



Role of CSR in Building Brand Image, Consumer Loyalty and Purchase Intention: An Empirical Literature Synthesis

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Abstract: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has shifted from an additional feature to an integral part of brand strategy for organizations looking to project a good brand image, maintain customer loyalty, and instigate purchase intention. This paper focuses on the effect of corporate social responsibility on brand image, customer loyalty, and purchase intention through the synthesis of empirical studies already carried out in various journals on marketing and business ethics. Contrary to a conventional research paper that would require the collection of primary data, the present paper follows a systematic literature-based research approach by synthesizing information on the effect of CSR from peer-reviewed empirical studies which have tested the relationship between CSR and consumer behavior using actual data. The review highlights the positive effect of CSR on brand image as well as its indirect effect on purchase intention through brand attitude. Nonetheless, some literature suggests that such an impact is dependent on variables such as fit between CSR and brand, perception of motive, and consumer skepticism. The paper ends by providing suggestions regarding future research, including region-based and industry-based investigations.

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Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) involves those initiatives that a corporation voluntarily takes that transcend its legal obligation in an effort to contribute towards the betterment of the environment, society, and economy of the geographical locations where it functions (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). While in the past, Corporate Social Responsibility was thought of only as a Public Relations exercise, today it is recognized by academics and practitioners alike as a tool that can influence consumer perceptions and behavior about the brand (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). In light of growing awareness amongst consumers regarding environmental and social concerns, consumers often expect corporations to be socially responsible (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

The term brand image is used to describe the general perception and set of associations held by the consumer about the brand stored in his memory (Keller, 1993). The term consumer loyalty implies a strong desire of the consumer to continue purchasing a preferred product or brand repeatedly in the future, notwithstanding the possible situation-specific factors that may lead to switching behavior (Oliver, 1999). The concept of purchase intention can be described as the probability of the consumer's purchase of some product or brand; this concept is often applied in marketing researches as a predictor of the consumer's behavior (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991). It is necessary to understand the way how the

corporate social responsibility impacts all three constructs as an interrelated chain of decisions made by the consumer.

In this paper, an effort is made to review the empirical findings of research papers in the field of marketing and business ethics that investigate the effects of CSR on brand image, consumer loyalty, and purchase intentions. In other words, the paper will review the empirical findings published in peer-reviewed journals on the topic, without performing any primary research through surveys or interviews. Thus, the findings of this paper will be based on empirical data obtained by other authors through their empirical work.

Literature Review

Several theories have been applied in examining CSR. Carroll (1991) presented a popular model where CSR is conceptualized as a pyramid consisting of four responsibilities: economic responsibility, which entails profitability of a firm; legal responsibility, which entails legality; ethical responsibility, which entails doing the right thing; and philanthropic responsibility, which entails giving back to the community voluntarily. In their attempt to explain CSR from the theory of the firm perspective, McWilliams & Siegel (2001) assert that CSR is undertaken partially because of the competitive advantage it creates through perceptions of the firm in the eyes of its consumers.

The importance of brand image as an important factor determining consumer reaction is well known. According to Keller (1993), customer-based brand equity, which includes brand image, is built on the basis of associations made by consumers in their minds, and these associations determine how positively consumers perceive the brand's marketing activities. The effect of corporate associations, including social responsibility of companies, on consumer evaluation of companies' products was one of the first empirical findings reported by Brown and Dacin (1997).

Consumer loyalty has been studied under two categories, namely, behaviorally, whereby loyalty is concerned with repeat purchases, and attitudinally, whereby the focus is on consumer attachment. Oliver (1999) has postulated that consumer loyalty comes about through various stages, beginning with cognitive loyalty, which is dependent on brand beliefs, followed by affective loyalty, which depends on consumer liking of the brand, and finally, conative and behavioral loyalty, whereby the consumer remains loyal to the brand in spite of other alternatives available. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) have empirically validated the fact that brand trust and brand affect both result in brand loyalty, which consequently influences market share and price.

