

Csr and Consumer Affairs, an Unresolved Paradox: An Empirical Study in Indian Perspective

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ABSTRACT : *There is an unresolved paradox concerning the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in consumer affairs. On the one side, consumers demand more and more CSR information from organisations. On the other side, research shows a considerable gap between consumers' apparent interest in CSR and the limited role of CSR in their affairs and purchase behavior. During the past decade, consumers have become progressively more interested in corporate social responsibility. Several reasons for this have been advanced: On the one hand, firms are progressively engaging more in CSR activities and putting more emphasis on communicating their CSR efforts. On the other side, consumer supporter groups are highlighting irresponsible corporate behavior and calling for boycotts. The increased attention placed on CSR also seems to affect consumers' purchase intentions. In reality, CSR still only plays a minor role in consumption decisions. When being asked, consumers shows their motivation and willingness to take into account CSR activities, but when it comes to taking decision about real consumption, only very few consumers take into account of CSR. The discrepancy between reported intentions and actual behavior calls for a better understanding of the limited role CSR plays in purchase decisions. This paper tries to shed light on this issue and attempts to provide a improved understanding of the process by which consumers integrate their perceptions of CSR initiatives as a purchase norm. We use qualitative data from in detail interviews. The findings of this study show that the evaluation of CSR initiatives is a complex and hierarchically-structured process during which consumers distinguishes between three factors core factor, central factor, and peripheral factors. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the role of CSR in consumption decisions.*

KEYWORDS: *Corporate social responsibility, purchase intention, consumer behavior.*

I. INTRODUCTION

There is an unresolved paradox concerning the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in consumer affairs. On the one hand, consumers demand more and more CSR information from corporations. On the other side, research shows a considerable gap between consumers' apparent interest in CSR and the limited role of CSR in their affairs and purchase behavior. During the past decade, consumers have become progressively more interested in corporate social responsibility (Maignan, 2001; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). A number of reasons have been advanced for this: On the supply side, firms are ever more engaging in CSR activities and give more stress on communicating their CSR efforts while, on the demand side, consumer support groups are putting light on irresponsible corporate behavior and calling for boycotts (Snider, Paul, & Martin, 2003). The increased attention placed on CSR also seems to affect consumers' purchase intentions, many surveys and experiments come out to show (e.g. Brown & Dacin, 1997; Mohr & Webb, 2005; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). However, despite consumers' interest in CSR and its ostensive impact on purchase behavior, but actually, CSR still only plays a minor role in consumption decisions (Mohr et al. 2001). This challenges many findings based on experiments and survey, which shows that consumers take into account a company's CSR initiatives while making purchasing. Probable explanations point to two shortcomings in this stream of research are, First one is the experimental setting of many researches induces artificial awareness for CSR. So, while such studies give some useful insights, but the impact of CSR on actual consumer behavior may not be fully captured. Second point is, many of these studies tend to suffer from a social desirability bias like When being asked, consumers state their willingness and motivation to take into consideration CSR, but when it comes to decision of real consumption, only very few take account of CSR (Timothy M. Devinney, Auger, & Eckhardt, 2010; Auger & Devinney, 2007). The inconsistency between reported intentions and actual behavior of the consumer calls for a better understanding of the limited role CSR plays in purchase decisions. Our paper tries to put light on this problem and tries to give a better understanding of the process by which consumers incorporate their perceptions of CSR initiatives as a purchase criterion. We used qualitative data from in-depth interviews. The results show that the appraisal of CSR initiatives is hierarchically-structured and complex process in which consumers distinguishes between core factor, central factor, and peripheral factors.

