

The Role of Moral Identity in Consumers' Purchase Intention with Corporate Social Responsibility

Guisheng Jin

School of Economics and Management
Zhejiang Sci-Tech University
Hangzhou, China
Tonjin2004@sina.com

Di Chen

School of Economics and Management
Zhejiang Sci-Tech University
Hangzhou, China
chendihq@126.com

Abstract—Based on the domestic and international researches about consumer response to corporate social responsibility (CSR), this research builds a theoretical model about the effects of CSR on consumers' purchase intention, which introduces the consumer corporate identity and the self-importance of moral identity. Through theoretical derivation, enterprises to fulfill their CSR will positively influence consumer corporate identity and consumers' purchase intention, in this process, the consumer corporate identity plays a mediating role, and the self-importance of moral identity plays a moderating role.

Keywords—corporate social responsibility; purchase intention; the self-importance of moral identity; consumer corporate identity; theoretical models

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issues about consumer-based CSR constantly take seriously. Enterprises will fulfill their social responsibility as a strategic behavior, and strive to create a good corporate image, to obtain the trust of consumers, in order to enhance the competitiveness of enterprises. Our country is in economic restructuring, the unethical behaviors of enterprises continue to be exposed, such as counterfeit products, wage arrears for workers, environmental pollution and so on. Such behaviors of a serious lack of moral have punished by law and condemned by the whole society. The status of corporate ethics compel society's concern for CSR, which also evokes consumers think about CSR, and strengthen consumers' awareness of CSR.

However, CSR is not the dominant factor that affects consumers in purchasing decisions, while traditional standards, such as price, quality, brand familiarity are still the most important criterion in the buying process for consumers (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000). Especially in China, CSR at an early stage of development, although corporate ethics problems have prompted the consumers to appeal for CSR, the perception of CSR and the support for CSR is still relatively lacking in the actual buying process. The survey found that only 44% of consumers will make a positive response to ethical marketing practices, in which 44% of consumers, only 12% consumers will actually make the purchasing behaviors in order to respond to corporate ethics activities, nearly 32% consumers just hold appreciation attitude and express the intention to buy, but not necessarily to make the actual purchasing behaviors to support corporate ethics activities (Deng, etc., 2011). To solve

this problem, this research attempts to study consumers' levels of their own morals, to explore whether the moral identity of consumer will affect consumer's response to CSR. And this research is to provide a more favorable theoretical basis for enterprises to do social responsibility activities, so that CSR activities are more targeted and effective.

II. THE CONCEPT OF CSR

The concept of CSR is proposed by an American scholar Sheldon (1924) for the first time, but given the initial definition is Bowen (1953), he believes that "businessman are obligated to develop policies, make decisions or take certain actions, according to socially desirable goals and values." But in defining the concept of CSR, the pyramid model proposed by Carrol (1979) is the most classic, in which CSR is divided into four dimensions: economic responsibility, legal responsibility, ethical responsibility and philanthropic responsibility; And CSR is defined as the social expectations of the enterprises at a given point on the economic, legal and philanthropic behavior. This is more clearly in the directions of CSR, revealing the basic normative of CSR. And McWilliams, etc.(2001) define CSR as the behaviors that companies take the initiative in committing to public interest, which beyond the level of economic interests and legal constraints, companies take the initiative committed to social behavior of public interest. They directly promote CSR to the height of ethical responsibility and philanthropic responsibility. Chinese scholars also carry out the extensive and in-depth study on CSR. Chen & Han (2005) divide CSR into the basic, intermediate and advanced levels, and believe the definition of CSR should be comprehensive, but to fulfill it should be hierarchical, and enterprises should determine the level of social responsibility they stay at, according to their own situation. Xu & Yang (2007) through inductive analysis examines the scope of the concept of CSR in China, come to Chinese nine dimensions of CSR: economic responsibility, legal responsibility, environmental protection, customer orientation, people orientation, public service, employment, business ethics, social stability and progress. And Deng & Jiang (2011) explore the meaning of CSR in consumers' minds, find CSR in consumers' minds is a multidimensional structure, that consumers expect companies to commit to their social responsibility, employee responsibility, legal responsibility, consumer responsibility and economic responsibility, in which consumer responsibility are the most

valued by consumers, but social responsibility and economic responsibility are not relatively valued.

