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Tarek Abid, Marie-aude Abid-Dupont, Jean-louis Moulins. What corporate social responsibility brings to brand management? The two pathways from social responsibility to brand commitment. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 2020, 27 (2), pp.925-936. 10.1002/csr.1856 . hal-04374323

HAL Id: hal-04374323

<https://hal.science/hal-04374323v1>

Submitted on 5 Jan 2024

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Why do consumers consider social responsible associations in their relationship with brands? The case of organic food brands

Abstract:

Social responsibility has become a cornerstone of marketing policy, enabling brand differentiation in a high growth market. By distinguishing between symbolic and utilitarian associations of social responsibility, our study identifies two levers for consumer brand commitment. We posit that utilitarian associations enhance consumer brand commitment by strengthening consumer trust. We also argue that brands can encourage consumer commitment through their environmental and philanthropic engagements by conveying values with which consumers can identify. This second commitment lever is argued to be particularly effective for consumers with strong social/environmental personal norms. We empirically test our research model on a sample of regular consumers of organic food brands validating the two pathways from social responsibility to brand commitment. The moderating role of consumers' personal norms on the process was confirmed regarding the philanthropic dimension but not the environmental one. Contributions and implications of these findings are discussed.

Key-words: Brand Social Responsibility, Brand Commitment, Brand Trust, Brand Identification, Personal Norms

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Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has traditionally been conceptualized as a managerial obligation to take measures that protect and improve well-being, both of society and firms' interest (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Despite the scientific debate as to the influence of CSR on firms' financial and economic performance (Brown & Dacin, 1997), CSR is generally considered to be an asset for firms, extending its shared value (Lindgreen et al., 2012). More and more companies consider CSR to strengthen the performance of their relations with principle stakeholders in particular with clients (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Indeed, research has shown that positive associations in terms of CSR increase consumers' trust towards the company (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008), leading to more positive evaluations of product quality and increased purchase intentions (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007). Besides, positive associations affect customer satisfaction and loyalty (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

Thus, more and more practitioners consider social responsibility as a central element of brand differentiation policy (Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005; Hildebrand, Sen & Bhattacharya, 2011) that corresponds to a new market of social responsibility (Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009). Certain brands such as "Ben & Jerry", "Ecover", "Green Mountain", "Patagonia" and "Björk", go beyond this, positioning themselves as "the socially responsible brand" in their activity sector (Lindgreen et al., 2012). However, most research has only focused on social responsibility holistically, without taking account of its different facets that are likely to condition consumer reactions.

Despite the number of studies demonstrating the influence of social responsibility associations on the consumer-brand relationship (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009; Lacey & Kenett-Hensel, 2010), to our knowledge, no study has yet focused on the process by which these different dimensions of social responsibility influence the consumer-brand relationship. To study this relationship, we examine brand commitment as a central variable of an effective relational marketing policy towards a durable relationship between consumers and brands (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). It seems crucial to identify the mechanisms and condition of this influence to design policies suited to consumers' expectations in terms of social responsibility. The objective of this research is thus to study how and in which conditions these dimensions of social responsibility influence the process of brand commitment.

1. Conceptual framework

1.1 Social responsibility and consumers

1.1.1. The social responsibility of brands from consumers' viewpoint

In marketing, CSR is generally studied from the point of view of the consumers' perception of the firm's activities and engagements related to its obligations towards society or stakeholders (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Most studies on the beneficial effects of CSR consider it as a one-dimensional concept (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007; Abid & Moulins, 2015). However, it is generally accepted that the domains of socially responsible activities are many and various (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). In this study we adopt a multidimensional conception of social responsibility in order to capture the concept's rich variety (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008).

According to Lindgreen et al., (2012), consumers may establish a relationship with a given brand without necessarily knowing the company behind it. Abid & Moulins (2015) propose an approach to consumers' perception of brands' social responsibility by focusing on

consumers' specific brand expectations regarding three dimensions : (1) the consumer dimension, or the brand's capacity to propose safe and healthy products and provide correct information as to their ingredients: (2) the environmental dimension, or the brand's capacity to reduce its environmental footprint and (3) the philanthropic dimension, or the brand's participation in the societal and cultural life of its locality and/or its support of important causes such as handicap or child-protection.

1.1.2. Brand social responsibility: a lever of brand commitment

Consumer commitment can be considered as the central variable of any effective relationship marketing strategy¹, resulting in behaviors such as stable preference, loyalty, resistance to temptation from competitors and/or word of mouth (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002; Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010).

Indeed, since Morgan and Hunt's studies, most research agrees that engagement is a central variable of relational marketing and plays a crucial role in describing and explaining brand repurchase behavior (Doney & Cannon, 1997), in particular "true" brand loyalty (Fournier, 1998). The present study follows this attitudinal approach to commitment that is widely mobilized in marketing research on consumer-brand relations (Terrasse, 2006). Commitment can be defined as a psychological state that reflects the consumer's desire to continue a relationship with the brand, even if this means making sacrifices (Terrasse, 2006).

