Corporate social responsibility: a roadmap toward customer loyalty – Proposing a research framework

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Abstract. This paper seeks to explore the path that links corporate social responsibility (CSR) to customer loyalty as previous studies have confirmed that no direct link seems to exist between the two variables. Considering the literature gap, this research provides future researchers an opportunity to thoroughly understand the road that ties CSR and customer loyalty, especially in the hospitality industry. The research uses a newly proposed CSR conceptualization, customer loyalty dimensions, customer loyalty antecedents, and the relationship between them. In addition to the mediators, this study considers sociodemographic variables (age, gender, and education) as moderators. The new research framework proposed contributes to advance the existing knowledge of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and customer loyalty.

1. Introduction

Customer loyalty is the most crucial task, according to most CEOs all over the world [1]. It is a considerable component that enables firms to increase profit and ensures their sustainability. However, with the increase of consumers' awareness toward environmental and social issues, CSR became critical in attracting and retaining customers. CSR's influence on customer loyalty is principally explained not directly through mediators that, without them, no linkage seems to happen [2]. The literature's future guidelines emphasize the need to propose different antecedents of customer loyalty, a new dimensionality approach to customer loyalty, and a new research framework. Accordingly, a need to explore the path linking CSR to customer loyalty for the hospitality industry is recommended and appreciated. The tourism industry was selected because of the sector's contribution to environmental problems such as pollution, global warming, littering, and waste management [3,4,5]. However, analyzing CSR practices is particularly relevant in this industry.

2. Research framework development

2.1 Conceptualization of CSR

Carroll (1979) has conceptualized CSR by emphasizing four businesses' responsibilities representing total CSR: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. Economic responsibility (be profitable) refers to companies' principal role in making goods and services and generating a profit. Legal responsibility (obey the law) refers to businesses being supposed to conform with the government's rules and regulations. Ethical responsibility (be ethical) implies activities that are expected to consider stakeholders' needs and are not mandatory by laws. Lastly, philanthropic or discretionary responsibility (be a good corporate citizen) refers to businesses being good corporate citizens. Companies' social activities are voluntary and not mandated by law and are generally not expected from companies. However, Carroll (2016) suggested a new framework for its pyramid by categorizing the four responsibilities under new classifications (required, expected, and desired by society). Society considers economic and legal responsibilities to be "required" of companies, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities to be "expected" of companies, but philanthropic responsibilities can also be only "desired" of companies. Various scholars attempted to modify Carroll's CSR pyramid to match industry characteristics [8,9]. In the airline industry, for example, Kim et al. (2020) adapted Carroll's pyramid and classified it into two main categories: (1) Required CSR that includes economic and legal responsibilities, and (2) Desired CSR that includes environmental and philanthropic responsibilities. Similarly, this current study considers only the desired CSR (environmental and philanthropic) for the hospitality industry by endorsing this new CSR approach. The last CSR dimension that this research will take into consideration is the society (community) component. One of the most cited articles in CSR is the one by Brown and Dacin (1997). The researchers have defined CSR dimensions according to two associations (corporate giving and community involvement). The community dimension is crucial, and companies must dedicate serious attention to society's wellbeing.

2.2 Dimensionality of customer loyalty

Three primary methods are generally examined to measure loyalty: behavioral, attitudinal, and integrated [12]. Behavioral loyalty, associated with customer retention, is defined as the repeat buying or use of a specific product or service over time [13, 14, 15]. It is one of the largely symbolic approaches customers articulate their satisfaction with a firm, and it is strongly linked to a business's profitability [16]. However, researchers found that the behavioral method was not sufficient for explaining customer loyalty, and thus they considered the attitudinal component. Attitudinal loyalty, associated with psychological commitment to or positive effect toward a company, can be defined as customers' psychological and emotional commitment to a specific company's products and services. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) define it as the level of customer commitment to a firm. It includes positive word-of-mouth and recommendation of the service to others. Therefore, customers remain loyal to the company in emotional terms and reflect their loyalty through their preferences and intentions. However, even though the attitudinal dimension plays a vital role in determining loyalty, having a positive attitude regarding a product or service may not systematically lead to repurchase the product. Behavioral loyalty is closely associated but different from attitudinal loyalty [14]. Therefore, researchers stress the importance of measuring customer loyalty in both behavioral and attitudinal dimensions [18]. Lastly, the integrated approach, also called composite or combinational, is defined as the customers' re-preferring products and services of the same company and recommending them [19]. Authors like Lawrence (1969) have taken into consideration both dimensions as one definition. Söderlund (2006) claimed in his critical research of the loyalty measurement the inadequacy of gathering together the two aspects of loyalty in one measure. The author explained that some attributes could not be assembled, like the affective attitude with purchase intentions. However, most researchers [21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 18] have measured customer loyalty as one construct without separating it into the two main aspects (behavioral and attitudinal). Martinez and del Bosque (2013) have emphasized the importance of considering the two constructs of loyalty separately as it will help explain the nature of the relationship better and highly between CSR and customer loyalty.

Considering these research gaps, to measure loyalty, the two dimensions will be considered since it makes sense to treat such aspects individually for a thorough and deeper understanding of the way CSR influences loyalty.

2.3 Antecedents of customer loyalty

The research incorporates social identity and exchange variables to contribute to a better explanatory path that links socially responsible activities to customer loyalty. Unfortunately, therefore, research combining social identity and exchange variables remains restricted [18].

2.3.1 Customer trust

Trust is a prerequisite for preserving long-term relationships between the company and its customers [27]. Several researchers [28, 29, 30] asserted the relationship between trust and loyalty. To win customers' loyalty, the path starting from winning their trust is mandatory [31]. The concept is defined as "a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence" [32]. In the hospitality industry, trust is crucial for building relationships. Several scholars have studied the critical role of trust in loyalty to hotels. In our research, we will adopt the definition of Morgan and Hunt (1994). The authors stated that trust happens when one party has confidence in the other partner's reliability and integrity. Customers are expecting hotels to communicate their CSR commitments through a reliability and integrity basis. Chauduri & Holbrook (2001) have confirmed that behavioral and attitudinal loyalty correlates with trust to customer loyalty. Therefore, we suggest the next hypothesis:

H1.a. Customer trust will positively impact customer behavioral loyalty.
H1.b. Customer *trust will positively impact customer attitudinal loyalty.*

2.3.2 Customer-company identification

Similar to satisfaction, customer identification also impacts customer loyalty [33]. This impact has been affirmed through various academic studies [34, 35, 19]. The concept is believed to be proposed based on a mixture between both social identity theory [36] and organizational identification [37, 38] or self-categorization theory [39, 40]. Social identity theory refers to an individual's self-concept derived from their perceived membership in a social group. The group membership guides an individual's behavior within the intergroup and therefore influences its self-concept. This theory's extension is the self-categorization theory, which considers an individual's evaluation of the in-group; the distinction aims to minimize the out-group to increase self-esteem. Lastly, organizational identification refers to how employees identify themselves as members of the organization and the degree they experience a feeling of oneness.

In our research framework, we retain the definition of Lichtenstein et al. (2004). The authors define the concept as a psychological state of connection or closeness between a customer and a firm that arises from identifying a significant intersection between the customer's perception of their identity and their perception of its identity. Accordingly, customers psychologically accept the company as part of their own identity [42].

Consequently, we propose the next hypothesis:

H2.a. Customer-company identification will positively impact customer behavioral loyalty.
H2.b. Customer-company identification will positively impact customer attitudinal loyalty.

2.3.3 Customer satisfaction

Many researchers assert that customer satisfaction positively impacts loyalty [43, 44, 23, 19]. It is believed to be the critical predictor of commitment and loyalty [45]. Accordingly, companies have to ensure that customer's expectations are met; otherwise, the customer will choose the competitor. Researchers in the hospitality industry, such as Pérez and del Bosque (2014), have shown that customer satisfaction is one of the vital antecedents of customer loyalty to take into consideration. Customer satisfaction links the purchase to the post-purchase experience, resulting in repeated purchases and positive word-of-mouth [46].
Therefore, we suggest the next hypothesis:

H3.a. Customer satisfaction will positively impact customer behavioral loyalty.
H3.b. Customer satisfaction will positively impact customer attitudinal loyalty.

2.4 Impact of CSR on customer-company identification, trust, satisfaction

2.4.1 Impact of CSR on customer identification

Socially responsible activities produce benefits for a company by enhancing consumers' identification with the firm [41]. Based upon this theory, customer loyalty is affected by a socially responsible company. When customers are aware of a company's CSR practices, they will better identify with it than customers who are not aware [33]. Through CSR activities, a company will project an image of a caring company personality to customers, facilitating their self-definition procedures [47]. Customers generally are keen to be identified with a socially responsible company to improve their self-esteem and embody a better social image [48]. Therefore, we suggest the next hypothesis:

H4. CSR will positively impact customer-company identification.

