



# **CSR Engagement and Identification with the Moderating Effect of Social Capital and Construal Level**

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## **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Aims:** Previous research has primarily focused on companies' overall use of Facebook and message strategies on CSR-dedicated Facebook pages. The current research is developed to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, we propose how the quantity of Facebook use (number of Facebook friends, time spent using Facebook) and motivations for accessing Facebook (making new friends, maintaining ties with current friends) relate to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and consumer identification in both direct and moderating routes. Furthermore, the current research integrates and proposes multiple moderators under a theoretical framework of social capital and construal level theories.

**Methods:** A literature review integrated with theoretical background leads to propositions.

**Conclusions:** Given the fact that Facebook has grown to be the most popular social networking site (SNS), companies have begun to adopt the platform in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. This research not only fills the literature gaps of CSR initiatives and moderators on SNS, Facebook in particular but also these propositions can provide more possibilities for companies to reconsider and redesign their CSR strategy and program via SNS.

**Keywords:** *Construal level theory; consumer-company identification; consumer engagement; corporate social responsibility initiatives; facebook; social capital theory, social cognitive theory.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Online social networking sites (SNS) have already revolutionized the way we live, communicate, and search for information. Among them, Facebook is the largest and dominant player in the market with approximately 1.37 and 2.07 billion daily active users and monthly active users respectively, as of September 30, 2017 [1]. Given the widespread use and growing influence of the site, the need for researchers to understand how Facebook impacts consumers' information acquisition, perceptions, and decision-making process [2-5].

Given the fact that Facebook has grown to be the most popular social media, companies have begun to adopt the platform in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication, such as building CSR-dedicated spaces on Facebook with the objectives of sharing CSR initiatives information to connect and interact with users, and gathering feedback about CSR [6]. CSR is defined as a business to act in social behavior that not only exceeding its legal obligations but also to fulfill societal demands [7,8,9]. CSR is recognized as a valuable marketing tool for a company to enhances its performance and image through performing altruism when the company responds to consumer expectations [10,11,12]. Studies have shown that CSR affects consumers' cognition, attitudes, and behavioral intentions in the domain of marketing [10-17].

Previous research has primarily focused on companies' overall use of Facebook [5,18,19,20,21,22] and message strategies on CSR-dedicated Facebook pages [6,23,24]. Yet, no research has been made to examine how Facebook relates to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and consumer identification in direct and moderating routes as well as other moderating effects.

The current research is thus developed to fill this gap in the literature. Specifically, we look at how the quantity of Facebook use (number of Facebook friends, time spent using Facebook) and motivations for accessing Facebook (making new friends, maintaining ties with current friends) relate to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and consumer identification. Furthermore, the current research integrates

multiple moderators under a theoretical framework of social cognitive and social capital theories. The current research also contributes to the psychological construal level theory in the domain of CSR strategy.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PROPOSITIONS

### 2.1 CSR Initiatives

CSR can be defined as the "corporate social actions whose purpose is to satisfy social needs" [7]. It also involves the policy and practice of a corporation's social involvement over and beyond what is legal obligations for the benefit of the society at large [7]. The most common definition of CSR agreed among researchers is the Carroll's theory of the pyramid model of CSR. In the model, CSR is seen as a structural element that links to four levels of the relationships between the business and society, including the legal, economic, social, and ethical expectations of business organizations [8]. In 2011, a fresh perspective for developing CSR was brought by Porter and Kramer, proposing the CSR concept as a way of creating shared values (CSV) [25]. The central idea of CSV is for corporations to demonstrate responsibility to their community. In addition, corporations not only provide community feedback but also comply with standards as a way of becoming good corporate citizens. In the process of being good corporate citizenship, companies must strive to create more values to fulfill both social benefits and profit-making values [25].

Based on the previous research, CSR initiatives in general fall into four major and commonly used categories: cause-related marketing (CRM), corporate philanthropy, sponsorship, and CSV [25,26,27]. CRM occurs when consumers purchase a company's product or service, the company will donate a certain amount of money it promised [10,28]. Empirical research found that a corporate image is likely obtained when a company launches CRM campaigns that leverage with charities and/or public sector [29]. Scholars also provided evidence showing that a corporate brand has a positive relationship with cause-related actions [30]. Consequently, CRM creates a win-win solution for the company itself and the non-profit organizations. Contribution of

returns takes in different forms to nonprofit organizations for gratitude, to corporations for making profits, and contribution to the society at large; this is known as “doing well by doing good” [31]. Optimally, CRM can be utilized as a marketing strategy to enhance corporate images and benefits [28]. In addition, CRM influences consumers’ perceptions toward products [32] and consumer buying behavior [33].

