COMMUNICATIONS OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PURCHASE INTENTION OF CONSUMERS

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ABSTRACT

Corporate social responsibility (CSR), a polarizing subject in business studies for decades, has become a common man's point of discussion in recent years. As companies' impact on peoples' everyday lives becomes massive, people have become wary and curious of how these companies behave concerning the environment, their employees, and the society at large. Companies are catering to this expectation by reporting and communicating their CSR practices in various ways. This information about a company's CSR initiatives among the consumers has been found to affect their perceptions of these companies and their attitude towards its brands. CSR communication has been found to ultimately impact consumers' purchase intentions, and this relationship is influenced by various moderators and mediators. This literature review article examines the impact of CSR communication among the consumers and how it translates to consumers' purchase intention for the brands of organizations that communicate their CSR activities. This study aims to review the literature on consumers' purchase intention for companies communicating CSR, build a conceptual framework for further research, and set the future research agenda.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility; CSR communications, Purchase Intention; Sustainable Consumption; Consumer ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends suggest that consumers are taking a greater interest in companies' corporate social responsibilities and are using their purchasing power to encourage brands to become good (Schaeffer, 2019). Historically, profit-maximization has been the primary goal for companies; however, customers these days expect companies to contribute towards the cumulative well-being of the society and environment (Mohr & Webb, 2005; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2011). Consumers expect companies to aim for sustainable growth and value societal contributions in a similar fashion to business profits (Parker, 2009; Groza, Pronschinske, & Walker, 2011; Vahdati, Mousavi, & Tajik, 2015). Consumers are fuelled by the belief that individual commitment to the well-being of the community can also be demonstrated through a preference for responsible products and brands (Vitell, 2014). Consumers have taken the onus to reduce their environmental impact through conscious changes to their lifestyle and sustainable consumption is considered as a way to solve some social and environmental problems plaguing the world (Hansen & Schrader, 1997; Reisch & Thøgersen, 2015). As a growing number of consumers choose to purchase from caring businesses, companies need to resolve broader economic, social, and environmental issues (Mohr, 2001). In order to satisfy these needs, companies must prove to be excellent corporate citizens in the consumer's eyes (Garriga and Melé, 2004) as they look to establish long-term associations with their customers and boost sales through CSR efforts (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002).

This first step in this direction is to communicate Corporate Social Responsibility as CSR cannot influence consumers' behavior if they are unaware of the CSR activities of the company. Consumer perception of CSR are built due to consumers' collective interactions with the company (Schmeltz, 2012). To this end, the communication delivered via companies regarding their CSR helps build consumer perception of CSR that could lead to positive attitudes towards these companies.

These CSR perceptions affect various aspects of the brand like brand preference, purchase intention, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand equity (Kim & Hall, 2015; Silva et al., 2017; Cowan & Guzman, 2020).

Various individual-level characteristics of consumers influence their purchase intentions for products from companies involved in CSR activities. Aspects like religiosity, attitude towards helping others, warm glow, nationality, and culture have been found to influence this relationship to varying levels (Webb et al., 2000; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012; Wang et al., 2019). Demographic aspects like gender, age, income, and religion also impact the relationship. Varied aspects like brand associations, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and customer-company identification have been found to be affected by CSR communications (Auger et al., 2009; Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010; Boccia et al., 2019). These aspects then affect the purchase intention for those products and thus mediate the relationship between CSR perceptions and purchase intention.

