

# Consumer Psychology Towards Corporate Social Initiatives : An Empirical Investigation

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## Abstract

Gradually, the world is recognizing the role of corporate responsibility towards society. Accordingly, there is a shift towards socially responsible behaviour around the world. This study attempted to address the question, whether social initiatives undertaken by a company influence the consumers' attitude towards it. For the said purpose, an empirical study was conducted to examine the impact of a company's CSR initiatives on consumers' trust and purchase behaviour. The effectiveness of social initiatives was measured on the basis of consumer attitude towards the factors such as subject, sincerity performance, and the value of assistance and cooperation provided. The results of our study revealed that consumers rewarded the companies that engaged in rehabilitation of appropriate social issues with due sincerity no matter how they provide social assistance to a social cause. There has always been buzz among the Indian companies about choosing and engaging in right social issues in order to gain consumers' favourable attitude. Thus, our study would assist managers to understand the consumers' psychology towards social initiatives, and would aid organizations in positioning themselves as socially responsible companies.

**Key words:** corporate social initiatives, corporate social responsibility, CSR, consumer psychology

**JEL Classification:** M14, M30, M31

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been gaining interest in business practices across all industries. The companies involved in CSR acts not only comply with legal rules or accounting regulations, but are also aware that their customers are using it to evaluate social performance. Social performance brings business benefits for a company in terms of increased positive consumer behaviour (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Vogel, 2005). Thus, acting socially responsible not only pays out for firms, but can also be a financial gain as consumers are rewarding such companies (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Kotler & Lee, 2004; Smith, 2003).

In the current scenario, consumers expect more out of organizations than simply products of quality at low prices (Handelman & Arnold, 1999). They seek organizations to demonstrate congruence with some social values as contribution to community and society at large. Today, consumers are more aware of corporations' social responsibility through better education and influence of media. Companies, therefore, strategically publicize their CSR works through various media channels (Moharana, 2010). Hence, it may no longer be accepted for business organizations to ignore their social responsibilities (Rahim, Jalaludin, & Tajuddin, 2011). The role of businesses in the society is no longer focussed on acting responsibly towards stakeholders (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009; Harrison & Freeman, 1999).

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A lot of work has been done in Western countries to identify an organization's behaviour towards consumers' purchase attitude. However, not many studies have been conducted in emerging markets such as India, and where CSR is still far from being the most dominant criteria in consumer buying behaviour. Consumers continue buying for personal reasons rather than societal ones (Beckmann, Christensen, & Christensen, 2001). Thus, relatively contradictory results have been observed so far. This study was undertaken to explore the Indian consumers' psychology towards companies' CSR activities and their purchase orientation for such socially responsible brands.

## **Corporations and Social Responsibility**

In India, the term CSR might be new, but the concept is not. It has been there since ancient times, going back to an age when society itself was in its formative stages. It has been incorporated in the various laws where part of one's earnings is donated for the poor and community welfare. The Hindus call it '*dharmada*,' the Muslims '*zakatah*,' the Sikhs '*dashaant*'; call it by whatever name you will, the concept has been embedded in the society from the very beginning (Kumar, 2012).

CSR has never been so important than in the present context, when the role of the government is transforming from “governing business” to “business of governance.” Nowadays, companies are realizing that it is in their business interest to do the right thing everywhere they operate. Indian firms are aware that their long-term investment goals can only be achieved within a stable, healthy environment that is of social and financial constraints (Singh & Verma, 2014a, 2014b). However, companies alone cannot solve the challenges associated with social responsibility. They must work with governments, civil-society groups, development institutions, and citizens.

Jamshedji Tata, an entrepreneur, with his vision to create the Indian iron and steel industry transformed an unknown village 'Sakchi,' later renamed as 'Jamshedpur' into a model of town planning and community care. The Tatas, under the chairmanship of S. P. Kotwal, conducted a social audit, the aim of which was to find areas where Tata was not able to discharge its responsibility towards society. The Tata Group believes that CSR adds value to the social environment and ultimately to the company. According to a report, nine of the top ten Forbes 500 firms have something in common besides success: CSR programs. Corporate philosophy is undergoing a change, from “profit making” to “value creation” (Baxi & Prasad, 2013).

## **Consumer Psychology Towards Social Initiatives**

Consumers, in the era of advanced technology, are more aware of companies' social initiatives and their worthiness. In India, where news related to corporate frauds and scams pops out quite often, it keeps consumers sceptical about companies' notion of being honest corporate citizens. Yet, consumers develop a positive attitude towards companies who genuinely and sincerely engage in social activities. Here are real examples of few companies who are honestly doing well towards the society.

In December 2003, CNBC was telecasting a program on “Modern Corporate and Social Responsibility” and Mr. Narayana Murthy, the chief mentor of Infosys Technologies, software giant of India, was to be interviewed. He said that unless companies give back to the society some of what they are getting out of it, a very violent future may be in the store for the companies (Baxi & Prasad, 2013).

The Tatas and Birlas are still practicing corporate philanthropy. ITC started a program called *Sumehra Kal*. The aim of this program is to bridge a partnership with local communities to develop water and forest resources, open-up new non-farming livelihoods, empower women economically, and expand primary education. Likewise, many other companies such as Wipro, Mahindra & Mahindra, and SBI, to name a few, have spearheaded a large social investment program for building better relationships with communities. These increased inclinations of

companies towards social initiatives are to build a strong bonding with society (Ramakrishnan & Reshma, 2010). However, companies cannot avail consumer rewards if they fail to demonstrate sincere motto of social engagement. Consumers will have a positive perception for those firms which have undertaken activities as per communities' requirements.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

In India, research concerning consumer reaction to corporate social initiatives is a relatively new field of study. In this subject, a few studies have been conducted in foreign countries. Related to the aforementioned area, the previous studies have tried to confirm whether the implementation of social initiatives brings about positive consumer reactions such as more favourable attitude towards a company (e.g. Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006), higher consumer retention (e.g. Salmones, Crespo, & Bosque, 2005) or high purchase intentions (e.g. Lafferty & Goldsmith, 1999). However, Yoon and Gurhan-Canli (2003) said that social initiatives do not always bring intended outcomes. Pioneer research on the influence of social initiatives on consumer behaviour and attitude was performed by Brown and Dacin (1997). They (Brown & Dacin, 1997) studied, among other things, the influence of a company's hypothetical image on its evaluation made by consumers. In this study, it was shown that not only a company's competencies, but also pro-social initiatives brought a positive consumer attitude towards it.

A decade later, a similar research was performed by Marin and Ruiz (2007). Their findings indicated that a higher level of a company's perceived social responsibility was more favorably evaluated by consumers. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) claimed a relationship between a company's assessment evaluated by consumers for its pro-social activity and its performance. Their findings also suggested that there is a connection between the degree of consumer identification with a company and a company's social initiatives.

A review of literature by Maignan and Ferrell (2004) identified a number of CSR programs; their findings confirmed a positive influence of social initiatives on consumers' attitude. They (consumers) engage in positive word-of-mouth about a firm that is committed to actions allied with institutional norms (Ineizeh, 2014). Studies by Barone, Miyazaki, and Taylor (2000), Berger and Kanetkar (1995), and Creyer (1997) affirmed that consumers support companies that are committed to cause related marketing, environmental friendly practices, or ethics (Ineizeh, 2014 ; Maignan & Ferrell). Corporate social initiatives may be a useful tool in strengthening trust and the consumers' union with a company (Aaker, 1996; Maignan, Ferrell, & Hult, 1999 ; Salmones et al., 2005). However, Delgado - Ballester and Munuera - Alemán (2001) established that trust was based on individual's experiences coming not only from indirect ways of advertisements or reputation. Hence, it is clear that perception of socially responsible behaviour enhances consumers' commitment towards a company. According to Kotler and Lee (2005), there are six different types of CSR initiatives. These six types of initiatives are discussed in the Table 1.

Hence, from the literature survey and discussions, we propose the hypothesis 1 (H1) as follows :

➔ **H1:** Consumers' positive perception of social initiatives of a company enhances their level of trust.

Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) studied how CSR leads to customer satisfaction and how satisfied customers turn back to a company again and again which enhances firms' performance. However, they also asserted that sometimes, CSR initiatives reduced the customers' satisfaction if these were not innovative or had no positive social impact. Most of the academic research shows that consumers prefer eco-friendly products only if they do not have to compromise with the product quality, price, and convenience to use. Nowadays, companies are publishing their CSR activities on their websites in order to keep transparency to win customer trust and loyalty. Research of Ochoti, Muathe, Ronoh, Maronga, and Ochoti (2013) showed that companies are hugely investing in

**Table 1. Types of CSR Initiatives**

Type of Initiative	Significance
<b>Cause Promotion</b> →	In these initiatives, companies provide funds and try to increase awareness and concern for social causes by informing the people about a cause. Such initiatives also tries to persuade people who can voluntarily contribute to the cause & participate in an event (Kotler & Lee, 2005, pp. 49-52).
<b>Cause Related Marketing</b> →	A corporation commits to making a contribution or donating a percentage of revenue to a specific cause based on product service or service sales. Most of the offer is for a particular time period and for a specific product or service and for a specified charity (Kotler & Lee, 2005, pp. 81-82).
<b>Corporate Social Marketing</b> →	It is a tool used by corporations to develop or to bring behavioural changes in the way of improving public health, safety, or community well being. It is mostly implemented by state, local, public sector, or non-profits organizations for prevention of use of tobacco, early pregnancy, and use of pesticides, etc (Kotler & Lee, 2005, pp. 114, 116, 143).
<b>Corporate Philanthropy</b> →	In this initiative, a corporation makes a direct contribution to a charity or cause in form of cash, donations, service. Corporate philanthropy is the most traditional form of CSR initiatives. It is also known by other names such as community giving, community relations, corporate citizenship, and community affairs. Providing cash donations, providing technical expertise, offering to use the equipment are some of the typical programs of corporate philanthropy (Kotler & Lee, 2005, pp. 144-147, 174).
<b>Community Volunteering</b> →	In this type of initiative, corporations encourage and motivate employees, retail partners to volunteer their time to support causes. Employees volunteering their talents, ideas, expertise, and physical labor come under volunteer efforts. Employees of the organization are only involved as a volunteer to help for the cause. Typical programs of community volunteering include sending specific volunteers for specific events ; for encouraging employees to do volunteer work, pay them off time work. Of all the CSR initiatives, community volunteering is viewed as genuine and satisfying. Volunteer programs help to build strong relationship with the local communities, motivate employees, improves corporate images as it is doing good for the community (Kotler & Lee, 2005, pp. 175-177, 205).
<b>Socially Responsible Business Practices</b> →	in this initiative, "a corporation adopts and conducts discretionary business and investments that support social causes to improve community well-being and protect the environment" (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 208).It focuses on activities that are discretionary and are not mandated by law.

CSR initiatives to increase their engagements with consumers in terms of improved buying behaviour. Thus, we propose the hypothesis H2 as under :

→ **H2:** Social initiatives undertaken by a company will enhance consumer buying behaviour.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The following are the objectives of the study:

- (1) To understand consumers' psychology towards social initiatives undertaken by firms.
- (2) To examine the impact of social initiatives undertaken by a company on consumer trust.
- (3) To examine the effect of social initiatives on consumer purchase behaviour.

## **Methodology**

The survey questionnaire was prepared based on extensive literature review and studied definitions. A final set of

**Table 2. Demographic Breakdown of Participants**

Category	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	119	59
Female	84	41
<b>Age</b>		
<21 years	11	5
21-30 years	93	46
31-40 years	67	33
41-50 years	23	12
>50 years	9	4
<b>Education</b>		
Undergraduate	19	9
Graduate	69	34
Post-graduate	103	51
Doctorate/Post-Doc	12	6
<b>Occupation</b>		
Service	107	53
Businessman	18	9
Professional	45	22
Self-employed	11	5
Student	22	11

12 items was designed in the questionnaire. The questionnaires were subsequently piloted with 30 different respondents to ensure that items are clear and meaningful. Upon respondents' suggestions, three items were deleted as these items were redundant. Hence, the final questionnaire consisted of nine items and was divided into three sections. The items were put on a likert scale; 1 being *strongly disagree* and 5 being *strongly agree*. In the first section, the items were related with consumer support to social initiatives ; in the second section, the items were related to consumer trust ; in the third section, items contained questions related to consumer buying behaviour, and in a separate section, kept at the end of questionnaire, there were questions regarding the demographic profile of the respondents. The main survey was conducted in four cities of India namely Allahabad, Bhopal, Indore, and Mumbai during the months of April - July 2015. Thus, the final questionnaires were sent to 340 participants. However, only 203 completely filled responses were received with a response rate of 59%. In this study, 59 % of the respondents were male and 41% respondents were female participants from various age groups (see Table 2). The participants had different levels of educational qualifications (e.g. undergraduate to doctorate) and were engaged in different occupations.

## Data Analysis and Findings

The study used regression analysis to ascertain the relationship between study variables by using SPSS version 16.0. Correlation is a statistical tool with the help of which the relationship between two or more variables is studied. The strength of correlation is denoted by  $r$ , which is also called the coefficient of correlation. On the other hand, regression analysis is a statistical procedure for analyzing an associative relationship between a metric dependent variable and one or more independent variables (Malhotra & Dash, 2010).

**Table 3. Measurement Model Summary**

Measurement Item	Factor Loading	Reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha$ )
<b>CSR</b>		.850
CSR <sub>1</sub>	.879	
CSR <sub>2</sub>	.567	
CSR <sub>3</sub>	.805	
<b>Consumer Trust</b>		.795
CT <sub>1</sub>	.762	
CT <sub>2</sub>	.597	
CT <sub>3</sub>	.753	
<b>Purchase Behaviour</b>		.727
PB <sub>1</sub>	.670	
PB <sub>2</sub>	.624	
PB <sub>3</sub>	.723	

Note: CSR<sub>1,2,3</sub> ; CT<sub>1,2,3</sub> ; and PB<sub>1,2,3</sub> denote the question items (observable variable) in the questionnaire i.e. CSR<sub>1</sub> = Corporate Social Responsibility, CT<sub>1</sub> = Consumer Trust, PB<sub>1</sub> = Purchase Behaviour . where  $i = 1, 2, 3$

**(1) Scale Validity & Reliability :** A confirmatory factor analysis was performed to assess the construct validity for each item of the measurement scale (Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998 ; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). It was examined through convergent validity. Convergent validity is tested by estimating factor loading, and the values should be greater than 0.50. Reliability of the items was assessed by examining internal consistency through Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) method. For the reliability of the scale, the value of alpha ( $\alpha$ ) should be greater than 0.70 (Nunnally, 1978). As is evident from the Table 2, the factor loading of the entire multi-item scale is greater than 0.50, which ranges from .567 to .879. The reliability of each construct exceeds the value 0.70. Overall, the data is supported for reliability and comparable factor structure of three multi items scale, which allows a meaningful study of relationships with constructs.

**(2) Results of Hypotheses Testing :** To examine the effect of corporate social initiatives on consumer trust (H1) and purchase behaviour (H2), successive regression analysis was conducted.

**(i) Regression Analysis Results - The Effect of CSR on Consumer Trust :** Regression analysis was conducted between CSR and consumer trust, where CSR is the independent variable (IV) and consumer trust is the dependent variable (DV).

The results reported in the Table 4 indicate that the effect of CSR on trust, as hypothesized, is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). The result, therefore, supports H1. Thus, it indicates that the companies sincerely engaged in CSR activities win the consumers' trust. Our findings on CSR and consumer trust corroborate with the findings of previous studies such as the ones conducted by Maignan and Ferrell (2004), Luo and Bhattacharya (2006), Klein and Dawar (2004), and Becker - Olsen et al. (2006) as these studies also reported a positive association between firm's CSR and consumer trust.

On the basis of the results reported in Table 4, the regression equation between CSR and consumer trust is as follows :

$$CT = 4.66 + 0.49*(CSR \text{ Initiatives})$$

where,  $CT$  = consumer trust; and  $CSR$  = corporate social responsibility

**Table 4. The Results of Test of Hypothesis 1 (H1)**

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	0.83	0.69	0.69	0.66	
a. Predictors: (Constant), CT					
Coefficients					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
		Beta			
1	(Constant)	4.66	0.40	11.67	0.00
	CT	0.48	0.02	0.83	21.11 0.00

a. Dependent Variable: CSR Note: CT- Consumer Trust

**Table 5. The Results of Test of Hypothesis 2 (H2)**

Model Summary					
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	
1	0.68	0.47	0.46	1.06	
a. Predictors: (Constant), PB					
Coefficients					
Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
		Beta			
1	(Constant)	4.64	0.64	7.23	0.00
	PB	0.49	0.04	0.68	13.27 0.00

a. Dependent Variable: CSR

**(ii) Regression Analysis Results - The Effect of CSR on Consumer Purchase Behaviour :** In order to examine the relationship between CSR and consumer purchase behaviour, a regression analysis was conducted, taking purchase behaviour as the dependent variable (DV) and CSR as the independent variable (ID).

The results shown in the Table 5 indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship between CSR and consumers' purchase behaviour ( $p < 0.05$ ). Hence, hypothesis H2 is also supported. Our finding on consumer purchase orientation owing to firm's CSR is consistent with the findings of prior studies such as the ones conducted by Holmes and Kilbane (1993) ; Berger, Cunningham, and Kozinets (1999) ; Mohr, Webb, and Harris (2001) ; and Sen and Bhattacharya (2001). The findings of these studies suggest that CSR plays an instrument to influence the consumer behaviour. However, Ali, Rehman, Yilmaz, Nazie, and Ali (2010) posted conflicting results. They found no relationship between awareness of CSR activities and purchase intentions. Since their study was undertaken in Pakistan on consumers of cellular products, it was observed that a country's economic state, culture, and lifestyle have a significant influence on purchase behaviour. As Pakistan is an economically weak country ; thus, consumers there opt for low price products with high service quality. Hence, their study (Ali et al., 2010) showed that consumers in Pakistan did not consider a firm's CSR as a purchase factor.

The regression equation between CSR and consumer's purchase behaviour is as follows :

$$PB = 4.64 + 0.49*(CSR \text{ Initiatives})$$

where,  $PB$  = purchase behaviour

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The hypothesized relationship between CSR and consumer trust is found to be positively significant. This confirms that Indian consumers have a favourable attitude towards those companies that are engaged in social activities apart from their obvious one of businesses. Consumers feel that a company operates in the society, consumes the natural resources and hence, has an obligation to give something back to society by providing its financial, managerial, and technical resources.

The present study explores that the consumers look for the sincerity of the companies, no matter how they provide social assistance, while engaging in such social initiatives. If they (companies) fail to assure the consumers of their honest and sincere motto of involvement into social issues, the adverse effect would be on their businesses. It is also found that consumers perceive the effectiveness of social programs from the factors- subject, sincerity performance, and value of social assistance provided.

Our second hypothesis (H2) is also in the hypothesized direction, that is, CSR of companies has a statistically positive influence on consumer purchase behaviour. Firms that engage in socially responsible behaviour will gain word of mouth, legitimization to operate in local communities, gain talent and loyal employees, investors, and customers (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006 ; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). On the other hand, the socially irresponsible companies will have a substantial impact on consumers' behaviour, indicating that the negative bias exists. The differences between various demographic groups indicate that companies must take into consideration these differences when implementing CSR initiatives. To conclude, the findings of the present study show that CSR can play a significant role in building a long term relationship with consumers. It encourages consumers to trust a company to the term of exchange (perceived credibility) which finally adds to favourable purchase behaviour.

## **Managerial Implications**

This research makes a contribution to understand the underlying dynamics of the role of CSR in consumers' trust and behaviour formation towards a company. The results of this study indicate that social initiatives, for example, CSR has a significant relationship with consumers' trust and purchase behaviour. Thus, implications of this study are that managers should note that this research supports previous results reported in the literature ; thereby suggesting that a substantial, viable, and identifiable consumer group exists that considers a company's level of social responsibility in its purchase decisions. Managers, therefore, must focus on to exhibit socially responsible behaviour in their every dealing with the intended stakeholders. The findings of the present study will also be useful for managers in formulating socially responsible marketing strategies, which is the need of hour for current market survival. For manufacturers and retailers, it is an opportunity to appeal to this group while simultaneously meeting their business objectives and make contributions to the society.

## **Limitations of the Study and Scope for Future Research**

Like any other study, this study also has some limitations; first is the generalization of the findings since the present study analyzed only 203 consumer responses to come to a conclusion. However, for more robustness and validity of results, future research in this direction should go for a larger sample size. Also, future research in this direction can be industry specific to have unbiased results, as consumers from different industries have different perceptions and expectations towards companies' social responsibilities. Second, the findings of the study may be limited to India, a developing economy, as results may vary from developed, developing, to underdeveloped economies due to their economic status, culture, lifestyle, and purchase behaviour (Ali et al., 2010). Third, the current study endeavoured to examine consumer psychology only on two grounds, that is,



consumer trust and purchase behaviour. Future research may include other factors such as consumer loyalty, advocacy, consumer-company congruence (C-C congruence) developed owing to a company's CSR orientations.

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