The influence of perceptions of social responsibility on consumers' commitment towards a company has received a certain amount of support (Pérez & Del Bosque, 2014). Recently, research has proved that this influence also exists between consumers and brands (Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010). Nevertheless, the literature explains this influence through different theoretical perspectives.

¹ Morgan & Hunt (1994, p.22) define relationship marketing as "all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing and maintaining successful relational exchanges".

When we consider social responsibility from the angle of stakeholder theory developed by Freeman², CSR is considered as a way of improving relations with company stakeholders by offering them advantages due to the firm's policies and activities (Post et al., 2002). At the heart of stakeholder theory, is the idea that the firm's long term viability depends on how it manages relationships with stakeholders with a view to mutual advantage. According to this approach, the contribution of social responsibility initiatives on the consumer-brand relationship relies on the brand's capability to develop a contract based on consumer relations (Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005).

Based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), this approach explains the consumer's wish to develop a long-term exchange relationship with the brand after a subjective analysis of the costs and benefits to be drawn from these exchanges and in comparison with alternative solutions (Stafford, 2008). The consumer is committed to brands that he considers socially responsible for instrumental reasons, in other words, because these brands' socially responsible initiatives bring them personal benefits.

However, the influence of social responsibility on the firm-consumer or brand relationship has also been studied from the angle of social identity theory and self-categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This approach explains the influence of social responsibility through questions of identity. According to this approach, socially responsible initiatives have symbolic value for consumers (McEnally & De Chernatony, 1999) enabling them to recognize themselves in the values conveyed by these initiatives and thus developing their social identity through their consumption. In fact, socially responsible brands appear to be particularly useful vectors for satisfying consumers' needs for self-definition (Fournier, 1998).

²According to stakeholder theory, the firm, in its role as center of decision, takes on a responsibility "towards all those who whether closely or remotely, depend on its existence, development and survival": stakeholders in its activity (employees, consumers, public authorities, shareholders, suppliers etc.) (Freeman, 1984).

We suppose that the basic process of mediation between the different associations of social responsibility and brand commitment depend on the type of benefit (instrumental or symbolic) that these associations produce for consumers.

1.2 Hypotheses development

1.2.1. The influence of social responsibility on consumers' brand commitment from the perspective of social exchange theory.

The “consumer” dimension of social responsibility refers to the brand’s capacity to offer safe, healthy products and give correct information as to a products’ composition. This dimension has utilitarian benefits for consumers in terms of health or quality (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008; Abid & Moulins, 2015).

By sending consumers a signal of its capabilities in terms of product quality control and the reliability of information on product components and origin, a brand can be perceived as credible and honest, two central dimensions of trust (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Similarly, by committing to reduce or eliminate potentially dangerous chemicals from products, a brand sends consumers a signal of its concern for their health and welfare. Thus, consumers are more likely to perceive the brand as benevolent and so, trust it (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008; Abid & Moulins, 2015).

Brand trust can be defined as “a psychological state that reflects a set of accumulated presumptions concerning the credibility, integrity and benevolence that the consumer attributes to the brand” (Gurviez & Korchia, 2002). Trust rests on a mechanism of attributing characteristics, motives and intentions to the exchange partner, making it possible to evaluate that partner’s potential, assuming that behavior will be predictable and conform to promises (Doney & Cannon, 1997).

The influence of perceptions of social responsibility on consumer trust has already been supported to a degree in the literature (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008). Trust appears as an

indispensable prerequisite for creating and maintaining long-term relationships between the consumer and the brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Brand trust reduces fear of malevolent or opportunistic behaviors and leads to positive expectations that the brand will continue to fulfill its obligations in the future (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008). The importance of trust as a central mediator between brand activities and consumer commitment has also been widely demonstrated in the relational marketing literature (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Fournier, 1998; Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2002). We therefore postulate that:

H1: Brand trust mediates the relationship between the consumer dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment.

1.2.2. The influence of social responsibility on brand commitment from the perspective of social identity and self-categorization theory.

The initiatives of social responsibility that refer to the brand's capacity to reduce its environmental footprint, to participate in the societal and cultural life of its local region of activity, to convey symbolic aspects whereby brands develop their identity (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007). These aspects humanize the brand (Fournier, 1998) by revealing identity dimensions such as "values" that appear to be fundamental and durable compared to other classic identity traits (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007). When consumers perceive that they share the same values as those conveyed by the brand, they are likely to identify with it.

Brand identification refers to the "inclusion" of the brand in one's own concept of self (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), besides personal identity, the concept of self includes a social identity, that is, a form of psychological attachment to an organization apparent when organizational members attribute certain organizational characteristics to themselves (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). By identifying themselves with a brand, consumers express and reinforce their own identity (Ahearne, Bhattacharya & Gruen, 2005) by attributing the brand's positive characteristics to

themselves. Brand identification thus provides consumers with psychological benefits by strengthening self-esteem, making them more inclined to develop attitudes and behaviors favorable to the brand (Donavan, Janda, & Suh, 2006).