This article explores all these aspects from selected literature, focusing on communications of corporate social responsibility and how it affects consumers. The aim of this article is to ascertain whether there is an effect of CSR communications on the purchase intentions of products, and the mediators and moderators that influence this relationship. A conceptual model of this relationship is built from this literature to set the future research agenda in this area. In a world where sustainability is a buzzword, the findings of this paper will be beneficial to academicians and marketers to gain insights into CSR communications and how they could be used build an associated with informer consumers of the day.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)
CSR has become one of the most important aspects of every organization in today's competitive world. According to Peter Druker – *"What corporations do to society is far more important than what corporations can do for society*," because according to him, businesses have more responsibilities today, where business ethics has become an oxymoron (Praxis, 2017). However, the concept of CSR is rapidly evolving due to the constant development of new theories and models. Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), the shareholder model (Friedman, 1962), and the CSR Pyramid (Carroll, 1991) are examples that incorporate economic, social, environmental, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities of a company. Stakeholder theory is based on the principle that companies must consider the effects of their actions on all stakeholders (e.g., shareholders, customers, employees, suppliers, the environment, and the community), even if profitability is reduced (Smith, 2003). Shareholder theory contends that a company's sole responsibility is to (legally) make profits for its shareholders (Smith, 2003). Since this study looks at CSR from the perspective of consumer, the stakeholder theory has been take ahead. Recent research has also demonstrated that the stakeholder approach has a positive impact on consumers, and incorporating philanthropic activities as a part of CSR leads to strategic business benefits (Torres et al., 2012; PWC CII Report, 2015).

Despite the fact that Corporate Social Responsibility is one of the most well-known terms in the literature, a clear and widely recognized definition remains elusive. CSR means something to everyone, but it is not often the same thing for everyone (Votaw, 1972). According to Bowen (1953), CSR is the duty of businesses to seek policies, make judgments, and follow the courses of action that are conducive to the improvement of the society's objectives. CSR is frequently viewed as actions of companies that go above what is required by law (Sims, 2003), as it is viewed as a company's commitment to reducing or removing all negative consequences of its operations while optimizing its long-term beneficial impact on society (Mohr et al., 2001). A socially conscious business, according to the concept of CSR, recognizes the consequences of its decisions on others, whether or not they are personally connected to the company. Thus, in a broad view, CSR refers to a concern for society's needs and objectives that extends beyond the purely economic (Davis, 1960; Eells & Walton, 1974). Therefore, CSR is a business activity that attempts to positively affect all stakeholders and goes beyond the company's economic interests (Turker, 2009).

COMMUNICATIONS OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Communication of corporate social responsibility is a challenging task as expectations of different stakeholders from a company with regards to its responsibilities are different (Kim, 2015). While there are different communication and reporting methods, the timing and form of communication must be properly planned to build effective relationships with stakeholders (Isaksson et al., 2014). CSR reporting and communication are essential for companies to maintain a dialogue with internal and external stakeholders and build proactively intangible assets that can benefit the firm (Isaksson, Kiessling & Harvey, 2014).

In this regard, three factors are proposed as particularly important in predicting the level of leverage that a CSR initiative might have on brands: (i) the degree of awareness and knowledge of the social cause; (ii) the degree of relevance and meaningfulness of the knowledge of the cause; and (iii) the degree of transferability of the cause's knowledge to the brand (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). Hence, a well-planned and well-executed communication strategy that builds perception and awareness of a company's CSR program in the minds of consumers is critical to achieving the desired outcomes (Maignan and Ferrell, 2003; Sen, Bhattacharya & Korschun, 2006; Du et al., 2007; Hsu, 2012). Consumer desires and perceptions are determined through a mixture of the customer's prior experience and understanding, as well as their evaluation of the company's communication (Engel et al., 1968). So a firm must ensure that consumers can easily find the information needed to evaluate social, environmental, and ethical stance because when consumers are informed of socially conscious practices, they are more likely to make a buying decision (Chu & Lin, 2013).

Various communication channels can be employed to create this awareness about CSR activities. For instance, regularly publishing of CSR reports with data on their financial commitments for social activities can add to a company's credibility in the eyes of its stakeholders (Dutta & Singh, 2013; Habel, Schons, Alavi, & Wieseke, 2016). CSR advertisement is another vital communication channel that facilitates the CSR communication process (Perks, Farache, Shukla, & Berry, 2013), which can be used to communicate a favourable acceptable corporate image (Pomering & Johnson, 2009). Social media platforms like Facebook can be used for CSR communication as brand communication as these kinds of media platforms have been found to enable consumer participation and engagement with the brands (Handa, Mahapatra & Yadav, 2018). Another way of communicating can be corporate image advertising to get expected corporate identity on the corporate brand as a whole rather than for any particular product (Rossiter et al., 2007).

