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Corporate social responsibility and its impact in consumer decision-making

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the relationship between the consumer perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the buying behaviour in the brand clothing Salsa. This paper intends to analyse if the consumer knows about the meaning of social responsibility in the economic, social and environmental contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper used a survey to assess the perception of the consumer of the social responsibility practices of the Salsa brand. The questionnaires were administered to consumers in the north of Portugal. The survey questions were tested through an exploratory factor analysis. A least squares estimation was performed to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The consumers revealed that they have four dimensions of perceptions of CSR: ecological reasons, no discrimination reasons, recycling reasons and communication reasons. The results suggest that the consumers consider that there are four aspects of CSR: economic, social, ecological and recycling. When it was verified that the personal concerns, regarding environment and recycling, play an important role in consumer decision, the seven stages of the consumer decision process developed by Blackwell et al. (2006) were evaluated. In this sense, it was observed that the knowledge of social responsibility practices and the dimensions of perceptions of CSR revealed by the consumers influence the purchase of the company's products.

Originality/value – This paper obtained an interesting result in the sense that the consumers distinguish the environmental aspects on ecological and recycling. It is also observed that this distinction, allied to the knowledge of social responsibility practices carried out by the company, leads to the affirmation that the final disinvestment stage of the consumer decision process plays an important role in consumer decision.

Keywords Social responsibility, Regression, Brand purchase, Consumer decision process, Factorial analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In all sectors of economic activity, the consumer plays a major role. The perception of consumers of the social responsibility activities is an important marketing research for the companies who invest in these activities (Maignan, 2001; Marin et al., 2009; Hassan et al., 2013). The result of this analysis may allow to explain the behaviour of loyalty (Du et al., 2007), the availability to pay more for the product/brand (Creyer and Ross, 1996), the decrease in the attribution of blame in face of unfavourable events (Godfrey et al., 2008; Klein and Dawar, 2004), the consumer response to the release of new products (Pirsch et al., 2007), the consumer identification with the company (Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) and, lastly, justifying the increase of the companies' financial performance (Peloza and Shang, 2011).

The social responsibility practices reflect information to the stakeholder about the organization's values and are useful in increasing the confidence that individuals have on companies (Pérez et al., 2013). The perception of consumers about the practices of CSR influence the affective responses of consumers who identify with the company

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(Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Page and Fearn, 2005; Marin and Ruiz, 2007; Alcañiz *et al.*, 2010; Pérez *et al.*, 2013).

Although current market conditions seem restricted, nowadays, many companies develop their communication of social responsibility practices as a way to distinguish themselves from the competition. According to the main results of the literature on corporate social responsibility (CSR), consumers are interested in the social behaviour of companies and their purchases are influenced by this behaviour (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001; Garcia *et al.*, 2005). Often, there are authors who argue that the profile of a company on CSR is important in the selection and purchase of certain brands (Castaldo *et al.*, 2009). This trend is linked to sophisticated consumer expectations of the role of the brands. On the other hand, there are studies that show that consumers are more motivated to reduce environmental impacts by recycling and buying ecological products (Paul and Rana, 2012; Paladino and Baggiere, 2008; Fraj and Martinez, 2007; Garcia-Gallego and Georgantzés, 2011).

In this paper, we intend to analyse if the consumer knows the meaning of social responsibility in the following three dimensions: economic, social and environmental. On the other hand, we seek to know if the purchase options reflect consumer perception about what the activities of CSR are. By applying the study to the case of the *Salsa* brand, we try to verify whether the consumer buys *Salsa* brand products as a result of the social responsibility activities of the company.

