

**IMPACT OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ON
CONSUMERS' ATTITUDINAL AND BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES: A
CRITICAL REVIEW**

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ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has remained a contemporary topic in academic and professional discourse, especially in the fields of management, marketing and organizational behavior. The discussions on the need for CSR and its potential consequences have been on-going for more than half a century. This study presents a review of the continuously evolving conceptualizations of CSR, as well as the perception and response of consumers towards CSR initiatives. The discussion dwelt on the lack of consensus on impact of CSR on consumer behavior and the factors, which have been noted to be responsible for the phenomenon. Major reasons identified as responsible for the equivocal conclusions on consumer responses to CSR include: the lack specificity regarding the definition, dimensions and measurement of CSR, the varied methodologies employed in CSR studies, the possible impacts of mediators and moderators, as well as issues surrounding consumers' awareness and understanding of CSR. The study concludes that the issue of CSR and consumer behavior will continue to remain a fertile ground for academic research, with a major challenge relating to whether uniform or varied approaches should be adopted for CSR studies across different cultures and contexts.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, consumer responses, research findings, consumer perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Businesses generally operate within a network of relationships with various stakeholder groups such as the employees, trade unions, customers, suppliers, shareholders, government/regulatory agencies, the local community and the society at large (Papasolomou- Doukakis et al., 2005; Murray & Vogel, 1997; Freeman, 1984). For this reason, management experts and researchers have emphasized the importance for companies to balance the interests of all the different groups who are perceived as having a stake in the company (Papasolomou- Doukakis et al., 2005; Freeman, 1984). In response to this call, companies often come up with corporate initiatives aimed at providing some benefits (economic and non-economic) to the community where they operate. These initiatives are often implemented through such acts as corporate philanthropy/donation to charity, events sponsorship, production of environmentally friendly products, and so on (Lee and Jackson, 2010; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004). These acts along with so many others, aimed at creating a favorable corporate image for the company, are captured under the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

CSR generally relates to the efforts/activities that a corporation undertakes with respect to meeting its obligations to its various stakeholders (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Brown & Dacin, 1997). The adoption of the CSR philosophy implies that a company has chosen to maintain socially responsible practices that benefit consumers and the larger society (Kotler & Armstrong, 2005; Papasolomou- Doukakis et al., 2005). It implies that the company is not only concerned with the profits it will get by providing immediate customers' satisfaction, but is also concerned about the long-run impact on the consumers and the society. This emphasizes several aspects of responsible business practices, beyond simply focusing on the process of maximizing consumer purchasing, thus allowing for more sustainable success, rather than short-term accomplishment (Kotler & Armstrong, 2005).

The emphasis on sustainability implies that CSR is beneficial to the company itself and the entirety of its stakeholders (Carroll, 1979, 1991, 1999), which includes, but not limited to the shareholders, employees, trade unions, customers, suppliers, government/regulatory agencies, the local community and the society at large (Papasolomou- Doukakis et al., 2005; Murray & Vogel, 1997; Freeman, 1984). Among these various stakeholder groups however, the consumers have always been the main target of, and the most susceptible to CSR activities aimed at building favorable corporate image and overall relationships (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). This is predicated upon the fact that the existence of the business itself depends upon the able and willing patronage of the consumers (Bello et al., 2012;

Agbonifoh&Edoreh, 1986). The practice of CSR have thus become an act of ‘enlightened self-interest’ (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Owen & Scherer, 1993), which most companies now embark on because of the belief that the consumers will reciprocate with positive outcomes, such as favorable corporate image, positive word-of-mouth, increased purchase intention, and even resilience to negative information (Marin et al., 2009; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Berens et al., 2005; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Creyer & Ross, 1997; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990).

