

CSR engagement and identification with the moderating effect of social capital and construal level

ABSTRACT

Aims: Previous research has primarily focused on companies' overall use of Facebook and message strategies on CSR-dedicated Facebook pages. The current research is developed to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, we propose how the quantity of Facebook use (number of Facebook friends, time spent using Facebook) and motivations for accessing Facebook (making new friends, maintaining ties with current friends) relate to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and consumer identification in both direct and moderating routes. Furthermore, the current research integrates and proposes multiple moderators under a theoretical framework of social capital and construal level theories.

Methods: A literature review integrated with theoretical background leads to propositions.

Conclusions: Given the fact that Facebook has grown to be the most popular social networking site (SNS), companies have begun to adopt the platform in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. This research not only fills the literature gaps of CSR initiatives and moderators on SNS, the Facebook in particular but also these propositions can provide more possibilities for companies to reconsider and redesign their CSR strategy and program via SNS.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility initiatives, consumer engagement, consumer-company identification, social cognitive theory, social capital theory, construal level theory, Facebook

1. INTRODUCTION

"Online social networking sites (SNS) have already revolutionized the way we live, communicate, and search for information. Among them, Facebook is the largest and dominant player in the market with approximately 1.37 billion daily active users and 2.07 billion monthly active users as of September 30, 2017"[1]. "Given the widespread use and growing influence of the site, researchers have recently recognized the need to understand how Facebook impacts consumer's information acquisition, perceptions and decision-making process" [2; 3,4, 5].

"Given the fact that Facebook has grown to be the most popular social media, companies have begun to adopt the platform in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, such as setting up CSR-dedicated spaces on Facebook with the objectives of sharing information about CSR initiatives, connecting and interacting with users, and gathering feedback about CSR"[6]. "CSR refers to a company's social behavior exceeding its legal obligations to fulfill societal demands"[7, 8, 9]. "CSR can be a valuable marketing tool for a company that responds to consumer expectations and enhances its performance and image through performing altruism"[10, 11,12]. "Studies have demonstrated that CSR affects the cognition, attitudes, and behavioral intentions of consumers in the domain of marketing"[10,12, 13, 14, 15, 16,17].

Previous research has primarily focused on companies' overall use of Facebook[5, 18,19, 20, 21, 22] and message strategies on CSR-dedicated Facebook pages[6, 23,24]. Yet, no research has been made to examine how Facebook relates to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and consumer identification in direct and moderating routes as well as other moderating effects.

The current research is thus developed to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, we look at how the quantity of Facebook use (number of Facebook friends, time spent using Facebook) and motivations for accessing Facebook (making new friends, maintaining ties with current friends) relate to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and consumer identification. Furthermore, the current research integrates multiple moderators under a theoretical framework of social cognitive and social capital theories. The current research also contributes to the psychological construal level theory in the domain of CSR strategy.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PROPOSITIONS

2.1. CSR Initiatives

“CSR can be defined as the “corporate social actions whose purpose is to satisfy social needs” (Angelidis and Ibrahim, 1993). It also involves the policy and practice of a corporation’s social involvement over and beyond what is legal obligations for the benefit of the society at large”[7]. “The most common definition of CSR may be Carroll’s theory of the pyramid model of CSR. He regards CSR as a structural element that relates to four different levels of the relationship between commercial enterprises and society, including the social, economic, legal, ethical, and charitable expectations of business organizations”[8]. “In 2011, Porter and Kramer provide a fresh perspective for developing CSR by proposing a new CSR concept: creating shared value (CSV)” [25]. The focus of CSV is not only that corporations must demonstrate responsibility to the community. In addition to the need of becoming good corporate citizens, corporations must provide community feedback and comply with standards. They must also produce more value: not only value creation for particular social problems but also profit-making value.

“Based on the previous research, this study divides CSR initiatives into four major and commonly used categories: cause-related marketing (CRM), corporate philanthropy, sponsorship, and CSV [25, 26, 27]. CRM refers to when corporations promise to donate a certain amount of money to a nonprofit organization, society or cause when consumers purchase their merchandise or services”[10, 28]. Farache et al. (2008) confirm that “companies that cooperate with charities or the public sector to implement CRM campaigns can improve consumers’ perception of their corporate image” [29]. Edmondson and Lafferty (2007) demonstrate that “the prominence of cause-related actions has a positive impact on a brand” [30]. “CRM is the optimal solution for corporations to create a win-win situation for themselves and nonprofit organizations. Contribute returns in the different form to nonprofit organizations or the great multitude through marketing to earn profit and contribute to society, this is known as doing well by doing good” [31]. “CRM strategies can thus improve the corporate image and enhance organization’s benefits”[28] and “influence consumers’ perceptions toward products”[32] and “consumer’s purchasing options”[33].

“Corporate philanthropy is a type of noble social behavior that is performed without expecting corporate benefits or business in return, simply to be a good citizen”[34, 35]. “Corporate philanthropy can attract customers, employees, and other stakeholders to consolidate resources, reduce constraints, develop core competencies, and enhance competitive advantages. It generates value-added effects that immediately or indirectly improve business performance”[36]. “Corporate philanthropy is often one of the most cost-effective methods for corporations to improve their competitive environment”. Gautier and Pache (2013) suggest that “it is no longer considered an independent philanthropy activity and corporations are adopting a more strategic approach by linking their corporate philanthropy to their CSR and overall business characteristics” [37].

“Sponsorship is thought to be a strategic investment, in cash or in-kind (people or equipment), in an activity for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with the property in return”[38, 39]. It is one of the most prominent forms of marketing campaigns [40], and according to Harvey (2001), sponsorship generates more money than all media advertising combined [41]. Sponsorship has been found to have a significant effect on brand awareness [39, 42, 43], brand image [44], and brand association [26].

“Conceptually, CSV refers to creating not only economic value but also value for society when handling the needs and problems of the society”[25]. “CSV not only promotes economic prosperity and social progress but also possibly facilitates the change of perceptions between society and corporations. Corporations and society are interdependent, and both should be governed by the principle of value sharing and make mutually beneficial decisions. A corporation can create shared value by choosing social topics that reinforce its competitiveness and promote CSR initiatives”[25]. “CSV is the practice of CSR through daily business activities”[25, 45]. “The most favorable opportunity for a corporation to create shared value is necessarily connected to its business and its most prominent business activity, which can contribute the maximum economic benefits to the corporation”[25, 46]. “Nevertheless, the implementation of CSV is still evolving and in debate. More research thus should be done to fully explore the effects of consumer attitudinal evaluations toward CSV”[47, 48].

2.2. Consumer Engagement in CSR Initiatives

Consumer engagement is the degree to which consumers are willing to participate in and relate to a CSR initiative [49, 50]. Consumers who go out of their ways to engage with a CSR initiative share a level of connection with the company[51]. The interactions help develop social attachments and nurture a sense of comradeship within the company[23]. When consumers engage in a CSR initiative with Facebook venue, such as liking, commenting, and/or sharing company or personal posts with other members, identification with the company begins to solidify [50].

2.3. Consumer-Company Identification

Consumer-company identification (CCI) stemmed from the social identity and organizational identification theories [52]. Based on the organizational identification theory, Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) explored the concept of identification and developed a conceptual framework for CCI [52]. The underlying principle of CCI is that consumers identify with a company because the company they patronize at least partly satisfies their self-definitional needs for self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement, even when they are not formal members of the company [53, 54]. Specifically, customers' needs for self-definition or a sense of belonging can be articulated through developing socially identifying relationships with a company [55, 56]. Such identification has consistently been found to have a significant and positive effect on loyalty [56, 57, 58] and citizenship behaviors [59, 60].

2.4. Facebook, Social Cognitive and Social Capital Theories

Many consumers use Facebook to contact new people, keep in touch with current friends, and for general socializing. Facebook use and motivations for accessing Facebook have been found to influence consumer psychological well-being [61], brand evaluations [62], consumer behavior [5, 63], and among others.

Facebook can increase social recognition and obtain social capital through increasing the number of friends and depth of the relationships[23]. Both social cognitive theory (SCT) and social capital theory can be used to understand the Facebook use and consumers' motivations for accessing Facebook as well as their relationships with CSR initiatives.