2.4.2 Impact of CSR on trust

The firm which is perceived as socially responsible is more likely to be trusted [49]. Martinez and del Bosque (2013) found that hotel customers approved that CSR practices support their trustworthiness. Choi and La (2013) presented customer trust as a mediating variable in the same vein and found that perceived socially responsible practices indirectly influence loyalty through customer trust. In 2018, Palacios-Florencio et al. introduced trust as a crucial determinant mediator of CSR. Therefore, we postulate that:

H5. CSR will positively impact customer trust.

2.4.3 Impact of CSR on satisfaction

Customers are satisfied by companies' products and services engaging in CSR activities [33]. Lee and Heo (2009) found that CSR activities have a positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Overall satisfaction is generated for products or services from a socially responsible company [52]. In addition, the authors found that CSR is a motivator of satisfaction that increases the market value [53].
A CSR strategy oriented to benefit society makes customers more satisfied with its offerings [44]. In accordance with these studies, we suggest the following hypothesis:

H6. CSR will positively impact customer satisfaction.

2.5 Relationship between trust, identification, and satisfaction

Trust is a crucial aspect of long-term social exchanges. It is an antecedent of identified relations [33]. Customers are more likely to identify themselves with trustworthy companies that convey an image of being caring and honest. The identification with a trustworthy hotel is a significant component in creating long-term relationships. Martínez and del Bosque (2013) have theoretically argued the antecedence of trust toward customer-company identification. However, their empirical evidence did not follow. This research gap between theory and empirical evidence directed scholars to think about the possibility that customer-company identification maybe not an outcome of trust but instead a precursor [54]. Based on the identification theory, trust derives when a customer is identified to a company that conveys good values such as CSR practices [55, 27]. Therefore, based on the previous discussion and ideas, we postulate that:

H7. Customer-company identification will positively impact customer trust.

Trust has a considerable impact on customer satisfaction [45]. Various studies assert that customer trust precedes customer satisfaction [56]. This can be justified because trust is a pre-purchase emotion, and satisfaction is a post-purchase emotion. In addition, trust creates a positive attitude toward a particular organization, which increases satisfaction [56]. Trust is

considered as the process of setting expectations of another's behavior and examining if the expectations have been met or not [57].

Similarly, in the hospitality industry, scholars like Christou (2010) have confirmed the relationship between trust and satisfaction. A customer who trusts a hotel has expectations for satisfaction about that hotel's socially responsible practices. If the hotel is considered trustworthy, positive satisfaction will be generated. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H8. Customer trust will positively impact customer satisfaction.

Customers choose companies and develop a sense of who they are with them [59]. Through this identification, they experience enhanced satisfaction. Various studies support that identification is a factor toward customer satisfaction [18, 60, 61]. In addition, some authors argue that identification precedes satisfaction because a customer identifies himself to a company before he even becomes a customer [61, 33]. However, the higher is the identification, the more the customer is satisfied with the company [34]. Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that:

H9. Customer-company identification will positively influence customer satisfaction.

2.6 The role of moderators

Jiddi and Ibenrissoul (2020) performed a bibliometric analysis of 11 years of CSR and customer loyalty literature. Their findings highlighted the lack of taking into consideration the role of moderators in explaining the relationship. Almost not a single research uses them in the research framework. The articles' future guidelines emphasize the need to propose a new research model and consider the moderating variables. In addition, little research has analyzed the sociodemographic factors as drivers toward creating a perceived image of a CSR strategy [23].

Various authors [10, 62, 63, 64] have supported that sociodemographic factors influence the way customers perceive CSR practices. Nevertheless, it should be noted that very few scholars found that the sociodemographic characteristics did not play a considerable role in constructing CSR image [23] or in moderating the link between CSR and customer loyalty [65]. However, even though the authors did not find them helpful in CSR strategies, they strongly emphasized the need to use the same variables (age, gender, education) in other sectors and countries to ensure the transferability of their findings. In the same vein, Raza et al. (2020) suggested using sociodemographic variables as moderators. Accordingly, we propose the use of sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and education.

First, the relationship between CSR activities and the customer's age is of particular interest. As a matter of fact, the authors stated that the younger the customer is, the more concerned CSR activities are. Various authors [67, 68, 69, 70] found that younger customers are more sensitive to CSR practices than older ones.

