**When Consumers Doubt, Watch Out! The Role of CSR Skepticism**

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***Journal of Business Research***

Submission: February 2012

Revision: May 2012

Acceptance: July 2012

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Acknowledgments

The authors thank Constantine S. Katsikeas (University of Leeds), Leyland F. Pitt (Simon Fraser University), and Leonidas C. Leonidou (University of Cyprus) for their constructive comments and suggestions on previous drafts of this manuscript. The authors also thank the Special Issue editors and the anonymous *JBR* reviewers for their guidance, valuable insights, and constructive comments.

**ABSTRACT**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a hot topic in management today. More than ever before, companies engage in CSR initiatives to make a positive contribution to society or support their strategic goals. Yet, in the face of a plethora of CSR claims and numerous reported incidents of corporate misconduct, many people doubt the extent to which companies live up to their professed standards, and consumer skepticism toward corporate social involvement is on the rise. Drawing on attribution theory, this study proposes and tests a model that explains both how consumer skepticism toward the CSR of grocery retailers develops and its influence on important consumer-related outcomes. The findings reveal that attributions of egoistic- and stakeholder-driven motives elicit consumer skepticism toward CSR, while values-driven attributions inhibit skepticism. The results also indicate that CSR skepticism hurts retailer equity, decreases resistance to negative information about the retailer, and stimulates unfavorable word of mouth.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; attributions; skepticism; retailing; equity; word of mouth; resilience to negative information.

**When Consumers Doubt, Watch Out! The Role of CSR Skepticism**

Doubts are more cruel than the worst of truth. Moliere

**1. Introduction**

Consumers, governments, and other corporate stakeholders are increasingly interested in the contributions companies can and should make to society, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) issues prominently appear on the corporate agenda. Such interest has stimulated a great deal of research on the importance of CSR in general and the extent to which companies “do well by doing good” in particular. The normative case for CSR focuses on companies’ obligation to apply ethical standards to their businesses and address societal problems and ills. The business case for CSR emphasizes the benefits to reputation and goodwill, employee and customer satisfaction and loyalty, and bottom-line performance. Thus, corporate social involvement is no longer a fringe activity by a few companies, but rather a mainstream, highly visible, and commonplace practice.

While more and more companies embark on the CSR bandwagon to leverage reputational and financial benefits, incidents of socially irresponsible company behavior continue to occur at an alarming rate (e.g., Carson, 2003; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). The media is replete with reports of consumer fraud and scams (e.g., pyramid schemes, cold calling), financial scandals (e.g., Enron, WorldCom), social transgressions (e.g., Nike, Gap), and environmental disasters (e.g., BP in the Gulf of Mexico, TEPCO at Fukushima Daiichi), revealing corporate misfeasance, misconduct, and wrongdoing. Consumers receive conflicting information about CSR involvement and often have trouble distinguishing socially conscious from irresponsible companies (Bernstein, 2009; Parguel, Benoit-Moreau, & Larceneux, 2011). Thus, they tend to question why companies embrace CSR and how such activities contribute to social well-being and become skeptical about corporate social involvement (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009).

Despite the widespread occurrence and importance of consumer skepticism toward firm actions, studies on the determinants and consequences of consumer skepticism toward CSR are lacking. This dearth of research is unfortunate for three main reasons. First, skepticism constitutes one of the most intriguing phenomena that manifest in a range of situations (e.g., McGrath, 2011; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Second, interest is rapidly increasing in negative consumer responses to corporate actions, such as boycott (Klein, Smith, & John, 2004), outrage (Lindenmeier, Schleer, & Pricl, 2012), suspicion (Ferguson, Ellen, & Piscopo, 2011), cynicism (Chyllinski & Chu, 2010), distrust (Darke & Ritchie, 2007), perceptions of corporate social irresponsibility (Lange & Washburn, 2012), and perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009). Third, consumer skepticism toward business is on the rise (*The Economist*, 2012) as, despite companies’ heavy investment in publicizing their good works (Porter & Kramer, 2004), reported incidents of irresponsible corporate behavior abound (Carson, 2003; Lange & Washburn, 2012), and negative information is generally more diagnostic and weights more heavily than positive information (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001).

This study contributes to the CSR literature by developing and testing a model that explains both how consumer skepticism toward CSR develops and its influence on consumer-related outcomes in the context of grocery retailers. Ethical issues are increasingly important in consumer food and grocery shopping decisions (Memery, Megicks, Angell, & Williams, 2012). The focus of this study is on cause-related marketing—a partnership between a retailer and a nonprofit organization, in which the latter gains money and profile and the former benefits by associating itself with a good cause and from increasing sales (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki, 2007). Cause-related marketing is particularly appropriate for the examination of consumer skepticism because of its dual (cause-beneficial and cause-exploitative) nature. Drawing on attribution theory, this study posits that CSR-induced consumer attributions—namely egoistic-, values-, strategic-, and stakeholder-driven motives—influence the formation of consumer skepticism toward CSR, which in turn decreases consumer-based retailer equity, consumer resilience to negative information, and word of mouth (WOM). Figure 1 presents the study’s model.

