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Enhancing Brand Commitment Through Social Responsibility Associations: A Two-Path Moderated Model

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ABSTRACT

Social responsibility has become cornerstone marketing policy, enabling brand differentiation in a high growth market. By distinguishing between symbolic and utilitarian associations of social responsibility, our study identifies two levers for consumer brand commitment. We posit that utilitarian associations enhance consumer brand commitment by strengthening consumer trust in a context imbued with fear and skepticism about consequences of consumption for health. We also argue that brands can encourage consumer commitment through their environmental and philanthropic engagements by conveying values with which consumers can identify. This second commitment lever is argued to be particularly effective for consumers with strong social/environmental personal norms. We empirically test our research model on a sample of regular consumers of organic food brands validating the two pathways from social responsibility to brand commitment. The moderating role of consumers' personal norms on the process was also confirmed regarding the philanthropic dimension but not the environmental one. Contributions and implications of these findings are presented in the discussion part.

**Brand Social Responsibility, Brand Commitment, Brand Trust, Brand Identification,
Personal Norms**

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is generally considered to be an asset for the firm, extending its shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and strengthening the performance of their relations with principle stakeholders and particularly with clients (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Thus, social responsibility has become for many brands such as “Ben & Jerry”, “Ecover”, “Patagonia” or “Björk a central element of brand differentiation policy (Hildebrand, Sen & Bhattacharya, 2011). However, despite the number of studies demonstrating the influence of social responsibility associations on the consumer-brand relationship (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009; Lacey & Kenett-Hensel, 2010), most research has only focused on social responsibility holistically without taking account of its many facets that are likely to condition consumer reactions. To study this relationship, we examine brand commitment as a central variable of an effective relational marketing policy for building a durable relationship between consumers and brands (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The objective of this research is thus to study how and in which conditions these dimensions of social responsibility influence the process of brand commitment.

THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

In marketing, CSR is generally approached through consumers’ perception of the firm’s activities and engagements related to its obligations towards society or towards stakeholders (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Abid & Moulins (2015) propose an approach to consumers’ perception of brands’ social responsibility by focusing on consumers’ specific brand expectations regarding three dimensions (1) the consumer dimension, or the brand’s capacity to propose safe and healthy products and provide correct information as to their ingredients; (2) the environmental dimension, or the brand’s capacity to reduce its environmental footprint and (3) the philanthropic dimension, or the brand’s participation in the societal and cultural life of its locality and/or its support of important causes such as handicap or child-protection.

The influence of perceptions of social responsibility on consumers’ commitment towards a company has received a certain amount of support (Pérez & Del Bosque, 2014). Nevertheless, the literature explains this influence through different theoretical perspectives:

Based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the consumer develop a relationship with the brand after a subjective analysis of the costs and benefits and in comparison with alternative solutions (Stafford, 2008). The consumer is committed to brands that he considers socially responsible for instrumental reasons in other words, for personal benefits. The “consumer” dimension of social responsibility (1) has utilitarian benefit for consumers in terms of health or quality (Abid & Moulins, 2015). In fact, by committing to reduce or eliminate potentially dangerous chemical products, a brand sends consumers a signal of its concern for their health and welfare and can be perceived by them as a credible and honest brand: two central dimensions of trust (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). The importance of trust as a central mediator between brand activities and consumer commitment has also been widely demonstrated in the relational marketing literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). We therefore postulates that:

H1: Brand trust mediates the relationship between the consumer dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment.

However, the influence of CSR on consumers' commitment has also been studied from the angle of social identity theory and self-categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Socially responsible initiatives have symbolic value for consumers (McEnally & De Chernatony, 1999) enabling them to recognize themselves in the values conveyed by these initiatives and thus developing their social identity through their consumption. These symbolic values of social responsible initiatives refer to the brand's capacity to (2) reduce its environmental footprint and to (3) participate in the societal and cultural life of its local region of activity. These symbolic aspects humanize the brand (Fournier, 1998) and express consumer identity by attributing the brand's positive characteristics to themselves (Ahearne, Bhattacharya & Gruen, 2005). Thus, it is the brand identification which refers to the "inclusion" of the brand in one's own concept of self (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). Bhattacharya & Sen (2004) declare that brand identification motivates consumers to commit with the brand's objectives. The influence of brand identification on consumer commitment has been demonstrated empirically by recent studies (Ahearne, Bhattacharya & Gruen, 2005). We thus postulate that:

