigated. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The literature states that a sample size of 12 to 20 respondents within the respondent category is sufficient to achieve saturation, defined as the point at which new interviews confirm the findings of previous interviews and do not yield new or unexpected results (Small, 2009).

Thematic analysis was used to discuss the results. Along with discourse analysis, it is one of the most commonly used methods for studying interviews in the social sciences and is defined as a method for developing, examining, and interpreting patterns in data using codes to develop themes (Knott et al., 2022). The process of analyzing semi-structured interviews is considered generative rather than extractive. The results are not simply found in the interview transcripts waiting to be synthesized; instead, researchers generate new insights by applying analytical approaches to the transcripts.

The deductive approach develops an analytical framework, theoretical approach, and hypotheses before the research and then applies them to the collected data. The inductive approach develops an analytical framework and theoretical approach based on the collected data. Thematic analysis combines inductive and deductive logic, creating an abductive approach that generates new ideas or theories to explain the collected data (Knott et al., 2022). In the abductive approach, researchers use creative thinking and data interpretation to construct new theories or concepts that explain the complexity of the phenomena they study. This involves looking for cause-and-effect relationships between data and theories, as well as

generating new hypotheses for further exploration. In other words, the abductive approach emphasizes generating new ideas or theories based on the analysis of specific data, helping researchers better understand complex phenomena in the real world. Recent research increasingly recognizes the abductive approach as a more realistic and desirable alternative to traditional inductive and deductive approaches. For example, researchers may begin their investigations with an adopted theoretical or initial analytical framework and refine it during the analysis process. The result is an iterative process of developing codes, subthemes, and themes.

The coding process is the most demanding stage of thematic data analysis. Coding involves organizing elements into a systematic order, incorporating them into a classification system, and categorizing them. Coding occurs when codes are applied and reapplied to qualitative data. This process enables separating, grouping, regrouping, and reconnecting data to consolidate meaning and explanation (Grbich, 2007). Bernard (2006) states that analysis is the search for patterns in the data and ideas that help explain why those patterns exist. Coding is a method that facilitates organizing and grouping similarly coded data into categories because they share a feature – the beginning of a pattern.

Code development and the coding process for this thematic analysis were based on The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers (Saldaña, 2016). The process began with the application of descriptive labels and summarization of interview content. In subsequent steps, various types of codes were generated, enabling the transition from data description to data interpretation. Through an iterative code refinement process, the goal was to produce a set of discrete, conceptually distinct, and non-overlapping codes. Applying the same codes throughout the data set made it possible to capture common elements in the interviews. This refinement process involved recoding and reorganizing how and where codes were applied in the data set. Practical code development began with the first interview data. The same codes were used in the second interview, with the set expanded by new codes identified in the second interview. An expanded set of codes was sought in the third interview, and so on. At a certain stage, some codes were found to overlap, prompting a reorganization of code application. This returned the coding process to the starting point, and each subsequent interview was analyzed according to the newly modified set of codes. The coding process continued until the need to merge or modify codes arose, prompting further reorganization. The process proceeded in iterations until the last interview was analyzed according to the most recent organization of code application.

In developing the codes for our thematic analysis, we followed Creswell's (2007) recommendations regarding the number of codes and themes. Creswell (2007) suggests initially developing 30 to 40 preliminary codes, which are then reduced to about 20, and ultimately synthesized into five to seven topics that form the basis for establishing the theory or insight. In our analysis, the 34 initial codes were reduced to 25, which were synthesized into eight categories and four themes (see Appendix).

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the research, several procedures were applied throughout the process. First, the coding process was iterative and involved repeated comparison between interview transcripts, codes, and emerging themes. The first author performed the initial coding, which was independently reviewed by the second co-author. The coding structure and emerging thematic categories were then discussed among the authors until agreement was reached on code interpretation and thematic structure. Second, analytical decisions and refinements of codes and categories were documented throughout the process to maintain transparency and consistency during theme development. Third, interpretation of the findings was continuously discussed among the authors to challenge assumptions, minimize interpretive bias, and enhance reflexivity. Finally, theoretical saturation was used as an additional criterion for concluding data collection, as no substantially new themes emerged in

the later stages of the interviews. Collectively, these procedures contributed to the credibility, consistency, and trustworthiness of the research findings.

