

Corporate social responsibility: a consumer psychology perspective

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This paper reviews the substantial body of work on corporate social responsibility (CSR), including the synonymous domains of cause-related marketing and ethical consumption, to synthesize the diverse findings on consumer responses to CSR. CSR is capable of engendering a range of company-favoring perceptions and behaviors, driven by both consumers' CSR-related motivations (e.g., consumer-company identification, affective motives) and their CSR-guided product perceptions. As well, the paper documents the plethora of CSR initiative-specific, company-specific, and consumer-specific factors that modulate consumers' reactions to CSR initiatives, and ends with a discussion of some key future research directions.

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With the ascendance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the global business firmament, scholars have turned to understanding consumers' reactions to CSR, conceived broadly as a firm's or brand's commitment to maximize long-term economic, societal, and environmental well-being through business practices, policies, and resources [1^{*}]. These initiatives vary in terms of their stakeholder focus (e.g., consumers; employees; supply chain; the environment), the type and extent of company involvement (donating funds, providing/developing corporate capabilities), and their precise structure [2], such as cause-related marketing or CRM, corporate social

marketing, corporate philanthropy, and socially responsible business practices.

In this article, we attempt to provide an integrative sense for our extant understanding of consumer reactions to CSR. We start with what this accumulative work in the synonymous domains of CSR, CRM and ethical products/consumption says about consumer responses to CSR. We then present the drivers of these responses as well as the guiding contingencies. We end with a brief discussion of some key directions for future research.

Behavioral responses to CSR

After the initial years of debate over whether or not CSR is an impetus for product purchase, the findings of recent research coalesce around a fairly clear sense that consumers are more likely, in a range of consumption contexts, to not just like products they perceive to be socially responsible [3^{*},4,5], but actually choose them in both experimental settings [6–8] and in the field [1,9,10]. This is reflected, in the longer term, in consumers' loyalty intentions, even in business-to-business markets [11], and behavioral loyalty (e.g., share of wallet) [12–14], lasting for up to a year [15].

At the same time, however, there remains a persisting sense that consumers sometimes do not act in line with their CSR-guided purchase intentions [16,17]. Examinations of this intention-purchase gap locate it in consumers' willful ignorance of a product's ethical features due to their desire to preempt feelings of anger and sadness stemming from the possible choice of an unethical option [18], the differential weighting of such features in the purchase intent versus actual purchase decision [19], and the prioritization, or lack thereof, of ethical concerns in the shopping process [17].

Consumers' CSR responses are not restricted to purchase. Of a range of advocacy behaviors, such as positive word-of-mouth [1^{*},20,21], perhaps the most intriguing is consumers' CSR-based resistance to negative information about a company or its products. After a product-harm crisis, for instance, CSR insulates a company by causing consumers to attribute the crisis cause to external circumstances rather than to the company [22]. More recent research finds that CSR can reduce anger and negative word-of-mouth following service failures [13,23^{*}]. Notably, such insulation is more likely in the case of lapses in the CSR domain, as opposed to the product/service domain [24].

Underlying mechanisms

From brand image to product efficacy

At the root of this array of pro-company behaviors is the insight CSR provides consumers into the company's moral character or 'soul' [3*,4], engendering trust [11,20,25] particularly of the affective kind [1*,13] and, consequently, a positive, broad, image-based [26–28] desire to support such companies and their products [13,14]. A more recent line of research points, however, to the ability of this CSR-based image to actually alter consumers' more specific perceptions of a product's features and performance. Consumers with green consumption values provide more favorable evaluations of the non-environmental attributes of green products [29*] and ascribe greater healthiness [30,31] to socially responsible food products, due, at least in part, to a CSR-based halo that enhances perceptions of product performance even after actual experience [3*]. At the same time, however, other research points to the adverse effects of CSR on product efficacy judgments. For instance, green products are deemed less rather than more effective by consumers high on environmental concern [32] and on strength-related product attributes [33]. The greater consumption of socially responsible food [30] and green products [32] stems, in such cases, from consumers' compensatory consumption behaviors, triggered by their CSR-altered performance appraisals, rather than a favorable brand image.

Consumer motivations

While consumers may be motivated to support a brand due merely to the functional benefits they receive from its CSR actions [10], their affinity for the CSR issue [29*] and, more generally, both altruistic and egoistic motives [34], a key focus of earlier research has been on their more abstract, identity-serving motives. This research [4,11,14] has sprung around the social identity-derived notion of consumer–company identification (i.e., their sense of identity-based oneness with a company [35]) to suggest that the CSR-based dimensions of a company's identity are particularly attractive to consumers motivated to define, enhance, and distinguish from others their sense of self through identification with the company, producing, in turn, support for the socially responsible company.

Notably, interest has turned more recently to the affective motives guiding consumer responses to CSR. Researchers have implicated both moral emotions such as pride and guilt [36] as well as feelings of empathy and gratitude [21] as drivers of consumers' intentions to purchase an ethical product. In the aftermath of a service failure, a company's CSR strategy can reduce consumer anger and regret, and increase guilt over harming the company [23*]. More specifically, anticipated guilt has been implicated as a driver of the effect of consumers' self-accountability (i.e., the activation of their desire to

live up to their self-standards) on their ethical product preferences [37].

Contingencies

Aspects of CSR

Perceived motives

Much research [3*,13,14,25,38,39] points to consumers' sense for why a company is engaging in CSR as a pivotal driver of their responses to it. This research has dichotomized consumers' attributions about a company's motives for engaging in CSR (though see Ellen, Webb, and Mohr [38] for a more nuanced articulation) as intrinsic (e.g., a genuine concern for societal and environmental well-being), producing positive consumer reactions, versus extrinsic (e.g., profit maximization), producing negative or at best neutral reactions [3*,13,14,39–43]. Interestingly, some research [1*,38] suggests that because of consumers' evolving understanding of CSR [44], from a zero-sum to a positive-sum game (i.e., creating value for both the company and its stakeholders), they may increasingly perceive and be tolerant of mixed (i.e., both intrinsic and extrinsic) motives.

Perceived efficacy

Fewer studies have focused on the key role of consumers' perceived efficacy of CSR actions. Naturally, beneficiaries of a CSR initiative are more supportive of the sponsoring company when they perceive the initiative to have contributed more to their welfare [10]. More interestingly, consumers' intentions to support a brand engaging in CSR depend not just on the gravity of the focal CSR issue but on their sense for the brand's ability to remedy it: when the latter is uncertain or low, consumers' brand preference actually decreases as the gravity of the CSR issue increases [45].

Aspects of the company

CSR-company fit

Of all the company-specific factors, the role of perceived fit between an initiative and its sponsoring company, on one or more of at least twelve conceptual (e.g., brand positioning) and perceptual (e.g., color scheme [46]) dimensions [47] has garnered the most research interest. Not surprisingly, higher fit initiatives produce, in general, more positive consumer responses [15,46,48]. Perhaps more interesting are its less obvious interactions with other moderators such as CSR initiative type and intendedness [49], the level and focus (i.e., brand versus CSR issue) of consumers' thoughts regarding it [50], their issue affinity and perceived company motive [51], and the extent of company involvement [34]. For instance, when consumer's issue affinity is high or when the perceived company motive is extrinsic, CSR-company fit has little impact on consumer responses [51].

Company involvement

Less attention has been devoted to the key role of company involvement (e.g., donation amount in a

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