

ACADEMIC PAPER

Millennials' evaluation of corporate social responsibility: The wants and needs of the largest and most ethical generation

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Email: elenachatz@hotmail.com**Abstract**

Millennials are the most ethical generation, yet their evaluations of ethical practice remain unexplored in academic literature. Recently, the field of corporate social responsibility is moving closer to the forefront of corporate concerns as it climbs the hierarchy of consumer needs. Millennials are more aware of company activity than any other generation and so this presents a crucial opportunity for marketers to explore the gap between consumer attitudes and consumer purchasing behaviour by improving their understanding of this unique generation. This study explores how millennials evaluate corporate social responsibility (CSR), how authenticity perceptions are structured within CSR and what factors are most important to their ethical behaviour. In order to capture these antecedents with adequate depth, 15 qualitative interviews were conducted and analysed iteratively and rigorously using thematic analysis. According to the findings, millennials evaluate company activity through a lens of idealism. They have a natural scepticism for corporate ethics which drives them to look for cues that company actions are authentic and originate from unselfish motives. Activities associated with philanthropy are not trusted by millennials as they believe that companies should be responsible for their own domains of activity. This study is significant in providing managers with an in-depth understanding of a powerful generation and its contemporary mentality.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Millennials, born between 1979 and 1994 (Smola & Sutton, 2002), are perceived to be the largest and most diverse generation (American Marketing Association [AMA], 2017). Millennials are becoming an important demographic for researchers to consider, especially as the generation grows and begins to constitute a larger proportion of the workforce. Over a similar timeline, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has moved closer to the forefront of contemporary literature as consumers become more aware and socially conscious (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). The benefits of CSR

are being studied more and more, the results of which show that it is a key antecedent in the creation of brand trust, loyalty, and equity (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2007; Lacey & Kennett-Hensel, 2010; Torres, Bijmolt, Tribó, & Verhoef, 2012). Within the wider-ranging stakeholder perspective, Sen, Bhattacharya, and Korschun (2006) argue that CSR stimulates a multitude of reactions outside of purchase intention. A critical finding of Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen (2010), for example, is that CSR is a powerful stimulant of word of mouth, making it an important consideration in marketing communications. Equally, Nielsen's (2015) global consumer survey also showed that 66% of consumers trust

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other consumers' opinions. Consumers are arguably the most credible stakeholder group to take advantage of word of mouth (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004); it could be argued, therefore, that millennials are the most appropriate demographic to target with CSR initiatives and campaigns.

Having grown up on the front line of the digital revolution, millennials are more aware of business activity than any other generation (Stewart, 2016), but this alone does not warrant their relevance to the field of CSR. Several studies have noted that millennials are the most ethical generation in the UK (and the US) (AMA, 2017; Deloitte, 2017; Mintel(a), 2015; Mintel(b), 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Inklings Report, 2016). However, the steady rise of CSR (Moore & Manring, 2009) is increasing consumer scepticism about the motives behind ethical behaviour. Some researchers believe that there needs to be a congruence between a company and its campaign in order for consumers to perceive it as genuine. This relationship is termed "CSR fit" in a study by Bhattacharya and Sen (2004), proposing that companies bring attention to the relevance of CSR initiatives to normal business activity should such a relationship exist. However, while a company can make CSR more effective with highly relevant CSR initiatives, the concept of fit is not nearly as straightforward as it appears (de Jong & van der Meer, 2017). CSR fit is closely related to authenticity via consumers' desire to verify altruistic and honest motives for corporate ethicality. Studies following this line of inquiry found authenticity to be a powerful mediator of CSR's effect on consumer perceptions (e.g., Alhouti, Johnson, & Holloway, 2016). As the industry for CSR grows in line with the uptake of information technology, the competitiveness of campaigns will be decided by managers' understanding of how consumers constitute authentic CSR.

The aforementioned studies have firmly established millennials as an ethical demographic, but the research is severely lacking in its understanding of their specific wants and needs (AMA, 2017; Deloitte, 2017; Mintel(a), 2015; Mintel(b), 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Inklings Report, 2016). There has been very little research into how millennials value the various dimensions of authentic CSR and which factors are involved in their evaluation of ethical companies. This study aims to reveal the barriers between the reported attitudes and genuine ethical behaviour. A further objective of this study is to discover which ethical orientation millennials are most aligned with, and additionally how they perceive ethicality. In doing so, the scope of the research is to understand how millennials incorporate authenticity in evaluations of CSR.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Corporate social responsibility

Social responsibility has become a valued aspect of business strategy in the past decade, often forming part of firms' competitive advantage (Choi, Chang, Li, & Jang, 2016; Servaes & Tamayo, 2013; Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015; Stoian & Gilman, 2017). Porter and Kramer (2006) were among the first to propose that the long-term prioritisation of CSR can bring about "mutually reinforcing" (p. 92) success between the firm and

its stakeholders. Stoian and Gilman (2017) have shown that, by leveraging social capital and developing ethical credentials, British SMEs are able to grow and enhance their competitive advantage.

Dahlsrud (2008) analysed the components of 37 previous definitions of CSR (e.g., Wood, 1991) and their frequency of use in online publications. The results (Table 1) showed the most frequently used components and concluded that the most widely applicable definition of CSR was "a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis" (Commission of the European Communities, 2001).

This provides a concise base definition of CSR and its components, though a limitation of the method is that the definitions are not paired with any descriptions of their ideal performance or how the dimensions should be balanced in decision-making (Dahlsrud, 2008). CSR is fundamentally subjective, making it difficult to strategise without intense profiling of customers (Crane, Matten, & Moon, 2004). In a similar study, Matten and Moon (2004) emphasised the need to distinguish CSR definitions between US and European publications. They explain that aspects of CSR in Europe are implicit in consumer lifestyles, whereas in the US, concepts like free healthcare would be considered a CSR activity. In a later study, Lee and Shin (2010) stipulated that CSR activities may be perceived differently across borders. The CSR discussed in this study is solely "explicit CSR" – only those activities which go beyond the basic offerings of firms.

