The Moderating Role of CSR Associations on the Link between Brand Awareness and Purchase Intention

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Abstract

This study uses the moderating model to explore the relationships between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) associations, brand awareness and consumer purchase intention. Besides investigating the direct effects of CSR associations on brand awareness and consumer purchase intention, this study also focuses on discovering the moderating role of CSR associations on the relationship between brand awareness and consumer purchase intention among Vietnamese students. Adapting scales from previous research, the authors distribute questionnaires to consumers across the country. Then, the validity and reliability are tested via Cronbach's alpha, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Moreover, by employing a meta-analytical path analysis with a sample of 686 consumers, the authors show that CSR associations play an important role in shaping purchase intention among Vietnamese consumers regarding the consumption of organic milk products. Also, CSR associations have a strong effect on brand awareness. However, our study shows that purchase intention is not directly affected by brand awareness. In other words, brand awareness does not mediate the relationship between CSR associations and purchase intention. Interestingly, authors show that CSR associations moderate the link between brand awareness and consumer purchase intention. Based on the research, some recommendations are made to companies that produce organic milk products.

Keywords : CSR Associations, Brand Awareness, Consumer Purchase Intention

JEL Classification Code: M14, M31, L66

1. Introduction

Consumers decide to choose their favorite and familiar brands because of the growing consumer consciousness (Chi et al., 2009). Thus, companies have to entice their consumers

to love to buy their products and brands in order to enhance their competitive advantages, and defeat their competitors. Although consumers are willing to buy a product or use a service, brand awareness still plays a crucial role in their purchase decision. When consumers consider the purchase of a product, the brand name, which might come to their minds at once, reflects the high brand awareness of that product (Macdonald & Sharp, 2000). Consumers' purchase intention and behavior can be affected by a high brand awareness (Dodds et al., 1991; Grewal et al., 1998). This explains why a company with a product enjoying high brand awareness also has high market share as well as better quality evaluation (Chi et al., 2009). Besides, the role of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) associations in enhancing the brand awareness and purchase intention has been the subject of some recent research (e.g. Gatti et al., 2012; Mattera et al., 2012; Rivera et al., 2019). Indeed, corporate reputation is determined as a valuable asset that positively affects purchase intention. Consequently, CSR issues are of

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increasing interest and the importance of CSR also has been increasingly stressed (Gatti et al., 2012).

Corporate Social Responsibility is seen as the extent to which enterprises assume responsibilities related to economic, legal, ethical and discretionary perspectives with regard to their stakeholders; it can be perceived as the best tool which, when effectively managed and communicated, can cooperate with the search for separate positioning to encourage consumer reactions (Maignan et al., 1999; Lacey et al., 2015). According to a marketing perspective, CSR and green-washing are two different constructs, but sometimes they get confused. 'CSR involves the proactive integration into the firm's social, environmental or cultural actions of activities that, put into value, are capable of generating positive impacts for the firm and its stakeholders (e.g. consumers). It is, therefore, much more than a communicative reaction (a social or environmental 'facelift'), as a response to poor brand positioning or an image crisis' (Rivera et al., 2019, p.396).

Although, many empirical studies on the effects of CSR associations on consumer behavior have approached this topic from a number of different angles (Brown & Dacin, 1997; He & Li, 2011; Tian et al., 2011), empirical studies on the effects of CSR associations on brand awareness and purchase intention are still few (Wongpitch et al., 2016). Especially, the moderating effect of CSR associations on the link between brand awareness and purchase intention are still unknown. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by analyzing: (1) the direct impacts of CSR associations on brand awareness and purchase intention; (2) the direct link between brand awareness and purchase intention; (3) the mediating role of brand awareness in the relationship between CSR associations and purchase intention; and most importantly (4) the moderating effect of CSR associations on the link between brand awareness and purchase intention.

This study is organized as follows: First, literature review, conceptual framework and hypotheses related to the relationship between CSR associations, brand awareness and consumer purchase intention will be described. Second, research methods including data collection, analyses and measures will be presented. Then, the research result will be discussed. Conclusion and recommendations for further research will be proposed in the final part.

2. Literature Review

In a globalized market economy, CSR is seen as part of a modern business. The scope and awareness of CSR issues have changed over time. With several decades of CSR research and development, numerous definitions have been proposed by scholars, organizations, business communities and governments all over the world (Doanh & Gadomska-

Lila, 2020). Indeed, evidence of the attention of the business community in the social perspectives of firm behavior can be discovered from the mid-twentieth century (van Marrewijk, 2003). Then, the conceptual frameworks related to CSR concepts have been very diverse. CSR can be seen as the reflection of a new social deal between firms and society (van Marrewijk, 2003), while it is also understood as a reaction to the pressure of society, which enterprises have to face now (Carroll, 1979). CSR is placed in the strictly philanthropic field by some studies (van Marrewijk, 2003) whereas others perceive it as obligatory (Bowen, 1953; Frederick, 1960). 'CSR involves the conduct of a business so that it is economically profitable, law-abiding, ethical and socially supportive. To be socially responsible... then means that profitability and obedience to the law are foremost conditions to discussing the firm's ethics and the extent to which it supports the society in which it exists with contributions of money, time and talent. Thus, CSR is composed of four parts: economic, legal, ethical and voluntary or philanthropic' (Carroll, 1999, p. 286).

CSR, sometimes referred as corporate ethics, corporate responsibility, and citizenship, is a broad complex concept and continually evolving. In the past, CSR was considered an obligation of the firm to society (Huynh et al., 2020; Nguyen & Tu, 2020; Smith, 2003). Then, today CSR is a voluntary activity done by organizations in order to bring benefit to workforce and community. It becomes an opportunity to create value and sustainability for business (Bhattacharya et al. 2011). Each company may engage in CSR via various initiatives, the most common ones are doing charity, engaging in environmental project, making positive contributions to local communities, ensuring human rights.

Academic studies related to CSR-consumer binominal has fundamentally concentrated on two perspectives, such as operationalizing the CSR concepts from the point of consumer's insights and analyzing how the CSR perceptions affect the responses of consumers to the firm (Rivera et al., 2019). Following the first view, some studies have investigated the multidimensionality of CSR construct, proposed by Carroll (1979), including economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic dimensions, and the Sustainable Development Approach-consisting of economic, social and environmental aspects (Alvarado-Herrera et al., 2017). However, Brown & Dacin (1997) draw a conceptual framework, which is mostly applied to show the dimensions that place CSR as consumer perception to discover its subsequent effects on subject's response (Du et al., 2007).

Regarding the second view, consumer perceptions of CSR change greatly (Lacey et al., 2015). Although it is believed that CSR is fundamentally involved in affective consumer perceptions of the company, it has been presented that CSR programs can have purely cognitive influences and behavior impacts, such as purchase intention and intention

to recommend firm image to others (Rivera et al., 2019). Moreover, consumers tend to positively accept company's CSR initiatives, however, they were primarily skeptical of them (Ellen et al., 2006; Forehand & Grier, 2003). When a company shows its social responsibility, it adapts the common reference framework of increasing turnover and maximizing profit, used to examine behavior of company. Through CSR, the company tries to project a personality characterized by altruistic values, so, consumers start a cognitive process of elaboration to obtain guarantees in linking to the company's good faith in its social obligation and guarantees that the method the company is proving itself via CSR programs is consistent with the firm's real values (Rivera et al., 2019). This cognitive process derived from a course of principal judgments in terms of firm's credibility, its reputation between CSR activities, the company's main programs and its brand positioning displayed in advertising campaign, websites as well as social media (Bigné et al., 2012).

A literature review on the impacts of CSR associations on consumer purchase intentions and behaviors shows that there has been little empirical research on this topic (Ellen et al., 2006; Groza et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2010). Recently, some studies have shown that CSR associations are positively related to brand awareness, even to purchase intention (Rivera et al., 2019), but there are still gaps in our understanding about the moderating role of CSR associations in the link between brand awareness and consumer purchase intention. Thus, the conceptual framework was drawn to explore the direct effects of brand awareness and CSR association on purchase intention as well as investigate the moderating role of CSR associations in the correlation between brand awareness and purchase intention among Vietnamese consumers towards buying organic milk products.

Firstly, brand is defined as a 'name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, that is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors' (Kotler, 1991, p.442) while brand awareness is specified as the consumer's capacities to identify and recall the brand in various situations, and it also play the important role in consumer's purchase decision (Aaker, 1997). Brand awareness has contributed to brand equity for experienced customers, however, not to a similar level (Prasad & Dev, 2000; Uslu et al., 2013). Some studies show that brand awareness has direct influence on consumer decision-making in that it affects the formation and strength of brand associations (Lin et al., 2015). Consumers intend to purchase a brand with little time and less cognitive effort (Hoyer, 1984). Brand awareness can help consumers recognizing the brand in the different categories of products and affect them to intent or make decision to buy one (Percy & Rossiter, 1992). Thus, in this study, the effect of brand awareness on consumer purchase intention will be tested.

