The Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on Brand Trustworthiness, Perceived Brand Quality, Brand Attitude and Purchase Intentions: The Case of a Leading Vietnamese Sausage Manufacturer

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Abstract

The influence of corporate social responsibility practices on customer perception of brand quality, trustworthiness, attitude and purchase intentions were examined among Vietnamese consumers of processed meat (sausages). Responses (*N* = 595) were collected in Ho Chi Minh City through a convenience sampling technique. Structural equation modeling was used for hypotheses testing. The findings revealed that intention to purchase sausages was influenced by corporate practices across the domains of environment, community, and food safety. However, social practices did not influence brand trustworthiness, and environmental and social practices did not affect perceived brand quality. The management of food manufacturing companies should pay more attention to corporate practices related to food safety and environmental concerns in order to build up positive brand trustworthiness and brand attitude, which could help improve company sales. Corporate social responsibility marketers may monitor return-on-marketing investment by measuring customers' brand perceptions in order to launch cost-effective programs.

Introduction

Quality is one of the key factors that contributes to customers' satisfaction and sale revenue (Garvin, 1984), particularly product quality and the quality management system (Elshaer, 2016). In the food industry, several other product characteristics are directly related to customers' food purchasing intentions beyond quality, such as food safety, cleanliness, and nutrition (Nawi & Nasir, 2014; Niraj & Sanjeev, 2015; Norshamliza & Peter, 2015). Customers also have health and environmental concerns, so food safety and eco-friendliness are emerging as selection criteria in food purchases (Kianpour, Jusoh, & Asghari, 2014). Brand is strongly important for buying decisions made by customers (Aaker, 1996; Osselaer & Alba, 2000; Khan et al., 2016), and corporate social responsibility (CSR) also has an effect on consumer attitudes and purchase intentions (Magnusson et al., 2015).

Limited studies have focused on the relationship between brand and CSR-related activities, specifically in the food industry, and its influence on customer purchase intentions. In the food supply chain, CSR practices could be used as a method to create a corporate image of societal responsibility in various fields such as animal welfare, biotechnology, environmental concerns, fair trade practices, occupational health and safety, and labor and human rights (Maloni, 2006). By doing so, corporations are actually sustaining their businesses by practicing CSR and satisfying consumers at the same time. Prior studies in the food industry context have examined dimensions of CSR, including the environment, human responsibility and product responsibility (Anselmsson & Johansson, 2007; Ha, 2016; Morgan, 2016).

This study was undertaken to shed light on the influence of CSR practices on customer purchase intentions. Aspects considered include food safety, brand trustworthiness, perceived brand quality, and brand attitude.

Literature Review

Corporate social marketing (CSM) was defined to cover CSR practices that use firm resources to support social welfare (Andreasen & Drumwright, 2001). A CSM program focuses more on imagery-related associations than product-related information. It can enhance brand equity, including brand awareness, image, credibility, feeling, community, and engagement (Hoeffler, 2002). The CSM may favor establishment of a positive brand image in customers that inspires them to become kind, generous, and do good things. Customers may make certain judgements and experience various feelings linked to the brand.

Several studies illustrate the influence of environmental CSR on consumer perceptions, purchase intentions, and satisfaction. Researchers have also found positive relationships between environmental CSR (a "green" corporate image, such as pollution prevention, energy conservation, and sustainable development) and perceived brand quality, brand preference, and customers' satisfaction (Liu et al., 2014). Recently, eco-friendliness was suggested for inclusion in product quality dimensions in addition to the 8-dimension definition of Garvin (1984). This is because a majority of respondents consider environmental friendliness as a basic quality requirement (Kianpour et al., 2014).

Customers' food safety perception is called *risk perception*, and it impacts customer consideration in choosing food brands. Thus, quality and safety perception are linked to food choice (Grunert, 2005).

