Enhancing Brand Image through Corporate Social Responsibility in Mexican Small Business

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Abstract

Brands are considered in the current literature as one of the most important intangible resources for any organization, especially for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), allowing a close relationship with both customers and with consumers of products or services generated by companies, but brands acquire more relevance when they are directly related to the activities of corporate social responsibility (CSR). The inconsistent results obtained in the relationship between brand image and CSR, makes it necessary conducting more studies providing theoretical and empirical evidence of the effects exerted by CSR activities in the brand image. Therefore, the main objective of this research is the analysis and discussion of existing effects between CSR activities and brand image of SMEs, using a sample of 308 companies in Mexico. The obtained results show that CSR activities have significant positive impact on the brand image of the products or services produced by SMEs

*Keywords***:** Brand image, corporate social responsibility, small business.

1. Introduction

Generally in the current literature of the field of marketing you may find that the brand is commonly considered as an intangible resource that businesses possess, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which induce consumers to acquire them for a long period of time (Schau *et al.*, 2009; Park *et al.*, 2010), which enables organizations to gain a higher level of business performance which can be used both to significantly reduce the price of products or services as well as the marketing costs (Ailawadi *et al.*, 2003; Mizik & Jacobson, 2008), resulting in companies that have adopted this type of activity are trademarks of their products or services with a higher level of image than those companies who have not done it yet (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010).

Also, the brand building of the products or services produced by the companies, among them the SMEs, has achieved a higher importance in the literature (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010), because it not only has developed more investment in its construction by companies, but also it has been the subject of further analysis and discussion in the literature for its measurement (Ricks, 2005; Kayaman & Arasli, 2007). Therefore, the brand may be considered in the literature as the measurement of the image that a certain group of consumers of a determined product or service (Ailawadi *et al.*, 2003), in which generally interact both attitudes and rewards as well as consumer's preferences over such brand (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010).

As a result, and given the importance of brands in the marketing literature, there have been identified in the current literature various factors, including financial and non-financial, which might result in companies that both the value and image of its brands is much better (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010). Thus, Simon and Sullivan (1993) found a significant positive relationship between brand image and financial indicators of companies, for his part Keller (2003) concluded that marketing programs determine in a high percentage the image of the brand. However, one of the factors that has the most effects on the image of the brand and that has not been analyzed and discussed widely in the literature, and has even received very little attention from researchers and academics, is corporate social responsibility (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010).

Actions by corporate social responsibility (CSR) that are realized by the businesses are fundamental activities to achieve the objectives of the organization, because they force businesses, particularly SMEs, to take into consideration the interests of society as a whole when making any decision regarding the brand image of their products or services (Polonsky & Jevons, 2006). In addition, one of the most important factors that has a strong influence on both brand building and its measurement is precisely CSR (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010), as companies that have incorporated CSR actions in their various construction activities and brand image of their products or services, have achieved better results than those achieved by their main competitors (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010; Melo & Galan, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2014; Da-Chang *et al.*, 2015).

In this sense, CSR actions that undertake the companies will have to take into account not only financial benefits, but also the interests of society in general (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), because the more they fulfill their social obligations and best implement CSR activities, enterprises including SMEs, not only can significantly increase their level of business performance, but also the level of your brand image (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010). Therefore, following the recommendations of Chomvilailuk and Butcher (2010), Liu *et al.* (2014) and Farooq *et al.* (2015), to increase the theoretical and empirical studies linking CSR activities with the brand image of the products or services generated, the main contribution of this empirical study is the analysis and discussion of the effects of CSR on brand image of SMEs.

2. Literature Review

It exists in the current literature of business studies and marketing positions found on the results in relation with CSR activities and brand image of the products or services generated by companies. For example, Preston and O'Bannon (1997) concluded that when managers reduce investment in social responsibility activities, at the same time and in a short period of time not only profits but also the level of the brand image of the products or services of companies is reduced. Meanwhile, Waddock and Graves (1997) obtained similar results to the above, while Campbell (2007) considered that CSR activities that are realized form social charities, have negative impacts on both the return of economic and image brand of products or services organizations.

However, it is also possible to find in the literature of marketing that CSR activities have significant positive effects on brand image (Orlitzky *et al.*, 2003; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Sanchez & Sotorrino, 2007; Beurden & Gossling, 2008). For example, Brickley *et al.* (2002) found that while companies have a more socially responsible behavior, the greater the value and image of the brand of their products or services. Meanwhile, Torres *et al.* (2012) concluded that CSR activities are one of the most important factors for a higher level of equity and brand image, while Du *et al.* (2007) considered that a proper implementation of CSR activities generates both a strong brand identification of the products or services by the company as a brand loyalty, a higher level of brand image and better business results.

In general, various researchers and academics have provided theoretical and empirical evidence in the current literature of business and marketing studies, the existing positive relationship between CSR activities with the brand image (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). To support this assertion, Sheth and Babiak (2010) emphasized in their study that for companies, including SMEs, have products and services with strong brands and good image level, it requires a strong knowledge by consumers of these brands, and CSR activities facilitate this previous knowledge, therefore actions that adopt and implement the companies will have a strong positive influence significant in the brand image (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010).Also, Ricks (2005) found in the study a significant positive interaction between different actions and types of CSR and the brand image of the products or services of companies, which it allowed to generate various scenarios in which stated that companies could be reactive or proactive in direct implementation of CSR activities that would enable a better level of brand image. Meanwhile, Pirsch *et al.* (2007) proposed that when managers of enterprises, especially SMEs, have a greater commitment to the development of CSR activities and perform actions to promote the brand of its products or services, such as donating to social charity activities by 10% of total sales, it generated not only an increase in brand loyalty by consumers but also a better brand image of the products or services by the organizations.

Similarly, Dean (2003/2004) had already found similar results to previous concluding that the unconditional donations to social charity activities realized by companies, have greater positive effects on the brand image of their products or services than when companies make charitable donations conditional.

In addition, Mohr and Webb (2005) concluded that the CSR initiatives implemented by the companies, have significant positive effects on purchase intent, but this intention increases more when the organization conducts philanthropic initiatives, which leads to the obtaining a better brand image level of the products. Therefore, Pedersen (2006) considered it important that CSR initiatives adopt and implement businesses must have the active participation of customers and business partners to achieve better results in the image of the brand.

In this sense, the image of the brand has been widely recognized in the literature of marketing as an essential element for purchase intent, and brand image of the products or services has always been considered a good predictor of purchases (Banks, 1950). Therefore, the brand image is generally used as a key predictor for measuring consumer purchases (Taylor, 2000; Court *et al.*, 2010), and whenit relates to the CSR activities represents an essential strategy both for large companies as well as SMEs (Singh *et al.*, 2008). However, despite the importance of CSR activities and brand image of the products or services of the companies, there is need for more empirical studies linking these two important constructs (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010), to which it is important to guide further empirical research towards this important sector of companies.

Thus, Creyer and Ross (1997) concluded that CSR activities can generate a greater level of reputation and brand image of the products or services produced by the companies. In a similar study, Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) measured the consumer's perception and response and found a strong significant positive relationship between CSR activities applied by companies and brand image of the products. Meanwhile, Hoeffler and Keller (2002) found that an excellent application of CSR activities by companies, can significantly increase the perception of the image that consumers have of the products or services brand produced by organizations, thereby generating higher judgment value and transcendence.

Another study realized by Luo and Bhattacharya (2006), using secondary data found that CSR activities adopted and implemented by companies significantly increased both consumer satisfaction and financial results and improving the brand image. Also, Singh *et al.* (2008) concluded that CSR activities had a strong significant positive impact on the brand image of the products and services of the companies. Meanwhile, Chomvilailuk and Butcher (2010) found that CSR activities conducted by private financial institutions, allowed a significant increase in the brand image of the institutions. Furthermore, Tian *et al.* (2011) found a significant positive influence between CSR activities and brand image on consumers in China, while Hsu (2012) concluded that CSR generates a higher level of image of the products and services.

In summary, most studies analyzed previously generally provide that an elevated percentage of consumers respond positively to the activities and practices of CSR realized by companies, thereby improving the brand image of their products or services (Liu *et al.*, 2014), but under certain circumstances in particular, consumers react negatively to inefficient or irregular CSR activities (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001; Ricks, 2005). Also, the positive effects that CSR activities and actions have with the intention of consumer purchasing products or services generated by companies is diluted considerably as the products or services do not meet the requirements of satisfaction and preferences of the consumers, either because the CSR activities are improperly implemented (Auger *et al.*, 2008).

Therefore, CSR activities that companies adopt and implement have to be activities that contribute significantly to both consumers and society in general (Turker, 2009). Furthermore, Mohr *et al.* (2001) considered that there is strong pressure on companies, mainly SMEs, both to maintain and to increase the level of utilities and improved brand image of their products or services, to which the various CSR activities can be the solution to these problems. Therefore, to achieve a significant positive influence both CSR activities and actions that implement the organizations in the brand image of their products or services, there must be proper communication to current and potential consumers of CSR, of such manner that generate the greatest possible amount of training effects on purchase intent of consumers and therefore a better brand image (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010).

In addition, for consumers to significantly increase their intent to purchase the products and services generated by companies they must envision a greater value than that paid for such products, therefore philanthropic activities, social and environmental activities that implement SMEs will be essential, not only for consumers to improve their intention to buy but also to improve the brand image (Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010). Proof of this is the study realized by Lichtenstein *et al.* (2004) where they found that the diverse philanthropic activities by CSR that the companies implemented had a significant positive impact not only on the reputation of the company but also the brand image of their products.

Additionally, Marin and Ruiz (2007) found a direct association between attracting customers of banking institutions and the reputation of banks when they have implemented CSR activities, but when the banks have made CSR activities aimed at supporting social causes such as cultural activities in the communities where they are located, improvements in the environment, philanthropic and social support for disabled groups has significantly improved the image of the company and brand of their services. Thus, there is theoretical and empirical evidence in the current literature of business and marketing science that makes a significant positive relationship between CSR activities and brand image (Hoeffler & Keller, 2002. Brickley *et al.*, 2002; Orlitzky *et al.*, 2003; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Sanchez & Sotorrino 2007; Du *et al.*, 2007; Beurden & Gossling, 2008; Chomvilailuk & Butcher, 2010; Liu *et al.*, 2014; Da-Chang *et al.*, 2015).

Thus, considering the information presented previously is possible to establish the following hypothesis:

H1:*A higher level of implementation of CSR activities, greater brand image of the products or services of SMEs.*

3. Methodology

In order to respond to the hypothesis established in this research it was considered relevant conducting an empirical study of SMEs in the state of Aguascalientes (Mexico), using the business directory of Business Information System of Mexico 2016, which was registered in January of the same year 6,662 companies, but for purposes of this study were considered only those companies that were between 5 and 250 workers, reducing the corporate directory to 1,334 companies. Also, a survey by a personal interview method was applied to the managers and/or owners of SMEs in a sample of 308 companies, which were selected by simple random sampling with a maximum error of ±5% and a level of reliability of the 95%, applying these surveys during the months of January to April 2016.

Also, CSR activities implemented by companies were measured by three dimensions: social, environmental and economic responsibility, all of them being defined by one-dimensional scales. Thus, the dimension of social responsibility was measured by a scale of 15 items, the dimension of environmental responsibility was measured with a scale of 7 items, and the dimension of economic responsibility was measured by a scale of 9 items. The three dimensions of CSR activities were adapted from the European Union (2001), Bloom and Gundlach (2001), Bigné *et al.*(2005) and Alvarado and Schlesinger (2008). Also, the scale for measuring brand image was adapted from Alvarado and Schlesinger (2008), being measured by a 7-item scale. All items of the scales used are constructed according to a Likert scale of 5 positions, with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = completely agree as limits.

Similarly, to evaluate the reliability and validity of CSR activities and brand image of the products or services of SMEs, it was considered appropriate the implementation of a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using the maximum likelihood method with the EQS 6.2 software (Bentler, 2005; Brown, 2006; Byrne, 2006). Therefore, the reliability of the four scales used was performed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability index (CRI) proposed by Bagozzi and Yi (1988), also considering both the recommendations made by Chou *et al.* (1991) and Hu *et al.* (1992), regarding the correction of statistical theoretical model when considering that the normal data is present, as well as robust statistical proposed by Satorra and Bentler (1988) to provide a better statistical fit to the data.

The results obtained from the application of AFC are presented in Table 1 and indicate that the model has a good fit of the data ($S\text{-}BX^2$ = 825.234; df = 399; p = 0.000; NFI = 0.811; NNFI = 0.827; CFI = 0.829; RMSEA = 0.059), as all items of the related factors are significant (p <0.01), the size of all standardized factor loads are higher than 0.60 as recommended Bagozzi and Yi (1988), Cronbach's alpha and CRI are greater than 0.70 and Variance ExtractedIndex (VEI) is greater than 0.50 as suggested by Fonell and Larcker (1981). Therefore, all these values indicate that there exists sufficient evidence of reliability and convergent validity, justifying the internal reliability of the two scales used (Nunally & Bernstein 1994; Hair *et al.*, 1995).

Table1. Internal consistency and convergent validity of the theoretical model

Variable	Indicator	Factorial Loading	Robust t-Value	Cronbach's Alpha	CRI	VEI
Social Responsibility	RSS6	0.690***	1.000[a]	0.932	0.933	0.587
	RSS7	0.691***	6.697			
	RSS8	0.656***	6.378			
	RSS9	0.616***	5.981			
	RSS10	0.701***	7.578			
	RSS11	0.740***	8.415			
	RSS12	0.893***	8.673			
	RSS13	0.837***	8.863			
	RSS14	0.873***	9.004			
	RSS15	0.897***	8.690			
Environment Responsibility	RSA1	0.679***	1.000[a]	0.910	0.911	0.597
	RSA2	0.696***	9.799			
	RSA3	0.728***	8.796			
	RSA4	0.769***	8.230			
	RSA5	0.793***	8.330			
	RSA6	0.839***	8.508			
	RSA7	0.884***	8.292			
Economic Responsibility	RSE4	0.782***	1.000[a]	0.893	0.894	0.584
	RSE5	0.681***	7.018			
	RSE6	0.746***	8.745			
	RSE7	0.791***	9.922			
	RSE8	0.787***	9.120			
	RSE9	0.792***	9.929			
Brand Image	REP1	0.620***	1.000[a]	0.917	0.918	0.616
	REP2	0.827***	10.579			
	REP3	0.834***	10.000			
	REP4	0.827***	9.479			
	REP5	0.768***	9.639			
	REP6	0.834***	9.523			
	REP7	0.760***	9.061			
S-BX^2 (df = 399) = 825.234; p < 0.000; NFI = 0.811; NNFI = 0.827; CFI = 0.829; RMSEA = 0.059						
[a] = Constrained parameters to such value in the identification process *** = $p < 0.01$						

Regarding discriminate validity of the theoretical model the evidence is provided through two test shown in Table 2. First, the *confidence interval test* proposed is presented by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), which states that with an interval of 95% of confidentiality, none of the individual elements of the latent factors of the correlation matrix contains the value of 1.0. Second, the *test of variance extracted* was presented, proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), which states that the variance extracted between each pair of constructs is superior than its corresponding IVE. Therefore, according to the results of both tests of this empirical study it is possible to conclude that both tests show sufficient evidence of discriminate validity of the theoretical model.

Table 2. Discriminate validity of the measurement of the theoretical model

Variables	Social Responsibility	Social Responsibility	Social Responsibility	Brand Image
Social Responsibility	0.587	0.059	0.051	0.087
Environmental Responsibility	0.188 – 0.300	0.597	0.076	0.045
Economic Responsibility	0.180 – 0.272	0.256 – 0.336	0.584	0.082
Brand Image	0.254 – 0.338	0.164 – 0.260	0.247 – 0.327	0.616

The diagonal represents the Extracted Variance Index (EVI), whereas above the diagonal the variance is presented (squared correlation). Below diagonal, the estimated correlation of factors is presented with 95% confidence interval.

4. Results

To answer the research hypothesis posed in the theoretical model a structural equations model (SEM) was applied by using the EQS 6.2 software (; Byrne, 2006; Bentler, 2005 Brown, 2006), in which it examined the nomological validity of the theoretical model through the test of Chi squared, which consisted of comparing the results obtained between the theoretical model and the measurement model.

Indicating in the results that the differences between the two models are not significant, which allows to offer an explanation according with the relationships observed between the latent constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Hatcher, 1994). Table 3 presented below shows in greater detail these results.

Table 3. Results of the SEM of the theoretical model

Hypothesis	Structural Relationship	Standardized Coefficient	Robust t-Value
H1: Higher level of CSR activities, higher level brand image of products and services.	CSR → Brand Image	0.406***	7.419
$S\text{-}BX^2$ (df = 399) = 851.441; p < 0.000; NFI = 0.800; NNFI = 0.816; CFI = 0.819; RMSEA = 0.061			

*** = P < 0.01

Table 3 shows the results obtained from the application of the structural equation model of second order, and in respect to the first of the research hypotheses raised **H1**, the results obtained β = 0.406, p <0.01 indicate that CSR has significant positive effects in the brand image of the products or services of SMEs. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that CSR actions that adopt and implement SMEs will have serious repercussions on the brand image of their products or services.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Considering the results presented previously, it is possible to conclude in two essential aspects. On the one hand, it is possible to measure CSR activities that have been adopted and implemented by the companies, particularly SMEs, through three dimensions or factors: social, environmental and economic responsibility. Therefore, CSR activities that perform the SMEs have to focus them not only in philanthropic aspects or economical donations for people with disabilities, but also in all those activities related to the care and conservation of the environment of the communities or localities where they are located, and especially with a higher quality of life for all employees and workers of the organization, as well as their contributors, customers and shareholders.On the other hand, the more CSR activities realized by SMEs the better results obtained in the level of brand image of their products or services, since it has been shown theoretically and empirically the close significant positive relationship that exists between these two constructs. Therefore, if managers of SMEs want to improve in a satisfactory manner the brand image of their products or services with current and future consumers, then you first have to design and implement a program of CSR activities that allow communicating effectively and efficiently to current and future consumers, that companies are contributing with concrete actions of social responsibility that they have with society in general, in which consumers may prefer buying their products or services than the ones offered by their main competitors.

In general, it is possible to conclude that all actions and CSR activities that adopt and implement SMEs, will have serious significant positive effects on the brand image of the products or services generated by companies, so the managers SMEs must be very careful with the development of this type of activity, since a poor implementation and communication of them can generate conflicts in the perception of brand image that customers and consumers have of the products or services of companies, on the contrary a proper implementation coupled with excellent communication program, the current and potential customers and consumers will have a better image of the products or services offered by this type of companies, thereby increasing the possibilities of increasing their purchases. Similarly, these results also have a series of implications both for SMEs and the managers of them. Thus, one of the first implication is that managers and/or owners of SMEs not only have to have a clear understanding of the benefits generated by the actions and CSR activities for the organization as a whole, but also design and implement an adequate program for both those activities related to social responsibility, such as those concerning environmental responsibility and economic responsibility, since this will enable the generation of a complete program of CSR that may have greater probability to have better results than realizing activities of

social, environmental and economic responsibilities in isolation manner. Another important implications for SMEs is that they should design and implement an appropriate communication program of the activities and CSR actions that they are developing, as this will allow its current and potential customers and consumers to be aware of such actions of social responsibility, and prefer the acquisition or purchase of products or services generated by these companies because they will feel they are indirectly collaborating with the social, economic and environmental causes sponsored by SMEs.

Therefore, the communication program must be efficient and effective to achieve the communication to customers and consumers the various CSR activities undertaken by SMEs, thereby achieving better results than those obtained without the application of such actions.

Also, a proper implementation of the program of actions and CSR activities can generate better results in SMEs, among them increasing the level of the brand image of the products or services produced by businesses. For this to happen, managers have to design a series of training programs for both employees and workers, with the conclusion that they are able to share their skills, knowledge and experience to their collogues and are aware and take ownership of the CSR activities, in such manner that all staff of the organization work hard and together to achieve that current and potential customers and consumers know as much detail as possible of the CSR activities undertaken by SMEs thus improving the brand image of the products or services generated by companies.

In addition, this empirical study also has several limitations that is precise to establish at this moment. A first limitation is that only three factors or dimensions were considered to measure CSR activities (social, environmental and economic) and one factor to measure brand image, therefore in future studies it will be necessary to use other type of scales with other factors to compare the results obtained in this research. A second limitation is the obtained information, as only qualitative variables were considered to measure both CSR activities such as brand image, therefore in future studies it will be important to consider quantitative variables or hard data for SMEs, for corroborate the results obtained in this empirical study. A third limitation is that the questionnaire for collecting information applied only to managers and/or owners of SMEs located in the state of Aguascalientes (Mexico), so the results obtained in this study may differ considerably if considered a different population. A fourth limitation is that the only companies considered were those that had between 5 and 250 employees, therefore it would be useful in future studies to also consider SMEs of less than 5 workers. A fifth limitation is that it was assumed that all managers and/or owners of SMEs surveyed had a clear knowledge of CSR activities and brand image of the products or services generated by their companies, to which not necessarily business managers have the knowledge of the two constructs analyzed.

A final limitation is that a high percentage of the companies surveyed felt that the information requested in the applied survey was confidential, so the information provided by the managers and/or owners of the SMEs do not necessarily reflect the reality in the companies regarding CSR activities and brand image of the products or services produced by SMEs, therefore in future studies it will be necessary to consider the participation of chambers and business associations to prevent, to the extent of the possibilities, the falsity of the information requested.

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