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Research Article

Brand Karma: Do Brands Receive Back What They Give? A Study on Social Responsibility and Consumer Loyalty

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Abstract: The rising focus on ethical business practices has led to the increased significance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in influencing consumer perceptions and brand relationships. A conceptual study has been conducted to examine the concept of "Brand Karma," which implies that brands, in the end, get back what they give to society, communities, and stakeholders. The research looks into how the socially accountable measures convince consumer trust, authenticity, and loyalty that lasts for a long time. It points out that consumers decide on brands more than just product quality or price, but also based on moral conduct, sustainability, community engagement, and transparency of the brand. The study uses the integration of CSR, consumer trust on brand, and relational authenticity to demonstrate how these factors can be a source of sustained consumer loyalty and advocacy. The idea of Brand Karma sees CSR as not being a cost, but a strategic move that increases brand equity and deepens a competitive advantage. Besides, this paper goes further to delineate a conceptual framework associating CSR activities with consumer loyalty by associated variables such as perceived brand authenticity and belief against brand. The research findings suggest that brands which, as a matter of fact, help the society in a positive way, become the recipients of the loyalty of their consumers, thus demonstrating that responsible behavior leads to loyalty of consumers over the long run.

Keywords: Brand Karma; Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); Consumer Loyalty; Brand Trust; Ethical Branding; Sustainability; Consumer Perception.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers are demanding that brands operate with good ethics, responsibility, and social awareness. So, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is no longer just a voluntary philanthropic approach, but has become a strategic part of brand management. Contemporary consumers judge brands based on the quality of their products and the prices they sell at but also on the brand's contributions to society, and transparency and sustainability trust of the brand. This consumer evolution sets the stage for the concept of "Brand Karma" which assumes that a brand finally gets back from the market what it gives to its stakeholders and the global community. The idea of Brand Karma points out that good corporate social responsibility practices can enhance consumer trust, perceived authenticity, and loyalty of the kind that lasts. To the extent that consumers view a brand as real, loving, and making a significant contribution to society, they will be more willing to promote, support, and be loyal to the brand in the long run. This conceptual point of view, based on insights from stakeholder engagement and relational marketing theories, sees CSR not as a financial liability but as a strategic move that increases brand equity and competitive advantage. By conforming brand values with consumer expectations and societal wellbeing, companies become capable of generating a good reputation that facilitates sustained consumer loyalty. Therefore, the Brand Karma concept is about a reciprocal relationship where responsible brand behavior leads to enduring consumer support.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The link between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and consumer loyalty has been a major focus of academic research over the past few decades, especially after the shift in markets towards value-based consumption. CSR as a concept was first understood by Carroll (1991) when he saw it as a multi-dimensional set of responsibilities that a company owes to the community besides profit-making. Furthering this idea Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) found that CSR programs impact consumer evaluations and purchase decisions only if such programs reflect consumers' values. To that effect, Maignan and Ferrell (2004) claimed that CSR allows consumers to relate to the brand thus, building a strong emotional bond. Aaker (1996) was of the opinion that CSR helps to build brand equity as it brings in more brand associations and increases the perceived quality. Subsequent researches have also supported the view that CSR results in brand trust which then leads to brand loyalty (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Vlachos et al., 2009). The engagement of firms in CSR activities that are not only verifiable but also congenial to their image results in the perception of such firms as being ethical and trustworthy and as a consequence, these consumers end up developing strong emotional bonds (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010). Moreover, the extant research points to perceived authenticity as an essential facilitator. When consumers see CSR activities as genuine rather than as some sort of promotion, the positive impact of loyalty is heightened (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). On the contrary, the perception of hypocrisy lowers brand trust (Wagner, Lutz, & Weitz, 2009). Emotional attachment is another route that is explored when the social responsibility activities of companies are in line with the personal or social identities of consumers (He & Harris, 2016). The researchers also point out that CSR programs may become the source of long-term customer relational value through the idea of advocacy, where consumers get encouraged to spread favorable word of mouth (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). Besides, CSR helps a brand to build its reputation which in turn makes it easier for the brand to have a competitive edge in a crowded market (Fombrun, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2016). In online settings, the use of social media networks that are open and honest in communicating CSR allows consumer interaction and loyalty to be built (Özdemir & Koçak, 2020). Nevertheless, the expert community is not unmindful of the fact that CSR needs to be strategically planned and incorporated into the central business operations as opposed to being just an occasional philanthropic activity (Porter & Kramer, 2006). The corporations which adjust CSR in line with the requirements of stakeholders and objectives of sustainability are said to have Brand Karma meaning, they get back in the form of loyal customer relationships what they give in the form of the positive social contribution (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Fatma & Khan, 2020). Summing up the literature evidences as a whole, the present body of research regularly supports that CSR is a driver of enhanced customer loyalty owing to the following factors: trust, emotional resonance, authenticity, and stakeholder alignment—demonstrating that consumers respond to responsible brands with sustainable loyalty.

IDENTIFIED PROBLEM OF THE RESEARCH STUDY

Consumers nowadays are evaluating brands beyond, product quality and price by considering the ethical behavior, social contribution, and responsibility of the brands towards the communities and environment. However, despite many brands investing in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), the impact of such efforts on consumer loyalty is still ambiguous. Some brands obtain benefits from CSR activities only to promoting their products, causing consumers to question their authenticity and hence trust. Thus, consumers have difficulties in distinguishing those brands which make a real contribution to the society from those which use CSR as a marketing tool. Consequently, the question arises about the relationship between responsible brand behavior mainly in terms of CSR, perceived authenticity, and trust and long-term consumer loyalty. Hence, it is worth investigating if brand positive and responsible actions are followed by consumer commitment, which would be evidence of "Brand Karma."

RESEARCH GAP

It is well known through various researches that one of the main factors that affect consumer perceptions is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). However, some studies have only treated CSR as a mere tool for promotion or image building. Hence, they have not really assessed the consumers' interpretations of CSR in terms of authenticity and trust. To date, most of the research has been looking at CSR and consumer loyalty as two separate things without realizing that perception of CSR sincerity could actually be the key factor that links CSR and consumer loyalty. On top of that, there are only few studies that have considered the interaction between CSR, Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust as one combined conceptual model influencing Consumer Loyalty. Besides, "Brand Karma" - the idea that brands in the end get loyalty due to the positive value they bring - has not been much conceptualized and integrated into consumer behavior frameworks. This leads to a missing link in understanding the psychological and relational processes through which brand karma results in loyal customers. Hence, there is a need to perform a conceptual review which will serve as a bridge to these variables and reveal the pathway from responsible actions to consumer loyalty of a long-term nature.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To examine the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility, Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust on Consumer Loyalty toward socially responsible brands.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a conceptual study design to investigate the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust on Consumer Loyalty. Being a conceptual study, it relies solely on secondary sources, which include peer-reviewed journals, books, industry reports, and credible online publications that focus on CSR, consumer behavior, brand management, and loyalty. A thorough review of the literature was carried out to find themes, relationships, and insights that explain how the implementation of socially responsible brand activities influences consumer perceptions and loyalty. The study derives a conceptual framework from these findings, indicating the direct relationships of the independent variables—CSR, brand authenticity, and brand trust—with the dependent variable, consumer loyalty. The key concepts and variables are clearly outlined in the existing literature to help comprehension and concurrence. As a conceptual study, there has been no primary data collection or statistical analysis; the research has been devoted to knowledge synthesis from the literature to give a comprehensive understanding of the brand-customer relationship going beyond CSR to loyalty.

VARIABLE SUMMARY

Table 1 – Variable Summary

Variable Type	Variable Name	Description
Dependent Variable	Consumer Loyalty	The degree of commitment, repeat purchase behavior, and advocacy exhibited by consumers toward a brand.

Variable Type	Variable Name	Description
Independent Variable	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	The voluntary initiatives and actions undertaken by a brand to benefit society, environment, and stakeholders.
Independent Variable	Perceived Brand Authenticity	The extent to which consumers believe the brand's actions are genuine and aligned with its stated values.
Independent Variable	Brand Trust	The confidence consumers have in the brand's reliability, honesty, and commitment to fulfil promises.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

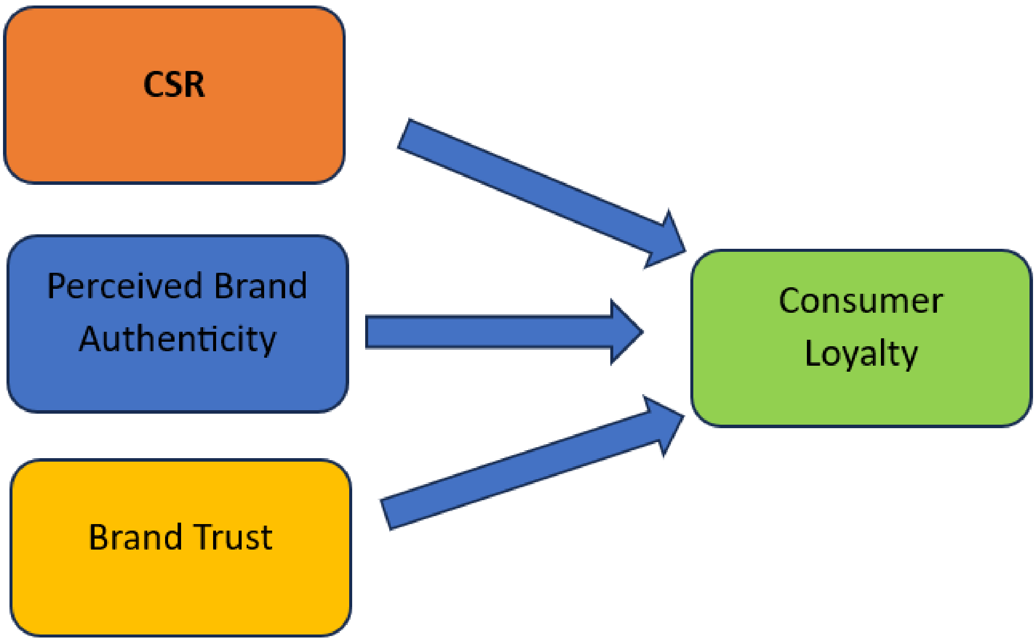

Fig – I Conceptual Framework

EXPLANATION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this study rests on the idea that consumers are the ones who give long-term loyalty to brands that show them responsibility, sincerity, and reliability. In this model, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust are the Independent Variables which each have a direct impact on Consumer Loyalty, the Dependent Variable. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a brand's a unit of the voluntary actions through which it positively contributes to the society, the environment, and the welfare of stakeholders. As a result of seeing such consistent and meaningful CSR initiatives, consumers come to the brand with positive evaluations. This responsible behaviour reaps the brand's social image and motivates consumers to remain loyal to the brand which thus leads to the growth of Consumer Loyalty. Perceived Brand Authenticity is the extent to which consumers accept the brand's actions as true and in harmony with the brand identity expressed. If CSR activities are perceived as being done for the sake of the business rather than for promotion or profit, then consumers will experience a stronger emotional and moral bond with the brand. The feeling of being genuine is one of the reasons consumers stick to the brand and thereby increase loyalty. Brand Trust is a consumer's belief in the brand's capacity to be reliable, honest, and to live up to its commitments. Trust is a critical element in the establishment of long-term consumer-brand relationships. When a consumer trusts a brand, he or she will buy more from that brand rather than the competing brands because of loyalty which he or she can also express by telling others about it, thus, the promotion of trust leads to loyalty. In the end, Consumer Loyalty comes from the brand being responsible, genuine and trustworthy in the consumers' eyes. This framework argument is most evident in the way the model relates the elements of CSR practice with Loyalty through the mediators of authenticity and trust. Hence, the model underscores that as well as through product quality and price, brands can foster loyalty over time if they behave ethically, uphold value transparency and trust in their relationships with society.

RESEARCH DISCUSSION

This study aimed to determine the impact of Corporate Social Responsibility, Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust on Consumer Loyalty toward socially responsible brands. The conceptual framework shows these three variables as those that directly lead to loyalty thus implying that consumers not only reward brands for delivering functional value but also for giving ethical and emotional value. CSR is the main factor as the socially responsible actions are the ones that not only generate a positive public image but also prove that the brand is committed to the society and not just to profit maximization. Consumers witnessing brands that are actively involved in community supporting, environmental protection, or are practicing fair labour will form favourable attitudes toward such brands and thus be more willing to support them. Alone, however, CSR is not enough unless it is seen as authentic. Hence, Perceived Brand Authenticity gets to be the key point as modern consumers are quite insightful when it comes to "token CSR," which means fake CSR activities just for a marketing advantage. When CSR activities are genuinely part of the brand's identity and hence authentic, consumers are likely to develop an emotional bond with the brand which results in their preference and loyalty to the brand. Brand Trust is the factor that helps to keep this relationship going. Trust is given when the consumers are convinced that the brand consistently fulfils its promises, is transparent in its communications, and goes for the right and responsible in all other stakeholder management activities. It is the trust that constitutes the psychological basis of loyalty which leads to repeated purchases and making it less probable that consumers will shift to other competing brands. Consequently, loyalty is, in this sense, not only a behavioral one but also emotional and relational. The interaction of CSR, authenticity, and trust thus emphasize that loyalty is not just a matter of satisfaction with product performance but mostly depends on how consumers judge the brand's honesty and its social contribution. According to this research, brands that want to have the loyalty of their consumers in the long run need not only to provide quality products but also act responsibly, communicate sincerely, and build trustful relationships. The results are consistent with the concept of "Brand Karma" which means that in the end, brands get from consumers what they give to society. Therefore, consumer loyalty is influenced by ethical value, emotional value, and reliability, which makes these three independent variables central for maintaining a competitive and meaningful brand relationship.

FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study, being conceptual, offers a theoretical insight into the interrelation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust with Consumer Loyalty. However, it also suggests numerous possibilities for research further down the line. To begin with, the conceptual model put forward may be subjected to empirical testing by collecting primary data from consumers of various industries and demographic segments to confirm the suggested relationships. Another point is that the researchers by the next works can incorporate more variables in the model such as brand reputation, customer satisfaction, or cultural factors to inquire their influence on consumer loyalty. Thirdly, a longitudinal study can track how the effect of CSR activities on loyalty changes over time, thus, providing an understanding of consumer behavior in the long run. Last but not least, comparative research on cultural and industrial differences could assist in generalizing the results to a wider range of markets, thus, giving managers practical advice on how to design socially responsible strategies that efficiently cultivate loyalty among various consumer groups.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As a conceptual study, this research has certain limitations. For one, it is a study entirely dependent on secondary sources like journals, books, and reports, which means that the results are drawn from the already existing literature and there is no new primary empirical data, thus it is limited in terms of testing or validating the proposed relationships in real-world settings. In addition to that, only a few variables have been considered in the research, namely Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust, leaving out the possibility of other factors that may influence consumer loyalty such as customer satisfaction, price perception, or brand experience. Moreover, the ideas in the paper are of a general and theoretical nature, and thus may not necessarily reflect the behaviors of consumers in different sectors, geographical areas, or cultural backgrounds. The paper, however, serves as a basis for subsequent field studies that can experimentally test, adjust, and extend the conceptual framework to provide tangible insights both for academics and practitioners, despite these constraints.

CONCLUSION

The study finds that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Perceived Brand Authenticity, and Brand Trust are the main factors that affect Consumer Loyalty. From the conceptual framework and the review of the literature, it appears that consumers are not only attracted by good product quality and reasonable price but they also grant more market share to brands that are responsible, ethical, and transparent. CSR activities not only make a brand more attractive to consumers and show its return commitment to the community, but also seem to be supported by authenticity and trust as they form the strongest emotional and psychological bond between consumers and the brand. In effect, these factors lead to repeat purchasing, long-term loyalty, and positive advocacy, which is consistent with the idea of "Brand Karma," where loyal brand behavior is met with consumer loyalty. The research accomplishes its goal by demonstrating the direct effects of the independent variables identified on consumer loyalty, thereby providing a theoretical basis for future empirical research. In essence, socially conscious branding turns out to be an instrumental approach for maintaining a competitive advantage and creating lasting consumer relationships.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author affirms that no conflict of interest is associated with this work. The investigation was independent and no such relationships of a financial, personal, or professional nature have contributed to the results or the interpretations in this theoretical study.

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