Figure 1 here.

**2. Conceptual framework and research hypotheses**

In general, skepticism refers to a person’s tendency to doubt, disbelieve, and question (e.g., Boush, Friestad, & Rose, 1994; Forehand & Grier, 2003). The word “skepticism” comes from the Greek word “skeptomai,” which means to think, to consider, to examine. Skepticism relates to but is qualitatively different from cynicism, suspicion, (low) trust, and distrust. Specifically, cynicism involves the enduring belief that people act solely on the basis of their selfish motives and constitutes a personality trait that is stable across contexts and over time (Mohr, Eroglu, & Ellen, 1998).

Suspicion refers to the belief that an actor’s behavior reflects a motive that the actor wants hidden from the target of his or her behavior (Fein, Hilton, & Miller, 1990). Trust is a positive expectation of a partner’s beneficial conduct, while distrust is not just the absence of trust, but the active expectation that the other party will behave in a way that violates one’s welfare and security (Cho, 2006).

Studies on skepticism extend across a range of disciplines, such as philosophy (e.g., McGrath, 2011), politics (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006), sociology (e.g., Owen-Smith, 2001), and psychology (e.g., Forgas & East, 2008). In the business context, skepticism is the focus of considerable research as a potential consumer response to advertising, promotion, and public relations (e.g., Boush et al., 1994; Obermiller, Spangenberg, & MacLachlan, 2005). Some writings on skepticism also surface in the context of corporate social marketing (Forehand & Grier, 2003), environmental claims (Mohr et al., 1998), cause-related claims (Singh, Kristensen, & Villasenor, 2009), CSR communication during crises (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009), and CSR programs (Pirsch, Gupta, & Grau, 2007). Although some studies treat skepticism as a personality trait and an ongoing state of disbelief (dispositional skepticism) (e.g., Boush et al., 1994; Obermiller & Spangenberg, 1998), most investigations focus on situational skepticism, which is a consumer state, induced independent of evaluator traits, that varies depending on the context and situation (e.g., Forehand & Grier, 2003; Mohr et al., 1998; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). A distinctive feature of skeptical people is that they can change their minds when presented with sufficient proof (Mohr et al., 1998). Accordingly, while consumers’ doubting disposition may vary, skepticism is a cognitive response that can result from situational factors (Forehand & Grier, 2003).

Friestad and Wright’s (1994) work on the persuasion knowledge model posits that consumers learn to interpret and evaluate the persuasion agents’ goals and tactics and use this knowledge to cope with persuasion attempts. One way consumers develop persuasion knowledge to help themselves understand and deal with certain events is through attributional inferences (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Lange & Washburn, 2012). Attribution theory explains how people attribute causes to events and how this cognitive perception affects their subsequent attitudes and behavior (Kelley & Michela, 1980). The theory maintains that causal analysis is inherent in people’s need to understand events and divides the way people attribute causes to events into two main types: internal and external. An internal attribution assigns the cause of the given event to the individual, while an external attribution attributes the cause of the given behavior to the surrounding environment (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002).

Accordingly, consumers attribute motives to companies’ actions, and these attributions affect their subsequent response to the company (Boush et al., 1994; Campbell & Kirmani, 2000). The literature suggests that consumers assign to companies two primary types of motives: firm-serving motives, which emphasize the potential benefit to the firm itself, and public-serving motives, which focus on the potential benefits to people outside the company (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000; Forehand & Grier, 2003). In general, consumers perceive firm-serving motives negatively because they signify an individualistic or opportunistic perspective and public-serving motives favorably because they show an element of altruism and enhanced societal interest (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006).

Attribution theory provides an appropriate framework for exploring the role of consumer skepticism toward CSR by illuminating the way people explain corporate social involvement and how this cognitive perception affects their subsequent attitudes and behavior (Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000; Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009). The theory is suitable to the CSR context because consumers express great interest in justifying why firms engage in CSR practices (Gilbert & Malone, 1995) and show little confidence in corporate efforts to appear as “good corporate citizens” (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). Recent writings in the context of CSR suggest that, rather than the traditional self- versus public-serving motives, four different types of causal inferences can occur: egoistic-, values-, strategic-, and stakeholder-driven motives (Ellen et al., 2006; Vlachos et al., 2009). Arguably, CSR activities are complex, and consumers are likely to identify multiple plausible causal inferences for corporate social engagement (Oberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Gruber, 2011).

Egoistic-driven attributions refer to beliefs that the company is exploiting rather than supporting the cause (Ellen et al., 2006; Vlachos et al., 2009). When consumers assign opportunistic and excessive profiteering motives to CSR engagement, they perceive CSR as a deliberate attempt to mislead them into false conclusions about the company’s ethos. Beyond the manipulative, consumers view such motivations as unethical and not reciprocal to the social cause because the company is preoccupied with its own interests (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Vlachos et al., 2009).

