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Avoiding CSR skepticism through brand reputation and brand-cause fit enhancement

The influence of brand reputation and brand-cause fit on consumer skepticism towards CSR activities

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of brand-cause fit and brand reputation on consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. Consumers are more positive about companies that are involved in CSR activities. However, consumers evaluate their brand-cause fit, brand reputation and organizational motives to discern if their CSR activities are reliable on the company's values. Based on previous literature this study examined whether varying levels of both factors, brand-cause fit and brand reputation, affect consumer's skepticism towards CSR practices. Additionally, it investigates the role of perceived organizational motives on this relationship. A 2 (brand-cause fit: low, high) x 2 (brand reputation: low, high) between-subjects experimental design was conducted. The present study demonstrates that high brand-cause fit leads to less skepticism towards CSR practices. Results show that when consumers perceive that the brand has a bad reputation and engages in CSR practices, they will be suspicious towards the brand and it social intentions. Perceived organizational motives play a relevant mediating role between reputation, fit and consumers' skepticism. Therefore, communicating CSR practices can lead to positive attitudes, if brand's reputation, relatedness between brand and social cause, and organizational motives are evaluated prior to engaging in CSR activities.

Keywords: CSR, brand reputation, brand-cause fit, skepticism, perceived organizational motives.

Table of contents

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility has become a necessity for companies (Falkenberg & Brunsael 2011). Recent studies suggest that every company's goal to use CSR is to increase their corporate success through sustainability (Lii, Wu & Ding, 2013). Many studies explore different advantages (e.g. employee identification with the company) that CSR can provide to employees (Kim, Lee, Lee & Kim, 2010), consumers (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2007) and other stakeholders (Turker, 2008). Moreover, several studies found that CSR has a positive effect on brand reputation (Elving, 2013), customer and employee satisfaction (Korschun, Bhattacharya, & Swain, 2014), loyalty and engagement with the brand (Vlachos, Tsamakos,Vrechopoulos & Avramidis, 2009). According to Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) consumers are more positive about companies that are involved in CSR practices. However, most companies do not apply CSR practices that fit their company business (e.g. Marlboro giving economical support to lung cancer). This incongruence or congruence is defined as brand-cause fit. According to Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010) brand-cause fit is the perceived congruence between a social issue and a company business. Consequently, the previously mentioned CSR practices advantages, may depend on the degree of brand-cause fit.

If companies support causes that are related to their positioning and brand image, it could increase the consumers' perceived satisfaction with the company expertise (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). Hence, if consumers perceive that the company is involved in social initiatives, skepticism about corporate social responsibility practices would be lower (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Morel and Pruyn (2003) defined consumer skepticism as the "consumer's tendency to question any aspect of a company's product or activities, in any form it may appear (e.g. facts, inferences, or claims)" (pp. 3). Therefore, if consumers produce negative responses,

when the company communicates their CSR activities, a higher negative effect towards the

company's reputation and attitude would arise (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). According to Elving

(2013), when companies act for improving their image and their initiatives differ from what they

sponsor, consumers are likely to be skeptical. CSR practices used for selling more products

rather than engaging with the consumers' concerns can make consumers become suspicious

about the company's motives (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli & Schwarz, 2006). However, consumers

have different points of view of a company's CSR practices. Depending on how the company's

motives are perceived, their attitude and behavior towards the company changes (Marín, Cuestas

& Román, 2016). CSR efforts are related to the perceived organizational motives. Research

suggests that when consumers attribute values-driven and strategic motives to the firm, the

response to that firm and its offer is more positive (Ellen, Webb & Mohr, 2006).

When companies are involved in social initiatives, people could add different motives to

the company. Consumers' or stakeholders' response to companies' involvement in social

initiatives arises from their evaluation of the company's relation with social initiatives. If there is

a fit between the company and the social cause, it will influence positively the attitude towards

that company. However, if there is no fit between the company and the social cause, skeptical

attitudes towards the company could arise. Consumers could think that a company is involved in

social initiatives for self-interest rather than for the well being of society (Elving, 2013).

Therefore, the relatedness between company and social initiative could lead consumers and

stakeholders to attribute different motives to the company. Thus, it is relevant to understand the

role of perceived motives in the relationship between brand-cause fit and consumer skepticism.

Nevertheless, organizational motives and brand-cause fit are not the only issues to be

considered when we talk about consumer skepticism. Previous studies have demonstrated that a

company's reputation influence consumers' evaluations of their commitment with CSR activities

(Yoon et al. 2006). If a company's prior reputation is positive, consumers will evaluate the

company's engagement with CSR activities as credible. Whereas, if a company with bad

reputation engages in CSR activities, consumers will evaluate the company as less trustworthy.

Therefore, brand reputation has an important relationship with consumer skepticism.

Although many studies have investigated the relationship between fit, consumer

skepticism and brand reputation (Ellen et al. 2006; Yoon et al. 2006; Becker-Olsen, Cudmore &

Paul Hill, 2006; Elving, 2013), to our knowledge not many studies have incorporated fit and

brand reputation concurrently with perceived organizational motives as a mediating role.

It is relevant for academics as well as marketers to understand the effect that brand-cause

fit and brand reputation have on consumer skepticism towards CSR practices, mediated by

perceived organizational motives. Marketers and researchers have been trying to construct

guidelines to how companies can communicate their CSR activities in a way that prevents

consumer skepticism. The current study investigated how different levels of brand-cause fit and

brand reputation can influence skepticism towards CSR practices. Moreover, it aimed to

investigate the interaction between brand-cause fit and brand reputation, regarding consumer

skepticism. Consequently, the study focused on the following research questions:

To what extent do brand-cause fit and brand reputation have an effect on consumer

skepticism towards CSR practices? What is the role of perceived CSR motives in this

relationship?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

According to Windsor (2006) corporate social responsibility (CSR) is considered to be any concept concerning how managers should handle public policy and social issues. CSR is nowadays an important matter for public policy makers, marketers and academics (Rivera, Bigne & Curras-Perez, 2016) because is part of the current social agenda. Recent research suggests that consumer attitudes towards a company and their products are positively related to CSR actions (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Furthermore, if consumers have a positive image of the company, their willingness to purchase products will be higher (Du et al., 2010). Different CSR initiatives such as corporate philanthropy, cause-related marketing or socially responsible employment, are decisive for the company's financial status (Drumright, 1994). Moreover, CSR initiatives are used to create a positive relationship with consumers and diverse stakeholders, to address consumers' social regards and to create a propitious corporate image (Yoon et al., 2006).

Research shows that a positive reputation, increase of consumers' purchase intentions and loyalty can be generated by CSR involvement (Smith & Langford, 2009; Du et al., 2010). CSR is relevant for different aspects such as free publicity, attractiveness to be an employer, and tax benefits (Kim & Park, 2011). While CSR is beneficial for our society and the organization itself (Jong & Meer, 2015), the positive impacts can be less than expected for several reasons. CSR can be less beneficial for society as stakeholders might not be aware of them (Beckmann, 2007). Furthermore, when consumers are informed about the CSR activities in which an organization is involved, their attitude can be skeptical towards these practices (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Excessive CSR communication diminishes the perceived sincerity of the company's motives for CSR activities (Van de Ven, 2008).

2.2 Consumer skepticism

One of the most important aspects in CSR communication is to prevent skepticism. According to Webb and Mohr (1998), skepticism occurs when the audience questions, distrusts and has contrary feelings towards a company's societal obligations or actions, after frequently being inconsistent in behaviors and declarations. Similarly, marketing literature has focused on the consumer view of skepticism. Consumer skepticism can be defined as the consumer's suspicion or disbelief of marketer actions (Foreh & Grier, 2003). Consumer skepticism is mainly caused by advertising and marketing related messages (Helm, 2006).

There are two types of consumer skepticism: dispositional and situational skepticism (Foreh et al., 2003). According to Foreh et al. (2003), situational skepticism can be defined as the momentary state of distrust of an actor's motivations, whereas dispositional skepticism is an individual's ongoing tendency to be suspicious of other people's motives in general. Given that, the present study will focus on the role of brand reputation and the fit between the core business and the communicated social cause, the focus will be on consumers' situational skepticism.

Several studies have focused on the role of consumer skepticism towards different concepts (e.g. brand reputation, brand awareness). These studies found that, when consumers are skeptical, factors such as consumer attitude and company's motives have a negative influence on how they perceive the company's intentions (Foreh et al., 2003; Bae & Cameron, 2006; Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Ellen et al., 2006; Elving, 2013). Skepticism towards CSR initiatives arises from the distrust of the voluntary company's commitment to improve society. Consumers may have the belief that companies make use of CSR to increase their profits (Rim & Kim, 2016). Communicated CSR activities, through advertising, can negatively affect CSR-value if

consumers perceive an inconsistency between the company's CSR and its overall reputation (Servaes & Tamayo, 2013).

When CSR campaigns are not perceived as sincere, they can lead to a negative brand image, and result in a damaged reputation. Previous research has shown that companies with a low brand reputation are more susceptible to be considered suspicious by their stakeholders (Bhattacharya et al., 2004, Du et al., 2010). Moreover, higher credibility and more successful CSR initiatives are linked to good reputations (Du et al., 2010), whereas poor reputation leads to the opposite (Yoon et al., 2006). One of the possible important topics when it comes to skepticism is if there is relatedness between the brand and the cause.

2.3 Brand-cause fit

The relatedness between the brand and its cause is known as brand-cause fit (Simmons et al., 2006). Du et al. (2010) defined this concept as "the perceived congruence between a social issue and a company's business" (pp. 12). When the social cause and the company's business are perceived as congruent, the degree of fit between brand and cause will be high (Park, Milberg & Lawson, 1991). Different studies have investigated the brand-cause relationship and its effects on stakeholders (Pracejus & Olsen, 2004; Simmons et al., 2006; Nan & Heo, 2007). A company's fit has been exposed to have an effect on consumer skepticism towards CSR activities.

Studies that have focused on the fit between a brand and the cause are part of the CRM literature. Cause-related marketing (CRM) is a form of CSR communication, where companies implicate themselves with a good cause or non-profit organization, for example by donating an amount of money when consumers purchase one of their products (Nan et al., 2007). According to Nan et al. (2007) the fit will be higher if the brand and the social cause serve a related

consumer base (e.g. Yoplait yogurt and the fight against breast cancer, which provide health benefits to avoid future illnesses) or if the brand and the social cause have a similar value (e.g. Johnson & Johnson first aid products and the American Red Cross, both having the red cross on their products as a common value). Other studies on CRM, such as the one by Pracejus and Olsen (2004), contribute to the fit literature. The researchers found that brand-cause fit amplifies the effect of choice behavior and that high-fit leads to higher market shares. This effect on consumers' choice behavior will stimulate positive consumer responses and have a positive impact on their final choice. Accordingly, when the perceived fit is high, consumers respond favorably, whereas when the fit is low consumers respond negatively (Elving, 2013). It is imaginable that the fit between the brand and the social cause will influence consumers' suspicion towards the brand's social involvement.

2.4 Brand-cause fit and consumer skepticism

Some firms want to be perceived as doing something good for society with CSR initiatives (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Nevertheless, the firm's good intentions may not lead to desirable thoughts, beliefs or behaviors. Customer perception and brand-cause fit have a high-positive correlation (Shree, Gupta & Sagar, 2017). Moreover, low-fit may decrease the perception of corporate credibility (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). According to Foreh et al. (2003), skepticism towards a company is not only a matter of profit-motivation, but also an inconsistency between the brand objectives and its actions. In other words, consumers can perceive skepticism towards a company when the brand practices are focused on the needs of the brand and not on the well being of individuals.

In order to achieve positive attitudes towards the company and increase consumers' purchase intention, high fit is required to reduce the skepticism towards the organization (Elving,

2013). Moreover, Elving (2013) argued that high fit reduces the difficulty to integrate CSR communication into the consumer's mind. Congruence between the company's motives and the CSR activities will lead to less skepticism or criticism towards the company (Elving, 2013).

According to Yoon et al. (2006), consumers can be suspicious about CSR activities, leading to a more negative image than if the company had not implemented any CSR communication (e.g. tobacco company supporting the National Cancer Association). Moreover, if there is no fit between cause and brand, consumers will doubt the sincerity of the company (Yoon et al., 2006).

Thus it seems relevant that brands are careful in employing low-fit CSR initiatives and motives in their communication because it can reduce the negative impact on the consumers' perceptions of credibility (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Based on previous literature, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

> *H1: A high brand-cause fit will produce less skepticism towards CSR practices than a low brand-cause fit.*

2.5 Brand reputation

In addition to a main effect of brand-cause fit on consumer skepticism, different levels of brand reputation will modify consumer's perceptions of credibility. The result of the perceptions that individuals have of a company is the reputation of that organization (Elving, 2013). According to Melo and Garrido-Morgado (2012), brand reputation is the sum of a company's management actions and behavior and how consumers perceive these. Moreover, this brand reputation is also the extent to which a company is highly appreciated by the stakeholders (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). If the company behaves well and accordingly to their principles, the perception of stakeholders and their expectations will be high (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Brand

reputation can be very influential. When there is a lack of information about a product or company, consumers will rely on the company's reputation to judge the company's services or products (Schinietz & Epstein, 2005).

In order to create product and brand differentiation, companies make investments in CSR initiatives (Hsu, 2012). Consumer's perceptions of CSR initiatives affect the reputation of a company (Elving, 2013). For instance, if a company's CSR activities are seen by consumers as self-serving and manipulative, the reputation of the company will be perceived as low (Elving, 2013). Perceived negative information can be prevented by a good reputation (Lange, Lee & Dai, 2011), although it is hard to establish a good reputation and to recover a damaged reputation (Fatma, Rahman & Khan, 2015). Brand reputation is the outcome of the company's actions, and CSR initiatives are a way to build good reputation in the eyes of consumers. Hence, companies integrate socially responsible activities as tools to improve their image and build a good reputation (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Consumers do not appreciate that companies engage in CSR initiatives to rebuild their reputation, as companies with negative reputations are likely to trigger negative reactions by the use of CSR communication.

Many studies focusing on reputation considered this to be a consequence of consumers' company evaluation that is influenced by CSR communication and activities of the company. For instance, when companies are trying to meet consumers' expectations to engage in CSR communication, companies can elicit negative reactions of consumers towards CSR communication, and consequently affect their initial company reputation perception (Morsing, Beckmann & Reisch, 2006). However, some studies have considered reputation as an independent variable that influences the effects of CSR communication (Elving, 2013).

2.6 Brand reputation and consumer skepticism

Different studies in CSR context have shown that consumers are skeptical when companies are involved in a social initiative if they have a low reputation (Bhattacharya et al., 2004; Du et al., 2010). The reputation is a set of criteria to which judgments of the behavior of a company can be made (Elving, 2013). The effectiveness of CSR communication could also be moderated by the reputation because stakeholders rely on this to interpret ambiguous information about the company (Du et al., 2010). Du et al. (2010) stated that brands with high reputation would be more credible than brands with low reputation if they communicate their CSR activities. Consumers are more likely to be skeptical towards CSR activities when companies have an unfavorable reputation. If brands with low reputation communicate their CSR activity, consumers will evaluate the company more negatively, producing a backfire effect (Yoon et al., 2006). The backfire effect can affect the consumers' knowledge about the company, resulting on a more suspicious attitude towards the company's purposes. The knowledge that consumers have about the company is used to understand the purpose of the CSR initiatives (Brown et al., 1997). When companies have a poor reputation CSR initiatives can be perceived by consumers as stemming from self-serving motives (Skard & Thorbjørnsen, 2013). Therefore, consumers can perceive the company's motives for initiating the CSR initiative as a way of improving the company's reputation.

Consumers are more skeptical when companies try hard to improve their reputation (Elving, 2013). Consequently, when a company has a good reputation rather than a bad reputation, consumers identify themselves more with that company (Sen et al., 2001). Identification leads to more commitment towards the brand and, consequently, better consumers' evaluations. According to Elving (2013) when the company has a good reputation, this is related

to intrinsic motives (e.g. good character of the company), whereas a company with bad reputation that applies CSR initiatives will be associated with extrinsic motives (e.g. trying to improve the reputation).

Not many scholars have focused on the relationship between brand reputation and skepticism (Bae & Cameron, 2006; Elving, 2013). Bae et al. (2006) found that when a company had a good reputation, consumers perceived more honest motives from the company, but more skepticism when it had a bad reputation. Moreover, Elving (2013) confirmed that bad reputation leads to more skepticism than good reputation. Thus, with respect to previous literature regarding the relationship between reputation and skepticism, one could argue that low or high reputation will influence the skepticism towards CSR practices. Therefore, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

H2: A high brand reputation will produce less skepticism towards CSR practices than a
low brand reputation.

Elving (2013) investigated if the effects of fit and reputation are dependent on each other when they influence on the level of skepticism. When the reputation was low, fit had a strong negative effect on the level of skepticism towards the company. The effect of brand-cause fit on skepticism was dependent on the company's reputation, while the brand reputation determined the strength and negative effect of fit. Therefore, the effect of fit on skepticism might disappear if a company has a good reputation. As this relationship is important, but earlier studies did not find clear results, this study is going to investigate the following research question:

Q1: Is there an interaction effect between brand-cause fit and brand reputation
regarding consumer skepticism?

2.7 The mediating role of perceived organizational motives

Perceived organizational motives can affect the influence that reputation and fit have on consumer skepticism towards CSR initiatives (Ellen et al., 2006; Vlachos et al., 2009; Skarmeas et al., 2013; Marin et al., 2016; Austin & Gaither, 2017). Ellen et al. (2006) argued that consumers can attribute different motives to CSR initiatives. Egoistic-driven motives are present when a company exploits a cause (e.g. Shell donating to a polar bear protection foundation, while drilling the Artic placing the area at a risk of oil spill) instead of helping it, whereas values-driven motives are exhibited when a company engages in CSR activities because believes that it is a good action (Ellen et al., 2006).

Consumers believe that companies with values-driven motives implement CSR activities because they care about social issues, have a moral behavior, and are sincere about their intentions (Vlachos et al., 2009). On the other hand, companies with egoistic-driven motives that put CSR activities into practice pursue their own profit and unethical behaviors (Vlachos et al., 2009). According to Austin et al. (2017) consumers are likely to attribute values-driven motives towards low brand-cause fit in a socially stigmatized industry. Consumers apply motive attributions when the fit and the social cause are inconsistent. Zasuwa (2017) suggests that a low fit will induce doubts and change the focus to the organizational motives underlying the CSR initiative (Zasuwa, 2017). However, a low fit not only gives rise to attribution processes, but also increases consumer skepticism towards a company (Zasuwa, 2017). In other words, when the fit is low, consumers may be less likely to attribute the CSR initiative to the company´s altruistic motivation and be more skeptical towards the company. Whereas when there is a high fit between the company and the social initiative, consumers may be more likely to perceive the

CSR initiative to help the cause and be less skeptical towards the company. Thus, consumers through their perceptions and evaluations, interpret differently the motives of a company.

Some findings demonstrate that motives can mediate the influence of skepticism towards CSR activities. Walker, Heree, Parent and Drane (2010) found that values-driven motives and stakeholder-driven motives mediate the influence of CSR awareness on reputation. Finally, Skarmeas et al. (2013) argued that the large presence of egoistic-driven motives and the absence of values-driven motives are recommended for the progress of consumer skepticism towards CSR practices.

Few studies have focused on the mediating role of CSR attributions. Prior research has suggested that consumer attributions can directly influence attitude towards CSR initiatives (Walker et al., 2010). Therefore, it is believed that CSR motives will have a role in the relationship between brand-cause fit, brand reputation and consumer skepticism. Therefore, the following hypotheses arise to be investigated:

H3: Perceived organizational motives mediate the effect of brand-cause fit on consumer skepticism.

H4: Perceived organizational motives mediate the effect of brand reputation on consumer skepticism.

2.8 Conceptual model

Based on the previous literature and empirical findings, the current study proposed four

hypotheses. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of the suggested hypotheses to investigate.
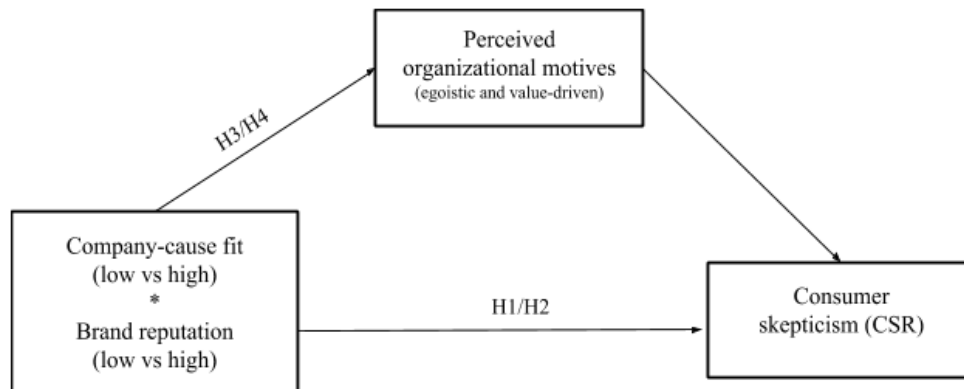
Figure 1. Conceptual model

3. Method

3.1. Research design

To investigate the research question and test the hypotheses, an online experiment was

conducted with a 2 (brand-cause fit: low, high) x 2 (brand reputation: low, high) between-

subjects design.

3.2. Procedure

An experiment was designed with the online survey tool, Qualtrics (Appendix C).

Participants received an online invitation to follow an online study. In addition, participants were

anonymous when they followed the study and informed about the purpose of the experiment, that

was to contribute on the corporate social responsibility research field and support the researcher

on her Master thesis. During the experiment, participants were assigned to an article with either

positive or negative brand reputation. The scenario presented was of a fictitious premium

chocolate brand, Excelencia, introducing a new chocolate for demanding palates. After the

manipulation check on brand reputation, participants were assigned to a print advertisement

(high fit vs. low fit) where they had to evaluate the fit between the brand and the social cause

involved. Moreover, they were asked about the level of the skepticism and their attitude towards

the CSR activities of the company.

Subsequently, participants filled out manipulation check questions about both

independent variables. Moreover, participants either agreed or not with some statements

measuring the perceived organizational motives. Furthermore, demographic information and

control variables were answered.

3.3. Sample

Participants were contacted through the snowball sampling technique. The participants

received the link to the online questionnaire through social media platforms and e-mail. In total,

227 were recruited to participate in the study (63% female). Out of 227 participants, 111 had a

full time job and 86 were students; 34% Spanish, 23% Dutch and the other 43% other

nationalities. Moreover, participants were divided in four conditions (N=50 per condition) and

with a mean age of 34.83 years ($SD = 13.85$).

3.4. Materials

The aim of the study was to investigate the effect of brand reputation and brand-cause fit

on the evaluations of consumer skepticism. A fictitious gourmet chocolate brand was chosen to

rule out possible effects of prior relationship with the company and brand. The chosen name for

the brand was Excelencia, creating an association between the excellence of the product and the luxury market where it will be placed. Brand reputation and brand-cause fit of a fictitious firm (Excelencia) were manipulated.

3.4.1. Brand reputation

Brand reputation was manipulated through a newspaper article. Excelencia was presented to the participants as a brand with either high or low reputation. The article was based on the study of Elving (2013). The researcher did not include CSR activities in the articles so as not to affect the outcome. Therefore, the articles presented did not include CSR activities. In the low reputation condition, the article reported a company's scandal: the use of palm oil when they were promoting the contrary. In the high reputation condition, the company was portrayed as one of the first chocolate companies without palm oil in their products, as consuming palm oil had some health risks. Both articles contained the same headline: "Excelencia chocolates and palm oil". The manipulated newspaper articles can be found in Appendix A.

3.4.2. Brand-cause fit

Brand-cause fit was manipulated through an advertisement, where the brand was introducing the new chocolate and promising a donation to a social cause. The high fit condition was represented by the donation of the brand towards a charity organization "No deforestation" that collects money to improve forest protection, restoration, sustainable cocoa production and farmer livelihoods. In the low fit condition, the brand made a donation to another fictitious charity brand "One Shoe, One life" that helps Spanish children below the poverty line to have shoes to go to school. The advertisements can be found in Appendix B.

3.5. Pre-test of manipulation

A pre-test was conducted to check whether the conditions were perceived correctly by the participants. In total 30 participants in the pre-test were divided equally over the fours conditions, 70% were female (N= 21) and 30% were male (N= 9). Participants were between 18 and 56 (*M*= 26.50, *SD*= 7.565). The pretest was conducted following a between subject design, as participants were randomly assigned to each condition through an online Qualtrics questionnaire.

Firstly, participants were exposed to an article were the reputation of Excelencia was manipulated. To check whether the brand reputation was successfully manipulated, Hsu (2012) 3 item 7-point Likert scale (1= "Totally agree"; 7= "Totally disagree") was used. The scale included the following statements: "Excelencia has a good reputation", "Excelencia is well respected" or "Excelencia has status". The reliability of this scale was good (Cronbach's α = .97). The results showed that the low reputation condition (*M* = 2.68, *SD* = 1.19) was lower than the high reputation condition (*M* = 5.91, *SD* = 0.62). This difference was significant (*Mdif* = -3.94, *t*(28) = -9.32, *p* < .01).

Afterwards participants were exposed to an advertisement in which brand-cause fit was manipulated (low fit - high fit). In order to check whether the fit manipulation was understood, a 4 item 7-point Likert scale (1= "Totally agree"; 7= "Totally disagree") based on Zdravkovic, Magnusson and Stanley (2010) was used. The items comprised statements such as " Excelencia and the charity organization fit well together" or "The relationship between Excelencia and the charity organization is logical". The scale had a good reliability (Cronbach's α = .97). The results further showed that the low fit condition (*M* = 2.33, *SD* = 1.17) was lower than the high fit

condition (*M* = 5.82, *SD* = 0.74). This difference was significant (*Mdif* = -4.21, *t*(28) = -9.73, *p* < .01).

Finally, in order to check whether the text in the article and the advertisement were perceived as credible, a three item 7-point Likert scale (1= "Totally agree"; 7= "Totally disagree") based on Gaziano and McGrath (1986) was employed. The items included in the scale were "The text that I just have read was realistic" or "The text I just have read was trustworthy". The reliability of the scale was good for the article (Cronbach's α = .84) and for the advertisement (Cronbach's α = .63). First, the results showed the text was perceived realistic, trustworthy and readable for the low reputation article (*Mtext*= 5.33, SD = 1.43) and the high reputation article (*Mtext* = 5.31, SD = 1.12). The results further showed that the text was perceived realistic, trustworthy and readable for the low fit advertisement (*Mtext* = 5.16, SD = 1.18) and the high fit advertisement (*Mtext* = 5.36, SD = 0.85).

Overall, the pre-test showed that the manipulations for the brand reputation and the brand-cause fit were successful in the fictitious newspaper article and advertisement.

3.6. Measures

3.6.1. Manipulation checks

In order to be sure that the manipulated conditions were understood by the participants, manipulation checks were carried out in the main experiment. Therefore, the same scales were used for the manipulation checks in the main experiment.

The reliability of the scale measuring brand reputation had a good reliability (Cronbach's α = .96). The scale measuring brand-cause fit had a high reliability (Cronbach's α = .91).

Finally, the scale measuring the article's credibility (Cronbach's α = .69) and the advertisement's credibility (Cronbach's α = .76) had a good reliability.

3.6.2. Dependent variables

Skepticism was measured on a 4 item 7-point Likert scale (1= "Totally agree"; 7= "Totally disagree") derived from Obermiller and Spangenberg (1998). Participants indicated their opinion toward the brand based on the article and advertisement with statements such as " I am skeptical towards the brand Excelencia that claims to engage in donation activities", "I find Excelencia reliable when it comes to their CSR activities". The scale had a good reliability (Cronbach's α = .90).

3.6.3. Mediator

Perceived motives were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1= "Totally agree"; 7= "Totally disagree") based on the scale developed by Ellen, Webb & Mohr (2006). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on each CSR motive; for instance: "They are taking advantage of the cause to help their own business" (2 items for egoistic motives), or "They are trying to give something back to the community" (2 items for values-driven motives). The scale for egoistic motives had a good reliability (Cronbach's α = .71). Moreover, the scale for values-driven motives (Cronbach's α = .83) had a good reliability.

3.6.4. Control variables

3.6.4.1. Social identification

Bartels and Hoogendam (2011) conducted research to investigate the effect of social identification with green consumer groups on organic products. They concluded that

identification with the organic consumer had a strong effect on consumers' behavior. Therefore, people who are concerned about the environment are more attached to organic food consumption and may vary their behavior as they are influenced by the level of identification with a social group. Furthermore, Currás-Pérez, Bigné-Alcañiz and Alvarado-Herrera (2009) found a direct effect of the social identification on consumers' attitude towards the brand. Therefore, it can be argued that social identification has an impact on brand reputation and brand-cause fit and can influence consumers' evaluations of CSR activities. In order to control for the social identification of the participant with the socially concerned consumer, a 3 item 7-point Likert scale (1= "Totally agree"; 7= "Totally disagree") for solidarity based on Leach et al. (2008). The scale included statements such as: "I feel a bond with the group of socially responsible consumer" or "I feel committed to the social cause of Excelencia". This scale reported a good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).

3.6.4.1. Product involvement

The level of engagement of the participant with the type of product advertised was controlled through a scale based on Bloch (1981). This scale consisted of a three Likert scale statements (e.g. I like chocolate very much) and answers based on a 7-point Likert scale (1= "Totally agree"; 7= "Totally disagree"). This scale had a good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$).

4. Results

4.1 Manipulation check

In order to check if the manipulations of brand reputation and brand-cause fit worked as it was expected, an independent t-test for each manipulation was carried out. The test showed that there was a significant difference between conditions on high reputation and low reputation

(Mdif = -3.14, t(225) = -23.38, *p* < .001). On average, the low reputation condition (*M* = 2.56, *SD* = 1.02) was lower than the high reputation condition (*M* = 5.71, *SD* = 0.97). Thus, participants identified the brand as positive when they were in the high reputation condition group, whereas participants in the low reputation condition evaluated negatively the brand. Moreover, the credibility of the newspaper article was investigated. The results further showed that the text was perceived realistic, trustworthy and readable for the low reputation article (*M*text = 4.90, *SD* = 1.17) and the high reputation article (*M*text = 5.18, *SD* = 1.03).

The test for brand-cause fit showed that there was a significant difference between conditions, low fit condition (*M* = 2.60, *SD* = 0.79) was lower than the high fit condition (*M* = 5.17, *SD* = 0.95), (Mdif = -2.56, *t*(225) = -20.65, *p* < .001). Participants recognized No deforestation charitable foundation as a high fit with the brand core business and One shoe, One life charitable foundation as a low fit. Furthermore, the credibility of the advertisement was checked. The results showed that the text was perceived as rather realistic, trustworthy and readable for the low fit advertisement (*M*text = 4.24, *SD* = 1.23) and the high fit advertisement (*M*text = 5.14, *SD* = 1.11).

Overall, the brand reputation and the brand-cause fit were successfully manipulated both in the fictitious newspaper article and the advertisement.

4.2 Main effects and interaction effect: Hypothesis 1 and 2

In order to test if high brand-cause fit will produce less skepticism towards CSR practices than a low brand-cause fit (H1), a one-way ANOVA was performed. The results showed that the difference between the effect of high brand-cause fit (*M*=3.74, *SD* = 1.37) and low brand-cause fit conditions (*M* = 4.47, *SD* = 1.37) on consumer skepticism was significant (F(1, 225) = 14.78,

$p < .001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was confirmed, high brand-cause fit produced less skepticism towards CSR practices than a low brand-cause fit.

In order to examine if high brand reputation will produce less skepticism towards CSR practices than a low brand reputation (H2), a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results depicted that there was a significant difference between the effect of high brand reputation ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.41$) and low brand reputation ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.33$) on consumer skepticism (F(1, 226)=13.78, $p < .001$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 was confirmed, a high brand reputation produce less skepticism towards CSR practices than a low brand reputation.

Finally, it was investigated if there was an interaction effect between both independent variables regarding the dependent variable. In order to check whether there was an interaction effect between brand-cause fit and brand reputation regarding consumer skepticism, a two-way ANOVA was conducted. The test revealed that there was no significant difference between conditions (F (1, 227) = 1.09, p = .297). This means that high brand-cause fit and high brand reputation ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.37$) did not lead to less skepticism, than high brand-cause fit and low brand reputation ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.36$), low brand-cause fit and high brand reputation ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.49$) or low brand-cause fit and low brand reputation ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.17$). Therefore, there was no interaction effect between brand-cause fit and brand reputation regarding consumer skepticism.

4.3 The mediation effect: hypothesis 3 and 4

To investigate whether there is a link between brand-cause fit and consumer skepticism that can be explained by perceived organizational motives (egoistic motives and values-driven motives), a mediation analysis was performed using the procedures developed by Preacher and Hayes (Hayes, 2013). In this analysis brand-cause fit was entered as a predictor of consumer

skepticism, and perceived organizational motives (egoistic motives and values-driven motives) were entered as mediators. The overall model was significant, $R^2 = .27$, $F(1, 225) = 81.31$, $p < .001$. The model is displayed in Figure 2.

Total indirect effect = -0.14, 95% BCa CI [-0.23, -0.06]

$b = -0.13, p = .023$

egoistic motives

$b = 0.44, p < .001$

values-driven motives

Brand-cause fit

$b = 0.48, p < .001$ $b = -0.17, p = .012$

Consumer skepticism

Direct effect = -0.11, 95% BCa CI [-0.23, -0.01]
Total effect = -0.25, 95% BCa CI [-0.36, -0.13]

Figure 2. The relationship between brand-cause fit, egoistic motives, value-driven motives, and consumer skepticism.

As can be seen, brand-cause fit was indeed related to both egoistic motives and value-driven motives, and both were significantly related to consumer skepticism. There was a significant total effect of brand-cause fit on consumer skepticism ($b = -0.25$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$), indicating that a high brand-cause fit produced less skepticism towards CSR practices. This effect did not remain significant when adding the mediators to the model, the direct effect was $b = -0.11$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .082$. However, the total indirect effect was significant ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% BCa CI [-0.23, -0.06]). Therefore, an interpretation of the individual indirect effects was done. The completely standardized indirect effect of egoistic motives was significant ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% BCa CI [-0.13, -0.01]). In addition, the completely standardized

indirect effect of values-driven motives was significant (b = -0.09, SE = 0.04, 95% BCa CI [-0.18, -0.00]).

Given these results, it can be concluded that perceived organizational motives (egoistic motives and values-driven motives) explain the link between brand-cause fit and consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. Thus, H3 was confirmed.

To investigate whether there was a link between brand reputation and consumer skepticism that can be explained by perceived organizational motives (egoistic motives and values-driven motives), a mediation analysis was performed using the procedures developed by Preacher and Hayes (Hayes, 2013). In this analysis brand reputation was entered as a predictor of consumer skepticism, and perceived organizational motives (egoistic motives and values-driven motives) were entered as mediators. The overall model was significant, R^2 = .07, $F(1, 225)$ = 16.52, $p < .001$. The model is displayed in Figure 3.

Total indirect effect = -0.11, 95% BCa CI [-0.18, -0.06]

egoistic motives

b = -0.18, $p < .001$ b = 0.41, $p < .001$

values-driven motives

Brand reputation b = 0.20, $p < .001$ b = -0.19, p = .002   Consumer skepticism

Direct effect = -0.14, 95% BCa CI [-0.23, -0.05]
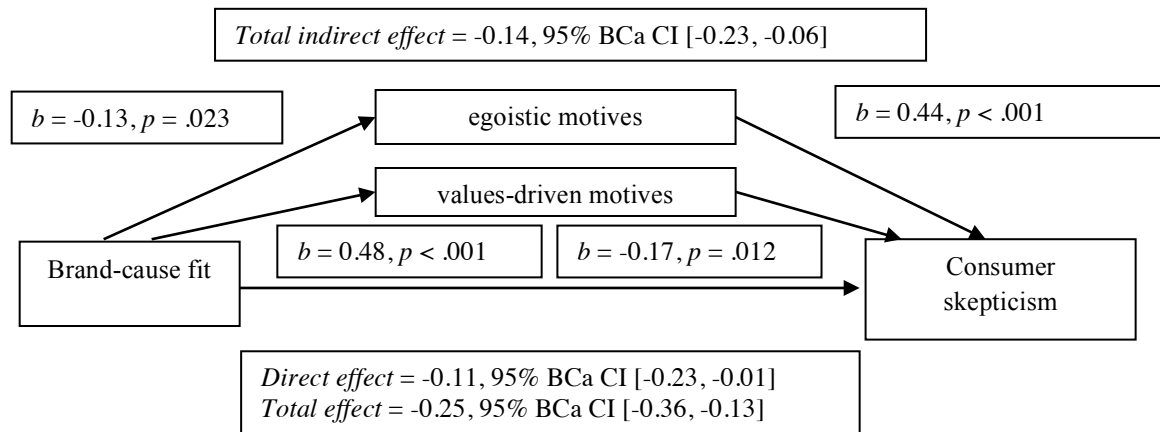Total effect = -0.25, 95% BCa CI [-0.35, -0.15]
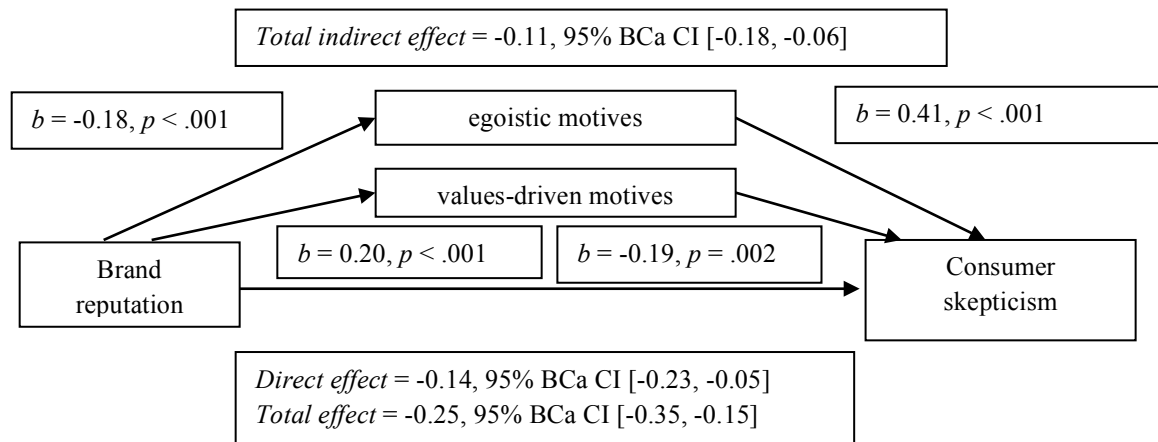
Figure 3. The relationship between brand reputation, egoistic motives, value-driven motives, and consumer skepticism.

As can be seen, brand reputation was indeed related to both egoistic motives and value-driven motives, and both were significantly related to consumer skepticism. There was a

significant total effect of brand reputation on consumer skepticism (b = -0.25, SE = 0.05, $p <$ .001), indicating that a high brand reputation produced less skepticism towards CSR practices. This effect remained significant when adding the mediators to the model, the direct effect was b = -0.14, SE = 0.05, p = .003. Moreover, the total indirect effect was significant (b = -0.11, SE = 0.03, 95% BCa CI [-0.18, -0.06]). Therefore, an interpretation of the individual indirect effects was done. The completely standardized indirect effect of egoistic motives was significant (b = -0.10, SE = 0.03, 95% BCa CI [-0.17, -0.04]). In addition, the completely standardized indirect effect of values-driven motives was significant (b = -0.05, SE = 0.02, 95% BCa CI [-0.11, -0.01]).

Given these results, it can be concluded that perceived organizational motives (egoistic motives and values-driven motives) can partly explain the link between brand reputation and consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. Thus, H4 was partly confirmed.

4.4 Additional analysis

In order to test the relation between control variables (social identification; product involvement), dependent variable (consumer skepticism) and mediator (perceived organizational motives) a correlation analysis were conducted. As the data was normally distributed, the Pearson's test was chosen. Table 4 shows an overview of the results.

Table 4

Correlations between skepticism, perceived organizational motives, social identification and product involvement (*N*=227)

Measure	*M (SD)*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Consumer skepticism	4.01 (1.41)	-				
2. Egoistic motives	4.64 (1.36)	.48**	-			
3. Value-driven motives	4.35 (1.42)	-.32**	-.22**	-		
4. Social identification	4.67 (1.36)	.14*	.03	.11	-	
5. Product involvement	4.85 (1.21)	.15*	.04	.05	.40**	-

*p < .05

**p < .01

The results showed a significant positive relationship between skepticism and egoistic motives (r= .48 p < .001) and negative relationship with values-driven motives (r= -.32 p < .001) .Therefore, when consumers perceived egoistic motives, being involved with a charitable foundation for their own profit, they were more likely to be skeptical towards the CSR practices, whereas when consumers perceived values-driven motives, being involved with a charitable foundation for a societal improvement, they were less likely to be skeptical towards the CSR practices.

In addition, the results illustrated that the more participants identified with the socially responsible consumer, the more skeptical they are (r = .14 p = .042). Therefore, participants that are socially responsible evaluated the brand's CSR messages more skeptically. Moreover, when participants were more involved in the chocolate industry, they were more likely to relate to the socially responsible consumer (r = .40 p < .001), and they were more skeptical towards the brand's CSR practices (r = .15 p < .05).

Finally, a multiple regression was conducted to test the influence of the control variables and the mediator on consumer skepticism as this can help us to find some new interesting results. For this model the variables that had significant correlations with the dependent variable were added. The general model was significant ($F(4, 222) = 24.45$, $p < .001$) with R^2 of .31. The analysis showed that social identification ($\beta = .11$, $p = .086$) and product involvement ($\beta = .12$, $p = .097$) did not significantly predicted consumer skepticism. Thus, it cannot be concluded that consumers that identify with the group of socially responsible consumers and are involved in the product, are less skeptical towards CSR practices. Perceived egoistic CSR motives ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$) and values-driven CSR motives ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$) significantly predicted consumer skepticism. In other words, the more consumers perceive motives as egoistic, the more likely that they will be skeptical towards CSR practices, whereas the more consumers perceive motives as values-driven the less likely that they will be skeptical they will be.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The present study aimed to understand the effect of brand-cause fit and brand reputation on consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. While several studies investigated the relationship between fit, consumer skepticism and brand reputation (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006; Ellen et al. 2006; Elving, 2013; Yoon et al. 2006), it has not been widely investigated if different levels of brand-cause fit and brand reputation will have a different effects on consumer skepticism. More specifically, the current study investigated to what extent brand-cause fit and brand reputation affect consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. Moreover, the study aimed to enhance the knowledge on the mediating role of perceived organizational motives and the interaction effect between brand-cause fit and brand reputation.

5.1 Summary of the findings

The results of this research led to several conclusions. First, results confirmed that high brand-cause fit led to less skepticism towards CSR practices than low brand-cause fit (H1). Therefore, when a brand is involved in a social cause and this cause is related to their brand values or core business, consumers will be less skeptical towards a brand's CSR practices.

Second, results confirmed that high brand reputation will produce less skepticism towards CSR practices than a low brand reputation (H2). Specifically, the results showed that when a company has a good reputation and they communicate their CSR activities, consumers perceive the brand as more credible and they are less skeptical towards their CSR practices. In addition, there was no interaction effect between brand-cause fit and brand reputation regarding consumer skepticism (Q1). This means that high brand-cause fit together with brand reputation did not lead to less skepticism than separately.

Third, results showed that perceived organizational motives fully mediated the effect of brand-cause fit on consumer skepticism (H3). Specifically, low fit led to egoistic motives, which in turn led to higher skepticism, whereas high fit led to values-driven motives and thus, triggered less skepticism. This means that when consumers perceived a company with egoistic motives, they were more skeptical towards the brand, as the company was exploiting a cause for their own profit. Whereas, when consumers perceived a company with values-driven motives, they believed that the company was involved in the social cause because they cared about that societal issue. Moreover, results confirmed that perceived organizational motives partially mediated the effect of brand reputation on consumer skepticism (H4). Therefore, perceived egoistic and values-driven motives partially explained the relationship between brand reputation and consumer skepticism.

Additional analyses revealed that social identification, product involvement, perceived egoistic and values-driven motives were significantly correlated with consumer skepticism. However, consumer skepticism towards CSR practices was not predicted by how much the participant identifies with the socially responsible consumer group and is involved in the product. In contrast, when consumers perceive motives as egoistic, they are more likely to be skeptical towards CSR practices, whereas when consumers perceive motives as values-driven, the less skeptical they will be.

5.2 Discussion and theoretical implications

The current study contributes to the literature on consumer skepticism towards CSR practices and suggests an understanding of how brands can avoid skepticism improving their brand-cause fit and brand reputation. Based on the existing literature, several findings will be discussed in the following section.

While many studies focused on the advantages of the application of CSR practices (Du et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2010; Turker., 2008), the current study showed to what extent brand-cause fit and brand reputation affect consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. In this context, Elving (2013) found that high fit leads to less skepticism towards the company. Hence, he concluded that the higher the fit between brand and social cause in CSR communication, the more positive attitudes towards the company. Similarly, the findings of the current study demonstrated that a high brand-cause fit leads to less skepticism towards CSR practices. Moreover, the results of this research are in line with Yoon et al. (2006) who argued that consumers will not perceive the brand as credible if there is no fit between cause and brand.

Concerning brand reputation, further findings led to the conclusion that good brand reputation produced less consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. This finding is consistent

with research conducted by Bae et al., (2006) who concluded that if a company has a good reputation, consumers would infer a lower suspicion level towards the company. In other words, when consumers perceive that the brand has a bad reputation and engages in CSR activities, they will have negative attitudes towards that brand, such as not believing their social intentions. In addition, Elving (2013) argued that a bad reputation directly leads to skeptical responses towards all the organizational activities.

Nonetheless, the effects of brand-cause fit and brand-reputation on consumer skepticism do not seem to be interdependent. This seems to be in contrast with earlier studies who suggested the opposite (Elving, 2013), confirming that the effect of fit on consumer skepticism is dependent of the brand's reputation. A possible explanation for the not significant results is that the company used on this research was not part of a controversial sector. According to Yoon et al. (2006) companies in controversial sectors, such as tobacco, already have a bad reputation. The fit in Yoon et al. (2006) research was that the tobacco company was donating to a cancer prevention foundation. However, this fit is controversial, since it enlarges the negative effect of the company's product. This research did not employ a controversial fit, turning out to not have any interdependence between brand-cause fit and brand reputation.

Another contribution of the present thesis is that this is the first study to investigate the effect of a hedonic good's reputation and fit on consumer skepticism. Consumers' product consumption can be categorized as hedonic or utilitarian (Okada, 2005). Hedonic products are consumed for fun, enjoyment and gratification purposes, while utilitarian products are instrumental, functional and practical (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). Chocolate consumption is based on hedonic motivations, possessing a hedonic value such as taste (Kuikka & Laukkanen, 2012). Previous research found that consumers purchase chocolate mainly for hedonic reasons

(Osman & Sobal, 2006). The purchase of hedonic goods can be enhanced by guilt-reducing justifications (e.g. donations to charity), thus a good fit between brand and social initiative could lead to better attitudes towards the brand (Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). When donating to a charity foundation, participants might have had better attitudes towards the chocolate brand and have reduced the skepticism towards its CSR activities. Elving (2013) findings showed that a utilitarian good, such as toilet paper, leads to less skepticism towards CSR activities when the brand has a good reputation and high brand-cause fit. The present study chose chocolate as a hedonic good, to investigate if there was a difference between hedonic and utilitarian goods and consumers' skepticism towards CSR practices. Although Elving (2013) expected that hedonic goods would reveal other effects, the results of the present study show no distinction between goods categorization. Thus, the effects of hedonic and utilitarian goods on consumer skepticism towards CSR practices are similar.

Furthermore, results of this study showed the importance of including perceived organizational motives when theorizing about consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. The current study demonstrated that egoistic and values-driven motives have a mediating role between brand-cause fit and consumer skepticism, while between brand reputation and consumer skepticism they have a partial mediating role. These results are in line with Zasuwa (2017) who suggested that when consumers perceive egoistic motives underlying the CSR initiative produced by a low fit, consumer skepticism towards the company will increase. Specifically, while values-driven motives avoid any contribution to the development of consumer skepticism towards CSR practices, egoistic motives reinforce its formation (Skarmeas et al., 2013). Thus, in line with previous empirical findings (Vlachos et al., 2009) companies that are attributed with egoistic motives and employ CSR practices, can be seen as pursuing their own profit, whereas

companies with values-driven are seen as sincere towards society. Companies should therefore avoid using inconsistent information when communicating their CSR practices, so that consumers will not be skeptical and perceive their motives as egoistic (Marín et al., 2016).

Although, our hypotheses were confirmed, some additional results were revealed to strengthen the previous findings. Consumers that identify themselves more with the social responsible consumer were more skeptical towards the brand's CSR practices. In line with previous research (Bartels et al., 2011), consumers' behavior towards a brand can have an impact when consumers feel identified with the social responsible consumer group. Finally, when consumers were more likely to be involved in the product, they were more likely to be skeptical towards CSR practices. According to Chen and Leu (2011) consumers that are more involved with a brand or product, own more information about that field and might be more critical towards the brand. The current study extends this work on the social identification's role and product involvement. The socially responsible and involved consumer had more awareness and was more suspicious when evaluating the brand's CSR practices. One can argue that a socially responsible consumer perceives more credible a sustainable brand than a brand that does not involve with a societal cause, developing a bond with the brand with high brand-cause fit. The next section provides implications that arise from the previous findings.

5.3 Practical implications

There are several implications that marketers and practitioners can obtain from this research. From the results it is shown that companies should first investigate about how consumers perceive the brand. Before communicating its CSR activities, a brand should ensure that it has a high reputation. According to Elving (2013) when companies are not aware of the reputation that its among consumers, CSR communication should be carefully taken into

account. Based on the results of the current study, it can be further concluded that building a good reputation on hedonic goods will have a beneficial effect for the company. Consumers will not only perceive the quality of the products, but as the good values that they posses. Moreover, consumers will trust the CSR practices of a company more if they have a good reputation than a bad reputation (Bogel, 2016). Therefore, brand reputation is the tool to interpret the CSR communication of a company.

Second, the fit between cause and brand seems to be very relevant. When a company is willing to be involved in a societal cause, it is recommended to explore the different good causes that might match more with the brand core values, otherwise consumers will not perceive the brand as credible (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006). Companies would profit when engaging with a social cause if there is a link between the cause and the company's existence. Thus, companies involved in social causes that match with their values, might have better business outcomes in the long run.

Furthermore, when consumers perceive egoistic motives or values-driven motives from the brand, consumers are more (egoistic motives) or less (values-driven motives) skeptical towards the brand's CSR activities. Consequently, managers willing to develop a suitable CSR communication and achieve positive attitudes towards a brand should focus on the consumers' perceived organizational motives.

Finally, companies should try to raise consumers' trust about their CSR activities and change the perception about the importance of these CSR practices. Therefore, managers are advised to integrate CSR into a matching content strategy and company's behavior (Du et al., 2007).

5.4 Limitations and future research

The present study has certain limitations, which can provide future research opportunities. First, this study used a fictitious gourmet chocolate brand and social causes, in order to minimize the effect of a preconceived brand reputation and motives. The purpose of using an unknown brand and social causes was to avoid any associations between participants and the brand or products. However, these findings cannot be generalized as using a fictitious brand can threat the external validity of the experimental design. Previous research suggests that consumers' intention to buy and trust a specific brand are based on their familiarity or experience with the brand (Laroche, Kim & Zhou, 1996). On the other hand, an unfamiliar brand that has an association with a cause will probably have a greater effect on attitudes towards the brand (Lafferty, 2009). In other words, the results of this study could be different if a real brand was used. Participants would have prior knowledge on the brand's behavior and reputation if an existing brand was used. Consequently, if future researchers want to avoid threats to internal validity when using a real brand, they should previously ask participants their perceptions of that specific brand. Thus, future research could conduct an experimental design with an existing brand, controlling participants' prior knowledge about that brand.

Furthermore, the present study only used perceived organizational motives, egoistic motives and values-driven motives, as a mediator. The selection of these two motives was made in order to find a higher contrasting effect, as they are perceived completely opposite to each other. Intrinsic and extrinsic motives, egoistic motives and values-driven motives, were employed in this study (Vlachos et al., 2009). However, for future researchers it could be interesting to investigate a more complex definition of motives presented by Ellen et al. (2006) with all 4 types of motives, including stakeholder-driven motives and strategic-driven motives.