III. CSR AND CONSUMER RESPONSE

For the study of CSR, scholars study and explore CSR in the enterprises' perspective in the 1980s to 1990s. After 1990s scholars began to explore the interaction between CSR and stakeholders in the stakeholders' perspective, especially in the consumers' perspective. Enterprises through good ethical performance and a higher level of CSR access to consumers, and ultimately gain the competitive advantage. In other countries, there have been many scholars researching the related issues on consumer response to CSR and drawing important conclusions. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) believe that the effects of CSR on consumer are mainly reflected in three aspects: (1) CSR affects on consumers on the purchasing behaviors, and enables consumers take considerations beyond economic (price) and some other "rational" (i.e., product attributes); (2) CSR has "spillover effect" which impacts unconventional consumption, such as enhancing consumers' evaluation of new products; (3) CSR is the insurance for the company when in crisis (i.e., harmful products, etc.). Based on the previous study, Bhattacharya & Sen (2004) experimentally prove that CSR can influence stakeholders on the internal response and external response, internal response refers to consumer's awareness, attitude and attribution of corporate's CSR activities; external response refers to buying behavior and loyalty. In China, in recent years, CSR as a new field has also been in a more rapid development. Many foreign scholars explore the direct effect of CSR on consumer response, compared with foreign researches, scholars in China try to find the intermediate conditions to study the mechanisms that CSR impacting on consumer response. Zhang, etc. (2010) believe the behaviors of CSR that perceived by consumers will ultimately promote their willingness to buy the products, while the perceived quality and the perceived risk plays a mediating role in CSR effecting consumers' willingness to buy. Ma (2011) use the consumer trust and the consumer support as a moderating variable, and finds that the "high trust" consumers and "high support" consumers' willingness to buy is more sensitive to the CSR.

In summary, the mechanisms of CSR and consumer response have been extensively researched by scholars. However, are there differences in responding to CSR between different types of consumers? That is, in what scenario, the effect of CSR on consumers would be more effective. Therefore, based on previous researches, this research explores the effects of CSR on consumers' purchase intention and consumer corporate identity in the different level of the self-importance of moral identity, and the effects of consumer corporate identity on consumers' purchase intention. And this research tries to build a conceptual model including CSR, consumer corporate identity, consumers' purchase intention and the self-importance of moral identity.

A. CSR and Consumers' Purchase Intention

Enterprise that has a good performance of CSR, will build a good corporate image in the minds of consumers, and obtain consumers' acceptance, ultimately enhance consumers'

willingness to buy the product. The effects of CSR on consumers' purchase intention have become the focus of academic research. In 2001, it was the first time that Sen and Bhattacharya confirmed the level of CSR directly affects consumers' purchase intention. The behaviors of CSR positively influence consumers on the evaluation of the enterprise and the purchase intention (Mohr & Webb, 2005), the lower level of CSR will greatly weaken the consumers' purchase intention, resulting in consumers are willing to buy the products just at a lower price. This conclusion of the study has been highly recognized in academia at home and abroad.

In recent years, Chinese scholars also made related research on this point. Zhou, etc. (2007) through experimental methods, has found that three areas of CSR (charitable contributions, environmental protection and treat their staff) have a significant impact on consumers' purchase intention and product quality perception, which is the same as conclusions of Sen, etc. (2001) and Mohr, etc. (2005). And found the relationship between CSR and consumer response is affected by personal characteristic and price signal. Consumers' purchase intention and the willingness to pay more for the enterprises, not only depends on whether a company is responsible (absolute level), but also on the relative level of the company's CSR in the industry (Zhou & Zhang, 2007); consumers' purchase intention for the product of a company with high (or low), CSR in the industry is also high or low. And Zhou & Li (2011) divide CSR into charity-based CSR, business-based CSR and comprehensive CSR, and the empirical study indicates a progressive change from low to high as to consumers' evaluations and purchase intentions on charity-based CSR, business-based CSR and comprehensive CSR, though all of them are higher than the neutral level.

B. CSR and Consumer Corporate Identity

Consumer corporate identity is used to explain the reasons and motives for consumers close with a brand or company (Du etc., 2007). The concept of consumers corporate identity is derived from the social identity theory (SIT). The theory is that people tend to put themselves and others in a variety of social classification, this social classification enables a person position and define themselves in a specific social context, which contributes to the formation of a unique identity and social identity; The recognition of this social identity, which is the feeling of consistency with the group in which a person, means that their personal characteristics is the same as the groups' characteristics of social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Thus consumer company identity refers to consumers' psychological attachment to a company based on a substantial overlap between their perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of the company (Du, etc., 2007). The fulfillment of CSR expresses the corporate actions are consistent with the values of the public expect, which would arouse customer corporate identity in terms of values. Customer apperceives the similarity or coincidence between the personal values and corporate's values through CSR, resulting in the formation of customer corporate identity (Yang, etc., 2011).

Many scholars have confirmed the CSR will positively affect consumer corporate identity (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Marin, etc., 2009; Rafael, 2009; Jin, 2006; Xie & Zhou, 2009).

Wu & Tsai (2007) believe that corporate's social identity positively affects customer corporate identity, and customer corporate identity based on CSR is much larger than that on the company's brand and image.

C. Consumer Corporate Identity and Purchase Intention

The higher consumer corporate identity is, the stronger the perceived ties between enterprises and consumers are, which leads to a positive intention to buy their products. According to the theory of self extends, to buy products has become a way of self-expression and self-prominence, which is very important to the definition of the individual (Yang, etc., 2011). So, once consumers identify with the enterprise they will take the appropriate actions for self-expression, such as the purchase of its products or services.