Thus, consumers are likely to question and doubt CSR efforts when they attribute the retailer’s social involvement to blatant self-centered reasons. H1: Egoistic-driven motives relate positively to CSR skepticism.

Values-driven motives refer to beliefs that the company engages in CSR actions purely because of its moral, ethical, and societal ideals and standards (Ellen et al., 2000). In this case, consumers believe that the company is acting out of character, cares about the cause, and has a genuine concern about social problems. Values-driven attributions suggest that CSR practices are symbolic of the company’s authentic desire to contribute to society and correspond to its true feelings and dispositions (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Consequently, consumers are likely to unquestionably accept and embrace the retailer’s social initiatives in the presence of attributions of benevolence-motivated giving. H2: Values-driven motives relate negatively to CSR skepticism.

Strategic-driven motives reflect beliefs that the company can achieve its business objectives while supporting the cause (Ellen et al., 2006; Vlachos et al., 2009). By their very nature, strategic-driven attributions epitomize the business case for CSR: the company attains goals inherent to its survival by undertaking social activities and subsequently promoting them in an effort to create a win-win situation. Strategic-driven motivations pose a perplexing problem to consumers: on the one hand, consumers may perceive them as legitimate because a company needs to be economically viable (Ellen et al., 2006). On the other hand, profit-motivated giving reflects a behavior that derives from economic, rather than moral, reasoning (Vlachos et al., 2009). The company decides to contribute to the social cause not because doing so is right, but because “doing so is just business.” Consumers may resent the intrusion of profit-seeking behavior into the area of social causes because values, rather than money, constitute the issue at hand (Hollender, 2004).

Thus, they are likely to raise doubts about a retailer’s CSR activities when they ascribe them to profit-seeking reasons. H3: Strategic-driven motives relate positively to CSR skepticism.

Stakeholder-driven motives refer to beliefs that the company engages in CSR to satisfy the expectations of different stakeholders (Vlachos et al., 2009). In other words, the company adopts this stance from necessity, as a response to pressures from various interest groups, such as stockholders, employees, and society as a whole. Such an explanatory attribution can lead to negative connotations about the company’s social initiatives because consumers view them as not corresponding to the company’s true values and beliefs (Smith & Hunt, 1978). Here, CSR efforts serve as a means for receiving rewards or avoiding punishment from stakeholders (Ellen et al., 2000; Vlachos et al., 2009).

Therefore, stakeholder-driven attributions are likely to engender consumer skepticism toward CSR. H4: Stakeholder-driven motives relate positively to CSR skepticism.

Retailer equity refers to consumers’ different responses to a focal and another retailer when both have the same level of offering; the difference in consumer response may be attributed to the retailer’s name (Arnett, Laverie, & Meiers, 2003). The focus of this study is on consumer-based retailer equity, which measures cognitive retailer equity at the individual consumer level (Yoo, Donthu, & Lee, 2000). What consumers know about a company can influence their overall evaluation of and attitudes toward the company’s products (e.g., Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). CSR associations play an important role in consumers’ considerations because, rather than providing information about the quality of a company’s products, they create a general context for consumers’ evaluation of the company (Klein & Dawar, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

When consumers believe that a company is concerned with the well-being of society and is committed to “doing good” CSR actions, they tend to form favorable attitudes toward the company and develop a sense of attachment or connection with the firm (Stanaland, Lwin, & Murphy, 2011). In the presence of skepticism toward CSR, however, consumers are not convinced about the genuine social consciousness of the company and express doubts about its ethical standards and socially responsibility. In this case, consumers believe that the company’s character is not virtuous, enduring, or capable of enhancing their self-esteem (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Such feelings undermine the social embeddedness of the consumer–company relationship and reduce the value of the retailers name in consumers’ minds (Cho, 2006).

Thus, consumers’ skeptical stance toward a retailer’s CSR efforts is likely to translate to lower consumer-based retailer equity. H5: CSR skepticism relates negatively to retailer equity.

Resilience to negative information refers to the extent to which consumers do not allow negative information about a company to diminish their general view of the company (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Eisingerich, Rubera, Seifert, & Bhardwaj, 2011). Such behavior occurs when a company has built “a reservoir of goodwill” and consumers experience an enhanced fit with the company’s identity (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Such behavior does not occur, however, when consumers doubt the company’s reasons for contributing to the well-being of society and are wary of its ethical standards and social engagement. Here, the negative information consumers receive about the company is largely congruent with their questioning attitudes toward its social involvement, and consumers lack the motivation to support and defend the company by generating counter-arguments in the face of negative publicity (Eisingerich et al., 2011).

Consequently, consumer skepticism toward CSR can be detrimental to the development of resilience to negative information. H6: CSR skepticism relates negatively to resilience to negative information.