The expectation of a ‘win-win’ relationship between the companies and their customers, as expressed above, has encouraged companies to continually increase their spending on CSR initiatives (Christopher & Luke, 2013; Kolkailah et al., 2012; Hutton et al., 2001). According to Hutton et al. (2001), corporate spending on CSR has continuously increased, such that, by the year 2000, CSR had become the third largest budget item for corporate communication departments in most Fortune 500 companies. Kolkailah et al. (2012) also noted that CSR has grown to become an industry on its own, where companies now engage consultancies to help proffer solutions on how best to design, implement and communicate CSR strategies (Dusuki, 2008).

In the same vein, academic research interests on CSR have increased over the years. This is most visible in the fields of management, marketing and organizational behavior (Su et al., 2014; Lam & Khare, 2010; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), where researchers have conducted studies aimed at determining what CSR entails, how it is implemented by the companies, and how the consumers perceive and respond to companies’ CSR initiatives. Despite this concentrated research effort however, there still appears to be a lot of controversies regarding the understanding and implementation of CSR and consumers perceptions and response to CSR (Beckmann, 2007, 2006). Thus, there is still much to be learnt in understanding how and why consumers respond to companies CSR initiatives (Su et al., 2014; Bhattacharya et al., 2009). This paper presents a review of literature on the subject matter of CSR and consumer responses, with particular attention to the continuously evolving conceptualizations of CSR, the equivocal findings in studies focused on CSR and consumer responses, and the potential causes of the inconclusive findings are also discussed in these studies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility

Like most concepts in management and social sciences, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has remained without a single universally accepted definition. The concept is noted to be one of the most important and yet controversial aspects of global business (Ikejiaku, 2012). Attempts at defining CSR have led to a continuously evolving concept encompassing a wide range of approaches, theories and terminologies (Ikejiaku, 2012; Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008), that can sometimes be ambiguous (Wood, 2010) or even complex and confusing (Fernández-Feijóo Souto, 2009; Garriga and Melé, 2004). The terminologies also being used as synonyms of CSR include social responsibility, corporate social responsiveness, corporate social philanthropy, corporate governance, corporate citizenship, corporate accountability, cause marketing, triple-bottom-line, and sustainable development (Ikejiaku, 2012; Raudenbush, 2011; Milovanović et al., 2009; Garriga & Melé, 2004).

Extant literature has credited the modern conceptualization of CSR to Bowen (1953), who is widely regarded as the father of modern CSR (Ghobadian et al., 2015; Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008; Gupta, 2002; Carroll, 1979). The initial conceptualization was in the form of social responsibility (SR), with emphasis on the individual managers' responsibilities for the social consequences of business actions. This is exemplified in the definition of CSR proposed by Bowen (1953), when he defined social responsibility as "The obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society". This definition by Bowen (1953) established the belief that businesses have obligations towards the larger society, beyond the primary objective of profit maximization (Galbreath & Shum, 2012; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Davis & Blomstrom, 1975).

However, Bowen's definition, as well as those that immediately followed, like those of Davis (1960) and Frederick (1960), have been described as being generic and inclusive in nature (Gaignet, 2013; Carroll, 1999). They did not elaborate on the specific responsibilities that business owes the society, and merely placed the responsibility for the good neighborly behavior of business on the shoulders of the businesspersons or managers. The ambiguity created by the earlier definitions of social responsibilities created divergent opinions among scholars as to what responsibilities the business actually has towards the society.

Attempting to address the issue, some scholars chose a narrow perspective in defining the responsibilities of business. According to these scholars, business should

only focus on its economic responsibilities (Carr, 1968; Friedman, 1962; Levitt, 1958). In their own opinion, the main responsibility of business is to be productive, earn profit and grow the equity for the owners (stockholders) of the business. This perspective is well captured in the famous declaration by Friedman (1962) that the one and only one social responsibility of business is to use its resources and engage in activities to increase its profit so long as it stays within the rules of the game in open free competition and without deception and fraud.