Brand image and brand attitude play important roles on customer engagement, and generate brand trust and brand love (Han et al., 2019). Perceived quality and brand image have a direct impact on trust, and trust is significantly associated with brand value. Customers develop trust in a brand based on their evaluations of its trustworthiness (Chiang, & Jang, 2006). Further, brand attitude and customers' purchasing intentions may be related positively to their attitudes and evaluation of corporations' CSR practices (Lee, & Qu, 2010).

Hypothesis Generation

Based on the literature cited above on CSR, the following hypotheses were generated and placed in a conceptual framework (Figure 1).

H_1: Environmental CSR (ENV) positively influences brand trustworthiness (BTS).
H_2: Environmental CSR (ENV) positively influences perceived brand quality (PBQ).
H_3: Social CSR (COM) positively influences brand trustworthiness (BTS).
H_4: Social CSR (COM) positively influences perceived brand quality (PBQ).
H_5: Food-safety CSR (FST) positively influences brand trustworthiness (BTS).
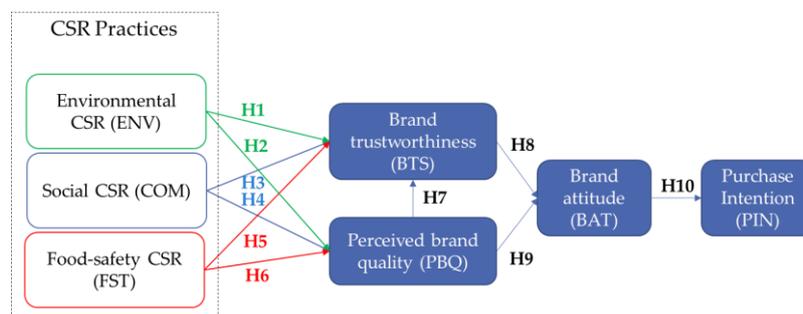H_6: Food-safety CSR (FST) positively influences perceived brand quality (PBQ).

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

In the area of food safety, customers' choice of a food brand was considered an important factor. Hence, hypothesis H_7 was generated to understand more about brand trustworthiness and how it is influenced by perceived brand quality. Brand image and brand attitude may also play important roles in customer engagement and generate brand trust and brand loyalty. To further understand the roles of perceived brand quality and brand trustworthiness in explaining customer brand attitude,

hypotheses H_8 and H_9 were generated. Finally, the influence of a customer brand attitude was included in hypothesis H_{10}.

> H_7: Perceived brand quality (PBQ) positively influences brand trustworthiness (BTS).
> H_8: Brand trustworthiness (BTS) positively influences customer brand attitude (BAT).
> H_9: Perceived brand quality (PBQ) positively influences customer brand attitude (BAT).
> H_{10}: Customer brand attitude (BAT) positively influences customer purchase intentions (PIN).

Methodology

This study was initiated to fill the knowledge gap regarding influence of CSR practices (community support, environmental protection, and food safety) on levels of brand trustworthiness, perceived brand quality, brand attitude, and purchase intentions specifically relating to a leading sausage manufacturer in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The definition of terms utilized in the study are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions and Operational Definitions

Variables	Definition (from Previous Studies)	Operational Definition (for This Study)
1. Environmental CSR (ENV)	Demonstration of responsible environmental care practices in supply chains, e.g., managing waste to protect water, soil, and air from pollution, and consuming energy responsibly (Maloni, & Brown, 2006).	Company X operates responsibly in their production system to protect the environment from harmful and wasteful usages.
2. Social CSR (COM)	Activities that provide support for the local community, e.g., social activities; support government and NGOs and caring for future generations (Maloni, & Brown, 2006).	Company X acts for society's benefits and contributes their resources to support the well-being of the society.
3. Food safety CSR (FST)	Activities/practices that ensure product safety, food security, protect consumers from diseases and food risks, and promote a healthy lifestyle (Maloni, & Brown, 2006).	Company X takes responsibility for their products, minimizes potential risks and ensures food safety was maintained from start to finish.
3.1. Product responsibility (FPR)	The activities/practices related to product safety, R&D, responsible declarations and labelling (Anselmsson, & Johansson, 2007)	Company X acts responsibly to ensure the products' safety and for accurate information on the packaging.
3.2. Quality of Food Risk Management (FRM)	Activities/practices related to protection of public health by controlling risks as effectively as possible via selection/implementation of suitable measures (Van Kleef et al., 2007)	Company X have adequate resources to manage food risks and make their products safe to eat.
3.3. Traceability (FTR)	Information necessary to describe production history of a food supply chain from the grower to the consumer (Gellynck & Verbeke, 2001)	Company X tracks product information related to ensure contributing factors can be identified in case of food incidents.
4. Brand trustworthiness (BTS)	Confidence a consumer places in a firm as to whether its actions would be in consumer's interest (Lassar et al., 1995)	Company X operates its business with honesty and consideration of consumers' interest.
5. Perceived brand quality (PBQ)	Consumer's judgement about product's overall excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988)	Consumers perceive products of X's brands have a superior level of quality
6. Brand attitude (BAT)	Function of associated attributes and benefits that are salient for the brand (Keller, 1993)	Overall feeling of consumers toward benefits of products under X's brands.
7. Purchase intention (PIN)	Likelihood that buyer intends to purchase the product (Grewal et al., 1998)	Intention of consumers to buy X's products

CSR practices adopted were company actions, programs, or policies toward society as responsible business operators. The sausage industry is a segment of the food industry that includes all

stakeholders in the supply chain, such as livestock, manufacturers, retailers, and consumers. Sausage manufacturers produce and supply all types of sausages to Vietnamese consumers, including sterilized, pasteurized, fresh, and smoked sausages.

Exploratory research was used in the study. Customer purchase intentions was the dependent variable, and three dimensions of CSR practices (i.e., environmental, social, and food safety), brand trustworthiness, perceived brand quality, and brand awareness were used as independent variables. Scaled items for all variables were subjected to Item Objective Congruence (IOC) testing and refined according to an expert's suggestions. For the environmental and social dimensions of CSR, scale items were adapted from the work of Liu et al. (2014), while the food safety dimension was adapted from several sources (Anselmsson, 2007; Van Kleef et al., 2007; Singh, 2008; Gellynck & Verbeke, 2001). For Brand Trustworthiness (BTS), scale items were based on Lassar et al. (1995). Scale items for Perceived Brand Quality (PBQ) were adapted from Aaker (1996). Brand Attitude (BAT) and Purchase Intentions (PIN) were based on Spears and Singh (2004) and Grewal et al. (1998), respectively. The scale items for all constructs were measured using a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

A draft questionnaire was developed from previous studies and modified according to results of IOC testing. For the pilot study, the modified questionnaire was translated from English to Vietnamese using a back-translation technique, and 32 respondents were surveyed in Ho Chi Minh City. Instrument reliability was evaluated through Cronbach's Alpha (CA) with a cutoff point of .70 (Hair et al., 2006). Cronbach's Alpha from the pilot test ranged from .83 to .95, showing high internal consistency. Exploratory Factor Analysis was used in a preliminary analysis to identify problematic cross-loading items.

Based on the results of the pilot study, the questionnaire was refined for the main data collection in Ho Chi Minh City, which is the largest city in Vietnam in terms of both population and economic growth. Per capita Gross Domestic Product of the nation at the time of the survey was US$2,385, while Ho Chi Minh City returned a value of US$5,538 (Deloitte, 2018).

In total, 620 questionnaires were distributed to customers who bought sausage products from Company X from January to March 2019 using a convenience sampling technique. The questionnaires were handed to shoppers passing through sausage display areas in convenience stores and supermarkets. After screening incomplete and invalid responses, 595 responses were used for further statistical analysis (96% response rate).