The measurement of purchase intention has generally involved the assessment of consumers' self-reported probability of purchasing the brand or product, using a Likert-scale type measure, according to the methodology of Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal (1991), who examined the effect of price, brand, and store information on consumers' evaluation of the product and their willingness to purchase it. In current CSR studies, purchase intention has increasingly emerged as the most frequently used dependent variable, due to its direct relationship with business performance.

The issue of CSR has also been associated with more general concepts of corporate associations and stakeholder management. McWilliams and Siegel (2001) stated that CSR could be seen as product differentiation, whereby companies engaged in CSR activities are essentially providing a good that some customers would pay extra for, just like other firms providing high-quality products or using good advertising. Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010) developed this approach further, considering how communication about CSR activities rather than the activities themselves influenced the awareness and appreciation of a company's social responsibilities; the authors suggested that awareness, motive attribution, and fit between the company and the cause acted as three major criteria that determined how a company's investment in CSR would translate into positive consumer reactions. These studies indicate that the impact of CSR on brand image, customer loyalty, and purchase intention is to be analyzed not only from the standpoint of what a company does but also from the perspective of how customers interpret these activities.

Figure 1. Carroll's (1991) Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility



Figure 1: Carroll's (1991) pyramid of corporate social responsibility.

Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses

On the basis of a review of the literature, a conceptual framework is developed in this paper wherein CSR is considered as an antecedent factor that affects brand image, consumer loyalty and purchase intention directly or indirectly through brand image and consumer company identification. Four major hypotheses have been formulated to frame the synthesis in this paper, which are as follows: H1, Positive relation between CSR perceptions and brand image; H2, Positive relation between brand image and consumer loyalty; H3, Positive relation between CSR perceptions and purchase intention, either directly or indirectly through brand image; and H4, The strength of these relations depends on context factors such as CSR-brand fit and attributed motive.

This model fits with the identification approach between consumer and company advanced by Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) and further explored by Marín and Ruiz (2007), in which consumers' identification with a company depends on their view of the company being socially responsible. This model fits well with the signaling approaches in which CSR behaviors act as signals of good corporate character lowering consumers' perceived risk and increasing their trust (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004).

In this way, the theoretical framework recognizes brand image not only as the consequence of CSR but also as the channel through which the impact of CSR flows to loyalty and purchase intention. It is important to recognize the mediating nature of the process because it provides an answer to the question why some companies with CSR have failed to improve loyalty and purchase intentions despite the fact that their CSR program was well-structured. It seems that if consumers cannot interpret the CSR actions in the positive brand image, there will be no impact of CSR activities on loyalty and purchase intentions.

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework Linking CSR, Brand Image, and Consumer Outcomes

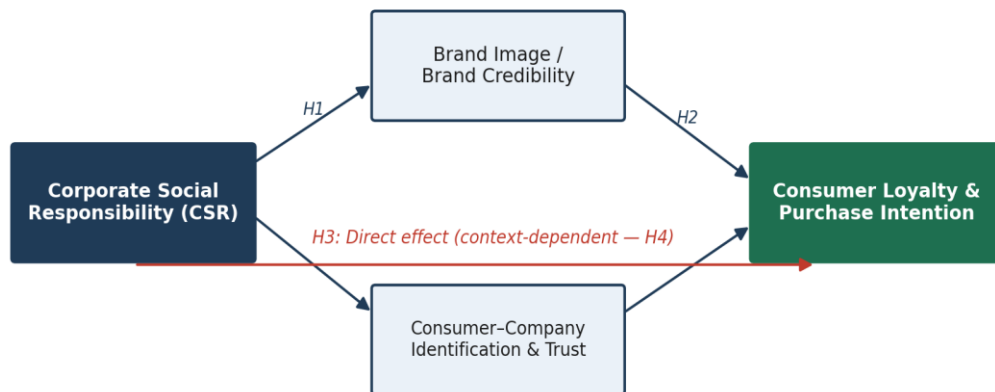


Figure 2: Conceptual framework linking CSR, brand image, and consumer outcomes.