II. BACKGROUND

Consumers as stakeholders

Why do consumers perform altruistic acts such as financial contributions to charitable organizations, giving high price for environmentally responsible products or even donating organs? One reason is the human wish to experience a warm glow (Andreoni, 1990), This is opposite to the traditional economists' view of people as selfish. But do consumers also experience a warm glow in respect of companies that perform altruistic acts and recompense them, therefore leading to improved corporate reputation? One of the central arguments in favour of corporate commitment to and engagement in social responsibilities is providing a positive answer to this question. It is set in in the general stakeholder argument: a socially responsible company is supposed to address the concerns and satisfy the demands of its main stakeholders (e.g., Donaldson & Preston , 1995; Jones , 1995; Maignan , Ferrell and Hult , 1999 ; Waddock , 2000) – those actors who can, directly or indirectly, affect, or be affected by, corporate activities such as customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders, the media, investors, regulators, and interest organisations (Freeman, 1984). Consumers are definitely one of the key stakeholders of companies in the marketing exchange process (Folkes and Kamins ,1999 ; Hunt and Vitell , 1992) . However, research addressing the relationships between CSR activities and consumers-as-stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes and behavior is so far quite under researched. Moreover – as will be seen below – the few studies investigating consumers and marketing management in this context are concerned with a wide and not necessarily coherent range of issues. In addition to that, studies explicitly investigating consumers' responses to the communication of CSR are scarce, while a little research more implicitly addresses consumer responses or non-responses often conceptualized as brand evaluations or purchase intentions.

This study will addresses the central question of what we know so far as to when, why & how consumers respond to which CSR activities? This assessment will then be used .The study will be organized as follows: The next section discusses previous work on corporate social responsibility and consumer behavior and identifies some of the common limitations inherent in review of existing literature. Subsequently, data and the methodological issues will be explained, and the findings will be presented .Finally, the implications of the findings are will be discussed, and avenues for further research will be suggested.

Corporate social responsibility

The concept of corporate social responsibility has been characterized as elusive (Smith &Langford, 2009), broad and complex (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001), malleable (T. Devinney, 2009), and blurry and fuzzy (Geoffrey, 2001). The basic idea behind it is straightforward: Corporations are responsible for more than simply making a profit (Godfrey & Hatch, 2007).However, achieving a clear and common understanding of what these corporate responsibilities are has proven to be difficult (McWilliams, Siegel, & Wright, 2006b). Devinney (2009) suggests that there are two kinds of views: those with a narrow focus , that perceive monetary profitability within the framework of the law as the sole responsibility of a company, and those with a broader view, perceiving companies as organizations with a much broader set of obligations. Most definitions are, however positioned on the range somewhere in between these two views (T. Devinney, 2009). This study will follow the broader view of corporate social responsibility in accordance with the European Commission, which has defined CSR as "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders".

Consumer responses to csr

Impact of CSR on Product and Company Evaluations several studies show that consumers take their commitment to CSR initiatives into account when evaluating companies and their products. In both the cases, positive news has a much weaker effect on the evaluation than negative CSR information (Biehal & Sheinin, 2007; Marin & Ruiz, 2007; Brown & Dacin, 1997). In addition, consumer identification with the company plays a role when evaluating a company. More the consumers identify themselves with a company, the more positively they assess it. On the other hand, a company's CSR position leads to consumer identification with the company, which in turn leads to better company evaluations (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Consumers' perception of motives for engaging in csr

Consumers' perceptions of companies' motives for engaging in corporate social responsibility also play an essential role in consumer responses to the concept (Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009; Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). Ellen (2006) identified different types of attributions: other-centered (stakeholder-driven and values-driven attributions), self-centered (strategy-driven and egotistically-driven attributions), and win-win. Other-centered attributions refer to consumers' perceptions that companies feel morally committed and see it as their responsibility to help; self-centered ones depict companies engaging in CSR for strategic reasons (e.g. to increase their profits).

Most consumers ascribe mixed motives to corporate engagement in CSR and view companies in a positive light when they credit CSR-related efforts with a combination of values-driven and strategic attributions (Vlachos, et al., 2009; Ellen, et al., 2006). Vlachos et al. (2009) show that values-driven attributions positively have an effect on trust, while stakeholder-driven, strategy driven and egotistically-driven attributions have a negative impact or no impact at all. Similarly, Becker-Olsen et al. (2006) conclude that social motivation is essential for a positive consumer reaction, at the same time as profit-motivated initiatives have a negative impact.