Nonetheless, companies need to be careful with their CSR communication because there is a fine line between bragging about CSR activities and keeping stakeholders informed. Companies that tout their CSR initiatives and portray themselves as models for engaging with the pressing social problems may be perceived as engaging in self-serving image-building exercises and face criticism (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Nyilasy et al., 2014), harming consumer trust and reputation (Mohr, 2001). However, in the case of consumers having a very high identification level with the company, the adverse effects are not that apparent (Garriga & Melé, 2011). The emphasis, thus, needs to be on a balanced showcase of CSR initiatives through advertisements to lessen the effect of skepticism (Calfee and Ringold, 1994).

CSR initiatives must have internal and external consistency along with coherence. Internal consistency should represent existing practices of the firm, and external consistency represents the expectations of societal stakeholders (Yuan, Bao, & Verbeke, 2011). For coherence, the new or proposed CSR practices should be coherent with the existing ones and the company values (Yuan, Bao, & Verbeke, 2011). CSR messages need to align with changes in its business conduct until its public image matches its desired image (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen (2010) suggest that ideal CSR communication will consist of the organization's monetary commitment towards CSR along with potential social impact of the CSR activity on society. Furthermore, consistency and transparency are essential elements in the CSR communication process as

this helps build stakeholders' trust and increases the credibility of the message (Coombs & Holladay, 2011).

The inclusion of social or environmental issues will increase the consumer's faith in the company's CSR activity, as well as reduce the element of skepticism from consumers' perception (Mahrinasari, 2019). This consideration will be paramount in the global context if cultural values exist that will cause customer response differences (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2013). Instead of going for short-term CSR activity, which may be an opportunistic promotion in most cases, the firms should instead concentrate on going for a longer-run CSR commitment (Webb and Mohr, 1998). Webb and Mohr (1998) found that the durability of support for a cause was used as a cue for judging a firm's motives: longer-term commitments were more likely to be seen as driven by a genuine concern for increasing community welfare, while shorter-term campaigns were more likely to be viewed as a way of exploiting a cause for the sake of profit.

On the communication message, brands must convey the necessary information without coming across as either curt or wordy; however, research suggests that the length of the communication does not significantly impact consumers' purchase intentions (Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010).

Companies are more likely to reap the benefits of such communication campaigns if they focus on creating awareness among consumers rather than hype among their various stakeholders (Dutta & Singh, 2013). Tailoring the information to a customer's interests would also contribute to the communication's success. For example, research shows that environmentally conscious consumers react better to green advertisements (Vitell, 2014). Defensive tactics in CSR communications could be apologies, justifying, or giving an excuse and reactive behavior towards society (Mohamed, Gardner & Paolillo, 1999). Additionally, business firms can invest in 'expert third parties' who specialize in CSR management to promote the company's image and reputation (Morsing, Schiltz, & Nielsen, 2008). The CSR communication should also have clear motives, i.e., the public serving motives and not firm serving motives (Bianchi et al., 2019).

When companies fail to communicate their CSR triumphs to their stakeholders in the right manner, they miss the opportunity to build, enhance, and nurture relationships with the stakeholders (Moreno and Capriotti, 2009). Consumers tend to make a purchase decision based on socially responsible activities when they are aware of it. Therefore, firms need to communicate CSR well so that consumers evaluate the firm positively and have higher purchase intentions for their products (Pradhan, 2018).

PURCHASE INTENTION
Purchase intentions are a measure of the degree to which consumers are likely to perform a shopping behavior of purchasing a product or service (Silva et al., 2017; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012). Purchase intentions are viewed as the primary indicator of real actions on behalf of the customers. The consumer's purchase intention can be predicted based on consumer attitude towards a future purchase decision (Espejel, Fandos & Flavian, 2008).

CSR has been found to lead to higher purchase intention for products from those companies (Dutta & Singh, 2013; Kim, 2015). Customers are now keen to buy the products that are produced by companies that take care of the environment (Schmeltz, 2012; Berger, 2019).