Research Methodology

Unlike in a primary data collection research design, this paper adopts a literature review research design. Empirical articles published in peer-reviewed marketing and business ethics journals such as the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Journal of Business Ethics, and Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science were found using keywords on corporate social responsibility, brand image, brand equity, consumer loyalty, and purchase intention. Such articles were chosen if they contained empirical results based on real consumer surveys, experiments, and structural equation models and not only conceptual arguments. Findings of these articles were then grouped thematically depending on the three outcome variables covered in this paper, which are brand image, consumer loyalty, and purchase intention. It is the right approach to take when writing a paper seeking to synthesize findings that have been reviewed and tested in different industries and countries rather than test a new data set.

There were two main factors that influenced the choice of studies included in this synthesis. Firstly, all of them should have provided evidence of the connection between CSR and at least one of the three dependent variables in question through statistical tests so that the conclusions made in the present paper would be based on numbers rather than beliefs. Secondly, preference would be given to those studies that had been carried out in reputable peer-reviewed journals where the sampling and measurement techniques had been clearly stated to increase the reliability of conclusions about the synthesis. In case there had been conflicting evidence in some of the studies, both pieces of evidence are mentioned and analyzed.

Synthesis of Empirical Evidence

The Impact of CSR on Brand Image. Many studies have provided empirical evidence of the positive influence of CSR on brand image. In their study of the impact of CSR on industrial brand equity among industrial buyers, Lai, Chiu, Yang, and Pai (2010) observed that CSR has a significant positive effect on industrial brand equity and that the effect is mediated through corporate reputation. In a study conducted among the South Korean population, Hur, Kim, and Woo (2014) observed that CSR had a positive direct effect on corporate brand credibility and corporate reputation and that the impact of CSR on corporate brand equity was completely mediated through those two factors. In the case of life insurance industry in Taiwan, Hsu (2012) found that CSR advertising had a positive effect on corporate reputation and brand equity.

CSR and Consumer Loyalty. Marín & Ruiz (2007) applied an empirically validated model that confirmed that CSR activities are positively related to consumer loyalty through their contribution to a

more favorable perception of the company and consumer identification with the company. The impact of CSR activities on consumer loyalty and behavior has been extended further by Marín et al (2009) who found that the positive influence of CSR on consumer behavior, such as consumer loyalty, is moderated by the salience of the identification of the consumer with the company. In other words, the context and time play a role in the relationship between CSR activities and consumer loyalty. Finally, similar findings have been reached by He and Li (2011).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Purchase Intentions. In a study conducted by Bigné&Currás (2008), the results indicated that the positive image of corporate social responsibility positively impacts consumer purchase intentions and consumer-company identification. The findings by Lichtenstein et al. (2004) indicated that consumer behavior regarding donations and patronage of a company is positively impacted when the firm supports the non-profits supported by the firm. According to Mohr & Webb (2005), a joint analysis of corporate social responsibility and price indicates that an increased perception of corporate social responsibility positively impacts consumer evaluation of the company.

Mixed Results and Boundary Conditions. Not all research findings indicate that there is a clear-cut positive association. One of the studies on this topic that has received wide attention is that of Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) which shows that CSR activities can have the effect of reducing consumer's purchase intention if there are specific conditions met. For example, consumers who have lower congruence between the CSR concern of an organization and its core business activity or when the consumers are doubtful about the motives of the organization will have reduced purchase intention. Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) showed that the relationship between CSR activities and the market value of the business was influenced by customer satisfaction and firm innovation capacity.

Findings and Discussion

The empirical literature that has been reviewed in this paper leads us to three major conclusions. Firstly, there is a consistent and positive association between CSR and brand image, regardless of the industry under consideration (such as industrial goods, financial services, insurance), which is mediated through some mediating variables like corporate reputation and brand credibility and not directly. Secondly, CSR impacts consumer loyalty primarily via some psychological constructs, like consumer firm identification and brand trust, and not through CSR activities themselves; in other words, consumers need to perceive the company as being aligned with their own values before their loyalty towards the company grows. Thirdly, the impact of CSR on purchase intentions occurs both directly and indirectly, but in case consumers question the company's motives or in cases where CSR is not consistent with the core activities of the company, the impact could become negative.

