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► To cite this version:

Laïla Benraïss-Noailles, Olivier Herrbach, Catherine Viot. The impact of CSR perceptions on employer attractiveness: an empirical study. *Question(s) de Management*, 2021, 32, pp.15-24. hal-03714729

HAL Id: hal-03714729

<https://hal.science/hal-03714729>

Submitted on 5 Jul 2022

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The impact of CSR perceptions on employer attractiveness: an empirical study

Laïla Benraïss-Noailles

Professeur des universités à l'IAE Bordeaux. Institut de Recherche en Gestion des Organisations (IRGO) – Université de Bordeaux.

laïla.benraïss-noailles@u-bordeaux.fr

Olivier Herrbach

Professeur des universités à l'IAE Bordeaux. IRGO – Université de Bordeaux

olivier.herrbach@u-bordeaux.fr

Catherine Viot

Professeur des universités à l'Université Claude Bernard Lyon 1. Laboratoire SAF (Sciences Actuarielle et Financière).

catherine.viot@univ-lyon1.fr

Benraïss-Noailles L., Herrbach O., Viot C. (2021), The impact of CSR perceptions on employer attractiveness, an empirical study, *Question(s) de Management*, 32, 15 -24.

The impact of CSR perception on employer attractiveness: an empirical study

Abstract

This study examines the impact of the perception of a company's commitment to CSR on its attractiveness as an employer, as perceived by management students. More specifically, it aims at checking whether or not future business graduates are more likely to be attracted to an employer based on their perceptions of that company's commitment to CSR.

A questionnaire-based survey was carried out with 295 first- and second-year master in management students in French and Moroccan universities.

Overall, the results show that the perception of CSR has no significant impact on the attractiveness of a potential employer. A country-specific analysis confirmed this result, as no difference between French and Moroccan students was found.

The paper's findings show that future employees may not be as sensitive to CSR aspects as could have been expected. It suggests that graduates are likely to be more attracted by their own expected working conditions as opposed to general CSR practices.

Keywords: Perception of CSR commitment, Organizational attractiveness, Recent graduates

Impact de la perception de la RSE sur l'attractivité de l'entreprise en tant qu'employeur : Une étude comparative

Résumé

Cette recherche s'interroge sur l'impact de la perception de l'engagement RSE de l'entreprise sur son attractivité en tant qu'employeur vis-à-vis de futurs jeunes diplômés en management. Plus précisément, elle vise à vérifier si ces futurs diplômés sont plus susceptibles d'être attirés par un employeur en fonction de leur perception des engagements en matière de RSE de ce dernier. Une enquête par questionnaire a été administrée à 295 étudiants de Master 1 et 2 en sciences de gestion, dans des universités en France et au Maroc. Les résultats montrent globalement un faible impact de la perception de la RSE sur l'attractivité de l'employeur potentiel. Une analyse par pays permet de confirmer ce résultat.

Mots-clés : Perception de l'engagement RSE, Attractivité organisationnelle, Etudiants en Masters 1 et 2

Events such as repeated financial scandals, recurring controversies calling the ethical behavior of business leaders into question and global warming have made it important for those companies that are conscious about their public image to demonstrate that they uphold the highest ethical standards. This general trend occurs at the worldwide level, albeit at different paces and with country-specific determinants and features.

In France, there has been increased interest in CSR practices since the beginning of the century. As of 1999, French companies are required by law to devote a portion of their annual report to their commitment towards social responsibility and sustainable development. This requirement now applies to all firms with over 500 employees. In a short time, these practices have become institutionalized, to such an extent that most listed companies now have a CSR or sustainable development manager in charge of implementing the company's social responsibility strategy. As a result of current legislation, CSR in France includes a growing number of social issues, such as diversity, disability and equal opportunities. Other issues related to a company's reputation are also reflected in CSR: change management and responsible restructuring, the promotion of social dialogue, quality of work life, etc. Therefore, CSR – as originally and currently conceived – extends beyond abiding by legal standards to defining a broader management philosophy and is one way to increase attractiveness and social branding as evidence of fair working conditions.