However, some other scholars chose a wider view of social responsibility by noting that the responsibilities of business includes responsibilities towards the larger society (Davis, 1973; McGuire, 1963), concerns for ethical issues (Eells & Walton, 1961), and voluntary philanthropic activities (Steiner, 1972). This view of a wider conception of CSR was aptly captured by McGuire (1963), when he asserted that “the idea of social responsibilities supposes that the corporation has not only economic and legal obligations but also certain responsibilities to society which extend beyond these obligations” (p. 144).

The need for clarity on the definition of CSR has led to the proposition of several other definitions of CSR, which have resulted in various conceptualizations by different scholars. The period of the 1970s was particularly noted to have witnessed a proliferation of CSR definitions and conceptualizations (Carroll, 1999). Some of the prominent definitions are presented below:

“A socially responsible firm is one whose managerial staff balances a multiplicity of interests. Instead of striving only for larger profits for its stockholders, a responsible enterprise also takes into account employees, suppliers, dealers, local communities, and the nation” (Johnson, 1971, p. 50).

“The firm’s obligation to evaluate in its decision-making process the effects of its decisions on the external social system in a manner that will accomplish social benefits along with the traditional economic gains which the firm seeks” (Davis, 1973, p. 313).

“Social responsibility usually refers to the objectives or motives that should be given weight by business in addition to those dealing with economic performance (e.g., profits)” (Backman, 1975, p. 2).

“Corporate social responsibility is the managerial obligation to take action, to protect and to improve both the welfare of society as a whole and the interest of organizations” (Davis & Blomstrom, 1975, p. 5).

“The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (Carroll, 1979, p. 500).

A common factor observable in the definitions expressing a wider perspective of CSR is that they all point to an agreement that CSR extends beyond the economic responsibility of the company. They almost unanimously refer to a company's responsibility towards the stakeholders of the business, though, without expressly using the term 'stakeholder'. Of particular importance is the definition by Carroll (1979), who specified the dimensions of responsibility that society expects from the business. Carroll's definition is regarded as the most popular of all definitions and conceptualizations of CSR (Christopher & Luke, 2013; Hussain, 2013; Galbreath, 2008; Podnar & Golob, 2007; Mohr et al., 2001). By highlighting the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary responsibilities that companies are expected to uphold, the definition comprehensively incorporate both the narrow and wider views of CSR. By emphasizing the economic dimension along with the other three dimensions (i.e., legal, ethical and discretionary), Carroll clearly pointed out that an organization has obligations towards its owners as well as the society where it operates. The definition thus recognizes the potentialities of CSR benefiting both the company and the stakeholders (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Carroll, 1999).

Going by Carroll's (1979, 1991) definition of CSR, the responsibilities of a company entails (1). Economic responsibilities, which relates to society's expectation that organizations will produce quality goods and services that are needed and desired by customers and sell those goods and services at a reasonable price. (2). Legal responsibilities, which relate to the society's expectations that organizations will comply with the laws set down by recognized institutions in the society. (3). Ethical responsibilities relating to societal expectations that companies will conduct their affairs in a fair and just way, and refrain from all activities that are considered as immoral or unethical in the society (4). Discretionary responsibilities, which relates to the society's expectations that the company voluntarily commits part of its resources to improving the overall welfare and betterment of the society.

Several new conceptualizations of CSR have been proposed after that of Carroll's (1979, 1991), especially from the onset of current millennium. These new conceptualizations are mostly in response to contemporary developments in the business environment and the global society (Ghobadian et al., 2015; Rahman, 2011). Examples of developments that influenced the definitions of CSR in these periods include issues relating to corruption, corporate scandals and collapses (e.g.

Enron and Worldcom); environmental disasters and social problems (e.g. deplorable working conditions in the developing world, oil spills by multinational oil companies); and the financial crises and global recessions of the late 2000s (Ghobadian et al., 2015; Rahman, 2011; Dusuki, 2008; Swaen and Chumpitaz, 2008). Examples of the new definitions that came up from around the year 2000 and beyond include:

“The degree of (ir) responsibility manifested in a company’s strategies and operating practices as they impact stakeholders and the natural environment day-to-day” (Waddock, 2004, p. 10).

