

Exploring the Mediating Role of Customer-Company Identification: The Association Between Perceived Corporate Social Responsibility and Customer Citizenship Behavior

Xiangyu Bian¹

Abstract

Customer citizenship behavior can not only reduce the production and marketing costs of enterprises, but also improve customer satisfaction and achieve long-term development. Taking the customers of Chinese Internet companies as the research object, this study aims to examine the role of customer-perceived CSR on customer citizenship behavior and to explore whether customer-company identification will act as a mediator in it. Through an empirical analysis of 832 Internet company customers, the results reveal a significant link between customer-perceived CSR and customer citizenship behavior. At the same time, the intermediary effect of customer-company identification also has a significant supporting role. Based on the findings of the study, the following management insights can be discerned: Internet companies should actively undertake social responsibilities. Companies should also strengthen communication with customers to enable customers to have a deeper understanding of the company's social responsibility commitments, thereby enhancing customers' sense of identification with the company. In addition, companies can consider creating incentives to encourage customers to engage in more citizenship behaviors.

Keywords: *Corporate social responsibility, customer-company identification, customer citizenship behavior, social exchange theory.*

INTRODUCTION

As companies continue to pursue long-term growth, enterprises have recognized the growing importance of fulfilling their social responsibilities (Székely & Knirsch, 2005). Customers, as essential stakeholders, significantly impact enterprises, as their expectations encompass both company capabilities and social responsibilities (Tian et al., 2011). Extensive research has demonstrated the beneficial effects of corporate social responsibility on companies, including improved consumer evaluations and increased purchasing behavior (Hayat et al., 2022; Matute-Vallejo et al., 2011; Pradhan, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Assuming corporate social responsibility has gradually become an important strategic goal of enterprises (Li et al., 2018).

The existing academic research on the relationship between enterprises and customers has extensively explored various aspects of customer behavior (Burlea-Schiopoiu & Balan, 2021; Chai et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2020). However, customer purchasing behavior has received considerable attention in the literature (Anuradha & Bagali, 2015; Fianto et al., 2014), but non-purchasing behaviors, including feedback, recommendation, and assistance, have been relatively understudied. In the realm of marketing, customer behavior is traditionally divided into in-role behavior and out-of-role behavior (Fatma & Khan, 2023). In-role behavior pertains to actions necessary for customers to engage in the

¹ International College, National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand, bianxiangyu2023@163.com

process of purchasing products and enjoying services, such as purchase and usage behavior (Grissmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2012). Conversely, out-of-role behavior encompasses voluntary actions initiated by customers that benefit the enterprise in non-transactional contexts, such as providing recommendations, suggestions, and assistance (Bove et al., 2009). This extra-role behavior, also known as Customer Citizenship Behavior (CCB), has a significant impact on the longevity of the business (Abdou et al., 2022). Nonetheless, comprehensive investigations into customer non-purchasing behavior, particularly customer citizenship behavior, remain limited. Consequently, further scholarly exploration in this area is warranted to contribute more evidence of practice to the development of customers and businesses.

The active participation of companies in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices can have a favorable impact on their stakeholders (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). According to the principle of reciprocity in social exchange theory, individuals tend to feel a sense of responsibility when they receive satisfaction from others (Matute-Vallejo et al., 2011), which leads to customer citizenship behaviors to express trust and appreciation for the corporate. Therefore, the adoption of social responsibility by the company, can trigger actively customer support (Carroll, 2016). This lays the foundation for further research on the link between CSR and customer citizenship behavior. While previous studies have shed light on the connection between customer-company identification and the expression of CCB (Tuzun & Devrani, 2011; Yi et al., 2013), there is a need for further exploration and understanding. Additionally, the role of organizational factors such as corporate social responsibility initiatives in fostering customer-company identification and subsequently influencing customer citizenship behavior warrants deeper investigation.

Therefore, this study aims to address these gaps in the existing literature by investigating how the customer-company identification mediates the connection between perceived CSR and CCB. By investigating how customer-company identification facilitates customers' willingness to participate in citizenship behaviors, the primary goal of this study is to provide insights into effective strategies for companies to cultivate a culture of active customer participation and co-creation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social exchange theory

Social Exchange Theory posits that individuals prioritize interactions with companies or individuals that offer greater returns, and reciprocate through actions (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Blau (1964) highlighted that social interactions involve various exchanges, both material and non-material, which contribute to the development of society as people engage in mutual exchanges. In the area of corporate social responsibility (CSR), enterprises undertake social responsibility as a form of resource payment (Abdou et al., 2022). In response, consumers, as the other party in this exchange, exhibit corresponding behaviors upon perceiving the resource payment, providing reasons to support corporate actions (Abdou et al., 2022). Consumers become loyal enthusiasts of the company through repeated consumption of its products and services (Glaveli, 2021). Consumer engage in CCB, which will have positive impact on the enterprise or other customers, as a special expression of gratitude (Aljarah, 2020). This illustrates the mutually reinforcing relationship between CSR, consumer responses, and creating a mutually beneficial exchange (Kim, 2011).