In Morocco, the royal speech delivered during the 3rd *Intégrales de l'Investissement* (investment conference, in 2005) encouraged companies to establish CSR indicators and tools: *“Social responsibility requires more than charitable compassion since it is an essential condition for the sustainability, long-term profitability and social acceptability of investments and economic growth. Keeping this in mind, we are closely monitoring the development of a flow of financial investments and placements combining legitimate goals of cost-efficiency and profits with the equally legitimate universal goals of social responsibility and sustainable human development. Morocco, in light of its legislation and political choices, is an able and willing partner and destination for socially responsible investors and upholds the highest social, environmental, and governance standards”*. In accordance with this initiative, the CGEM (Confédération Générale des Entreprises du Maroc – General Confederation of Moroccan Companies) introduced in 2005 the first prize designed to reward socially-responsible companies for their commitment to CSR and organized a national conference to promote CSR in Morocco. This confederation has since adopted a social responsibility charter and introduced its own social label (Benraïss-Noailles & Bentaleb, 2014).

The impact of Morocco's opening up to the international market has also contributed to companies paying greater attention to their social responsibility practices. The presence of subsidiaries of multinational firms that are submitted to the requirements of their parent companies in terms of CSR has driven companies to adopt responsible practices. A study comparing the CSR practices of Moroccan companies listed on the stock exchange confirmed this trend (Benraïss-Noailles & Igalens, 2013). Based on the sustainable development reports available on the institutional websites of the companies under study, the survey concluded that the subsidiaries of international French groups make their practices visible and adopt a communications strategy that makes it easier to understand CSR commitments in comparison to domestic companies.

The present research aimed at assessing whether the alleged beneficial effect of CSR initiatives in terms of organizational attractiveness is empirically supported. This was done using an online survey of two samples of future business graduates in France and Morocco. In so doing, we first contribute to the CSR literature by subjecting one of its important assumptions to empirical enquiry. Secondly, we also relate this literature to the literature on organizational image and attractiveness.

1. Organizational attractiveness

Organizational attractiveness refers to the “envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization” (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005: 156). It affects a company's workforce in several ways. For instance, it may influence their compensation systems: potential employees are willing to make salary concessions if an employer has a good reputation (Cable & Turban, 2003). Organizational attractiveness also has an impact on a number of employee attitudes, including motivation (Berthon et al. 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens, Van Hove & Anseel, 2007), job satisfaction (Barakat et al., 2016; Bodderas et al., 2011; Davies 2008), commitment (Kunerth & Moseley, 2011; Priyadarshi, 2011; Vaijyanthi et al., 2011; Love & Singh, 2011), loyalty (Priyadarshi, 2011; Mignonac, Herrbach & Guerrero, 2006) and retention (Tulasi & Hanumantha, 2012; Love & Singh, 2011). Several studies have demonstrated the impact of attractiveness on the intention to apply to and join a company (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009; Collins & Stevens, 2002), the probability of accepting a job offer, the applicant-to-hire conversion rate, the time required to fill a position and the number and quality of applicants (Highhouse et al., 1999; Cable & Turban, 2003; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009; Lemmink, Schuijff & Streukens, 2003).

Potential applicants use a wide range of information sources to learn about employers, including those that are not voluntarily provided by companies (Cable & Turban, 2003). Such sources include word-of-mouth (Van Hove, 2012) and social media (Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013). Empirical research has shown that candidates are most attracted to companies with a strong employer brand equity (Highhouse et al., 1999; Cable & Turban, 2003; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Lemmink et al., 2003). Previous research also confirmed that adequate employer branding increases a company's attractiveness for future graduates (Shahzad et al., 2011; Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009).

2. CSR and corporate attractiveness

Companies seek to set themselves apart from their competitors in order to attract the best candidates (Rynes, 1991). The characteristics of job position (e.g., pay) and company (e.g. location) influence job choice (Chapman et al., 2005). Creating a positive impression in the minds of current and potential employees is an ongoing process that cannot be achieved only through generous compensation programs; many other factors contribute to attractiveness, such as work culture, HR policies, job satisfaction, the company's social image, and many others (Kashikar-Rao, 2014).

However, these factors do not effectively differentiate between companies seeking candidates with the same profiles. Certain CSR practices, on the other hand, may be strong distinguishing factors that allow a responsible company to stand out from other potential employers (Jones, Willness & Madey, 2014; Peretti, 2019). CSR is a broad and evolving construction which makes its definition quite difficult (Zweers, 2015). For Elkington, (1997), most definitions of CSR use a generic term that includes economic (basic need for financial success), social (linked to problems of poverty, health and income inequality) and environmental (business activities impact on the environment and natural resources).

For Kashikar-Rao (2014), there is a link between organizational reputation, organizational perceived CSR and employer brand. Now, companies have realized that CSR is inextricably linked to their reputation among external and internal stakeholders. As a result, CSR performance may enhance a company's attractiveness as an employer (Backhaus et al., 2002), leading Ewing et al. (2002) to consider CSR commitments, when upheld, to be assets in terms of perception of a company and its potential attractiveness. For Grigore and Stancu (2011), socially engaged companies have an advantage over other companies in terms of attractiveness. They propose a model in which values, CSR strategy and benefits for employees as a result of

CSR practices play a mediating role between employees' perceptions of CSR and the employer brand (in terms of being a responsible employer). Indeed, *“by implementing a CSR strategy and sharing information about this subject publicly, organizations send signals to the job market and enhance their attractiveness”* (Capelli, Guillot-Soulez & Sabadie, 2015: 6).

Several other studies establish the importance of CSR and its effects on organizational attractiveness (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Bauer & Aiman-Smith, 1996; Gomes & Neves, 2010; Greening & Turban, 2000; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Aiman-Smith et al. (2001) evaluated two dimensions of CSR, ecological practices and lay off policy. They found that the CSR's ecological dimension was a better predictor of organizational attractiveness. Behrend, Baker and Thompson (2009) confirmed this result and showed that a pro-environmental message on the recruitment site improves students' perception of the organization's reputation. In another study based on a sample of business administration students, Turban and Greening (1997b) examined the effects of CSR as a multidimensional approach. The results show that an organization's rating on employee relations, product quality and the environment were the strongest predictors of organizational attractiveness. In another later research, Greening and Turban (2000) conducted an experiment in which CSR was manipulated in terms of relations with unions (weak and strong). The authors found that job seekers were more attracted to organizations with a positive reputation (strong union relations).

The perception of a company's CSR activities is therefore a key factor in building an employer brand image and in the choices of future applicants (Grigore & Stancu, 2011; Bhattacharya, Sen & Korschun, 2008; Backhaus et al., 2002; Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Turban & Greening, 1997a). Jones et al. (2014) identified the main CSR signals that affect organizational attractiveness. They included potential candidates' anticipated pride in being associated with a prestigious organization commended for its CSR efforts, as well as the expected work conditions resulting from the company's efforts to increase employee well-being through responsible practices on their behalf. After reviewing this literature, we propose the following hypothesis:

The perception of CSR affects a company's attractiveness as an employer.

2. Methods

To test our hypothesis, a quantitative empirical study was conducted using two samples of students in two different countries. An online questionnaire was used to collect data. We used measurement scales that demonstrated strong psychometric properties. This methodological

approach is consistent with the positivist epistemological position adopted for this research and has been a characteristic of most empirical investigations in the field of employer branding to date.

3.1. Sample

The Sphinx software was used to design the questionnaire and make it available online in order to collect data. The questionnaire was disseminated in Moroccan (sample 1) and French (sample 2) universities using a link sent by mail to students directly and shared on social media sites (LinkedIn, Viadeo and Facebook) between the months of September and December 2016. The current study is based on convenience sample. Interviewing future graduating students allows to target a population of potential employees and thus respond to the issue of the present study, namely the attractiveness of potential employees and the determinants of their choice of a future employer. Moreover, targeted individuals were students who were about to complete their studies. These upcoming graduates will be looking for employment in the coming months. Using this type of sample is a widespread practice in studies exploring the impact of CSR on organizational attractiveness (e.g. Turban & Greening, 1997b; Behrend et al., 2009).

