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An Examination of Consumer's Attitude towards Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Web Communication Using Media Richness Theory

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to examine the effect of media richness on attitude towards website in communicating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). We use Media richness theory (MRT) as the main theory for this paper. To meet the objective, we consider the sample of 242 students as consumer to browse through the different richness of CSR information websites that are lean and rich. We use statistical t-test to analyze the data. The result shows rich media has a significant impact on CSR communication towards consumer. This finding contributes to a new empirical literature of CSR communication and MRT.

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1. Background

The aim of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication is to anticipate consumers expectation with providing true and transparent information about CSR activities (Podnar, 2008). Previous researchers have come up with the ideas of using CSR communication strategy where the concept of marketing communication is aimed at

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influencing consumers (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009). Some researchers claimed that the advertisement (marketing approach) is not a good means to disclose social information because its effectiveness has been quite controversial and some companies are spending more on the advertisement rather than CSR actions itself (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2012). There is empirical result that showed that using CSR as selling propositions has contributed to consumers' skepticism, especially to 'sin industries' like tobacco manufacture and oil companies (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009).

Nevertheless the above phenomenon is still a paradox and more studies are needed using various means of communication strategy to understand how to create consumers' positive perceptions. The awareness on the importance of driving the consumers' perception on CSR makes the management starts considering new media or Internet-based communication when disclosing their social activities (Lodhia, 2006). The use of website for CSR communication enables information to disseminate to a wide range of consumers. In addition, the presentation is more attractive due to the use of graphics, hyperlinks, and multimedia elements. This kind of richness in presentation could facilitate consumers understanding and able to increase consumer's impression. The element of richness, highlighted in MRT has been successfully obtained consumers' engagement in e-commerce field of study (Jahng, Jain, & Ramamurthy, 2007; Simon & Peppas, 2004). But, there is still a lack of research that embedded MRT with CSR communication study including consumers' attitude towards CSR internet disclosure. This study has attempted to fill this gap by examining the attitude towards website using different level of richness on presenting CSR information.

2. Literature review

2.1. CSR communication

CSR communication is defined as "communication that is designed and distributed by the company itself about its CSR efforts" (Morsing, 2006, p.171). CSR communication studies originated from corporate communication concepts and tools that fully use of internal and external communication as a basis to engage with stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2011). The increase of CSR information in corporate communication, appears to be a response to an identified need, implies that management teams are sensitive to market trends and shifts in views and opinions of stakeholders and results in more attention and resources being directed towards this area. The main reason for communicating CSR is for higher company performance index, responsible image and to avoid negative impacts or to counter negative publicity (Arvidsson, 2010; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2012).

The companies use a wide range of medium for CSR communication, including annual reports, brochure or pamphlets, website, advertisement, organize dialogues with society, cause-related marketing, product packaging and television (Lodhia, 2004, 2006). However, recent studies emphasize on annual report, advertisement, dialogue and website. Traditional media or printed media, like annual report is the most common medium and the main channel amongst listed companies in disclosing their CSR activities (Ramdhony, Padachi, & Giroffle, 2010). This is due to annual report has a certain degree of credibility among consumers and is more transparent in showing how many organizations had contributed to sustainable development compare to another medium (Hunter & Bansal, 2006; Ramdhony et al., 2010).

However, annual report is not perceived as the most useful medium for social disclosures. This is largely due to time and space constraints involved in producing an annual report and it seems to disclose information based on an organization's needs rather than consumers' needs (Lodhia, 2004). In addition, there is lack of consistency and comparability of CSR information and have limited means of presenting and organizing information (Ramdhony et al., 2010). Under traditional communication modes, it is not certain as to whether the CSR information is actually reaching its target consumers and the involved cost are usually outweighed the benefit (Aerts & Cormier, 2009). The existence of the internet or websites is becoming the medium of self-representation that replaces traditional corporate communication media and organizations are increasingly concerned with ethical and responsible communication (Wanderley, Lucian, Farache, & Sousa Filho, 2008). The advent of the web has led the organizations to reconsider their disclosure strategies since website is different than traditional media in term of more data can be disseminated, easy access at anytime and anywhere (Aikat, 2000). The websites also possess a particular feature like multimedia characteristics, electronic document retrieval and search tools that allow the company to communicate with specific and obtain feedback from the consumers (Aikat, 2000; Branco & Rodrigues,

2006). Because of the benefits of using website when communicating CSR activities, this study develops corporate website by taking into accounts the elements or media richness in presenting the CSR message.

MRT was introduced by Daft and Lengel (1986) that stated that the ability of media to convey messages and cues and in turn facilitate consumers' understanding is different that is based on how the companies choose and use the right media. According to Schmitz and Fulk (1991), there are four characteristics to classify either the medium is rich or lean: (1) the ability to handle multiple cue simultaneously; (2) the ability to facilitate rapid feedback; (3) the ability to establish personal focus; and (4) language variety. Lean media are the media with less ability on the stipulated characteristics. In the early research on media richness, face to face (FtF) is the richest medium because of its ability to appreciate all the characteristics. However, the emergence of Internet changes the meaning of richness.

Multiple addressability, external recording and computer-processing memories, which do not exist in traditional media, are attributes of MRT in determining richness in electronic communication (Markus, 1994). The website is considered rich if it has an interactive presentation of visual images, symbols, sounds and navigating functions (Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007). In some studies, rich website is described as website that has text, pictures, sound and video clips whereas lean website contains only text or text and pictures (Cho, Phillips, Hageman, & Patten, 2009; Jiang & Benbasat, 2007; Simon & Peppas, 2004). As for commercial websites, most companies are using rich presentation, such as video or other kind of multimedia features where consumers can interact or experience the product as if in reality (Jiang & Benbasat, 2007). It is believed that consumer's positive attitude towards website could engage consumers with company. The richness elements incorporated into a corporate website becomes a strategy to attract consumer positive attitude towards website with CSR. The next section will discuss on attitudes towards websites.

2.2. Attitude towards website

According to Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), attitudes are learned disposition to respond to an object or behavior. It is one of the critical factors in explaining consumer behavior and become as one of the most studied concepts (Jang-sun Hwang, McMillan, & Lee, 2003; Jahng et al., 2007; Simon & Peppas, 2004). The attitude has been the focus of marketing studies, particularly to measure the effectiveness of advertising (Simon & Peppas, 2004). It is important to understand consumer attitudes because it can generally predict consumer purchasing intentions and behavior. This logic has been proven with respect to attitudes towards a website.

Attitude towards website become an important subject to study, particularly on consumer perceptions towards the company. It's has a greater impact on on-line perception of the company (Allen et al., 2007). Attitude towards website is related to web design (San Martín & Camarero, 2008). In fact website design has direct influence on consumer's satisfaction towards website. However the elements of web design are complex. Thus, this study focuses on media richness as part of web design. It was uncovered that richness is an influential factor to form positive attitude toward on-line systems (Jahng et al., 2007). Simon and Peppas (2004) posited that consumers prefer richer presentation regardless of the nature of the product. The development of the corporate website with multimedia interactivity and tools allow consumers to customize both content and delivery format. This, in part, provides some explanation of why consumers prefer rich media sites for both simple and complex products. However, it still remains unclear how attitudes toward online content are formed because most of the study covered in the scope of e-commerce companies and only a few studies that look into attitudes towards the content of the website. Based on previous findings regarding the positive effects of media richness and attitude towards website, this study predicts that:

H₁: Attitude towards website is positive when CSR is communicating in rich presentation rather than lean presentation.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and measures

In this study, the attention is focused on the type of CSR message that commonly disclose by fast-food restaurants in Malaysia. The researcher had examined eight websites of fast food companies and found most of them are disclosed nutritional values and 'halal' status of their food as their main priority. Some companies disclose details of their CSR contribution that cover food quality; food safety; details on food nutritional for each item and highlight their halal policy (enclosed the halal certificate). From this initial investigation of the fast-foods' website, researcher decided to present CSR information richness into two categories that are rich and lean. Rich website means the CSR information is presented using elements such as text, images, animation and video. Website that represented by text and still images is called as lean presentation. These two categories of websites are used to examine the impact of media richness on attitude towards website. The use of fictional website is created to control for any predisposition participants may have related to real companies (Cho et al., 2009). Website of "Hungry Me", a fictional fast food restaurant created by the researcher where most of the website appearance is similar to popular fast-food restaurants website with the content of CSR message is originally adopted from the real websites. The items of attitudes towards website were assessed with six questions based on the scale of Chen, Clifford, and Wells (2002). A five-point Likert scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) was used for the questions.

3.2. Research procedure and sampling

Convenience sampling of university students is chosen to represent gender and the group of consumers of fast food companies. The researcher contacted the instructors of business program at a Malaysia local university. The researcher asked their permission to have students to participate in this study. Upon obtaining the consent, the subject is randomly assigned to one of the two conditions of CSR information richness. In this case, the experiment is done in the computer lab and researcher will give a brief explanation about the study. Subjects are given a sufficient time browsing on the assigned corporate website so that they are able to answer the questionnaire. After browsing the website, the subjects are instructed to answer the questionnaire to get feedback on their attitude towards the site. Finally, the subjects answered demographic questions.

The 242 respondents were divided into two, where each group viewed rich and lean CSR information website respectively. Of the respondents, 74.8 per cent were female and 25.2 percent were male. The respondents age groups from 19 to 25 years old, where the highest mean score is 21.63.

4. Result and discussions

An independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the attitude towards website scores for lean and rich website. However, the finding shows the Levene's test is significant, it means the violation of the assumption of equal variance exists. The result is based on equal variance not assumed and it's showed there is a significant relationship between the level of presentation richness and attitude towards website. Further analysis showed that the mean of rich website (mean = 22.45) is higher than lean website (mean = 18.26). Based on this result, H1 is accepted.

The result is consistent with MRT and previous studies that stated that rich website has strong direct effects on consumers' positive attitudes towards the website (Jahng et al., 2007; Jiang & Benbasat, 2007; Simon & Peppas, 2004; Tomaseti, Ruiz, & Reynolds, 2005). It is believed that the rich website with its capacity allows more social, non-verbal and complex cues and this leads to consumers positive attitudes towards website (Jahng et al., 2007). The result is expected because previous study had found that consumers preferred a rich presentation regardless of the nature of the product. Perhaps technological changes and changing consumer preferences have outpaced MRT (Simon & Peppas, 2004). The result of this study is also aligned with Jiang and Benbasat (2007) that claimed that attributes such as media richness are utilized to determine consumers' attitude toward the website. Those consumers who value the design of the website generates satisfaction towards the company (San Martín & Camarero, 2008).

Even though, there are several factors that contribute to the intention to use corporate website which are perceived cohesion among consumers and commitment to the website. Unsurprisingly, attitude towards the website is the strongest predictor of this intention (Mattila, 2009). It seems that rich presentation of the online environment does have an impact on the theoretical explanation of consumer behavior online and became one of the influential factors to form positive attitude toward E-commerce systems (Jahng, et al., 2007). However, this study is the first that examines the relationship between MRT and attitude towards website on CSR content. The result suggests that the companies should manipulate the potential of website in term to improve communication with consumers regarding their CSR policy.

5. Conclusion

This study's finding opens up a new way of explaining the consumers' perception of CSR information. The use of information richness has an impact towards consumer attitudes of website in displaying CSR. Thus, company could manipulate the use of rich website to improve the perceptions towards the company, particularly in high skepticism company such as in the fast food industry. Furthermore, this study extended beyond the thrust of MRT. Previous studies on MRT were focused primarily on the impact of the different communication channels, such as face-to-face, telephone, e-mail or web communication.

This study is merely focused on specific communication medium that is corporate website and result showed that rich presentation influence the consumer attitude towards website. This current finding added to a growing body of literature on MRT. Beside theoretical contributions, several managerial implications are advanced from the results of this study. This study provides business managers with additional insights regarding potential investment, particularly in CSR communication. It is confirmed that CSR could bring many benefits including intensifying the positive attitude towards the company (Arvidsson, 2010; Wanderley et al., 2008). The use of corporate website becomes widely accepted medium for companies to communicate their CSR. It is important to understand how consumer response on CSR information using this website. The result showed the richness aspect is important in making the website a dynamic communication channel. It could assist and help managers to design the most effective website designs and eventually attract the positive attitude towards the company.

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