One of noble social behaviors conducted by companies is corporate philanthropy. Taken this action is a way of showing a good corporate citizenship in society (or community) by donations without expecting benefits or profits in return [34,35]. Such an act is perceived rather altruism by stakeholders, in particular the customers. As a result, a firm performs corporate philanthropy that attracts customers, employees, and other stakeholders; hence, the firm is more likely to consolidate resources, reduce constraints and develop core competencies and overall, the competitive advantages. The action produces value-added effects that result in better corporate performance immediately or indirectly [36]. To better cope in a competitive environment, corporate philanthropy becomes one of the most cost-effective methods. Scholars have advised that firms should not treat corporate philanthropy as a single act but rather to integrate it into their CSR activity and overall business more strategically [37].

Sponsorship involves a process of investing in-cash or in-kind (people or equipment) activities with an expectation of accessing and exploiting possible commercial potentials in return; hence, it can be seen as a strategic investment [38,39]. In marketing campaigns, sponsorship is one of the most prominent forms [40], and it generates more money than all media advertising combined according to Harvey [41]. Sponsorship has been found to have a significant effect on brand awareness [39,42,43], brand image [44], and brand association [26].

Conceptually, CSV proposes that organizations should take an active role to create their economic value at the same time to expand values for society when they meet the needs and problems from the society [25]. Consequently, CSV promotes not only economic prosperity but also social progress. Additionally, CSV can be a bridge to facilitate the sharing value perception between the society and corporations. Due to the fact that corporations and society are interdependent, they should follow the principle

of “value sharing” and make “win-win” beneficial decisions. As a result, a corporation should create and choose a shared (social) value that reinforces its competitive advantage and its CSR initiatives at the same time [25]. Foreseeing, CSV is a firm’s practice of CSR initiatives through its daily business activities [25,45]. Overall, the best way is to include CSV allied with CSR initiatives into a firm’s marketing strategy. In this way, firms are possible to connect the created shared value into their business and daily operation and by doing so might contribute and maximize economic returns to the firms [25,46]. Nevertheless, the implementation of CSV is still evolving and in debate. To enhance CSV literature, scholars suggested to further explore the effects of consumer attitudinal evaluations on CSV [47,48].

## **2.2 Consumer Engagement in CSR Initiatives**

Consumer engagement is the degree to which consumers are willing to participate in and relate to a CSR initiative [49,50]. Consumers who go out of their ways to engage with a CSR initiative share a certain level of connections with the company [51]. The interactions foster social attachments and a sense of companionship with the company [23]. When consumers engage in a CSR initiative with a Facebook venue, such as likes, comments, and/or shares to companies or personal posts with other members, identification with the company starts to consolidate [50].

## **2.3 Consumer-Company Identification**

Consumer-company identification (CCI) stemmed from theories of social identity and organizational identification [52]. Derived ideas from the organizational identification theory, Bhattacharya and Sen [52] further scrutinized the concept of identification and took a consumer point of views; then, they advanced the concept into a framework, that was the CCI [52]. The underlying principle of CCI is to meet consumers’ self-definitional needs of self-continuity, self-distinctiveness, and self-enhancement when a company has done something good that consumers patronize at least partly, even they are not formal members of the company [53,54]. Specifically, a company continues to promote “good causes” that customers identified the cause and then fulfill their self-definitional needs or a sense of belonging. The identification processes enhance the development of socially identifying relationships between the company

and consumers [55,56]. Such identification and relationship were found in studies that indicated a significant and positive effect on loyalty [56,57,58] and citizenship behaviors [59,60].

## **2.4 Facebook, Social Cognitive, and Social Capital Theories**

Many consumers use Facebook to contact new people, keep in touch with current friends, and for general socializing. Facebook use and motivations for accessing Facebook have been found to influence consumer psychological well-being [61], brand evaluations [62], consumer behavior [5,63], and others.