The influence of evaluations of social responsibility on consumers' brand or firm identification has already received a certain amount of support (Lichtenstein, Drumwright & Braig, 2004; Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007). Bhattacharya & Sen (2004) declare that brand identification motivates consumers to commit with the brand's objectives. To feel in harmony with themselves and avoid feeling guilty in their purchases, consumers commit with brands that they perceive as sharing the same values as them. Brand commitment thus results from a feeling of moral obligation to act in accordance with their values by continuing to buy brand products that share these values. The influence of brand identification on consumer commitment has been demonstrated empirically by recent studies (Ahearne, Bhattacharya & Gruen, 2005). We thus postulate that:

H2: Brand identification mediates the relationship between the environmental dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment

H3: Brand identification mediates the relationship between the philanthropic dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment

1.2.3. The role of consumers' personal norms

It is commonly admitted that consumers' expectations in terms of social responsibility are far from being uniform; they vary from one consumer to another (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). We postulate that these expectations are likely to condition consumer reactions towards the symbolic dimensions of social responsibility.

Research on organizational identification³ suggests that people are more likely to identify with an organization when they perceive congruence between that organization's identity and their own self-concept (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006). According to cognitive coherence theory, consumers seek balance and harmony between their beliefs and feelings on one hand and their consumer behavior on the other (McGuire, 1976). Consequently, consumers avoid choosing brands that are incompatible or dissonant with their own system of beliefs and values; they rather commit to the brands that are most congruent with their self-concept and their personality (Aaker, 1999).

We can thus suppose that consumers' reactions to the symbolic dimensions of social responsibility depend on the congruence they perceive between the brand's values as revealed by its environmental and societal commitments, and their own. These perceptions of congruence are likely to vary from one consumer to another depending on consumers' personal norms regarding social responsibility.

Personal norms can be defined as personal expectations based on interiorized values (Schwartz, 1977). They translate into a feeling of moral obligation to act in accordance with these values (Schwartz, 1977). This moral obligation generally stems from specific personal norms (Grankvist, Lekedal & Marmendal, 2007).

Personal norms, in terms of social responsibility, appear as the principal explanation of individuals' predispositions to support causes (Stern, 2000). Consumers whose self-concept includes high personal norms of social responsibility will thus perceive greater congruence between themselves and the brand, whether in terms of common attributes or shared prototypes, than consumers whose personal norms of social responsibility are low.

³For a revue, see Bergami, M., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2000). Self-categorization, affective commitment and group self-esteem as distinct aspects of social identity in the organization. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 39, 4, 555-577.

Since identification is at least partly motivated by people's need to maintain a coherent and positive self-image, (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail 1994), consumers are more likely to identify with a brand when its social responsibility efforts are perceived as corresponding to their own personal norms. They will thus tend to identify and engage with brands that they judge favorably on the symbolic dimensions of social responsibility.

We thus postulate that:

H4 : Consumers' personal norms moderate the indirect link between the environmental dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment via brand identification such that this mediation is stronger (weaker) when respondents' personal norms are high (low).

H5 : Consumers' personal norms moderate the indirect link between the philanthropic dimension of social responsibility and brand commitment via brand identification such that this mediation is stronger (weaker) when respondents' norms are high (low).

Insert Figure 1 about here

2. Material and Methods

To test our research model, we carried out a survey among regular consumers of national brands⁴ of organic foods sold through mass retail. Indeed, organic food is one of the fastest growing industries in socially responsible consumption⁵. The consumption of organic products is based both on instrumental motives, related to health protection, quality and to more ethical concerns such as preserving the environment and/or philanthropic activities (Magnusson et al., 2003).

⁴We eliminated retailers' brands

⁵Organic food reach a market penetration rate of 96.3% in 2013 "Kantar World panel".

Moreover, the choice of national brands sold only in supermarkets enabled us to control the effect of the image of the retail brands, specialized stores versus supermarkets⁶, on the relationship consumers may develop with the stores they frequent. In France, 81% of organic products are today purchased in small and medium sized supermarkets (CSA Agence du Bio, 2016⁷).

To select the brands likely to be included in our panel, we relied on the results of a national study presenting the 10 most purchased organic foods in France (Kantar, 2012)⁸. A distribution channel accepted to distribute our survey to its virtual community of consumers of organic products "Mieux Vivre avec Auchan" (Live better with Auchan). Auchan referenced a large number of organic food products including the list of national organic food products mentioned above. The questionnaire was sent to about 3541 consumers of the "Mieux Vivre avec Auchan" community.

The first question was about respondents' most regularly purchased brand. By concentrating on "regular" consumers, we could be sure that they had already established a relationship with the brand through their previous behavior and were engaged in purchasing, which is an important prerequisite for brand commitment (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, Terrasse, 2006). We then asked respondents to fill in the questionnaire with reference to the brand they bought most often.

We obtained 312 complete responses, representing a response rate of about 9%. Among the responses, we selected only those relative to the brands included in our list of ten national brands. Moreover, we evaluated consumer involvement in their purchase of the brand by using a global measure. Only respondents with a high level of involvement were retained.

⁶Specialized shops such as Biocoop have a more positive image than traditional retail distributors like Auchan or Leclerc.

⁷French Agency for the development and the promotion of organic farming, (CSA- Consumer Science and Analytics), <http://www.agencebio.org/comprendre-le-consommateur-bio>

⁸For reasons of confidentiality, we cannot present the whole list. For example, this list included brands like "Bjorg", "Jardin Bio" and "Les 2 vaches".

Strong involvement ensured in-depth treatment of information thus rendering brand consumers' evaluation more pertinent (Terrasse, 2006). The final sample comprised 299 respondents of whom 55% were women with an average age of 37 years.

2.1. Instruments of measure

To check for social desirability bias, we measured it with a 10-item scale by Strahan & Gerbasi (1972) adapted from the Crowne & Marlowe (1960) social desirability scale. Research on socially responsible consumption has shown that social desirability can influence consumers' responses (Roberts, 1995). Following the recommendation of DeVellis (1991), we withdrew items strongly correlated with social desirability; in all, 7 items were withdrawn respectively from the scales of identification (3 items withdrawn), commitment (1 item withdrawn), personal norms (2 items withdrawn) and trust (1 item withdrawn).

Consumer brand identification was measured using the 6 item scale of Escalas & Bettman (2003; 2005). After withdrawing items strongly correlated with social desirability, the 3-item scale presented good reliability ($\alpha = 0,923$).

Consumer brand commitment was measured using the Terrasse (2006) 9-item scale adapted to the French context of the Gruen & al. (2000) and Bansal & al. (2004) and scales. The three dimensions of commitment (normative, affective and continuous) were combined into a single higher order factor. The scale presents a satisfactory reliability coefficient ($\alpha = .891$) as do each of its dimensions (α between .858 and .865). We then undertook a second order confirmatory factor analysis to determine the fit validity. The results show an acceptable fit to the data ($X^2 = 83.42$, $df = 18$, $CFI = .95$, $TLI = .955$, $PAGF = .885$, $RMSEA = .11$) that is significantly better than the first order model ($X^2 = 390.74$, $df = 20$, $CFI = .744$, $TLI = .642$, $PAGF = .506$, $RMSEA = .249$).

Consumers' brand trust was measured using the [Gurviev & Korchia \(2002\)](#) 8 item scale. The reliability coefficient for this scale is .931; those of the three dimensions vary between (.899 and .925). We then carried out a second order confirmatory factor analysis to determine the data fit validity of the higher order factor. The results show that it fits the data very well ($\chi^2 = 6.08$, $df = 6$, $CFI = 1$, $TLI = 1$, $PAGF = .997$, $RMSEA = .007$), indeed far better than the first order model ($\chi^2 = 316.03$, $df = 9$, $CFI = .798$, $TLI = .664$, $PAGF = .442$, $RMSEA = .338$).

We used the [Abid & Moulins \(2015\)](#) 11 item scale to evaluate respectively the following dimensions: consumer ($\alpha = .911$); environment ($\alpha = .853$) and philanthropy ($\alpha = .921$) of brand social responsibility. Finally, we measured consumers' personal norms using the [Harland, Staats & Wilke \(1999\)](#) 8 item scale. After eliminating the two items correlated significantly with social desirability, the factor analysis also suggested that we eliminate two other poorly represented items. Finally, the factor analysis on the 4 remaining items enabled us to identify a unidimensional structure that restituted a little over 75% of variance and presented satisfactory reliability ($\alpha = .892$). All instruments of measure are presented in the appendix.

2.2. Analysis strategy

2.2.1. Test strategy for the mediation hypotheses (H1, H2 and H3)

To test our mediating hypotheses, we used the structural equation method (SEM) to evaluate the mediation since this method makes it possible to evaluate all the relationships simultaneously ([Zao, Lynch & Chen, 2010](#)). The SEM allows to test complex mediation models in a single analysis comprising several independent, dependent or mediating variables. Furthermore, by modeling the concept with latent variables, SEM takes account of errors in the measure of the mediator, which allows to distinguish a "true" indirect effect from one that is an artifact of errors in the variables to be measured ([Zao, Lynch & Chen, 2010](#)).

