



Gender differences in customer expectations and perceptions of corporate social responsibility



Armando Calabrese ^{a, 1}, Roberta Costa ^{a, 1}, Francesco Rosati ^{b, *, 1}

^a Department of Enterprise Engineering, University of Rome "Tor Vergata", Italy

^b Department of Management Engineering, Technical University of Denmark, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

The literature on business ethics, corporate social responsibility and sustainability includes many studies on gender differences, however the results are often contrasting. In particular, there has not yet been full agreement on the role and significance of gender differences in customer expectations and perceptions of responsible corporate conduct. An extensive review of the research on the subject reveals that the published studies have not dealt with the substantive significance of gender differences, and as a result, the size of such differences is unknown. The current study analyses both the statistical and the substantive significance of gender differences in customer expectations and perceptions of corporate responsibility, also examining the influence of age and education. The analysis is carried out on a remarkably large sample of 908 clients, pertaining to 12 of the largest Italian banks. The overall results show that there is a small substantive difference between women's and men's average expectations, with women showing higher average values than men. This result holds generally true with variation of education levels and age groups. Young females show the highest average values of expectations, and the significance of gender differences decreases with age. In contrast, the perception of corporate social responsibility does not show significant gender differences, either at the general level or when the analyses are repeated by education levels and age groups. The paper introduces the use of a standardized measure of effect size for analysing the substantive significance of gender differences in customer expectations and perceptions of corporate social responsibility. This novel approach increases results reliability and, accordingly, the effectiveness of company or policy maker strategies in designing, planning, implementing and assessing sustainability initiatives.

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1. Introduction

Over recent decades it has been increasingly recognised that companies must behave responsibly, to respect the needs of current and future generations and preserve their rights to live in environments that are safe, healthy and rich with opportunity (WCED, 1987). To do this they must consider the impact of their productive activities on the social, environmental and economic dimensions in which they operate. Thus "companies should have in place a process to integrate social, environmental, ethical, and human rights concerns into their business operations and core strategy, in close collaboration with their stakeholders" (EC, 2011). Nevertheless

some companies act irresponsibly, and so cause environmental and social harms (e.g. Sims and Brinkmann, 2003; Crooks, 2012). Given the contrasts among company behaviour and the simultaneous variety of offer in advanced economic systems, customers then have the opportunity to choose their purchases from those companies that operate in a sustainable manner (Seyfang, 2009). The enactment of this capacity implies that the customers are knowledgeable about the degree of responsibility of the companies of which they are stakeholders (Wigley, 2008; Lee and Shin, 2010).

Consequently, business ethics, CSR and sustainability are topics widely considered and discussed in the current business context. But what is the meaning of these concepts, and how are they related? Business ethics can be defined as "a form of applied ethics that examines ethical rules and principles within a commercial context" (Christensen et al., 2007, p. 351). CSR refers particularly to "the voluntary actions taken by a company to address economic, social and environmental impacts of its business operations and the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: frro@dtu.dk (F. Rosati).

¹ The authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

concerns of its principal stakeholders” (Christensen et al., 2007, p. 351). Sustainability refers still more specifically to “business that contributes to an equitable and ecologically sustainable economy” (Christensen et al., 2007, p. 351). According to these definitions, business ethics refers to the general moral principles governing corporate decisions while the focus of CSR is on the decisions and actions concerning the specific area of stakeholder expectations. The areas of “business ethics” and “CSR” are then obviously closely related in the academic literature. In contrast, sustainability stands out as a distinct and highly important dimension of business ethics and CSR, with a specific focus on environmental aspects.

Although the literature suggests that the awareness of customers concerning company social and environmental responsibility has been increasing in recent decades (e.g. Brunk and Blümelhuber, 2011), not all customers are equally interested and knowledgeable about issues of responsible company behaviour (Elias, 2004; Lämsä et al., 2008). Customers' expectations and perceptions about responsible conduct of companies can vary with their gender, education, age, ethnicity, culture, nationality and other characteristics (e.g. Luthar et al., 1997; Dellaportas, 2006). Among these, gender has attracted some of the most substantial scholarly attention. However, while the literature provides numerous studies on this issue, the results are often contrasting, and there is as yet no full agreement on the significance of gender differences in consumer expectations and perceptions of responsible corporate conduct (e.g. Collins, 2000; McCabe et al., 2006). Moreover, the existing literature on gender differences in business ethics, CSR and sustainability is affected by an extensive confusion of statistical significance with substantive significance.