Screening questions were used in order to include only first- and second-year professional master's students in management sciences as respondents for this study. The average age of respondents for the first sample (n=154) was 23 years and 11 months. Men represented 65% of the respondents and second-year master students represented 54.5% of the sample. The respondents in the second sample (n=141) had an average age of 23 years and 6 months. Men represented 56% of the sample and second-year master students represented 62.4% of the sample. The average age of respondents was 23 years and 11 months for sample 1 (n=154) and 23 years and 6 months in sample 2 (n = 141). Men represented respectively 65% and 56% in sample 1 and sample 2. 54.5% of respondents were second-year master students in sample 1 (62.44%, in sample 2). Therefore, both samples were taken from generation Y, as popularized by Coupland (1991), referring to individuals born between 1977 and 1995.

3.2. Measures

The survey instrument was administered in French. Except for the demographic variables, the response categories for all variables ranged from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). The respondents were first asked to think of the specific company they would like to work for when they start their career. Then, they were told to answer all items included in the questionnaire based on their assessment of this company.

The scale proposed by Jones et al. (2014) was used to measure the perception of the potential future employer's CSR activities. The items in this scale measure two facets of CSR

perceptions. The first dimension, CSR-Community, is measured by four items: *“This company gives back to its community (locally, nationally, and/or internationally)”*, *“This company takes part in voluntary or charitable activities”*, *“This company is active in helping its community”* and *“This company tries to have a positive influence on its community”*. Four additional items reflected the second facet, the perception of CSR-Environment: *“This company has good environmental policies”*, *“This company is concerned about environmental sustainability”*, *“This company tries to reduce its impact on the environment”* and *“This company is an environmentally friendly company”*.

The organizational attractiveness of the employer of choice is measured by an overall scale of organizational attractiveness (Rampl & Kenning 2014), including three items: *“I would accept a job offer from X”*, *“I would attend to apply for a position at X”* and *“I would very much like to work for X”*.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis – Moroccan sample

Future graduates were asked to answer an initial question about the company they intended to apply to after graduation. A descriptive analysis of the responses shows that for the Moroccan respondents, private Moroccan companies topped the list (49%). These companies included primarily the OCP¹ (13%), the banking sector (14%) and telecommunications (14%). The other responses in this category were divided between many other companies (mainly three large groups Al Omrane, Managem and Menara Holding). Next, came multinational companies (30%) – led by a three-way tie between Renault, Procter & Gamble and Unilever, followed by Google and L’Oréal² – and the public sector (21%). If we take OCP’s past into consideration (public company until 2008, but still associated with the public sector in respondents’ minds), a third of the respondents hoped to work in this sector.

In our sample, respondents are prepared to relocate in order to find their first job (92% will look for a job in another city, primarily in Casablanca) and a large majority (64%) had no previous experience in the desired company (64%). The absence of a first experience (e.g.: internships) in the desired company emphasizes the important role that a company’s reputation could play in respondents’ choices, since the choice is not based on the desired company knowledge.

¹ Office Chérifien des Phosphates (Cherifien Phosphates Office)

² These companies also appear in the 2018 Universum ranking (https://www.challenges.fr/entreprise/voici-le-classement-des-entreprises-qui-font-rever-les-etudiants-en-2018_576332). These companies play right into the aspirations of generation Y. For students, they convey a likeable and innovative image while offering a multicultural environment or the opportunity to work abroad.

4.2. Descriptive analysis – French sample

For the French respondents, two sectors topped the list: agri-food and ICT (17%) with Danone and Google being cited the most often in their respective sectors. The third most attractive sector was cosmetics with L'Oréal (12%). The aeronautics sector came in fourth place (9% of respondents), with Dassault as the top choice among this industry. More than a third of respondents (36%) indicated that they did not plan to move to a new location for their first job, while more than 20% indicated that they plan to start their career abroad. Out of the respondents who planned to move to relocate, Paris and the surrounding region was the leading destination for 34% of the respondents.

