

Building Brand Equity: Creating Customer-Brand Congruence by appealing to Gender Identity Differences with CSR Initiatives

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Abstract

Businesses often struggle to identify the benefit of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs in terms of both business and consumer outcomes. We propose that utilizing an identity perspective, based on appealing to gender identity differences embedded in social identity and the value-action gap theories, to assess how CSR programs allows for a greater level of understanding how consumers will react to them. We go on to posit that by focusing on gender identity, firms can add value and benefit from CSR initiatives if they shift their efforts toward strengthening brand equity and brand loyalty.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Gender, Identity, Brand Equity, Marketing

Introduction

While some continue to debate whether ethical and social programs (e.g., corporate social responsibility CSR) are just marketing tactics, there is a wealth of evidence of the global initiative toward social justice and environmental protection/preservation. Therefore, social related causes and sustainability are becoming a growing concern for firms and their stakeholders. These pressures from macro forces (e.g., governments, social trends, industry norms, and competition) are creating new norms for organizations to systematically change how they operate (i.e., produce goods and services in an ethical and responsible manner (Alsmadi, 2007)). These norms are also becoming embedded in what consumers expect from businesses in terms of their impact on society (Lubin & Esty, 2010).

'...customers are looking beyond compliance issues to how we're handling waste, whether our suppliers pay fair wages, and even if we've eliminated printed documentation and moved everything on-line' (McNulty & Davis, 2010: p.134).

Not only are these pressures forcing organizations to change, CSR practices are also increasingly becoming more institutionalized across industries through international standards and stock indexes; as well as at the organizational level through the development of new corporate officer positions (e.g., CSR Office, Chief Sustainability Officer, Director of CSR Marketing and Communications to name a few), the creation of CSR reports and ethical codes of conduct to fulfill requests from key stakeholders, and the promotion of those practices (e.g, green marketing).

While implementation of these social related practices and programs are becoming commonplace, researchers have found conflicting results regarding whether and how they are beneficial to the firm in terms influencing consumer behavior (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), differentiating the firm strategically (Sharp & Zaidman, 2010), and generally creating a true competitive advantage (Thomas, 2001; Lopez, Garcia, & Rodriguez, 2007). If the development and promotion of CSR practices is only enough to create competitive parity for a firm; is there way that organizations can actually benefit from the large amount of resources being utilized to create these programs? From a marketing perspective researchers have started to address this issue by focusing more on strengthening brand relationship and connecting with consumer identity over trying to actually change consumer behavior (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2012). While we believe this path is a wise path forward, there is still a significant gap in the literature in terms of differentiating this congruence between consumer identity and brand, especially with regard to gender variance.

On its surface, gender may appear to be as “simple” as ones sex. In the case of many marketing managers, sex category is often used as a proxy variable for gender, and sex is generally delineated into that of male and female (Westwood, Prtichard & Morgan, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Springer, Stellman & Jordan-Yougn, 2012). While we do not ascribe to such a simplistic view of gender, it is important to note that it is just one of the many different approaches for examining gender. A more sophisticated view is from a sociological perspective where gender is perceived as a negotiated social construct that is performed, identified, and acted upon by actors within different cultural and institutional contexts (Butler, 1988). We will, throughout this article, focus on feminist gendered components and characteristics in terms of how consumers identify with those socially constructed concepts. This is by no means to suggest that all females carry these characteristics or that all males do not, only that certain traits might associate with various socially constructed views of gender types. As we continue our discussion on gender and CSR initiatives we attempt to bridge the socially constructed view of gender with that of a simple proxy currently utilized by many practitioners, given that this complex construct is extremely informative when used to investigate how consumers react to marketing and social initiatives.

As many practitioners have highlighted ‘Women are most powerful consumers, and their impact on the economy is growing every year’ (Breenan, 2015). Women drive nearly 80% of all consumer purchasing through their buying power and influences (Breenan, 2015; Moss, 1999). For example, Nike had \$5.7 billion in sales of women-specific products in 2015 and women’s products account for 46% of all gender-specific products at REI. Additionally, Silverstein and Sayre (2009) highlight that almost 80% of all advertising budgets are spent on appealing to women. It is therefore curious that there is a paucity of research focusing on how to influence this huge market segment through ethical or social marketing campaigns. There is even more of a concern that there has been limited research focusing on CSR and the female identity of consumers given the significant amount of theoretical work relating to gender variation toward ethical and social causes (Ford & Richardson, 1994; Dawson, 1997; Signhapakdi, 1999; Lämsä *et al.*, 2008). Even in this long tradition of examining the variance (based on gender) on the proclivity toward social and environmental causes, much of the research only tells us that unless the consumer is predisposed toward ethical consumer behaviors, marketing campaigns focused on ethical and social issues have minimal influence on actual behaviours (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), with little variance between the genders (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). Therefore, we want to highlight a path forward on how to potentially create more than just competitive parity.

Since prior research points to other aspects for segmenting markets such as income, education, social status, price, values, convenience, etc. that are better predictors of behavior over ethical or social marketing (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000), we

build this on a perspective of congruence between consumer identity and brands by highlighting that there are significant differences between the gender identities. Resources may therefore be better utilized toward understanding and capitalizing on that congruence rather than on focusing on changing behaviours. More specially, we draw on aspects of social identity and ideal-self theories to highlight gender differences with regards to identity and how focusing on those differences may potentially be a more useful way to capture the true benefits of ethical and social marketing; potentially highlighting an opportunity female consumers have to influence change in consumption practices by contributing social justice issues (D'Souza & Taghian, 2017; Piñeiro, Díaz, Palavecinos, Alonso, & Benayas, 2014).

An Identity Perspective

Utilizing a combination of social identity theory and an understanding of the value-action gap allows we discuss how marketers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how consumers react to CSR initiatives, especially when identifying variables such as gender in their target market. First, as noted previously, there are significant differences in how a person views and presents their identity to others based on their gender. Feminine identity is often associated with values such as nurturing and togetherness while masculine identity can emphasize a need for uniqueness and competitiveness (Deaux, 1985; Twenge, 1997). This suggests that while all people may value societal initiatives, these consumers identifying with these specific traits (whether they are male or female) are more likely to find value in those that fit with their current identity structures. Prior work has operationalized this concept, albeit outside the domain of gender, by investigating what they called the 'consumers' perceived congruence with their own characters and that of the company' as well as a customer's support for a given CSR domain (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001: p.227). They go on to say:

'More generally, consumers' personal support of a CSR domain appears to be a key determinant of their sensitivity to a company's CSR efforts. Therefore, if a company's choice of CSR domains is dictated at all by market considerations rather than just by ideology, managers may want to research a variety of CSR initiatives and select those that enjoy the highest and most widespread support among the company's key consumer segments' (2001: p.227).

Gender is an inherently useful variable with which to understand consumer heterogeneity when reacting to ethical and social initiatives, and the *identity* lens provides an advantageous way to assess and understand these differences. This begs the question though: If gender matters, what is its influence? Fortunately, existing research gives us insight into the role gender plays, as well as to the importance of understanding the nature of consumer identity.

Creating Commitment through Social Identity

According to social identity theory, individuals understand themselves through identification with a collective group that is distinguishable from others (Turner *et al.*, 1979; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Organizations often attempt to distinguish themselves from other brands based on their CSR endeavours. The notion of organizational identification focuses on how the individual integrates an organization into their view of self thus making it a component of their identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000). In essence, it becomes a part of who they are and how they define themselves. The extent to which you identify with an organization determines behaviour in terms of membership in that group (Ellemers *et al.*, 1999). Individuals are more prone

to relate to groups they perceive match a part of their identity and consider that group as unique (Tsui *et al.*, 1992; Shamir, 1991). CSR activities focused on environment, poverty, or health care initiatives can create the perception of similarity in beliefs or values. This holds true from a gender perspective, as prior research points to women viewing their individual social responsibility towards society to be more salient than men, and further, females tend to have a greater expectation for ethical and social activities by organizations (Hatch & Stephen, 2015).

Going further, two motives linked to identification, including the desire to maximize continuity (Goldberg *et al.*, 2010; Hogg & Terry, 2000) and the desire to maintain a positive self-evaluation (Sedikides & Strube, 1995), offer an even stronger argument that a focus on creating commitment (e.g., brand loyalty) is a salient perspective. Self-continuity is the degree to which individuals show preference toward similar others (Goldberg *et al.*, 2010). The self enhancement motive is the desire to develop and maintain positive beliefs of self-induced by individuals' psychological needs (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Together these motives work to reinforce the alignment between the individual and organization, resulting in continued commitment (affective organizational commitment) and in the case of consumer behavior creating a stronger commitment to the brand. These motives are especially relevant in the notion that gender identity is inherently a part of a consumer's self-concept (Friemuth & Hornstein, 1982). Consumers will therefore reinforce their concept of self (especially in the case of femininity and masculinity (Grohmann, 2009)) through self-expression by way of attachment and identification with a brand that is symbolically congruent with their self-image or those of the group they wish to be associated with. This is especially true if marketers can appeal to specific traits (e.g., nurturance, interpersonal warmth, communion; Deaux, 1985) that are closely linked to those traits embedded in CSR programs and initiatives (and often considered essentialized feminine traits) and may be congruent with consumer self-image no matter if they are male or female. Therefore, the degree to which organizations can create organizational identification, a sense of belonging and reinforcement of positive self, may be the key to longevity in purchasing decisions.

Value-Action Gap: Appealing to Ideal and Actual Self

Recent research highlights that women (as measured by the gender the consumer self-identified with) may show a significantly stronger positive feeling toward CSR initiatives than men across multiple CSR domains (Jones *et al.*, 2017). Interestingly, while attitudes were more strongly influenced for females, this did not translate into significant differences in CSR related behaviours with males more likely to engage in CSR behaviours than females, despite the attitude difference (Jones *et al.*, 2017). These findings illustrate the importance of understanding the value-action gap when assessing how CSR initiatives will influence actual consumer behaviour.

The value-action gap is often suggested to be driven by a consumer's perception of their self, specifically the difference between ideal and actual selves (Mowen & Minor, 2006). The ideal-self is 'how a person would like to perceive himself or herself' while the actual-self is how 'a person actually perceives him- or herself' (Mowen & Minor, 2006: p.111). There is often a gap between a person's ideal-self and their actual-self. This gap between ideal-self and actual-self is evident when viewing consumers' stated values and ideas against their actual behaviour. Prior research has supported, that a gap does exist between a consumer's environmental values and attitudes and their behaviours (Laroche *et al.*, 2001; Pickett-Baker & Ozaki, 2008). Pickett-Baker and Ozaki (2008: p.282) describe this in their research as the value-action gap. As Jones *et al.* (2017)

suggest, the value-action gap with regard to gender identification may be a useful way for organizations to create stronger brand relationships through calls to action relating to ethical or social issues, as research has highlighted that women may feel a stronger desire to be engaged in local activism (Dobscha & Ozanne, 2001). This may be of even more importance given the selectivity hypotheses asserting that females will assimilate all available cues, while males are thought to be selective when processing information and only assimilate salient cues (Meyers-Levy & Mahaswaran, 1991; Wolin, 2003). Therefore, marketers have the opportunity to more effectively provide comprehensive cues toward female consumers, who are more sensitive to recognizing brand images and personality dimensions that match their self-concepts (idea or actual) (Lau & Phau, 2010). If marketers are therefore able to identify how their ethical and social programs fit with their consumer's self-concept they have the ability to strengthen customer loyalty.

