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COMMUNITY ORIENTED CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: CONSUMER EVALUATION OF COMMUNITY ATTACHMENT

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction
Many studies from the sociology literature have noted the importance of communities and feelings of community attachment on individual decision making (Goudy 1990; Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). In an age of globalization, increasingly mobile populations, and growing urban sprawl, the character of social interactions are altered away from communal attachments and more towards primarily economic based contacts through work and shopping (Putnam 2000). The ensuing sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction with everyday life may lead people in these situations to regain some sense of balance by seeking social-collective activities, (Bellah et al. 1986). Arnold, Kozinets, and Handelman (2001) suggest that individuals may turn to businesses in the community, such as retailers, to provide a sense of community. As such, through their community oriented Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, businesses might attempt to portray themselves as attached to the community (Besser 1999; Miller and Besser 2000).

Theoretical Development
Drawing on Oliver (1991), organizations may employ different CSR strategies that demonstrate their attachment to the community. This study empirically examines three of these strategies. The first is acquiescence whereby the organization presents a direct and unquestioned acceptance and compliance to community rules. Here, the organization contributes directly to community causes with no economic based expectations in return. The second strategy is compromise whereby the organization’s contribution to a community cause is directly linked to an economic return. Cause-related marketing is an illustration of this where a community contribution is directly linked to the sale of a product. The third strategy is symbolic acquiescence where the organization creates a façade of acquiescence by symbolically linking itself to a community cause, but not making a tangible contribution. It is hypothesized that the type of strategy will have a significant impact on a consumer’s evaluation of the business’ community attachment whereby an acquiescence strategy will be most effective and the symbolic acquiescence strategy will be least effective.

An important variable that is hypothesized to moderate the effectiveness of these strategies on the consumer’s assessment of the organization’s community attachment is the type of ownership of the business employing the strategies. In particular, large, non-local businesses are typically regarded by consumers as strictly economic-oriented operators and unaware of local issues (Brennan and Lundsten 2000; Miller and Besser 2000). As such, it is hypothesized that an acquiescence community oriented strategy will be more effective for non-local businesses than local businesses in that consumers would not expect non-local businesses to comply so directly with community norms.

A final hypothesis is that community attachment will mediate the impact of strategy and ownership type on a consumer’s patronage intention. In other words, community oriented CSR strategies and ownership type do not lead directly to a patronage decision. Instead, they help the consumer assess the degree of attachment that business has to the community. It is this assessment that is hypothesized to influence patronage decisions. Of course, this hypothesis must be put in context. Community attachment is but one variable that resides alongside other important variables, such as price, quality, etc., in influencing patronage decisions. However, the purpose of this study is to highlight the potential impact that community attachment may have on a consumer’s patronage decision.

Empirical Research
Results from a 3 (acquiescence, compromise, and symbolic acquiescence strategies) x 2 (local versus non-local ownership) between subjects experimental design in a retailing context support the importance of considering the community attachment construct. First, it was found that the type of ownership had a significant effect on the consumer’s evaluation of the retailer’s community attachment. A locally owned retailer was regarded as significantly more attached to the community than a non-local retailer. In addition, type of ownership also moderated the effect of strategy on assessments of community attachment. For local retailers, there was no significant difference between the effectiveness of the three different types of strategies on the consumer’s assessment of the retailer’s community attachment. This included the use of symbolic acquiescence. However, for non-local retailers, the type of strategy used made a significant difference. For non-local retailers, an acquiescence strategy was significantly more effective at building an evaluation of community attachment than a symbolic acquiescence strategy. The effectiveness of a compromise strategy fell in between the two.

Finally, community attachment is shown to completely mediate the impact of strategy and type of ownership on a consumer’s patronage intentions. This mediating role speaks to the possibility of the community attachment construct as being another contributor to consumer patronage decisions. Community attachment also helps explain how an organization’s community-oriented CSR strategies might translate into consumer patronage. In particular, community attachment may serve as an important objective in guiding marketers as they develop CSR initiatives. In designing these initiatives, marketers must also take into consideration the nature of their organization. For non-local businesses, the use of an acquiescence strategy is the most effective means to convince consumers of community

References


