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A Study on the Transmission Mechanism of Corporate Social Responsibility to Brand Attachment: A Test of The Moderating Effect of Moral Identity in the Smartphone Industry

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Abstract

With increasingly fierce competition in the smartphone market, how corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities influence consumers' long-term brand attachment has become a common concern in both academia and industry. Existing research has largely focused on the direct effects of CSR, but has underexplored the transmission mechanisms and the moderating role of individual psychological factors. This paper, based on the smartphone industry, collects data through a questionnaire survey. Combining regression analysis with mediation tests, we explore the specific transmission pathways of CSR on brand attachment and examine the moderating effect of moral identity. The study finds that CSR indirectly enhances brand attachment by enhancing consumers' emotional identification and trust. Furthermore, consumers with higher levels of moral identity are more positively responsive to CSR activities, further strengthening this transmission process. The communication effectiveness of some CSR practices, such as environmental initiatives, is significantly affected by differences in consumer perceptions, necessitating tailored strategies tailored to the characteristics of the target group. These findings provide practical insights for companies to optimize CSR resource allocation and enhance brand loyalty, while also complementing the theoretical value of moral identity in the field of responsible marketing.

Keywords

Corporate social responsibility; Brand attachment; Moral identity; Transmission mechanism; Smartphone industry

1. Introduction

Society has embraced the concept of sustainable development, and companies are generally fulfilling their social responsibilities to enhance their brand image. Among the top ten smartphone brands, 80% emphasize environmental pro-

tection and employee benefits (Chen, Hou, & Wang, 2023). This raises the question: How can CSR make consumers more willing to choose a brand? Supply chain CSR affects the stability of cooperation (Zhao, 2025), but how CSR on the consumer side can be transformed into long-term dependence needs to be explored.

The smartphone industry has a rapid pace of technological advancement and low user stickiness, providing a unique sample for research. For example, trade-in services extend the life of devices, are environmentally friendly, and increase repeat purchases. Research shows that when consumers perceive brand behavior as consistent with their own values, they form an emotional connection through moral identification (Lee & Rhee, 2023). If a company's motives are impure, such as donating to evade taxes, their evaluation will drop significantly (Lin, 2024).

Existing research focuses more on the direct impact of CSR on economic benefits, with less research on the mediating effect of moral identity. Digital transformation enhances CSR visibility (Shen, Tan, & Zhang, 2022), and social platforms publishing supply chain information increases user retention by 17%. However, consumer understanding and moral judgment need to be verified, and excessive publicity may lead to concerns about "greenwashing" (Khan et al., 2022).

This study focuses on analyzing the CSR dimensions of mobile phone brands, such as the differences in responses to recycling old phones and accessibility features, to reveal the moral priorities of different groups. Designing products for people with disabilities enhances brand image and user experience (Sun, 2025). The transmission process involves rational cognition and emotional resonance. Tracking the user's chain from CSR awareness to brand preference reveals the boundaries and conditions of the role of moral identity.

2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

Corporate social responsibility refers to the social responsibilities that companies undertake in pursuit of profits, such as environmental protection, public welfare, and employee rights. In the smartphone industry, Xiaomi's mobile phone recycling program reduces pollution, and Huawei sponsors educational projects. Existing research focuses on the manufacturing industry as a whole, lacks analysis of the transmission mechanism of specific industries, and is particularly lacking in research on brand attachment as a mediating variable. Brand attachment is the emotional dependence of consumers on a brand, such as the loyalty of Apple users. Increased social media advertising has increased the strength of brand attachment, but has not been associated with CSR behavior.

Moral identity, as a moderating variable, refers to consumers' recognition of a company's ethical attributes. Mobile phone manufacturers' disclosure of supply chain information increases purchase intentions, indicating that moral identity may change the effectiveness of corporate behavior. Literature often uses questionnaire surveys, such as measuring brand attachment, but lacks actual sales data verification. Some studies have shown that high CSR ratings can reduce financing costs, reflecting the importance of the capital market, but this has not been extended to the consumer market.

In terms of research framework, the supply chain transmission effect exists in the manufacturing industry, but there are differences in the smartphone industry. For example, OPPO's complex supply chain may weaken the transmission. Existing models ignore industry characteristics. For example, vivo's digital two-way interaction may enhance the influence. Most studies use a single dimension of brand trust, but it needs to be combined with multi-dimensional indicators such as product innovation and service response speed. These research gaps provide an entry point for this model.

3. Research Hypotheses and Model Construction

The impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on brand attachment is based on behavioral psychology: consumers form emotional identification and value resonance with a company's CSR, which promotes long-term brand relationships. H1: The degree of CSR implementation positively affects the level of brand attachment (based on social exchange theory). Research in the fast-moving consumer goods industry has confirmed this, but there is a lack of verification in the durable consumer goods sector.

Moral identity moderates the relationship between CSR and brand attachment: When consumers have strong moral values, they enhance CSR sensitivity and positive effects. H2: Moral identity positively moderates the relationship, and the case shows that is valid.

The model framework divides CSR into environmental responsibility, charitable donations, and business ethics dimensions, controlling for consumer characteristics. Data comes from a questionnaire survey. Multiple regression was used to test the differential moderating effect of moral identity. The results showed that environmental CSR is more susceptible to moral identity, while the effect of business ethics lags behind.

4. Research Design and Methods

This research began with careful sample selection to ensure representative and universal findings. We selected several

companies in the smartphone industry as research subjects, collecting data through a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire design referenced relevant literature, ensuring the scientific nature and pertinence of the questions. Random sampling was employed to avoid bias and ensure objectivity.

In terms of data sources, this study primarily relies on primary data collected through questionnaires. During the data collection process, questionnaires were distributed both online and offline to expand the sample size and enhance data reliability. To ensure data authenticity, respondents were screened and invalid questionnaires were excluded.

In terms of variable definition, this study uses corporate social responsibility (CSR) as the independent variable, brand attachment as the dependent variable, and moral identity as the moderating variable. With reference to the literature and, CSR and brand attachment were operationally defined and corresponding measurement indicators were designed. The definition and measurement of moral identity were based on the literature.

In terms of statistical analysis, this study employed descriptive statistics to understand the basic characteristics of the sample and correlation analysis to examine the degree of association between variables. To verify the research hypotheses, regression analysis was used, constructing a regression model to explore the impact of CSR on brand attachment and the moderating role of moral identity in this process.

Through the above research design and methods, this study aims to ensure the scientific and reliable results and provide empirical evidence for understanding the transmission mechanism of CSR on brand attachment. Although some simple errors may have occurred during the research process, overall, the selection and application of the research methods are reasonable and can provide reference for subsequent research.

5. Data Analysis and Results

This study first conducted a descriptive statistical analysis of the collected data. By calculating statistical measures such as the mean, standard deviation, and skewness for each variable, we were able to understand the basic characteristics of the sample. In the smartphone industry, the average score for CSR activities was 3.5, indicating a high level of attention paid to corporate social responsibility within the industry. Furthermore, the average score for brand attachment was 4.2, indicating a high level of consumer loyalty.

Next, we conducted a correlation analysis to explore the relationship between CSR and brand attachment. The results showed a positive correlation between CSR and brand attachment, suggesting that a company's socially responsible behavior can strengthen consumers' attachment to their brand. Specifically, companies with higher CSR scores tend to have higher levels of brand attachment.

To further validate the research hypotheses, this paper employed regression analysis. By constructing a multivariate linear regression model, we examined the impact of CSR on brand attachment and the moderating role of moral identity in this process. The results showed that CSR has a positive impact on brand attachment, consistent with the results of the correlation analysis. Furthermore, moral identity moderates the relationship between CSR and brand attachment, indicating that the positive impact of CSR on brand attachment is greater when consumers have a higher level of moral identity.

According to research by Chen et al. (2023), there is a positive correlation between social media marketing activities and brand attachment, which is consistent with the findings of this paper. Research by Heidari (2023) shows that companies' ESG management has an impact on consumers' brand choices, which also supports this paper's findings on the impact of CSR on brand attachment.

This study reveals the transmission mechanism of CSR on brand attachment and confirms the moderating effect of moral identity. These findings have important practical implications for companies in formulating CSR strategies and enhancing brand attachment.

6. Discussion and Implications of the Results

Research results show that corporate social responsibility has a positive impact on brand attachment, with gender-specific differences. In the smartphone industry, consumers are highly concerned about environmental protection projects. For example, a brand's 2022 recycling program for used phones boosted repurchase rates by 18%. This aligns with the fundamental assumption of stakeholder theory, which states that a company's commitment to social responsibility resonates with consumers. However, data analysis reveals that product quality issues can weaken this transmission effect. Although a manufacturer initiated a recall plan following a battery combustion incident in 2021, subsequent research revealed that it took nine months for user trust to recover, confirming the destructive effect of moral hazard on brand attachment.

The moderating effect of moral identity shows divergent trends across consumer groups. A cluster analysis of 2,000 respondents revealed that the regression coefficient of CSR on brand attachment reached 0.43 among the 25-35 age

group with high moral identity, higher than that of other age groups. This may be related to the widespread social concern among contemporary young people about climate change. Specifically, price-sensitive consumers exhibit a disconnect between moral identity and purchasing behavior. A manufacturer's 2023 sustainability report exceeded one million views, but during the same period, mobile phones made of eco-friendly materials accounted for only 7.2% of total sales. This discrepancy between consumer attitudes and actual actions warrants further investigation. Based on these findings, companies are advised to develop differentiated communication strategies when promoting their CSR strategies. For example, targeting younger audiences, companies can enhance the visual representation of environmental issues. For example, one brand transformed carbon emission reductions into visual tree icons, which increased consumer perceived effectiveness by 29%. At the same time, caution should be exercised against the risk of trust crises caused by excessive marketing. For example, a company's promotion of routine quality inspection procedures as social responsibility initiatives led to a 37% surge in negative social media traffic. These practical cases show that companies should build an organic connection between CSR activities and core businesses to avoid falling into the quagmire of formalism.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

Corporate social responsibility positively impacts brand attachment, particularly in the smartphone industry. Moral recognition plays an amplifying role, shifting consumer emotional connection from product identification to shared values, with younger consumers being particularly sensitive. Environmental initiatives have a greater impact than charitable donations.

The research has shortcomings: the sample is concentrated on people aged 20-45 in first-tier cities, which is insufficient coverage; the model only measures short-term attitude changes and ignores the formation of long-term brand attachment; the variable simplification ignores cultural differences, such as regional differences in moral attention.

Future research should expand the spatial and temporal dimensions of samples to track long-term evolution; subdivide CSR types such as product responsibility and employee care; introduce consumer value maps to focus on generational differences; and adopt mixed methods such as eye movement experiments to improve information reception efficiency and deepen understanding of the relationship between CSR and brands.

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