

Building Trust Between Consumers and Corporations: The Role of Consumer Perceptions of Transparency and Social Responsibility

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Abstract Developing trust in a company is a significant part of building the company-consumer relationship. Previous studies have sought to identify the positive consequences of trust such as loyalty and repurchase, but the question of what builds trust remains largely unanswered. To answer the question, we developed a model that depicts the relationships among transparency, social responsibility, trust, attitude, word-of-mouth (WOM) intention, and purchase intention. An online survey was conducted with a US nationwide sample of 303 consumers, and the data were analyzed using the structural equation modeling method. The results indicated that consumers' perceptions of a corporation's efforts to be transparent in the production and labor conditions and to be socially responsible by giving back to the local community directly affected these consumers' trust and attitudes toward the corporation, and indirectly affected their intentions to purchase from and spread positive WOM about the corporation. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords Social responsibility · Transparency · Trust · Word-of-mouth · Sustainable business

Abbreviations

FLA	Fair labor association
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
WOM	Word-of-mouth
TRA	Theory of reasoned action
CFA	Confirmatory factor analysis
GFI	Goodness of fit index

AGFI	Adjusted goodness of fit index
CFI	Comparative fit index
NFI	Normed fit index
SRMR	Standardized root mean square residual
RMSEA	Root mean square error of approximation
MI	Modification indices
SMC	Squared multiple correlation
AVE	Average variance-extracted estimate

Introduction

The largest death toll (1,127 dead) recorded in a single apparel industry accident related to the collapse of a Bangladesh factory building has again focused the spotlight on the conditions of workers in apparel manufacturing facilities and exposed many companies to criticism (Manik et al. 2013). A global movement of consumers and activists has placed pressure on consumer product brands such as apparel and footwear sectors to fix their "sweatshop" problem (Micheletti and Stolle 2007). A number of companies have responded to the concern expressed by this activism, which includes boycotts, by building aggressive social responsibility programs (Klein et al. 2004). Non-governmental organizations, such as the fair labor association (FLA) and students against sweatshops, have been formed by consumers, labor activists and companies seeking to improve labor conditions. At the heart of these social responsibility efforts is the idea that consumers have the right and power to influence how companies conduct their business. While some researchers debate the ability of consumers to successfully address the issue of labor violations in manufacturing processes (Arnold and Hartman

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2005), consumers around the globe remain interested in improving the ethical behavior of companies (Hoffmann and Hutter 2012). One powerful motivator to improve both the behavior of companies and their suppliers and the willingness of companies to be transparent about their efforts could be the knowledge that increasing transparency could improve their relationship with their consumers.

Building the consumer-company relationship should be grounded on trust. Trust is a consumer's belief that a company will act in the best interests of its consumers and keep what the firm promises (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Erdem and Swait 2004). Trust built between consumers and a company significantly contributes to positive outcomes for the company such as loyalty toward the company, customer retention, product choices, purchase intention, willingness to act, and overall market performance (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Delgado-Ballester et al. 2003; Erdem and Swait 2004; Matzler et al. 2008; Willmott 2003). For this reason, being considered a trustworthy company by consumers is more critical than ever and companies should be focusing on what it takes to build such trust with its consumers (Knowles 2003). Despite extensive studies on brand trust, most of which have focused more on the outcomes of trust (e.g., loyalty and repurchase) rather than its predictors, the question of what builds trust on the part of consumers remains largely unanswered.

In an effort to build trust with customers, numerous companies including major brand corporations such as Gap Inc., Nike, Macy's, and Microsoft have expanded the scope of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives by being transparent about their supply chain and labor issues and/or organizing outreach to the community (e.g., Macys 2012; Steigrad 2010; Tu 2012). Following these initiatives, in order to cultivate trust, companies typically work to effectively communicate with its consumers about their CSR efforts. Guides for communicating CSR efforts begin with the suggestion that brands "be credible, transparent, honest" (Middlemiss 2003, 359). Therefore, we argue that consumers' subjective evaluation on a company's efforts to be transparent and socially responsible would be critical in predicting how trustworthy the company would be seen by these consumers.

This current study was aimed at answering following important questions: What creates the perception by consumers that a company is trustworthy? Do the company's specific efforts to be transparent and socially responsible really build trust among consumers? How do trust and positive attitude lead consumers to purchase products of the company and speak positively of the company to other people (known as positive word of mouth)? The purpose of this study was to understand the role of consumers' subjective evaluations on a company's transparency and social

responsibility efforts in building trust and positive attitudes between consumers and the company as well as shaping consumers' intentions to purchase from the company and give positive word-of-mouth (WOM) referrals about the company and its products.