Sen & Bhattacharya introduce this variable "consumer corporate identity" to explain why consumers have a higher purchase intention for the enterprise in CSR for the first time. Bhattacharya & Sen (2003) have found the positive results of consumer corporate identity include: consumers are more likely to be loyal to the company's existing products and try its new products; to promote the company; to recruit people from their extant social networks to be new customers of the company; to be resilient to negative information about the company; and to claim on the company. Consumer corporate identity is a source of competitive advantage for companies (Jin, 2006), consumers have a higher evaluation and purchase intentions on the company's products which they have recognized, and are more willing to disseminate company's positive information to others, to negative information have the higher avoidance or resistance. Xie & Zhou (2009) believe that CSR has direct positive effects on consumers' purchase intention, it also has positive indirect effects on consumers' purchase intention through consumer identification channels; What's more, the intensity of indirect effects is far greater than that of the direct effects. It can be seen that consumer corporate identity is better able to explain why consumers improve purchase intentions due to CSR.

D. The Self-Importance of Moral Identity

The definition of moral identity is a mental representation (i.e., a self-image) that a consumer may hold about his or her moral character (Aquino & Reed, II, 2002). A consumer's moral identity may stimulate the choices and pursue their behavior. When a consumer's moral identity is highly salient or self-important, his or her sensitivity to acts that are consistent with moral identity increases (Reed, II, etc., 2007). Huang, etc. (2012) have found that donating money is more effective on purchase likelihood for consumers who are low level in the self-importance of moral identity because the entrepreneur donating money is perceived as a more competent man; While donating time is more effective on purchase likelihood for those who are high level in the self-importance of moral identity the entrepreneur donating money is perceived as a more warm man. Thus, consumers in the different self-importance of moral identities will have differences in the perception and judgment of ethical behaviors, their action will also be different. A consumer who is high level in the self-importance of moral identity will inevitably strengthen the

mental link with the enterprise due to CSR, and generate a stronger corporate identity. Therefore, consumers' self-importance of moral identity will directly affect the moral judgment on CSR, affect consumer corporate identity, thereby affecting consumers' behavioral intention (i.e., purchase intention).

IV. THE THEORETICAL MODEL

Through researching the relevant literatures, I build a theoretical model about CSR affecting on consumers' purchase intention (see Figure 1). It can be drawn from the model that CSR will positively affect consumer's willingness to buy the product or service; In the process consumer corporate identity plays a mediating role, CSR will also enhance consumer corporate identity, the more consumer corporate identity, the more intense their purchase intention will be; Consumer's self-importance of moral identity plays a moderating role in the process, namely consumers who are high level in the self-importance of moral identity are more likely to generate the corporate identity because of CSR, and to improve consumers' purchase intention for the company.

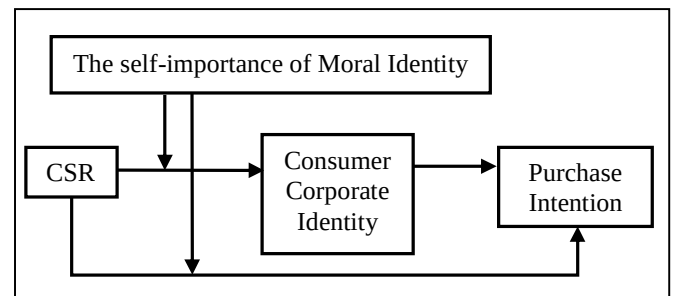


FIGURE 1. THE THEORETICAL MODEL

V. CONCLUSION

This research is to build a theoretical model about CSR on consumer purchase intention, which introduces "consumer corporate identity" as a mediating variable, and introduces "the self-importance of moral identity" as a moderating variable. This research has made some additions and extensions on the content for the existing researches. First, in the country, the researches which use consumer corporate identity to explain the effects of CSR on consumers' purchase intention is not particularly large. Based on the theoretical study of consumer corporate identity, the paper has made a detailed explanation on the relationship of CSR, consumer corporate identity and consumers' purchase intention. Enterprises in the increasingly competitive market in order to gain the competitive advantage in the consumer market, consumer corporate identity is an important competitive strategy. By establishing a good corporate image, especially corporate's social image, the company gain the consumer corporate identity, consumers will generate the goodwill and recognition of its products. Secondly, this paper introduces consumer's self-importance of moral identity as the moderating variable for the first time in the process of consumers responding to CSR. Enterprises should take targeted activities of CSR based on the consumer's level of self-importance of moral identity, consumers can more

effectively improve the corporate identity and generate the corresponding behavioral intentions. However, this research is mainly theoretical research and lacks relevant empirical research, the latter study can confirm the theoretical model constructed in this paper through empirical research, making the results be more convincing.

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