4. Results

The sample included 30 respondents (13 male and 17 female) with an average age of approximately 30 years. Most participants had higher education qualifications, while about one third had completed secondary education. The majority were already parents ($n = 23$), while seven respondents were expecting their first child. Most participants were married and lived with their partners and children in households of two or three members. Net monthly household income ranged from EUR 500 to EUR 3,900, with an average of EUR 1,700. The sample was predominantly urban ($n = 24$), with only six respondents living in rural areas. Participants from rural areas were, on average, slightly younger and reported lower levels of education and household income compared with urban respondents.

Thematic analysis identified four themes that shape the purchasing process for baby and children's products during the transition to parenthood, emphasizing the perception of social responsibility from the perspective of new parents. These include the factors influencing the purchasing process of new parents, the connection between social responsibility and consumer decisions, and the perceived social responsibility or irresponsibility of manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products.

An analysis of the factors influencing the purchasing process of parents of first-born children established that product safety and quality, as elements of social responsibility toward consumers, rank highly as motives for purchasing products for babies and children. In contrast, ecological awareness, as an element of social responsibility toward the environment, ranks somewhat lower as a motive for these purchases.

The purchasing decisions of current and future parents of first-born children are primarily shaped by recommendations from close family members and friends (Loudon et al., 2016), as well as advice from experts such as pediatricians and pharmacists. Fathers additionally rely on recommendations from drugstore salespeople. Most purchasing decisions are made by mothers, who, in addition to direct sources of information, also consider the experiences of other parents from online forums and social networks. However, online sources tend to have a more pronounced negative than positive effect, as negative experiences and recommendations from strangers are more likely to deter purchases than positive encouragement. As one interviewee explained: "One negative review affects me more than ten positive ones because I do not want to take risks with products for my child." A similar concern was expressed by another participant: "Before buying anything new, especially cosmetics or food, I first check what other parents experienced because I feel more secure when I know someone has already tried it." This indicates that perceived transparency and access to credible information directly influence responsible purchasing intentions.

Product brand and perceived quality are the next most important motives, with parents showing a high level of caution and a tendency to choose well-known brands that inspire trust, often due to nostalgia for products used in their own childhood. As one participant stated: "I usually choose brands I already know and trust because with a baby I do not want to experiment too much."

Environmental awareness and product safety rank third among the motives and are particularly important when purchasing baby food, cosmetics, and specific necessary items. In addition to purchasing new products, parents often borrow or buy used products, primarily due to their durability and to avoid unnecessary costs. Environmental responsibility was generally viewed positively; however, parents often indicated that sustainability considerations became relevant only after product safety had been confirmed. One participant noted: "I care about environmentally friendly packaging and sustainability, but if I have to choose, I will

always choose the product I trust more for the child." This suggests a hierarchical interpretation of CSR dimensions, in which safety-related responsibility remains dominant.

"When I buy something for myself, I compare prices first. But when buying for my child, safety comes before everything else. I need to feel completely sure that the product is safe." This quotation reflects a broader pattern observed across interviews, where perceived safety consistently took precedence over price considerations and shaped trust in both products and retailers. Another parent similarly emphasized, "Price matters, of course, but when it comes to products for the baby, safety is the first thing I look at, and only then everything else."

When selecting where to purchase, the price-quality ratio is crucial, as are discounts and promotional offers, which often determine the final decision. Despite strong support for responsible and sustainable consumption, financial constraints frequently influenced purchasing behavior. As one respondent stated, "Organic or sustainable products feel like the right choice, but sometimes the price simply makes that decision impossible." This tension was also reflected in another interview: "I would prefer to buy more sustainable options whenever possible, but realistically we also need to stay within our budget." This finding highlights the conflict between CSR preferences and economic affordability.

During the transition to parenthood, the key driver in the purchasing process is a change in priorities as participants' responsibility expands from self-care to childcare. As their first encounter with the baby and children's product category, this phase requires more intensive information gathering and a greater focus on quality, resulting in a longer and more cautious purchasing process. As one future mother explained, "I spend much more time researching products now than before because I feel responsible for making the right decision from the beginning."

Another important factor is the emotional shopping experience, characterized by strong emotional involvement from parents and their environment and a large selection of products, which often leads to impulsive purchases despite a limited budget. One participant described this emotional aspect: "Sometimes I buy something immediately because it feels right for the baby, even if I had not planned it before." The emotional aspect is equally present in mothers and fathers. Self-care occurs less frequently and predominantly among pregnant women, who show an increased preference for natural cosmetics and organic food products during this period.

