



Research Note

Exploring the interaction between perceived ethical obligation and subjective norms, and their influence on CSR-related choices



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore the relationship between perceived ethical obligation and subjective norms as well as their simultaneous influence on CSR related choices. A scenario based experimental approach was employed. Our results indicated that subjective norms strengthen the explanatory power of the model. Subjective norms are additionally found to have a mediating effect on perceived ethical obligation.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore how perceived ethical obligation and subjective norms influence corporate social responsibility (CSR) related choices. Both ethical obligation and subjective norms are constructs commonly cited as factors influencing decision-making (Dubinsky & Loken, 1989; Shaw & Shu, 2002). A number of authors (Bommer, Gratto, Gravander & Tuttle, 1987; Mattison, 2000; Shaw, Grehan, Shiu, Hassan & Thomson, 2005) have emphasized the influence of awareness of ethical obligation on decision-making. For instance, Shaw, Shiu, and Clarke (2000) found that adding ethical obligation could be a significant factor in explaining behavioral intention to purchase a fair trade grocery product. In addition, subjective norms have been found to influence the CSR decision-making process (Schuler & Cording, 2006). This may be linked to increased stakeholder pressure requiring businesses to respond to the demand for a more sustainable behavior (Font, Walmsley, Cogotti, McCombes & Hausler, 2012).

The concept of CSR has received widespread attention over the past decades. This is also evident within the hospitality industry, with many businesses now focusing on CSR policies and implementing different CSR programs (Kang, Lee, & Huh, 2010). Despite an increased awareness of CSR in the hospitality industry, it is still a rather new topic in hospitality management studies on which

relatively little research has been undertaken (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008). To further explore the decision-making processes underlying CSR-related decisions may therefore be a useful contribution to the current literature. Two research questions are being raised in this study. First, we ask whether the inclusion of subjective norms strengthens the variance explained in the perceived ethical obligation and certification program equation. The second question inquires about whether subjective norms mediate perceived ethical obligation.

We use a meditational model to explore the relation between perceived ethical obligation and subjective norms (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Fairchild & MacKinnon, 2009). Different methods can be used to estimate mediation (Fairchild & MacKinnon, 2009). Baron and Kenny (1986) suggested a straightforward regression approach to test mediation hypotheses. This method has been growing in popularity (Dugard, Todman, & Staines, 2010); hence, it was chosen for our analyses.

2. Method

Data were collected using a pre-tested questionnaire. All variables were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = very unlikely to 7 = very likely/1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree). A cluster sampling was chosen for convenience. Moreover, it allowed us to achieve appropriate variance in the study sample. Being a manager in a Scandinavian, independently owned small-medium sized hospitality business was set as criteria for participating in the study. The data were collected in three different ways; (1) the research project was presented at annual meetings gathering managers in small and medium sized hotels. Here the managers were asked to

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fill out the questionnaire (paper version), (2) CEOs of two different marketing/brand organizations for small and medium sized hotels sent e-mails to the managers in their organization encouraging them to participate in the survey. These managers subsequently received e-mail with some information about the research study and a link to the electronic survey, (3) phone calls were made to the remaining managers in various small and medium sized hotels. Again the research study was shortly presented and they were then asked if they would be willing to participate in the study. If they accepted to do so, the electronic survey was sent them shortly afterward. The total sample consisted of 211 respondents (52% response rate). The majority of the respondents were Norwegian (73%), 14% of the respondents were Danish while the remaining 13% came from Sweden.

A scenario based experimental design was employed in which the respondents were presented four different CSR related choices. In our study, CSR was conceptualized as certification programs (Table 1). Certification programs have received widespread attention simultaneously, with the increased CSR focus within the industry (Dodds & Joppe, 2005), and they have been promoted as a valuable management tool for the hospitality industry in the context of CSR (Font, 2005; Mensah, 2013). The dependent variables measured the respondents' responses to the four alternatives. The first alternative was to do nothing, which in this specific setting meant not certifying the business. Next, the certification with a social dimension dealt with issues concerning the society in which the hospitality business operates. Important considerations for this certification were workplace safety and working conditions, promotion of social and cultural diversity, the involvement of communities, consultation with stakeholders and training of staff in sustainable practices. The third alternative was a certification with an environmental perspective. Important issues for this alternative were environmental performance in different areas, such as energy saving measures, green purchasing and waste minimization practices. The final and most comprehensive certification program presented in the study incorporated both a social and an environmental perspective.

Perceived ethical obligation was measured with the following four items: "I believe there is an ethical dimension to the choice regarding certification programs", "I believe that when making a decision regarding a certification program, it is important to take into account considerations beyond the financial aspect", "When choosing a certification program, it is personally important for me to take into account considerations beyond the financial aspect" and "I feel that I have an ethical obligation to certify the business where I am a manager".

Subjective norms are considered a summed product of individuals' beliefs that important others think that they should or should not perform the behavior in question and their motivation to comply with these important others (Ajzen, 2005). Important others in our study are believed to be guests, employees, suppliers, owners, local community, NGOs, local government, and central governments.

3. Results and discussion

First, we checked for multicollinearity between the independent variable and the mediator. If there is mediation, correlations that are too high will leave minimal unique variance in the mediator to explain variance in the independent variable. Though some correlation emerged, the correlation between perceived ethical obligation and subjective norms was moderate; thus, multicollinearity was not a problem in this study.

The first research question asked whether the inclusion of subjective norms would strengthen the explanatory power of the perceived ethical obligation and certification program equation. A significant increase in the explanatory power (R^2) can be seen for alternatives 1, 3, and 4 (Table 2), indicating that subjective norms together with perceived ethical obligation strengthen the variance explained compared to perceived ethical obligation alone.

The second research question asked whether subjective norms would have a mediation effect on the relation between perceived ethical obligation and intention to certify a business. Meditational analyses are used to assess the degree to which a variable is

Table 1
The four alternatives presented in the study.

| | |
|--|---|
| Alternative 1: No certification | The first option is to not certify the business. The situation is then unchanged and the operation continues normally. |
| Alternative 2: Certification with a social perspective | This certification emphasizes the businesses' social responsibility toward the local community and the relationship between businesses and the community that is in focus. Important aspects of this certification are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life quality and social values. This means, among other things, to preserve and enhance the life quality in local communities, including social structures and access to resources and common goods. • The creation of local ownership and commitment to locally based tourism development. • Job quality for employees, for example, by improving the quality of tourism jobs (directly and indirectly). • Guest satisfaction and safety. This means ensuring safe, satisfying, and enriching experiences for all tourists, regardless of gender, race, disability, or other factors. |
| Alternative 3: Certification with an environmental perspective | This certification emphasizes the businesses' responsibility and commitment to the natural environment. Important aspects of this certification are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimization of the company's energy consumption. • Procedures for requesting and prioritizing the most environmentally friendly options that meet the needs of the business. • Introduction of procedures to ensure cleaning without harmful chemicals (except where regulations require chlorine or other unhealthy or environmentally dangerous chemicals for disinfection). • Subcontractors having to satisfy the relevant requirements of an environmental certification program. • Introduction of procedures for reuse and recycling. • Procedures to ensure that the use of motorized vehicles is minimized. |
| Alternative 4: Certification with a social and environmental perspective | The fourth and final certification is to combine scenario 2 (social/community perspective) and scenario 3 (environmental perspective), thus emphasizing equally both the social/community and environmental perspective. Important aspects of this certification are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working conditions. • Consumer issues. • Community involvement and development. • Requirements for subcontractors. • Environmental responsibility. |

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