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A study of the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility and price image on retailer personality and consumers' reactions (satisfaction, trust and loyalty to the retailer)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of a retailer's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) policy and its price image on retailer personality, along with the impact of these two variables on the consequences of retailer personality: consumers' satisfaction, trust and loyalty toward the retailer (measured by their attitude and future behavioral intentions). Data were collected on a convenience sample of 352 consumers of a French grocery retailer. Using Partial Least Squares analysis (PLS), we show that perceived Corporate Social Responsibility and price image have a significant positive/negative influence on retailer personality traits ("agreeableness" and "conscientiousness"/"disingenuousness") and that Corporate Social Responsibility has also a significant positive influence on the "sophistication" personality trait. For the consequences examined (satisfaction, trust and loyalty to the retailer), we show that Corporate Social Responsibility, price image and retailer personality have a direct or indirect impact on these dependent variables.

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1. Introduction

By acquiring notoriety, a strong image and hence significant brand equity, retailers have become full-fledged brands (Achenbaum and Bogda, 1997). From both a theoretical standpoint and that of various retail market actors (distributors, consumers and manufacturers), retailers have become brands that convey messages, promises and value (Fleck and Nabec, 2010). Zentes et al. (2008) define the retail brand as "a group of the retailer's outlets which carry a unique name, symbol, logo or combination thereof". It is crucial for retailers to possess powerful brands that can help them thrive in their often highly competitive market (Henderson and Mihas, 2000). The retail brand strongly influences consumers' perceptions and guides their choices, and builds their loyalty to the retailer and its points of sale, in a relationship established between the retailer and its customers (Ailawadi and Keller, 2004). The retailer, like the brand, is a milestone, a source of benefits and a vector of a preferred attitudinal and behavioral relationship between consumer and retailer (Fleck and Nabec, 2010).

In France, food retailers suffer from poor consumer confidence (58%) at two main levels: price image and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)¹ policy. Nonetheless, these retailers have recently intensified their efforts to integrate CSR in their analyses and actions, either driven by the market, the competition and their executives, or to reduce costs (Binninger, 2010). If price remains a major element of food retailers' strategy, it is no longer a sufficient differentiation factor, in a context where gaps between retailers' price images are constantly shrinking.² Retailers are thus seeking to develop or reinforce their image of being a responsible company while preserving their price image to better position themselves and meet the expectations of the consumers, who, in the current economic and ecological crises, are seeking both low prices and more responsible consumption modes.³

The main objective of this study is therefore to examine the influence of the retailer's CSR policy and price image on its personality. The influence of these two variables on the consequences of retailer personality – consumer satisfaction, trust and loyalty to the retailer (measured by their attitude and future behavioral intentions) – is also analyzed. This study will thus

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¹ LSA (a magazine for professionals in France), no. 2205 (17/11/2011), pp. 12–15.

² Points de Vente (a magazine for professionals in France), no. 1110 (5/3/2012), pp. 22.

³ Marketing Magazine (a magazine for professionals in France), no. 152 (01/10/2011), pp. 34–37.

supplement current research, mainly qualitative, on the antecedents of brand personality (Bregman and Willems, 2009) along with studies of the consequences of price image (Zielke, 2006, 2010). Whereas Corporate Social Responsibility has been investigated extensively, mainly regarding its influence on consumers (e.g., Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006; Stanaland et al., 2011; Herault, 2012), few studies have specifically looked at the consequences of price image. The remainder of the article is structured as follows. The first section discusses retailer personality and presents the model and hypotheses. The methodology used is then described and the results presented. The limitations of the study are noted and future research avenues are proposed.

2. Retailer personality

Retailer personality is often defined with reference to brand personality. Aaker (1997) was the first to conceptualize brand personality as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand”. This seminal definition nonetheless includes other characteristics (e.g., sociodemographic, such as age, gender and social class) in addition to personality. Consequently, new definitions of brand personality have been proposed.

Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) define brand personality as “the unique set of human personality traits both applicable and relevant to brands”. Based on this definition, Geuens et al. (2009) developed a 12-item scale to measure brand personality. This reliable and valid instrument comprises of four positive traits (activity, responsibility, simplicity and emotionality) and one negative trait (aggressiveness).