The immediate reaction of new parents regarding social responsibility for most participants was responsibility toward people. The findings show that current and future parents are most sensitive to people as stakeholders in social responsibility, including themselves, employees, and the local community, and that they recognize the social responsibility of manufacturers and retailers as responsibility toward people, primarily consumers. From the perspective of new parents, responsibility toward consumers is reflected in the production and sale of safe products. Since in this case the consumers are newborn babies and young children, current and future parents believe that manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products have a particularly great moral responsibility to deliver safe products that are not harmful or dangerous to the health and safety of children. In this regard, they state that they prefer natural products made from natural and ecological materials, which also reflects responsibility toward the environment. However, it is important to note that the majority of current and future parents view environmental responsibility only as a secondary guarantee of responsibility toward consumers.

Thematic analysis has also highlighted the issue of ethics in practicing social responsibility. This category examines the obstacles consumers face in achieving their desired socially responsible practices. In other words, it explores what hinders or prevents consumers from acting according to their own beliefs and worldviews. The category is illustrated by two codes: money as an obstacle to social responsibility and the product versus packaging relationship.

Money as an obstacle to social responsibility is evident in the inability to act on one's attitudes about ecology, employer-employee relations, and similar issues due to being unable to pay higher prices for products from socially responsible producers and retailers. For example, a parent who understands and supports the benefits of organically produced food over conventionally produced food often cannot buy only organic products because of their higher price. As one respondent noted, "I know what I would ideally choose, but not every responsible product is financially realistic for us at this stage." The product versus packaging relationship refers to consumers' differing attitudes toward ecology regarding the product itself and the packaging it comes in. One parent summarized this distinction: "What matters most to me is what comes into contact with the baby; packaging feels less important compared with the product itself." Many current and future parents demonstrate strong environmental awareness regarding the products they consume but do not hold packaging to the same high standards. This is explained by the fact that parents of first-born children are environmentally aware to the extent that it benefits them, which implicitly places the issue of ethics at the center of the research.

5. Discussion

The results of the study confirm that the transition to parenthood leads to significant changes in purchasing behavior, with the most pronounced changes involving shifting priorities and a more intensive search for information before making purchases. These findings align with previous research showing that during the transition to parenthood, especially motherhood, there is an increased search for information and the development of higher ethical and moral standards in consumption ([AbiGhannam & Atkinson, 2016](#)). This study contributes by confirming that these changes are not exclusive to mothers but are also present among fathers, complementing existing knowledge about the impact of life status changes on consumer behavior ([Andreassen, 1984](#); [Hogg et al., 2004](#); [Hemetsberger et al., 2013](#); [Burningham et al., 2014](#)).

The research further confirms the important role of corporate social responsibility in shaping purchasing decisions, with consumers expecting companies to engage actively in socially responsible initiatives and being willing to reward such behavior as well as sanction irresponsible business practices ([Becker-Olsen et al., 2006](#)). The results of the thematic analysis show that parents consider the most important aspects of social responsibility to be those that directly contribute to product safety and quality, while environmental responsibility has a secondary but still significant impact, consistent with the findings of Gupta and Pirsch (2008).

The findings are also consistent with theoretical approaches that view corporate social responsibility as a strategic tool for long-term success and corporate image management ([Adkins, 1999](#); [McWilliams & Siegel, 2001](#)), with motives for such activities being both strategic and altruistic ([Moon, 2001](#); [Hemingway & MacLagan, 2004](#); [Rollinson, 2002](#)). Respondents do not penalize companies for non-altruistic motives but instead value socially responsible activities that directly involve consumers and employees, consistent with the findings of Kell and Ruggie (2001).

Moreover, the results confirm the relatively homogeneous response of consumers transitioning to parenthood regarding socially responsible activities, in contrast to the general heterogeneity of consumer responses described in the literature. The strong influence of word of mouth is particularly notable, further confirming the importance of recommendations from family and friends in the purchase process. The findings also align with research that distinguishes the dimensions of social responsibility toward people, the environment, and the product. In this context, responsibility for product safety and quality has the most pronounced impact on purchase intentions ([Anselmsson & Johansson, 2007](#); [Öberseder et al., 2014](#)), with

an emphasis on the important but underutilized role of the point of sale and packaging as channels for communicating social responsibility.

