
THE MEDIATING ROLE OF TRUST IN THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CSR AND CUSTOMER BEHAVIOR: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF STARBUCKS IN THAILAND

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the mediating role of trust in the relationships between CSR and customer behavior like willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty in case of Starbucks in Thailand. A quantitative research method was carried out to test the proposed hypotheses. Data were collected through questionnaires with 203 respondents. Structural equation modeling (SEM) with a two-step approach was employed to assess the test of causal relationships among the constructs. The findings confirmed three of five hypothesized relationships in expected direction. Interestingly, the direct impacts of CSR to customer behavior, in this case willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty, were not significantly supported. Specifically, the results demonstrated that trust significantly had the fully mediating role in the relationships between CSR and customer behavior comprising willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty.

Keywords: Trust, Corporate social responsibility, Willingness to pay price premium, Customer loyalty, Starbucks

บทคัดย่อ

การวิจัยครั้งนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อทดสอบบทบาทการเป็นตัวแปรคั่นกลางของความเชื่อมั่นในความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคมขององค์กรและพฤติกรรมของลูกค้าอันได้แก่ ความยินดีที่จะจ่ายในราคาสูง และความภักดีของลูกค้ากรณีสตาร์บัคส์ในประเทศไทย การวิจัยนี้เป็นการวิจัยเชิงสำรวจเก็บข้อมูลปฐมภูมิโดยใช้แบบสอบถามกับกลุ่มตัวอย่าง 203 คน ข้อมูลที่ได้ถูกนำไปวิเคราะห์และประมวลผลโดยใช้วิธีการทดสอบโมเดลสมการโครงสร้าง 2 ขั้นตอน ผลการวิจัยยืนยันความสัมพันธ์อย่างมีนัยสำคัญเชิงสถิติระหว่างตัวแปรในทิศทางความสัมพันธ์ที่ได้คาดไว้ใน 3 สมมติฐานจาก 5 สมมติฐาน เป็นที่น่าสนใจว่าความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคมขององค์กรไม่มีอิทธิพลทางตรงอย่างมีนัยสำคัญต่อความยินดีที่จะจ่ายในราคาสูง และความภักดีของลูกค้า ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นว่าความเชื่อมั่นมีบทบาทเป็นตัวแปรคั่นกลางโดยสมบูรณ์อย่างมีนัยสำคัญในการส่งผ่านอิทธิพลจากความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคมขององค์กรไปยังความยินดีที่จะจ่ายในราคาสูง และความภักดีของลูกค้า

คำสำคัญ: ความเชื่อมั่น, ความรับผิดชอบต่อสังคมขององค์กร, ความยินดีที่จะจ่ายในราคาสูง, ความภักดีของลูกค้า, สตาร์บัคส์

Introduction

As businesses realize the significant impacts of their business operations on the society and environment, the movement toward corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been embraced among global business community (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Jeon and Gleiberman, 2017; and Lacey and Kennett-Hansel, 2011). Companies around the world go beyond their traditional business responsibilities and engage in CSR initiatives, ranging from business-process CSR (i.e., supportive programs focus on primary stakeholders) to philanthropic CSR (i.e., social activities target to secondary stakeholders), as an important marketing strategy.

However, recent empirical studies demonstrate mixed results on customers' evaluation of the firms engaging in CSR (Habel et al., 2016; Perez, 2009; Vlachos et al., 2009; and Nuttavuthisit and Thoersen, 2017). Perez (2009) found that how customers perceive CSR may or may not be straightforward. Vlachos et al. (2009) addressed that customers may be skeptical about the real reasons why the companies care about social and environmental issues, and suspect companies of greenwashing and scandal avoidance. Habel et al. (2016) proposed customers' perception on the CSR markup pricing to finance CSR engagement. Nuttavuthisit and Thoersen (2017) mentioned that many consumers afraid of being manipulated to pay premium price for the fault claims.

To ensure the positive desirable behavior outcomes like willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty is challenging. Previous studies (i.e., Chen, 2013; Vlachos et al., 2009; Konuk, Rahman and Salo, 2015; Nuttavuthisit and Thoersen, 2017; and Chaimankong et al., 2018) recognized trust as a key prerequisite linking the relationship between CSR customer behaviors (e.g., purchase intention, word-of-mouth, willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty). However, their findings display uncertain mediating role of trust, for example, Konuk et al. (2015)'s cross-country study found a different mediating role of trust across the focal countries; while Chaimankong et al. (2018) found no significant effect of CSR on trust but confirmed the positive influence of trust on customer loyalty. Therefore, this study aimed to empirically investigate the mediating role of trust in the relationship between CSR and customer behaviors (i.e., willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty) in retailing business in case of Starbucks in Thailand.

Literature Review

A strategic approach of CSR requires a company to address social and environmental issues that fit with its business (Porter and Kramer, 2006; and Chaimankong et al., 2011). Kotler and Lee (2005) classified six categories of CSR initiatives; 1) cause promotion, 2) cause-related marketing, 3) corporate social marketing, 4) corporate philanthropy, 5) community volunteering, and 6) socially responsible business practices. While Habel et al. (2016) addressed two major types of CSR; business-process CSR and Philanthropic CSR, and defined CSR engagement as "the level to which customers perceive a firm to engage in actions the appear to further some social good, beyond the interests of the firm and that

which is required by law” (Habel et al., 2016, p. 85). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) and later Perez (2009) proposed that by engaging in CSR initiatives, a company develops a unique social responsible identity, and differentiate itself as a good citizenship comparing to the competitors. In this study, we define customers’ perception toward CSR as “customers’ evaluation on a company’s socially responsible characteristics or identity” (Chaimankong et al., 2018, p. 12).

Trust has been generally emphasized as a critical mediating element in developing and maintaining a strong connection between a customer and a company (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen, 2011; and Hansen, 2014). Doney and Cannon (1997) emphasize how trust is only relevant in situations where there is some level of uncertainty. Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Doney and Cannon (1997) agreed that this is a reflection of psychological quality perceived from the exchange partner like consistent, competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful and benevolence. Therefore, this study conceptualized trust in global terms, in line with Morgan and Hunt (1994, p.23), as “existing when one party has confidence in an exchange partner’s reliability and integrity.”

Customer behavior in this study comprised of willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty. A price premium is a significant issue of a company engaging in CSR activities (Habel et al., 2016; and Nuttavuthisit and Thoersen, 2017). A willingness to pay price premium is a relative comparison, which customers are willing to pay more for products from a brand than they are willing to pay for similar products from other relevant brands. We defined the willingness to pay price premium as “the amount a customer is willing to pay for his/her preferred products, services or brands.” (Konuk et al., 2015, p. 39). Jone (2010) addressed that it is cheaper for a company to maintain the existing customers than to acquire the new ones. Customer loyalty is a critical component for business to gain competitiveness and sustainability (Jone, 2010). Oliver (1999, p. 34) describes loyalty as “a deeper held commitment to rebuy or repatronize a preferred product of service consistently in the future,” and proposes two dimensions of customer loyalty, attitudinal and behavioral. While Lewis and Soureli (2006) argued that loyalty is formed by both attitudinal and behavioral intentions of customers. In line with Lewis and Soureli (2006), this research conceptualized customer loyalty as a combination of both attitudinal and behavioral intentions of customers to maintain a long-term relationship with a company.

Conceptual Framework

Many companies engage in CSR initiatives as strategic requirement to establish and maintain their sustainable competitiveness (Porter and Kramer, 2006), to stimulate relationship quality indicator, based on relationship marketing theory, like trust (Lacey and Kennett-Hensel, 2010), and to foster customer positive behavior (i.e., willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty) toward a company (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; and Habel et al., 2016). Therefore, this research posited:

H₁: Customers’ perception toward CSR positively enhances trust

H₂: Customers' perception toward CSR has positive influence on willingness to pay price premium

H₃: Customers' perception toward CSR has positive impact on customer loyalty

In social exchange theory, trust is emphasized as the most important variable to create a strong connection with a customer (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; and Duet al., 2011); because it reduces uncertainty that may arise between two parties, moderate several positive behavioral outcomes, including willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004, Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun, 2006; Lacey and Kennett-Hensel, 2010; and Nuttavuthisit and Thogersen, 2017). Therefore, we posit:

H₄: Trust positively stimulates willingness to pay price premium

H₅: Trust positively enhances customer loyalty

Figure 1 demonstrates the conceptual framework for this research.

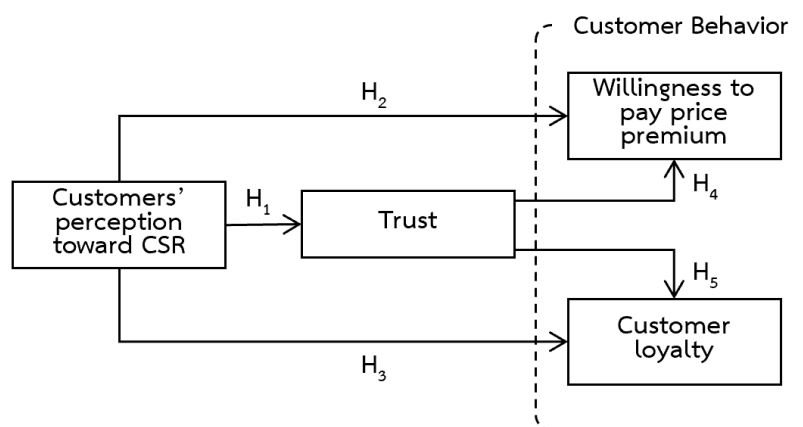


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

Methodology

To empirically test the proposed hypotheses, a quantitative research method was carried out. The aims of this empirical testing were to measure, assess and explain the mediating role of trust in the relationships between CSR and customer behavioral, willingness to pay premium price and customer loyalty. Data were based on a survey of the customers of Starbucks in Bangkok, Thailand.

Starbucks was chosen to be a context of this study because of the following reasons: 1) according to Newsweek's Global Green Ranking 2017, Starbucks ranked the first in its sector; 2) Starbucks position themselves as a responsible company by engaging in CSR initiatives, both business-process CSR and philanthropic CSR, such as executing ethical sourcing, working to reduce their environmental footprint through energy and water conservation, recycling containers and packaging, and fostering the well-being of their surrounded communities; and 3) many literatures (e.g., Wang, 2012; Elder, Lister and Dauvergne, 2014; and Lampiloski et al., 2014) addressed Starbucks as one of the sustainability leaders among businesses. Therefore, Starbucks would be a proper context to facilitate the investigation of causal effects proposed in this study.

The target population for this study comprised individual customers of Starbucks in Bangkok area. This study used a convenience sampling technique. Well-trained research assistants conducted the field survey outside the Starbucks branch in the five responsive shopping malls (50 questionnaires for each location) in Bangkok central business district during May 2018. To ensure the active on-going relationships were included on the samples, potential participants were approached as they exited the Starbucks. The participants were informed about the purpose of this study and asked to voluntarily participate in this study. It took participants about 15 minutes on average to complete the questionnaire. Noted that the shopping mall locations were randomly selected using simple random sampling method. A total number of 250 questionnaires were distributed via self-administrative method, and the final of 203 usable samples, which exceeded the minimum sample size for structural equation modeling suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and Hair et al. (2010), were obtained.

The measurements used in this study were adopted from the existing well-established scales in previous literatures with multiple-item 7-point rating scales, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) to measure the constructs of the interest. Customers' perception toward CSR was measured following a six-item scale provided by Perez (2009). Trust was measured following a five-item scale capturing credibility and benevolence provided by Liu and Wu (2007). Finally, the customer behavior, customer loyalty and customer willingness to pay price premium were adopted from Zeithaml et al. (1996) and Konuk et al. (2015) respectively. Since the study was conducted in Thailand, we translated the questionnaire from English to Thai and the Thai version was reviewed by a group of Thai university lecturers. Before the main study, a two-phase pretest was conducted. First, to assess content validity, two academic and one professional experts in marketing field and five customers of Starbucks were asked for feedback concerning item comprehensibility, readability, and wording. After that, to assess reliability test using Cronbach's alpha, 50 participants were asked to answer the questionnaires. The results of the reliability test ranged from 0.896 to 0.953 higher than 0.70 threshold (Nunnally, 1978).

Research findings

Data were entered and screened for missing data and outliers. The results indicated no concern of missing data and outliers. The multivariate outliers were detected by Mahalanobis D^2 measure. The results indicated that every case had a D^2/df value exceed the suggested value of 3 or 4 (Hair et al., 2010). Then, the test of normality was assessed. Visual inspection of histograms and bivariate scatter plots did not suggest any violation of the assumption that the indicators were normally distributed. Every item exhibited skewness and kurtosis values of between -1.5 and +1.5 as recommended by previous literature (e.g., Hair et al., 2010). The values for this study ranged between -0.198 to -0.019 for skewness and between -0.412 and 0.965 for kurtosis. Thus, the skewness and kurtosis values for all items in this study fell within the suggested range to assume normal distribution. Lastly, to test multicollinearity, we assessed the variance inflation factor (VIF) of the variables and

found that VIFs ranged within the threshold value of 3 from 1.476 to 2.609, and all of the tolerance values exceeded 0.10 (Hair et al., 2010).

