

Research on the Influence Mechanism of Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Behavior from the Perspective of Attribution Theory

Ying Liu^{1,a,*}

¹*University College London*

a. uceiy86@ucl.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Since prior studies did not focus a lot on the influence mechanism of CSR on consumer behavior from the perspective of consumers, this topic needs to be further researched. Based on the attribution theory, this study takes Hongxing Erke as the representative case using grounded theory to explore the influence mechanism of CSR on consumer behavior. This research finds that CSR strength, CSR consistency and brand image are the three main conditions that affect consumers' attribution pattern, and consumers' perception of marketing is the boundary condition that affects consumers' attribution pattern. Attribution can be divided into prosocial and self-interest. Prosocial attribution has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention, while self-interest attribution has a negative effect on consumers' purchase intention. This study has certain guiding significance for enterprises' marketing strategy and CSR implementation.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, donation, purchase intention, consumer behavior

1. Introduction

Nowadays, corporate social responsibility becomes significant gradually. The increasing number of corporations pay more attention to it. They assume that high social responsibility can create a better corporation brand image, then will attract more consumers, and bring larger profits. However, the influence of corporate social responsibility to consumers is mixed, which can be positive or negative case by case. For example, both Adidas and Apple focus on protecting environment. Adidas aims to only use recycled polyester from 2024 onwards to decrease their effect on the environment [1], which earns consumers' respect and support. Nevertheless, for the same purpose of protecting environment, Apple's action, choosing to remove the charger and headphones from the box of iPhones [2], triggers the anger of consumers. This means lots of external factors could affect the attribution pattern of the consumer, which increases or decreases the influential level of corporate social responsibility. Overall, we will explore these attribution factors and when we can maximize the positive level resulted from social responsibility to get the optimal situation for a company. The majority of current studies mainly focus on the macro impact of CSR on corporate performance, stock price and marketing performance. However, there are some limits among them. To be specific, lots of studies displayed the relationship from a static perspective instead of a dynamic perspective. People cannot see the developmental process behind the influence. Therefore, this study uses grounded theory to capture the process better.

In addition, current documents rarely talk about the psychology behind the consumer, which is why and how consumers would treat the companies doing CSR activities by different attitudes. Instead of a macro view, we can narrow this topic down to focus on consumers' view. In a more dynamic way, we can research on the influence mechanism of corporate social responsibility on consumer behavior from the perspective of attribution.

2. Literature Reviews

2.1. The Impacts of CSR on Consumers

There are many researches about the influence of CSR on consumer behavior, but there are also the disputes among these researches. Some researchers point out that CSR bring the positive influences on consumer behavior, while some researchers state that CSR can cause negative outcomes on consumer behavior. To be specific, Sen Zhang's study shows that CSR will affect the perceived value of consumer positively, which can enhance the consumer loyalty effectively [3]. In addition, Xinming Deng finds that CSR has a direct and significant positive impact on consumers' purchase intention, indicating that CSR performance can significantly improve consumers' purchase intention [4]. In contrast, Shuai Fan points out that if consumers perceive CSR to be hypocritical, that is, "words and deeds are inconsistent", the angry mood will influence the consumer to take more active retaliatory actions and punish the enterprise to a greater extent. At this point, assuming CSR will bring negative impact to the enterprise [5]. To sum up, it is true that enterprises should do some practical things about social responsibility, but in order to bring positive impact, practical things need to be spot on and satisfied with consumers, otherwise it will have negative impact. The purpose of this article is to explore under what conditions the benefits of CSR can be maximized from the perspective of attribution theory.

2.2. Attribution Theory and Applications

When an individual observes a certain phenomenon, he or she will always look for a reason to meet the need of cognitive closure. Therefore, in the face of a certain event, he or she will have different ways of attribution, which is called attribution theory. Many scholars applied the attribution theory to CSR studies to analyze consumers' attribution of CSR motivation. Drumwright believes that consumers will classify CSR actions as being motivated by economic goals and contributing to society [6]. Mohr states that consumers will classify the motivation of CSR into four categories: seeking the return of the enterprise's own interests; Most for the interests of enterprises, a small part for the interests of society; Most for the benefit of society, a small part for the interests of enterprises; All for the good of society [7]. Forehand believes that consumers will divide the motivation of CSR into internal motivation and external motivation. Only consumers believe that enterprises fulfill social responsibility for internal motivation will bring a positive impact on purchase intention [8]. Dong Lu points out that consumers will divide the motivation of CSR into altruistic attribution and self-interest attribution. The altruistic attribution is that consumers think enterprises have higher social moral standards, consciously fulfill their social responsibilities, and make selfless contributions. Self-interest attribution means that consumers believe that enterprises are under external pressure to fulfill their social responsibilities [9].

In short, there are always intensive debates between the influence of CSR on consumer behavior, so it is necessary to do further research to solve the conflict. Based on the past studies, attribution theory from consumers' view is helpful and reasonable to be used on our research. Therefore, this research will study the influence of CSR on consumer behavior from the perspective of attribution theory and find the factors that affect consumers' attribution through qualitative research.

3. Case Study and Research Process

This research selects Hongxing Erke Group's CSR action as the case study. In July 2021, Hongxing Erke Group donated 50 million yuan to Henan, China during a rainstorm, sparking heated discussion among Chinese netizens. Moved by Hongxing Erke's generous donation, netizens flooded into Hongxing Erke's live broadcast to consume irrationally, and the products in the physical store were also snapped up. Hongxing Erke as a typical national brand, the effect of donation has formed a phenomenal marketing case, which is very representative. This event can give some enlightenment on how to maximize the positive effects brought by corporate social responsibility, so this paper will deeply study on this representative case, Hongxing Erke's donation to Henan triggered consumers' spontaneous purchase, to explore the influence of CSR. This study collected consumers' opinions on this event through weibo, Tieba, Taobao and other social media platforms. The search keywords were "Hongxing Erke donates to Henan" and "Hongxing Erke donated". One hundred comments were randomly selected and sorted out using a grounded-theory study to explore the influential factors. The grounded-theory process is shown by the chart below.

Table 1: Translation of Grounded Theory Data Analysis Concepts.

Evaluations	Segmentation of the Factor	Influence Factors
Li Ning is very stingy; I'll break up with anyone who wears Nike and Adidas	Horizontal comparison (Comparing with other similar companies)	CSR Intensity
Other brands donate with a variety of spokesmen together, but Hongxing Erke itself donated so much.		
When our country is in trouble, no foreign brands donate		
I'll support it. I really think Hongxing Erke is going out of business	Vertical comparison (Comparing with company's own ability)	
I saw the Hongxing Erke's physical store near my house closed down, but it still donated 50 million yuan		
I thought Hongxing Erke was going out of business, but it donates so much. I am just so touched		
In 2008, donated to Wenchuan earthquake-stricken areas... In 2013, donated to Fujian Provincial Foundation for The Disabled... In 2018, donations for poor or disabled families... In 2019, donated to the Disabled Persons' Federation of China... In 2020, donated to Wuhan during the epidemic... In 2021, donated to Henan disaster-stricken areas	Different time & Different events	CSR Consistency
I read the story of Rongzhao Wu, the boss of this brand. At the beginning, the shoes produced by the factory he founded were all soaked by the flood overnight. He himself had been in the rain, so he wanted to hold an umbrella for others.	Entrepreneur image	Brand Image
As a boss, he didn't wear any expensive watch, didn't wear any designer clothes, only wore cheap shoes made by Hongxing Erke		
Hongxing Erke and Anta (both donated 50 million yuan) are just like the old generation who saved pennies and put them in iron boxes carefully. As soon as they heard the motherland needed them, they took out the iron box	Enterprise image	
item received, the size is just right, support our domestic goods, big brand is good.		
Hongxing erke's quality is definitely the best domestic sports brand. I have a pair of Hongxing Erke, which is more durable than three pairs of Li Ning.	Product image	
Not only is the quality good, but the price is very friendly to the people		
Why are you so lowkey	(Boundary Condition)	Consumers' Perception of Marketing
Hongxing Erke: it is better to donate money than buy marketing		
I just heard the anchor in the live broadcast say, "I hope you really want to buy because of the demand, and don't consume blindly, which is what our boss said." I was really touched		
Their boss didn't even buy Weibo membership! They are not able to spend money on the marketing!		

4. Attribution Process and Results of Consumers to Corporate Social Responsibility

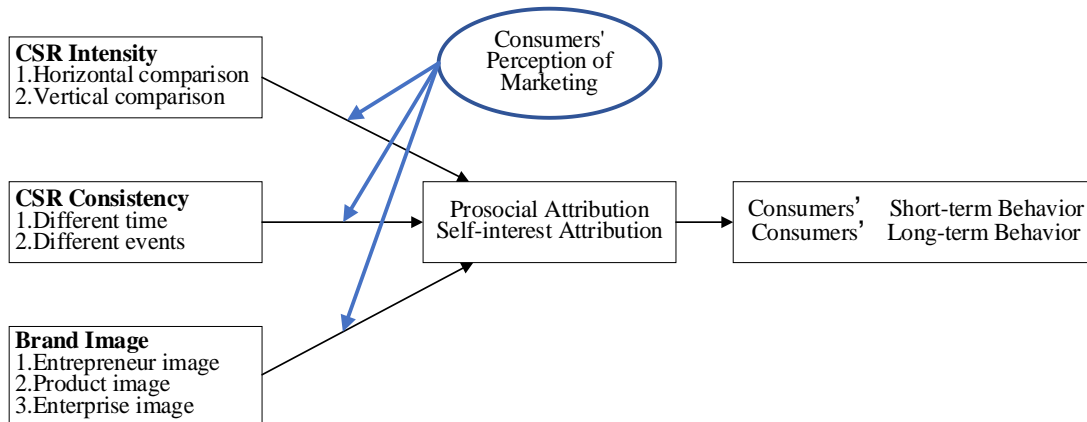


Figure 1: Consumers' Attribution Process.

Based on the grounded theory, this paper explores the influence mechanism of CSR on consumer behavior from the perspective of attribution theory. To be specific, we find that CSR intensity, CSR consistency, brand image and consumers' perception of marketing can be the factors affecting consumers' short-term and long-term behaviors.

Firstly, the CSR intensity will increase consumers' prosocial attribution and decrease their self-interest attribution. CSR intensity is a measure of an enterprise's cost or contribution of doing CSR. This contribution as an external performance will have a direct impact on consumer cognition. Overall, CSR intensity is the result of comparison in consumers' minds, so it can be divided into horizontal comparison and vertical comparison. Horizontal comparison refers to a comparison between the enterprise and other similar enterprises in the same industry, while vertical comparison refers to a comparison between the enterprise's CRS contribution and its own ability. In our case, when the ability of Hongxing Erke is much smaller than the abilities of similar brands such as Li Ning, Nike and Adidas, and its own financial status has problems, it still reacted quickly and donated 50 million yuan, a lot of money for Hongxing Erke, to Henan. Therefore, consumers feel that Hongxing Erke is really contributing its own capabilities to this event and doing its best.

Secondly, CSR consistency is another important factor affecting consumers' attribution patterns. CRS consistency will improve their prosocial attribution compared with their self-interest attribution, because consumers' behavior towards CSR is not only related to one donation action, but also a key result formed over a long period of time. When different disasters occur at different time, consumers expect the enterprise will continue to assume its social responsibilities. If enterprises insist on doing CSR all the time, consumers will give them more positive evaluations. In our case, Hongxing Erke donated in front of all disasters in need. This kind of persistent behavior will enhance consumers' prosocial attribution.

Thirdly, Brand image also influences consumers' attribution patterns. Specifically, brand image can be divided into entrepreneur image, product image and the overall image of the enterprise. Each aspect of the image will affect the way consumers attribute. In our case, the founder of Hongxing Erke, Rongguang Wu, is a genial and generous person. Consumers are attracted by his personality, building a great entrepreneur image. Also, Hongxing Erke has long been in the public eye with an excellent product image of good quality but low price. Besides, Hongxing Erke is perceived by consumers as the presentative national sport brand in China, that is, Hongxing Erke has a good overall image of the enterprise. All these positive brand images can trigger consumers' prosocial attribution and decrease their self-interest attribution.

However, need further pointed out that the three factors above on the consumers' attribution way have a boundary condition, which is the consumers' perception of marketing. When consumers feel enterprise using CSR as a marketing tool deliberately, it will arouse consumers' psychological inversion producing disgust and think that enterprise's CSR action is a hypocritical behavior, which improves the self-interest attribution and reduces the prosocial attribution.

Consumers' attribution pattern will affect their subsequent consumption behavior and recognition of the enterprise. To be specific, increase in prosocial attribution would improve consumers' purchase intention and increase in self-interest attribution would decrease consumers' purchase intention. When consumers think the enterprise undertakes social responsibility actively in a prosocial way, they tend to think the enterprise's products have good quality, which will increase their purchase intention. In addition, buying the goods from an enterprise with high social contribution can increase the pleasure of consumers. Overall, the enterprise can create a positive image of responsible in the consumer's cognition, which promotes consumers' intention to buy. However, self-interest attribution makes people think about the commercial motives behind donations. In other words, if the self-interest attribution is activated, consumers will think the enterprise is hypocritical and egoistic, and their evaluation of CSR actions will be reduced. Therefore, if the enterprise improves consumers' prosocial attribution, consumers' purchase intention will be increased in the short term. In the long term, brand loyalty of consumers will be established. They will not only buy but also recommend to others. In our case, in the short term, consumers flooded into Hongxing Erke's live broadcast to consume irrationally. In the long run, consumers will firmly remember Hongxing Erke as a brand and prefer Hongxing Erke in future decisions of consumption. Consumers' favorable impression of the brand will form a long-term emotional bond, and the brand will occupy the inner position of consumers, thus increasing consumers' loyalty to Hongxing Erke.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Conclusions

Based on the attribution theory, this study found that CSR intensity, CSR consistency, brand image and marketing perception have an impact on consumer behavior. According to the grounded-theory process, CSR strength, CSR consistency and brand image are the three main conditions that affect consumers' attribution pattern, and consumers' perception of marketing is the boundary condition that affects consumers' attribution pattern. Attribution can be divided into prosocial and self-interest. Prosocial attribution has a positive effect on consumers' purchase intention, while self-interest attribution has a negative effect on consumers' purchase intention.

5.2. Contributions

Firstly, this study points out the main factors that influence consumer behavior from the attribution perspective. Prior studies have focused more on the characteristics of corporate social responsibility itself, and emphasized that companies should do more, but they ignored the consumers' view and how people evaluate CSR. If this is ignored, a good CSR action probably will even cause bad results, meaning that enterprises do a lot but get no return. However, this study analyzes the influential factors from the consumers' view. Knowing these factors can better learn consumers' ideas and understanding consumers' minds can better predict their behavior.

Secondly, this study further put forward the boundary condition, consumers' perception degree of marketing, in the interpretation mechanism, which means that CSR will bring more positive effects only when consumers perceive that enterprise's marketing intention is low.

Thirdly, this study has guiding significance for enterprises' marketing strategy and CSR implementation and has clarified how to stimulate consumers' correct cognition. On the one hand,

persistent CSR investment should be made to build a good brand image; on the other hand, CSR action should not be too deliberate and overhype.

5.3. Future Research Directions

There are many theoretical and methodological deficiencies. To be specific, the consumers' perspectives can be explained by other theories, such as social identity theory. Furthermore, this study collected relatively small samples from online platforms, which may result in bias. Finally, this study finished using qualitative research. In the future, it can be perfected by combining experiment or tracking studies.

References

- [1] Adidas: *In 2021, for the first time, more than 60 percent of all products will be made with sustainable materials.* adidas. (2020, December 28). Retrieved January 19, 2022, from <https://www.adidas-group.com/en/media/news-archive/press-releases/2020/adidas-2021-first-time-more-60-percent-all-products-will-be-made/>
- [2] Shead, S. (2020, October 14). *Sustainability experts welcome Apple's move to scrap iPhone accessories, call for more action on e-waste.* CNBC. Retrieved January 19, 2022, from <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/14/apple-praised-for-removing-earpods-and-charger-from-iphone-12-box.html>
- [3] Zhang, S. (2021). *The Impact of Corporate Social Responsibility on Consumer Loyalty.* Journal of Henan University (Social Sciences), 61(6), 24–32. <https://doi.org/10.15991/j.cnki.411028.2021.06.004>
- [4] Deng, X., Zhang, T., Xu, Y., & Long, X. (2016). *A Study of the Influence of the CSR on Consumers' Purchase Intention.* Chinese Journal of Management, 13(7), 1019–1026. <https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1672-884x.2016.07.009>
- [5] Fan, S., Tian, Z., & Guo, N. (2020). *Research on the Influence of Corporate Hypocrisy on Consumer Punishment in CSR.* Business Management Journal, (1), 125–136. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.19616/j.cnki.bmj.2020.01.008>
- [6] Drumwright, M. E. (1996). *Company advertising with a social dimension: The role of noneconomic criteria.* Journal of Marketing, 60(4), 71–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299606000407>
- [7] Mohr, L. A., Webb, D. J., & Harris, K. E. (2001). *Do consumers expect companies to be socially responsible? the impact of corporate social responsibility on buying behavior.* Journal of Consumer Affairs, 35(1), 45–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6606.2001.tb00102.x>
- [8] Forehand, M. R., & Grier, S. (2003). *When is honesty the best policy? the effect of stated company intent on consumer skepticism.* Journal of Consumer Psychology, 13(3), 349–356. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327663jcp1303_15
- [9] Lu, D., Samart, P., & Kou, Y. (2010). *Corporate Social Responsibility Based on Consumers' Viewpoints: Altruism or Self-Interest.* Chinese Journal of Management, 7(6), 861–866.