WOM refers to informal, interpersonal communication among consumers about their personal thoughts, ideas, or comments about a company (De Matos & Rossi, 2008). Consumers likely engage in WOM as a form of communicating their positive or negative experiences, feelings, and emotions with companies in an attempt to exchange diagnostic information and improve decision-making quality (Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991). Extant literature suggests that negative information is more attention getting, more carefully processed, and more dominant in evaluations than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001). In addition, negative feelings are more strongly coded in consumer memories and can lead to negative impressions having greater influence on outcome variables (Cho, 2006). In an attempt to communicate their disposition to incredulity toward the CSR practices of the retailer, skeptical consumers are likely to share their doubts, verify their suspicions, and warn others (Ferguson et al., 2011; Herr et al., 1991).

Thus, consumers’ skepticism toward the CSR efforts of the retailer is likely to inhibit their willingness to talk positively about the retailer to their friends and acquaintances. H7: CSR skepticism relates negatively to WOM.

Retailer equity implies that consumers have enduring, favorable associations with the retailer (Yoo et al., 2000). Consumers who hold strong positive attitudes toward a retailer likely demonstrate enhanced resistance to negative information about the firm (Dick & Basu, 1994). Attitude-driven message selectivity and cognitive consistency processes can explain this relationship. The former argues that people with certain perceptions about an object likely engage in selective attention of information to block out any inconsistency with their attitudes (Fazio, 1990). The latter reflects people’s need to maintain a coherent set of beliefs and attitudes about objects to appropriately drive information processing and acceptance (Frey, 1986).

Therefore, consumers with strong attachments to a retailer are more likely to downplay or reject information that runs counter to their positive attitudes toward the retailer and less likely to accept such information as diagnostic and relevant to their decisions (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, & Unnava, 2000). H8: Retailer equity relates positively to resilience to negative information.

Positive WOM occurs when customers have high satisfaction with the company, experience notable and positive emotional experiences, and have high levels of commitment and loyalty (Brown, Barry, Dacin, & Gunst, 2005). Consumer-based retailer equity reflects a strong relationship between consumers and a retailer (Yoo et al., 2000). Such equity prompts consumers to give favorable recommendations of the company to others in their reference group. When consumers have a superior experience, they are likely to spread positive WOM to project a better image about themselves and their choices, reduce potential post-purchase anxiety or dissonance, express their concern about others, and help others make more informed choices (De Matos & Rossi, 2008; Ryu & Feick, 2007). H9: Retailer equity relates positively to WOM.

**3. Method**

*3.1. Sampling*

The data collection procedure for the study was an online survey using the subject pool Amazon Mechanical Turk, which is a novel online marketplace for collecting high-quality data quickly and fairly inexpensively (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Respondents needed to have an Internet Protocol address within the United States, to be at least 21 years of age, and to have successfully completed a high percentage of prior tasks to participate in the survey. Budget constraints (i.e., informants received the equivalent of approximately $10 per hour for their participation) limited access to the online survey to a total of 520 respondents.

However, four of these were eliminated because of incomplete data and another 12 because respondents did not rate the scenario provided as realistic (see next section). Thus, the final sample consisted of 504 respondents, 43% of whom were male. Respondents varied considerably in terms of age (21–24: 19.7%; 25–34: 35.3%; 35–44: 19.6%; 45–54: 15.5%; ≥55: 9.9%), occupation (employed: 45.4%; student: 13.5%; self-employed: 13.3%; unemployed: 11.7%; housework: 9.9%; retired: 4.3%), and shopping frequency (every month: 10.7%; every two weeks: 22.2%; every week: 45.4%; two or three days per week: 19.2%).

*3.2. Questionnaire development*

A thorough review of the pertinent literature together with interviews with consumers helped specify the conceptual domain of each construct and operationalize them effectively. A draft questionnaire was developed, and three academics with a background in CSR and/or consumer behavior assessed the face and content validity of the measures. In addition, eight doctoral students in the areas of management and marketing tested the revised questionnaire to ensure readability and clarity. Next, the students participated in a pilot study. The results did not reveal any problems with respect to the measures and/or response formats.

The study employed a scenario to test the research hypotheses. The first part of the questionnaire instructed participants to recall a grocery retailer that they had recently visited, to specify this retailer, and to complete the questionnaire with respect to the identified retailer. Then, the scenario informed respondents that this retailer promised to donate a large percentage of its profits during the Christmas period to a non-profit organization. This organization aims to promote healthful, balanced lifestyles through good nutrition and exercise with a particular emphasis on fighting childhood obesity. Most grocery retailers make such donations, and the pre-study interviews showed that respondents were familiar with such practices and had no problem believing this scenario. In addition, the study used two items to check the realism of the scenario given: “The situation described was …” (–5 very unrealistic to +5 very realistic) and “I had no difficulty imagining this situation” (–5 strongly disagree to +5 strongly agree) (Dabholkar & Bagozzi, 2002; Vlachos et al., 2009). Further analysis excluded responses with a value lower than 1 for one of these items. Thus, the corresponding mean scores in the sample were 2.68 and 2.80, which provides some confidence in the realism of the scenario used.