H1: Brand awareness has positive effect on consumer purchase intention

Secondly, the number of empirical studies of the impacts of CSR associations on consumer purchase intention is still rather few and the models proposed are also very simple, and usually include CSR associations, attitude toward the company, and/or consumer purchase intention (Wongpitch et al., 2016). In Vietnam, the CSR concept is still in the early stage (Doanh & Gadomska-Lila, 2020) and many consumers are not aware of CSR associations adequately, particularly in ethical and philanthropic degree (Bala & Yeung, 2009). The lack of understanding can become a barrier to consumer sensitivity to CSR associations and explains why CSR associations cannot be paid attention to when appraising a company and its products (Maignan, 2001). However, the more the consumers understand about CSR associations, the better they are aware of CSR activities (Lee & Shin, 2010); as a result, those consumers with a higher degree of awareness of CSR are more likely to present positive attitude towards the sponsoring company and its products or services, and a higher level of purchase intention (Tian et al., 2011).

H2: CSR associations have positive effects on consumer purchase intention

Thirdly, some previous studies posit that CSR associations enhance brand awareness (Rivera et al., 2019). Indeed, CSR associations have direct and positive effects on brand awareness, which then influences brand attitude (Aldas et al., 2013). Consumer perception related to CSR associations is singular, being different to brand attribute (Du et al., 2010), that helps to improve awareness by making brand become more memorable and recognizable. CSR not only has a positive impact on consumer brand perception, but it also is seen as a crucial driver of brand evaluation (Holt et al., 2004). Thus, CSR associations can increase brand awareness (Keller, 2003). In other word, consumer perception of CSR associations results in positive brand awareness (Lai et al., 2010). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed to test the relationship between CSR associations and consumer's brand awareness of the organic milk products in Vietnam.

H3: CSR associations have positive effects on brand awareness.

Finally, as mentioned, there are very few studies exploring the relationship between CSR associations and consumer purchase intention (Wongpitch et al., 2016; Zahari et al., 2020) and still now, no studies investigate the moderating role of CSR associations in the link between brand awareness and consumer purchase intention. A moderating impact is defined as 'a variable that alters the direction or

strength of the relation between a predictor and an outcome' (Frazier et al., 2004, p. 116). Thus, besides exploring the direct relationship between CSR associations and purchase intention, this study also discovers the moderating effect of CSR associations in the link between brand awareness and purchase intention among Vietnamese consumers towards buying organic milk products.

H4: CSR associations moderate the link between brand awareness and consumer purchase intention.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of this study.

3. Research Methods

3.1. Sample

The survey is in two parts, based on the purpose of the research, theoretical background and hypotheses (Doanh & Bernat, 2019a). In the first section, the questions are designed to allow consumers present their viewpoint regarding brand awareness, CSR associations and purchase intention regarding organic milk products. The measures were also adapted from previous studies. In the second section, demographic questions are designed to obtain consumers' information such as gender, age, marital status, educational level and working experiences. 700 questionnaires were directly distributed to consumers across three regions in Vietnam (North, Central and South), as they go shopping. The authors explain clearly the objectives of the research and instruct respondents how to complete questionnaires. Only 686 questionnaires were answered fully, but the number meets enough conditions for further analyses. Demographic information of respondents is presented in Table 1.

The results of descriptive statistics of demographic layouts show that the big proportion of consumers is female, accounting for 61.8%, and 38.2% consumers are male. In terms of age, just 0.6% consumers are under 18 years old; most respondents are aged 22 to 30 (46.4%), followed by customers aged from 35 to 50 (20.2%), and from 30 to

35 (15.6%). In addition, 57.4% of consumers are married and 42.6% of them are single. Regarding of educational level, the large percentage of consumers had obtained a bachelor degree (42.2%), followed by those who have high school, master and PhD degrees (35.5%, 18.9% and 3.4%, respectively). Moreover, 43.2 % of consumers have 4-6 years of working experiences and only 14.2% of them have been working under two years.

