

Consumers' Response to Socially Responsible Actions of Corporate: An Experimental Study

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Abstract---Corporate social responsibility has become the buzz-word these days. It has drawn serious attention of the corporate across the globe. In this paper we aim to investigate the type of emotional response that gets generated when an individual is exposed to socially responsible actions of the corporate. Scenario based experimental design was used to manipulate the emotions. Respondents were assigned to the experimental as well as control condition using random sampling. PLS based SEM was used for the purpose of data analyses.

Keywords--- Corporate social responsibility, emotions, scenario based experimental design, PLS based SEM

I Introduction

Corporate social responsibility has become the buzz-word these days. It is something which has drawn serious attention of the corporate across the globe. Employees, suppliers, customers and the society at large, all talk about the growing importance of CSR (Gaur & Anand, 2019). According to the definition given by Abdeen (2016), CSR is defined as “the efforts made by an organization to maximize long-term benefits to the stakeholders and minimize the harm caused to the society”. It is considered as an opportunity for businesses to enhance their goodwill, and that is what motivates them to show their concern towards the people, planet and profits. A report by KPMG (2013) brings to the forefront that most companies now a days indulge into CSR and report their performance to the various stakeholders.

Companies these days are engaging extensively into CSR and they are devoting a good amount of resources for the same. Hence, it is important to examine the how corporate social responsibility leads to various positive stakeholder responses when such stakeholders come across these responsible actions of the corporate.

In the present paper, we aim to investigate the type of emotions that get elicited when an individual comes across the various responsible actions of the corporate and how these emotions lead to exhibiting support behavior towards the organizations involved into CSR. Bhattacharya et al. (2009) conducted a study in which they proposed that the impact of expectations on the various outcome responses is mediated by the psychological variables. According to them, the understanding of an individual of the company's various Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities produces benefits for the stakeholders, and it is these considered benefits that affect the quality of the relationship between stakeholders and the company, leading to various behavioral outcomes.

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In gathering customer reactions, Xie et al. (2014) used a novel approach. According to them, “consumer responses typically occur in unexpected contexts, under low involvement conditions and, with little time to think deeply.” Further they posit that CSR actions of the company evokes various emotions. The effects of expectations on customer behavior are further regulated by these emotions (Gaur et al., 2011). We follow an approach similar to that of Xie et al. (2014). There has been an escalating research on various consumer responses to the wrong doings of the corporate but very few studies focus on the responsible behavior of the corporate. Past research has highlighted the importance of environmental issues for customers and evokes positive feelings within them (Stern and Dietz, 1994; Vining and Ebreo, 1992; Chen and Chai, 2010). By taking cues from these research works we plan to study the role of emotions in generating customer reactions to corporate green behavior.

II Fashioning the phenomenon to be explained

Corporate Social responsibility is a business model that helps company follow self-regulatory practices and be socially accountable to the stakeholders, public and above all- to itself. CSR aims at making the company conscious of the kind of impact it is having on not alone the profits, but also people and planetary element. Thus, engaging in CSR means that the company is operating in ways that that enhance their contribution to the society and environment instead of affecting them negatively. Past researches have brought to the fore front that there are very few studies focusing on the positive emotions elicited when a company practices CSR. Much of the studies have focused on negative emotions (Shaver et al. 1987). Infact Elsworth and Smith (1988) suggest that there are four to five studies on negative emotions for each positive emotion study. Contrary to this, we based our research on positive emotions.

We suggest a conceptual framework that hypothesizes that sustainable actions of the corporate elicit emotional feelings. It is these felt emotions that act as mediators between the sustainable actions of the corporate and consumers’ responses (general public) when they are exposed to such actions of the corporate. Though, the emotions being non- deliberative, Haidt (2012) states that, “they function as a kind of information processing of the moral significance of stimuli to which one is exposed.” Since the present study focuses on the sustainable actions of the corporate, the emotion under the study is gratitude.

Froh et al. (2009) and Raggio et al. (2014) have in their study state that gratitude is identifies as the only other-focused positive moral emotion with a good amount of work.