Based on the above discussion, we postulate that:

H10.a Age moderates the relationship between trust and behavioral loyalty (Supported by H1.a)
H10.b Age moderates the relationship between trust and attitudinal loyalty (Supported by H1.b)

Second, gender is another crucial moderator that reinforces the linkage between CSR and customer loyalty. Studies found a difference in terms of information process between men that tend to be more rational, than women that tend to be more intuitive [23]. According to Arlow (1991), women are more concerned about CSR activities. This view was supported by other scholars such as Burton and Hegarty (1999) confirmed the link between women and philanthropy, and Dietz et al. (2002) validated the relationship between women and the environment in their purchase behavior.

Based on this, we postulate that:

H11.a Gender moderates the relationship between identification and behavioral loyalty (Supported by H2.a)
H11.b moderates the relationship between identification and attitudinal loyalty (Supported by H2.b)

Third, educational level is also a critical moderator for our study. Studies have shown that customers could be targeted based on their education as customers with a higher educational level are more interested in socially responsible practices for more effective CSR communication. A most recent study [10] demonstrated that customers with higher educational levels are more loyal to companies opting for CSR activities.

Other authors [73, 74] also argued that CSR activities are more perceived by customers with higher educational degrees. In the same context, scholars [75, 76] also support that better-educated customer are the ones who adopt more green attitudes. More particularly, Moisescu (2015), in his study about dairy products, confirmed the moderating role of education in the relationship between CSR and customer loyalty. It is hence assumed that customers with a higher educational level are more interested in CSR practices. Based on those studies, we accordingly suggest the next hypotheses:

H12.a Education moderates the relationship between identification and behavioral loyalty (Supported by H3.a).
H12.b Education moderates the relationship between identification and attitudinal loyalty (Supported by H3.b).

Based on the above discussion regarding developing a research framework for understanding CSR's impact on customer loyalty, this study proposed the following conceptual framework (Figure 1).
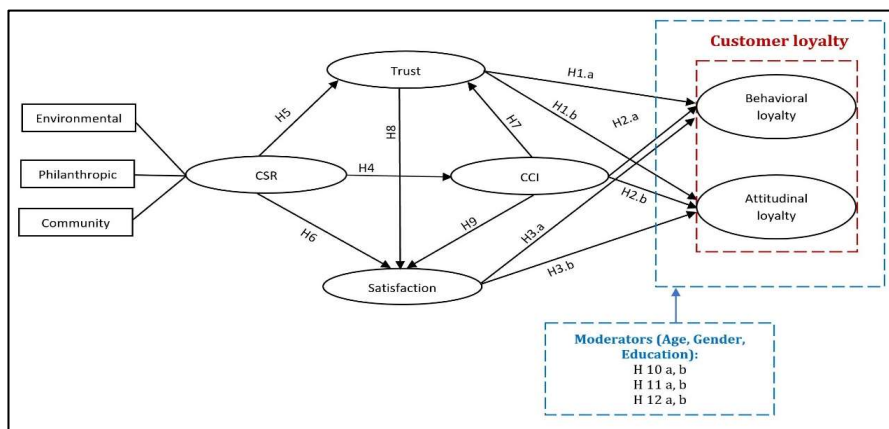
Figure 1: A proposed Research framework

3. Conclusion

A conceptual framework has been proposed to study the relationship between CSR and customer loyalty. CSR has been conceptualized based on three dimensions: philanthropic, environmental, and society. The gathering of those particular CSR factors is based mainly on a new and modified Carroll's pyramid. For measuring customer loyalty, most researchers [21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 18] have measured it as one construct without separating it into the two main aspects (behavioral and attitudinal). Thus, the need to consider the two constructs separately was highly critical.

In response to this gap, this research treats the two aspects individually for a thorough understanding of the relationship between CSR and customer loyalty.

Both social identity and exchange variables were incorporated as mediators, considered mixing two different theories (social identity theory and social exchange theory). The study shed new light on the relationship between the three mediators for a fuller understanding. Finally, moderators' role, specifically sociodemographic variables (age, gender, and education), has been considered as the majority of previous studies recognized the lack of using them in their conceptual framework.

This research also has various recommendations. First, this conceptual framework needs to be validated empirically. Furthermore, this is what we intend to do by realizing empirical evidence for the Moroccan hospitality industry. Second, the conceptual framework can also be validated empirically for different contexts and sectors. Third, future researchers should test this research in developing countries as many studies have been dedicated mainly to the developed world.

Lastly, future scholars may consider other mediators (like brand image, emotions, commitment) and other moderators (like cultural background, religion) explaining the relationship between CSR and customer loyalty.

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