Results

Female and male respondents accounted for 83.4% (*n* = 496) and 15.5% (*n* = 92), respectively. People buying sausages at least once a week (daily and weekly) accounted for around 50% of respondents. Most respondents (73%) lived in five districts of Ho Chi Minh City, including No. 12 district, No. 6 district, Tan-Phu, Binh-Tan, and Tan-Binh. The average skewness and kurtosis of all measuring items was -1.09 and 0.71, respectively, which means that the data was normally distributed (cut-point +/-2.0; George, 2016).

In Table 2, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) results showed that all fix indexes matched the model fit criteria referred to by previous researchers. Three sets of CFAs were run as follows: (1) ENV, COM, FST; (2) BTS, PBQ, BAT; and (3) PIN. In the CFA results, all composite reliability results were higher than the threshold (CR > .70), ranging from .886 to .979. The average variances extracted were also higher than the cut-off value (AVE > .50), which confirmed both scale validity and convergent validity (Bagozzi, 1980; Fornell, & Larcker, 1981). The comparative fit index for each CFA was higher than the cut-off value (CFI > .95), and the standardized root mean square residual exceeded the requirement (SRMR < .08) (Hooper et al., 2007). Acceptable fit indices rely on the combination strategy of Hu and Bentler (1999), where CFI > .95 and SRMR < .08.

Table 2. Results of Reliability Analysis, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Reliability Test			CFA		
Criteria	CA (> .7)	CFI > .95; SRMR < .08	CR > .7	AVE > .5	MSV < AVE
ENV	.907		.886	.722	1.038
COM	.910		.911	.719	1.038
FST	.978	CFI = .952; SRMR = .029			
FPR	.955	GFI = .873; CMIN/*DF* = 5.543	.979	.782	0.632
FRM	.960				
FTR	.926				
BTS	.930		.931	.770	0.857
PBQ	.936	CFI = .979; SRMR = .017	.923	.800	0.904
BAT	.953	GFI = .949; CMIN/*DF* = 4.796	.948	.819	0.904
PIN	.949	CFI =1.00; SRMR = .004 GFI = .998; CMIN/*DF* = 1.494	-	-	-
MODEL	-	CFI = .951; SRMR = .025 GFI = .854; CMIN/*DF* = 3.665	-	-	-

Note: CA: Cronbach's Alpha; CFI: Comparative fit index; GFI: Goodness of fit index; SRMR: Standardized Root Mean Square Residual; CMIN/DF: Minimum Discrepancy; CR: composite reliability; AVE: average variance extracted; MSV: maximum shared variance.

In Figure 2, path analysis was conducted by using Structural Equation Modeling to test the hypotheses with a 95% confidence level ($p < .05$), whereby modification indices and fitness indices were used as references. Correlations among the three variables were identified: ENV and COM (β = .526, $p < .01$), ENV and FST (β = .476, $p < .01$), COM and FST (β = .468, $p < .01$).
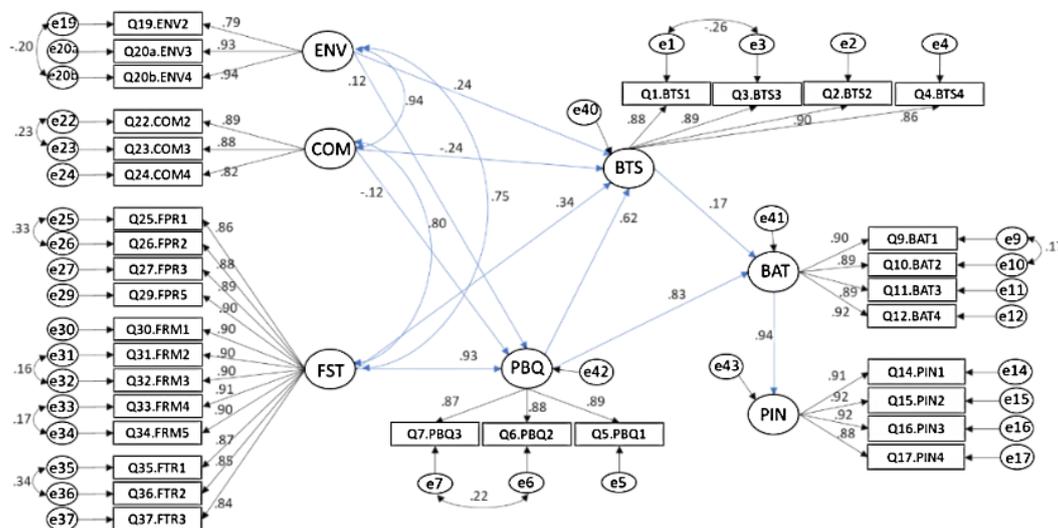