Most researchers have recognized the importance of gratitude for building and maintaining positive social ties over the years (e.g., McCullough et al. 2008). Further, McCullough et al. 2008 define gratitude as “a positive emotion that typically flows from the perception that one has benefited from the costly, intentional, voluntary action of another person”. People are most likely to feel grateful when “(a) they have received a particularly valuable benefit; (b) high effort and cost have been expended on their behalf; (c) the expenditure of effort on their behalf seems to have been intentional rather than accidental; (d) the expenditure of effort on their behalf was gratuitous” (McCullough et al. 2001). Past researches like Okamoto and Robinson (1997), Tesser et al. (1968) and Tsang (2006) also support these conditions of elicitation of gratitude. Gratitude is derived from

the belief that one is benefitted from another's behavior (Bono et al., 2015). Previous research on gratitude focused primarily on the perceived value of economic benefits a consumer gets from organizational function, but new research has begun to explore the important role of gratitude in producing positive responses for organizations (Morales, 2005; Hasan et al., 2017). Since gratitude is elicited by “the perception that one is the beneficiary of another’s intentionally-provided benefit” (Algoe and Haidt, 2009), therefore we argue that consumers (public) should feel thankful upon becoming aware of the socially responsible actions of the corporate. Thus, we propose,

H1: Exposure to socially responsible actions of the corporate, will elicit felt gratitude.

The impact of gratitude on consumer (public) responses

McCullough et al. (2001) suggested, “gratitude has three specific moral functions in that it serves as a moral barometer, a moral motive for beneficiaries, and a moral reinforcement for benefactors”. Here we concentrate on its intrinsic motivation for beneficiaries in that gratitude motivates beneficiaries to engage in social conduct towards their benefactors and others (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; McCullough et al. 2002; Tsang 2006). Exposure to corporate responsible environmental practices in the current study evokes gratitude in customers, and their impulses to behave are to reward the good behavior of the business and to reciprocate favorably with goodwill towards the company. More precisely, we propose that tangible customer reaction to felt positive moral emotions would include conveying favorable word of mouth to families, friends, and colleagues. In addition, because positive emotions continue to expand the attention of consumers (Fredrickson 1998; Fredrickson and Branigan 2005), identification with the company and investing in the business should also be encouraged. Thus, we propose that:

H2: The greater the feeling of gratitude, the greater will be the positive responses towards the socially responsible actions of the corporate.

H2a: The greater the feeling of gratitude, the greater will be the positive word of mouth for the organization.

H2b: The greater the feeling of gratitude, the greater will the consumers’ identify themselves with the organization.

H2c: The greater the feeling of gratitude, the greater will be the likeliness of consumers’ to invest in such organization.

III Methodology

Experiments are seen as the gold standard in organizational research (Shadish et al. 2002). We manipulated the socially responsible actions of the corporate using experimental and control conditions. The mediating and the dependent variables were the measured variables. They are illustrated below:

1. A manipulated variable (X) indicating exposure to either the experimental condition or the control condition. Experimental condition being coded as +1 and control condition being coded as -1.
2. One mediating variable (M) gratitude for the socially responsible actions of the corporate.
3. Three continuous outcome variable (Y) highlighting consumer (public) responses. They are: positive word of mouth, investing in the company, identification with the company.

The variables in our research design are shown in Figure 1. We followed procedures proposed by Ringle et al. (2015) for testing of conditional effects.