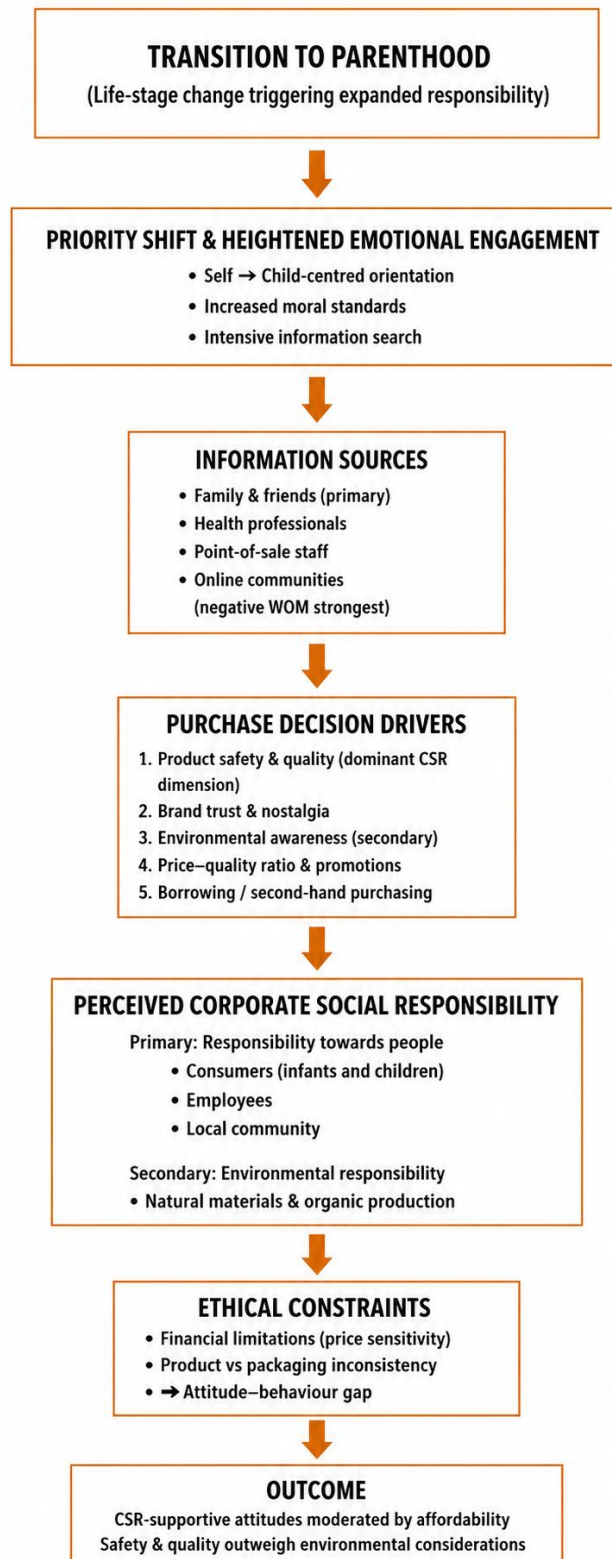
The study indicates that, although new parents generally support socially responsible business practices, there is an ethical issue closely tied to consumer price sensitivity. Higher prices for socially responsible and environmentally friendly products often hinder consistent behavior aligned with personal values, resulting in a gap between attitudes and actual purchasing behavior. Consequently, social responsibility is perceived and practiced mainly when consumers receive direct and financially acceptable benefits. This finding has important implications for manufacturers and retailers, who should develop social responsibility strategies that do not shift the ethical burden onto consumers through higher prices, but instead offer safe, high-quality, and environmentally friendly products at affordable prices, enabling the genuine practice of social responsibility rather than merely declarative support. [Figure 3](#) presents the proposed conceptual model illustrating the relationships among the key research variables. The model is developed based on the theoretical framework and qualitative study and serves as a proposition for empirical testing through quantitative research.

In addition to confirming earlier findings about the positive role of CSR in shaping consumer trust and responsible purchasing behavior, this study provides further conceptual insight into how CSR dimensions are prioritized during major life transitions. The findings show that first-time parents do not view CSR as a single or equally weighted construct. Instead, CSR is interpreted hierarchically. Consumer-directed responsibility, especially product safety and quality, becomes the most immediate and behaviorally relevant dimension, while environmental responsibility gains importance mainly when it reinforces trust and perceptions of product reliability. This extends previous CSR literature by suggesting that the perceived immediacy of risk and responsibility influences which CSR dimensions become behaviorally salient. In this context, the transition to parenthood emerges not only as a demographic characteristic but also as an important contextual mechanism shaping CSR interpretation and purchasing decisions.