Perceived corporate social responsibility (PCSR)

Bowen (1953) emphasized that business operations should align with societal values. Since then, numerous scholars have examined CSR from the perspectives of stakeholders and corporate ethics (Jamali, 2008; Kim et al., 2017; McWilliams et al., 2006). Jones (1980) suggested that the fulfillment of social responsibility by enterprises should be a

voluntary action. Secondly, CSR also includes the fulfillment of appropriate social responsibilities to customers, employees, suppliers, communities and other related parties (Jones, 1980). Drawing from a review of existing literature, this study defines CSR as the voluntary responsibilities and obligations that enterprises undertake towards society, beyond their economic and legal responsibilities. According to stakeholder theory, corporate social responsibility (CSR) encompasses a company considering the effects of its actions on multiple stakeholders (Brin & Nehme, 2019). Among these stakeholders, customers play a crucial role and hold significant importance for businesses (González-Rodríguez et al., 2015). As consumers become more conscious about their involvement in the shopping process, they increasingly prioritize a company's social responsibility performance when making purchasing decisions (Green & Pelozo, 2011).

Customer citizenship behavior

Customer citizenship behavior has emerged from the concept of organizational citizenship behavior in the field of organizational behavior, with a shift in focus from employees to customers within the context of enterprises (Balaji, 2014). Groth (2005) introduced customer citizenship behavior (CCB) and defined it as voluntary customer behavior that, while not essential for the production or delivery of products and services, generally benefits the enterprise. Groth (2005) further categorized customer citizenship behavior into three dimensions: recommending, providing feedback, and assisting other consumers.

The relationship between corporate social responsibility and customer citizenship behavior

Dutton et al. (1994) examined that customers with a stronger sense of corporate support are more likely to exhibit customer citizenship behavior. Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) pointed out that CSR will affect customers' recognition of enterprises, and the behavior of recognized enterprises will generate supportive behaviors for enterprises. Using social identity theory, Dang et al. (2020) proved that Chinese retailers' corporate social responsibility plays a positive role with customer citizenship behavior. Moreover, Kim et al. (2020) divided corporate social responsibility into economic, moral, legal and charitable dimensions, and pointed out that CSR will promote the behavior of customers to recommend, help other consumers and provide feedback. Therefore, the follow hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Perceived CSR has a positive impact on CCB in Internet companies.

Customer-company identification

Customer-company identification (CCI) is a concept derived from the research of organizational identity (Ahearne et al., 2005). Lichtenstein et al. (2004) suggested that customers establish a sense of identification with enterprises when the characteristics of the enterprise align with their own characteristics or desires. Einwiller et al. (2006) viewed customer company identification as the degree to which customers perceive a connection between their self-defined characteristics and the characteristics of the enterprise. Bagozzi et al. (2012) proposed that customers experience a strong sense of identity and emotional response when they perceive a strong relationship between themselves and the company. Previous research has shown that customer-company identification can significantly influence various customer-related outcomes, including loyalty, and willingness to engage in citizenship behaviors (Fatmawati & Fauzan, 2021; Kang et al., 2015).

Corporate social responsibility and customer-company identification

Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) introduced the concept of customer-company identity and explored the connection between customers' perception of company identity and their behavior. Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) constructed a conceptual model of customer

response to CSR behavior. It is pointed out that CSR affects customers' evaluation of enterprises through customer corporate identification (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Bhattacharya et al. (2008) shown that the more active enterprises are in fulfilling their social responsibilities, the more likely they are to gain customers' recognition. Further, Pérez and Rodríguez del Bosque (2015) examined that customer perceived CSR will actively shape customer loyalty towards enterprises, and customer-company identity plays an intermediary role. In addition, Glaveli (2021) conducted an empirical study in a telecom company, which also verified that CSR initiatives will affect consumers' recognition of the company. Therefore, the follow hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Customer perceived CSR has a positive impact on CCI in Internet companies.

Customer-company identification and customer citizenship behavior

Customer-company identification is a cognitive state of the customer towards the company, which is generated by comparing their own identity characteristics with the company's identity characteristics (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Paulssen et al. (2019) pointed out that customer company identification can affect extra-role behaviors toward customers, and a company's reputation and image in the market will have an effect on customer citizenship behavior through customer corporate identity. Alhouz and Hasouneh (2020) collected data from hotels in Northern Cyprus that confirmed the correlation between CCI and CCB. Wang and Zhang (2022) also found that consumer-company identification promotes Chinese customer citizenship behavior. Therefore, the follow hypothesis is proposed:

H3: CCI have a positive impact on CCB in Internet companies.