*3.3. Measures*

When possible, well-established measures were identified from existing research and adapted to better suit the context at hand. Unless otherwise indicated, the study employed a 7-point Likert-type response format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The items measuring egoistic-, values-, strategic-, and stakeholder-driven attributions derive from the work of Ellen et al. (2006) and Vlachos et al. (2009). Participants expressed their level of agreement or disagreement with possible explanations for the donation described in the scenario. Three items assessed egoistic-driven motives, and four items measured values-, strategic-, and stakeholder-driven motives, respectively.

The four-item construct of CSR skepticism assesses the extent to which the consumer is skeptical about the social involvement of the retailer. Two methods helped develop items measuring consumer skepticism toward CSR: a review of the literature (e.g., Forehand & Grier, 2003; Mohr et al., 1998; Obermiller et al., 2005) and face-to-face interviews. Two focus groups with 19 MBA students were conducted to complement item generation and ensure content and face validity. Then, eight doctoral students and two retail managers tested the resulting pool of 10 items for the CSR skepticism scale to check for consistency, clarity of wording, and response format. Next, data from a group of 30 arbitrarily selected consumers (not included in the sample) were gathered to check the dimensionality and reliability of the scale. Furthermore, data from the pilot study were used to examine the extent to which the final four-item scale of consumer skepticism toward CSR behaves as expected within a system of related constructs. Finally, a global item summarized the essence of the CSR skepticism construct (i.e., “I am skeptical whether this is a socially responsible retailer”). The correlation between the skepticism scale used and the global item was highly significant (*p* < .01), providing additional support for the validity of the skepticism measures.

The three-item construct of retailer equity taps the incremental utility or value added to a retailer by its brand name. The items come from Yoo et al. (2000) and Arnett, Laverie, et al. (2003). The three-item construct of resilience to negative information captures the extent to which consumers do not allow negative information to diminish their view of the retailer. The work of Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2007) and Eisingerich et al. (2011) provided the relevant material for measuring this construct. The three-item construct of WOM gauges the extent to which consumers communicate negative/positive information about the retailer in social situations (7-point semantic differential scale). The items derive from Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003). The study also includes customer orientation as a control variable because prior research suggests that customer orientation (i.e., the extent to which consumers view the retailer as being caring and attentive to their needs) plays a key role in influencing consumer responses to the firm (e.g., Homburg, Wieseke, & Bornemann, 2009). The goal of this study is to examine the role of consumer skepticism toward CSR beyond consumer perceptions of the retailer’s customer orientation. The four-item construct of customer orientation comes from Donovan, Brown, and Mowen (2004).

*3.4. Validation of measures*

Exploratory factor analysis and item-to-total correlations initially examined the internal consistency of the scales employed in the study. Items with low item-to-total correlations, weak individual loadings on each factor, and high cross-loadings were dropped from further analysis. Next, confirmatory factor analysis using EQS 6.1 (Bentler, 2006) assessed the validity of the remaining set of items. The analysis used the maximum likelihood estimation procedure.

A measurement model estimated the items representing the study constructs. Table 1 presents the measurement model results, including the scale items. The findings indicate that the measurement model provides a good fit to the data. While the chi-square (χ2 = 859.13) for this model is statistically significant (*p* < 0.001) for 428 degrees of freedom, favorable fit indices include a ratio of chi-square to the degrees of freedom (χ2/df) of 2.01, a normed fit index (NFI) of 0.92, a non-normed fit index (NNFI) of 0.95, a comparative fit index (CFI) of 0.96, an incremental fit index (IFI) of 0.96, a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) of 0.045, and an average off-diagonal absolute standardized residual (AOSR) of 0.034.

Table 1 here.

All indicators loaded significantly on the latent variables they were intended to represent (the average factor loading was 0.83, and the minimum t-value was 16.50), which provides evidence of convergent validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). To test for discriminant validity, a series of two-factor confirmatory factor analysis models assessed all possible pairs of constructs. Each model ran twice: once constraining the phi coefficient to unity and once freeing the parameter. In all pair-wise comparisons, the difference in the chi-square value for one degree of freedom was greater than the critical value of 3.84, which shows evidence of discriminant validity (Gerbing & Anderson, 1988). Cronbach’s alpha scores for the constructs range from 0.82 (egoistic-driven attributions) to 0.92 (CSR skepticism). Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the constructs investigated in this study.

Table 2 here.

*3.5. Assessment of common method bias*

Several steps helped reduce the risk of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The particular design and administration phases of the survey ensured the use of clear grammar and concise scale items; guaranteed and communicated anonymity and confidentiality to all study participants; made explicit that the questions had no right or wrong answers; grouped construct items in general topic categories, instead of positioning them by variable; and employed different, rather than a single, response formats. Harman’s single factor test was performed on all questionnaires. Using varimax rotation, the results of an exploratory factor analysis with all the model variables showed that nine factors accounted for 71% of the total variance, with the first factor explaining only 27% of the variance, suggesting the absence of a single general factor in the data set.