New-age consumers seek additional information when purchasing a product and consider factors such as the environmental aspects and public health in their purchase decision (de Magistris, del Giudice, & Verneau, 2015; Ramesh et al., 2019). Consumers also display a propensity to trust and buy products linked with CSR when they have CSR-linked perceptions about them (Vahdati et al., 2015). Sustainability policies of businesses have a substantial beneficial impact on the customer assessment of a company and their purchase intentions for their goods (Mohr & Webb, 2005). This relationship between CSR and Purchase intention is not direct and is influenced by various constructs (Gatti, Caruana, & Snehota, 2012) as described in the next section.
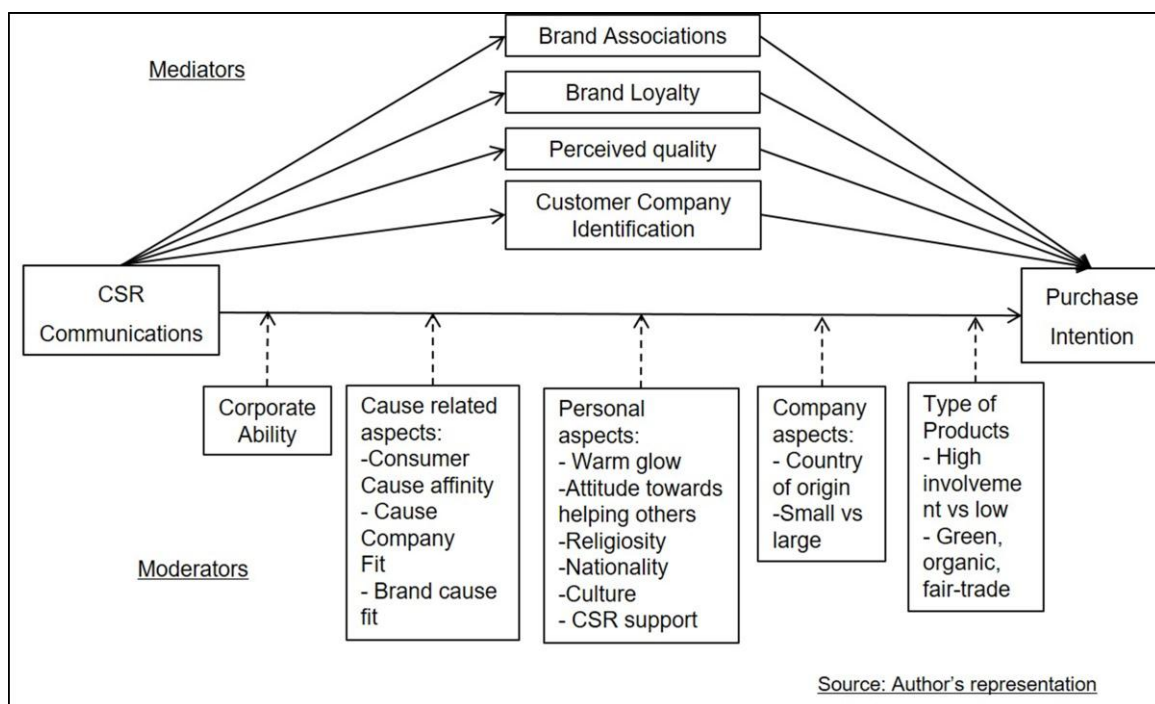
FACTORS AFFECTING THE INFLUENCE OF CSR COMMUNICATIONS ON PURCHASE INTENTION

The relationship of CSR communications on the purchase intention of consumers is influenced by various moderators and mediators. Variables that are affected by the independent variables and then go on to affect the dependent variable are known as Mediators (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Moderator variables affect the relationship between the input variable and output variable, but moderators themselves are not affected by the independent variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Moderators affect the strength and direction of the relationship (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). The following figure shows the various mediators and moderators that influence the relationship between CSR communications and Purchase intention.

describe how or why certain effects occur (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Consumer's purchase intention of a product is affected by various aspects of the brand like brand associations, perceived quality, brand awareness and brand loyalty. These aspects have been found to be affected by CSR communications (Auger et al., 2009; Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010; Boccia, Malgeri Manzo, & Covino, 2019). When the customer has a positive CSR opinion of the company, the company's goods are viewed as technologically sound and worth the money that is invested (Dutta & Singh, 2013). Customer perception built by CSR, in turn, leads to customer predisposition that is based on their loyalty to the brand, their satisfaction from the product, and the belief in the cause supported by the CSR (Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, & Hoyer, 2012). Consumer-Company