“A concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment. A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis (European Union, 2004).

“a company’s commitment to minimizing or eliminating any harmful effects and maximizing its long-run beneficial impact on society” (Mohr & Webb, 2005).

“A stakeholder oriented concept that extends beyond organization’s boundaries and is driven by an ethical understanding of the organization’s responsibility for the impact of its business activities, thus seeking in return society’s acceptance of the legitimacy of the organization” (Maon et al., 2009: 72)

“Responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour” (ISO 26000 International Standard, 2010, p. 3).

“The commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the work force and their families as well as of the local community and society at large” (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2008, qtd. in Rahman, 2011, p. 172).

These new conceptualizations of CSR however continued to exist alongside the traditional ones; with a focus on the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders, and how to improve the general business and society relationship (Ghobadian et al.,

2015). The concurrent existence of these various conceptualizations of CSR thus underscores that fact that the CSR concept is yet to achieve a singular, generally accepted definition, due to its ever expanding scope and dimension.

Consumer Response to perceived CSR

Discussions on the motives behind companies' adoption and practice of CSR can be categorized under two broad headings: the normative case and the instrumental case for CSR engagement (Lam & Khare, 2010; Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Smith, 2003). Scholars who hold on to the normative standpoint believe that it is a moral duty for the companies to engage in CSR. To these group of scholars, CSR is considered as the 'right thing to do' (Lam & Khare, 2010; Smith, 2003) for companies, since they operate within the environment and utilize the resources provided therein (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Carroll, 1999; Maignan et al., 1999; Jones, 1980). On the other hand, some scholars are of the opinion the CSR is not just the 'right thing to do', but is actually the 'smart thing to do' (Lam & Khare, 2010; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Smith, 2003). This instrumental view, which is also referred to as the business case for CSR (Porter & Kramer, 2006; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004), is based on the corporate returns that corporations receive from engaging in CSR activities, e.g., better reputation, corporate competitiveness, improved patronage and loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth (Hartmann, 2011; Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

Arising from these two viewpoints, researchers have resolved that companies' motives for engaging in CSR is usually a combination the two motives highlighted in the preceding paragraphs. However, the majority of scholars have presented compelling reasons to justify corporations' adoption of CSR as a business and marketing tool (Hartmann, 2011; García de los-Salmones et al., 2009; Bhattacharya et al., 2008; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; García de los-Salmones et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Smith, 2003; Brown & Dacin, 1997). The argument holds that, with the rising competition in most markets and industries, product and process standardization have become the norm in today's global marketplace. As such, product and brand differentiation strategies can no longer be relied upon as means of achieving competitive advantages (Bhattacharya et al., 2009; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Gupta, 2002). Companies now have to turn to CSR initiatives, which are adjudged as more innovative and less imitable means of achieving differentiation, as well as securing and strengthening customer relationship (Melo & Garrido-Morgado, 2012; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

The potential positive returns have resulted to the adoption of CSR as a business and marketing tool by companies, with much expectation on the possible favorable

returns they can get from the customers. Consequently, the consumers have become one of the most targeted groups for CSR communication (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). The general expectation of the companies is that, when consumers become aware of companies CSR initiatives, they are likely to respond favorably to such a company and the services/products offered by such a company (Christopher & Luke, 2013; Kolkailah et al., 2012; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Hutton et al., 2001; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Brown & Dacin, 1997). This has led to the development of a dedicated branch of research that has over the years explored the relationship between companies' practice of CSR and the consumers' responses.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is essentially a review paper, which captures developments in the literature on consumer perceptions and response to corporate social responsibility. The review covers journal articles based on studies conducted across different parts of the world. Efforts were made to identify and collect relevant theoretical and empirical articles on the subject matter. However, empirical studies constitute majority of the papers reviewed, so as to give adequate consideration to consumers' views and opinions on the subject matter. No new data were reported in the study.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Scientific study on the effect of social responsibility on consumer responses was pioneered by Brown and Dacin (1997), who developed a framework that was used to investigate the relationship between corporate associations and consumer product responses (He and Li, 2011; Lee et al., 2011; Du et al., 2007; Berens et al., 2005). Brown and Dacin (1997) sought to find out how consumers are influenced by what they know about a company, and how this information influenced their responses towards the company and its products. The findings from their study indicated that consumers' knowledge of a company's CSR influences their response both direct and indirectly, through corporate evaluation.