This brand of fashion apparel is a family-owned business that was started in 1994. The *Salsa* brand is present in over 35 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The brand is sold in over 250 retail outlets (own brand and shop-in-shop) and over 2,000 multi-brand customers. *Salsa* is noted for its entrepreneurial spirit and for being a pioneer brand in developing innovative products. Its development aims are to reach all stakeholders. This attention is reflected in the actions of social responsibility covering the surrounding community. These actions highlight the concern of integrating young people into the labour market and the will and desire to continue production in Portugal, thus preserving jobs and contributing to the social and local development. Its behaviour also includes helping in various charitable organizations, not only local institutions but also in others with a more international scope. At the environmental level, *Salsa* scrupulously complies with the rules of environmental protection and in terms of recycling the concern is in visible growth.

The goals of this research are to:

- know whether consumers perceive CSR into its three components: economic, social and environmental;
- understand whether consumers know that there are socially responsible practices that influence the purchase; and
- analyse whether the purchase of the *Salsa* brand is influenced by the perception of its CSR activities.

Finally and also important, our analyses and results are relevant for not only Portugal but also for other countries. An entire range of countries is experiencing apparel brands that have social responsibility activities.

The work begins with a literature review of the main concept of the paper – consumer perceptions of CSR and evidence of the research questions. Then follows the research methodology of the empirical analysis and measuring of the constructs is explained. After that, the result of the study is presented, and a final session covers the findings, the management implications, the limitations of the study and further research.

Theoretical framework and definition of the hypotheses

For some decades now, research on the role and responsibilities of business in society has been searching for the business case for CSR. The proliferation of studies on the relationship between corporate social performance and economic bottom line is the result of different shifts in the academic debate. On the one hand, in terms of the level of analysis, research has gradually moved from a focus on the macro-social effects of CSR to organizational-level analysis of CSR effects on firm behaviour and performance. On the other hand, in terms of theoretical orientation, researchers have moved from explicitly normative and ethics-oriented study to implicitly normative and performance-oriented analysis (Castaldo *et al.*, 2009; Aguinis and Glavas, 2012).

If the impact of CSR on consumers was universal and meaningful, there should be a clear identifiable impact in the bottom-line of social responsible businesses (Castaldo *et al.*, 2009; Green and Pelozo, 2014). These authors argue that CSR has an impact on consumer buying decisions if the product's specific organisation has implied a ethical proposal and shows a commitment in protecting consumer interests. In a rational view point, if stakeholders realise that an organisation is socially responsible, they will give it their preference (Hassan *et al.*, 2013). On the supply side, social responsible organisations manage to attract and retain consumers and are able to charge a premium price for their products (Barnett, 2007).

The role of companies and brands in a growing dynamic context is now being questioned, including which issues might affect their socially responsible behaviour. Despite significant research and effort to capture the influence of CSR from the consumer behaviour perspective, there is still no full consensus over the dimensions of CSR perceived by the consumer (Dahlsrud, 2008; Feldman and Vasquez-Parraga, 2013).

There are several approaches that have emerged over the years about the concept of social responsibility, and therefore, this concept has been defined in various ways, depending on the management school (Webb *et al.*, 2008; Castaldo *et al.*, 2009; Pelozo and Shang, 2011). However, most of the definitions of the concept are related to inherent stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995). In this sense, CSR is understood as the organizational setting of a firm on principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsibility and policies and programs whose observable results are linked to the social networking company (Wood, 1991).

The concept of CSR in academic research deals, on the one hand, with the business involvement in a network of social relations, in the identification of more detailed management tools and, on the other hand, with the effort of market policies and stakeholders in translating the idea of socially responsible behaviour (Perrini *et al.*, 2007). CSR can be understood as one kind of ethical behaviour by firms (Kim and Kim, 2010).

The CSR activities can mean different things to different people in different places and time (Campbell, 2007; Pelozo and Shang, 2011; Dahlsrud, 2008), with the possibility of the dimensions perceived by the consumer of social responsibility activities not being understood.

Carroll's (1991) model conceives CSR as a construct made up of four dimensions: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. The sustainable development model and the European Commission conceive CSR as a concept covering three dimensions: economic, social and environmental considerations. Brown and Dancin (1997) suggested a one-dimensional approach of CSR.