SCT is a comprehensive theoretical framework for predicting, analyzing, and understanding human motivations, thoughts, and actions, and social interaction [64, 65]. Expected outcome is a key element in SCT measure, which includes derived social status and social presencethat can be utilized to explain the effect of CSR initiatives on consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and CCI. These two SCT measures are commonly used for analyzing various aspects of consumer behaviors concerning Facebook and other SNSs [66, 67].

Social capital theory provides a theoretical explanation for the direct and moderating effects of Facebook use and motivations on consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and CCI. Social capital theory is about the visible and invisible resources embedded within, accessible through, and stemmed from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social entity[68]. Since human beings are born social, social capital is hence a necessary resource acquired by consumers.

"Many methods and types of classification of social capital exist. By function, it can be divided into bonding and bridging"[69]; "by application scope, it can be divided into country and the individual. Social capital is embedded in interpersonal relationship network resources and is obtained through relationships. Therefore, the people consumers contact constitute their social capital. Therefore, the two elements of social capital are (a) a social network and (b) the resources that this network makes obtainable. So far as the theory of capital is concerned, social relations are an investment from which a return is expected. The first step in investment is building relationships. When more abundant resources are chosen, it indicates that the resources are more diverse. Bourdieu (1985) argues that when individuals establish close relationships within a group, their social capital increases" [70]. Coleman (1990) argues that "social capital is a resource that exists in a social structure. Resources and information are exchanged through trust, interaction, and communication among people, which helps communities and their members achieve their desired goals"[71].

"By performing CSR initiatives, corporations provide their resources, such as capital, human resources, and material resources, to other members of society. Simultaneously, Facebook users who engage in these initiatives receive resources from other members of society, including support (e.g., friends and likes), awareness, and reputation"[72]. Subsequently, the interaction is completed among the Facebook users, other members of society, and the company. Through social interaction with other consumers or Facebook members, the Facebook users can acquire social capital, and hence promotes their engagement with the CSR initiative and identification with the company. From this the first two propositions are suggested:

- P1: Facebook use has a positive relationship with (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI.
- P2: Motivations for accessing Facebook has a positive relationship with (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI.

Previous research has found that different types of CSR initiatives exert relative effects on consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions [60, 73,74,75,76]. In the same vein, it is proposed that consumers may perceive different level of social capital gained by engaging in the four types of CSR initiatives. Thus, we suggest the following propositions:

- P3: The effect of Facebook use on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the perceived relative gains of social capital.
- P4: The effect of motivations for accessing Facebook on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the perceived relative gains of social capital.
- P5: The relative effect of the four types of CSR initiatives on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the perceived social capital gains.

2.5. Facebook and Construal Level Theory

“Construal level theory (CLT) has been used to explain consumer perception, cognition process, and decision-making behavior” [77, 78, 79, 80]. “The key premise of CLT is that individuals regard a close event or object as having concrete, specific, observable, or discrete features. On the contrary, a distant event or object is classified in terms of abstract, intangible, unobservable, and broad concepts” [81]. “According to CLT, the level at which an event or object is mentally represented is contingent on how far/close an event or object feels from the self in an abstract psychological space” [82]. “Four manifestations of psychological distance that have been empirically identified to promote an abstract level of mental construal, which in turn guides prediction, evaluation and decision-making behavior, are temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and hypotheticality” [82].

“Temporal distance refers to the actual distance between a point of reference (e.g. today) and the time of occurrence of the event under contemplation (e.g. tomorrow or next year). Spatial distance refers to the actual distance between a reference location (e.g. the place where the observer lives) and the location where the event occurs (e.g. a place closer to the observer or 500 miles away). Social distance is the perception that the event is endorsed by a person/firm that is dissimilar vs. similar to the observer. Hypotheticality is the probability that the event is highly likely vs. unlikely to take place. The literature on construal level theory reveals that an event can be represented at a high/low level of construal when the event has greater/lower temporal distance” [81,83], spatial distance [84,85], social distance [86], and hypotheticality [87].