For each mediation hypothesis, we evaluate the importance of the indirect effect ($a \times b$) by using a bootstrap procedure. Bootstrapping is a procedure of sample simulation from the initial sample. There is a current consensus in the literature that recognizes the superiority of bootstrapping compared to the Baron and Kenny approach for testing mediation effects (Hayes, 2013). This procedure establishes the existence of a significant indirect effect when the confidence interval excludes 0. To establish the type of mediation (total or partial), we see whether the direct effect (c) remains significant or not. When the mediation is partial (the direct effect is significant), it means that other mediating processes, that have not been measured, are at work. Conversely, when there is total mediation (the direct effect is not significant), we can conclude that this variable alone explains the phenomena at work.

2.2.2. Test strategy for hypotheses of moderate mediation (H4 and H5)

Hypotheses H4 and H5 correspond to a conditional indirect effect, meaning that the moderating variable influences the indirect impact of the independent variable on the dependent variable (Hayes & Preacher, 2013). To test these effects, only simultaneous analysis obtains reliable and robust results (Hayes, 2013). There again, the bootstrap procedure is recommended in so far as it obtains a more precise estimate that does not rely on normality hypotheses, rarely verified for these effects (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). To test these effects, we use the macro PROCESS developed by Hayes (2013) that tests them directly using a bootstrap procedure using SPSS. The macro PROCESS generates a moderate mediation index associated to a confidence interval from the bootstrap.

3. Results

Table 1 below presents the standard deviations and correlations

Insert Table 1 about Here

3.1. Results of the test of the mediation hypotheses (H1, H2& H3)

The results of the tests of the mediating effects show that hypothesis 1 relative to the mediating role of trust between the consumer dimension and commitment is confirmed. The direct effect of the consumer dimension on commitment is statistically insignificant. We can thus conclude that the mediation is total.

Our results also confirm hypotheses 2 and 3 relative to the mediating role of identification between the environment and philanthropy dimensions of social responsibility and brand commitment. There again, the direct effects of the environment and philanthropy dimensions on commitment appear non-significant, thus confirming the total mediations. The tables below summarize the results of the test of mediating effects.

Insert Table 2 & 3 about Here

The global model including the three mediating effects explains almost 70% of the variance of brand commitment. It presents a good fit.

Insert Table 4 about Here

Furthermore, the inclusion of the mediating effects in the model significantly increases the model's fit to the data, as shown in the following table.

Insert Table 5 about Here

3.2. Results of the test of the hypotheses of moderate mediation (H4, H5)

Our results are not able to validate hypothesis H4 relative to the conditional effect of personal norms on the indirect effect of the environment dimension on brand commitment. Although the indirect effects appear significant with different levels of moderator, the index of moderate mediation presents a confidence interval that includes 0. Tables 6 and 7 below present these results in detail.

Insert Table 6&7 about Here

Our results confirm to the conditional effect of personal norms on the indirect effect of the philanthropy dimension on brand commitment through identification, validating hypothesis H5. The tables below present the results of the test of indirect effects at different values of the moderator as well as the index of moderate mediation. The index of moderate mediation presents a confidence interval that excludes 0 with respect to the philanthropy dimension. We can deduce that personal norms condition the strength of the indirect effect of the philanthropic dimension on brand commitment through identification. The indirect effect appears significantly stronger when consumers' personal norms are high, as we hypothesized. Tables 8 and 9 present these results in detail.

Insert Table 8&9 about Here

4. Discussion

Our research is part of the stream dealing with the beneficial effect of social responsibility on the consumer-brand relationship. It extends previous studies by using a dual theoretical framework to explain the processes involved in different associations of social responsibility influence on consumer brand commitment.

Notably, this research confirms the need to consider social responsibility with its different dimensions. By distinguishing the instrumental and symbolic dimensions of brand social responsibility, our study identifies the mechanisms through which the different associations of social responsibility can impact consumers. It seems necessary to go beyond the holistic view of social responsibility in order to understand this effect.

Our results show that the mediating processes at work between the different associations of social responsibility and consumer brand commitment depend on the type of benefits that these associations convey (utilitarian or symbolic). Our research also reconciles two

theoretical perspectives that have often been considered separately to explain the benefits of social responsibility in the consumer-brand relationship.

Previous studies on the beneficial effects of company social responsibility have highlighted the crucial role of trust, presented as the fundamental mechanism of consumer commitment and loyalty (Swain & Chumpitaz, 2008) in a context where skepticism and suspicion of firm behavior is rife (Bibb & Kourdi, 2004). The brand's capacity to protect consumers' health and provide clear information on product ingredients appears to be an attribute of brand reputation. It sends out positive signals (Spence, 1974) regarding the quality of products and offerings (Brown & Dacin, 1997) as well as firms' capacity to watch over consumers' well-being. The consumer dimension of social responsibility thus influences the consumer-brand relationship according to a classic relational process, based on reciprocity and respect of promises in the exchange. Trust plays a central role (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) as a mechanism of consumer commitment concerning the consumer dimension of social responsibility.