Although strategic-driven motives (e.g. attracting more consumers) are self-centered corporate efforts, such as egoistic motives, Ellen et al. (2006) found opposite effects between egoistic motives and strategic-driven motives. Consumers perceived positively strategic-driven motives and negatively egoistic motives. Furthermore, the same opposite effect was found between values-driven motives and stakeholders-driven motives (intrinsic). Thus, the influence of organizational motives might change when applying a more complex definition based on Ellen et al. (2006).

Moreover, this study investigated the effects of brand-cause fit and brand reputation on consumer skepticism, whereas future research could focus on the influence of the type of medium on consumer skepticism towards CSR activities. As depicted by previous research (Wang, Tong, Takeuchi & George, 2016) consumer attitude towards CSR activities can change depending on the type of medium that the brand uses to communicate. Therefore, depending on the media used to communicate, the consumers' perceived credibility will differ (Saat & Selamat, 2014). Credibility could positively influence consumers' attitude towards the brand. When a company communicates CSR activities through online media, is more effective and reduces negative responses. In line with previous studies (Flanagin & Metzeger, 2000) consumers' trust on information retrieved from Internet is higher than from traditional media. This study used an online newspaper to introduce the reputation of the company. However, it could be different when a Facebook post is selected to communicate the reputation and initiatives of the company. Future research could investigate the effect of type of medium on consumer skepticism.

5.5 Conclusion

To sum up, it can be stated that despite the limitations, there are significant effects of brand-cause fit, brand reputation and mediating effects of perceived organizational motives on consumer skepticism towards CSR practices. Results revealed that consumers' suspicion about a company's CSR activities depend on the nature of brand-cause fit and brand reputation. Therefore, before engaging on CSR activities brands should focus on their brand reputation and brand-cause fit before deciding to contribute to a social cause and communicate it. Furthermore, company motives play an important role as when consumers perceive that the company put CSR activities into practice to pursue their own profit, instead of perceiving the CSR initiative to help the cause. Thus, it can be concluded that communicating CSR practices can lead to positive attitudes towards the brand, if reputation, relatedness between brand and social cause, and organizational motives are previously evaluated.

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Appendix A

Manipulation articles

THE DAILY NEWS

www.dailynews.com   MEMPHIS SAYS: "More of what you want to know"   - Since 1879

Excelencia chocolates and palm oil

The well-known premium chocolate brand, Excelencia, has been involved in a scandal. An investigation carried out by the European Health Committee discovered that Excelencia is not committed to palm oil avoidance. The use of palm oil can generate many health risks. One risk factor is heart disease, as the oil contains high levels of saturated fats.

Moreover, a high-fat diet with a saturated fatty acid called palmitic acid (the main component of palm oil) increases the ability of cancer to spread. In addition, replacing tropical forests and peatland with palm oil trees is devastating the environment, wildlife and people's quality of life. Excelencia has been accused of having lack of respect for their commitment with the consumers.

Figure A1. Article used for the condition: Low brand reputation

THE DAILY NEWS

www.dailynews.com   MEMPHIS SAYS: "More of what you want to know"   - Since 1879

Excelencia chocolates and palm oil

The well-known premium chocolate brand, Excelencia, has been awarded for their health commitment. The European Health Committee awarded Excelencia for their palm oil free chocolates. The use of palm oil can generate many health risks. One risk factor is heart disease, as the oil contains high levels of saturated fats. Moreover, a high-fat diet with a saturated

fatty acid called palmitic acid (the main component of palm oil) increases the ability of cancer to spread. In addition, replacing tropical forests and peatland with palm oil trees is devastating the environment, wildlife and people's quality of life. Excelencia has been ranked as one of the most conscious companies for being the first palm oil free chocolate company.

Figure A2. Article used for the condition: High brand reputation

Appendix B

Manipulation advertisements

Figure B3. Advertisement used for the condition: Low brand-cause fit

Figure B4. Advertisement used for the condition: High brand-cause fit

Appendix C

Questionnaire

Introduction 1

Dear participant,

Thank you for participating in this questionnaire. As part of my Master Thesis at Tilburg University, I would like you to answer some questions regarding your opinion towards Excelencia, a gourmet chocolate brand. The survey takes about 7 minutes.

The research consist of a newspaper article about Excelencia and an advertisement where they are committed with a charity foundation as a Corporate Social Responsibility initiative.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) means that companies (want to) bear responsibility for social problems such as air pollution, climate change, working conditions of employees or aging of the population. CSR starts with companies trying not to make these problems bigger. Organization who goes a step further aim to contribute to solving these problems.

All data will be treated confidentially and anonymously. Your data will be kept for this project and for the purpose of this research.

If you agree to participate, please click the agree button below.

If you have any questions regarding the survey, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Kind regards,
Marina Gómez Fuentes

○ I agree to participate

○ I do not wish to participate

Brand reputation article introduction

On the next page you will see a newspaper article about Excelencia. Please read it carefully because further questions will be based on this article!

Q1. Based on the news article that I have just read, I think that...

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
Excelencia has a good reputation (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Excelencia is well respected (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Excelencia is well thought of (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Excelencia has status (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Excelencia is reputable (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q2. Please state to what extent you disagree or agree with the statements below.

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
The article I just have read was realistic (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The article I just have read was trustworthy (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The article I just have read was readable (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Brand-cause fit advertisement introduction

On the next page you will see an advertisement of Excelencia. Please read it carefully because further questions will be based on this advertisement!

Q3. Based on the advertisement that I have just seen, I think that...

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
Excelencia and the charity organization fit well together (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The relationship between Excelencia and the charity organization is logical (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Excelencia and the charity organization complement each other (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The charity organization in the advertisement is suitable for Excelencia (4)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q4. Please state to what extent you disagree or agree with the statements below.

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
The advertisement I just have seen was realistic (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The advertisement I just have seen was trustworthy (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The advertisement I just have seen was readable (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q5. I think Excelencia invests in socially responsible initiatives because:

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree (7)
They feel morally obliged to help (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
This is in line with the norms and values of Excelencia (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q6. I think Excelencia invests in socially responsible initiatives because:

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree (7)
They have a hidden agenda (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
They take advantage of the nonprofit organization to help their own business (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q7. Your opinion towards the activities of Excelencia:

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree (7)
I am skeptical towards the brand Excelencia that claims to engage in donation activities (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I find it unbelievable when the brand Excelencia claims to engage in donation activities (6)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

I find it unreliable when the brand Excelencia claims to engage in donation activities (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I find it misleading when the brand Excelencia claims to engage in donation activities (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q8. I think Excelencia invests in socially responsible initiatives because:

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
They feel their customers expect it (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
They feel society in general expects it (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q9. I think Excelencia invests in socially responsible initiatives because:

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
They want to attract more customers (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
They want make more profit (5)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q10. Please define to which extent you agree witht he following statements.

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
I like chocolate very much (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
When I buy chocolate, I pay attention to what I buy (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I consider chocolate as an important part of my day (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q11. Please define to which extent you agree witht he following statements.

	Strongly disagree(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	Strongly agree(7)
I feel a bond with the group of socially responsible consumers (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel solidarity with the group of socially responsible consumers (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
I feel commited to the group of socially responsible consumers (3)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q12. What is your gender?

○ Male

○ Female

Q13. What is your age?

Q14. Where are you from?

▼ Afghanistan (1) ... Zimbabwe (1357)

Q15. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.

○ Elementary school (1)

○ High school (2)

○ Higher education (3)

○ Bachelor's degree (4)

○ Master's degree (5)

Q16. What is your current professional situation?

○ Full time job (1)

○ Part time job (2)

○ Unemployed (3)

○ Retired (4)

○ Student (5)

○ Other, specify (6) _____

End of the questionnaire

This is the end of this questionnaire. Thank you for your collaboration. Your data will be useful for this research.

If you have any suggestions or questions do not hesitate to contact me: