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Consumer intention to purchase and corporate social responsibility: Evidence from an experiment in an entrepreneurial context

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Abstract

Previous research has addressed the effects of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives on consumer purchase intention (CPI). However, most of the empirical evidence is based on the analysis of mature large-scale firms; much less examines the effects of CSR initiatives on CPI in entrepreneurial contexts. In this study, we address this gap by investigating whether entrepreneurial start-ups' declaration of CSR engagement affects consumers' purchasing intent. We assert that consumers may consider firms' CSR engagement as a signal for unobserved product quality. We exploit a vignette experimental approach to test our theoretical predictions. In our experiment, participants received online invitations to subscribe to an electronic catalog that advertised various products supplied by entrepreneurial start-ups. The invitations are of five types, some of which presenting different CSR-related information on the suppliers to the participants. Overall, we find that the displayed information on CSR engagement promotes participants' willingness to subscribe to the electronic catalog, indicating that consumers will increase their purchase intentions for ethically oriented suppliers. Moreover, we find that among all the initiatives, external CSR initiatives (social contribution and environmental responsibility) promote consumers' intentions to purchase most effectively. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first to explore the effects of different CSR initiatives on entrepreneurial start-ups in entrepreneurship literature. We highlight the heterogeneous effects of CSR initiatives on CPI, contributing new insights to research on CSR and consumer behavior.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consumer purchase intention (CPI) is defined as the possibility that a consumer intends to purchase a product depending on various personal and contextual factors (Dodd & Supa, 2011; Esch, Langner, Schmitt, & Geus, 2006). Recently, scholars have focused on the effects of firms' engagement in corporate social responsibility (CSR); defining CSR broadly as firms' pursuit of ethics beyond simple

monetary motivations (for a review, see McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Most studies indicate a positive relationship between firms' involvement in CSR and CPI (Chu & Chen, 2019; Creyer & Ross, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

However, while many studies have explored the association between consumer behavior and the CSR practices of mature organizations, there is a paucity of literature that links CPI and CSR in an entrepreneurial context. Entrepreneurial start-ups differ from mature firms because consumers usually possess significantly less market information on their products, leading initially to a lower level of trust.

Yun Liu and Cheng Xu contributed equally to this study.

Therefore, CSR involvement could be considered a vehicle that signifies the quality of the start-up's products, that may help gain consumer trust. It is also possible that since entrepreneurial start-ups are completely new organizations for most consumers, information on their CSR involvement is less reliable. Consumers may also be reluctant to believe that entrepreneurial start-ups have the capability to engage in CSR practices. Further, CSR comprises myriad and diverse initiatives like employee well-being and protection, each of which affects CPI differently. The literature does not address the heterogeneous effects of these different CSR initiatives on consumer behavior, preventing us from obtaining a wider perspective on the link between CSR and CPI.

This study attempts to fill these important gaps by exploring the effects of CSR involvement on CPI in an entrepreneurial context. Leveraging signaling theory (ST), we propose that consumers' knowledge about entrepreneurial start-ups is limited, and hence, many consumers tend to infer details on the quality of the products from information available on those start-ups' CSR involvement. Consumers tend to have a higher level of trust in start-ups engaged in CSR. We exploit a vignette experiment to test our theoretical predictions. We find that (a) consumers display a higher intention to purchase products that come from start-ups with CSR engagements; (b) among all the CSR initiatives, external initiatives like social contribution and environmental protection can stimulate CPI most profoundly. We conclude that CSR involvement works as a signal of the quality of entrepreneurial start-ups' operations and products and that external CSR initiatives can boost consumers' empathy more effectively. We also discuss the practical implications of our findings.

2 | THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 | Signaling theory

We leverage ST from information economics to explain the effects of CSR information on CPI. A key assumption of ST is that information asymmetries exist. In applying ST to management studies, scholars have found that enterprises could exploit CSR engagement as a signal of certain values. For instance, in a study of emerging economies, Su, Peng, Tan, and Cheung (2016) find that firms which adopt CSR practices, send positive signals to investors, proclaiming that their firms have superior capabilities for filling institutional voids.

ST is one of the most influential theories in neoclassical economics (Stiglitz, 2000). It asserts that when a firm cannot transfer direct information on quality to its customers, those customers will instinctively choose some alternative observable behaviors or trends to infer quality levels from. These alternative behaviors are signals. ST is widely used in many fields beyond economics, such as strategic management (for a review, see Bergh, Connelly, Ketchen Jr, & Shannon, 2014). Consumer behavior literature finds that many attributes of products are used as signals for certain attributes of product quality, such as price (Bergh et al., 2014; Boccia, Malgeri Manzo, &

Covino, 2018; Calfee & Ford, 1988), packaging (van Ooijen, Franssen, Verlegh, & Smit, 2017), and social media activation (Chu & Chen, 2019). Some studies have shown that firms' engagement in CSR can mitigate information asymmetries between focal firms and their stakeholders (King, Lenox, & Terlaak, 2005; Montiel, Husted, & Christmann, 2012). Through CSR practices, firms can signal unobserved characteristics to consumers, suppliers, and employees (Carroll, 1979; Fombrun, Gardberg, & Barnett, 2000). Consumers tend to believe that suppliers that engage more in CSR will provide better quality products. This is based on the belief that a firm that cares more about ethical issues will be ethically motivated to also provide better products (Siegel & Vitaliano, 2007).

Unlike for mature organizations, there is usually no information available on the quality of products and services provided by entrepreneurial start-ups because of their recent establishment. Thus, consumers may resort to inferences about quality via other observable behaviors of those firms. Thus, consumers use firms' CSR involvement as an important indicator of their sustainability and product quality. CSR involvement reflects the responsibility of firms toward society and the community, and it is expected that this spirit of responsibility extends to their production process. Hence, CSR involvement plays a key role in signaling the quality of products (Dodd & Supa, 2011); that is, if an entrepreneurial start-up engages proactively in CSR, it cares about consumers' interests, which then signals the trustworthiness of its products.

Thus, we propose hypothesis 1:

- H1.** Consumers will have a higher intention to purchase products provided by entrepreneurial start-ups with higher CSR involvement.

2.2 | Moderating effect of the nature of CSR initiatives

A plethora of research has focused on the effects of CSR on consumer behavior; however, various CSR initiatives may heterogeneously affect consumer behavior. Al-Shammari, Rasheed, and Al-Shammari (2019) proposed the division of CSR practices into internally oriented (e.g., employee well-being) and externally oriented CSR (e.g., donations). The first contributes to a minority group; the organization usually shares information on these activities internally with a limited number of persons or beneficiaries. For example, information on well-being initiatives is usually shared only with the employees of the firm. Furthermore, customers may perceive these well-being initiatives to be pertinent to the interests of employees only, and thus unrelated to themselves.

In contrast, consumers may feel that external CSR initiatives will impact their lives and therefore, they exhibit more interest in these initiatives. Consumers may perceive that they could also benefit from these initiatives. Thus, when participants enquire and receive information about a firm's external CSR initiatives, it can evoke feelings of empathy. We believe that when consumers process CSR information,

they perceive a relationship between themselves and those practices. Some initiatives could induce a feeling of connectedness (Wang & Chan, 2001). For instance, environmental initiatives relate to the broader community, and consumers may perceive direct benefits from those initiatives. In contrast, employee well-being does not directly affect consumers, because of the low possibility or coincidence of being an employee of the same firm.

Based on the discussion above, we propose hypothesis 2:

H2. The external CSR initiative promotes CPI more effectively than internal CSR.

3 | EMPIRICAL STRATEGY

We exploit a vignette experiment to test our theoretical predictions. The vignette experiment aims to present participants with carefully constructed and realistic scenarios to assess the dependent variables. These variables are intentions, attitudes, and behaviors (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). This approach has garnered increasing scholarly attention in the field of marketing (Gamliel, 2010; Yoon & Vargas, 2011). We constructed online invitations for subscriptions to an electronic catalog that displays various consumer products, such as cosmetics and snacks. In the baseline invitation, we offer a 1% discount for subscriptions indicating only that the suppliers are entrepreneurial start-ups; however, in the experimental treatments, we offer the 1% discount and additionally advise that those suppliers also practice CSR. There are three experimental groups practicing CSR, environment-related CSR, employee benefits, and social contribution. The fifth treatment offers a higher discount than the baseline treatment (the specific scripts of the invitations can be seen in the appendix).

We randomly sent invitations to 200 students via the student email list at a Chinese university with a total of 30,000 students. A total of 182 students responded, of which 174 were valid responses. In our experimental design, we represented the participants' CPIs through their willingness to subscribe to the catalog. We use this proxy for two reasons: first, subscribing to the catalog requires more effort to be exerted by participants than would be evidenced by simply questioning them of their intent to buy products from the catalog. Thus, their answers would be more reliable. If they agreed to subscribe to the catalog, they were required to provide a personal e-mail address and agree to receive frequent emails. Thus, they would be more cautious in subscribing. Second, we believe that the subscription action also reflects their willingness to buy a product. If they did not want to buy any products at any stage, they could reject the invitation.

The experiment comprises three stages:

1. The invitation stage

In this stage, we construct different versions of the invitations, including different information on firms' CSR engagement. We randomly distributed the invitations to the participants.

2. The questionnaire stage

Participants who have made a decision on whether subscribe to the electronic catalog were required to fill in a questionnaire composed of demographic questions. Those agreed will be additionally required to provide their personal e-mail address to receive the catalog. This step required that participants invest more effort toward the subscriptions process.

3. The explanation stage

After collecting the data, we sent emails to all the participants, indicating that the invitations were part of an experiment, that we were grateful for their cooperation; and that if they had any concerns about being surveyed, they could contact us for further clarification.

The dependent variable was computed as a dummy that was coded one if the participants agreed to subscribe to the electronic catalog and zero if they refused. For the robustness checks, we also considered the frequencies by which the subscribers agreed to receive the catalog.

As mentioned, we have one control group and four treatment groups in our experimental setting. We compute a multi-nominal variable for which we code the control group as 0, and the treatment groups as 1, 2, 3, and 4. The specific treatments are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 lists five treatments. T1 is the baseline treatment for which the invitation shows no information on CSR. In T2, the invitation contains information on environmental responsibility. In T3, the invitation has information on employee benefits. In T4, the invitation gives information on social responsibility, and in T5, the participants are offered a 2% discount on the products, if the electronic catalog was subscribed to.

We also included participants' demographic factors as control variables. Age is a continuous variable that indicates the age of the participants; education is a continuous variable that represents the total number of years of education received by the participants to date; gender is a dummy variable that equals one for female participants, and zero for male participants; and economics is also a dummy variable that equals one if the majority of the participants are economics or business majors and zero otherwise.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Descriptive statistics

A total of 174 valid responses were received. The specific descriptive statistics of the demographic variables of the participants across the different invitations are presented in Table 2.

4.2 | Subscription percentage across treatments

We collected data on participants' decisions on subscriptions across the five treatments. The results are shown in Figure 1.

From Figure 1, we can see that, on average, the baseline treatment (T1) has the lowest subscription ratio. The invitation with

environment-related CSR information (T2) has the highest subscription ratio, even higher than the invitation with a higher discount (T5). People usually show a higher willingness to buy when discounts are also higher (Tseng, 2016), thereby verifying Hypothesis 1. When these start-ups are more involved in CSR activities, consumers show a higher intention to purchase. We then conducted pairwise t-tests to determine whether these pairs were statistically significant. The results are presented in Table 3.

The results in Table 3 support our observation that, except for T3, the other invitations received significantly more subscriptions than

T1. In our experiment, we built a context that allows consumers to express their intention to purchase by subscribing to a catalog. Thus, H1 is validated, in that consumers will have higher-level purchase intentions toward those products supplied by entrepreneurial start-ups with higher-level CSR involvement.

Among the invitations that included information on CSR initiatives (T2–T4), the invitation containing information on social donations (T4) received the highest ratio of subscriptions. Hence, these statistical results validated H2, in that external CSR initiatives will promote CPI more effectively than internal ones.

TABLE 1 Experimental treatments

Enclosed information	Treatments
No CSR information – 1% discount	T1
CSR information – environment responsibility, 1% discount	T2
CSR information – employee benefits, 1% discount	T3
CSR information – social contribution, 1% discount	T4
No CSR information – 2% discount	T5

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics

Panel A: Baseline invitation						
	Age	Education	Female ratio	Economics ratio	Subscription ratio	Subscription duration
Mean	27.75	15.85	72.50%	70.00%	45.00%	36.30
SD	5.92	1.83				64.98
N	40	40	40	40	40	40
Panel B: Invitation with environment CSR						
	Age	Education	Female ratio	Economics ratio	Subscription ratio	Subscription duration
Mean	22.50	17.12	55.88%	41.18%	82.35%	113.50
SD	1.58	1.01				129.04
N	34	34	34	34	34	34
Panel C: Invitation with Employment CSR						
	Age	Education	Female ratio	Economics ratio	Subscription ratio	Subscription duration
Mean	22.16	17.16	57.89%	50.00%	47.37%	89.65
SD	1.97	1.001				113.65
N	38	38	38	38	38	38
Panel D: Invitation with donation CSR						
	Age	Education	Female ratio	Economics ratio	Subscription ratio	Subscription duration
Mean	23.47	16.63	68.75%	43.75%	65.63%	86.00
SD	2.42	1.79				127.29
N	32	32	32	32	32	32
Panel E: Invitation with higher discount						
	Age	Education	Female ratio	Economics ratio	Subscription ratio	Subscription duration
Mean	22.33	11.17	70.00%	36.67%	76.67%	86.73
SD	2.31	3.88				116.29
N	30	30	30	30	30	30

4.3 | Regression analysis

For robustness checks, we ran a probit regression with the choices of subscription as the dependent variable. A probit model is a type of regression in which the dependent variable can take only two values. The purpose of the probit model is to measure the effects of certain variables on others, and it is widely used in consumer research (Hsu & Nien, 2008; Rusmevichientong, Ebrahim, Nila, Cheng, & Weiss, 2021; Wang, Malhotra, & Lu, 2014). In our study, the dependent variable was, whether

FIGURE 1 Subscription ratio of participants in five treatments [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

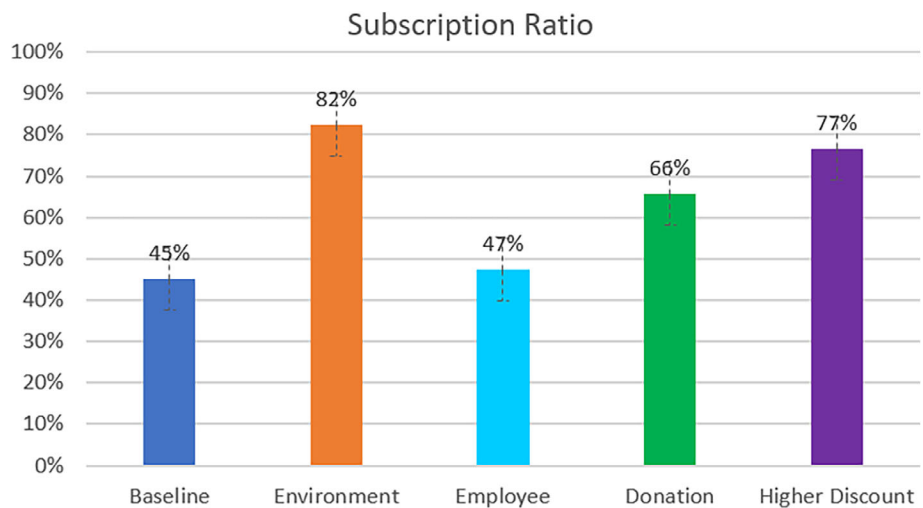


TABLE 3 Pairwise *T*-tests of subscription rates across different treatments

Pairs	<i>p</i> -value
Baseline-environment	.000529
Baseline-employee	.832302
Baseline-donation	.038878
Baseline-higher discount	.005755
Environment-employee	.001257
Employee-donation	.065588
Donation-higher discount	.478948

TABLE 4 Probit outcomes on subscription ratios of different invitations

Variables	Study
Age	0.095 (1.801)
Education	−0.123 (−1.456)
Invitation with higher discount	1.343 (1.866)
Invitation with donation	1.347 (2.397*)
Invitation with employment	0.843 (1.496)
Invitation with environment	2.508 (3.879**)
Gender	0.782 (2.176*)
Major	0.287 (0.795)
Constant	−1.541 (−0.765)
McFadden R square	0.124
Cox & Snell R square	0.151
Nagelkerke R square	0.206
Observation	174

Note: ***, **, and * indicate that the point estimate is significantly different from zero at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively. The SEs are shown in parentheses. The SEs are robust to heteroscedasticity by clustering at the individual level.

to subscribe to the catalog (Agresti, 2015); and the probit model was used to measure the effect of CSR information on the probability of a participant subscribing to the catalog. We also added relevant control variables: age,

gender, education, and academic major subject. The specification is as follows:

$$\text{Subscription}_i = a_0 + a_1 \text{Treatment} + a_2 X_c + \varepsilon$$

Subscription_{*i*} equals one if participant *i* subscribes to the electronic catalog and zero otherwise. Treatment is an independent variable that denotes the treatment accepted by a specific participant. *X_c* is a vector of the control variables, and ε is an error term.

The specific results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 shows that the coefficients for the invitation with donation are statistically significant at the 10% significance level, and the coefficient for the invitation with the environment initiative is statistically significant at the 5% significance level. These results indicate that consumers are more willing to subscribe to the catalog and receive product information from firms engaged in external CSR initiatives. Moreover, information on firms' CSR contribution to employee well-being does not stimulate consumers' interest in learning about the products of the company.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we investigate the association between CPI and firms' CSR engagement in an entrepreneurial context. By exploiting a vignette approach, we find that delivering information on entrepreneurial start-ups' CSR engagement can increase customers' purchasing intentions. Specifically, CSR information on environmental and social contributions can spur CPI more significantly than does CSR for employee well-being.