Figure 1: Conceptual model showing all mediators and moderators in the CSR communications - purchase intention relationship

Source: Author's representation

Mediators

In general, a variable is said to act as a mediator when it accounts for the relationship between the predictor and the criterion (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Frazier et al., 2004). Mediators describe how external physical phenomena take on the psychological meaning on the inside (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Unlike moderator variables, mediator variables

(C-C) Identification is the way in which consumers connect and identify with companies (Lii, 2011; Lii & Lee, 2012; Schrempf-Stirling, 2018; Baskentli, Sen, Du, & Bhattacharya, 2019). Often a part of an individual's identity comes from his associations with a variety of organizations, and CSR has been found to affect the C-C identification of consumers (Bhattacharya &

Sen, 2003). CSR communications is thus also an important marketing tool because it can help bring about purchase intention (Ho, 2017) via C-C identification.

Moderators

The relationship between CSR communications and consumers' purchase intention for those products is influenced by various moderators, which are classified and discussed below.

Cause-Related factors

Cause-related factors can be looked at in 3 ways. Firstly, how well the cause addressed by the CSR activity being communicated fits with the brand; secondly, how well the cause fits with the company owning the brand; and thirdly, how much the consumer aligns with and is interested in the cause focused on by the company. How well the social cause suits the brand suggests the cause-brand fit, and how well it aligns with the company is accounted for in the company-cause fit. These play a crucial role in consumers' attitudes towards the brand as cause-brand fit and CSR association linearly impact brand attitude, which positively impacts purchase intention (Rahman, 2013). Consumers' affinity (Berseder et al., 2011; Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012), personal ethics (Vitell, 2014), and regionality (Berseder et al., 2011) influence consumer-cause fit that affect consumers' purchase decisions in a similar way.

Personal level factors

Consumers' individual level characteristics like warm glow and attitude towards helping others have been found to influence this relationship to varying levels (Webb et al., 2000; Hartmann & Apaolaza-Ibáñez, 2012; Wang et al., 2019; Palihawadana, Oghazi & Liu, 2016).

While attitude towards helping others is self-explanatory, warm-glow effect is the product of selfish gratification resulting from good deeds and is a result of pro-social actions in which people experience pleasure and happiness as a result of playing their part to help others. However, as self-interested people, there is a value of feeling positive in letting others experience these ostensibly selfless actions (Andreoni, 1990). Why do people donate money to charitable organizations, pay extra for environmentally friendly goods, or even donate organs? The desire to feel a "warm glow" (Andreoni, 1990) is one of the reasons, which goes against conventional economists' views of people as greedy utility maximisers. However, the question is whether customers also get a "warm glow" from businesses who do good deeds and reward them with improved corporate credibility, brand value, and customer loyalty.

Other aspects that have been found to moderate the relationship are personal concern or CSR support (Koschate-Fischer, Stefan, & Hoyer, 2012), ethnicity (Hustvedt & Bernard, 2010), culture (Chu & Lin, 2013), economic acumen (Boccia et al., 2019), nationality (Staudt et al., 2014), and religiosity (Vitell, 2014). If customers are generally optimistic about CSR, the purchase intention is positively affected (Vahdati et al., 2015).

Type of products

Whilst the business performs virtuous things as a part of CSR, this social attribute is the core of certain types of products like fair trade products, renewable and sustainable goods, and organic goods (Teyssier et al., 2012). Fair-trade offerings grant better livelihood for producers, and green products reduce the overall environmental footprint (Teyssier et al., 2012). Organic goods are considered green since they are less toxic than inorganic products to their nature. Studies have found that the purchase intention for them is higher than normal products given all else is the same (Arnot, Boxall, & Cash, 2006; Didier & Lucie, 2008). Nassivera, Troiano, Marangon, and Nencheva (2017) found that there was a favourable association between positive consumer attitudes towards fair trade and CSR-linked products and the purchase intention of consumers. Consumers with previous information about a product's social attributes like green or fair trade or organic strongly influence the next purchase decision for these consumers as well (Chu & Lin, 2013).