3.2. Analyses

The authors performed a regression analysis to explore the contributions of brand awareness and CSR associations on consumer purchase intention as well as to examine the moderating effect of CSR associations on the link between brand awareness and purchase intention. Structural equation modelling (SEM) also should be implemented to test the hypothesized relationships and analysis process includes three main steps (Doanh & Bernat, 2019b). First, Cronbach's alpha and explorative factor analysis (EFA) are employed to evaluate the reliability of variables. Second, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is applied to examine the empirical validity of the research model and variables. Finally, the structural equation modelling was then implemented to estimate path

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Sample Demographics

Demographic variables		F	%
Gender	Male	262	38.2
	Female	424	61.8
Age	Under 18 years old	4	0.6
	From 18 to 22 years old	103	15.0
	From 22 to 30 years old	318	46.4
	From 30 to 35 years old	107	15.6
	From 35 to 50 years old	139	20.2
	Over 50 years old	15	2.2
Marital status	Single	292	42.6
	Married	394	57.4
Educational level	High School	244	35.5
	Bachelor	289	42.2
	Master	130	18.9
	PhD	23	3.4
Working experience	Under 2 years	97	14.2
	From 2 to 4 years	174	25.3
	From 4 to 6 years	296	43.2
	More than 6 years	119	17.3

Note: N=686; F: Frequency; %: Percent

Figure 1: The conceptual model

coefficients for each proposed links in the research model. In addition, a statistical analysis has been performed using SPSS 22.0 and AMOS 22.0 softwares.

3.3. Measures

All scales used in our study were adopted from past research. All constructs are measured on seven-point Likert scales, from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Especially, brand awareness was measured on a 4-items adapted from Rivera et al. (2019), CSR associations were approximated using a 5-item scale adopted from Yoo et al. (2000). Consumer's purchase intention is adapted from the studies of Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Rivera et al. (2019) with four items. All measures were then subjected to exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the purpose of scale examining and purification. Particularly:

Brand Awareness-BA (Cronbach's alpha = 0.778), the scale identifies four items: 'It is a well-known brand in its sector' (0.723); 'The brand is appropriate for organic milk products' (0.728); 'I can easily recognize it among others in the sector' (0.703); and 'I can quickly remember its logo' (0.740).

CSR associations-CSR (Cronbach's alpha = 0.910), the scale consists of five items: the brand of your preference 'tries to manage economic resources well' (0.897), 'tries to improve the working conditions of collaborators' (0.893), 'tries to contribute to the improvement of the communities in which it works' (0.879), 'tries to promote environmental sustainability' (0.879), and 'tries to behave in an ethically responsible manner' (0.899).

Purchase Intention-PI (Cronbach's alpha = 0.844), the scale includes four items: 'I consider my reference brand as my first choice when buying organic milk products' (0.828); 'I will buy my reference brand in my next purchases of organic milk products' (0.793); 'Given equal characteristics with other brand, I prefer to buy my reference brand' (0.798), and 'I do not buy another brand if my reference brand is available in the store' (0.790).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

After estimating the reliability of scales by Cronbach's alpha, all 13 items are employed in the exploratory factor analysis (EFA). The results of testing the validity of measures (variables) by the exploratory factor analysis show that KMO = 0.838, Sig. (Bartlett's Test) = 0.000 < 0.005, Initial Eigenvalues = 68.717 > 50%. Thus, all scales are appropriate for confirmatory factor analysis at the next part. The final results of the exploratory factor analysis are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Items	Components		
	1	2	3
CSR3	0.886		
CSR4	0.867		
CSR1	0.829		
CSR2	0.828		
CSR5	0.789		
PI2		0.825	
PI4		0.824	
PI3		0.814	
PI1		0.751	
BA3			0.806
BA1			0.775
BA2			0.750
BA4			0.741
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO)			0.838
Sig. of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity			0.000
Cumulative %			68.717

Note: N= 668

4.2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

In order to assess measurement validity, the authors carried out a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) through applying AMOS 22.0 (Hair et al., 1988). The results generally showed a good level of fit for the measurement models (see Figure 2). Especially, the results of CFA represented a reasonably good level of fit: $\chi^2 (51) = 170.014$, $p = 0.000$. CMIN/df = 3.334 < 0.5 (Kettinger & Lee, 1995), CFI = 0.963, GFI = 0.974, TLI = 0.960 > 0.9, RMSEA = 0.058 (Bentler & Bonnett, 1980). Finally, the convergent validity is identified at whole scales.

Moreover, Table 3 shows the results of testing the discriminant validity between variables. The correlation of each couple of variables (r) and standard deviation (SE) are different to 1 (P-value = 0.000 < 0.005). Thus, the discriminant validity between variables is proved.