H2: Brand identification mediates the relationship between the environmental dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment

H3: Brand identification mediates the relationship between the philanthropic dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment

Finally, it is commonly admitted that consumers' expectations in terms of social responsibility are far from being uniform; they vary from one consumer to another (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Personal norms, in terms of social responsibility, appear as the principal explanation of individuals' predispositions to support causes (Stern, 2000). We can thus suppose that consumers' reactions to the symbolic dimensions of social responsibility depend on the congruence they perceive between the brand's values as revealed by its environmental and societal commitments, and their own. These perceptions of congruence are likely to vary from one consumer to another depending on consumers' personal norms regarding social responsibility (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). We thus postulate that:

H4 : Consumers' personal norms moderate the indirect link between the environmental dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment via brand identification such that this mediation is stronger (weaker) when respondents' personal norms are high (low).

H5 : Consumers' personal norms moderate the indirect link between the philanthropic dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment via brand identification such that this mediation is stronger (weaker) when respondents' norms are high (low).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

To test our research model, we carried out a survey among regular consumers of national brands¹ of organic foods sold through mass retail. Indeed, organic food is one of the fastest growing industries in socially responsible consumption². The consumption of organic products is based both on instrumental motives, related to health protection, quality and to more ethical concerns such as preserving the environment and/or philanthropic activities (Magnusson et al.,

¹We eliminated retailers' brands to control the effect of the image of the retail brands, specialized stores versus supermarkets such as Biocoop have a more positive image than traditional retail distributors like Auchan or Leclerc.

²Organic food reach a market penetration rate of 96.3% in 2013 "Kantar World panel".

2003). The final sample of our survey comprised 299 respondents of whom 55% were women with an average age of 37 years.

Research on socially responsible consumption has shown that social desirability can influence consumers' responses (Roberts, 1995). To check for social desirability bias, we measured it with a 10-item scale by Strahan & Gerbasi (1972). We withdrew items strongly correlated with social desirability; in all, 7 items were withdrawn respectively from the scales of brand identification³ (3 items withdrawn), brand commitment⁴ (1 item withdrawn), personal norms⁵ (2 items withdrawn) and trust⁶ (1 item withdrawn). All final scales presented good reliability. To test our mediating hypotheses (H1, H2 & H3), we used the structural equation method (SEM) (Zao, Lynch & Chen, 2010) by using a bootstrap procedure. There is a current consensus in the literature that recognizes the superiority of bootstrapping compared to the Baron and Kenny approach for testing mediation effects (Hayes, 2013).

Hypotheses H4 and H5 correspond to a conditional indirect effect (Hayes & Preacher, 2013). To test these effects, we use the macro PROCESS developed by Hayes (2013) that tests them directly using a bootstrap procedure using SPSS.

RESULTS

The results of the tests of the mediating effects confirm hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 relative to the mediating role of trust and identification (table 1 and 2).

	M1		M2		Y	
	Trust		Identification		Commitment	
	β	t-test	β	t-test	β	t-test
Consumer SR	.565	9.544***			.053	.609 (ns)
Environmental SR			.449	8.383***	.097	1.415 (ns)
Philanthropic SR			.411	7.692***	-.110	-1.627 (ns)
Trust					.650	7.217***
Identification					.283	3.472***
R ²	.32		.50		.70	

Table 1: Test of mediation model

Note: entries are standardized regression weights *p <.05; ** p<.001; * p<.0001**

³ 6 items Escalas & Bettman (2003; 2005)

⁴ 9-item scale Terrasse (2006) adapted to the French context of the Gruen et al. (2000) and Bansal et al. (2004)

⁵ 8 item scale Harland, Staats & Wilke (1999)

⁶ 8 item scale Gurviez & Korchia (2002)

Hypothesis	Indirect effect	Confidence Interval		Direct effect	Confidence Interval		Result
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper	
H1	.368	.246	.516	.053	-.131	.229	Full mediation
H2	.127	.046	.234	.118	-.022	.297	Full mediation
H3	.116	.034	.223	-.110	-.273	.038	Full mediation

Table 2: Test of mediation paths

Note: a: confidence interval of 95% for the indirect effect by bootstrap corrected for bias

b: confidence interval of 95% for the direct effect by bootstrap corrected for bias

The global model including the three mediating effects explains almost 70% of the variance of brand commitment. It presents a good fit.

χ^2	do	χ^2/n	AGFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
855.473	308	2.778	.804	.918	.907	.077

Table 3: Model fit

Furthermore, the inclusion of the mediating effects in the model significantly increases the model's fit to the data, as shown in the following table.

	χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2$
Independent model	1305.8	316	
Direct effects	1213.6	313	92.2(3)***
H1	1034.2	311	179.4(2)***
H1 & H2	913.1	309	121.1(2)***
H1, H2 & H3	855.5	308	57.6(1)***

Table 4: Fit Improvement

Our results do not allow validating hypothesis H4 relative to the conditional effect of personal norms on the indirect effect of the environment dimension on brand commitment. Tables 5 and 6 below present these results in detail.

	M (Identification)		Y (Commitment)	
	Coef.	T-test	Coef.	T-test
Age	.097	2.131*	.075	1.985*
Gender	-.085	-1.923	-.056	-1.527
X : Environmental Social Responsibility	.467	9.503***	.138	2.958**
M : Identification			.390	8.330***
W : Personal norms	.249	4.997***		
X x W (interaction)	.002	.040		
R ²	.35***		.35***	

Table 5: Model of conditional indirect effect of environment on commitment through identification

*p <.05; ** p<.001; *** p<.0001

Moderator W (Personal norms)	Indirect effect	Confidence Interval	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
-1	.181	.121	.255
0	.182	.134	.240
1	.183	.126	.252
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>	.001	-.037	.036

Table 6: Test of Indirect conditional effect of environment on commitment through identification at different levels of personal norms (H4)

However, the indirect effect appears significantly stronger when consumers' personal norms are high, as supposed in H5. We can deduce that personal norms condition the strength of the indirect effect of the philanthropic dimension on brand commitment through identification.

	M (Identification)		Y (Commitment)	
	Coef.	T-test	Coef.	T-test
Age	.118	2.676**	.089	2.371*
Gender	-.134	-3.067**	-.078	-2.131*
X : Philanthropic Social Responsibility	.517	10.594***	.201	4.244***
M : Identification			.356	7.646***
W : Personal norms	.276	5.776***		
X x W	.091	2.033*		
R ²	.39***		.37***	
Δ R ²	.01*			

Table 7: Model of conditional indirect effect of philanthropy on commitment through identification

*p <.05; ** p<.001; *** p<.0001

Moderator W (Personal norms)	Indirect effect	Confidence Interval	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
-1	.152	.108	.208
0	.184	.135	.244
1	.216	.157	.292
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>	.032	.011	.058

Table 8: Test of indirect conditional effect of philanthropy on commitment through identification at different levels of personal norms (H5)

DISCUSSION

Our research reconciles two theoretical perspectives that have often been considered separately to explain the benefits of social responsibility on the consumer-brand relationship. By distinguishing between symbolic and utilitarian associations of social responsibility, our study identifies two levers for consumer brand commitment.

We posit that utilitarian associations enhance consumer brand commitment by strengthening consumer trust in a context imbued with fear and skepticism about consequences of consumption for health. The consumer dimension of social responsibility thus influences the consumer-brand relationship according to a classic relational process, based on reciprocity and respect of promises in the exchange. Trust plays a central role (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) as a mechanism of consumer commitment concerning the consumer dimension of social responsibility.