Consumers' awareness and the communication of csr

Common problem of most studies researching the link between CSR and consumer behavior is an assumed or artificially-induced awareness of CSR. However, consumers generally have a low level of awareness about what CSR is (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006). Nonetheless, when consumers are made aware of what is meaning of CSR, it shows that CSR does lead to positive attitudes and stronger behavioral intentions towards buying products from a socially-responsible company (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Sen, et al., 2006). Hence, communicating CSR activities is essential to enhancing CSR awareness. In particular, communication channels that are not directly controlled by the corporation play a major role in CSR communication, as does the type of CSR program (namely institutional, as opposed to promotional) (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Pirsch, Gupta, & Grau, 2007). Institutional CSR programs offer a complete approach to CSR, tries to fulfill a company's social obligations towards all stakeholder groups and touching on all aspects of the company" (Pirsch et al. 2007, p. 126). Companies offer institutionalized CSR create CSR policies for all stakeholders and tries to satisfy their moral obligations. This type of program has a greater impact on customer loyalty, attitudes towards the company, and purchase intention than do promotional CSR programs, which are targeted at selling products (Pirsch, et al., 2007).

Csr and purchase intention

The type of CSR activity, consumers' support of the initiative and their beliefs about the tradeoffs a company makes for the sake of its CSR play a crucial role in consumers' reactions to CSR activities (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). Furthermore, the influence of CSR on consumers' purchase intention can be direct or indirect. The effect is indirect when a corporate situation for purchase intention is created, this means when consumers know the company and its CSR actions. Though, a company's CSR actions can also have a direct influence on the attractiveness of its products. At this time, a company's CSR actions directly affect purchase intention, as the CSR initiative corresponds to the consumer's CSR beliefs and his/her support for the initiatives (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). And it is also clear that Consumers who respond more positively to CSR activities have also been found to take more responsible purchase decisions and act more responsibly in their disposal behavior (Mohr & Webb, 2005). Extant research also showed that CSR only has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention when consumers are interested in the CSR activity and support it. Moreover, there must be a good fit between the company's CSR activity and its business. Furthermore, irresponsible corporate behavior has been found to have a greater impact on consumers' purchase intention than responsible behavior (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

However, Mohr et al. (2001) draw attention to the fact that only a small segment of consumers uses CSR as a purchasing criterion on a regular basis. Building on qualitative data, Mohr and colleagues identified four different groups of consumers: (1) pre-contemplators, (2) contemplators, (3) action-oriented consumers, and (4) maintainers. Pre-contemplators do not base their consumption decisions on CSR; contemplators think about CSR, but do not actually act on it; action-oriented consumers sometimes use CSR as a purchase criterion; and maintainers are committed to considering CSR when they buy. Most respondents (precontemplators and contemplators) have positive attitudes towards companies who engage in corporate social responsibility activities, but few (action-oriented consumers) consider CSR be an important purchase criterion. Only a minority (21%) use a company's CSR position as a purchase criterion sometimes or on a regular basis (Mohr, et al., 2001). Current figures of fair trade are in line with these results; shows that fair trade sales account 1% of global trade (Siegle, 2009). Taken collectively, a growing body of literature focuses on CSR and consumer behavior. While the findings of this research show some impact of CSR on consumers' product and company valuation, they display the limited impact of CSR on purchase intention. Moreover, the research points to the importance of the perceived motives of CSR and, in particular, to the central role of consumer awareness and communication of CSR. Similar results have been obtained from a related stream of research on "the ethical consumer". Though, in contrast to the literature on CSR and consumer behavior, the discourse about ethical consumption is already further advanced and focuses on the identification of antecedents of moral consumption.