Table 4 illustrates the results of estimating the measurement validity by CFA. The results represent standardized regression weights (λ), composite reliability (pc) and average variance extracted (pvc) of all variables.

4.3. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) Analysis

The overall fit statistics of the model without the control variables illustrated an acceptable level of

Table 3: The results of testing the discriminant validity

Correlations			r	1-r	r ²	SE	CR	P-value
PES	↔	EPT	0.497	0.503	0.247	0.018	27.287	0.000
PES	↔	ETH	0.157	0.843	0.025	0.021	40.182	0.000
PES	↔	EXP	0.241	0.759	0.058	0.021	36.815	0.000

Note: N=686; r: correlation; SE: Standard Deviation; CR: Critical Ratios.

Table 4: The results of testing the measurement validity

Scales	Items	λ	ρ^c	ρ^{vc}
BA: Brand Awareness		0.688	0.780	0.474
BA4	4	0.634		
BA3		0.751		
BA2		0.695		
BA1		0.670		
CSR Associations		0.801	0.900	0.645
CSR5	5	0.776		
CSR4		0.844		
CSR3		0.882		
CSR2		0.789		
CSR1		0.715		
PI: Purchase Intention		0.666	0.761	0.444
PI4	4	0.659		
PI3		0.640		
PI2		0.642		
PI1		0.721		

Note: N=994; λ : Standardized Regression Weights; ρ^c : Composite reliability (CR); ρ^{vc} : Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

fit: $\chi^2(50) = 177.657$, $p = 0.000$. CMIN/df = $3.553 < 0.5$, CFI = 0.962, GFI = 0.972, TLI = $0.957 > 0.9$, RMSEA = 0.061. So, the original model was used to test the hypothesized relationships.

A total of four proposed relationships were tested, including three direct effects and one moderating impact. Three of the four hypothesized paths were statistically significant and just one hypothesis was rejected in the direction predicted (see Figure 3 and Table 5). Particularly, CSR associations have the strongest effect on purchase intention ($\beta = 0.389$; p -value < 0.001) (H2). In addition, CSR associations also affect directly on brand awareness ($\beta = 0.105$; p -value < 0.001) (H3). However, there is not enough statistic evidence to show that brand awareness has an effect on purchase intention (p -value > 0.05) (H1). Interestingly, our study shows that the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention is moderated by

Figure 2: The results of confirmatory factor analysis (unstandardized estimates) **Figure 3:** Structural equation modelling (unstandardized estimates)

CSR associations, although the effect level is not high ($\beta = 0.020$; p -value = $0.004 < 0.01$).

5. Conclusions

This study is expected to contribute to CSR research and practices. The contribution of our study to CSR literature

Table 5: The results of testing the research hypotheses

Hypotheses		Estimate	S.E	C.R	P	Conclusion
H1	BA→ PI	0.063	0.046	1.373	0.170	Rejected
H2	CSR→PI	0.389	0.034	11.294	***	Rejected
H3	CSR→BA	0.105	0.124	0.036	***	Supported
H4	Interact(CSR*BA)→PI	0.020	0.030	2.901	0.004	Supported

Note: N=686; *** < 0.001; S.E: Standard Deviation ; C.R: Critical Ratios.

is two-fold: Firstly, CSR associations have a strong and positive influences on brand awareness and consumer purchase intention, however, our study shows that brand awareness does not affect directly customers purchase intention. In other words, although CSR associations play an important role in shaping both brand awareness and customers' purchase intention, brand awareness does not have direct impact on purchase intention, and it also does not mediate the relationship between CSR associations and consumer purchase intention. Secondly, this study shows that CSR associations not only have direct effect on customer purchase intention, but they moderate the link between brand awareness and consumer purchase intention.

With regard to practices and implications, our research show that companies, which produce organic milk products, should take into account CSR activities to promote consumer's brand awareness as well as purchase intention. On the one hand, the study shows that CSR associations have very strong effects on purchase intention. Thus, consumers are really interested in the information related to CSR practices of firms, and this information can help them recognizing the firm' brand and then entice them to buy the products. On the other hand, CSR associations moderate the relationship between brand awareness and purchase intention. Thus, although brand awareness does not affect directly purchase intention, CSR associations can alter the strength of this relationship. Firms should pay adequate attention on CSR associations to enhance their business advantage.

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