The above trend in results is consistent with the consumer-brand identification model as a means through which the impact of CSR on brand-related results is examined because it addresses not only the overall positive impact noted in most literature but also the anomalies noted in the literature including that presented in Sen & Bhattacharya (2001). In addition, the above is important in noting that brand image, consumer trust, and identification act as mediators in the sense that CSR impacts consumer loyalty or purchase intention through the process of.

Another point worth noting is the fact that the strength of these relationships also differs according to the industrial setting. Within the realm of industries and business-to-business relations, as seen in Lai et al.'s (2010) research, CSR's impact on brand equity was channeled mostly through corporate reputation, since industrial customers often make purchasing decisions based on their perceptions of the corporation as a whole and have fewer emotions involved in the process compared to typical consumer decisions. In consumer-oriented businesses, including finance services and retail, as observed in the researches by Bigné and Currás (2008) and Marín and Ruiz (2007), consumer-company identification proved to play a greater part. This indicates the presence of different mechanisms of the relationship between CSR and brands within these settings, although the direction of this connection always proves to be a positive one.

Managerial Implications

The findings presented here provide some useful guidance for managers. For instance, organizations should opt for CSR programs that fit well with the organization's business activities and brand image, since poor fit can reduce or negate the positive effects of CSR, according to studies like Sen & Bhattacharya (2001). Furthermore, organizations need to clearly communicate about CSR, since it

was found by Hsu (2012) that CSR advertising enhances the association between CSR and brand outcomes, whereas confusion regarding communication will generate doubts in the consumers. Creating true identification between the company and consumer, instead of perceiving CSR as a temporary marketing program, seems to be key to transforming CSR expenditure into customer loyalty, according to Marín & Ruiz (2007) and He & Li (2011). Finally, since brand image and reputation often serve as mediators, firms should keep an eye on brand perception measurements in conjunction with CSR activities to see if their CSR activities have enhanced their brand image before making conclusions about loyalty and purchase intention.

Moreover, marketers and brand managers need to be careful when they use corporate social responsibility for promotion alone. According to the empirical evidence provided by Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010), consumers do not only care about what the company does; they also care about why it seems to be doing what it is doing. Corporate social responsibility that is seen as self-serving or communicated only when the company is facing a crisis in public relations does not contribute to the creation of the sense of identification that contributes to the loyalty of customers. Embedding corporate social responsibility into the corporate identity and daily business practices seems to be able to bring more sustainable results regarding the brand image and consumer loyalty.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The arguments presented in this paper are based on the review and synthesis of existing empirical studies rather than on new primary research. It is worth noting that most empirical studies analyzed in this paper were carried out within particular industries, such as banking, insurance, industrial goods, and retailing, as well as particular countries, such as Spain, Taiwan, South Korea, and the USA, so that the conclusions reached may not be applicable to other industries and countries. In the future, one may conduct empirical research based on the proposed framework, analyzing primary survey data gathered from a particular industry or country which has not been widely covered by previous empirical research, such as an emerging market retailing or e-commerce setting. In addition, one can explore how modern CSR communication practices, such as social media disclosure, affect consumer skepticism and brand performance compared to traditional CSR communication channels.

Conclusion

This study aimed at examining the effect of CSR on brand image, consumer loyalty, and purchase intention by analyzing secondary sources of empirical research rather than presenting primary data that was not researched before. As seen from the review of the literature, CSR improves brand image most of the time and that improved brand image, along with identification and trust are key factors for converting the effects of CSR into consumer loyalty and purchase intention. However, there are certain preconditions under which CSR can either help or, on the contrary, harm brand performance. The preconditions include CSR-brand fit, effectiveness of CSR communication, and consumer skepticism as to company's motivation. Those organizations, that wish to leverage the potential of CSR to improve their brands' performance, need to approach CSR as an integrated and long-term strategy rather than a temporary marketing technique.

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