The major contribution of this research is that this study initiates a focus on consumers' perception of how transparent a company is, specifically, in addressing sweatshop issues and/or labor conditions plays a significant role in building trust and forming positive attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the company. Further, this study contributes to increasing the rigor of the body of literature on brand trust by providing an empirical model that simultaneously identifies the predictors (transparency and social responsibility) and outcomes (purchase and WOM intentions). In addition to theoretical contributions, this study has practical implications in providing business leaders and brand practitioners with confidence in the value of CSR efforts, and furthermore assisting in strategically selecting and conducting CSR activities that result in a more enduring trust by their customers.

Literature Review

Transparency

Transparency is one of the basic conditions in establishing positive relationships between consumers and corporations, which is built by the communication of CSR efforts (Reynolds and Yuthas 2008). In his model of the citizen brand, Willmott (2003) suggests that transparency is an important aspect of the relationship built by brand trust, along with communication and perceived good citizenship. Being accountable to stakeholders is one of the foundations of social responsibility and transparency is fundamental to accountability (Waddock and Bodwell 2007). In her analysis of corporate citizenship, Waddock (2004) suggests that while transparency would seem to be simply a governmental aspect of corporate behavior, along with anti-corruption and upholding the rule of law, transparency is in fact the one corporate value that directly impacts all three spheres (economic, social and environmental) of corporate behavior.

The relationship between consumers and companies is influenced not only by the transparent actions of the company, but also by the consumer's subjective estimation of how the company is behaving in situations where actions cannot be transparent (Kitchin 2003). Companies with public social responsibility efforts are in a unique position. They are not merely asking consumers to trust that the products will be satisfying or to trust that returns or complaints will be handled fairly. Socially responsible companies are asking consumers to trust both their transparent

communications and their unobserved intentions to act in a socially responsible manner (Kitchin 2003). While many consumers recognize that the self-interest of corporations plays a part in the business decisions regarding their CSR initiatives, a study (Scholder et al. 2006) concludes by suggesting that it is important to understand what consumers think of motives behind CSR policy. The motivation to be transparent, which according to Reynolds and Yuthas (2008) is a cornerstone of CSR, will not always be self-interested on the part of corporations, given that this transparency occasionally exposes CSR failures.

This study focuses on a corporation's effort to be transparent and honest especially in addressing labor conditions, sweatshop issues, and related activities in manufacturing, producing, and/or sourcing processes. McDonald and Rundle-Thiele (2008) suggest that CSR initiatives related to overseas operations, specifically the banning of child labor and sweatshops and the support of human rights, yields the highest level of customer satisfaction related to CSR, in contrast to the lower levels of satisfaction created by efforts toward community support.

Social Responsibility

Numerous studies suggest that consumers are willing to actively support socially responsible companies (Barone et al. 2000; Berger and Kanetkar 1995; Creyer 1997). Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) found that CSR efforts have an impact on the market value of firms mediated by customer satisfaction. This indicates that the impact of consumer opinions about the social responsibility of firms should not be considered in isolation from the general attitudes that consumers have about the company.

Cause-related CSR is often used by corporations who are seeking to improve their reputation (Porter and Kramer 2006). In one light all CSR efforts could be construed "as gifts or grants from the corporation to various stakeholder groups" (Godfrey et al. 2009, 427) not just explicit charitable giving. However, Vlachos and Tsamakos (2011) warn that particularly in the case of charitable giving, consumers need to believe that the donations were made because the company believed in the cause and not due to any possible economic or tax benefits. Eisingerich et al. (2011) found that CSR efforts can protect a firm from the effects of negative information about CSR efforts but not from negative information about the core services offered by a company, again suggesting that the general attitudes towards a corporation mediate the impact that perception about CSR have on consumer behavior.

