Connecting with global consumers through corporate social responsibility initiatives: A cross-cultural investigation of congruence effects of attribution and communication styles

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes that consumers' attribution styles influence how they respond to corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages. The current study employs a cross-cultural experiment to examine the interplay of consumer attribution styles and message types on the outcome of CSR communication, and reveals a significant interaction between attribution style and CSR message. Individuals with a dispositional attribution style responded more favorably to evidence-based CSR messages than to belief-based messages, while those with a situational attribution style responded more favorably to belief-based messages than to evidence-based messages. This study extends cross-cultural research into the area of CSR communication and offers practical guidelines for international marketers and corporations on how to communicate their CSR involvement to global consumers.

1. Introduction

In today's socially conscious market environment, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have become a significant component of most global business agendas. When executed well, CSR initiatives benefit both consumers and organizations. Corporations benefit by acting not only as a positive force for social change, but by potentially furthering core profit-making functions (Crane, 2008; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). While global corporations readily acknowledge the importance of CSR, they have to work hard to convey to consumers the depth of their involvement (Cone, 2015a; Du et al., 2010).

While CSR remains a relatively new concept in Asia (Welford, 2004, 2005), Asian consumers have been found to be the most socially conscious shoppers in the world (Nielsen, 2014). This tracks with recent studies revealing that Asian consumers are beginning to reward and punish companies for their level of CSR involvement. For example, an East Asian Institute (EAI) survey revealed that approximately 77% of South Korean respondents reported they would not buy the products or use the services of a company that fails to meet its minimum CSR standards (EAI, 2005). And, nearly two-thirds (64%) of Asian consumers surveyed said they were willing to pay more for products and services from companies committed to positive social and environmental CSR. While globalization enables companies to connect Western and East Asian societies and economic systems, differences in cultural value orientations and communication styles are still factors to work through when implementing a CSR initiative (Chapple & Moon, 2005, 2007; Ramasamy, Yeung, & Chen, 2013).

Cross-cultural studies have found that Westerners and East Asians communicate differently, use information differently, and have different causal attribution and cognitive systems (Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999; Hall, 2000; Nisbett, Choi, Peng, & Norenzayan, 2001). Westerners tend to think analytically, while East Asians tend to think holistically. Cultural psychologists maintain that this phenomenon has led Westerners and East Asians to adopt differing attribution styles or ways of explaining behaviors (Fiske, Gilbert, & Lindzey, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989, 1995). Hence, Westerners tend to explain a person's behavior as evidence of his or her true character (i.e., dispositionism), while East Asians tend to explain behavior by considering the context in which it takes place (i.e., situationism or contextualism). Similar patterns can be expected when Western and East Asian consumers explain the behaviors of global corporations.

Global companies try to build a socially responsible image by implementing CSR initiatives and then disseminating information about those initiatives to the media. Consumers use such information to assess

and predict a company's behavior. In other words, people make inferences about a company's character by evaluating its CSR activities (Du et al., 2010; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Weiner, 1985). A company may craft different CSR messages to capture the attention of a global audience composed of consumers with different causal thinking styles and ways of processing messages. Culture may therefore play an important role in this attribution process.

A large body of research on CSR has examined such topics as psychological mechanisms (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Menon & Kahn, 2003; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013), message strategies (Andreu, Casado-Díaz, & Mattila, 2015), message sources (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Szykman, Bloom, & Blazing, 2004), company characteristics (Webb & Mohr, 1998; Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006), and internal and external outcomes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Murphy, 2013). In today's competitive global business environment, the role of culture is important. Nonetheless, there is limited research that delineates the role of culture in CSR communication (Chapple & Moon, 2005; Welford, 2005). This study thus aims to examine how Westerners and East Asians differ in their responses to various types of CSR messages, inquiring whether a message type that is congruent with a recipient's attribution style is more effective than one that is not.

This research makes several important contributions to understanding CSR communication. First, this study extends CSR communication research into the cross-cultural context. As more and more companies expand their footprint into multiple regions of the world, a deeper understanding is needed of how corporations operating across cultures communicate their CSR initiatives (Bortree, 2014; Scherer & Palazzo, 2008). To date, most studies have focused on one culture or a single country at a time (Chapple & Moon, 2005; Ellen et al., 2006; Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Kim & Rader, 2010; Maignan & Ralston, 2002; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). It is thus timely to investigate cross-cultural differences in CSR communication in more than one country. Second, this research builds a theoretical conceptualization that integrates insights gained from cross-cultural psychology and marketing communication for CSR. Previous literature has informed us that culture affects an individual's attribution style (Choi et al., 1999; Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004; Masuda & Nisbett, 2001; Nisbett & Masuda, 2003; Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 1999, 2002; Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000). The research is limited, however, that tests how this psychological factor influences consumer response toward various message framings. The current research, though, empirically tested the role of attribution style in cross-cultural CSR communication. Lastly, communicating CSR endeavors is different from communicating aspects of corporate ability (e.g., product superiority) because CSR communication often encompasses a company's identity-revealing characteristics such as virtues (Du et al., 2010). Consumers may use CSR messages to attribute the underlying motive and character when they evaluate a company's citizenship (Ellen et al., 2006; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006). In this regard, examining the role of consumers' attribution styles in CSR communication should offer insights to researchers and practitioners. Given that the purpose of CSR initiatives is promoting the social wellbeing of the community where the company belongs, messages communicating those activities should match consumers' cultural orientations and thinking styles. Furthermore, the cultural understanding gained through results from this study can offer a starting point for future investigations delving into culture-based responses to CSR such as ethnic cultures within a single country.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. CSR and attribution style

Consumer knowledge about a company exists as a company schema. Brown and Dacin (1997) identified two types of company schemas: corporate ability (CA) association and corporate social responsibility

(CSR) association. CA association focuses on a company's ability to produce products; CSR association focuses on a company's societal and stakeholder obligation (Pérez & del Bosque, 2015). Research suggests that information pertaining to CSR associations reveals a company's moral traits and, in the various phases of a consumer's global impression formation of a company, play a more important role than competence traits (Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998).

Messages that convey CSR associations help establish a company's identity and reveal its virtues (Du et al., 2010). Consumers digest these messages as part of the attribution process as they evaluate a company's standing as a social citizen. Consumers often question a company's motives for becoming involved in CSR initiatives that they use those messages in inferring a company's true motives (Ellen et al., 2006; Sen et al., 2006). In fact, rather than engage in the time-consuming process of evaluating a company on its objective merits, consumers tend to make spontaneous inferences about a company through its CSR associations (Hassin, Bargh, & Uleman, 2002; Winter & Uleman, 1984).

How, then, do consumers process the information they glean from CSR messages? In order to understand a company's behavior, consumers engage in two types of causal attribution—*dispositional* and *situational*. In other words, an individual may make attributions about a company either on the basis of its disposition or on the basis of a situation that plays a role in shaping the company's behavior (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Consumers with a dispositional attribution style are more likely to attribute a company's behavior to its stable internal dispositions, such as expertise. Consumers with a situational attribution style are more likely to infer a company's behavior in terms of context-specific factors such as reputation and social role (Choi et al., 1999). Depending on the preferred attribution style, consumers may find one type of information easier to access than the other and respond differently toward CSR messages.

2.2. Culture and causal attribution

An ample amount of studies have suggested that different cultures lead to different causal attribution styles (Choi et al., 1999; Norenzayan & Nisbett, 2000; Um & Lee, 2015). Individualistic cultures tend to believe that behaviors are caused by internal personality traits because they view individuals as autonomous entities who behave according to their personal preferences (Choi & Nisbett, 1998). People in individualistic cultures are distinguished by their tendency toward dispositionism. They make inferences by decontextualizing structure from content, by using formal logic, and by avoiding contradiction. In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures are more inclined to make inferences about a company on the basis of situational factors. This tendency is reinforced by the belief that behavior is shaped by relationships and that people are socialized to behave according to situational constraints and group norms (Morris & Peng, 1994; Harry, Charalambos, & Triandis, 1995).

Cross-cultural studies on causal theories suggest that East Asians frequently explain the outcome of behaviors by using situational factors—and do so more often than Americans (Norenzayan et al., 1999). Cousins (1989) examined differences between how Americans and Japanese described themselves in the Twenty Statement Test and found that Americans referenced personality traits (e.g., "I am curious," "I am sincere"), while Japanese referred to specific contexts in their self-descriptions (e.g., one who plays Mah-Jong on Friday nights"). Similarly, Rhee, Uleman, Lee, and Roman (1995) found that Koreans described themselves using social categories (e.g., brother, student) more often and with fewer personal traits (e.g., kind, honest) than did Americans.

Differences in causal attribution between Westerns and East Asians can also be found through the content of their communication. Morris and Peng (1994) analyzed the content of English- and Chinese-language newspaper articles about crimes committed by, in one instance, an American postal worker, and in another, a Chinese student. Results showed that while American newspaper articles focused on personal