Latest example of this research stream is a contribution by Bray et al. (2011), who identify exogenous (consumer characteristics) and impeding variables in ethical consumption and their impact on various consumer behavior outcomes (e.g. boycott, self-interest). Our paper widens this discussion by moving beyond individual (ethical) product offers to the tactical level, i.e. CSR initiatives. Consequently, we attempt to shed light on the role a company's CSR activities plays in purchase decisions by exploring the consumers' evaluation process of CSR perceptions as a purchase criterion.

III. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper aims to understand the meanings that actions by individuals convey rather than to predict their behavior and explore and understand perceptions; beliefs, and values, qualitative inquiry seems to be most appropriate (McCracken, 1988). In addition, qualitative methods are considered most helpful to examine situations where claimed attitudes and actual behavior diverge (Belk, Devinney, & Eckhardt, 2005). Because of these reasons, in-depth interviews with consumers seem to be most advisable, as they enable researchers to gain "a more accurate and clear picture of a respondent's position or behavior" (Ghauri & Gronhaug, 2002, p.101). So, we are using an exploratory approach, aimed at developing a grounded understanding of consumers' evaluation of their perceptions of a company's CSR position during the purchasing process.

Data collection

Since the investigation of ethics-related topics is vulnerable to the social desirability bias, great care must be taken when collecting data (Brunk, 2010a; Mohr, et al., 2001). Hence, to reduce social desirability bias, several measures have been taken. We decided to use face-to face interviews over focus groups in order to minimize self-presentational concerns (Wooten & Reed II, 2000). The interviews were conducted in individuals' homes to make them feel comfortable. The familiar atmosphere, as well as the open interview style of semi-structured interviews offered the interviewees a trusted environment, encouraging them to answer openly and honestly. Moreover, before the interview, the participants were advised that the focus of the study was to investigate their opinions and beliefs and that there were no right and wrong answers to the interview questions. For particularly delicate questions, we used protective techniques, asking our respondents to interpret the behavior of other consumers (Fischer, 1993). The realization of the interviews was as follows: First of all, in the interview we discussed the companies and shops they liked and which products they had bought most recently. Then, they were asked why they visit those particular shops and which purchasing criteria are important to them. In a next step, the interviewees were shown visual stimuli representing the logos of predetermined companies. Again, they were asked to select those companies they like and/or where they buy products. Then, consumers were asked why they like and why they shop at these companies. Subsequently, the discussion moved towards the CSR policies and initiatives of these companies. After that, the conversation was directed towards the question of whether consumers can influence a company's behavior. Support and Boycotts for socially-responsible companies were debated. Finally, the main purpose of the study was revealed and discussed. A total of 25 individual interviews were conducted.

Sample

As qualitative research focuses on in-depth exploration, a small but diverse sample is recommended. Consumers with different shopping habits were chosen, ranging from price-conscious to quality shoppers. In addition, we chose consumers with diverse backgrounds with regards to demographic characteristics such as age, level of education, gender, occupation, and marital status. Thus, our sampling strategy was driven more by theory than by representativeness. Concerning the selection process we identified interviewees using two well-established approaches (Brunk, 2010b): First, the majority of interviewees were selected by convenience. Second, a few interviewees were recommended by participants (snowballing).

Data analysis

The basic steps in the analysis of qualitative data consist of coding the data, combining the codes into broader categories and themes, and interpreting the results (Sinkovics, et al., 2005; Creswell, 2007). This analysis developed gradually during the data collection process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); Analysis of the first transcript given the discussion guidelines to be polished for subsequent interviews. And after all the data had been collected, the final analysis has done.

IV: FINDINGS: FACTORS EFFECTING THE ASSESSMENT OF CSR AS A PURCHASING STANDARD

Overall, the interviewees agreed upon the minor importance of CSR compared to other purchase criteria like price, brand, quality, country of origin, or service. This is in accordance with prior research, which shows that CSR is not at the top of many consumers' lists (Beckmann, Christensen, & Christensen, 2001; Bray,

et al., 2011; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004) and it clear that only a very small segment of consumers consider CSR when purchasing products (Mohr, et al., 2001). The following statements illustrate this
For me, it is important that it is affordable; I can say that I am able to make use of it. That is what I primarily take into account: that it is inexpensive, that it is a good value-for-money-ratio. In the case of sport equipment, for me, quality is, crucial. I mean, for instance, a running shoe: I look at the functional parts. I think that is important, that it is a good product. Although a company's CSR initiatives alone do not trigger a purchasing decision in most cases, there are several determinants that increase the likelihood of taking CSR into consideration when making purchase. Specifically, consumers clearly make difference between core factor, central factor, and peripheral factors. Now, the three factors will be discussed in detail.