We would like to discuss some alternative explanations. First, consumers may be motivated to subscribe to the catalog because they appreciate the catalog provider rather than the product supplier featured in the catalog. In our study, we have not directly tested CPI; however, a subscription to the catalog can represent intention to purchase the products included in the catalog. This is a safe assumption because the only valuable information provided by the catalog in our experimental setting

is the product information. Consumers gain no other value, except for the information on the products via subscription to the catalog. This fact mitigates concerns that consumers subscribe to the catalog for other considerations.

Moreover, we believe that the manipulation of this experiment is effective. The baseline invitation offers subscribers a 1% discount for purchasing the products in the catalog, and the higher-discount invitation offers a 2% discount. Rational consumers would prefer a higher discount, *ceteris paribus*. As the empirical result shows, participants' subscription rate for the higher discount invitation is statistically and significantly higher than that of the baseline invitation, indicating the effectiveness of our manipulation.

Our research adds the following insights to the literature. First, our study enriches the literature on the CSR-CPI link. The literature has shown a positive association between firms' CSR engagement and CPI. We examine this finding in an entrepreneurial setting and find that, as in large-scale organizations, CSR engagement can improve the CPI of entrepreneurial start-ups.

Second, we contribute to academic discussions on the heterogeneity of CSR initiatives. Ex-ante literature mainly focuses on the overall effects of CSR engagement on CPI, but our research differentiates between the heterogeneous effect of external and internal CSR initiatives on CPI. In line with our theoretical arguments, we show that external CSR initiatives can promote CPI more effectively.

Our research also has implications for entrepreneurs. To secure consumer interest and increase CPI, entrepreneurial start-ups should engage in CSR initiatives and announce the details of such initiatives to targeted consumers. Specifically, entrepreneurial start-ups can improve their engagement in environmental protection to enhance the CPI of their products.

We identify the following limitations of this study. First, in this study, CPI is represented by the decision to subscribe to an electronic catalog. Logically, the action of subscribing can be a metaphor for CPI, but they remain different constructs. In the future, we expect that other CPI measurements can be used to explore this topic.

Second, in our study, we investigate several types of CSR initiatives, but there are others we have not considered like the firm's responsibility to its suppliers. Future studies could introduce more CSR initiatives to shed light on the heterogeneous effects on consumer and other stakeholder behavior.

Finally, consumer behavior is usually embedded against the backdrop of different societies. Our sample is composed of Chinese students, so we encourage future studies to be conducted in different countries and regions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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APPENDIX A.

Invitation scripts

{T1} This electronic catalog will provide you with rich information on a variety of products, such as clothes and food. If you subscribe to our catalog, you will enjoy a discount of 1% on the products listed in it.

{T2} This electronic catalog will provide you with rich information on a variety of products, such as clothes and food. The products listed in our catalog come from producers who strive to deliver value to customers through good business conduct that is economically and environmentally sustainable. They focus on environmental issues in all their business concepts and operations. You will enjoy a discount of 1% if you subscribe to our catalog.

{T3} This electronic catalog will provide you with rich information on a variety of products, such as clothes and food. The products listed in our catalog come from producers who are continually taking exceptional steps to treat their unionized workforce fairly and have instituted outstanding employee benefits or other programs addressing work and life concerns, such as childcare, elder care, or flextime. You will enjoy a discount of 1% if you subscribe to our catalog. {T4} This electronic catalog will provide you with rich information on a variety of products, such as clothes and food. The products listed in our catalog come from producers who have a long and proud tradition of supporting broader communities worldwide through a variety of philanthropic programs. Through charitable grants, in-kind product donations, and employee volunteerism, they have impacted and helped people around the world. You will enjoy a discount of 1% if you subscribe to our catalog.

{T5} This electronic catalog will provide you with rich information on a variety of products, such as clothes and food. If you subscribe to our catalog, you will enjoy a discount of 2% on the products listed in it.

Response to participants who made a decision (for T1–T5):

Thank you for your decision.

Please answer the enclosed questions. The information collected will be kept strictly confidential.

Best regards,

Name (gender not recognizable).

Affiliation.

Address.

Questionnaire:

What is your age?

What is your gender?

What is your major?

As of the moment, how many years of education have you received?

If you agree to subscribe to the catalog, for how many days are you willing to continue to receive the catalog?

If you agree to subscribe to the catalog, please leave us your personal email address, thus we can send you catalogs.

Your personal email address: