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ARTICLE

The impact of congruence between the CSR activity and the company's core business on consumer response to CSR

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Abstract The focal action in CSR campaigns can be either related or unrelated to the company's core business. Previous research has revealed mixed results as to which option produces the most favorable consumer responses. In this paper, we try to shed some light on the effect of congruence between the CSR campaign and the company's core business on consumer response, while identifying skepticism toward CSR as the key moderator that can help us assess its impact. The data confirm our hypotheses and clarify the role of congruence in CSR initiatives. Both academic and managerial implications are reported and discussed.

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Impacto de la congruencia de las acciones de RSC y la actividad principal de la empresa en la respuesta del consumidor

Resumen La actividad central de las campañas de RSC puede estar relacionada o no con la actividad principal de la empresa. La literatura previa ha obtenido resultados no concluyentes en cuanto a qué alternativa genera las respuestas más favorables en los consumidores. En este trabajo, se aporta evidencia sobre el efecto de la congruencia entre las acciones de RSC y la actividad principal de la empresa en la respuesta del consumidor, al tiempo que se identifica el escepticismo hacia las acciones de RSC como el moderador clave para entender el impacto de la congruencia. Los datos confirman nuestras hipótesis acerca del efecto de la congruencia de las iniciativas de RSC. Al final de este trabajo se discuten las implicaciones para la literatura de RSC y para la gestión de la empresa.

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Introduction

The question that arises today is no longer whether companies should invest their resources and time on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, but how and when they can create a significant impact on consumers through investment in social initiatives. CSR initiatives have moved from being an option to being perceived as an activity to be performed in order to improve the results of the company, not only in the short term, but also with regard to long-term relationships (Porter & Kramer, 2006). The main reason behind this new perception and role of CSR activities is that consumers' expectations have changed. As revealed by the 2013 Cone Communications/Echo Global CSR Study, 94% of consumers believe that companies should go beyond the economic performance and play an important role in improving social and environmental welfare, which is known as triple bottom line.

Every day more companies implement initiatives to improve public health, safety, the environment or welfare of the community, with examples of well-known companies such as Primark, Ikea or Coca Cola Company. Since its partnership with BSR (Business for Social Responsibility) in 2011, Primark is working on the project Health Enables Returns to improve the quality of life of its employees in factories in Bangladesh, providing tools (training on maternal health, personal hygiene and diseases such as AIDS, malaria and dengue fever) that enable women to have greater control over their personal and work life. Ikea has developed the initiative People + Planet, through which they aim to have a positive impact on both individuals and the environment. And since 2005, Coca Cola has partnered other organizations in 86 countries to support local water conservation initiatives.

When companies engage in CSR, consumer's attitude toward the company is positively reinforced through better assessments of the company and its products (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). However, the study of the relationship between CSR and consumer behavior is relatively recent, which at least partly explains the lack of a generally accepted model of consumer responses to CSR initiatives. Research has shown that CSR campaigns influence buying behavior in a more ethical direction only if it is convenient and there is no extra cost in terms of increase in price or quality loss (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Additionally, while negative information on CSR affects all consumers, only those truly motivated toward social behavior are affected by corporate initiatives related to the welfare of society (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Therefore, further investigation is needed to shed light on the differential responses consumers show when exposed to such initiatives.

One of the key factors that affect the way consumers respond to CSR is related to the congruence between the social initiative and the main activity of the company (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Bigné, Currás-Pérez, & Sánchez-García, 2009; Bigné, Currás-Pérez, & Aldás-Manzano, 2012; Webb & Mohr, 1998). Previous literature has reported mixed results with respect to the activities on which a company must focus when investing in CSR. First, there is evidence suggesting that in certain situations where

the company develops CSR activities, consumers infer a self-ish motivation when business and causes are linked, while real altruistic behavior is attributed when the activity of the company and the social cause are not related (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Moosmayer & Fulhjan, 2013). However, another stream of research states that results are better for campaigns where the social initiative and the main activity of the firm are congruent (Dean, 1999; Lee & Jeong, 2014; Lucke & Heinze, 2015; Speed & Thompson, 2000).

In this paper, we resume the influence of congruence on CSR associations, instead of focusing on attitude, as the former represents the immediate consumers' reactions to the campaign. Additionally, the lack of consensus with regard to the effect of congruence on consumers' responses lead us to believe that such congruence is not enough to explain consumers reactions to CSR initiatives. There must be other variables able to explain why this effect is positive in some studies and negative in others. We propose that skepticism is the variable that can clarify the results found so far. Skepticism has previously been studied in literature and defined as the person's tendency to doubt, disbelieve, and question (Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Forehand & Grier, 2003). In the context of CSR initiatives, individuals can be more or less skeptical depending on their inferences about the firm motives to engage in such action. Thus, skepticism toward CSR refers to whether the consumer attributes CSR campaigns to egoistic-driven motives or public-serving motives (Skarmetas & Leonidou, 2013).

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, we analyze the effect of congruence between the CSR campaign and the company's core business on CSR associations. Second, we incorporate CSR skepticism as a moderator in the relationship and as a key construct to shed light on the lack of consensus previously stated in literature. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we review the relevant literature and propose a set of hypotheses. Then, the methodology is presented. Next, the results are reported and, finally, both theoretical and managerial contributions are discussed.

Literature review

CSR and consumer behavior

The existence of more than forty definitions of CSR (Dahlsrud, 2008) proves the lack of consistency in terms of both conceptualization and measurement. CSR was initially approached from the perspective of management and later marketing scholars started to analyze the phenomenon from the consumers' point of view (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Ellen et al., 2000; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). This marketing approach has primarily focused on two key aspects. On the one hand, the operationalization of the CSR to influence consumers' perceptions about the social responsibility of the company (Aguinis & Glavas, 2013; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). One way companies have operationalized CSR has been through the creation of a connection with a cause, which is properly called cause-related marketing (CRM) and defined as "the process of formulating and implementing

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