Core factors

Consumers' perceive two core factors as decisive for a potential consideration of CSR as a purchase criterion: information and personal concern. The most important and complex one is information on a company's CSR position. Past research also draws attention to the fact that information is a necessity for consumers to consider ethical product features in their consumption decisions (e.g. Bray, et al., 2011; Timothy M. Devinney, Auger, Eckhardt, & Britchnell, 2006). The following two statements illustrate how the type of information shapes consumers' perceptions:

This problematic nature is, we heard often about child labor at Nike, Puma and Adidas, and all of these manufacturers of sports equipment. It is a constantly-recurring issue there. When consumers have no or only little information about a company's socially-responsible behavior, CSR will unlikely be considered a purchase criterion. Put differently, when equipped only with some vague idea of a company's CSR practices, consumers will tend to overlook this information and continue with their customary purchasing behavior:

I can imagine myself doing that [engaging in a boycott] if I got to know it [that companies employ dubious practices], but I just don't have access to the information. But I am surely a person that never goes there [to a company employing dubious practices] in case I would learn about something like this. In contrast to these two statements, consumers can also have full knowledge of a company's CSR behavior. This can recount both to positive and to negative corporate behavior. When well resourced with comprehensive CSR information, the respondents believe that it is easier and more likely for them to integrate CSR into the decision-making process: I prefer buying products from companies that I consider to be OK. For example, I never buy Nike shoes, because I like Adidas much more than Nike. Also, I do not think they [Adidas] have been in the media [for bad practices]. I intentionally buy Fair Trade products, including orange juice and coffee, sure this is only a small product range but here I pay attention to it. I choose these products over others because I know that it is a recognized label and I know that they use the money for a good cause, helping [other people]. If consumers do have enough CSR-related information about a specific company, they will evaluate whether the respective behavior can be reconciled with their own personal concern of CSR issues. This is a main factor and comprises the attitudes consumers have towards CSR initiatives, such as non-employment of child labor, fair trade, air wages, environmentally-friendly practices, or organic production, etc. This main factor is very subjective in nature. In contrast to other factors, personal concern cannot be influenced by companies:

For me, it is also important how executives behave towards employees and workers, how they treat them... That plays an important role for me. Wal-Mart and its sub-contractors severely exploit the environment and pay only very low wages; for me this definitely was a reason for not buying there whenever they will come India. Many of the interviewees confirmed that they wait to be informed and then assess whether they can merge the obtained information with their personal concern. There should be definitely more information [on CSR initiatives]. This should not be hidden, but rather used for misinformation purposes. I really believe this should be done. For me, it is very important information that a grocery store, if they have a surplus, they do not throw it away, but rather give it to needy persons'. However, in a few cases, this process is reversed: Some respondents have strong negative attitudes concerning certain issues and proactively seek corporate information on these issues: Nowadays, consumers question certain things. I do not randomly go into [any shops] and say I do not care [about their CSR activities]. Instead, I ask what is behind it [the company], what are they doing [in terms of CSR].