The managerial implications of this study suggest several practical directions for retailers and manufacturers in the baby and children's products segment. First, retailers should strengthen in-store CSR communication by clearly presenting product safety standards, certifications, origin information, and sustainability-related attributes at the point of purchase, as transparent and accessible information was identified as highly relevant for new parents' decision-making. This may include visible shelf labels, informational displays, or digital communication tools that highlight both product safety and environmental responsibility. Second, packaging communication should be clear and credible, particularly regarding ingredients, materials, safety instructions, and sustainability claims, since participants emphasized trust and product safety as primary decision criteria. Clearer and more transparent packaging information may reduce uncertainty and support more informed purchasing decisions. Third, staff training is an important opportunity for retailers, especially in specialized stores and drugstores, where parents often seek reassurance before purchasing. Training employees to communicate product safety features, certifications, and responsible business practices in a professional and trustworthy manner may strengthen consumer confidence and improve the overall shopping experience. Collectively, these practices may support responsible consumption and enhance retail performance by building stronger trust and long-term relationships with parents during this important life transition.

Figure 3

Conceptual Model Illustrating Hierarchical CSR Evaluation and Responsible Purchasing Among First-Time Parents



Note. Created by the authors based on the study results.

6. Conclusion

CSR refers to the integration of ethical, social, and environmental considerations into business activities, with companies recognizing their responsibility not only for economic objectives but also for society and the environment. In retail, CSR is demonstrated through responsible sourcing, product safety, ethical working conditions, reducing negative environmental impact, and transparent communication with consumers. The retail sector plays a unique role due to its direct contact with end users and its ability to influence the entire supply chain. Consumers perceive CSR through visible practices, which strengthen trust, loyalty, and willingness to recommend, while enabling companies to create shared value and competitive advantages. As a result, CSR practices can improve retail performance through stronger customer relationships, increased purchase intentions, repeat purchases, and positive word of mouth.

The transition to parenthood is a significant life change that heightens the sense of responsibility, perceived risk, and parents' tendency to seek reliable and safe products. During this period, parents are more vigilant in monitoring the quality, safety, and ethics of products for their children, making companies' CSR activities an important signal of trust and the moral correctness of purchases. Transparent and consistently implemented initiatives help reduce uncertainty, facilitate decision-making, and strengthen the emotional connection with the brand.

The study contributes to the CSR literature by showing that, in the context of the transition to parenthood, CSR is interpreted through a hierarchical decision-making lens rather than as a uniform evaluative construct. The findings suggest that perceived responsibility toward the child amplifies the importance of product safety and trust, while environmental responsibility becomes influential when integrated with perceptions of reliability and care. This provides a more context-sensitive understanding of CSR evaluation in retail settings involving high emotional involvement and perceived consumer risk.

The qualitative research confirms the important role of manufacturers and retailers of baby and children's products in shaping the purchasing behavior of new parents, with social responsibility proving to be a relevant but selectively valued factor. New parents primarily associate social responsibility with concern for people, especially through product safety and quality, while environmental responsibility is seen as a secondary benefit. The point of sale has emerged as the key and most effective channel for communicating socially responsible activities, while formal corporate communication often goes unnoticed.

The scientific contribution of this work lies in the integration of CSR theory and the transition to parenthood, revealing the motives and perceptions of parents and emphasizing the role of perceived risk and emotional involvement in decision-making. The study shows that parents in transition value product safety and quality most, while environmental and social responsibility represent an additional factor of trust. It indicates that the transition to parenthood increases parents' environmental and moral awareness, although financial constraints, product convenience, and perceived risk often prevent full implementation in actual purchases. As a result, there is a clear gap between the values held by parents and their actual purchasing decisions, as product safety and quality override environmental priorities. This gap can be bridged by CSR activities of companies acting as key signals of trust, thus aligning parents' values with consumer behavior.