Demographic characteristics: Female respondents accounted for 76.4% of the sample while male respondents represented 23.6%. The age of 67% of the respondents was range between 24 and 38 years, followed by 21.2% ranged between 39 and 53 years. Most of the participants (82.3%) were single, and almost 17% were married. Almost 85% had no child. Most of the participants (62.1%) finished undergraduate level, followed by 36% had graduate degrees. Most of the participants (59.6%) worked as employees in private sector, 13.3% were full-time students, and 12.3% worked for either government agency or state-owned enterprise. The highest percentage of participants (34.5%) had a monthly income range between 15,000 and 30,000 baht, while only 7.9% had monthly income more than 100,000 baht. Around 85% of the participants had experience of consuming one to two products of Starbucks.

Hypothesis testing: To test the causal relationships of the constructs proposed in this study, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) program, AMOS 24.0, and followed a two-step approach of SEM recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess measurement model and followed by structural equation modeling (SEM) to assess hypotheses testing and nomological validity of the proposed structural model.

Measurement model: The first phase was to establish acceptable levels of goodness-of-fit. The four-factor structure was conducted for confirmatory factor analysis. As shown in Figure 2, measurement items of customers' perception toward CSR (CPCSR, 6 items); trust (TRST, 5 items); willingness to pay price premium (CWPP, 3 items); and customer loyalty (CLYT, 5 items) were assessed as a measurement model. Results of the CFA suggests that our measurement model was identified as an acceptable fit (Chi-square = 300.519, $df = 138$, $\chi^2/df = 2.178$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$, $GFI = 0.80$, $AGFI = 0.821$, $TLI = 0.944$, $CFI = 0.955$, $NFI = 0.920$, and $RMSEA = 0.073$).

The second phase of confirmatory factor analysis was assessed to find evidence of reliability and construct validity (i.e., convergent validity and discriminant validity). The results of a reliability test using composite reliability (CR) for each construct ranging from 0.90 to 0.94 exceeded the threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2010, Fornell and Larcker, 1981 and Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Therefore, the reliability was exceeded.

Convergent validity was determined based on three criteria. Firstly, the findings indicated that all items loaded significantly ($t\text{-value} > 1.96$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$) on the theoretical constructs and all standardized factor loadings exceeding the 0.50 threshold (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Secondly, the average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs exceeded the recommended level of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981, Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). Lastly, the composite reliability (CR) for each construct were above 0.60 as suggest in Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Bagozzi and Yi (1988). Hence, the convergent validity was supported.

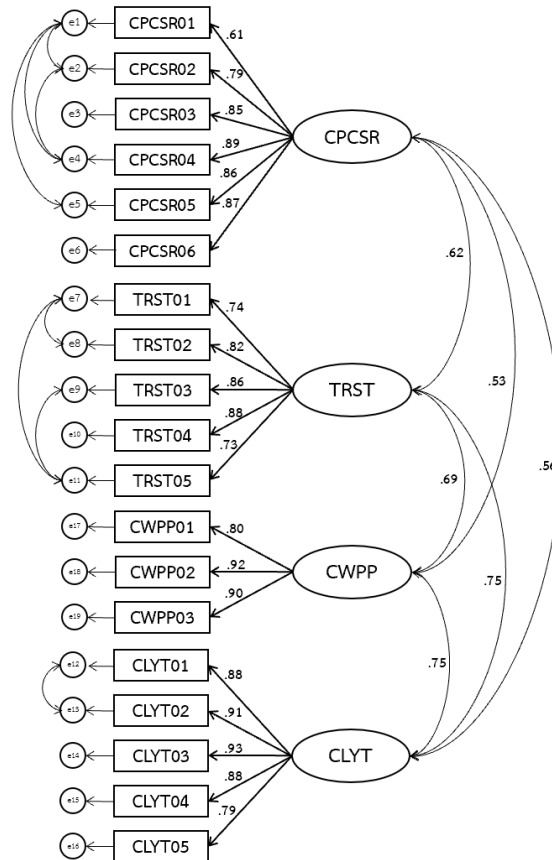


Figure 2: The assessment of measurement model

In examining discriminant validity, researchers compared the average variance extracted (AVE) with the squared correlations among constructs. The results showed that AVE of each construct exceeded the squared correlations of that particular construct to others. Therefore, the results demonstrated discriminant validity.

Table 1 shows the results of construct validity, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), and square correlation among constructs.

Table 1: The results of construct validity

Construct	CR	AVE	Square correlation			
			1	2	3	4
1. CPCSR	0.923	0.671	0.671			
2. TRST	0.904	0.654	0.385	0.654		
3. CWPP	0.909	0.770	0.283	0.483	0.770	
4. CLYT	0.945	0.775	0.317	0.556	0.561	0.775

Note: AVEs are displayed in diagonal in bold letters.

Structural model: The structural equation modeling (SEM) was utilized to assess the model fit and test causal relationship in the theoretical proposed model. The findings showed that the structural model achieved a good level of fit (Chi-square = 297.886, df = 132, $\chi^2/df = 2.257$, p-value = 0.000, GFI = 0.86, AGFI = 0.800, TLI = 0.943, CFI = 0.967, NFI = 0.924, and RMSEA = 0.075). All fit indices indicated

strong fit statistics in desirable ranges, except the significance of the chi-square which expected to be influenced by sample size.

Table 2 illustrated the results of hypothesized relationships. Out of five, three hypothesized relationships were significant in the expected direction, while two hypotheses were not significantly supported. Hypothesis 1 to Hypothesis 3 proposed that customers' perception toward CSR has positive impact on trust (H_1), willingness to pay price premium (H_2) and customer loyalty and (H_3). The findings significantly supported only the relationship between customers' perception toward CSR and trust (H_1 , $\beta = 0.636$, t-value = 7.958, p-value < 0.001), while the relationships between customers' perception toward CSR and willingness to pay price premium (H_2 , $\beta = 0.049$, t-value = 0.741, p-value = 0.459), and between customers' perception toward CSR and customer loyalty (H_3 , $\beta = 0.059$, t-value = 0.920, p-value = 0.358) were not significantly supported, due to p-values for both relationships greater than the significant level of 0.05.

Hypothesis 4 and Hypothesis 5 posited that trust positively enhances willingness to pay price premium (H_4) and customer loyalty (H_5). As expected, the results significantly supported the impact of trust on both willingness to pay price premium (H_4 , $\beta = 0.563$, t-value = 6.586, p-value < 0.001), and customer loyalty (H_5 , $\beta = 0.771$, t-value = 8.241, p-value < 0.001). Due to the p-value lower than 0.05, H_4 and H_5 were significantly supported.

Table 2: The results of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis		Standardized regression weight	t-value	Sig.	Support
H_1	Customers' perception toward CSR positively enhances trust.	0.636	7.958	***	Yes
H_2	Customers' perception toward CSR has positive influence on willingness to pay price premium.	0.049	0.741	0.459	No
H_3	Customers' perception toward CSR has positive impact on customer loyalty.	0.059	0.920	0.358	No
H_4	Trust positively stimulates willingness to pay price premium.	0.563	6.586	***	Yes
H_5	Trust positively enhances customer loyalty.	0.771	8.241	***	Yes

Note: *** p < .001

Squared multiple correlations (R^2) for: Trust = .40, Customer loyalty = .66, Customer willingness to pay price premium = .35.

Model goodness of fit indices: Chi-square = 297.886, df = 132, $\chi^2/df = 2.257$, p-value = 0.000, GFI = 0.86, AGFI = 0.800, TLI = 0.943, CFI = 0.967, NFI = 0.924, and RMSEA = 0.075

Testing of mediation: To fulfill the objective of this study, the mediating role of trust in the relationships between Customers' perception toward CSR and customer behavior (i.e., willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty) was explored. A four-step of mediating analysis and an assessment of bootstrapping were employed to facilitate and establish a better understanding of the

relationship (Baron and Kenny, 1986) proposed in the structural model. The results showed that trust fully mediate the relationships between Customers' perception toward CSR and customer behavior (i.e., willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty).

Figure 3 demonstrates the final structural model with standardized regression weights and coefficient of determination (R^2) values.