The CSR is understood as the actions and policies of a specific organizational context that takes into account the expectations of stakeholders in three performance levels: economic, social and environmental (Aguinis, 2011; Rupp, 2011; Rupp *et al.*, 2010; Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). It refers to the efficiency of a business to produce and put products in the market, taking into account the management of social obligations (Pérez *et al.*, 2013). In this

sense, it is pertinent to assess whether the three levels mentioned above are perceived by the respondents in our sample, thus formulating the first hypothesis:

H1. Consumers perceive CSR in its three components: economic, social and environmental.

There is little academic work that has examined the extent to which consumers are willing to support the effort of socially responsible activities and punish companies that are not socially responsible (Maignan, 2001). Brown and Dancin (1997) demonstrated that negative associations of social responsibility activities had a negative effect on the evaluation of the products of these companies. Also, the work of Handelman and Arnold (1999) concluded that the actions of marketing with a social dimension make consumers positively assess these companies and are willing to buy their products.

Recent studies have found that consumer response to CSR practices is quite complex and consumers are strongly influenced by reasons related to values (Barone *et al.*, 2007; Pivato *et al.*, 2008; Alcañiz *et al.*, 2010; Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000). The exposure of consumers to information on social responsibility activities determines the consumers' beliefs about them and their general attitude towards the company practices (Wagner *et al.*, 2009; Sen *et al.*, 2006). Also Mohr and Webb (2005) showed that when the consumer receives information about the activities of social responsibility of a company he trusts, this information affects the way they evaluate the company and also their purchase intentions. The relationship between consumer knowledge of the activities of social responsibility and the influence in the buying process is the second hypothesis examined here:

H2. Consumers know what socially responsible practices are and that influences the purchase.

According to the main findings of the literature on CSR, consumers are interested in the social behaviour of companies and are influenced in their purchases by these behaviours (Maignan, 2001). Frequently, consumers argue that a company's profile on social responsibility is important in the selection and purchase of certain brands (Castaldo *et al.*, 2009; Singh *et al.*, 2008). Finally, we intend to evaluate the case of the *Salsa* brand, by formulating the third hypothesis:

H3. The purchase of the Salsa brand is influenced by the perception of the practices of corporate social responsibility of the Salsa brand.

Research design

Survey instrument, sample selection and scale items

This study adopts a quantitative approach. The quantitative phase involved data collection based on the analysis of 123 respondents. We used a survey to assess the perception of Portuguese consumers of social responsibility practices of the *Salsa* brand. The *Salsa* brand is a Portuguese fashion apparel brand and fits into a small company that invests in CSR activities (Jenkins, 2006; Udayasankar, 2009). The choice of this company is due to the fact that it is perceived as a socially responsible enterprise even without a formal social responsibility program (Green and Pelozo, 2014; Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004).

The questionnaires were administered to consumers in the north of Portugal. The sample was composed of 123 randomly selected consumers. The data were collected through paper and pen in front of the *Salsa* stores, in the months of January and February 2013.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first collected information allows the characterization of the respondent. The second part covered three dichotomous questions about knowledge of what the social responsibility activities are (S_1), whether to purchase a product of the *Salsa* brand (S_2) and knowing the social responsibility activities of the *Salsa* brand (S_3).

The third part of the questionnaire consisted of 18 questions on socially responsible consumer behaviour that used a five-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 =

“strongly agree”). These questions were adapted from Roberts's(1996) study of Socially Responsible Consumer Behaviour, to maintain consistency with previous studies and because it considers the three dimensions of CSR. Socially responsible consumer behaviour scale is as follows:

- *SRCB₁*: I have purchased products because they cause less pollution.
- *SRCB₂*: When there is a choice, I always choose the product that contributes to the least amount of pollution.
- *SRCB₃*: When I have a choice between two equal products, I always purchase the one that is less harmful to other people and to the environment.
- *SRCB₄*: When I purchase products, I always make a conscious effort to buy those products that are low in pollution levels.
- *SRCB₅*: I have switched products for ecological reasons.
- *SRCB₆*: If I understand the potential damage to the environment that some products can cause, I do not purchase those products.
- *SRCB₇*: I do not buy household products that harm the environment.
- *SRCB₈*: Whenever possible, I buy products packed in reusable containers.
- *SRCB₉*: I make every effort to buy paper products made from recycled paper.
- *SRCB₁₀*: I use a recycling centre or in some way recycle some of my household trash.
- *SRCB₁₁*: I only try to buy products that can be recycled.
- *SRCB₁₂*: If possible, I will not use a product that can be harmful to other people.
- *SRCB₁₃*: I do not buy products that use advertising depicting minority groups in a negative way.
- *SRCB₁₄*: In the past, I have not purchased a product because its advertising depicted women in a negative way.
- *SRCB₁₅*: I do not buy products from companies that use child labour.
- *SRCB₁₆*: I do not buy products from companies that discriminate against minorities.
- *SRCB₁₇*: I do not buy products from companies whose employees live and work in poor conditions.
- *SRCB₁₈*: I will not buy a product if the company that sells it is socially irresponsible.

Analysis

Initially, we proceeded with the general characterization of the respondents and we applied the chi-square analysis to assess the significant differences. The survey questions, included in the scale, were tested through exploratory factor analysis and, in this scope, we tested *H1*. The factor analysis reflects a set of statistical techniques that help explain the relationship between a set of observed variables in the sense that they simplify data by reducing the number of variables described. Next, the validity of the constructs was tested. The level of Cronbach's alpha was measured for each factor to assess the internal consistency of the factor. Finally, we carried out a least squares estimation to test *H2* and *H3*.

Results and discussion

Description of respondents

In the resulting samples of 123 respondents, 52 per cent were female and 48 per cent were male; more than 66 per cent were between 25 and 45 years of age; 45.5 per cent had a net monthly income in the family from €1,001 to 2,000; and more than 50 per cent had

secondary education. It was found that 85.4 per cent of the respondents assumed that they know what the social responsibility activities are, 48 per cent were *Salsa* customers and 97.1 per cent evidenced that they had a perception of the practices of CSR of the *Salsa* brand. The data found in the sample with respect to the monthly income and level of education, two important variables in the consumer decision process, were found to be consistent with the average values found for Portugal and for the 27 countries in the European Union (EU27). Regarding the monthly income of the families, it appears that, in 2011, the average of the EU27 countries was €1,020 and the Portuguese case stood at €1,083 (Pordata). In the EU27 countries, in 2011, over 70 per cent of the population has secondary and higher education (Eurostat).

Thus, the analysis developed here can be extended to several countries, not only because a sample has been achieved which may represent several countries but because a whole range of countries have experiences of apparel brands that have social responsibility activities.

Measurement quality

This study was conducted by exploratory factor analysis to verify the dimensions perceived by the consumers about the social responsibility practices. The first indicators of this type of analysis are the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure (KMO) and Bartlett test, giving an indication of how far the factor analysis should be performed with the data in question. The data obtained show us that the factor analysis should be performed (KMO = 0.759) (Table I). The statistical value of $\chi^2 = 973.577$ Bartlett's test is significant, and the correlations between variables are suitable to make a factor analysis.

Results

We conducted a factor analysis using varimax rotation for the items and four distinct factors emerged in the sample which explained 78,054 per cent of the total variance for the data (Table II). All items loaded highly on the factors, and no item loaded on more than one factor, supporting the independence of the dimensions. The criteria for acceptance of the results were the value of each eigenvalue being greater than 1.0; the factor loading after varimax rotation is greater than 0.3; the variance explained by all factors is greater than 40 per cent; and no variable has significant loading on more than one factor.