However, our research shows that trust is not the only lever of consumer commitment. In fact, consumption is not related only to a functional end but also fulfills a role of expression (Baudillard, 1970). Our research extends previous studies by showing that identification to a brand is the fundamental process of consumer commitment regarding the symbolic dimensions of social responsibility. Furthermore, our results attest to the role of personal norms that condition the influence of the philanthropic dimension on consumer commitment through identification. It thus seems that the influence of the philanthropic dimension on consumer identification and commitment is greater for individuals with strong personal norms.

Finally, our research underlines the major role brands play in firms' social responsibility policy. Social responsibility is often approached at the firm level without taking account of the role of brands. This empirical research validates the suggestions of previous research holding that social responsibility can be applied to brands (Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009; Lindgreen et al., 2012).

Managerial Implications

Our research attests to the central role played by the marketing function in setting up a social responsibility policy (Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005), particularly in terms of brand policy (Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009). Social responsibility applied to brands secures brand value in terms of durability (Hildebrand, Sen & Bhattacharya, 2011). Consumers take account of the criteria of social responsibility to evaluate the brands they buy. Studying social responsibility at brand level is even more necessary in so far as a large number of firms adopt mixed or multi-brand strategies (Lindgreen & al., 2012).

Our research shows that commitment mechanisms differ depending on the type of social responsibility initiatives highlighted by brands and their symbolic or utilitarian nature for consumers. Understanding these mechanisms helps to guide managerial decisions in terms of the design and promotion of various socially responsible actions that should encourage consumer commitment and loyalty. Brands positioned on attributes such as product safety and quality should communicate about the respect of promises by providing consumers with guarantees of product safety and quality through quality certificates to develop trust and overcome widespread consumer skepticism (Bibb & Kourdi, 2004).

In terms of brands' commitment for social and environmental benefits, the objective should be to increase the attractiveness of brand identity for targeted consumers. For this, the characteristics of the targeted consumers should be studied to make sure that the engagements made by brands are compatible with consumers' values in order to encourage brand identification. The communication should be thought of in terms of activating personal norms. Following Schwartz' model, personal norms influence behavior under two conditions (1) when people think that their action will have real consequences on others' well-being; (2) when they can attribute responsibility for this action to themselves. To activate consumers' personal norms and thus encourage their commitment, marketing managers should play on these two levers in their communication.

Limitations and Research Avenues

Like any study, this one also presents a certain number of limitations that need to be underlined. First of all, we chose to test our model of research on consumers of only one product category, namely, organic food products. This choice certainly strengthened the internal validity of the research. However, it opens the way to a certain number of questions as to the possible generalization of the results to other product categories. The external validity of this study should thus be reinforced by studying other fields.

Next, we tested our model on consumers of national brands. Our results converge with those of researchers in Europe and the United States (Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005; Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009). It seems therefore that social responsibility can contribute in a similar way to national brands, as well as to a global, transnational brand strategy (Pestre, 2014), or a mixed "glocal"⁷ strategy (Persais, 2010). Our results should thus be completed by testing the model on consumers of multinational brands such as "Björk" or "Patagonia".

The third limit of this research is related to time. Like all studies in the relational stream, our research is transversal and does not take account of temporal aspects in the construction of a relationship. A longitudinal study thus seems appropriate to account for the role of interactions taking place between the consumer and the brand studied.

Regarding future perspectives, a promising avenue of research is the reaction to inconsistencies between engagements that firms convey and their actual practices when these are discovered to be divergent. In fact, we could imagine that consumer reactions to allegations of irresponsibility will depend on the utilitarian or symbolic nature of their commitments. Furthermore, mechanisms for reinstating trust may differ from levers of reconstructing the attractiveness of the brand identity. These research avenues appear particularly promising.

⁷While previous researches set local strategies against global strategies, [Persais \(2010\)](#) suggests combining both, benefiting from advantages of local and global CSR strategies.

Finally, other variables may modify the relation between consumers and brands, such as the degree of consumer skepticism or the relative weight of social responsibility initiatives during purchase decisions. Other variables, outside the scope of the present study but identified in the literature on ethical and equitable consumption might also be integrated into future work. We can thus mention consumers' tendency towards collectivism or individualism or their sensitivity to products' origin. Cultural and/or national differences are highly likely to play an important role in evaluating brand social responsibility and its influence on consumers.

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