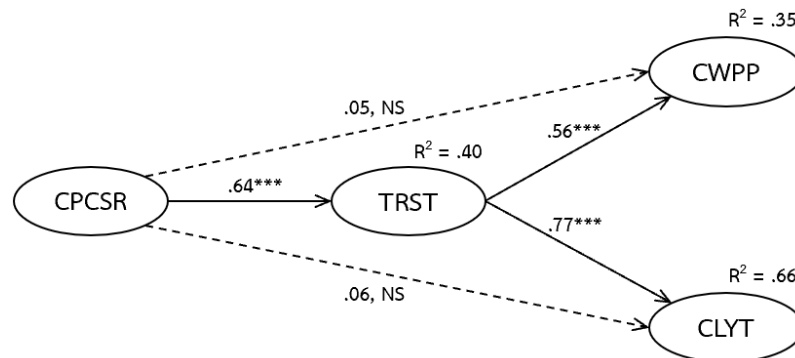


Figure 3: The final structural model

Another bootstrap was computed with user-defined estimand by AMOS 24.0 to test significance of each of the indirect effect path. Table 3 presents the summary of the test for mediation using bootstrap analysis.

Table 3: The summary of the test for mediation using bootstrap analysis

Path	Standardized regression weight	p-value
CPCS → TRST → CWPP	.516	***
CPCS → TRST → CLYT	.545	***
Direct effect CPCS → CWPP	.017	.905
Direct effect CPCS → CLYT	.027	.681
Total effect CPCS → CWPP	.516	***
Total effect CPCS → CLYT	.545	***

Note: *** $p < .001$

CPCS = customers' perception toward CSR, TRST = Trust, CLYT = Customer loyalty, CWPP = willingness to pay price premium

Conclusions and Discussion

The movement toward corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement as an important marketing strategy has been widely applied among global business community (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Jeon and Gleiberman, 2017; and Lacey and Kennett-Hansel, 2011). Companies, including Starbucks, engage in CSR initiatives ranging from business-process CSR (i.e., supportive programs focus on primary stakeholders) to philanthropic CSR (i.e., social activities target to secondary stakeholders), not only to minimize social and environmental causes (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004), but also, to establish and maintain their sustainable competitive advantage (Porter and Kramer, 2006), and to develop strong bond between customers and their companies (Wright and Nyberg, 2017; and Chaimankong et al., 2018).

However, previous empirical studies found that how customers perceive CSR may or may not be straightforward (Perez, 2009); addressed that customers may be skeptical about the real reasons why the companies care about social and environmental issues (Vlachos et al., 2009); and suspect companies of greenwashing and scandal avoidance. Recent marketing research proposed that customer perceive the CSR markup pricing differently, for example, Habel et al. (2016) addressed that customers believe the firms charge a higher price to finance their CSR engagement. In addition, Nuttavuthisit and Thoersen (2017) mentioned that many consumers afraid of being manipulated to pay premium price for the fault claims. Therefore, the challenge is to ensure that engaging in CSR activities would lead to positive desirable behavior like willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty. Many studies (i.e., Chen, 2013; Vlachos et al., 2009; Konuk et al., 2015; Nuttavuthisit and Thoersen, 2017; and Chaimankong et al., 2018) recognized trust as a key prerequisite linking the positive relationship between CSR customer behavior (e.g., purchase intention, word-of-mouth, willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty). The propose of this study was to investigate the mediating role of trust in the relationship between CSR and customer behavior (i.e., willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty) in retailing business in case of Starbucks in Thailand. The findings confirmed three of five hypothesized relationships in expected direction. Interestingly, the direct impacts of CSR to customer behavior, in this case willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty, were not significantly supported. Specifically, the results demonstrated that trust significantly had the fully mediating role in the relationships between CSR and customer behavior comprising willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty.

Recommendations

Our findings confirmed that trust is an important element to establish and maintain relationships with customers. Investing resources in CSR initiatives as marketing strategy and hoping to enhance positive customer behavior in return, without trust, may not be universally happened. Thus, managers should ensure that their motives of CSR engagement are communicated in a sincere and honest way. They should also examine how the public especially their customers perceive and evaluate the companies' actions in order to assure the trustworthiness of the companies.

This present study is subject to several limitations. First, the study may have limited generalizability because this research is based on data from one business context, Starbucks, and one stakeholder group, customers. To establish the generalization, future research should explore and examine this integrative model with other contexts and other groups of stakeholders. Second, this study focused on the relationship between CSR, as a customers' evaluation on a company's socially responsible identity, and two customer behaviors, i.e., willingness to pay price premium and customer loyalty. The future research may investigate the effects of different types of CSR on same or other aspects of customer behavior. Lastly, to extend this study, further studies of the mediating roles of trust and/or other relationship quality constructs like commitment and customer-company identification between other marketing tools and customer behavior are needed.

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