The Mediating Role of Customer-Company Identification

Some studies have shown that CSR can promote customer-company identification, and numerous studies also confirmed that the identification of customer can promote customer citizenship behavior. Therefore, when customers perceive that companies fulfill social responsibility, customers will identify with the values, business purposes and business concepts of companies. And then generate customer citizen behavior such as customer recommendation, help and feedback (Fatma et al., 2022). Aljarah (2020) figured out that CSR will promote the recognition brought about by the benevolent trust perceived by consumers, and this benevolent trust will increase customer citizenship behavior. Fatma and Khan (2023) found that banking customer involvement as an intermediate variable was found to have an impact on the relationship between the two. Based on the above, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: CCI plays a mediating role between perceived CSR and CCB in Internet companies.

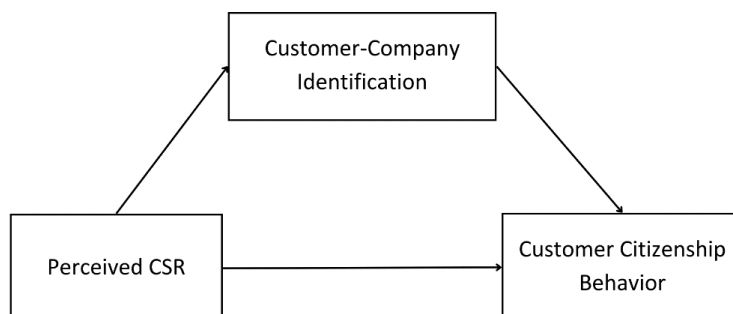


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

METHODOLOGY

Measurement

The measurement items of perceived CSR are adapted from Wagner et al. (2009). The customer-company identification scale is adapted from the scale of Fatma et al. (2022). The 12-item customer citizenship behavior scale with four dimensions is designed according to Yi et al. (2013). All scale items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). This study also used age, gender, educational level as control variables.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed by Wenjuanxing (WJX, 2023), a well-known Chinese questionnaire survey website, and data were collected online by simple random sampling method. The original English questionnaire was translated into Chinese, checked by several language experts, and then translated back to English to confirm the consistency of the questions after language conversion. In order to test the significant effect, this study plans to collect 800 questionnaires. This study use SPSS26.0 and AMOS 24.0 to conduct data analysis. After questionnaire collection and removal of invalid questionnaires, a number of 832 questionnaires were collected for data analysis.

RESULTS

Descriptive information about the respondents is shown in Table 1 below. In terms of gender, the number of females is 401, accounting for 48.2% of the total, slightly lower than the number of male 431 (51.8%). The proportion of samples is reasonable to ensure the objectivity of the results. Regarding age, the majority falls between 20 and 40 years old, constituting 60.4% of the total sample, aligning with the study's focus on internet company consumers. Additionally, there is representation from respondents aged 41-50 (21.4%) and over 50 (15.4%). In terms of educational level, the highest percentage had a bachelor's degree (38.3%), followed by a college degree (26.3%) and high school or less (19.8%). Those with a master's degree or higher accounted for 15.6% of the total.

Table 1: Demographic and work characteristics of samples

Constructs	Characteristics
Gender	Male: 431 (51.8%) Female: 401 (48.2%)
Age	20-30 years old: 263(31.6%) 31-40 years old: 240(28.8%) 41-50 years old: 201(21.4%) 51-60 years old: 128(15.4%)
Educational level	High school or below: 165 (19.8%) Junior college degree: 219 (26.3%) Bachelor degree: 319 (38.3%) Master degree: 108 (13.0%) Doctor degree or above: 21 (2.6%)
Monthly Income	0-3000 RMB: 196 (23.6%) 3001-6000 RMB: 228 (27.4%) 6001-9000 RMB: 203 (24.4%) 9001-12000 RMB: 170 (20.4%) 12001-15000 RMB: 27 (3.2%) Over 15000 RMB: 8 (1.0%)

Table 2 presents the standardized factor loading, AVE, CR, and Cronbach's α value for each variable. The study revealed that for each construct, the Cronbach's α value ranged from 0.687 to 0.944, and the CR value ranged from 0.828 to 0.951. These values exceed the standard threshold of 0.6, indicating an acceptable reliability. Additionally, each variable item's factor loading exceeds the acceptable value of 0.6. Therefore, the measurement indicators utilized in this study demonstrate good reliability (Kennedy et al., 2016). Table 3 shows the correlation between the variables as well as the mean and standard deviation. The table shows that there is a positive correlation between the variables.

Table 2. Reliability and validity assessment of each factor

Construct	Items	Factor Loading	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Perceived Corporate Social Responsibility (PCSR)	PCSR1	0.810	0.687	0.828	0.616
	PCSR2	0.779			
	PCSR3	0.764			
Customer-Company Identification (CCI)	CCI1	0.794	0.702	0.861	0.607
	CCI2	0.793			
	CCI3	0.737			
	CCI4	0.792			
	CCB1	0.796			
Customer Citizenship Behavior (CCB)	CCB2	0.797	0.944	0.951	0.619
	CCB3	0.829			
	CCB4	0.746			
	CCB5	0.677			
	CCB6	0.762			
	CCB7	0.778			
	CCB8	0.806			
	CCB9	0.826			
	CCB10	0.853			
	CCB11	0.788			
	CCB12	0.771			

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations

	PCSR	CCI	CCB	Mean	SD
PCSR	1			4.077	0.683
CCI	0.552***	1		4.320	0.617
CCB	0.820***	0.659***	1	4.291	0.637

*** $p < 0.001$

Path analysis and hypothesis test

After measuring the reliability, validity and correlation of variables, this study uses SPSS Process and AMOS for regression analysis and mediation effect path test. The research model and results are shown in Figure 2. The results of all hypothesis verification are: PCSR is positively related to CCB ($\beta = 0.6116$, $p < 0.001$). PCSR is positively correlated with CCI ($\beta = 0.4986$, $p < 0.001$). CCI is positively related to CCB ($\beta = 0.3061$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, H1-H3 are supported.

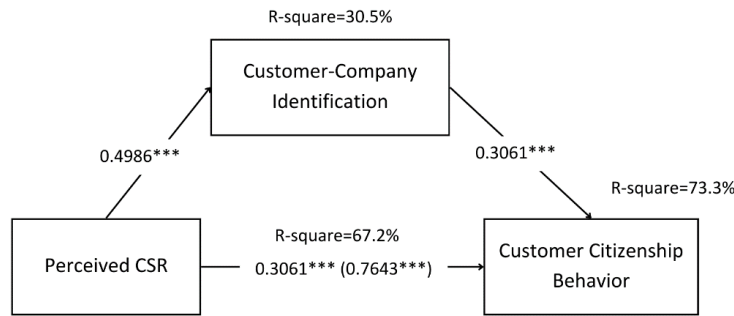


Figure 2. The research model and results ***p<0.001

Mediating effect test

To assess the mediating effect, this study uses the bootstrap method proposed by Bollen and Stine (1990) utilizing a 95% confidence interval and choose a bootstrap sample of 5000 for testing. If the 95% confidence interval between the lower bound and the upper bound does not contain 0, then the mediation effect is significant. As shown in Table 4 below, there is a significant mediating effect (p=0.000, LL=0.1180, UL=0.1917). Thus, H4 was supported.

Table 4. Mediating test

Relationship	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		P-Value	Conclusion
	Bootstrapping		BC95% CI			
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
PCSR->CCI->CCB	0.6116	0.1526	0.1180	0.1917	0.000	Partial Mediation

CONCLUSION

The research results show that, first, customers perceived corporate social responsibility will positively affect customer citizenship behavior, which is the same as other scholars (Dang et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020). Second, there is a significant relationship between customer perceived corporate social responsibility and customer-company identification. Usually, customers will recognize a company with a high level of CSR, which will enhance their identification with the company. Third, CCI will promote CCB. When customers identify with the company, they will give suggestions and feedback to the company, recommend the products of the company to others, and help other customers use the products of the company (Paulssen et al., 2019). Finally, customer-company identification acts as a bridge between customer PCSR and CCB, which strengthens customer engagement.

Implications

Companies should first pay attention to customer responsibility, provide customers with safe and reliable products, and treat every customer fairly. When choosing products or services, customers will not only consider the use value of products, but also take into account the social responsibility factors undertaken by companies (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Second, companies should strengthen the communication with customers. This is because customers may not fully understand a company's social responsibility due to their external position and information gaps (Castaldo et al., 2009). Timely disclose corporate social responsibility performance information can strengthen the friendly relationship (Du & Yu, 2021). Third, companies should actively cultivate customer citizenship behaviors. Customer feedback is an important tool for identifying problems and improving the

quality of products or services (Bose, 2009). Encouraging customer referrals can attract more customers and increase profits (Liu & Shih, 2005). Additionally, customers' willingness to help each other reduces the company's workload and ultimately increases overall customer satisfaction (Guchait et al., 2016).

Limitation and future research

This study chose the convenience sampling method in the sampling process. The age of the respondents is mainly concentrated between 20-40 years old, and the selected industry is the Internet company. Therefore, the sample may lack certain representativeness, and future research can expand the number and scope of the sample to make the results generalizable. This study only analyzes the factors that influence customer citizenship behavior. In the era of rapid Internet development, the influence of customer citizenship behavior on enterprises, employees and other customers is also constantly changing. In future research, it would be valuable to place greater emphasis on exploring the effects of customer citizenship behavior on employees and other stakeholders.

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