H1 is not verified. In this hypothesis, we test if the consumers perceive CSR in its three components: economic, social and environmental. We found that the consumers perceive four dimensions of social responsibility practices: ecological, recycling, non-discrimination and communication (Table III). The ecological and recycle dimensions should be concentrated on a single factor, giving rise to the environmental dimension. In turn, the dimension defined here as non-discriminative can be accepted as the social dimension of

Table I Performance factor analysis

Indicators	
KMO	0,759
Bartlett's test of sphericity	Approximate $\chi^2 = 973,577$ df = 78 Significance 0.000

Table II Total variance explained

Components	Total	Initial eigenvalues		Rotation sums of squared loadings	
		Total	Cumulative % of variance	Total	Cumulative % of variance
Factor 1 – Ecological dimension	4.416	33.970	3.555	27.345	
Factor 2 – Non-discrimination dimension	3.090	57.736	2.473	46.369	
Factor 3 – Recycling dimension	1.597	70.024	2.317	64.189	
Factor 4 – Communication dimension	1.044	78.054	1.802	78.054	

Table III Exploratory factor analysis

Items	Factor loadings*			
	Ecological dimension	Non-discrimination dimension	Recycling dimension	Communication dimension
SRCB ₁	0.818			
SRCB ₂	0.824			
SRCB ₃	0.821			
SRCB ₄	0.886			
SRCB ₅	0.886			
SRCB ₁₅		0.806		
SRCB ₁₆		0.913		
SRCB ₁₇		0.882		
SRCB ₉			0.829	
SRCB ₁₀			0.841	
SRCB ₁₁			0.841	
SRCB ₁₃				0.904
SRCB ₁₄				0.907

Notes: *Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: varimax with Kaiser Normalization

social responsibility. Finally, the factor of the company's communication of its CSR practice incorporates the economic dimension of social responsibility.

In these findings, we verified that the personal concerns regarding environment and recycling play an important role in the consumer's decision. In this case, we consider the seven stages of consumer decision process developed by Blackwell *et al.* (2006). The seven stages of consumer decision process model, divestment, regards several options that the consumer has for discarding products: disposal, recycling or remarketing (Blackwell *et al.*, 2006). The awareness of the environmental and of the recycling impact in the perception of consumers about the practices of social responsibility, helps the consumers have a more sustained choice. Some studies have analyzed consumer behaviour at various stages of the consumer decision process model in a variety of settings, including apparel (Chen-Yu and Kincade, 2001; Hart and Dewsnap, 2001; Shao *et al.*, 2008; Rickwood and White, 2009), but have mostly focused on the beginning stage.

After obtaining the factors, we proceeded to an analysis of the reliability of the scale used to yield the Cronbach's alpha. The obtained results are shown in Table IV. The consistency of the external factors is defined as the proportion of the variability in the responses resulting from differences in the respondents, i.e. the answers are different because respondents have different opinions and not because the questionnaire may be confusing. An indicator measuring the internal consistency of the factors is the Cronbach's alpha coefficient. This indicator is defined as the correlation which is expected to be achieved between the scale and other scales used in the same hypothetical universe with an equal number of items that measure the same characteristic. It is an indicator that varies from 0 to 1, considering the reasonable internal consistency from values higher than 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2010).

Then, and by least squares, estimations to test the *H2* and *H3* were performed. The results shown in Table V were thus obtained. To test *H2* the endogenous variable S_1 = knowledge of social responsibility practices and exogenous variable S_2 = buy branded *Salsa* products was considered. To test *H3*, the endogenous variable became S_2 and the exogenous variable was S_3 = knowledge of the practices of social responsibility *Salsa* brand.