However, our research shows that trust is not the only lever of consumer commitment. In fact, consumption is not related only to a functional end but also fulfills a role of expression (Baudillard, 1970). The symbolic aspects of social responsibility provide consumers with means for self-fulfillment and expression of their values and ideals through consumption (Ahearne, Bhattacharya & Gruen, 2005). This attractiveness depends on the brand's capacity to satisfy consumers' identification needs (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

More and more research is focused on the way consumers identify themselves with a brand, as well as the consequences of this identification on consumer-brand relationships (Lichtenstein, Drumwright & Braig, 2004). Our research extends previous studies by showing that brand identification is the fundamental process of consumer commitment regarding the symbolic dimensions of social responsibility.

Furthermore, our results confirm the role of personal norms that condition the influence of the philanthropic dimension on consumer commitment through identification. It thus seems that the influence of the philanthropic dimension on consumer identification and commitment is greater for individuals with strong personal norms.

The concept of personal norms has been widely mobilized in the literature of socially responsible consumption. It sheds light on why certain consumers are more inclined than others to adopt socially responsible consumer behavior. The moderating effect of personal norms is implicit in previous research on consumer reactions to CSR. This strongly depends on the personal support of the consumer for the social responsibility initiatives conveyed by the firm (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Several authors have also evoked the role of consumer affinity with the cause defended (Drumwright, 1996), the importance of the question for the self or personal pertinence (Creyer & Ross 1996). However, the research on the beneficial effects of social responsibility on the consumer-brand relationship has never taken account of the role of personal norms. The concept of personal norms, resulting from the work of Schwartz (1977), clarifies this effect by providing a theoretical framework that highlights this effect of individual dispositions.

However, the influence of personal norms on the effects of the environmental dimension was not supported by our analysis. This result can probably be explained by our field of study, namely organic products. Indeed, according to a study conducted in 2015⁹, preserving the environment is the second reason why people purchase organic products, just behind maintaining health. We can imagine that regular consumers of organic food products show

⁹13thbarometer of the consumption and perception of organic products in France carried out in 2015 by the “French agency for the development and the promotion of the organic farming” and supported by CSA (consumer science and analytics)
http://www.agencebio.org/sites/default/files/upload/documents/4_Chiffres/BarometreConso/barometre_agence_bio_public.pdf

strong individual predispositions to take account of environmental considerations in their consumption.

Finally, our research underlines the major role brands play in firms' social responsibility policy. Social responsibility is often approached at the firm level without taking account of the role of brands. This empirical research validates the suggestions of previous research holding that social responsibility can be applied to brands (Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009; Lindgreen & al., 2012).

Managerial implications

Our research attests to the central role played by the marketing function in setting up a social responsibility policy (Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005), particularly in terms of brand policy (Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009). Social responsibility applied to brands secures brand value in terms of durability (Hildebrand, Sen & Bhattacharya, 2011). Consumers take account of social responsibility criteria while evaluating the brands they buy. Studying social responsibility at brand level is even more necessary in so far as a large number of firms adopt mixed or multi-brand strategies (Lindgreen & al., 2012).

Our research shows that commitment mechanisms differ depending on the type of social responsibility initiatives highlighted by brands and their symbolic or utilitarian nature for consumers. Understanding these mechanisms helps to guide managerial decisions in terms of the design and promotion of various socially responsible actions that should encourage consumer commitment and loyalty. Brands positioned on attributes such as product safety and quality should communicate about quality certificates to develop trust and overcome widespread consumer skepticism (Bibb & Kourdi, 2004).

In terms of brands' commitment for social and environmental benefits, the objective should be to increase the attractiveness of brand identity for targeted consumers. For this, the characteristics of the targeted consumers should be studied to make sure that the engagements

made by brands are compatible with consumers' values in order to encourage brand identification. The communication should be thought of in terms of activating personal norms.

Following Schwartz' model, personal norms influence behavior under two conditions (1) when people think that their action will have real consequences on others' well-being; (2) when they can claim responsibility for this action to themselves. To activate consumers' personal norms and thus encourage their commitment, marketing managers should pull these two levers in their communication.

Like any study, this one also presents a certain number of limitations that need to be underlined.

First of all, we chose to test our conceptual model on consumers of only one product category, namely, organic food products. This choice certainly strengthened the internal validity of the research. However, it opens the way to a certain number of questions as to the possible generalization of the results to other product categories. The external validity of this study should thus be reinforced by studying other fields.

Next, we tested our model on consumers of national brands. Our results converge with those of researchers in Europe and the United States ([Maignan, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2005](#); [Lindgreen, Swaen & Johnston, 2009](#)). It seems therefore that social responsibility can contribute in a similar way to national brands, as well as to a global, transnational brand strategy ([Pestre, 2014](#)), or a mixed "glocal¹⁰" strategy ([Persais, 2010](#)). Further research should be conducted in order to test the model on consumers of multinational brands such as "Björk" or "Patagonia".

The third limit of this research is related to time. Like all studies in the relational stream, our research is transversal and does not take account of temporal aspects in the construction of

¹⁰While previous researches set local strategies against global strategies, [Persais \(2010\)](#) suggests combining both, benefiting from advantages of local and global CSR strategies.

a relationship. A longitudinal study thus seems appropriate to account for the role of interactions taking place between the consumer and the brand studied.

Regarding future perspectives, a promising avenue of research is the reaction to inconsistencies between engagements that firms convey and their actual practices when these are discovered to be divergent. In fact, we could imagine that consumer reactions to allegations of irresponsibility will depend on the utilitarian or symbolic nature of their commitments. Furthermore, mechanisms for reinstating trust may differ from levers of reconstructing the attractiveness of the brand identity. These research avenues appear particularly promising.

Finally, other variables may modify the relation between consumers and brands, such as the degree of consumer skepticism or the relative weight of social responsibility initiatives during purchase decisions. Other variables, outside the scope of the present study but identified in the literature on ethical and equitable consumption might also be integrated into future work. We can thus mention consumers' tendency towards collectivism or individualism or their sensitivity to products' origin. Cultural and/or national differences are highly likely to play an important role in evaluating brand social responsibility and its influence on consumers.

Figure 1: Research Model

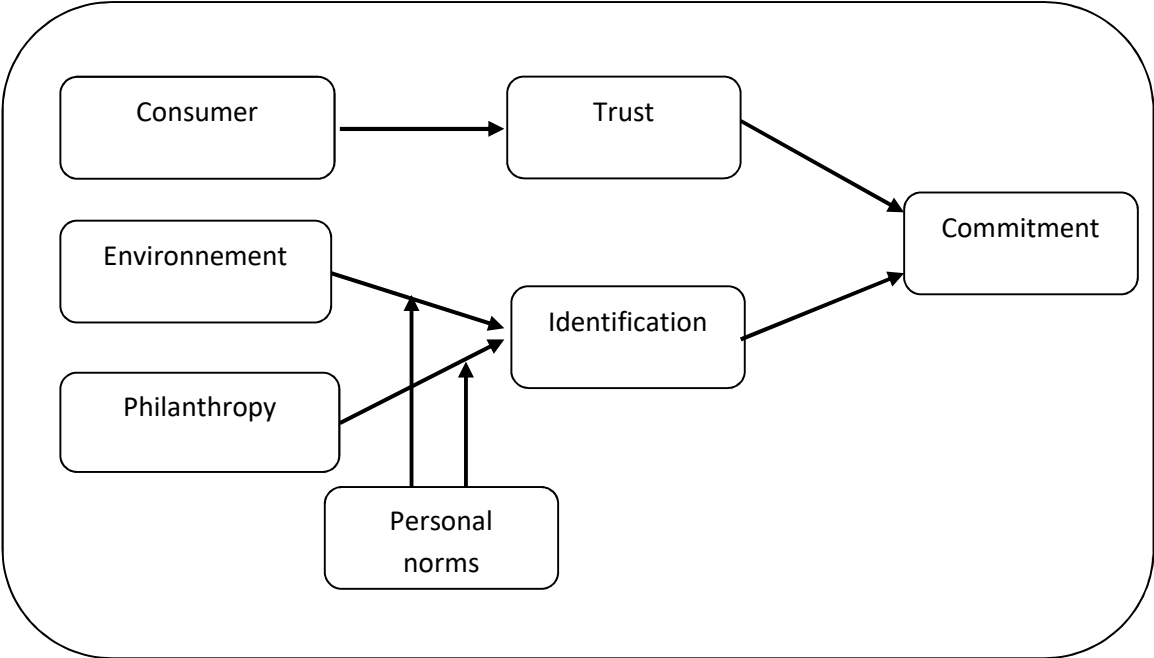


Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations and Inter-correlations

** p< 0,01 ; M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Consumer SR	6.30	.66						
2 Environmental SR	6.17	.75	.539**					
3 Philanthropic SR	5.61	1.14	.345**	.325**				
4 Trust	5.73	.88	.493**	.401**	.461**			
5 Identification	4.88	1.33	.545**	.534**	.509**	.656**		
6 Commitment	5.60	.90	.467**	.444**	.331**	.647**	.608**	
7 Personal norms			.244**	.277**	.241**	.318**	.362**	.315**

Table 2: Test of mediation model

	M1 Trust		M2 Identification		Y Commitment	
	β	t-test	β	t-test	β	t-test
Consumer SR	.565	9.544***			.053	.609 (ns)
Environmental SR			.449	8.383***	.097	1.415 (ns)
Philanthropic SR			.411	7.692***	-.110	-1.627 (ns)
Trust					.650	7.217***
Identification					.283	3.472***
R ²	.32		.50		.70	

Note: entries are standardized regression weights *p <.05; ** p<.001; *** p<.0001