Facebook can increase social recognition and obtain social capital by increasing the number of friends and depth of the relationships [23]. Both social cognitive theory (SCT) and social capital theory can be used to understand Facebook use and consumers' motivations for accessing Facebook as well as their relationships with CSR initiatives.

SCT is a comprehensive theory that understands, analyzes, and predicts human motivations, thoughts, actions, and social interactions [64,65]. The expected outcome is a key element in SCT measure, which comprises of derived social status and social presence that can be utilized to explain the effect of CSR initiatives on consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and CCI. These two SCT measures are commonly used for analyzing various aspects of consumer behaviors concerning Facebook and other SNSs [66,67].

The social capital theory provides a theoretical explanation for the direct and moderating effects of Facebook use and motivations on consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and CCI. The Social capital theory is about the visible and invisible resources embedded within, accessible through, and stemming from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social entity [68]. Since human beings are born social, social capital is hence a necessary resource acquired by consumers.

The social capital explained in different methods and types of classification. By function, it is parted into bonding and bridging [69]; by application scope, it is separated into an individual and the country level. The social capital is a network resource embedded in interpersonal relationships and is obtained via

the relationships. Hence, people's interaction constitutes the social capital. Therefore, social capital contains two elements, a social network and the resources of this network that is accessible. According to the theory of capital, social relations are treated as an investment and so a return is expected. To establish social capital, the simplest way is to build social relationships as an investment. The more the resources can be chosen, the more diverse is the social capital. Bourdieu [70] claimed that whenever an individual forms close relationships with anyone or a group, his/her social capital increases [70]. Coleman (1990) simply said that social capital is a source of social structures. When trust is built and interaction, and communication take place among people, resources and information are likely to be exchanged; consequently, this happens to benefit communities and their members to reach their desired goals [71].

By performing CSR initiatives, companies can offer their resources, for instance, capital, human and material resources, to other members of the society. Simultaneously, Facebook users who engage in these initiatives receive resources from other members of the society, such as support (e.g., friends and likes), awareness, and reputation [72]. Subsequently, the interaction among Facebook users, other members of the society, and the company is accomplished. Through social interaction with other consumers or Facebook members, Facebook users can acquire social capital, and hence promotes their engagement with the CSR initiative and identification with the company. From this the first two propositions are suggested:

P1: Facebook use has a positive relationship with (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI.

P2: Motivations for accessing Facebook have a positive relationship with (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI.

Previous research has found that different types of CSR initiatives exert relative effects on consumer perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions [60,73,74,75,76]. In the same vein, it is proposed that consumers may perceive the different levels of social capital gained by engaging in the four types of CSR initiatives. Thus, we suggest the following propositions:

P3: The effect of Facebook use on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the perceived relative gains of social capital.

P4: The effect of motivations for accessing Facebook on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the perceived relative gains of social capital.

P5: The relative effect of the four types of CSR initiatives on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the perceived social capital gains.

## 2.5 Facebook and Construal Level Theory

Scholars have exploited construal level theory (CLT) to elucidate consumer perception, cognition process, and decision-making behavior [77,78,79,80]. The primary principles of CLT are concerned with an individual how he or she perceives whether a close or distant event or objects as concrete, specific, observable or abstract, intangible, and unobservable features, respectively [81]. According to CLT, one feels how far or close to an event or object forms a mental psychological space [82]. Empirical studies have found and seem to promote four manifestations at an abstract and mental construal level of the psychological distance, that is temporal, spatial, social, and hypotheticality distance, which in turn leads to predict, evaluate, and decision-making behaviors [82].

Temporal distance is recognized as actual distance of an event with a point of time reference (e.g. today) and the actual occurrence of the event under contemplation (e.g. tomorrow). Spatial distance is perceived to be actual distance between a location (e.g. a place where the observer locates) and the location where the event takes place (e.g. a closer or faraway place to the observer). Social distance refers to an observer who perceives similarity or difference of an event held by a person or company. Hypotheticality assumes that an event is either highly likely or unlikely to happen. Research on construal level theory indicates that an event can be characterized as a high or low level of construal when the event has greater or lower temporal distance [81,83], spatial distance [84,85], social distance [86], and hypotheticality [87].

