Doing good for humanity, the community or the planet! Consumers reward CSR-practicing mass market retailers according to their prevalent morality

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Abstract
Over the past decades, global mass market retailers have increasingly invested in corporate social responsibility (CSR) across diverse domains (e.g., promoting human rights, supporting local communities, protecting the environment), as CSR can improve mass market retailers’ value delivered to their consumer stakeholders. Previous research provides supporting evidence for mass market retailers’ choices: customers reward mass market retailers that practice (vs. do not practice) CSR. However, while these previous studies advance knowledge on the effects of practicing CSR on consumer responses, they suffer from one major limitation. They adopt a dichotomized (‘practicing CSR’ vs. ‘not practicing CSR’) perspective. They lack of delving into the ‘practicing CSR’ side to explore the impact that diverse CSR initiatives may have on consumers responses (e.g., pro-company consumer behaviors). This topic is surprisingly under-researched in academia but exceptionally relevant in business practice. Mass market retailers need to ascertain the effectiveness of their investments across different CSR initiatives.

The current work contributes to the knowledge on the effectiveness of CSR investments. It delves into the effects that diverse CSR activities (i.e., ethic-related, community-related, and environment-related CSR activities) may have on relevant pro-company consumer behaviors. Grounding on moral foundation theory, this work hypothesizes significant response variation to diverse CSR activities by considering the moderating role of consumer moral codes of autonomy, community, and purity. Specifically, it theorizes significant variations in pro-company behaviors by considering the congruence, as opposed to incongruence, between a consumer’s central moral foundation (autonomy vs. community vs. purity) and the CSR domain a consumer is exposed to (ethic-related vs. community-related vs. environment-based CSR). Furthermore, it unveils the psychological mechanism through which the observed effects occur.

Across three studies conducted with adult consumers from four countries (Italy, US, China, India), we show that: i) Consumer reward CSR-practicing mass market retailers; ii) Ethic-related, community-related, and environment-related CSR initiatives have all significant effects on pro-company consumer behaviors; iii) The level of that influence however varies according to a consumer’s focal moral foundation. In the presence of congruence between central moral foundation of autonomy and ethic-related CSR activities as well as between purity and environment-related CSR activities consumers show the most positive responses toward the mass market retailer; iv) the same positive effects are not observed in the presence of congruence between central moral foundation of community and community-related CSR activities; v) the attitude toward the mass market retailer fully mediates the hypothesized relationships; vi) the observed effects are stable across respondents from WEIRD and non-WEIRD countries. Relevant managerial implications for global mass market retailers are finally discussed.

The paper is co-authored with Simona Romani, LUISS Guido Carli University, Italy and Yanyan Chen, Toulouse Business School, France