Figure 2. Summary of Structural Equation Modeling and Fit Indices

Note: CFI = .951; SRMR = .025; GFI = .854; CMIN/*DF* =3.665; ENV and COM: β = .526, $p < .01$; ENV and FST: β =.476, $p < .01$; COM and FST: β = .468, $p < .01$

A summary of hypothesis testing results is shown in Table 3. The data showed that perceived brand quality was significantly influenced by CSR practices related to food safety (H_6), but not by CSR practices related to environmental and social factors (H_2, H_4). Brand trustworthiness was positively influenced by CSR practices related to the environment and food safety, as was perceived brand quality (H_1, H_5, H_7), but it was negatively influenced by CSR practices related to social issues (H_3).

Perceived brand quality and brand trustworthiness exerted positive impacts on brand attitude (H_8, H_9), and in turn brand attitude positively affected customer purchase intentions (H_{10}).

Table 3. Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Structural Path			Path Estimates	Standard Error	Significance Level	Conclusion
H_1: Environmental CSR (ENV) positively influences brand trustworthiness (BTS).	ENV	→	BTS	0.235	0.085	.006**	Supported
H_2: ENV positively influences perceived brand quality (PBQ).	ENV	→	PBQ	0.115	0.085	.176	Rejected
H_3: Social CSR (COM) positively influences brand trustworthiness.	COM	→	BTS	-0.255	0.105	.016†	Rejected
H_4: COM positively influences perceived brand quality.	COM	→	PBQ	-0.129	0.105	.219	Rejected
H_5: Food-safety CSR (FST) positively influences brand trustworthiness.	FST	→	BTS	0.317	0.073	**	Supported
H_6: FST positively influences perceived brand quality.	FST	→	PBQ	0.855	0.042	**	Supported
H_7: Perceived brand quality positively influences brand trustworthiness.	PBQ	→	BTS	0.621	0.074	**	Supported
H_8: Brand trustworthiness positively influences customer brand attitude.	BTS	→	BAT	0.169	0.069	.015†	Supported
H_9: Perceived brand quality positively influences customer brand attitude.	PBQ	→	BAT	0.848	0.074	**	Supported
H_{10}: Consumers' brand attitude positively influences their purchase intentions.	BAT	→	PIN	1.039	0.032	**	Supported

Note: (*) $p < .05$, (†), $.01 < p < .05$, (**) $p < .01$

Discussion

The detailed results showed that perceived brand quality was significantly influenced by CSR practices related to food safety (H_6), but not by CSR practices related to environment and social issues (H_2, H_4). This phenomenon is consistent with previous research in Vietnam, as urban consumers may have primary concerns regarding product responsibility related to health and food safety (Ha, 2016). In a study by Morgan (2016), health and safety were rated the highest, and environmental issues as the second highest in CSR practices in fast-food restaurants in the United States. Concerns with environmental and social issues affecting quality may develop over time in Vietnam.

Brand trustworthiness was positively influenced by CSR practices related to the environment and food safety, as well as perceived brand quality (H_1, H_5, H_7), but was negatively influenced by CSR practices related to social dimensions (H_3). The explainable reason could be that customers of Company X were exposed to negative company information that made them skeptical toward CSR practices. Historically (2013), Company X increased egg pricing from VND23,500 up to VND30,000 or VND35,000 without any explainable reason given to the media (newspaper and authorities) on account of the stable market supply at that moment (Hanh, 2013; Hung 2013). This explanation, based

the findings of Bögel (2016), would have significantly decreased consumer trust in the company's CSR activities if consumers had known. Consumer skepticism about a company's CSR activities tends to be higher if they learn about these activities through an external source (Bögel, 2016).

Perceived brand quality and brand trustworthiness exerted positive impacts on brand attitude (H_8, H_9), and in turn brand attitude positively affected customers' purchase intentions (H_{10}). These results aligned with a previous study by Han et al. (2019), who found a relationship between brand trustworthiness and brand attitude.

Theoretical Contribution

This study extended the existing literature by investigating the influence of three dimensions of CSR (namely environmental, social, and food safety), in the context of the food industry, on perceived brand trustworthiness, brand quality, and brand awareness, which lead to customers' purchase intentions. Comprehensive measurement was developed relating to the food safety dimension of CSR practices by including product responsibility, food risk management and food traceability from previous studies (Anselmsson, & Drumwright, 2007; Forsman-Hugg et al., 2013; Ha, 2016; Hartmann, 2011).

Managerial Implications

Management could apply these research findings to develop a comprehensive Corporate Social Marketing program that could improve customers' brand attitude, and increase purchase intentions to sustain competitive advantages over other competitors. Specifically, the management of food manufacturing companies may pay more attention to CSR practices related to food safety and environmental concerns aligned with international standards for food safety management systems such as ISO 22000:2018 or FSSC 22000 (food safety system certification), as well as environmental management systems (ISO 14001:2015). Investing in appropriate CSR practices may build up positive brand trustworthiness, perceived brand quality, and improved brand attitude. These could in turn help increase company sales. CSR Marketers may monitor return-on-marketing investment by measuring customers' brand perceptions (i.e., brand trustworthiness, perceived brand quality, brand attitude) in order to launch cost-effective CSR programs.

For practitioners, managers can implement CSR programs as tools to improve trust and perceived brand quality, and ultimately to gain more sales. Food producers/exporters may need to put greater emphasis on food safety CSR programs. However, all three aspects should be implemented at the same time because they are correlated and support one another. In this study, CSR practices related to social (community support) were not significant, but may cause a reverse effect on customers' brand trustworthiness. The study was not designed to figure out the underlying reason, but it is suggested that management carefully plan a CSR program, especially for companies with prior negative reputations. One suggested solution for such situations was that companies should increase positive CSR awareness by external media reports, certificates, or labelling to improve trustworthiness. CSR information needs to be easily available on packaging or at the point of sale (Bögel, 2016).

Limitations and Recommendations

First, this study was conducted in Vietnam, an emerging developing economy, specifically in Ho Chi Minh City, the biggest economic zone, with triple citizens' purchasing power compared to the rest of the nation. It could not represent all markets in Vietnam. Second, the study focused on one product category (sausages). Consequently, the results might have limitations to explain consumer behavior in other industries. Future research may extend to other economies and/or industries to increase generalizability.

Conclusion

In this study, relationships between customers' perception of CSR practices and motivation to purchase products were investigated. Specifically, the influence of three dimensions of CSR practices (i.e., environmental, social, food safety) on customers' perception were measured. Their perceptions of brand trustworthiness, perceived brand quality, and brand attitude also were examined in relation to purchasing intention of sausages manufactured by a Vietnamese company. The data showed that practices incorporating respect for the environment and food safety were important to Vietnamese customers and subsequently could increase their intentions to purchase sausage products. The findings could help managers develop a CSR Marketing campaign to increase sales.

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