The value-action gap helps us understand the interplay between our ideal-self, and our actual-self in terms of both identity construction, presentation, and behaviour. While the those consumers identifying certain feminine ideals may lead to higher attitudes towards the organization when utilizing CSR initiatives, these attitudes should not be expected to drive behaviour unless that those attitudes match current consumption practices. This value-action gap is potentially stronger for those consumers with female gender identities than male identities, and shows that even minimal switching costs will significantly reduce CSR related consumer behaviours. Further, a consumer may feel good about a company and what they do, but if these feelings do not fit with the reality of their daily consumption experiences they are unlikely to influence behaviour. For example, recall the introduction of a biodegradable bag by the SunChips brand by Frito-Lay in the USA in 2008 which was removed from shelves because the bag crinkled too loudly. While many consumers would say that biodegradable packaging is something positive, the reality of a loud snack chip bag was not well liked. The point here is that while the idea of the biodegradable bag may have fit with consumers' ideal-self in some way, the fact was that this new biodegradable bag did not fit with the daily reality because the bag was too noisy, hence highlighting the limitations of CSR initiatives on actual consumer behaviours.

We do not, however, suggest that the value-action gap is a deathblow for the viability of CSR initiatives. While the value-action gap often focuses on getting consumers to change their behaviours, we feel that it is also important to look at the influence of CSR initiatives on current consumers. We propose that CSR initiatives, especially those that match gender identities of a company's target market, will significantly increase both brand equity and brand loyalty. Brand equity tends to be conceptualized as an attitudinal construct (Keller, 1993) and as such provide a logical means for organizations to engage with their existing customer base.

Adding Value to Brand Identity

Brand equity is generally defined as the value of the brand to the consumer outside of the utility of the good or service itself (Aaker, 1992). In the case of CSR initiatives, especially with those consumer who identify with certain traits (e.g., nurturance, interpersonal warmth, communion), organizations have an effective way to increase this value. By identifying the makeup of their target market, a company can find a straightforward way to increase the value of their offerings to consumers. As shown previously, female consumer attitudes tend to react more strongly to CSR initiatives (Signhapakdi, 1999), so for practitioners basic demographic information can be used to help determine the influence of a CSR program. CSR programs should also be

helpful in markets with little product differentiation, if there is little difference between offerings between competitors a CSR program may create additional value needed to entice current customers to stick with the product and possibly even sway a new customer's choice.

Similarly to brand equity, we propose CSR initiatives will be influential on a consumer's brand loyalty - as long as they are currently customers. If a customer has already evaluated a company as worthy of having their business, a CSR initiative may push them to behave more loyally towards that company. The value-actions gap suggests that while customers may not change their behaviour based on CSR initiatives, such initiatives may be used to reinforce existing behaviour.

Conclusion

Social responsibility and social causes are often frustrating for marketers as it is hard to tell how these programs may influence consumer's perception and behaviour. Using an *identity* lens, we have identified several key mechanisms for this influence. First, CSR initiatives generally fit better with certain identities (which are often considered to be essentialized feminist traits), and this fit leads to stronger attitudes for those that identify with those traits, no matter their sex category. Second, while these stronger attitudes are important, they will not necessarily lead to changes in consumer behaviour. While social identity theory helps us identify the interplay between gender and consumer attitudes, we must also take into account the role of the value-action gap when determining the value of CSR initiatives to the firm. The value-action gap suggests that while consumers may feel strongly about CSR initiatives, it is unlikely to lead them to engage in new behaviours based on that information. This does not mean that CSR initiatives lack value though as it is clear that both brand equity and brand loyalty for existing customers can be influenced with these tactics. Overall, it is important for an organization to identify the fit for their CSR initiatives with the current and target markets, as well as to understand that CSR may enhance the value of existing behaviours. Finally, by focusing on *identity* researchers have an opportunity to inform practitioners how to move past simple sex categorization in their marketing by offering new strategies to employ into how actually tease out gender identities in their marketing campaigns.

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