The four major categories of CSR initiatives can be constructed in both a concrete and abstract manner. However, many initiatives are often constructed in abstract manner that encourages abstract thinking [88]. Most companies use ambiguous terms when describing their CSR initiative such as supporting research for motor neuron diseases, saving the forest, and sponsoring child education. Even if the details of initiative and the amount of money donated, the intended use of the money is hardly enunciated [75]. CRM in the form of buy-one-give-one initiative is proved to evoke a concrete mindset than monetary-based CRM initiative [75]. Taken together:

- P6: The effect of Facebook uses on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the construal level of the CSR initiative.
- P7: The effect of motivations for accessing Facebook on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the construal level of the CSR initiative.
- P8: The relative effect of the four types of CSR initiatives on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the construal level of the CSR initiative.
- P9: The effect of Facebook use on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI is more positive with concrete initiatives (e.g., buy-one-give-one CSR initiative) relative to abstract initiatives (e.g., monetary-based CSR initiatives).
- P10: The effect of motivations for accessing Facebook on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI is more positive with concrete initiatives (e.g., buy-one-give-one CSR initiative) relative to abstract initiatives (e.g., monetary-based CSR initiatives).

2.6. Consumer Engagement and CCI

This study posits that CCI is related to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives. Identity attractiveness refers to the favorable evaluation of the identity of CSR’s engagement by consumers in terms of meeting the consumer’s self-definitional needs [52, 89,90]. A consumer’s favorable evaluation of a company’s CSR initiative can lead to identification with the company [91]. Consumers may find the identity of a company’s CSR initiative more attractive in terms of defining and expressing their self-concept over other companies, which could lead to engage with the CSR initiative and further identify with the company.

- P11: Consumer engagement in CSR initiatives has a positive relationship with CCI.

2.7. Consumer Citizenship Behaviors

Consumer tendency or demonstration of citizenship behavior has its root in the theory of organizational citizenship behavior, which according to Organ in 1988 [92], represents individual behaviors that are

discretionary and not directly or explicitly recognized by a formal reward system. Consumer behaviors that are beneficial to a firm are a matter of personal choice, such as purchasing that company's products, which can be categorized as in-role behaviors [93]. On the other hand, extra-role behavior refers to voluntary and discretionary behavior that is not expected or rewarded [94], such as making suggestions related to product or service improvement, making recommendations to others, and engaging in positive word of mouth (WOM) about that product.

Social identity theory supports the link between customer attitudinal evaluations and consumer citizenship behavior. The theory explains how one party feels about a relationship with another party as the one party depending on their perceptions of fairness during a process of negotiated exchanges [95,96]. Blau (1964) notes that social exchange is based on the expectation of trust and reciprocation, while the exact nature of the return and the time frame is left unspecified [96]. As such, when a company engages in a CSR initiative, consumers may perceive that company to be altruistic, which could lead to more favorable attitudinal evaluations of the same company [10]. Consumers are hence more likely to engage in reciprocation that may benefit that company [94]. Thus, based on the concept of citizenship behavior [97] and boundary-spanning behavior [98], consumers are more likely to express their support for CSR initiatives by engaging in in-role behaviors, such as purchasing products from the company [99] and extra-role behavior, such as making recommendations to others and engaging in positive word of mouth [100, 101]. Thus, in line with the previous research, we propose the following:

P12: The more positive consumer engagement in CSR initiatives, the more likely is it that consumers will exhibit (a) purchasing (in-role) and (b) advocacy (extra-role) behaviors that support the company.

P13: The greater the C-C identification, the more likely is it that consumers will exhibit (a) purchasing (in-role) and (b) advocacy (extra-role) behaviors that support the company.

3. CONCLUSION

This research is likely to contribute to the academic literature related to CSR, Facebook, social capital, and construal level in several ways. This study fills the literature gap in CSR and SNSs, especially in Facebook. No study has focused on the effect of CSR initiatives and Facebook on consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and CCI as well as the factors that moderate the relationships such as social capital and construal level. Thus, the propositions in this research may be able to provide a direction for companies that frequently participate in CSR initiatives in social networking site. CSR marketing strategies and programs can consider the theory-based propositions to rethink or redesign on how to enhance corporate images through consumer engagement and identification via the social networking sites.

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