More than two decades after Brown and Dacin, the literature has witnessed a proliferation of researches focused on investigating the relationship between CSR and consumer responses. Findings from this stream of research have however remained largely mixed, inconclusive and sometimes controversial. A sizeable number of these studies have reported a direct and positive effect of CSR, on a range of consumer responses (Carvalho et al., 2010; Castaldo et al., 2009; Marin et al., 2009; Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008; Pirsch et al., 2007; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Gupta, 2002; Folkes and Kamins, 1999; Murray & Vogel, 1997). While some others studies have reported insignificant, and/or even negative

effects (Marquina-Feldman & Vasquez- Parraga, 2013; Kolkailah et al., 2012; Arredondo Trapero et al., 2010; Castaldo et al., 2009; Castaldo&Perrini, 2004; Carrigan& Attalla, 2001; Mohr et al., 2001 Boulstridge&Carrigan, 2000). A brief summary of the major findings on the CSR-consumer responses relationship is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of major findings in the CSR – consumer response studies

Citations	Main findings	Nature of Relationship
Berens et al. (2005); Brown and Dacin (1997); Folkes and Kamins (1999); García de losSalmones et al. (2009); Khan et al. (2015); Lichtenstein et al. (2004); Luo and Bhattacharya (2006); Murray and Vogel (1997); Sen et al. (2006)	Information about company’s engagement in CSR leads to increase in consumers’ positive attitudes towards the company and/or the brand	Positive effect of CSR on consumer perceptions and responses
Bhattacharya and Sen (2004); Sen and Bhattacharya (2001); Barone et al. (2000)	Consumers show preferences for buying products from companies that invest in CSR	
Dawar and Pillutla (2000); Klein and Dawar (2004); Ricks (2005)	CSR functions as “insurance policy” in crisis situations: the importance of pro-active CSR commitment	
Creyer and Ross (1997); Handelman and Arnold (1999); Lee and Shin (2010)	Consumers are aware of and interested in CSR and say that CSR is a purchase criterion	
Creyer and Ross (1997); Carvalho et al., (2010)	Consumers are willingness to pay premium (higher) prices for products from companies engaging in CSR	
Khan et al. (2015); Swaen and Chumpitaz (2008); Vlachos et al. (2009)	Positive CSR perceptions serves as a boost to customer trust	
Klein and Dawar (2004); Murray and Vogel (1997)	Consumers are willing to defend companies engaging in CSR against criticism	
Klein and Dawar (2004); Chernev and Blair (2015)	CSR has a spillover or halo effect on otherwise unrelated consumer judgments, and situations not related to companies core competencies	
Auger et al. (2003); Belk et al. (2005); Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000); Carrigan and Attalla (2001)	Consumers are largely unaware and lack of knowledge about CSR; and very little knowledge about which companies are CSR committed or not	Negative/Insignificant effect of CSR on consumer perceptions and responses
Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000); Carrigan and Attalla (2001); Chomvilailuk and Butcher (2010); Mohr et al. (2001); Berens et al (2005); Becker-Olsen et al (2006); Auger et al (2008)	Consumers respond more favourably to traditional decision criteria such as product features, price and convenience than CSR	