4.3. Results of the exploratory factor analysis

The exploratory factor analysis of the scale used to measure perception of CSR showed that it explains 50% of the total variance (Table 2). The resulting structure is one-dimensional, as seven out of the eight items in the scale loaded on one dimension. The second dimension was deleted because it was mono-item. Table 1 shows the factor structure of the scale. The exploratory analysis of the measurement scale for organizational attractiveness showed the expected one-dimensional structure and explained 81% of the variance (Table 3).

4.4. Results of the confirmatory analysis and discussion

The AMOS module of the SPSS software was used to assess the overall fit of the model to the data. The figure 1 shows the results. These results show that the perception of CSR commitment has no significant impact on a company's attractiveness as an employer. The respondents did not appear to be attracted to companies because of their strong commitment to CSR activities. Therefore, our hypothesis was not supported. A differentiated analysis of the two samples allowed us to confirm this impact. Figure 2 presents the correlations of the model for the two samples separately. It shows that the impact of the perception of a company's level of CSR commitment remained insignificant whether the respondents were from Moroccan (0.03) or French (0.11) universities. Therefore, the hypothesis was not supported for these two samples.

Figure 1: Research model

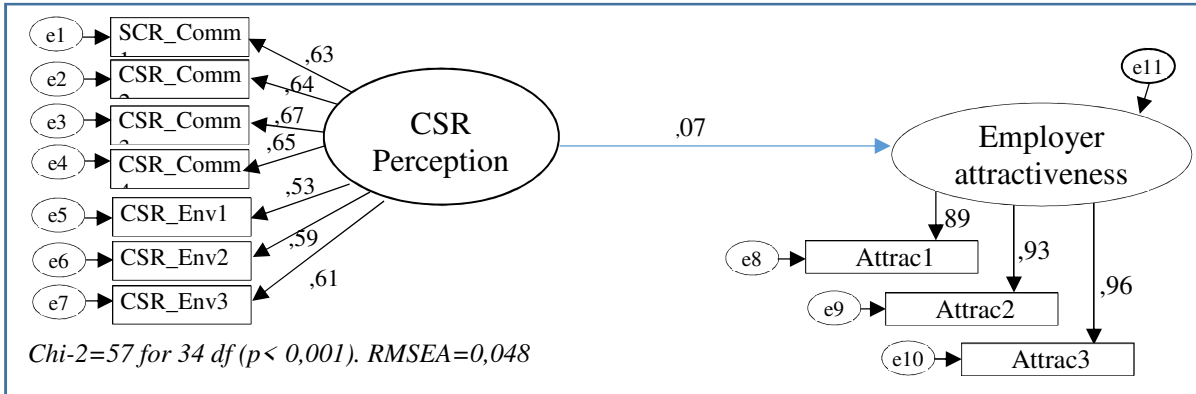
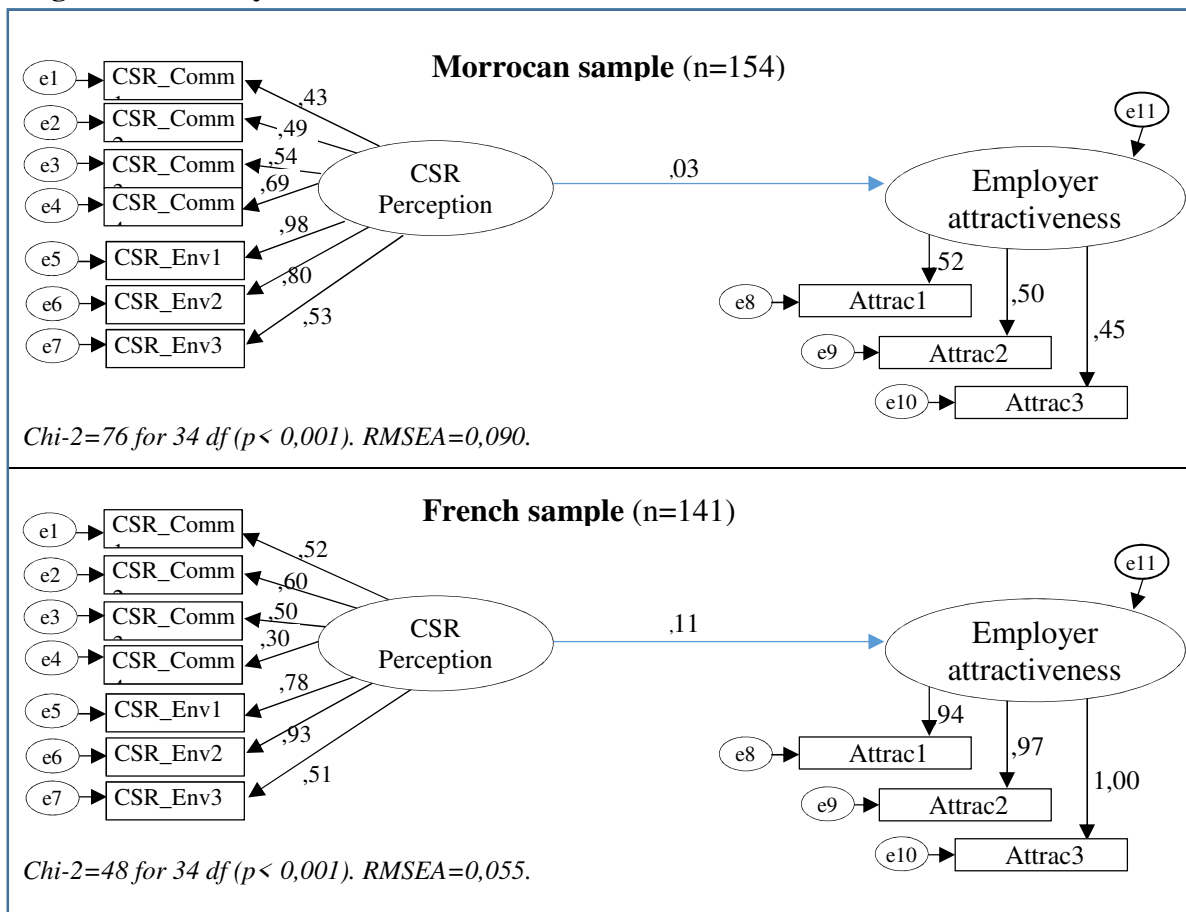


Figure 2. Country effect



5. Discussion

Based on two samples in different countries, perceptions of CSR did not appear to be related to organizational attractiveness. There are a number of possible explanations for these results. The first stems from the fact that CSR has become a widespread practice and no longer represents a means for firms to differentiate themselves. Indeed, since companies (and their subsidiaries) are required to communicate about their CSR activities and initiatives, all companies now

inform the public about their responsible practices for employees, society and the environment. It takes an expert eye to differentiate between more and less responsible companies, and an in-depth understanding of sustainable development reports, which is not often accessible to the general public. Such information concerning CSR – except when negative and reported in the media, therefore tarnishing a company’s reputation – does not impact choice and unaided awareness of companies perceived as having a positive reputation.

Another explanation could stem from a fear of being manipulated — applicants may pay particular attention to the credibility of companies’ messages about their CSR actions. CSR is often considered to be a marketing tool as it is increasingly present in institutional or advertising communications (Gauthier, 2006). Due to repeated exposure, a neutralizing effect may appear in relation to these messages. From a managerial perspective, this could raise questions about the importance of this type of message, at least in relation to recent graduates as a target. In any event, the credibility of corporate messages must be closely considered, in order to avoid the potentially negative effects caused by messages perceived as lacking credibility.

Next, the findings for the sample taken from French universities could result from the fact that students learn about CSR in management programs at these universities. This may have increased the respondents’ awareness of this dimension in a potential employer. It is possible that this awareness (at least for certain respondents) produced positive effects, as has already been observed for students in the USA (Jones et al., 2014), a country in which even greater emphasis is placed on CSR in corporate message strategies. Another explanation for this result comes from the rather feminine characteristic of French society (Masculinity score: 43)³ which means that the dominant values in society are concern caring for others, equality of the genders, solidarity and quality of life. While the score obtained by Morocco is intermediate (53), it is not conclusive. This result confirms the conclusions of Katz, Swanson and Nelson (2001) who found that countries with a female tendency were more willing to support the environment.