Central factor

The interviewees stress that the financial situation of a consumer constitutes a central factor in this process. The factor not only describes the consumers' price perception and willingness to spend money on products from socially-responsible companies, but also the actual monetary resources of a person. With price being a very important criterion in decision-making among interviewees, the financial situation of the customer is highly relevant when purchasing goods. These findings are in accordance with previous research on the importance price (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001) and the dominance of financial rather than ethical values in purchase decisions (Bray, et al., 2011). Thus, sufficient financial resources are a prerequisite for considering a company's CSR activities as a purchase criterion. Price is frequently only a justification for not considering products of socially-responsible companies. Our respondents assume that products of a socially-responsible company are more expensive than alternatives. In some cases, such as fair trade products, this conclusion seems justified. However, there is a multitude of products of socially-responsible companies that are not higher priced. Consumers may be willing to opt for the products of a socially-responsible company when these are not more expensive than "regular" products. However, they often make wrong price assumptions. From the data; it becomes clear that consumers infer that they will not be able to afford products of a socially-responsible company.

We can visualize that products that take care of certain issues and adhere to all regulations just cause higher production costs and sales costs than other products that do not care, that are just cheap and produced at an ecological minimum. Finally, sometimes a company's CSR efforts are actually incorporated into a product's price, as in the case of fair trade. Consequently, there are consumers who do not have the financial resources to buy these products. It is definitely dependent on the money you have at your disposal. If you have a job where you don't earn a lot and you maybe still have to support a family, it might be possible that you would like to [consider a company's commitment or CSR efforts], but you just can't. Respondents approved that, in most cases, purchasing products of companies with positive CSR activities is related to the assumed price premium of such products: If the price differs only slightly, they would prefer the product of a socially-responsible company over a company with a negative CSR profile: In order to consider CSR as a purchase decisive factor, respondents stress that the two discussed core factors and the central factor have to be met. We believe that products made under socially responsible practices and terms, they (people) do not buy them because of their lack of knowledge, their disinterest, and shortage of money. These prerequisites limit the group of consumers who may take account of CSR initiatives in their purchase decisions. And, worse still, our interviewees experience the assessment of the core and central factors as a complex process that demands much more involvement than other criteria, such as brand familiarity, which is easy for them to determine when standing in front of the shelf. When all core and central factors are met, our respondents argue that CSR does not automatically become relevant in their decision-making.

Peripheral factors

When all core factors are met and the central factor – price – is perceived acceptable, our interviews revealed that the respondents consider three additional factors before they incorporate a company's CSR initiatives into their purchasing decisions. These peripheral factors include the image of the company, the credibility of CSR initiatives, and the influence of peer groups. The label "peripheral factors" indicates that these factors, by themselves, are not able to trigger an inclusion of CSR criteria in the decision-making process. However, consumers state that they might further enhance or decrease the probability of considering CSR in purchase decisions. The image of a company is, according to the respondents, an indication of whether or not it employs socially-responsible practices when conducting business. A positive perception of a company's image evokes the association that the company behaves socially responsible. Our respondents think that this, in turn, increases the likelihood to consciously opt for a company's products and incorporate CSR efforts into their purchasing decisions.

On no product it says, "I am a socially-responsible company" or "I am not." It's not marked anywhere, but rather you know the company. Yes, it either has a good image or a less good image, & this is what matters in the end. Eventually, it is an overall picture. If it (the company) treats everyone fair and makes a good product, it will certainly have a good reputation.

The credibility of CSR initiatives constitutes another peripheral factor. The respondents agree that credibility is influenced by the fit between a company's CSR initiatives and its core business. Many consumers only consider a CSR initiative credible if it is aligned with a company's core business. The respondents conceive that initiatives totally detached from the business a company is operating in appear less credible and are interpreted as a marketing ploy. Furthermore, initiatives are less credible if they involve only a monetary donation. Also the fit, the credibility of CSR initiatives strongly depends on the channel of communication.

The more “low-key” the communication is, the better. The more offensive, aggressive, or bold it [CSR initiatives] gets communicated, the more unpleasant I perceive it.

Being noted as sponsor on the program of a music event is OK, but a huge newspaper ad is quite annoying.

Finally, the influence of peer groups, which is closely connected to the image of a company is the last peripheral factor. A company’s image frequently develops through interactions with colleagues, friends, or family. Consumer respondents stress that peer groups can also directly influence their assessment of CSR as a purchase criterion. Family and friends can either dissuade or encourage consumers to buy from a socially-responsible company. According to the interviewees, this leads consumers to either refrain from buying certain products or to support a specific company.

