

Why More CSR Disclosure Does Not Mean More Favourable CSR Perception? Insights from Fast Fashion Industry of Italy

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Abstract. Corporate reputation (CR) is one of the most important intangible assets for a firm. Even though the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has long been examined in building or destroying CR, findings from these studies are usually inconclusive. When it comes to studies related to the positive impacts of CSR disclosure on CR, more decisive results can be drawn if CSR disclosure is actually leading to a good perception of CSR among different stakeholder groups. This study argues that CSR disclosure alone does not guarantee positive sentiments from different stakeholders, so it is required to investigate how CSR is perceived and which levers can be used to stimulate value co-creation behaviours in the stakeholders. Hence, the present work aims at investigating the mediating role of CR on the relationship between CSR perception and customer citizenship behaviour (CCB) in the context of social identity theory. This study uses structural equation modelling to investigate these relationships in a sample of 278 fast fashion customers of Italy and found that CSR perception has direct positive effect on CCB and CR acts as mediator in the relationship between CSR and CCB.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility \cdot Corporate reputation \cdot Customer citizenship behaviour \cdot Social identity theory \cdot Tolerance \cdot Helping others \cdot Feedback

1 Introduction

Fombrun [1: 72] defined corporate reputation as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared with other leading rivals". Corporate reputation (CR) is considered one of the most important, if not the most important, intangible assets that a firm can have [2]. Researches have shown that a strong corporate reputation: helps a firm charge premium price [3–6], enhances consumer trust [7, 8], increases consumer loyalty [9–11] and consumer satisfaction [10, 12, 13], improves investors' access to better financing [14]. A good corporate reputation takes time to develop [15], is hard to imitate [16] and thus provides a sustainable strategic advantage to a firm [17, 18].

Given the strategic importance of corporate reputation, many researchers have tried to identify its determinants [19, 20]. Among these determinants, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has received increasing attention. Sheehay [21: 639] defined CSR as "a socio-political movement which generates private self-regulatory initiatives, incorporating public and private international law norms seeking to ameliorate and mitigate the social harms of and to promote public good by industrial organisations". Importance of being socially and environmentally responsible to get stakeholders' approval cannot be overstated in today's world.

Even though the role of corporate social responsibility has long been examined in building or destroying corporate reputation, findings from these studies are usually inconclusive [22]. Pérez [22] observed that most of these researches are descriptive, with very few works emphasizing on empirical evidences to validate the respective frameworks and to reach a conclusion or a consensus. Moreover, CSR and CR relationship is mostly examined using published ratings or CSR reporting [23–25] rather than measuring them directly from the stakeholders i.e., customers. Our study attempts to provide empirical evidences about the relationship between CSR perception and CR for one stakeholder group represented by the customers of the firms.

Being socially responsible can bring many benefits to a firm [26, 27], even though researchers have pointed out the lack of practical approaches to measure these benefits [28]. Moreover, the relationship between CSR and customer citizenship behaviour (CCB) has hardly been discussed theoretically or tested empirically. Groth [29: 11] referred to customer citizenship behaviour as "voluntary and discretionary behaviours that are not required for the successful production and delivery of the service but that, in the aggregate, help the service organization overall". This study shall look into the relationship between CSR, CR and CCB to further our understanding of the interactions between these important concepts. This study shall use the lens of social identity theory to explain when and how CSR disclosure and practices lead to CSR perception and positive customer outcomes such as CCB.

2 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

2.1 CSR Perception and CSR Disclosure

Omran and Ramdhony [30] provided an extensive review of the theoretical pillars on which CSR disclosure literature was based on and discussed four of the most widely used theories in this field, i.e., legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, social contract theory and signaling theory. They also assert that none of these theories alone provides a satisfactory framework to explain diverse and often conflicting assertions of CSR disclosure literature.

Given this, it is unsurprising that many of the past studies related to positive implications of CSR disclosure have failed to provide proper theoretical justifications of their conflicting results [31]. Therefore, we propose that social identity theory can provide a new approach to explain such diverse findings. Social identity theory proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s [32] entails that the groups (e.g., social class, family, sport team etc.) which people belong to are an important source of pride and self-esteem for them. These groups give people a sense of belonging to the society: a sense of social

identity. These associations with the groups help people develop, protect and promote a sense of self (who am/are I/we?). Scholars have since utilized social identity theory's rationales in organizational settings to better explain stakeholder behaviours [33–35]. Researchers have proposed that people identify with organizations (or firms) just as if they would identify with any other social group when they perceive an overlap between organizational attributes and their individual attributes [36]. When such overlap exists, stakeholders tend to develop a sense of association and emotional attachment with the firms and exhibit constructive in-role and extra-role behaviours [37]. Thus, CSR practices and subsequent disclosure can lead to stakeholders identifying themselves with the firm and develop a strong feeling of attachment and dedication for the firm.

However, previous researches showed that not all types of CSR practices and disclosures are seen positively by stakeholders. Researches pointed out that, to better reap the benefits of CSR disclosure, firms must provide relevant, understandable and timely social information [38], exhibit the level of managerial commitment that is required by different stakeholder groups [39, 40] and tailor the contents of the social reports according to the needs of different stakeholder groups [19, 24]. Only then CSR practices and disclosure are seen as trustworthy and admired by stakeholders, leading to strong firm-stakeholder identification. Hence firms need to start relying more on channels other than their websites and on disclosure tools other than annual reports, to learn and cater to diverse social concerns of different stakeholders.

Many studies in the past have shown that CSR disclosure in itself does not necessarily lead to positive firm outcomes (as it was expected) until such CSR actions are perceived as substantial, relevant and genuine. Pérez and López [24] highlighted that reporting intensity to stakeholders does not necessarily mean a better CSR reporting outcome such as reputation. Role of different communication channels cannot be overstated either. CSR actions, if not noticed and acknowledged by different stakeholders, can hardly bring anything to the firm.

What is needed is to understand that CSR practices and communications do not guarantee high CSR perception among different stakeholders. CSR practices and disclosures are most relevant for positive firm outcomes when these actions lead to strong company-stakeholders identification. Firms also need to look past the traditional approaches in reporting and disclosing about their social performance and utilize other channels such as social networks, online apps and other electronic media to reach diverse stakeholders. As more and more people have started to rely on social and online media for information and communication, firms must utilize these channels to improve the stakeholder engagement, to better learn contemporary social concerns and to foster strong firm-stakeholder identifications.

Most of the studies that have tried to investigate the link between CSR disclosure practices and their positive outcomes have either relied on published CSR ratings [23, 25] or on CSR disclosure practices as a proxy for CSR perception [23, 39]. However, a company's CSR initiatives are only as good as they are learnt and acknowledged to be genuine by different stakeholder groups and lead to positive identification with the firm by different stakeholders. This study, therefore, measures the CSR perception directly from the specific category of stakeholders represented by the customers, instead of relying on published ratings or reports.

2.2 CSR and CCB

In recent times, CSR has received increasing attention and firms are under constant pressure to act in socially and environmentally responsible manners [41]. The effect of CSR on CCB can be better understood by first looking into the literature of organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and organizational identification theory. Organizational identification theory, building on social identity theory, refers to the degree to which employees define themselves as members of an organization and to what extent they experience a sense of association with it [36]. When employees perceive that key organizational features are in congruence with their self-identity, they are more likely to identify and associate themselves with the organization that may bring many benefits to firms such as: enhanced employee motivation and loyalty [42], higher employee commitment [43], job satisfaction [44] and extra-role performance [45]. Organ [46: 4] defined extra-role performance or organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) as "individual behaviour that is discretionary, not explicitly recognized by the formal reward system and that in the aggregate promotes the effective functioning of the organization". In context of organizational identification theory, the motivations for such extra-role behaviours may stem from a strong sense of associations and emotional attachment of employees to the organization [37]. Since a socially and environmentally responsible firm is always seen in a positive light, we can expect employees to identify more strongly with such firms and support them more with extra-role activities i.e., organizational citizenship behaviour.

Scott and Lane [47] argued that the concept of social identification apply to all stakeholders (i.e., customers, investors, suppliers etc.) and not just only to employees. Even though employees were regarded as the key players in creating value through OCB in the past [48], customers' extra-role behaviour or customer citizenship behaviour (CCB) is increasingly considered to be an influential factor in value co-creation [29]. Yi and Gong [49] identified four dimensions of CCB i.e., "helping others", "feedback", "tolerance" and "advocacy". Where helping others refers to customer behaviour aimed at assisting other customers in the acquisition or utilization of a service; feedback refers to solicited and unsolicited information that customers provide voluntarily to the employees, which helps employees and the firm improve the service creation process in the long run; tolerance refers to customer willingness to be patient when the service delivery does not meet the customer's expectations, as in the case of delays or mistakes made by the employees of the firm; advocacy refers to recommending the firm to others [49]. This study focuses on three dimensions of customer citizenship behaviour identified by Yi and Gong [49] that is helping others, feedback and tolerance as they have received the least attention, if any, in the past.

Drawing on theories of social identity and organizational identification, Bhattacharya and Sen [50] proposed that strong consumer-company relationships often result from consumers' identification with certain companies (i.e., firms which are more socially responsible) resulting into consumer-company identifications which prompt the customers to become 'champions' of these companies and their products.

Thus, we argue that the positive perception of CSR leads to stronger customers' identification with the firm and these associations are likely to increase extra-role behavior that is CCB. In light of this argument, we propose the following hypotheses.

H1a: CSR perception has a positive direct effect on "helping others" dimension of CCB. H1b: CSR perception has a positive direct effect on "feedback" dimension of CCB.

H1c: CSR perception has a positive direct effect on "tolerance" dimension of CCB.

2.3 Mediating Effect

When it comes to the relationship between CSR disclosure and CR, scholars have observed that findings are inconclusive. This limitation derives from the fact that the literature on this issue is mostly theoretical in nature [51], with scholars having developed very few empirical papers to discuss the validity of their theoretical reasoning [52]. Though, studies that have focused on CSR perception instead of CSR disclosure as an antecedent of corporate reputation have, in fact, found more consistent results. Javed et al. [53], for example, found that diverse CSR initiatives lead to a higher perception of CR. Bianchi et al. [54] also showed that a good CSR perception leads to a good perception of CR among customers. Thus, being socially responsible can help a firm in building and maintaining its reputation over time [39, 55]. The findings of these studies imply that CSR perception, rather than CSR disclosure or CSR initiatives alone, is a more consistent antecedent to corporate reputation.

Past studies that have tried to examine the link between CSR disclosure and CR have frequently relied on the legitimization concerns in response to the pressures by stakeholders [56–58]. This legitimation process, in turn, helps the firm build up reputation capital [59]. Besides legitimacy theory, scholars have also utilized stakeholder theory, agency theory, impression management theory, social contract theory and signaling theory to explain why a firm might be involved in CSR practices and how these practices can benefit the firm [22, 30].

In the context of social identity theory, we propose that strong consumer-company identification results when a firm's CSR practices and disclosures are consistently acknowledged and appreciated by customers over a period of time. These continuous positive evaluations then lead to strong customer-company identification resulting into feelings of admiration, respect and trust embodied in a strong reputation for the firm. Therefore, we propose that CSR perception is antecedent of corporate reputation. This is an intangible asset created and sustained after the accumulation of stakeholders' evaluations of the firm's social performance in successive periods [60]. Therefore, to prepare and disclose social reporting at any given time does not necessarily lead to a good overall reputation, as building reputation requires time and consistency.

Corporate reputation in turn has been found to be the antecedent of CCB. We propose that customers identify strongly with the firm they perceive of high reputation and enhance their self-concept by supporting that firm. Thus, it can be argued that the effect of CSR onto CCB is mediated through CR. Some of the previous studies do highlight the positive effect of CR on CCB. Jinfeng et al. [61] demonstrated that CR significantly affects CCB. Bartikowski and Walsh [62] found that customer-based corporate reputation positively affects the 'helping others' dimension of corporate citizenship behaviour. Lii and Lee [63] found that employees' perception of a firm's reputation leads to higher levels of corporate citizenship behaviour. Walsh et al. [64] highlighted the positive influence corporate reputation has on customer feedback. Hong and Yang [65] found a positive relationship between corporate reputation and word-of-mouth. Thus, we propose that CR mediates the effect of CSR on CCB, formulating the following hypotheses.

H2a: CR mediates the effect of CSR on "helping others" dimension of CCB.

H2b: CR mediates the effect of CSR on "feedback" dimension of CCB. H2c: CR mediates the effect of CSR on "tolerance" dimension of CCB.

3 Methodology: Measures, Sample and Data Collection

Lange et al. [66] identified three conceptualizations of corporate reputation i.e., being known, being known for something and generalized favorability. This study uses Rep-Trak pulse developed by Ponzi et al. [67] to measure corporate reputation in term of generalized favorability of a firm. The dimensions of customer citizenship behaviour "helping others", "feedback" and "tolerance" are measured by adapting the scale developed by Yi and Gong [49].

Perception of CSR was measured from a three-item scale adapted from Walsh and Beatty [68]. Items used to measure these concepts can be found in Table 2. This study used five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Responses were collected online from customers of fast-fashion retailers in Italy with a useable sample size of 278 customers. Collected data underwent the standard checks for normality, missing values and outliers in SPSS [69].

4 Measurement Model

After initial data screening, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was run initially using maximum likelihood method and oblique promax rotation [70, 71]. All items loaded in their respective factors with loadings having a range of .67 to .91 as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Exploratory factor analysis of the variables: Csr refers to the perception of corporate social responsibility; Crp refers to the perception of corporate reputation; Fee refers to feedback; Hel refers to helping other customers; Tol refers to tolerance.

| Items | Factors | | | | |
|-------|---------|------|---|---|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Csr1 | | | | | .688 |
| Csr2 | | | | | .827 |
| Csr3 | | | | | .700 |
| Crp1 | .866 | | | | |
| Crp2 | .844 | | | | |
| Crp3 | .633 | | | | |
| Crp4 | .848 | | | | |
| Fee1 | | .916 | | | |
| Fee2 | | .917 | | | |
| Fee3 | | .798 | | | |

(continued)

| Items | Factors | | | | |
|-------|---------|---|------|------|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Hel1 | | | .727 | | |
| Hel2 | | | .932 | | |
| Hel3 | | | .789 | | |
| Tol1 | | | | .671 | |
| Tol2 | | | | .866 | |
| Tol3 | | | | .792 | |

 Table 1. (continued)

The variance explained by the model was 64.8% thus exhibiting reasonable factor structure. Harman's single factor test had been run to test for the common method bias [72]. The single factor accounted for 23.5% variance which is well below the threshold of 50%.

Next, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed. The CFA indicated excellent model fit with comparative fit index (CFI) of .978, goodness of fit index (GFI) of .938, root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) of .046, χ^2 /df of 1.574 and standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) of .0374. All the items loaded substantially on their respective factors as can be seen from Table 2.

Table 2. Standardized regression weights of confirmatory factor analysis: Csr refers to the perception of corporate social responsibility; Crp refers to the perception of corporate reputation; Fee refers to feedback; Hel refers to helping other customers; Tol refers to tolerance.

| Items of the scales | | Estimate | |
|---|----------|----------|------|
| This company seems to make an effort to create new jobs | ← | Csr | .720 |
| This company would reduce its profits to ensure a clean environment | ← | Csr | .781 |
| This company seems to be environmentally responsible | ← | Csr | .803 |
| This company has a good overall reputation | ← | Crp | .808 |
| This is a company that I admire and respect | ← | Crp | .748 |
| This is a company that I trust | ← | Crp | .860 |
| This is a company I have a good feeling about | ← | Crp | .839 |
| I would Provide information when surveyed by this company | ← | Fee | .899 |
| I would Provide helpful feedback to customer service | ← | Fee | .905 |

(continued)

| Items of the scales | | Estimate | |
|--|----------|----------|------|
| When I receive good service from the employees of this firm, I comment about it | ← | Fee | .827 |
| I would assist other customers in finding products for this company | ← | Hel | .838 |
| I would help others with their shopping in this company | ← | Hel | .863 |
| I would explain to other customers how to use different services correctly | ← | Hel | .772 |
| If a product or service from this firm does not meet my expectation, I would be willing to put up with it | ← | Tol | .648 |
| If the employee makes a mistake during product delivery, I would be willing to be patient | ← | Tol | .832 |
| I would be willing to adapt if I have to wait longer than normally expected to receive the products or service | ← | Tol | .842 |

Table 2. (continued)

Thereafter, we tested for reliability and discriminant and convergent validity of the scales. The tests showed no reliability and validity concerns as composite reliability (CoR) for all factors was found to be greater than .70, average variance extracted (AVE) greater than .50 and maximum shared variance (MSV), and square root of AVE greater than inter-factor correlations [73], as can be seen in Table 3. To test the presence of common method bias at factor level we ran two different models, one with unmeasured common latent factor and one without it [72]. The difference between standardized regression weights of the two models did not increase the recommended threshold of .20 [74]. Hence common method bias did not appear to be a significant concern in the study.

Table 3. Validity and reliability test: Hel refers to helping other customers; Csr refers to the perception of corporate social responsibility; Crp refers to the perception of corporate reputation; Fee refers to feedback; Tol refers to tolerance; CoR refers to composite reliability; AVE refers to average variance extracted; MSV refers to maximum shared variance.

| | CoR | AVE | MSV | Hel | Csr | Crp | Fee | Tol |
|-----|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Hel | 0.865 | 0.681 | 0.289 | 0.825 | | | | |
| Csr | 0.812 | 0.591 | 0.428 | 0.241 | 0.769 | | | |
| Crp | 0.887 | 0.664 | 0.428 | 0.322 | 0.654 | 0.815 | | |
| Fee | 0.909 | 0.770 | 0.289 | 0.538 | 0.239 | 0.342 | 0.878 | |
| Tol | 0.821 | 0.607 | 0.086 | 0.294 | 0.037 | 0.147 | 0.254 | 0.779 |

5 Test of the Hypotheses

Structural equation modeling was performed in AMOS to test the hypothesis while bootstrapping on 1000 samples was used to estimate the mediating effects at 95% confidence interval. Hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c predict a positive relationship between CSR and "helping others", "feedback" and "tolerance" respectively. When three dimensions of CCB were regressed on CSR, the results supported the hypothesis H1a and H1b with significant standardized regression weights of .244 and .247 respectively, supporting these hypotheses. While hypotheses H1c was rejected in favor of null as no significant relationship between CSR and tolerance could be found. The model showed good fit indices with GFI of .951, CFI of .977, RMSEA .052 and SRMR of .085. These result, therefore, indicates a strong positive correlation between CSR and helping others and feedback dimension of CCB.

Next, corporate reputation was introduced as mediator and both direct and indirect effects were estimated again. A good model fit was attained with CFI of .974, GFI of .934, RMSEA of .049 and SRMR of .0516. The introduction of CR turned all direct paths from CSR to CCB insignificant, indicating perfect mediation to all three dimensions of CCB, as shown in Table 4. Significance of the mediating effect of corporate reputation was estimated using bootstrapping. Results showed that CR significantly mediates the relationship between CSR and CCB dimensions at 95% confidence interval as 0 does not fall between low and high confidence level, rejecting null hypothesis (no mediation) as shown in Table 5. Such finding suggests that CSR probably does not lead directly to customer citizenship behaviour, but it does so through creating a high corporate reputation.

Table 4. Regression weights for mediating model: DV refers to dependent variable; IV refers to independent variable; Csr refers to the perception of corporate social responsibility; Crp refers to the perception of corporate reputation; Fee refers to feedback; Hel refers to helping other customers; Tol refers to tolerance; *** refers to p-value less than 0.001.

| DV | | IV | Unstandardized | Standardized | P |
|-----|----------|-----|----------------|--------------|------|
| Crp | ← | Csr | .694 | .654 | *** |
| Tol | ← | Csr | .024 | 106 | .314 |
| Hel | ← | Csr | .068 | .047 | .639 |
| Fee | ← | Csr | 008 | .013 | .891 |
| Tol | ← | Crp | .238 | .223 | .002 |
| Hel | ← | Crp | .413 | .299 | *** |
| Fee | ← | Crp | .590 | .339 | *** |

| | CSR | CL low | CL high | Hypotheses | Support |
|-----|------|-----------|------------|------------|---------|
| Tol | .165 | .005 | .339 | H2c | Yes |
| Hel | .287 | .090 | .562 | H2b | Yes |
| Fee | .410 | .168 | .765 | H2a | Yes |

Table 5. Significance of indirect effects: Tol refers to tolerance; Hel refers to helping other; Fee refers to feedback; CL low refers to lower bound of confidence level; CL high refers to higher

6 Implications and Discussions

When it comes to CSR reporting, many studies [31] have pointed out that the adoption of CSR reporting and CSR disclosing does not necessarily lead the stakeholders to develop a better perception of the company's actions over social, ethical and environmental dimensions of CSR. Consequently, studies that explore the direct effect of CSR disclosure alone onto positive stakeholder outcomes (i.e., CCB), ignoring the fact that this reporting might not represent or lead to high CSR perception, might fail to see the benefits that a good CSR perception can bring to the firm. CSR reporting and disclosing is considered more effective in generating positive stakeholder outcomes when corporate transparency, information quantity and information quality are high [22]. Only then such reporting can be appreciated by stakeholders and lead to firm-stakeholder identifications, which in turn can lead to positive customer outcomes i.e., CCB.

This study, unlike most previous studies, uses the lens of social identity theory to explain how CSR initiative and disclosure can lead to positive customer outcomes and asserts that firms need to be consistent, relevant and honest about their CSR commitments. The present research also finds that CSR perceptions alone do not necessarily determine positive customer outcomes, but it does so by some stable mediator i.e., reputation. CSR disclosure and initiatives that fail to lead to such stable emotional outcomes probably would not gain much in term of positive customer outcomes i.e., retention, CCB, willingness to pay premium prices. This is the reason why this work investigated the relationship between CSR perception-CCB in place of CSR disclosure-CCB in the first stage. Instead of relying on existing CSR ratings and instead of assuming that these ratings represent the true perception of CSR standings among customers, this study has directly asked the customers about their perceptions of CSR about the fast fashion industry in Italy.

This research also investigated the mediating role of CR on the relationship CSR perception-CCB. Managers and researchers thus are invited to look in-depth the role different CSR initiative plays into building company-stakeholders identification and explore new ways to make stakeholders feel more involved in CSR initiatives.

When it comes to direct effects of CSR on three dimensions of CCB as proposed in hypotheses H1a, H1b and H1c, there are enough evidences to prove that CSR directly affects helping others and feedback dimensions of CCB thus supporting hypotheses H1a and H2b. When these direct relationships were tested along with the mediating role

CR, CR proved to completely mediate the effects of CSR onto feedback, tolerance and helping others, thus supporting hypotheses H2a, H2b and H2c.

7 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Study

Like any study, this study has limitations. First, the mediating role of only corporate reputation was considered. Future research can include other mediators, along with reputation such as commitment, organizational identifications for different stakeholders, loyalty to better explain the ways CSR leads to discretionary behavior.

Second, the study only focused on one stakeholder group i.e., customers. Future studies can explore these relationships for different stakeholder groups and incorporate multiple group analysis with a big enough sample size to draw finer results for each group of stakeholders.

Third, this study did not discuss or look into the possibility of bidirectional nature (non-recursive model, simultaneous causality) of the relationship between CSR perception and corporate reputation. Future researches can look deeper into it and see how it affects the model and outcomes.

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