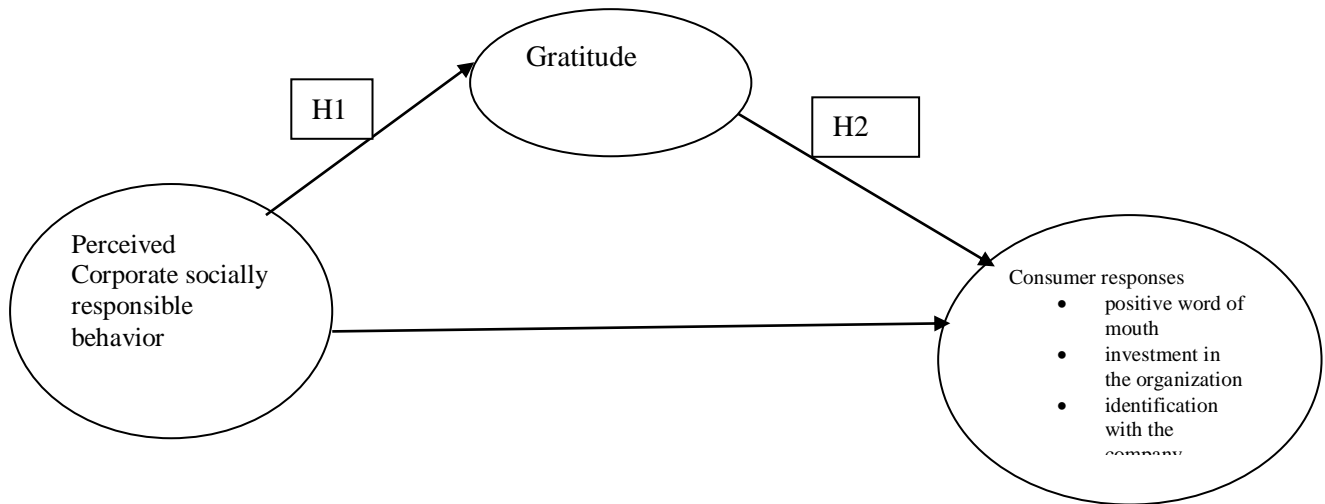


Figure1: Mediators and consumer responses for corporate socially responsible behavior

Stimulus materials

Specific emotional manipulation is a herculean task. It can pose ethical issues if one wants to do so. In the past, different psychologists have used scenarios to manipulate emotions (Roseman 1991, Fischer and Roseman 2007). In our research, narrative versions of both the experimental and the control condition for socially responsible actions of the corporate were developed with the help of professionals with insights into the socially responsible actions of the corporate. The positive scenario narrated a description of a fictitious company (ABC industries Ltd.) and the socially responsible actions taken by such company. A brief version of the scenario is presented below:

ABC industries, is an Indian multinational founded in 1987. It develops pharmaceutical, medical devices and consumer packaged goods. ABC industries has continuously been involves for more than two decades to reduce their impact on planet. Their projects range from exploiting wind power to supplying safe water to communities around the globe. Buying a private energy supplier in the Gujarat area allowed the company to reduce pollution while offering a clean, cost-effective alternative to electricity. The organization continues to look for renewable energy alternatives with the goal of sourcing from renewable sources of 40 percent of its energy needs.

The scenario for the control condition was a neutral description of the same company. It used identical descriptive content as employed in the experimental conditions. These scenarios were developed with experts who have insights into the corporate socially responsible actions. They were pretested and all revisions were incorporated after pretesting. We conducted a pretest among 62 Indian consumers who were assigned to the experimental and the control condition randomly, 31 in each condition. The manipulation of the corporate socially responsible actions worked well.

Respondents and procedures

We distributed the questionnaire along with the scenario to the various consumer groups in India excluding those whose inputs had already been obtained in the pre test. They were randomly assigned to both the conditions with 104 in the experimental condition and 109 in the control condition. Thus a total of 213 responses were collected for the above study.

Our sample had 103 men and 110 women. Out of these 213 respondents, 47 were in the age group of 18 to 30 years, 52 were in the age bracket of 30 to 40 years, 40 were in the age bracket of 50 to 60 years and 35 were above the age of 60. As far as education is concerned, 63 were just 12th Pass, 96 were graduates and 54 were post-graduates. In terms of occupation 58 were self- employed, 48 were in some kind of service, 59 were students and the remaining 48 were unemployed. A brief profile of respondents is shown in table 1 below:

Table 1: Respondents profile

	Experimental condition (104)	Control condition (109)	Total
Gender			
Male	55	48	103
Female	49	61	110
Age			
18-30 years	26	21	47
30-40 years	29	23	52
40-50 years	19	21	40
50-60 years	20	19	39
Above 60 years	10	25	35
Education			
10+2	36	27	63
Graduate	45	51	96
Post Graduate	23	31	54
Occupation			
Self-employed	27	31	58
Service	23	25	48
Student	35	24	59
Unemployed	19	29	48

Measures

Measures for mediators and outcome variables are presented in Table 2. Chronbach's alpha, composite reliability, factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted are also presented.

Mediating variable: Gratitude was measured by a two seven point item scale anchored with "1= I do not feel this at all" and "7= I feel this very strongly". The respondents were asked to indicate, " based on the information that you just read in the scenario above, please indicate the degree to which you feel the following emotions?". Gratitude was measured by two items: "I feel grateful" and "I feel thankful".

Outcome variables: Similarly seven point scales were adopted from various well-established literature to measure the outcome variables. Positive word of mouth was measured by three items; Identification with the company was measured by two items and investment in the organization was also measured by two items adopted from Xie et al. 2014, Grappi et al. 2013)

Table 2: Factor loadings, AVE and composite reliability and Chronbach's alpha of the measures

Variables	Items	Item loadings	Composite Reliability	AVE	Chronbach A
Gratitude	"I feel grateful"	0.94	0.95	0.92	0.91
	"I feel thankful"	0.95			
Positive Word of Mouth	"I intend to say positive things about this company to friends, relatives and other people"	0.92	0.95	0.87	0.93
	"I intend to recommend my friends, relatives and other people considering work for this company"	0.94			
	"I intend to speak well about the company to friends, relatives and other people"	0.94			
Investment in the company	"How likely would you invest in the company (buying stock)?"	0.94	0.94	0.89	0.87
	"How likely would you encourage other people to invest in the company?"	0.93			
Identification with the Government	"How do the characteristics, goals and values, and ethic behavior of the company correspond to your own characteristics, goals and values, and ethic behavior?"	0.92	0.90	0.82	0.81
	"How strongly do you identify yourself with this company?"	0.89			

Notes: Threshold values: loading > 0.7; CR > 0.7 and AVE > 0.5 (Hair et al., 2017)

IV Results

Measurement model assessment

The hypotheses of the study were examined using Partial least squares-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). Both Chronbach alpha (CA) and composite reliability (CR) scores were used to examine the reliability of all constructs. Hair, Hult, Ringle and Sarstedt (2017) suggested that a value of 0.70 provides adequate evidence for both chronbach alpha and composite reliability. As per Hair et al. (2017), item reliability is confirmed when an item has a factor loading greater than 0.70 on its respective construct. The factor loadings of all items fall within the threshold recommended by Hair et al. (2017). The composite reliability values range from 0.90 to 0.95. These composite reliability values also fall within the acceptable threshold of 0.7 (Gupta, Kumar, Singh, Foropon and Chandra, 2018; Hair et al. 2017). Convergent validity of the data was evaluated by Average variance extracted (AVE). The average variance extracted indicates the amount of variance that is captured by the construct in relation to the variance due to measurement error, was used to assess convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). The average variance extracted for all constructs ranges from 0.82 to 0.92 indicates that on an average the construct explained more than half of the variance of their indicators (Hair et al. 2017).

The discriminant validity of the variables was examined using Fornell Larcker criterion (Fornell and Larcker 1981) and also through the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) of the correlations suggested by Henseler, Dijkstra, Sarstedt, Ringle, Diamantopouloa, Straub and Calantone (2014) and Hair et al. (2017). Table 3 shows Fornell Larcker analysis where the correlations between each construct were lower than the square root of the AVE for each construct. Table 4 shows the highest ratio of HTMT value is 0.44 (<0.85) and the bootstrapped HTMT

confidence interval (95%) did not contain the value 1. The discriminant validity was confirmed by both Fornell Larcker (Fornell and Larcker 1981) and HTMT of the correlations suggested by Henseler, Dijkstra, Sarstedt, Ringle, Diamantopouloa, Straub and Calantone (2014) and Hair et al. (2017).

Table3: Discriminant validity based on Fornell Larcker Criterion

	Gratitude	Identification with the company	Investment in company	Positive word of mouth
Gratitude	0.95			
Identification with the company	0.23	0.89		
Investment in company	0.28	0.28	0.93	
Positive word of mouth	0.4	0.37	0.34	0.93

Table 4: Discriminant validity based on HTMT ratio

	Gratitude	Identification with the company	Investment in company	Positive word of mouth
Gratitude				
Identification with the company	0.28			
Investment in company	0.32	0.35		
Positive word of mouth	0.44	0.44	0.39	

Threshold: values<0.85 (Henseler et. al 2014)

Before testing the hypotheses, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was done for the measures by the use of Smart PLS software. The fitness of the measurement model was assessed through SRMR-Standardized Root Mean Square Residual. Henseler et al. (2014) introduced the SRMR as a goodness of fit measure for PLS-SEM that can be used to avoid model misspecification. A value less than 0.08 is considered a good fit. The SRMR value for the model (experimental condition, mediators and outcome variables) is 0.06 (p=.000). The findings show that SRMR is satisfactory thereby confirming the fitness of the model.

In assessing the structural model, the hypothesized relationships between constructs were examined using path coefficients. The bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 samples was used for path testing.

Results of Structural model analyses

The hypotheses of our study were examined using PLS SEM.

In this part, we present the results of mediation effects of corporate socially responsible behavior on consumer positive responses toward the organization. As shown in Figure 1, the experimental manipulation (X) is a scenario describing socially responsible actions of the corporate, and the positive emotion of gratitude is the mediator (M). consumer's positive responses include three outcome variables (Y): positive word of mouth, identification with the company and investment in the organization As shown in Figure 1, we tested whether

gratitude has a direct effect on consumers' positive responses, respectively (H1 and H2). The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Path coefficients

Hypotheses no.	Hypothesized Path	B	t Statistics	p Values	Decision
H1	Scenario →Gratitude	-0.63	12.21	.000	Supported
H2a	Gratitude →Positive word of mouth	0.17	3.15	.025	Supported
H2b	Gratitude → Identification with the organization	0.30	2.16	.002	Supported
H2c	Gratitude → Investment in the organization	0.18	2.11	.005	Supported

As shown in table 5 when an individual is exposed to the socially responsible actions of the Corporate, he experiences a positive moral emotion of Gratitude ($\beta= -0.63$, $t= 12.21$). Thus, hypotheses H1 stands supported. Also, I found significant direct effects of gratitude on positive word of mouth ($\beta=0.17$, $t=3.15$), Identification with the organization ($\beta=0.30$, $t=2.16$) and investment in the organization ($\beta=0.18$, $t=2.11$). Thus all hypotheses H2a, H2b and H2c stand supported.

V Discussion

In the green research, there is quite a bit of research relating consumer reactions to unscrupulous or untrustworthy activities of the business anyway there is almost no exact research which has concentrated on customer reactions to corporate socially responsible activities. The present examination proposes and tests a model to more readily comprehend this relationship.

At the point when an individual is presented to the green actions of the corporate, they experience the positive feelings of Gratitude. Gratitude is a feeling which holds a significant spot in making and keeping up positive relations. McCullough et al. (2008) has characterized gratitude as "a constructive feeling that normally spills out of the observation that one has profited by the exorbitant, deliberate, willful activity of someone else". Individuals feel appreciative when they get a significant advantage, or when high exertion and cost has been used for their sake or in the interest of their friends and family and this consumption or exertion is purposeful as opposed to coincidental as expressed by McCullough et al. (2001). Since gratitude is all things considered evoked by "the observation that one is the recipient of another's deliberately given advantage" (Algoe and Haidt, 2009); The discoveries displayed in table 5 show that when an individual encountered the socially responsible activities of the Corporate they feel gratuitous towards them. Along these lines, hypotheses H1 stands upheld. Predictable with the research of Xie et. al (2014), Xie and Bagozzi (2014) all show that when an individual encounters moral and capable activities of the corporate, they experience the positive feeling of gratitude. Observational proof likewise supports such elicitation states of Gratitude (Tesser et al. 1968, Okamoto and Robinson 1997, Tsang 2006).

Hypotheses H2a, H2b, and H2c study the job of felt appreciation in producing buyer reactions. By examining the role of emotions in generating consumer reactions to socially responsible activities of the corporate the after effects of this examination are reliable with the past explores that show that gratitude is a feeling that is effective in quickly provoking the customers to reward in some way (Smith, 1976, Algoe and Haidt, 2009, Xie et al. 2014, Xie and Bagozzi 2014). Gratitude which has been marked as "parent of all virtues" (Cicero 1851) was found to assume a huge responsibility in interceding the experience of corporate socially dependable activities and customer reactions.

In accordance with the previously mentioned researcher statements, the aftereffects of this investigation bring to the front line that Gratitude nurtures genius social practices between the consumers and the organization. This further urges the beneficiary to respond in some form or the other (Algoe and Haidt, 2009). This response further prompts building of trust and in this manner strengthening the relationship (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006). As in this case the reciprocation is in the form of various consumers' responses generated on being exposed to the socially responsible actions of the corporate like positive word of mouth, identification with the organization and investment in the company. Also this leads to building of trust which further motivates the individual to go in for positive word of mouth for the organization. Thus felt gratitude by and large mediates the impact of socially responsible actions on consumer positive responses towards the corporate. Along these lines, hypotheses H2a, H2b and H2c stand supported

Lastly, Lindebaum and Jordan (2012) argue that positive emotions result in universally positive results that are consistent with my research where it has been revealed that when an individual experiences positive emotions as in gratitude that leads to positive consumer responses being generated.

VI Theoretical Contribution

Our study makes important contributions to CSR research in a number of ways by exploring the role of emotional processes as instigators of customer responses towards corporate green behavior and contingencies regulating the functioning of the motivators. It contributes significantly to CSR research by exploring "soft" moral emotion processes in consumer decision-making, complementing past research into "cool" rational processes.

Very few studies have focused on positive emotions. We expanded the study of CSR actions by adapting the moral emotion framework and its regulatory mechanisms to a new and understood CSR context, a green context. Green corporate activities have become increasingly important in decision-making as corporations are facing "increasing public concern, more strict regulation and increasing pressure from stakeholders to protect the natural environment" (Leonidou et al. 2013). Further research is needed to explore customer attitudes and reactions towards green corporate behavior (Cronin et al. 2011). For this purpose, we also generally add to current CSR research by discussing customer reactions to CSR activities in the known context of green corporate behavior (Peloza and Shang 2011).

VII Implications of the research

Our findings have significant implications for the management of CSR activities in the organization, especially those related to environment. First, the mediating role of moral emotions between socially responsible corporate actions and consumer responses indicates the importance of emotional processes in the interpretation and response of consumers to CSR activities by companies, to which managers must pay special attention.

It is crucial for managers to consider particular emotions produced by their non-green behavior in customers, because these emotions have severe effects of action that can be related positive outcome responses that consumers take toward the business. The findings on the role of gratitude suggest that managers should monitor their firms' green actions and effectively communicate this to consumers in order to reinforce felt gratitude and try to "capitalize" on those positive feelings. For example, after implementing successful green practices, companies might give customers the opportunity to reciprocate with various product support acts that could strengthen the business-consumer relationship.

Felt gratitude could provide a competitive advantage over other businesses to the degree that it translates into a favorable picture of the product, reputation, positive word of mouth and other consequences. Specific emotions can therefore serve as targets in persuasive communications and publicity for mitigating or overcoming reactions to bad actions taken by companies or for taking advantage and promoting reactions to good actions taken by companies.

Finally, Customer word of mouth is a significant managerial concept to find out. We found that the customers responded with positive word of mouth to green behavior by firms. Berger (2013) claims that word of mouth "is the primary factor between 20 percent and 50% of all purchasing decisions" and is "at least ten times more successful" than advertisements.

VIII Limitations

One of the constraints of our examination is the utilization of narrative scenarios of a hypothetical organization to evoke moral feelings. In future investigations, utilization of portrayals or recordings of genuine occasions of real organizations may upgrade the level of authenticity of controls what's more, evoke more grounded good feelings, particularly for positive moral feelings. We speculate that our controls were here and there more vulnerable, be that as it may, than that really experienced in regular day to day existence. Though, our specific situations, while invented, were developed along the lines of real episodes of corporate mindful activities done previously.

Next, moral feelings were estimated distinctly by utilization of a language-based technique. It is attractive to quantify feelings through an assortment of techniques in future research

(e.g., outward appearances, autonomic or physical apprehensive framework reactions, fMRI procedures). In like manner, as opposed to utilizing situations of the sort we did, future research may control feelings straightforwardly, if such a methodology can be adjusted to green showcasing settings (Ragunathan and Pham 1999).

Last but not the least, special consideration is given to the analysis of stakeholders outside customers. In this regard, Cronin et al. (2011) identify a range of potentialities and propose a number of relevant theoretical and managerial directions for future research.

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