At one time, I really liked shopping of particular crackers. But then I got to know, from my circle of friends, that these products are just available because children have to do the work. This really shocked me, and I also know some others who stopped buying there for this reason

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper set out to assess the role of CSR in the purchase decision-making process and to explain the limited role of CSR in these decisions. The main contribution is the investigation of a complex process that explains why CSR is hardly ever of prime importance in consumer decision making. To this end, our research contributes to a better understanding of the attitude-behavior gap: Consumers report positive attitudes towards buying products from socially responsible companies, but these positive attitudes are not transferred into actual purchase behaviour. Our research explains this discrepancy and identifies a large number of factors that influence the assessment of CSR as a purchase criterion. This illustrates the complexity of the evaluation process.

This complexity may hinder even consumers with a positive attitude towards CSR to incorporate CSR into their decision-making process. Moreover, our research discovered that the evaluation process follows a hierarchical structure. While certain factors at the core level are a prerequisite for an inclusion of CSR as purchase criterion, others just exert a moderating effect on this decision. The distinction between core, central, and peripheral factors offers new insights into the complexity of the assessment and consumers’ involvement in the process. This research also offers several managerial implications. Managers face two fundamental options: - Firstly, they could ignore consumers’ interest in CSR and not integrate CSR initiatives into their marketing activities. In this situation, it is suggested to focus on a positive corporate image, as consumers who are interested in CSR deduce CSR associations from an overall corporate image. Secondly, managers could focus on CSR positioning and CSR in marketing communication.

Here, managers have to bear in mind the complex consumer evaluation process required to achieve consumers’ appreciation of CSR efforts. First and foremost, managers have to make CSR information more easily available and point out in which ways a product or the entire company is connected to CSR initiatives. Companies should only communicate those CSR initiatives that are related to the company’s core business – thereby accommodating the peripheral factor of credibility. Moreover, they would be well advised to disseminate their CSR efforts through various channels of communication, taking into account that the credibility of the information is highly dependent on the channels chosen for disseminating the information. Thus, managers have to assess the trade off between the communication credibility and the audience reached. Secondly, personal concern is the most difficult core factor to take account of when incorporating this research’s findings into business practice. The most valuable approach, although difficult, would be to segment consumers according to their personal concern and communicate different CSR efforts to different target groups.

Companies could, for example, use direct marketing communication with interested target markets. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. could be employed to initiate tightly targeted CSR campaigns to certain segments. Thirdly, concerning consumers’ price perceptions, managers have to be aware that income will influence a person’s ability to take CSR into account. Where applicable, the focus should be on communicating that the products of a socially-responsible company are not pricier than other products. In case the price is indeed higher, managers need to watch the differences to prices of competing products, as consumers pay a lot of attention to the proportionality of price differences. Pricing is particularly important for managers in high price/high quality niches, as consumers interested in CSR also look for high quality products. If managers make a decision to overlook consumers’

potential CSR interest, it is better to propose products in the low-price segment. As a qualitative study, this research suffers from a limitation inherent in all such studies, namely that the results cannot be generalized. Though, the aim of qualitative research is conceptualization and exploration, rather than generalization (McCracken 1988).

Thus, future research on the influence of CSR in purchase decisions could employ quantitative methods. More specifically, the identified factors could be cast in a questionnaire, and a large scale survey could attempt to measure the influence of the factors we identified in different consumption situations and the relationship between these identified factors would offer another promising possibility for further research. Another point for future investigation would be a cross cultural study to assess whether the identified factors differ in various cultural settings. Furthermore, as level of information is acknowledged to be a crucial point for evaluating corporate CSR initiatives and future research could focus on potential communication strategies and their impact on the target audience. Lastly, the relationship between CSR initiatives and price perceptions as well as the role of consumers' personal value system offer promising avenues for further research.

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