Table 3: Test of mediation paths

Hypothesis	Indirect effect	Confidence Interval		Direct effect	Confidence Interval		Result
		Lower	Upper		Lower	Upper	
H1	.368	.246	.516	.053	-.131	.229	Full mediation
H2	.127	.046	.234	.118	-.022	.297	Full mediation
H3	.116	.034	.223	-.110	-.273	.038	Full mediation

Note: a: confidence interval of 95% for the indirect effect by bootstrap corrected for bias
b: confidence interval of 95% for the direct effect by bootstrap corrected for bias**Table 4: Model fit**

χ^2	do	χ^2/n	AGFI	CFI	TLI	RMSEA
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Table 5: Fit Improvement

	χ^2	df	$\Delta \chi^2$
Independent model	1305.8	316	
Direct effects	1213.6	313	92.2(3)***
H1	1034.2	311	179.4(2)***
H1 & H2	913.1	309	121.1(2)***
H1, H2 & H3	855.5	308	57.6(1)***

*** p<.001

Table 6: Model of conditional indirect effect of environment on commitment through identification

	M (Identification)		Y (Commitment)	
	Coef.	T-test	Coef.	T-test
Age	.097	2.131*	.075	1.985*
Gender	-.085	-1.923	-.056	-1.527
X : Environmental Social Responsibility	.467	9.503***	.138	2.958**
M : Identification			.390	8.330***
W : Personal norms	.249	4.997***		
X x W (interaction)	.002	.040		
R ²	.35***		.35***	

*p <.05; ** p<.001; *** p<.0001

Table 7: Test of Indirect conditional effect of environment on commitment through identification at different levels of personal norms(H4)

Moderator W (Personal norms)	Indirect effect	Confidence Interval	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
-1	.181	.121	.255
0	.182	.134	.240
1	.183	.126	.252
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>	.001	-.037	.036

Table 8: Model of conditional indirect effect of philanthropy on commitment through identification

	M	Y
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	(Identification)		(Commitment)	
	Coef.	T-test	Coef.	T-test
Age	.118	2.676**	.089	2.371*
Gender	-.134	-3.067**	-.078	-2.131*
X : Philanthropic Social Responsibility	.517	10.594***	.201	4.244***
M : Identification			.356	7.646***
W : Personal norms	.276	5.776***		
X x W	.091	2.033*		
R ²	.39***		.37***	
ΔR^2	.01*			

*p <.05; ** p<.001; *** p<.0001

Tableau 9: Test of indirect conditional effect of philanthropy on commitment through identification at different levels of personal norms(H5)

Moderator W (Personal norms)	Indirect effect	Confidence Interval	
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
-1	.152	.108	.208
0	.184	.135	.244
1	.216	.157	.292
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>	.032	.011	.058

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Appendix

Measurement Instruments

Brand commitment	
Normative commitment	
I have a feeling that I have to continue to buy this brand	.871
This brand deserves my loyalty	.826
This brand is good for me. so it is proper that I support it.	.782
Continuance commitment	
The withdrawal of this brand would bother me a lot. because no other brand suits me so much	.924
This brand represents exactly what I lookfor	.771
It's interesting for me to continue to buy this brand. because I find it superior to all other brands	.749
Affective commitment	
I feel this brand like a «part of the family»	.922
I'm ready (e) to do everything possible to continue using this brand	.783
Brand identification	
I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people.	.926
I consider this brand to be “me” (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).	.914
I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be.	.913
Brand Trust	
Integrity	
This brand is always honest with its consumers	.897
This brand is always sincere with consumers	.876
This brand expresses an interest in its consumers	.795
Benevolence	
I think this brand renews its products to take into account advances in research	.940
I think that this brand is always looking to improve its response to consumer needs	.891
Credibility	
I trust the quality of this brand's products	.933
Buying this brand's products is a guarantee	.901
Brand Social Responsibility	
Philanthropy	
Support humanitarian cause (s)	.945
Support social and cultural activities	.943
Help countries in ways of development	.900
Environment	
Make the production process more environmentally friendly	.918
Participate in activities which aim at protecting and at improving the quality of the natural environment	.897
Make its products as environmentally friendly as possible	.824
Consumer	
Propose safe and healthy products	.929
Respect the laws and current health legislation	.909
Propose organic foods	.866
Give correct information to consumers about product composition	.850
Personal norms	
I feel personally obliged to buy organic and environment friendly brands	.881
I feel morally obliged to buy organic and environment friendly brands, regardless of what others do	.906

I feel guilty when I don't buy organic and environment friendly brands	.786
People like me should do everything they can to buy organic and environment friendly brands	.905
Social desirability	
I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake	
I always try to practice what I preach	
I never resent being asked to return a favor	
I have never been irked when people expressed ideas very different from my own	
I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings	
I like to gossip at times	
There have been occasions when I took advantage of someone	
I sometimes try to get rather than forgive and forget	
At times I have really insisted on having things my own way	
There have been occasions when I felt like smashing things	