The main limitation of the research stems from the qualitative methodology and the convenience sample, which means the results are not generalizable but provide in-depth insight into the purchasing process of new parents. An additional limitation relates to the geographical concentration of respondents, who are mostly from the Zagreb area and its surroundings. Therefore, future research should include parents from other parts of Croatia and from more socially vulnerable groups. It is recommended to conduct longitudinal research within the

same sample to monitor changes in purchasing behavior over time, as well as on-site research at retail outlets to examine the real impact of socially responsible activities on purchasing decisions. Future research would also benefit from broader and more geographically diverse samples, including participants from rural areas and different socioeconomic backgrounds, to further assess the transferability of the findings across different contexts.

The article is relevant to UN Sustainable Development Goals:



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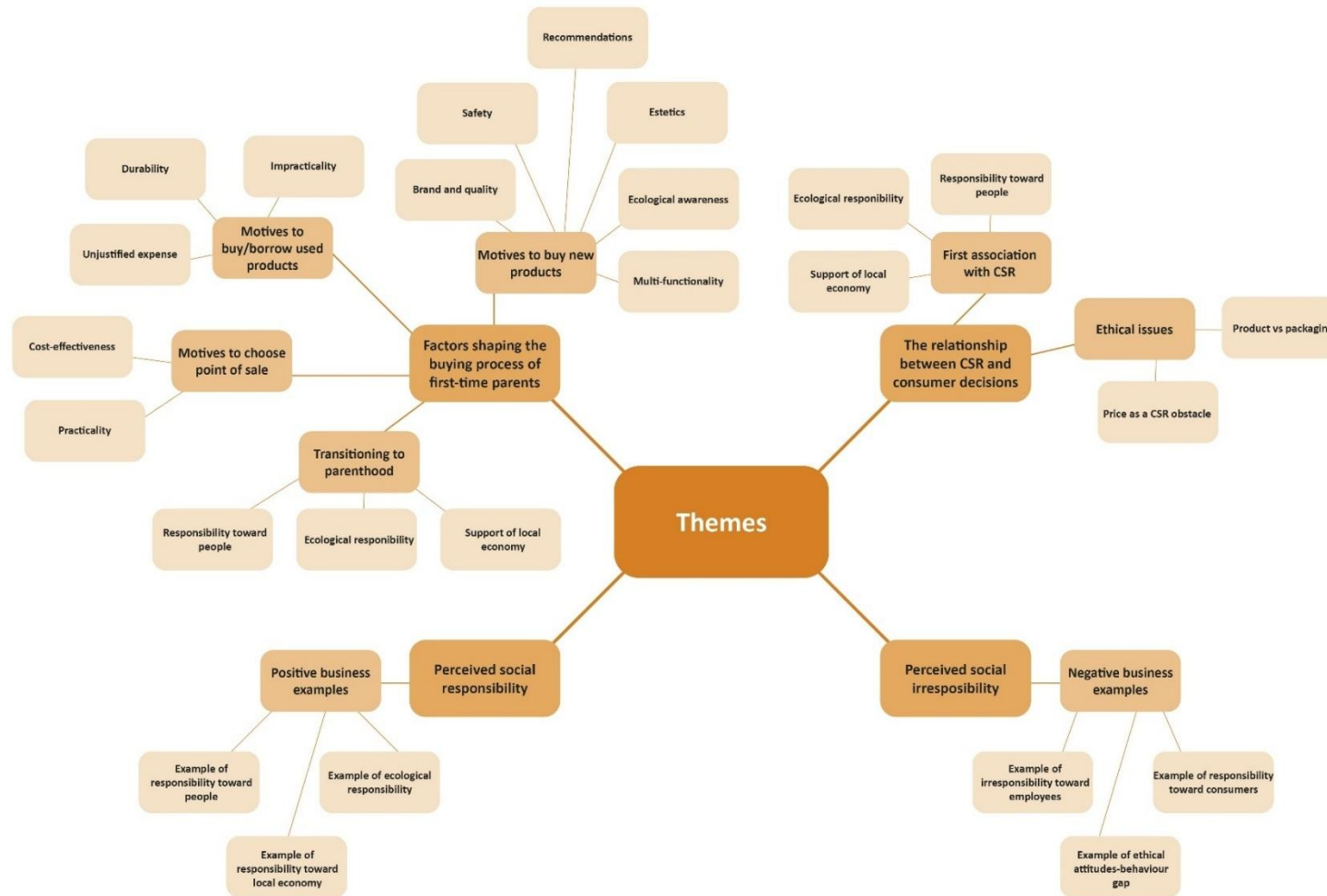
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Appendix

Thematic Analysis with Categories and Codes



Note. Figure created by the authors.