Drivers of Socially Responsible Purchasing Behavior: A Cross-Cultural Investigation

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ABSTRACT
Retailers and companies increasingly employ corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a global management strategy. They are motivated to act in a socially responsive manner to their global customers not only to fulfill their ethical obligations as a social entity but also due to the marketing and financial benefits resulting from consumer responses to CSR initiatives. Therefore, many retailers develop or participate in CSR activities and hope their actions can be recognized by others. Further, CSR activities are more likely to be perceived and accepted by consumers who show ethical purchasing behavior while shopping. Ethical purchasing behavior or socially responsible purchasing behavior is formed by their beliefs and norms which are influenced significantly by the culture they belong to. This study examined the differences between two countries with opposite cultures (i.e., the U.S. and South Korea) by considering the drivers (i.e., perceived consumer effectiveness, awareness, collectivism) and a consequence (i.e., satisfaction) of ethical purchase behavior. The findings suggested that perceived consumer effectiveness and awareness are important drivers to generate consumers’ commitment to companies’ CSR initiatives in general and the effectiveness is stronger in Korea than in United States. Implications and limitations were discussed.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Culture, Ethical Purchasing Behaviors, Perceived Consumer Effectiveness, Socially Responsible Purchasing Behavior

INTRODUCTION
Retailers and companies increasingly employ corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a global management strategy. These organizations are motivated to act in a socially responsive manner to their global customers not only to fulfill their ethical obligations as a social entity but also due to the marketing and financial benefits resulting from consumer responses to CSR initiatives (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). Therefore, many retailers develop or participate in CSR activities and hope their actions can be recognized by others. Labeled socially responsible consumption, consumers are able to use their purchasing behavior to express their feelings of responsibility toward society in general. Defined as a purchase that takes into account ethical...
issues such as human rights, labor conditions, and environmental issues for example, socially responsible consumption is used by these consumers as a purchasing criteria (Doane, 2001; Ozkan, 2009). CSR activities are more likely to be perceived and accepted by consumers who show ethical purchasing behavior while shopping. Ethical purchasing behavior or socially responsible purchasing behavior is formed by their beliefs and norms which are influenced significantly by the culture they belong to. These consumers are aware of the effect that their consumption has on a local, national, and international level (McGregor, 1999), causing their decisions to be influenced by how their behavior influences themselves as well as society and the larger environment.

Often consumers exercise their ethical concerns by purchasing products for their positive qualities (e.g., green products) or by boycotting products for their negative qualities (e.g., not buying products made by children) (De Pelsmaker, Driesen, & Rayp, 2005). This purchasing behavior allows a consumer to reward a company’s CSR initiatives through the demonstration of support of their ethical initiatives. More than ever before, ethical and social issues have become mechanisms for purchasing behavior leading consumers to seek out opportunities to exhibit how much they care about the unfairness in the world. When this occurs, consumers may examine an organization’s environmental practices, labor conditions, fair trade standards, and philanthropic activities so that they can feel good about the purchasing decisions they make (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001).

Today’s consumers are making purchasing decisions in a global market (Ozkan, 2009), but across the world people consume differently based on cultural variations. Most typically these differences are categorized within an individualism or collectivism context with these established differences affecting the way consumers respond to sustainability efforts (Newell & Green, 1997). The very meaning of consumption has become more symbolic in this global marketplace as products have begun to serve as a form of communication. For example, in some cultures consumption means to “waste, squander, or destroy” (Ozkan, 2009, p. 949) associating consumer purchases with human and environmental destruction. Therefore cultural differences are more likely to affect a consumer’s purchasing behavior in relationship to an organization’s CSR initiatives (Newell & Green, 1997; Oliver & Lee, 2010) based on these cultural differences. This makes it critical for companies to understand consumer purchasing behavior within a cultural context (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2002) particularly from an individualism/collectivism construct (Hofstede, 2001).

In individualistic cultures such as the United States, people prefer a very loose knit social framework in which individuals focus primarily on the care of themselves and their immediate family. On the other hand, in collectivist cultures such as in Asia, individuals have a tightly knit social framework in which members expect not only relatives but all other group members to participate in the caretaking role. In collectivist cultures, individuals “tend to subordinate personal goals to in-group goals, to participate in more in-group activities, to be more concerned with in-group interests, and to feel compelled to conform to in-groups” (Oliver & Lee, 2010, p. 97). These differences typically make the personal identity in the individualist cultures more important than the social identity, while in collectivist cultures social identity is more important.

The differences between collectivist and individualist cultures will naturally relate to consumer purchase intentions. During the past two decades, CSR in the United States has gained increasing momentum as companies look to emphasize their commitment to environmental, social, and economic goals (Jones, Comfort, & Hillier, 2007) and consumers have demanded that organizations become more ethically accountable. Until recently, it was viewed that socially responsible consumption practices were a Western phenomenon and a function of economic and social development in those parts of the world exclusively (Chapple & Moon, 2005).
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