As shown in more detail in section 2.3, statistical significance is about measurement precision and shows whether the observed values are distinguishable from chance; substantive significance is instead about the size of an effect and shows whether the magnitude of that effect is large enough to be considered relevant (Ellis, 2010). Thus a result concerning gender differences may be statistically significant, but not significant from the substantive point of view. Confusing these concepts can lead to systematic and misleading biases in scientific research (e.g., Ziliak and McCloskey, 2008; Fine, 2010; Filippin and Crosetto, 2014). One of the particular problems when studying gender differences is that the failure to attend to substantive significance can cause the researcher to state that differences exist, without revealing their true relevance (size). Therefore, it is essential to report both statistical significance (P value) and substantive significance (effect size).

Given this context, the current work examines the influence of gender differences on both CSR perceptions and expectations, in a particular commercial sector, while also deepening these explorations to reveal the gender-related influences with changing age and education, which are themselves known to be influential factors concerning responsible behaviour (e.g.; Luthar et al., 1997; Dellaportas, 2006; Lämsä et al., 2008). Moreover, the paper aims to clarify the difference between statistical significance and substantive significance of gender differences in business ethics, CSR and sustainability and review the literature accordingly. Thus the study analyses the substantive and statistical significance of the impact of gender differences on customer expectations and perceptions, and then repeats the comparison between men and women with different education levels and age groups, and then again for men and women concerning to different CSR issues and dimensions.

The analysis is carried out in the context of the Italian banking sector, examining the effect of gender differences among the clients of 12 major banks. Italy represents a useful field for research, as it is a world leader in the number of companies certified under sustainability standards, such as SA8000 (Ciliberti et al., 2008; Social

Accountability Accreditation Services, 2015). The banking sector is particularly interesting as a research area because of a number of recent financial scandals. Such scandals have attracted widespread attention from the media, the general public, the bank customers, as well government institutions and scholars (Cosma and Gualandri, 2012). In fact, consumers in Italy and other nations often criticise the banking and financial sector for irresponsible behaviour, considering this as one of the causes of the current broader economic crisis. It is thus important and useful to understand customers' CSR expectations and perceptions for this area, which is fundamental and pervasive in all aspects of the economy, and which at the same time has been subject to heavy criticism (Fassin and Gosselin, 2011).

In the following section, the literature on the topic of gender differences in business ethics, CSR and sustainability is reviewed and discussed. Sections 3 and 4 present the research method and provide the results of the study. The final sections present the study discussion and conclusions.

2. Literature review

Gender issues are of critical importance in the debate on orientation towards corporate responsibility (e.g. Larson and Freeman, 1997; Grosser and Moon, 2005; Grosser, 2009). This section reviews and discusses the literature concerning gender differences in perceptions, expectations and attitudes about ethics, business ethics, CSR and sustainability, with a special focus on substantive significance of gender differences.

In a recent systematic literature review in areas (e.g. marketing, ethics, psychology) where gender differences are reliably observed, Meyers-Levy and Loken (2015) concluded that, in dealing with research comparing male and female, the term “sex” tends to be used in the biological sciences, whereas the term “gender” tends to be used in the social-psychological literatures. In the current article, the term “gender” is considered as synonymous with “sex” and does not refer to the social and cultural meaning of gender (e.g. gender roles and stereotypes). This choice is in keeping with previous studies concerning gender/sex differences in business ethics, CSR and sustainability, which tend to use the terms “sex” and “gender” interchangeably, referring to the male/female distinction as “gender” (e.g., Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Lämsä et al., 2008; Luthar et al., 1997).

Table 1 provides a schematic summary of the ethics, business ethics, CSR and sustainability literature, showing the publications that inquire into the influence of gender on stakeholder perceptions, expectations and attitudes, in regards to company responsible efforts. This section concludes with a special focus on the difference between statistical and substantive significance of gender differences.

2.1. Gender difference in ethics, business ethics, CSR and sustainability

In recent decades, there has been a quite heated debate over if and how gender differences may influence consumer responses to company social and environmental responsibility (e.g., Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013; Aouina Mejri and Bhatli, 2013).

According to the gender socialisation approach, gender can influence a person's moral orientation and the outcomes of their decisions and practices, since men and women will have different values and psychological characteristics. As early as 1972, Yankelevich conducted a series of studies on college students' personal and political attitudes, from which it emerged that males demonstrate more scepticism, cynicism and pessimism about the state of society and institutions than do females. According to these studies,

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