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Exploring corporate ability and social responsibility associations as antecedents of customer satisfaction cross-culturally

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the mediating role of customer satisfaction in the relationships between two types of corporate associations (corporate ability and corporate social responsibility) and two behavioral outcomes (word of mouth and loyalty intentions). In addition, the authors explore whether these relationships are equivalent across two countries—Germany and the United States. With a sample of 437 retail customers, the important role of satisfaction as a mediator of both corporate associations is confirmed. Moreover, the relationships between corporate associations and behavioral outcomes experience differential (partial or full) mediation by satisfaction, depending on the country. The effects of corporate ability associations on satisfaction are stronger for U.S. than for German customers, while the effects of corporate social responsibility associations on customer satisfaction and behavioral outcomes are consistently stronger for German than for U.S. customers.

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1. Introduction

While research into customer satisfaction continues to enjoy surging popularity, especially in the service marketing field, little research in corporate associations literature embeds customer satisfaction within a nomological net of antecedents and consequences. Corporate associations refer to all information about a company that a consumer holds, which comprises associations about corporate ability (CA) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Whereas CA pertains to perceptions of expertise and competency for producing and delivering goods or services, CSR refers to associations about the character of the firm with regard to societal issues (Berens, van Riel, & van Bruggen, 2005; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

It is well established that customer satisfaction emerges from CA associations, in the form of service quality perceptions (e.g. Caruana, 2002; Oliver, 1997), and that such satisfaction then enhances profitable customer behaviors (e.g. Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, 1996). Previous research therefore builds on the mediating role of satisfaction to predict behavioral outcomes from CA associations (e.g. Caruana, 2002), though no studies apply satisfaction to explain the impact of CSR associations on customer behaviors. Yet researchers express interest in understanding how CSR contributes to customer behaviors

and ultimately firm performance (e.g. Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007), in line with Brown and Dacin's (1997, p. 80) call for research into "how societally oriented activities might bring about positive outcomes for the firm."

Studies that respond to this call reveal mixed findings about the effects of CSR on customer outcomes (e.g. Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000; Klein & Dawar, 2004; Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004; Pelozo, 2009; Salmons, Crespo, & Bosque, 2005; Vlachos, Tsamakos, Vrechopoulos, & Avramidis, 2009; Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). Such equivocal findings may emerge because extant studies neglect relevant mediator and moderator variables in CSR—customer outcome relationships. Some researchers also have used firm-level data (e.g. Luo & Bhattacharya, 2009) instead of focusing on individual consumers' corporate associations as the unit of analysis. To complement previous literature, this study investigates customer satisfaction as a mediator of the relationship between both types, CA and CSR, and behavioral outcomes, in terms of customer word-of-mouth behavior and loyalty intentions—both important determinants of firm performance (e.g. Oliver, 1997; Reichheld, 1996; von Wangenheim & Bayón, 2007). In addition, the study explores whether culture moderates these relationships. Some authors argue that cultural differences account for variations in satisfaction formation and behaviors (e.g. Laroche, Ueltschy, Abe, Cleveland, & Yannopoulos, 2004; Morgeson, Mithas, Keiningham, & Aksoy, 2011), though little research relates cross-cultural differences to antecedents of satisfaction in terms of corporate associations.

This oversight creates a serious problem for internationalizing service firms. As international business grows ever more quickly,

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marketers must increase their understanding of customers' cultural diversity and the effects on customer satisfaction (Kasper, van Helsdingen, & de Vries, 1999; Lovelock & Wirtz, 2007; Zhang, Beatty, & Walsh, 2008). Laroche, Ueltschy, Abe, Cleveland, & Yannopoulos (2004, p. 59) also emphasize that “cultural differences must be taken into account in any successful marketing effort, including the measurement of service quality and satisfaction.” To explore cross-cultural differences in the formation of customer satisfaction, this research tests the proposed model in both Germany and the United States.

2. Background and hypotheses

Customer satisfaction continues to attract research attention because of the promise of predicting beneficial outcomes, such as word-of-mouth behavior or loyalty (e.g. Bolton & Drew, 1991; Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, & Gremler, 2002; Walsh, Hennig-Thurau, Bornemann, & Sassenberg, 2010). Related research relies on the expectation–disconfirmation (E/D) paradigm (e.g. Oliver, 1997), which assumes that satisfaction results from the cognitive comparison between expected and actually perceived levels of service quality or performance. If customers perceive a service level that exceeds their expectations, satisfaction increases and can positively affect beneficial behaviors.