Bhattacharya and Sen, (2004); Elliott and Freeman (2001); Folkes&Kamins (1999); Vlachos et al. (2009)	Consumers' are more sensible to irresponsible than responsible corporate behavior – and their attitudes are more affected by unethical behaviour than by pro-CSR behavior
Lichtenstein et al. (2004); Sen and Bhattacharya (2001)	Consumers' support of the CSR domain chosen by the company matters
McDonald and Lai (2011); Castaldo and Perrini (2004); Castaldo et al. (2009); Page and Fearn (2005); Perez and del Bosque (2015)	CSR related to environmental or philanthropic initiatives have lesser influence on consumers, compared to those CSR initiatives that directly concern the consumers.
Arredondo-Trapero <i>et al.</i> (2010); Kolkailah et al. (2012) Marquina Feldman and Vasquez-Parraga (2013); Ricks Jr, (2005)	consumers' favorable disposition towards CSR is inconsistent with their actual buying behaviour
Marquina-Feldman and Vasquez-Parraga (2013); Walsh and Bartikowski (2010)	Differential effects of CSR on consumer behavior across cultures

Source: Compiled by the researcher

A cursory look at the major findings from these studies shows that there is a general inconclusiveness as regards to consumer perception and response to CSR (Hartmann et al., 2013; Kolkailah et al., 2012; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). As such, it is difficult to compare findings and make a general conclusion regarding the actual nature of consumers' perception and response to CSR (Alvarado-Herrera et al., 2015). The field of research relating to CSR and consumer behavior variable thus remains a fertile area for prospective researchers.

DISCUSSION

The inconclusive nature of the findings in most of the studies investigating the CSR effect on consumer behavior response has led researchers to attempt identifying the possible reasons for the mixed findings, as well as to proffer ideas and solutions to the perceived problems. The most prominent causes of the inconclusive findings in the literature include the following:

Methodology applied in most studies

One of the most prominent causes of the variations in the findings relating to consumer perception and response to CSR is that of methodology applied in these studies (Hartmann, 2011; Beckmann, 2007, 2006). Studies on CSR and consumer

behavior variables have often adopted either one of the three generic approaches used for empirical studies (i.e. experimental, attitude surveys or qualitative-focus group studies), with each approach showing the potential effects on the findings (Hartmann, 2011; Beckmann, 2007, 2006; Mohr et al., 2001). Regarding the use of the three approaches, the general tendency has always been that, while attitude surveys and opinion polls typically suggest high levels of consumer interest in CSR and positive effects on product evaluations and purchase intentions. Experimental and quasi experimental designs on the other hand usually lead to either inconclusive or more complex results, indicating that the effect of CSR on consumer behavior is influenced by several mediating and moderating variables (Hartmann et al., 2013; Beckmann, 2007; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). For qualitative researches involving focus groups and in-depth interviews, which usually entails a more detailed analysis of consumers understanding, perception and response to CSR, the results mainly reveal a lack of interest and knowledge and skepticism to CSR on the part of the consumers (Hartmann et al., 2013; Beckmann, 2007; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001).

Measurement of Perceived CSR

Another major reason for the mixed findings regarding consumers' response to CSR is the measurement of perceived CSR (Alvarado-Herrera et al., 2015; Pelozo & Shang, 2010). Although this is closely related to the methodology factor explained above, the problem however has its roots in the lack of specificity in the definition of CSR as well as its dimensions (Alvarado-Herrera et al., 2015; Babatunde & Akinboboye, 2013; Pelozo & Shang, 2010). The fact remains that CSR means different things to different people across cultures, economies, industries, and stakeholder groups, and even within specific stakeholder groups (Ailawadi et al., 2014; Babatunde & Akinboboye, 2013). The situation with most CSR researches is such that various dimensions and measurement scales have been used in different studies (Alvarado-Herrera et al., 2015; Turker, 2009), most of which attempted to explore the influence of CSR in purchasing decisions in general, and not in particular industries (Papafloratos, 2009). There is thus a high tendency for differential findings, especially when one considers the fact consumers "often use different purchasing criteria for different categories of product" (Papafloratos, 2009, p. 7).