Similarly, Ferrandi and Valette-Florence (2002) conceptualize brand personality as “the set of human personality traits associated with a brand”. Referring to this definition, Ambroise and Valette-Florence (2010) developed a reliable and valid 23-item scale to measure brand personality, comprising six positive traits (congeniality, creativity, seduction, preciousness, originality and conscientiousness) and three negative traits (dominance, deceitfulness and introversion).

Ambroise and Valette-Florence (2010) also proposed a second-level structure on which nine traits are grouped into five second-order factors. The five principal traits are agreeableness (which includes the traits of congeniality, creativity, and seduction), sophistication (which includes preciousness and originality), conscientiousness, disingenuousness (which includes dominance and deceitfulness) and introversion. This measurement scale, developed specifically for the French semantic and cultural context in which the present study is conducted, will be used to measure retailer personality. In line with the definitions of brand personality presented above, retailer personality is defined as the set of human personality traits associated with a retailer.

Adaptation to retailers of the concepts developed in the field of brands (e.g. personality) owes much to Ailawadi and Keller (2004), who recommend that marketing researchers apply to retailers the principles related to brands and their management. Brands and

retailers indeed share many similarities in terms of signs used to recognize them, functions filled for clients and mix (marketing mix for manufacturers and retailing mix for distributors). More generally, the association of the human personality with “objects” that are not human, such as brands or retailers, refers to the theory of anthropomorphism or “the tendency to imbue the real or imagined behavior of nonhuman agents with humanlike characteristics, motivations, intentions, or emotions” (Epley et al., 2007). Following their theoretical investigation of social psychology research, Freling and Forbes (2005) assert that anthropomorphism is a natural and inevitable human tendency that infiltrates the daily thoughts and actions of most individuals and influences people’s perceptions and responses throughout their lifetime. Humans thus need to anthropomorphize objects, especially those with which they interact frequently, to give more meaning to the world in which they live and to grasp it more easily (Waytz et al., 2010).

3. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses

The model proposed in this study (Fig. 1) primarily considers the relations between two antecedents of retailer personality: retailers’ CSR policy and price image. Links between retailer personality and the consequences of this concept (consumer satisfaction, trust and loyalty to the retailer) are incorporated in the model. Lastly, links between the retailer’s CSR policy and price image and the consequences of retailer personality are integrated. These relations are discussed below.

3.1. Antecedents of retailer personality: CSR policy and price image

To date, few studies have looked at the antecedents of retailer personality. A notable exception is Bregman and Willems (2009), who sought to identify the determinants of fashion store personality. In an exploratory qualitative study, they identified five main types of antecedents: (1) the environment of points of sale (i.e. ambiance, design, other customers and salespeople present in stores); (2) merchandise offered (price, quality, assortment and style); (3) retailer’s reputation (including advertising by the store, CSR policy, word-of-mouth from customers and their attitude toward the retailer); (4) services offered; and (5) store’s format and location. Based on five retailer personality traits (sophistication, solidity, genuineness, enthusiasm, and unpleasantness) proposed by d’Astous and Lévesque (2003), Bregman and Willems (2009) observed that the environment of points of sale (mainly design) is a particularly important factor in creating retailer personality because it strongly influences the five personality traits considered. The next strongest influence is sales staff, price and quality of merchandise, services offered and retailer’s CSR policy. Specifically, Bregman and Willems (2009) asserted that the retailer’s CSR policy influences the personality trait

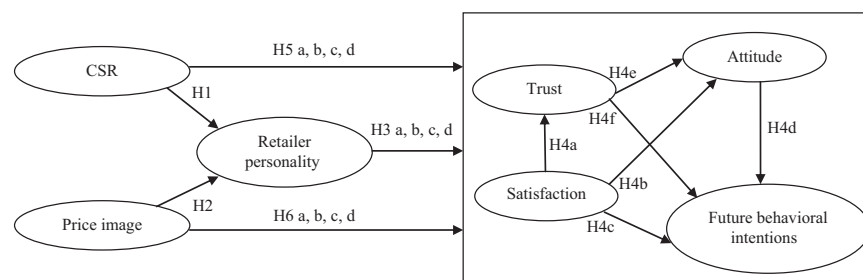


Fig. 1. Model proposed.

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