*3.6. Hypotheses testing*

The study employed structural equation modeling to test the research hypotheses. The model results provide evidence of a good fit to the data (χ2(444) = 884.99, *p* < 0.001; χ2/df = 1.99; NFI = 0.92; NNFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.96; IFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.045; AOSR = 0.039). The results (see Table 3) reveal that, with the exception of H3—in which no significant link exists between strategic-driven attributions and CSR skepticism (β = –0.06, *p* > 0.05)—the hypothesized relationships are all significant and in the theorized direction. Specifically, in support of H1, egoistic-driven attributions relate positively to CSR skepticism (β = 0.26, *p* < 0.01). Consistent with H2, values-driven attributions associate negatively with CSR skepticism (β = –0.43, *p* < 0.01). In support of H4, stakeholder-driven attributions relate positively to CSR skepticism (β = 0.13, *p* < 0.01).

In line with H5, H6, and H7, CSR skepticism associates negatively with equity (β = –0.41, *p* < 0.01), resilience to negative information (β = –0.27, *p* < 0.01), and WOM (β = –0.20, *p* < 0.01), respectively. As H8 and H9 predict, equity relates positively to resilience to negative information (β = 0.19, *p* < 0.01) and WOM (β = 0.30, *p* < 0.01), respectively. Finally, customer orientation associates negatively with CSR skepticism (β = –0.25, *p* < 0.01) and positively with equity (β = 0.19, *p* < 0.01), resilience to negative information (β = 0.15, *p* < 0.01), and WOM (β = 0.13, *p* < 0.05). Overall, the research model predicts approximately a quarter of the observed variance for resilience to negative information (25%), WOM (27%), and equity (28%) and almost half the variance for CSR skepticism (48%).

Table 3 here.

*3.7. Rival models*

The study model posits a mediating role of CSR skepticism. A rival model might predict that attributions of egoistic-, values-, strategic-, and stakeholder-driven motives also directly influence equity, resistance to negative information, and WOM. The results of the partial mediation model (χ2(430) = 886.74, *p* < 0.001, χ2/df = 2.06; NFI = 0.92; NNFI = 0.95; CFI = 0.96; IFI = 0.96; RMSEA = 0.046; AOSR = 0.039) indicate that the added paths did not improve model fit or change the statistical significance of the other paths in the model.

Likewise, an alternative model specification might suggest that CSR skepticism should not play a mediating role and that consumer attributions and CSR skepticism influence consumer responses. The results of this model (χ2(434) = 1123.27, *p* < 0.001, χ2/df = 2.59; NFI = 0.90; NNFI = 0.93; CFI = 0.94; IFI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.046; AOSR = 0.092) are considerably worse than the corresponding indices in the study model. This suggests that the “no-mediation model” fails to explain the data as well as the proposed structural model.

**4. Discussion, limitations, and conclusion**

This study extends prior research on CSR-induced consumer attributions (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Vlachos et al., 2009) by providing some of the first empirical evidence on the role of consumers’ complex set of causal inferences for CSR practices in the development of CSR skepticism. More specifically, the findings reveal that egoistic- and stakeholder-driven attributions contribute to the development of consumer skepticism toward CSR, while values-driven motives inhibit its formation.

The results also suggest that strategic-driven attributions neither facilitate nor alleviate CSR skepticism, which is an indication that consumers are tolerant of strategic motives for corporate social engagement. Collectively, the findings demonstrate that corporate policy makers should be cognizant that adopting CSR programs can backfire unless they pay particular attention to consumers’ attributions for CSR engagement. Insufficient understanding of consumers’ explanations for corporate involvement may result in the cultivation of consumer skepticism, rather than the development of “a reservoir of goodwill.” As a remedy, practitioners should first try to design control mechanisms to monitor levels of CSR skepticism among their customer base. They should also place emphasis on formulating and communicating CSR policies that revolve around values-driven motivations and minimize any reference to egoistic- or stakeholder-related reasons with a view to regulating skepticism.

The study also extends previous work on skepticism in the advertising literature (Mohr et al., 1998; Obermiller et al., 2005) by documenting the relevance and importance of consumer skepticism in the area of CSR. The results indicate that CSR skepticism leads to lower levels of consumer-based retailer equity. Skepticism reduces the incremental value of the retailers’ name in consumers’ minds, which is critical because retailer equity builds resilience to negative information and prompts positive WOM.

Skepticism exerts a direct deleterious influence on consumers’ resistance to negative information and WOM. Skeptical consumers are vulnerable to negative information about the retailer and denigrate the retailer in conversations with friends and acquaintances. Both outcomes are of prime importance because, when skeptical about the retailer’s CSR efforts, consumers are unwilling to overlook or forgive when the retailer comes under attack or adverse scrutiny in the public domain (e.g., in the event of a crisis) (Ahluwalia et al., 2000), and interpersonal communication is generally viewed as a more credible source of information (Grewal, Cline, & Davies, 2003). The study also shows that the extent to which a retailer understands and satisfies consumer needs and wants positively influences consumers’ attitudes toward the retailer and its CSR efforts, which is in line with findings in the customer orientation literature (Eisingeirich et al., 2011).

Managerially, these findings have important implications because knowledge on the damaging consequences of CSR skepticism can boost efforts to minimize this phenomenon. Given the general rise of skepticism toward the role of corporations in society (*The Economist*, 2012) and its potentially contagious nature (Chyllinski & Chu, 2010), companies should devote greater efforts to convince consumers that their social involvement is genuine. Managers should bear in mind that a few negative cues may overwhelm the cumulative effects of many positive activities, such that the success of CSR programs often depends more on mitigating the “bad” than on accumulating the “good” (Baumeister et al., 2001). People rarely blame firms for doing good, and the firm that acts in a socially beneficial way may generate strong consumer reactions (Lange & Washburn, 2012). This finding increases the importance of getting things right from the start in terms of CSR because consumers’ doubts and disbelief can open the door for a host of negative outcomes.

This study has several limitations, which provide directions for future work. The study obtained single-source data at one point in time, which brings into play the possibility of common method bias. To further control for the effects of a single unmeasured latent method factor, the study re-estimated the structural model with an added latent common factor specified as having a relationship with all items (Podsakoff et al., 2003). All factor loadings from the items to their designated theoretical factors remained significant, and the same source factor did not affect the overall pattern of results presented in the original structural model. Therefore, a methodological artifact likely did not generate the relationships observed in this study. However, longitudinal investigations of sources and consequences of CSR skepticism are necessary to avoid any potential common method variance bias. They can also help draw a better picture of the time duration of skepticism perceptions. Do skeptical perceptions fade away after a specific period? Are the consequences of skepticism enduring or short-term in nature?

The cross-sectional design of the study restricts its ability to examine causal relations. For example, treating consumers’ interpretation of firm motives underlying CSR as key to explaining their reaction to CSR is in concert with attribution theory (Kelley & Michela, 1980; Vlachos et al., 2009) and the study findings are generally supportive of this contention. However, a reverse sequence of events might occur such that skepticism may trigger active, sophisticated attributional thinking. This study draws conclusions based on the association between the model constructs, and clarification of the temporal order between them is possible only with longitudinal methods.

Testing the generalizability of the findings by replicating the study in alternative industries and in countries with dissimilar macro-level (e.g., economic, socio-cultural) and micro-level (e.g., competitive intensity) conditions would be worthwhile. This study focuses on consumer skepticism toward CSR. Thus, research could explore skepticism-related issues among other stakeholders, such as potential investors and company employees. In addition, the study uses a scenario based on a particular cause to capture the drivers and outcomes of skepticism. Further research could examine whether the fit of cause type and nature of core business has an effect on the development of skepticism toward CSR practices. Relatedly, this investigation considers a limited range of drivers and outcomes of CSR skepticism. Subsequent research could include additional drivers of CSR skepticism, such as corporate reputation, and assess the impact of skepticism on actual purchasing behavior.

Today, an increasing number of companies engage in CSR in an attempt to reap its benefits and meet the expectations of society. At the same time, media coverage and public criticism regarding various socially irresponsible business practices have increased at an alarming rate. As a result, more and more consumers tend to doubt and question corporate social involvement, and feelings of skepticism toward CSR practices are on the rise. Although this phenomenon can have serious implications for the formulation, implementation, and success of CSR policies, research on this topic remains scarce and limited. The central theme of this research effort is the role of consumer skepticism toward CSR. This study takes the first steps toward enhancing understanding of consumer skepticism toward CSR by introducing new measures for this construct and elucidating the factors that facilitate and/or inhibit its development, as well as its consequences. In doing so, this study joins a nascent stream of research that questions the extent to which consumers unconditionally embrace CSR practices and support companies for their social initiatives. This study thus aims to inspire continued theoretical and empirical research on the important topic of CSR skepticism.

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**Table 1**

**Measurement model results**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Factor and items | Standardized Loading | *t*-Value |
|  |  |  |
| *Egoistic-driven motives* |  |  |
| is trying to capitalize on the growing social movement | .80 | 19.57 |
| is taking advantage of social causes | .73 | 17.60 |
| is trying to benefit from the increased awareness of social problems | .80 | 19.79 |
|  |  |  |
| *Values-driven motives* |  |  |
| has a long-term interest in the society | .80 | 21.15 |
| is trying to give back something to the society | .86 | 23.63 |
| has an ethical responsibility to help society | .85 | 23.04 |
| feels morally obligated to help society | .88 | 24.71 |
|  |  |  |
| *Strategic-driven motives* |  |  |
| wants to keep its existing customers | .68 | 16.50 |
| hopes to increase its profits | .83 | 21.74 |
| wants to get new customers | .85 | 22.30 |
| hopes to increase its competitiveness | .72 | 17.72 |
|  |  |  |
| *Stakeholder-driven motives* |  |  |
| they feel its employees expect it | .78 | 19.90 |
| they feel its customers expect it | .82 | 21.19 |
| they feel its stockholders expect it | .79 | 20.12 |
| they feel society in general expects it | .77 | 19.29 |
|  |  |  |
| *CSR skepticism* |  |  |
| it is doubtless/doubtful that this is a socially responsible retailer | .89 | 25.22 |
| it is certain/uncertain that this retailer is concerned to improve the well-being of society | .87 | 24.23 |
| it is sure/unsure that this retailer follows high ethical standards | .86 | 23.84 |
| it is unquestionable/questionable that this retailer acts in a socially responsible way | .84 | 22.79 |
|  |  |  |
| *Equity* |  |  |
| it makes sense to buy groceries from this retailer instead of another store even if the groceries are the same | .89 | 25.01 |
| if there was another grocery store as good as this retailer, I would still prefer to buy groceries at this retailer | .89 | 24.61 |
| if another grocery store is not different from this retailer in any way, it seems smarter to purchase groceries from this retailer | .87 | 23.86 |
|  |  |  |
| *Resilience to negative information* |  |  |
| if this retailer did something I did not like, I would be willing to give it another chance | .83 | 21.40 |
| I would be willing to excuse this retailer if negative information about its activities was reported in the media | .78 | 19.66 |
| if I heard or read a negative story about this retailer, I would be willing to forgive it | .85 | 22.03 |
|  |  |  |
| *WOM* |  |  |
| talk down/talk up this retailer to people I know | .84 | 22.36 |
| bring up this retailer in a negative/positive way in conversations I have with friends and acquaintances | .86 | 23.24 |
| often speak unfavorably/favorably about this retailer in social situations | .91 | 25.64 |
|  |  |  |
| *Customer orientation* |  |  |
| tries to make every customer feel like he/she is the only customer | .76 | 19.60 |
| every customer’s problem is important to this retailer | .83 | 22.32 |
| does not provide individual attention to each customer | .89 | 24.74 |
| has a strong focus on customer needs | .79 | 20.65 |
|  | | |

**Table 2**

**Correlation matrix, reliability estimates, and descriptive statisticsa**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Measures | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Egoistic-driven motives | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Values-driven motives | -.27 | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Strategic-driven motives | .41 | -.19 | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Stakeholder-driven motives | .09 | .28 | .23 | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. CSR skepticism | .40 | -.53 | .21 | .01 | 1.00 |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Equity | -.11 | -.26 | -.03 | .02 | -.47 | 1.00 |  |  |  |
| 7. Resilience to negative information | -.18 | -.23 | -.01 | .08 | -.39 | .34 | 1.00 |  |  |
| 8. WOM | -.12 | .24 | -.01 | -.02 | -.39 | .40 | .24 | 1.00 |  |
| 9. Customer orientation | -.25 | .46 | -.12 | .03 | -.47 | .37 | .32 | .34 | 1.00 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| α | .82 | .91 | .85 | .87 | .92 | .91 | .86 | .90 | .89 |
| Mean | 4.77 | 4.13 | 5.47 | 3.91 | 3.26 | 3.93 | 4.11 | 4.58 | 4.05 |
| Standard deviation | 1.22 | 1.46 | 1.12 | 1.37 | 1.54 | 1.03 | 1.24 | 1.28 | 1.24 |

a Correlations ≥.09 are significant at the .05 level; correlations ≥.11 are significant at the .01 level.

**Table 3**

**Structural equation model results**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Hypotheses | Standardized Loading | *t*-Value |
|  |  |  |
| Egoistic-driven motives → CSR skepticism | .26 | 5.03\*\* |
| Values-driven motives → CSR skepticism | -.43 | -7.81\*\* |
| Strategic-driven motives → CSR skepticism | -.06 | -1.21 |
| Stakeholder-driven motives → CSR skepticism | .13 | 2.80\*\* |
| CSR skepticism → Equity | -.41 | -7.72\*\* |
| CSR skepticism → Resilience to negative information | -.27 | -4.49\*\* |
| CSR skepticism → WOM | -.20 | -3.56\*\* |
| Equity → Resilience to negative information | .19 | 3.49\*\* |
| Equity → WOM | .30 | 5.58\*\* |
|  |  |  |
| Customer orientation → CSR skepticism | -.25 | -5.32\*\* |
| Customer orientation → Equity | .19 | 3.60\*\* |
| Customer orientation → Resilience to negative information | .15 | 2.65\*\* |
| Customer orientation → WOM | .13 | 2.44\* |
|  |  |  |

\*\**p* < .01.

\**p* < .05.



**Figure 1. Research model**