Drawing on the E/D framework, the present study predicts that customer satisfaction results from both, perceptions of service quality and perceptions of a company's social responsibility. For example, Riahi-Belkaoui and Pavlik (1992) note that a company's organizational effectiveness and social performance are two key signals that firms can use to create favorable corporate associations among various audiences, including customers. Consumers may gather such signals from various sources, including prior experience, word-of-mouth communication, or media reports, and then form cognitive associations about the company (i.e. corporate associations).

The present study draws on Brown and Dacin's (1997) work to conceptualize CA associations in terms of perceived service quality. Bitner, Booms, and Mohr (1994) define service quality as customers' overall impression of the relative inferiority/superiority of the organization and its services. In contrast, CSR associations refer to customers' perceptions of corporate behaviors that go beyond economic interests (McWilliams & Siegel, 2000; Turker, 2009a). By engaging in CSR and signaling this engagement to customers or other stakeholders, companies can achieve greater strategic consistency (Basu & Palazzo, 2008), increase organizational commitment (Turker, 2009b), lower transaction costs (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006), attract high-caliber personnel (Greening & Turban, 2000), and improve customer-related outcomes (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

The differentiation of CA and CSR associations is warranted, because they may exert different effects on consumer responses (Brown & Dacin, 1997). How and when do CA and CSR engagements pay off, and how should managers trade off decisions related to communicating CA and CSR signals? Do different answers exist across countries or cultures? Evidence from different countries and contexts suggests that CA associations relate positively to customer satisfaction and behavioral outcomes (e.g. Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Oliver, 1997), but studies produce mixed findings in terms of how CSR affects relevant downstream variables.

The proposed conceptual model (Fig. 1) suggests that CA and CSR associations affect profitable behaviors directly and indirectly (through customer satisfaction). Furthermore, culture may moderate the effects of CA and CSR associations on satisfaction and behavioral outcome variables.

2.1. Mediated effects

CA associations may affect word-of-mouth behavior and loyalty intentions directly or indirectly (via satisfaction) (e.g. Bloemer, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 1999; Gupta & Pirsch, 2008; Reimann, Lünemann, & Chase, 2008; Rust, Zahorik, & Keiningham, 1995). Previous research therefore suggests that customer satisfaction partially mediates the relationship between CA associations and behavioral outcomes. Partial mediation exists when an exogenous variable (i.e. service quality) relates both directly and indirectly (i.e. through satisfaction) to an endogenous variable (i.e. word of mouth or loyalty) (Baron & Kenny, 1986). A direct positive relationship between service quality and the outcomes of word of mouth and loyalty is likely; a convincing quality perception of the current service provider should prompt recommendations for other customers as well as loyalty intentions. The effect of service quality on the outcomes gets amplified by high levels of customer satisfaction.

H1. Customer satisfaction partially mediates the effect of service quality on (a) word of mouth and (b) loyalty intentions.

Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) underline the importance of considering customer satisfaction as an evaluative consequence of CSR that helps explain the equivocal link between CSR and a firm's market value (i.e. stock-based firm performance). Regarding the direct effects of CSR on customer word of mouth and loyalty, Brown and Dacin (1997) argue that CSR influences behavioral outcomes through multiple paths, whether directly or mediated by overall corporate evaluation. Following Bhattacharya and Sen (2004), a firm's CSR actions, coupled with strong corporate abilities, should generate

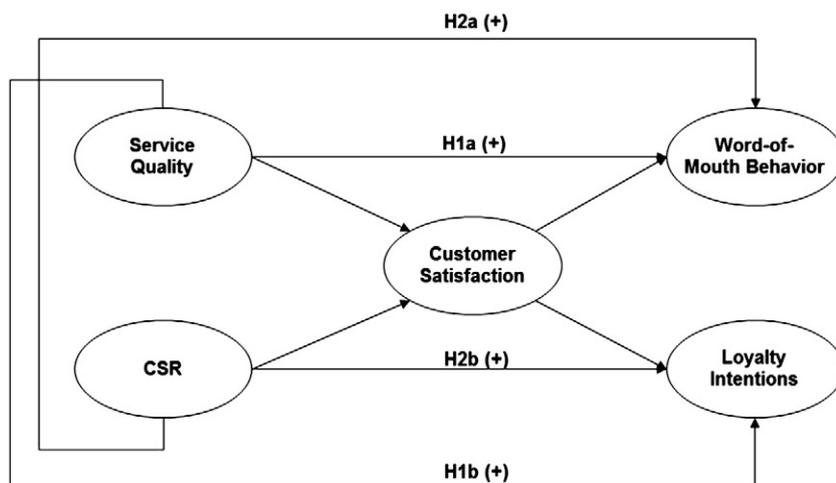


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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