Company level factors

Various company-level factors influence the relationship between CSR communications and purchase intention of associated products. For example, the country of origin of the company and the country of origin of the products, if the company is a large well-known company or a small company (Pappu

et al., 2006). Although the brand will have a more significant effect on consumer buying intentions for higher-involvement goods, for developing markets, the country of origin has also been found to affect consumer purchasing intentions (Ferreira & Ribeiro, 2016). The fostering of local entrepreneurs and local economic development resulting in their growth improves customer satisfaction; this is positive for local small businesses who usually target their local CSR programs towards the local community (Berseder et al., 2011). Global firms, too, can take their lead to deliver their CSR initiatives targeting more local communities (Habel et al., 2016).

While the company's size and its global spread matters, the consumers tend to support local CSR activities benefiting them in one way or another. The same could be the typical human tendency to be closer to personal connections and see change on a smaller scale better than on a global scale (Ferreira & Ribeiro, 2016). A variety of studies (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Park & Kim, 2015) looked at the effects of corporate ability on CSR-related customer behavior. Customer satisfaction (Wu & Chen, 2015), the ability to pay for the brands of corporations doing CSR (Narayanan et al., 2020), and the several other facets of the brand are affected by CSR communications were influenced by corporate ability association. Corporate ability has a moderating influence on CSR attitudes and their effects on the brand.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The present paper presents a detailed review of the communications of corporate social responsibility and its effects on consumers. This paper outlines the themes of the study observed in the CSR studies, their interpretations of customer expectations of CSR communications, and their resulting actions in the market towards the company and its brands. Although there is much research on the customer perception of CSR and its effect on the brand, there is not much research exploring how CSR communications affect the purchase intention of consumers. The paper brings forth the research that has been done in this area and provides future researchers with a comprehensive list of factors that affect their relationship as mediators and moderators. Although a few of the above studies were conducted to

understand CSR's effects on consumer behavior in terms of purchase intention, there are some limitations in them, including its inconclusiveness. Overall, CSR has been found to play a small role in consumers' purchasing decisions; that too if CSR is communicated in the right manner. CSR linked perceptions have even been found to have a negative effect when consumers are sceptical of the companies' true intent of communicating the CSR activities. Also, it has been found that reckless social conduct of companies is punished even if good CSR conduct goes unrewarded (Berseder et al., 2011).

The scarcity of CSR knowledge has been identified to be a significant barrier to buyers having purchase intentions for goods from CSR firms. The CSR done by every organization only influences consumers' buying choices if its consumers know about the company's CSR activities. The desire to pay stems from the consumer's awareness of the purpose they are committed to and can be researched in the future (Berseder et al., 2011).
It has been observed that there is a gap between the purchase intention and the actual consumer behavior. When looking at psychological parameters, it can be seen that consumer attitude depends upon the consumer's income level and level of knowledge of the benefits of CSR activity (Kuokkanen & Sun, 2014). Therefore, there is a need for fresh studies that help us better measure and reduce the inaccuracy of the direct and indirect method, which is another key reason for this gap between attitudes in research studies and reality. By widening the gap between attitude and behavior by quantifying social desirability and cynicism, future studies can maximize the measurement of attitude and behavior (Kuokkanen & Sun, 2014).

According to the state of the economy, consumers could react differently to corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications. Like in the COVID19 pandemic, the needs of consumers in terms of the corporate's functioning might change, and research can look into it. As new scenarios are developing, the governments in countries like India are urging their citizens to support locally made products. In other countries, too, there is a government role in the implementation of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) concept

into the business like End-of-Life Vehicle policies in Siberia (Krstic & Mihajlov, 2020). Such attributes about companies might influence consumers now. So, in studying the purchase intentions of potential CSR customers, there are many things to consider. This paper suggests that researchers take up this field of study in order to provide academic and corporate professionals with a better understanding of the impact of CSR on purchasing intentions.

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