2.2 | Social responsibility as a strategy

CSR's potential to impact business performance has been reinforced since its conceptualisation in the early 1980s (Carroll, 1979; Freeman, 1984; Wood, 1986; Wood, 1991; Etzioni, 1988). However, its introduction as a construct of business strategy is relatively new. Beckmann (2007) summarised two decades of literature on CSR and its impact on the consumer decision-making process. Among others before her (e.g., Auger, Burke, Devinney, & Louviere, 2003; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001), Beckmann (2007) found that CSR effectiveness is often impacted by a lack of awareness of company activity. Some studies argue, therefore, that technology has a mediating effect on ethical behaviour outside the domestic environment (King, 2016; Dumpawar, Zeamer, Gupta, Abramek, & Casalegno, 2016; Capriotti, 2016). Since

TABLE 1 The dimension score and dimension ratio for each of the five dimensions in CSR definitions (Dahlsrud, 2008)

Dimension	Dimension score	Dimension ratio
The stakeholder dimension	1,213	88
The social dimension	1,213	88
The economic dimension	1,187	86
The voluntariness dimension	1,104	80
The environmental dimension	818	59

modern audiences differ in their expectations of businesses, they will respond differently to various CSR approaches (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). These findings provide ample reason to explore the unique evaluations of authentic CSR.

More recent studies find that the relationship between fit and CSR success is not as linear as first thought (e.g., de Jong & van der Meer, 2017). Clearly, focusing on the effects of low versus high fit is not a representative exploration of the diversity of CSR fit. Alhouti et al. (2016) relate fit more closely with the field of authenticity, where the relationship is linked to the motives of the company, rather than the company's industry. They find that authenticity mediates the effects of CSR on consumer perceptions, depending on which cues of authenticity consumers look for. It is no longer enough for companies to consider the outcomes of their initiatives; instead, they need to incorporate how and in what circumstances they implement CSR.

The influx of CSR in marketing communications has blurred the lines between altruistic and profit-driven CSR. Consumers now place more weight on authenticity in their evaluations of CSR (Skilton & Purdy, 2017). The term authenticity derives from the ancient Greek word "αυθεντικός," which means something trustworthy and original, not an imitation or imaginary (Cappannelli & Cappannelli, 2004). In CSR, authenticity determines the degree to which consumers and stakeholders accept the claims of an organisation (Peterson, 2005). However, the role of authenticity is better represented by the concept of "CSR fit" (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004), which describes the closeness of a CSR initiative to consumers' perception of the company. For instance, a company which sells exotic fruit, and has a CSR campaign that benefits South American farmers, may be seen as having good fit. The centrality of fit to effective CSR is well-known, but further examination of its role in the evaluation of initiatives has been inconsistent as some studies find that medium fit actually has better outcomes than high fit (e.g., Kim & Park, 2011). This suggests that consumers may have different perceptions of fit, and that there may be other, largely unexplored factors moderating the impact of CSR fit in CSR evaluations.

Having defined CSR and explained its theoretical relevance to this study, the next section discusses the pertinent topic of authenticity. This is followed by further review of the contemporary literature on the millennial generation and its proclivity for ethical consumption.

2.3 | Authenticity in the consumption decision

Authenticity remains an asset to consumers, who desire authentic businesses, brands, places, and experiences (Kadirov, Varey, & Wooliscroft, 2013; Lu, Gursoy, & Lu, 2015; Schallehn, Burmann, & Riley, 2014). However, authenticity can be seen through the lens of different interest groups (by consumers, by the government, or by producers) and therefore it is possible to have more than one – typically positive – meaning (Cohen-Hattab & Kerber, 2004; Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Authenticity is considered a prerequisite of consumer behaviour, rather than a route to competitive advantage (MacCannell, 1973). Many scholars attribute authenticity's value to its

involvement in evaluations of companies in different industries (Cohen, 1988; MacCannell, 1973; Wang, 1999). Authenticity has been addressed as an influencer of consumer behaviour in many disciplines, though it is increasingly being considered as an aspect of value proposition (Napoli, Dickinson, Beverland, & Farrelly, 2014). As consumers fight the "homogenising forces of globalisation" (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2015, p. 139), there are emerging barriers to the influx of voluntary CSR, namely consumers' scepticism about the motives of ethicality.

Grayson and Martinec (2004) distinguish between types of authenticity based on codified concepts from Charles Peirce's philosophy of signs (1998). They explain that consumers rely on "indexical" and "iconic" cues from brands that trigger distinct types of authenticity. Indexical cues are links from a brand or product that assure consumers of originality, setting an object aside from its imitators. On the other hand, iconic cues revolve around physical appearance, where an object resembles something that is indexically authentic.

Nevertheless, authenticity considerations are not as straightforward as they seem since consumers find cues in a variety of sources and interpret them in different ways (Beverland & Farrelly, 2009). The modern shift of emphasis onto authenticity is, in part, a consequence of increased barriers to indexical authenticity created by advancements in information technology (Beverland, Lindgreen, & Vink, 2008). The growth of this simulated authenticity in online environments is so impactful that some firms will deliberately minimise advertising and, instead, promote authenticity less explicitly (Beverland et al., 2008). Some organisations will go as far as to openly critique the use of large advertising budgets to create iconic status for themselves (Holt, 2004). As early as 2003, Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) (p. 21) stated that authenticity had become one of the "cornerstones of contemporary marketing."

2.4 | Classifications of authenticity

A study by Beverland et al. (2008) analysed the types of authenticity created by indexical and iconic cues, revealing that consumers evaluated organisations through one of three types of authenticity: pure (literal) authenticity, approximate authenticity, and moral authenticity. These key concepts are important to the understanding of both why an object is perceived as authentic and when consumers seek authenticity in their purchasing decision. Pure authenticity relates to tradition, and the consistent commitment to a particular industry, community, or issue. Approximate authenticity is formed through symbolic impressions of tradition, conveyed through marketing communications. Moral authenticity relies on sincerity, referring to being truthful and that one should be true to oneself in order to be true to others (Varga & Guignon, 2003). As a result, being true to oneself is seen as a means to forming successful social relations, which rely on respecting the social moral system (Varga, 2013). Bauer (2017) argues that authenticity is an ethical ideal and a combination of the ideal of expressing one's individual personality and the ideal of being an autonomous and morally responsible person.

In the context of CSR, Mazutis and Slawinski (2015) identified two key aspects of authenticity as principally important in stakeholder

evaluations of CSR: distinctiveness and social connectedness. Essentially, stakeholders are more concerned with CSR's congruence with the company's core mission, and the degree to which CSR had a wider social impact. The study also noted that while these conditions were necessary, they were insufficient for perceptions of authenticity to occur; this paves the way for further exploration of authenticity and its connection to CSR. Clearly, authenticity is a highly relevant factor in the creation of effective CSR, but even as it becomes more common, there remains little exploration of authenticity on the consumer side. It is important to understand how valuable authenticity is to consumers, because the search for authenticity is often part of consumers' self-identity, meaning that they will actively seek it in their purchasing behaviour (Gergen, 1991; Goffman, 1978; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Tian & Belk, 2005; Cherrier, 2007; Kolar & Zabkar, 2010).

2.5 | Millennials as ethical consumers

Contemporary qualitative studies tend to address this generation as employees rather than consumers; topics generally revolve around ambitions, work-life balance, work ethic, and employee qualities (e.g., Weber, 2017; Seago, 2016; Stewart, Oliver, Cravens, & Oishi, 2016; Payton, 2015). Within the context of the workplace, millennials have shown that they do not tolerate unethical practice (Payton, 2015). They are natives to globalisation and the digital revolution, connected through technology to their peers, family, and brands (Stewart et al., 2016). Millennials' position on the "front line of green and ethical consumption" suggests there is a future for ever more generic attempts at strategic CSR (Autio & Wilska, 2005).

If a firm's CSR activities are aligned with consumers' own values, the likelihood of CSR becoming a purchase criterion increases (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Lee & Shin, 2010). Another study conducted by Anderson et al. (2016, p. 5) found that American millennials regard an organisation's CSR behaviour to be "substantially more important than any of [the] six other product attributes (including price and quality) when making a purchase decision." Equally, a report by Cone Communications found that 70% of US millennials are willing to spend more money on brands using cause-related marketing (AMA, 2017). Only recently has the difference between generations been so distinct. Almost three quarters of millennials are willing to pay more for sustainable brands compared to only half of baby boomers (Nielsen, 2015). The above literature lacks sufficient exploration of the needs and wants of millennials regarding their evaluations of CSR activity.

Deloitte's (2017) study suggests that ethicality in millennials is becoming ever more prevalent. More than 50% of 8,000 millennials said they feel accountable, primarily for "protecting the environment," "social equality," and the "behaviour and actions of large businesses." While these studies are valuable as broad generalisations, they overlook the vastness of these topics and their relative weight in the eyes of millennials.

2.6 | Addressing the attitude-behaviour gap

Shaw et al. (2016, p. 2) argue that "caring about" does not necessarily lead to "care-giving," which is defined as the attitude-behaviour gap. The attitude-behaviour gap describes the incongruous relationship between consumers' beliefs and their actual purchasing behaviour. The gap is often attributed to younger consumers for being especially inconsistent in their purchasing habits (Böltner & Sudbury, 2011). A multitude of studies addressed the causal factors of the attitude-behaviour gap in the lead up to Shaw et al.'s conceptualisation (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, & Gruber, 2011; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Caruana et al., 2016; Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011; Böltner & Sudbury, 2011; Hassan, Shaw, & Shiu, 2014; Antonetti & Maklan, 2015; Caruana, Carrington, & Chatzidakis, 2016). The variety of approaches in these studies is both a reflection of the complexity of ethical consumption, and of the difficulty of stimulating actual ethical behaviour.

Marketers can increase the correlation between attitude and behaviour, once they understand where consumer groups place their emphasis of concern (Hassan et al., 2014). It is important to note that the attitude-behaviour gap is not exclusively related to a lack of "genuine" ethicality or morality as many researchers suggest (e.g., Böltner & Sudbury, 2011; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Shaw et al., 2016). Instead, its existence is also due to factors that limit consumers' ability to be consistent with their own beliefs (Carrington et al., 2010). Subsequently, the attitude-behaviour gap is closely related to the field of virtue ethics, which explains consumers' ethical decisions from the perspective of their intrinsic values (Swanton, 2003).

2.7 | Ethical orientation

Theories of moral philosophy seek to explain internal motivations for ethical behaviour through either deontological or teleological approaches to ethical consumption (Davies et al., 2012). The Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), for example, explains that the antecedents of ethical behaviour lie in social norms and individual attitudes. On the other hand, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1988) suggests three main factors: consumer attitudes, consumer perceptions of societal pressure, and consumers' perception of control over the purchasing decision. At first glance, the need for exploration of consumer attitudes toward CSR is obvious, but the reality is that many practitioners Daniel Kahneman's work, in which he claims that consumers' tastes are fundamentally unstable. With a good understanding of consumers' attitudes, however, managers are able to reduce the ethical attitude-behaviour gap (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004).

Originating in Kantian moral philosophy and normative ethics, deontological evaluations are consumers' perceptions of moral "rightness"; they are made up of ethical standards developed over time by personal experiences (Shum, Chung, & Kim, 2017). As a result of their strict moral guidelines, consumers with deontological orientations are

more sceptical of CSR, but they are also more consistent (Xu & Ma, 2016). On the other hand, teleological approaches are usually referred to as “consequentialist,” because they evaluate the potential positive or negative consequences of ethical purchases. Consumers with this ethical orientation are more utilitarian (Shim et al., 2017); their perceptions of ethics are contingent on beneficial outcomes. Parallel to these orientations are Forsyth's (1980) ethical ideologies, idealism and relativism. Consumers with a deontological orientation are often more idealistic (Chakrabarty, 2015), which in the context of CSR means that company motives stimulate purchase intention regardless of the perceived benefit of the CSR initiative. Conversely, teleological (consequentialist) evaluations are better aligned with relativism (Chakrabarty, 2015), where consumers will violate collective norms in favour of the most beneficial outcome.

The Hunt-Vitell Theory of Ethics (Hunt & Vitell, 1986) illustrates the role of these evaluations in consumer behaviour, and therefore their relevance to the attitude-behaviour gap mentioned previously. In a later study, Vitell, Singhapakdi, and Thomas (2001) found that the principles of deontology contribute more to consumers' ethical behaviour than the principles of teleology. Interestingly, consumers in the same study evaluated unethical behaviour in the same way, regardless of whether the consequences of this behaviour were positive or negative. Deontological factors should therefore be more important in targeting ethical behaviour and CSR to homogenous groups. This connection highlights an area of managerial relevance for an in-depth understanding of consumer attitudes toward corporate ethics and social responsibility.

In more detail, the current study seeks to explore the attitude-behaviour gap of the millennial generation considering their apparent ethicality. This study covers, in part, marketing fundamentals of CSR which have not focused on millennials, leaving an important gap in the literature. In order to fill the gap appropriately, this study also aims to explore the driving influences behind ethical purchasing behaviour. The study aims to address the following questions:

What kinds of CSR are most sought after when millennials evaluate brands? To what extent does authenticity play a role in millennials' evaluation of CSR? What are the fundamental factors influencing millennials' evaluation of CSR?

3 | METHODOLOGY

To explore millennials' ethical perceptions and attitudes toward CSR, in-depth interviews are the most appropriate technique for producing narrative-rich data (Merriam, 2009). As interviews are fundamentally interpretative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), this research incorporated the relevant epistemological implications in that conclusions are filtered through the researchers' interpretation of the data. The fieldwork followed a theoretical sampling strategy and the identification of information-rich informants who fulfilled the data requirements to achieve theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2006). Data collection

reached saturation point at 15 interviews with millennials, people who were born during 1979–1994 (Smola & Sutton, 2002). No further data collection was undertaken at this stage because saturation had been reached, and no new choice elements were forthcoming (Chatzopoulou, Gorton, & Kuznesof, 2019). The method used targeted rich data about CSR and authenticity and this fulfilled the data requirements to achieve theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Skinner, Gorton, & Skinner, 2020).

Interviews were semi-structured, using set questions to explore the phenomena surrounding participants' perceptions of CSR authenticity and dimensions. Interviews were audio recorded using Audacity software so that conversations could flow without delay. Once data were collected, interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo 11 Pro. The software was useful in increasing the rigour and specificity of the data analysis process and in the visualisation of large amounts of data to produce initial themes.

This study takes a phenomenological and therefore interpretative approach to data analysis for its balance of depth and breadth. Thematic analysis can be applied through a range of epistemological perspectives and data types, making it both theoretically and practically flexible (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Cassell & Symon, 2006; King, 2004). The thematic analysis of the current paper followed an interpretivist approach by identifying recurring themes and patterns within the vast amount of data collected (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The final step of this thematic analysis is to build a valid argument for choosing the themes (Aronson, 1995), which is achieved throughout the findings section where the relationships between themes and sub-themes are explained. The connections to the literature are discussed in more detail in the discussion section. The latter stages of this process also include the creation of a “thematic map” of the analysis, to illustrate any relationships between codes, themes, and sub-themes. In this study, thematic maps of sub-themes were created in addition to the main map to visualise the data efficiently.

Data collection began with face-to-face in-depth interviews among a convenience sample of millennials of several European nationalities (e.g., Italian, German). Participants were recruited among those born between 1980 and 1997 who either studied or worked in the North East of England. A combination of two purposive sampling techniques (snowball and opportunistic sampling) was used to secure respondents (Johnson & Chattaraman, 2019). After the interviews, some participants introduced the authors to acquaintances of theirs who were willing to participate, and this snowball sampling aided participation. In total, 15 interviews with millennials took place during March and July 2019 (see Table 3 for participants' profiles).

4 | FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore millennials' evaluations of authentic CSR, to discover how they perceive corporate ethics and to explore the role of authenticity in the millennials' ethical purchasing decision.

TABLE 2 Types of authenticity

Variation	Description
1. Moral authenticity	Indicators that the CSR initiatives are honest and truthful while they are a reflection of the rest of the company.
2. Pure authenticity	Indicators that a company is without false credentials or deceitful activities.
3. Indexicality with credible sources	Indicators of authentic CSR from sources, independent of an organisation's marketing or organisations with causes that are perceived as authentic.

TABLE 3 Participants' profile

Participant	Gender	Occupation	Nationality	Age
1	Male	Professional	English	22
2	Male	Student	English	23
3	Female	Student	English	22
4	Female	Student	English	22
5	Male	Professional	Welsh	22
6	Male	Student	Welsh	22
7	Female	Professional	English	23
8	Female	Professional	German	24
9	Female	Student	English	22
10	Male	Student	Northern Irish	25
11	Male	Student	English	22
12	Female	Student	English	22
13	Male	Professional	Italian	24
14	Male	Professional	Italian	30
15	Male	Professional	German	23

not expected to affect ethical issues outside of their domain of operation:

“If a company is responsible, it integrates processes that become a standard which makes them ethical. Being responsible is about making the ethics a part of the company's routine and its overall motivations.” (P8)

The newly emerged sub-theme is represented in the additional seventh sub-theme, highlighted in Figure 1.

Responsibility was largely described using the same dimensions as corporate ethics, but in the context of long-term measures to prevent unethical practice. As a result of this perception, responsibility was perceived as more genuine:

“Responsibility has more of an air of like, being methodical about things and thinking ahead. You can be ethical in the short term, but I feel like responsibility has longer term implications.” (P4)

In contrast, perceptions of ethicality were described in more consequentialist terms regarding the company's actions to impact the above dimensions. For a company to be ethical, its presence in the market had to be accompanied either by a positive impact on a particular dimension, or at least by the lack of unethical behaviour:

“To start with, whatever they're doing should not have a negative impact on any of their employees or in the area that they're operating. So, for instance, a coffee company shouldn't mess up the environment that they're growing the coffee in.” (P3)

4.1 | Perceptions of “ethical” or “responsible” companies

The interviewees separated responsibility and ethicality, although they described largely similar dimensions and listed similar issues that they expected ethical or responsible companies to address (Figure 2). With the exception of two participants, their expectations of ethical companies did not differ in the area of CSR, the difference was in their perceptions of how these activities are implemented. The perceptions of ethical activities were described through a lens of philanthropic care-giving, where ethical activities were seen to tackle an issue such as global warming, or animal cruelty:

“I think you can be ethical, but not take responsibility for it. Giving money to a charity would be not taking much responsibility, it's not enough just to do ethical things.” (P10)

In contrast, responsible companies were seen as being accountable for their own standards and impact on these dimensions and were

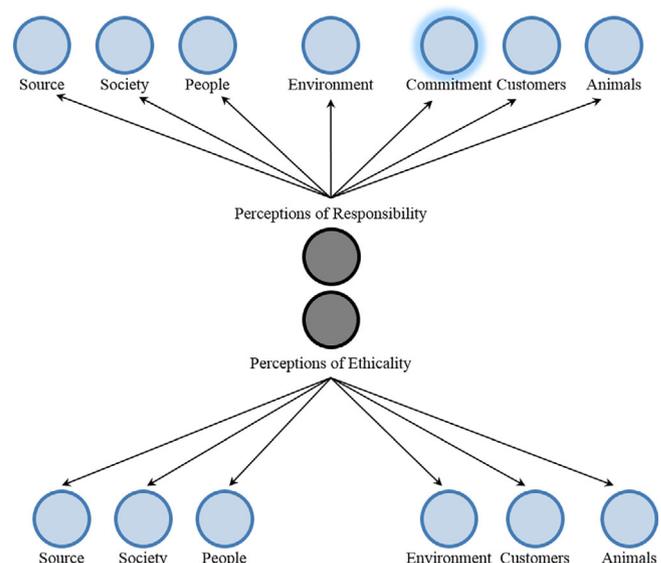
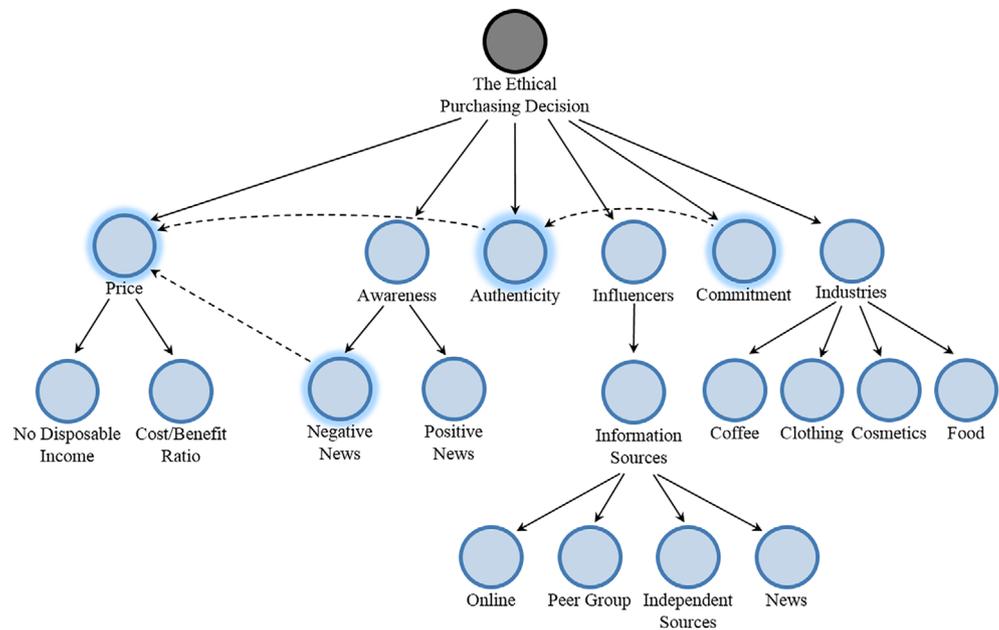


FIGURE 1 Map of sub-themes for perceptions of ethicality and perceptions [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 2 Map of sub-themes for the ethical purchasing decision [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]



Curiously, interviewees were far more forgiving of responsible companies, they even condoned “less ethical practices” on the condition that the company had been transparent about its processes, and took steps to raise standards:

“If everything's above board, the company should be able to do that about every accident, they should be transparent about their problems as well as the good things they do. So it's not that pretty to see, but everything's as good as it could be.” (P12)

At first glance, these perceptions seem to reflect a deontological tendency as they preferred actions which they could see having upright motivations. Essentially, responsibility dominated the ethical purchasing decision, because where ethicality was perceived as sporadic, responsibility was more closely related to commitment. Millennials viewed this as more authentic:

“It comes across as much more genuine, because you can see that most or as many decisions as possible are being made with ethics in mind.” (P4)

Within the six similar dimensions, interviewees most typically described environmental concerns, followed by concerns for people involved in the supply chain. These were seen as being directly related to the company's responsibility over its area of operation. Both themes were strongly linked to reducing environmental impact, although it was not described in terms of brand switching. If animal cruelty or human rights infringements came about as a result of core business functions, however, the company was branded unethical. Perceptions of ethicality included strict rules concerning what companies were forbidden from doing, but it was rarely clear what the objectives of CSR should be. When the discussion moved to what

constituted effective CSR, there was a clear reflection back to perceptions of responsibility, which were observed more plainly as authentic.

4.2 | The ethical purchasing decision

When talking about how companies could make themselves stand out as being ethical, the same theme of commitment appeared (Figure 2). Participants discussed at length the reasons why they would or could not make the decision, but rarely called for solutions to ethical issues raised in earlier questions. Instead, companies that ensured their practices were in line with industry standards were most highly valued, with little mention of any action to be taken. Authenticity features in Figure 2 because it played a role in the ethical purchasing decision for 12 of the 15 participants.

Within the ethical purchasing decision, the sub-theme of price was among the most prominent. Two attitudes were identified within the theme; one sub-group of the interviewees prioritised price over ethical credentials, though they maintained concern with ethical issues:

“If there are two products, they're both as good as each other, they're both the same price, and one of them has got better ethical credentials than the other, why would I not go for the ethical credentials one. If there are two products, I'm looking at a three-pound purchase, one's two pounds, one's three pounds, one's got better ethical credentials, I'd probably go for the three-pound product.” (P5)

“Convenience does sometimes win over. I'd say as much as possible, I try to make sure it dictates how I purchase and my buying behaviour. But it's not all the

time, definitely. I know all the bad stuff that Coke does, but I still buy Coke every now and then." (P4)

The other group places CSR above price when considering certain products, but their purchasing decisions are limited by their means:

"It's difficult to make sure all purchases are ethical. It's going to be top of my mind, most of the purchases, where I can, will be ethical, but it's also limited not only by my means, but also the number of companies that are truly ethical." (P8)

Despite these differences, a commonality among these two sub-groups is that authenticity appeared to influence the role of price in the purchasing decision. The theme of price impacts ethical action because millennials demand higher standards of authenticity from brands that charge higher prices:

"I think, if I knew that it was truly authentic, I'd be more likely to buy it. For example, when I said it affects me purchasing things because it's super expensive." (P7)

"It depends on the life you have, for me it's difficult to be ethical and at the same time save money." (P13)

Another common thread throughout the narratives is the imbalance of attitudes to positive and negative news about a company. Positive news is viewed with scepticism, while negative news is perceived as more trustworthy. Attitudes toward companies going below ethical standards were more damning than attitudes toward companies going above and beyond:

"If Adidas were to publicise that they don't use child labour, I don't care, because that'd be a basic expectation anyway. So going below a basic expectation is much more powerful than meeting one, in my opinion." (P5)

With reference to the medium of positive or negative news, participants typically looked to independent sources such as the Rainforest Alliance or the World Fair Trade Organisation for reliable information. Millennials commit to ethical purchasing in industries where poor ethical credentials are more common; where "it comes up more" (P6) and "we all know about that, it's very close to home" (P11). Interestingly, the common theme that drove such industry purchases was boycotting unethical companies – millennials shift their spending to deny unethical companies market share.

4.3 | Authenticity

Three types of authenticity were identified from the data corpus (Table 2).

Millennials looked primarily for indications that the company itself is ethical, because the extent of CSR initiatives is less important than the validity of the company's ethical motivations. Participants often mentioned that advertising campaigns alone are not useful indicators of authenticity:

"endorsing an idea without showing how you're following it through, that can come across as fake." (P4)

The theme of transparency was interwoven with the narratives of all 15 participants and was an important factor in improving perceptions of CSR. Even those millennials that said price took priority over CSR conveyed how important transparency is to making ethical purchases.

Transparency was related to moral authenticity; it reassured participants of honest CSR, and that the marketing of CSR is a reflection of the company's values:

"I think transparency is quite important. I think again, the fact that we have all the social media right now, it means that if you're not transparent, it's quite obvious that you're not putting across a real image of what you are." (P4)

In the same way, the strongest obstacles to authentic CSR also revolved around honesty and commitment to CSR outside of campaigns. As one participant expressed:

"most of the time it'd be okay if they came out with it and a plan to do something about it, but when they lie it makes it 10 times worse." (P9)

"If I see that there's a gap between what they say on their website and then what they actually do, that's definitely something I consider and something I look into." (P14)

Naturally, because openness leads to increased authenticity for ethical companies, CSR efforts were deemed unauthentic or "disingenuous" when such standards were not clear in the rest of the businesses' processes. Likewise, the participants were less willing to trust companies with unethical behaviour arising from scandals, than those that were open about their faults, regardless of their current standards:

"Like BP and stuff, they've had such horrific media about them, why would I trust anything they say now?" (P10)

As evident from this example, BP's "impressive evidence on environmental improvements" (Frynas, 2009, p. 9) are not nearly enough to negate the negative impression created by previous incidents.

Participants were sceptical of CSR activity; their demands for authenticity were mostly related to uncovering which companies care, and which do not. The authenticity of a company's CSR was decided

not on the actions within a CSR initiative, but rather the actions of the company outside of their dedicated ethical activities. As a result, most companies are seen as falling short of millennials' standards for authentic CSR. Effective CSR.

Millennials expressed their demands for substantiated ethicality, as well as the desire for companies to be open about their CSR from the outset – ethicality in hindsight is not authentic. Further, we explored why participants felt CSR is important as a whole, where other lines of questioning had looked at individual dimensions (Figure 3).

As previously mentioned, millennials seem to value CSR standards more than individual campaigns or initiatives. Companies could stand out by showing how their CSR was being carried out, differentiating themselves from competition through pure authenticity:

“I feel like in the long term, if I'm engaging with a company quite a lot, you'd expect to see some kind of evidence.” (P4)

The perceptions of CSR importance are more varied. Both male and female participants believe that companies have a responsibility to drive change because they have the power to do so. An important area of difference, however, is that female participants placed emphasis on their appreciation of CSR for the emotional value in purchasing ethical products:

“I am encouraging companies to be ethical by spending on companies that are ethical, it makes me feel good, and increases the value of my spend.” (P8)

On the other hand, male participants felt strongly that CSR should revolve around responsibility and showing ethical standards. CSR was

seen as important because it provided an opportunity to reject companies with lower ethical standards:

“An ethical company would be transparent about their entire operation from front to back, [...] that way we can see that they practice what they preach.” (P10)

“If I could be sure that one place was, as I said, doing something horrendous to its employees, I would definitely change, they need to make it easy for us to see who's ethical and who's not.” (P6)

Participants gave examples of campaigns which confirmed the value of previous themes on effective CSR. Good campaigns were distinct because the company's motivations were made authentic through evidence that they served more than just marketing purposes:

“I think Lush has good ones because they're a bit more obvious about how they're actually doing what they say they're doing.” (P7)

The line of questioning used for this theme effectively indicated which of the previous themes are legitimate preferences, and therefore which are most relevant for the creation of valued CSR.

5 | DISCUSSION

Overall, millennials are much more aware of CSR and, contrary to previous generations, they are the most ethical generation. Even if previous studies argue that sustainability awareness increases with age and that younger generations lack confidence which allows other

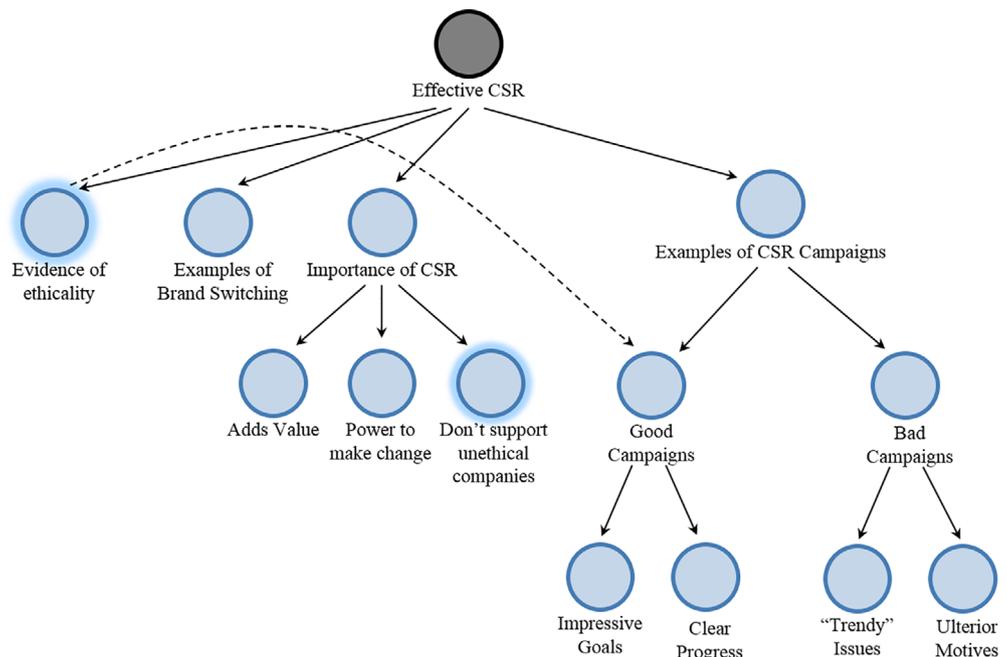


FIGURE 3 Map of sub-themes for effective CSR [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

determinants to guide their behaviour intentions (Johnstone & Lindh, 2018), our study argues that millennials are much more concerned about CSR practices and authentic CSR. As such, our study suggests that price is not at the top of the hierarchy for millennials, contrary to previous studies (e.g., Öberseder et al., 2011). Instead, according to our findings, millennials focus more on authenticity and the three types of authentic CSR (Table 2). Price is still an important factor, but not millennials' top priority. Price affects millennials' conceptualisation of socially responsible consumption behaviour (SRCB) only when it is about avoiding paying more due to the fact that their financial well-being is uncertain (Johnson & Chattaraman, 2019).

The structure of the hierarchy differs for millennials in ways that have bearing on the degree to which CSR can influence purchasing intention. Millennials place the content (i.e., positive or negative) and medium (e.g., newspapers, word of mouth, etc.) of information lower on the hierarchy than authenticity, which in Öberseder et al. (2011) paper is simply a "peripheral factor." Millennials' approval of CSR is contingent on the accurate reflection of ethicality in core business processes as part of moral authenticity (see types of authentic CSR for millennials in Table 2). Morality was expected to be part of our findings since it is recognised as a socially constructed status in which interpretation is up to each individual who freely decides what is right or wrong (Caruana, 2007a, 2007b). As millennials search online, they construct their own opinion and subjective views of moralities (Ossowska, 1971), which are constructed as a social process both within online and offline environments. Moreover, there is a positive relationship between the digital economy and millennials' sustainable purchasing decisions which in fact makes them loyal to brands (Gazzola, Colombo, Pezzetti, & Nicolescu, 2017). This way, the subjective constructed morality of each millennial affects their ethical consumption toward brands and (re)produces important social meanings through relevant brand identities (Caruana, 2007a, 2007b).

Based on Holbrook's (2006) value typology and Papista, Chrysochou, Krystallis, and Dimitriadis (2018) study, CSR may lead to brand loyalty as long as certain consumer perceived value dimensions exist, such as social value, altruistic value, and economic value. In the current study, we expand these two studies by adding authenticity as one of the consumer values (see Table 2). Moral authenticity, pure authenticity, and indexical authenticity affect millennials' brand loyalty toward companies with social responsibility. Moreover, the previous study of Johnson and Chattaraman (2019) argues that millennials' purchase decision is based on a firm's CSR performance, which shows consumers' commitment to being socially responsible (SR) through their purchasing decisions and makes the image and reputation of SR companies crucial. As such, the current study adds fresh insights regarding the reputation of SR companies, which seems to rely on the authenticity perception of CSR activities and practices. Therefore, we expand on marketing and consumer literature which argues that youngsters perceive marketing of companies to lack authenticity and to be manipulative in the way that companies sell their products and services (Heath & Chatzidakis, 2012).

Authentic CSR is certainly central to the present study and millennials' perceptions of corporate hypocrisy; that is, their reactions to the

implicit motives behind CSR initiatives, rather than literal congruence between industry and CSR initiative. This newfound emphasis on CSR activity is a result of the saturation of CSR in marketing communications, coupled with millennials' increased exposure via technology/digital platforms, which fosters their cynicism around initiatives. Our study adds to previous literature about millennials' engagement with CSR information through social media, as they experience a sense of belonging and connection according to social identity theory, and also the participatory and collaborative advantages of social media which contribute to higher levels of transparency and trust concerning the CSR activities (Chu & Chen, 2019). These findings are consistent with Alhouti et al. (2016) in that consumers find CSR to be more authentic when companies are believed to act out of altruism, and to a lesser extent when there is a strong fit between a company and its CSR objective.

In a pioneering paper, Shim et al. (2017) added ethical orientation to the list of characteristics which moderate evaluations of CSR. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews, this study proposes that millennials lean toward a deontological orientation; they are primarily concerned with seeking out evidence on the motivations of CSR, as opposed to the consequences. This means that companies' ethical actions are not conditional on any particular outcome. The findings of the present study suggest that consumers of this orientation also tend to be more ethically idealistic and rigorous; participants are not tolerant of unethical behaviour. The participants held little regard for the potential benefits to any one area of CSR, which naturally poses a threat to marketing strategies that emphasise contribution to a cause, as opposed to ethical duty. At least for the millennial generation, the existence of an attitude-behaviour gap in ethical purchasing does not appear to come down to the instability of consumer tastes; this study highlights millennials' inherent standards for moral "rightness" which filters CSR and would widen the attitude-behaviour gap for companies choosing to focus on the outcomes of their CSR.

A further finding of Shim et al. (2017) is that individuals with deontological orientations have stronger negative communication intentions than those with consequentialist orientations. This supports findings from this study that millennials are both more perceptive of negative news, and more influenced by it. Scepticism about CSR stimulates unfavourable word of mouth (Skarmas & Leonidou, 2013), which is important to note because participants acknowledged their own scepticism of CSR, a characteristic which is also consistent with descriptions of deontological orientations (Shum et al., 2017). This scepticism of CSR motives has been linked to evaluations of corporate hypocrisy (e.g., Shim & Yang, 2016). For a tech-savvy generation like millennials, it is therefore essential to consider the risks of poorly planned CSR initiatives. As evident from the literature, and the findings of this study, understanding the ethical orientation of consumer groups may offer critical information for the effective implementation of CSR in strategy.

One noteworthy finding of this study is that, with the exception of two participants, millennials did not identify as being ethical. This goes against common thinking that social desirability bias strongly influences self-reflection in qualitative interviews, that is,

“the desire of respondents to avoid embarrassment and project a favourable image to others” (Fisher, 1993, p. 303). It was presumed that millennials' increased need for impression management through information technology (e.g., social media) would intensify the effects of social desirability bias, as would be consistent with the literature (e.g., Randall & Fernandes, 1991). Perhaps this is linked to the idealistic moral standards stemming from their apparent deontological ethical orientation. Another possible interpretation is that the broad cynicism about ethicality may have somewhat reversed effects on social desirability, whereby participants may not want to be associated with an attribute they perceive to be inherently unauthentic.

6 | IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Overall, millennials seek out authentic CSR as they are quite sceptical about CSR practices of the past years. Companies need to show evidence of their motivations for CSR and especially through digital platforms, which seem to greatly influence the millennials. The current study argues that millennials are prone to be influenced by negative rather than positive online news and opinions, so companies need to enhance positive e-WOM about them. As such, we offer to practitioners the knowledge of how to promote their brands better to millennials, and that is by having a clear CSR identity focusing on one of the three types of authentic CSR (moral, pure, and indexical). However, it seems that for millennials moral authenticity is conceived to be the most authentic one. Finally, marketing strategies need to focus more on presenting CSR as a duty rather than a contribution to a cause.

Concerning the limitations of the current study, data were collected with a qualitative approach aiming to grasp for the first time the perceptions and meanings of authentic CSR. However, the number of interviews is quite limited and so, further quantitative research would be valuable to test our findings in a wider perspective by comparing millennial males' perceptions with females' perceptions. Another limitation was the refusal of some potential interviewees to participate. Their participation could have further benefited the study as they could have offered valuable information or interesting insights about authenticity, CSR, millennials, and consumer behaviour. They may also withhold commercially sensitive information, such as links between purchase intention, CSR, and global branding, or links between the quality of CSR and authenticity. These aspects were not discussed in detail, however the authors believe that they could have added value to the study and further assisted the exploration of authentic CSR and quality aspects. Finally, millennials with multiple nationalities could be studied in future research to contribute to consumer culture theory and authenticity. More specifically, the investigation could be about millennial consumers who hold more than one nationality and the question that remains is which of these identities influence their purchase intention for SR brands.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author (Dr. Elena Chatzopoulou) upon reasonable request.

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