The four major categories of CSR initiatives can construct in both concrete and abstract manners. However, many initiatives are often constructed in an abstract manner that encourages abstract thinking [88]. Most companies use ambiguous terms when describing their CSR initiative such as supporting research for motor neuron diseases, saving the forest, and sponsoring child education. Even if the details of the initiative and the amount of money donated, the intended use of the money is hardly enunciated [75]. CRM in the form of buy-one-give-one initiative is evident to trigger a more concrete mindset than monetary-based CRM initiatives [75]. Taken together:

P6: The effect of Facebook uses on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the construal level of the CSR initiative.

P7: The effect of motivations for accessing Facebook on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the construal level of the CSR initiative.

P8: The relative effect of the four types of CSR initiatives on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI will be moderated by the construal level of the CSR initiative.

P9: The effect of Facebook use on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI is more positive with concrete initiatives (e.g., buy-one-give-one CSR initiative) relative to abstract initiatives (e.g., monetary-based CSR initiatives).

P10: The effect of motivations for accessing Facebook on (a) consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and (b) CCI is more positive with concrete initiatives (e.g., buy-one-give-one CSR initiative) relative to abstract initiatives (e.g., monetary-based CSR initiatives).

## 2.6 Consumer Engagement and CCI

This study posits that CCI is related to consumer engagement in CSR initiatives. Identity attractiveness refers to a positive evaluation of the identity of CSR's engagement by consumers in terms of meeting the consumer's self-definitional needs [52,89,90]. A consumer's satisfactory appraisal of a company's CSR initiative can lead to favorable identification with

the company [91]. Consumers may find the identity of a company's CSR initiative more desirable in terms of defining and stating their self-concept over other companies, which may well lead consumers to involving with the CSR initiative and then identifying further with the company.

P11: Consumer engagement in CSR initiatives has a positive relationship with CCI.

## 2.7 Consumer Citizenship Behaviors

Based on Organ's research in 1988, the theory of organizational citizenship behaviors well explains consumer' tendency or demonstration of citizenship behaviors [92] and such behaviors are discretionary and indirectly or inexplicitly recognized by an official reward system. On the one hand, consumer behaviors that are beneficial to a firm are a matter of personal choices, such as acquiring the firm's products, this behavior is categorized as in-role behaviors [93]. On the other hand, consumers are willingly to take voluntary and discretionary actions, for instance, liking, sharing, and making positive/negative recommendations or suggestions associated with a firm's products and even spreading positive word of mouth (WOM) about its product or service. All these behaviors by consumers are not expected or rewarded by the firm [94].

Social identity theory explains the association between consumer attitudinal assessments and consumer citizenship behaviors. The theory claims that one feels about another party in a relationship is perceived reliantly on how fairness in a process of negotiated exchanges [95,96]. Blau (1964) stated that people act on the expectation of trust and reciprocation and then a social exchange occurs; however, the meticulous nature of the return and timeframe is left undefined [96]. Perhaps, consumers are likely to perceive a company is fair and trustworthy when it involves in a CSR initiative, such an act can possibly lead to positive attitudinal appraisals of the company [10]. Consumers consequently may take actions that are beneficial to the company [94]. Conferring to the theories of citizenship [97] and boundary-spanning behaviors [98], when a company engages in CSR initiatives, consumers are likely to support the company by purchasing its product or service, the in-role behaviors [99] and by sharing the product information, making positive recommendation, and spreading positive

word of mouth, the extra-role behavior [100,101]. Accordingly, the following propositions are consistent with the literature.

P12: The more positive consumer engagement in CSR initiatives, the more likely is that consumers exhibit (a) purchasing (in-role) and (b) advocacy (extra-role) behaviors to support the company.

P13: The greater the CCI, the more likely is that consumers exhibit (a) purchasing (in-role) and (b) advocacy (extra-role) behaviors to support the company.

## 3. CONCLUSION

This research is likely to contribute to the academic literature related to CSR, Facebook, social capital, and construal level in several ways. This study fills the literature gap in CSR and SNSs, especially on Facebook. Limited study has paid attention to the effect of CSR initiatives and Facebook on consumer engagement in CSR initiatives and CCI as well as the factors that moderate the relationship such as social capital and construal level. Thus, the propositions in this research may be able to provide a direction for companies that frequently participate in CSR initiatives on social networking sites. CSR marketing strategies and programs can consider the theory-based propositions to rethink or redesign how to enhance corporate images through consumer engagement and identification via social networking sites.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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