Table IV Reliability statistics

Cronbach's alpha	No. of items
0.824	13

Table V Regression results

Hypothesis	Relation	Standardized coefficient (β)	p-value	Contrast
H2	Consumers know what are socially responsible practices and that influences the purchase of the <i>Salsa</i> brand	0.113	0.202	Not accepted
H3	The purchase of the <i>Salsa</i> brand is influenced by the perception of the practices of CSR of the <i>Salsa</i> brand	0.406	0.001	Accepted

Failure to confirm *H2* is consistent with the results found in other studies (Lafferty, 2009; Hoek and Gendall, 2008) and goes against previous studies that suggest that consumers are willing to support socially responsible companies, but fail to characterize social behaviour that is perceived as a significant consumer (Maignan, 2001).

The confirmation of the *H3* is consistent with the one advocated by several authors that the knowledge of social responsibility practices influences the purchase of the company's products (Du *et al.*, 2007; Pelozo and Shang, 2011; Gupta and Pirsch, 2008; Green and Pelozo, 2014). Here, we obtained an interesting result that considered simultaneously the important role that the consumer gives to aspects on ecology and recycling and the knowledge of social responsibility practices carried out by the company, leading us to prove that the final disinvestment stage of consumer decision process model (Blackwell *et al.*, 2006) plays an important role in consumer decision. The reason for disinvestment appears to be directly related to the environmental awareness in the perception of consumers about the practices of social responsibility of the company and in the characteristics of the clothing in terms of recyclability.

Conclusion and implications

In increasingly competitive markets, firms need attractive alternatives to give their brand a symbolic value. CSR may be used to position strategy that provides a competitive differentiation. The present research contributes to our understanding of the consumer perception about the CSR activities.

One of the innovative results of the work relates to the non-fulfilment of one of the research hypotheses raised. We evaluated whether the consumer perceives the practices of social responsibility in its three dimensions: economic, social and environmental. We verified that, in the environmental component, the consumers make a clear distinction between an ecological dimension and a recycling dimension. Therefore, considering simultaneously the important role that the consumer gives to aspects on ecology and recycling and the knowledge of social responsibility practices carried out by the company, leads us to confirm that the final disinvestment stage of the consumer decision process model (Blackwell *et al.*, 2006) has an important role in consumer decision. The reason for disinvestment appears to be directly related to environmental awareness in the perception of consumers about the practices of social responsibility of the company and in the characteristics of the clothing in terms of recyclability.

Another conclusion seems to be that the consumer tends to prefer socially responsible brands but, at first, they often appear unconvinced about such practices. This happens when it is not confirmed that the hypothesis that the purchases are influenced by knowledge of the activities of social responsibility when consumers do not associate these activities to a company or to a brand, confirming the results found in the studies of Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000), Valor (2008), Carrigan and Attalla (2001) and Maignan and Ferrell (2004). From the moment that they identify the practices of social responsibility of a company or of a brand, their purchases are affected by these activities, as shown in literature (Brown and Dancin, 1997; Sen *et al.*, 2006; Marin *et al.*, 2009). These findings allow us to defend the need for companies to disclose and make known what they do in terms of social responsibility (Pelozo and Shang, 2011; Marin *et al.*, 2009).

From the instrumental point of view, the results of this study have interesting implications, not only for the *Salsa* brand but also for any company that wants to promote its social responsibility practices. The data suggest that the purchases are affected with specific knowledge on the part of the consumer, of the practices of corporate social responsibility, rather than just the knowledge of the concept of social responsibility, also found in the work of [Kozar and Connell \(2013\)](#).

The new leading role of socially responsible brands as a competitive differentiation tool motivates new promotional strategies that attempt to project a socially responsible company image. This strategy leads the consumer to include, in his decision process, the disinvestment evaluation in addition to other factors that may influence, such as purchasing power, lifestyle, motivation, personality, knowledge and attitudes, among others. For future work, it would be interesting to check the influence on the consumer of the practices of social responsibility on brand image and brand engagement. For this, a new data collection to consider the brand image and brand engagement associated with socially responsible companies can give answers to some questions.

Knowing that the consumers make a clear distinction between the ecological and recycling dimension, in the environmental component, it would also be interesting to extend the study to other brands, including other sectors, to verify if this result holds an innovative contribution.

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