Potential Influences of Mediator and Moderator Variables

Beyond the issues of methodology and measurement of CSR, researchers have also noted that the inconclusive findings could be due to suggestions that the effect of CSR on consumer related outcomes may be dependent on other factors besides CSR itself (Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Marquina-Feldman & Vasquez-Parraga, 2013; He and Li, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Brown & Dacin, 1997). For this reason,

researchers have suggested the inclusion of additional variables into the models exploring the relationship between CSR and consumer behavior. These additional variables are mostly in the form of mediator and moderator variables, which according to Aguinis and Glavas (2012, p. 934), respectively represent the “underlying processes” and “conditions under which” consumers’ perceptions of CSR “leads to specific outcomes”. These mediator/moderator variables may include factors related to the company (e.g. The CSR domain, product quality, brand dominance, etc.) and/or related to the consumer (e.g. awareness, CSR support, and attributions) (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001); as well as those relating to industry, culture, national system and context (Casado-Díaz et al., 2014; Azmat & Ha, 2013; Simpson & Kohers, 2002). The emphasis on mediator and moderator variables has further broadened the scope of the CSR – Consumer response research as researchers across several contexts have continued to search for potential mediator and/or moderator effects that may enhance the current understanding of the effect of perceived CSR on consumer buying behavior.

Consumer Awareness and Interest in CSR

One other reason that possibly accounts for the equivocal findings in CSR and consumer responses studies is the issue of awareness of CSR on the part of the consumers. Several scholars have raised the issue of consumer awareness of CSR/ethical behaviors of companies as a possible determinant of consumers’ perception and response towards CSR (Yusof et al., 2015; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Dolnicar & Pomeroy, 2007; Sen et al., 2006; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Auger et al., 2003; Maignan, 2001; Mohr et al., 2001). These researchers have argued that awareness of CSR ought to be a necessary pre-requisite to perceptions and subsequent consumer response to companies’ CSR efforts. Studies that have focused specifically on consumers’ awareness of CSR have reported that most consumers are generally not familiar with the term ‘CSR’; and in most cases, they do not actively search for information on companies CSR activities (Hartmann et al., 2013; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). Nevertheless, despite the low familiarity with the term CSR, research findings shown that most consumers have clear associations as to what they expect from companies in relation to contributions to the society. These expectations include “accountability, honesty, lawfulness, environmental responsibility, responsibilities regarding employees and local suppliers” (Schoenheit et al., 2007, as cited in Hartman et al., 2013).

Research findings relating to consumer awareness of CSR has resulted in two opposing suggestions. On one hand, some researchers have called for increased efforts on the part of companies to inform and educate the consumers on the CSR activities being implemented by the companies (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Auger

et al., 2003). On the other hand, some researchers have warned on the possible negative effects of companies directly communicating their CSR activities to the consumers (Du et al., 2010; Pomeroy&Dolnicar, 2009). They noted that such direct communication of CSR activities by companies would likely generate negative attributions from the consumers, who will view such messages as part of the marketing gimmicks aimed attracting consumer attention and patronage. This fact has also created additional line of research interested in determining consumer attributions to CSR messages and the sources used in delivering the messages (Swaen&Chumpitaz, 2008; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

5. CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussions have highlighted the importance of CSR in contemporary business world. The relevance attached to CSR has made it to generate interests from academicians and practitioners from different fields and expertise, and this may be partly responsible for the inability to reach a consensus on the precise definition of the concept. In the fields of (business) management and marketing, the absence of a consensus on the meaning and components of CSR, as well as the different levels of development and demand for CSR in different parts of the world (especially between the developed and developing economies) have resulted in a lack of consensus on the impact of CSR on business performance. This lack of consensus is most evident in studies dealing with consumer behavior variables, such as perceived service quality, corporate evaluation and trust, customer satisfaction, purchase intention and loyalty. The implication therefore, is that the issue of CSR and consumer behavior will continue to remain a fertile ground for research. The major challenge facing researchers is to decide if context-specific approaches should be adopted for CSR studies across the world, rather than a uniform approach.

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