Knowledge about the dominant cultural dimensions may also provide additional insight. The collectivist culture which is common in Morocco could lead to a company’s CSR dimension being seen as self-evident, since CSR actions and commitments are to be expected. According to Labelle and St-Pierre (2015), the society defines what is expected from the company. Indeed, a collectivist society (like Morocco) will rather promote solid relations where each one assumes responsibility for the other members of his/her group. Employer - employee relationships are

³ <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/france,morocco/>

Hofstede Insights is a consulting firm (Itim International until 2017) for more than 35 years, founded with the support of Geert Hofstede.

perceived as a family bond⁴. Therefore, potential applicants would give little consideration to these actions in differentiating companies in their job search, and CSR messages would not be as necessary as in other settings. Previous studies have shown that culture influences the impact of perceptions of CSR (Kang & Alcantara, 2011).

Finally, it could also be that CSR perceptions may not be as important in terms of determining future employee choices as other aspects, such as the quality of the specific job position that people expect to have. More specifically, CSR commitments are not a determining factor for candidates seeking their first job. Their concerns are probably elsewhere (e.g. a good salary). The role of CSR could be more decisive for more experienced potential employees. This will be the subject of future research. Duarte, Gomes and Gonçalves das Neves (2014) have indeed shown that applicants' responses are impacted mostly by engagement in practices toward employees and in the economic domain compared to engagement in practices that benefit community and environment.

Conclusion

This research showed that the perception of a potential employer's CSR commitment does not have a significant impact on student intentions, whether from French or Moroccan universities. These findings could be further examined through future research in order to understand expectations regarding CSR in the two contexts.

Future research could examine the influence of CSR communication on a company's attractiveness as an employer in differentiating the aspects related to the environment from those related to the company's involvement in the community. This could be conducted by studying the reaction of potential applicants to different company profiles determined in advance using the scenario method. An important dimension in that respect could be attributions made about CSR motives by organizations. Joo, Moon and Choi (2016) have indeed shown that CSR communications are more effective when future employees perceive a company as being "other-centered" as opposed to "self-centered" in terms of the reasons for their CSR policies.

It should be noted that there are limitations to this research. The first is inherent to the sample. First, since the respondents are first and second-year professional master's students and are therefore not actually seeking employment, they may idealize their potential employer. It would be worthwhile to question them again once they have graduated and are actively seeking employment, in order to assess how their perceptions of potential employers' CSR commitment

⁴ According to the same website.

have changed. Second, since the students were not in an authentic job search situation, they did not have the necessary time to look for information about their chosen companies. Respondents spontaneously cited companies (unaided awareness). Depending on the information that they could have found about their chosen company's CSR commitment, they may have been inclined to modify their choice.

Another limitation is methodological in nature. the measure of Attractiveness by an overall scale may bias the results. To rule out this bias, it would be more suitable to use a multidimensional scale, such as that of Berthon et al.(2005). Using the scale for employer attractiveness by Berthon et al. (2005) could have produced differing results. It comprises five dimensions of attractiveness (Interest value, Social value, Economic value, Development value, and Application value) and the results could have shown which dimensions are the most affected by the perception of an employer's CSR commitments.

The last limitation of this work comes from the deepening of the impact of culture on the perception of CSR practices of companies, only a global approach of national culture was used for the two significant dimensions (masculinity vs feminity and 'individualim vs collectivism). The literature shows that culture influences both the design and implementation of CSR (Matten & Moon, 2008; Labelle & St Pierre, 2015; Gautier, Elbousserghini & Berger-Douce, 2016), and the perception of corporate CSR activities by stakeholders (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Aiman-Smith et al., 2001; Bauer & Aiman-Smith, 1996; Behrend et al., 2009; Gomes & Neves, 2010; Greening & Turban, 2000; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). However, little research has been conducted to date on the perceptions of CSR initiatives by potential employees (Mueller et al., 2012, Zweers, 2015). Future comparative research could take into account the culture's dimensions in order to identify and measure the impact of each dimension on the perception of CSR initiatives by current and / or potential employees, on the basis of Hofstede's VSM 2013 (Value Survey Module, 2013).

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