Trust

A meta-analysis of research on trust in a business context found that the concept of trust involves reliability as well as

willingness and intention to act (Castaldo et al. 2010). According to their analysis, Morgan and Hunt (1994) provide one of the most often used definitions of trust when they define trust as confidence in the reliability and integrity of an exchange partner. Morgan and Hunt (1994) explain that reliability and integrity are associated with consistency, competency, honesty, fairness, responsibility, helpfulness and benevolence. They further argue that the behavioral intention of willingness to act is inherent in their definition of trust. Delgado-Ballester et al. (2003) define brand trust as "the confident expectations of the brand's reliability and intentions in situations entailing risk to the consumer" (p. 37). They go on to suggest that brand trust is comprised of two distinct elements, brand reliability and brand intentions. Brand reliability refers to the belief of the consumer that the brand will satisfy their needs. Brand intentions refer to the consumer's belief that the brand's actions and behavior are motivated by positive intentions toward the consumer's interest or welfare.

Trust has been founded as a critical predictor for positive outcomes of marketing and branding such as loyalty, consumer retention, and purchase intention (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Erdem and Swait 2004; Ranaweera and Prabhu 2003; Willmott 2003). Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) found that along with emotion, trust was the most significant predictors of loyalty. An important outcome of conscientious behavior by companies is that it builds trust, which can indirectly increase loyalty by consumers (Willmott 2003). Ranaweera and Prabhu (2003), in their study of the relationship of trust and consumer satisfaction, found that trust is a distinct driver of customer retention and should be managed separately from consumer satisfaction. Erdem and Swait (2004) found that consumers' trustworthiness on a brand, than perceived corporate expertise, had a greater impact on their consideration to purchase from the brand.

Trust has long been identified as a mediator of consumer-company relationships (Esch et al. 2006; Fournier and Yao 1997; Morgan and Hunt 1994). Breaking this trust can also threaten the consumer-business relationship (Fournier 1998). Alcañiz et al. (2010) found that trustworthiness played a mediating role in influencing consumers' opinions of a company's altruistic motives in their CSR efforts. Chen and Chang (2013) found that consumer perceptions of 'greenwashing' (PR designed to distract or deceive) negatively impacted trust in the environmental attributes of products. Pivato et al. (2008) found that trust played an important mediating role in converting CSR into organic consumer loyalty.

Word-of-Mouth

Originally identified as part of a model of consumer satisfaction, WOM in this model is the recommendation of a

firm's product or service following the effort of the firm to recover from some perceived failure in the eyes of the consumer (Maxham and Netemeyer 2003). This concept of WOM is sometimes called "positive WOM" emphasizing the relationship to satisfaction, while the "negative WOM" relating to dissatisfaction (Richins 1983).

WOM is likely to be influenced by consumer perception towards a company's efforts to be transparent and socially responsible. In their study of consumer perceptions on how corporations handle their complaints, Maxham and Netemeyer (2003) found that consumers who felt that a company shared their underlying values (in areas such as "justice") were more likely to engage in positive WOM, once their concerns had been addressed, than consumers who did not feel the company shared their values. Handelman and Arnold (1999), in their study of marketing actions with social dimensions, note that positive WOM is more likely to be received by companies who are not violating industry norms related to social responsibility.

WOM would be also affected by trust of consumers with a company. In their analysis of the components influencing the reputation of corporations, Allsop et al. (2007) found that emotional appeal, which includes the trust that consumers feel towards a company, influenced 41 % of the reputation and that WOM comprised a major influence on this emotional appeal, suggesting that WOM can boost trust. Sichtmann (2007) found that both competence and credibility were capable of producing brand trust that in turn produced positive WOM by consumers. Sweeney and Swait (2008) also found that credibility enhanced WOM. Wang and Huff (2007) looked at the effect of WOM on repeated violations of trust on the part of companies, especially violations where lack of integrity, rather than lack of capacity, caused the violations. Perhaps not surprisingly, their research found that violations of trust, especially when consumers felt that the violation was likely to be repeated, lead to increased negative WOM.

Attitude and Behavioral Intentions

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) has been used to model consumer behavior in many studies including purchases made from companies with CSR efforts (Cheng et al. 2005, 2006; Hyllegard et al. 2012; Yan et al. 2010). Hillenbrand et al. (2011) used a model based on TRA to explore the impact of social responsibility on both employee and consumer trust, further on a positive intent towards the organization. They found that CSR directly influences attitudes, including trust, which would lead to the formation of positive intent. Yan et al. (2010) looked at an apparel brand with a strongly advertised social responsibility effort, using a modified TRA model. They found that consumers who felt the

company had credibility related to this effort and then viewed advertisements that had a fair labor message were more likely to have the intention to purchase products from the company. Hyllegard et al. (2012) also used a modification of the TRA and found that explicit CSR messages on hang-tags increased consumer intent to purchase apparel.

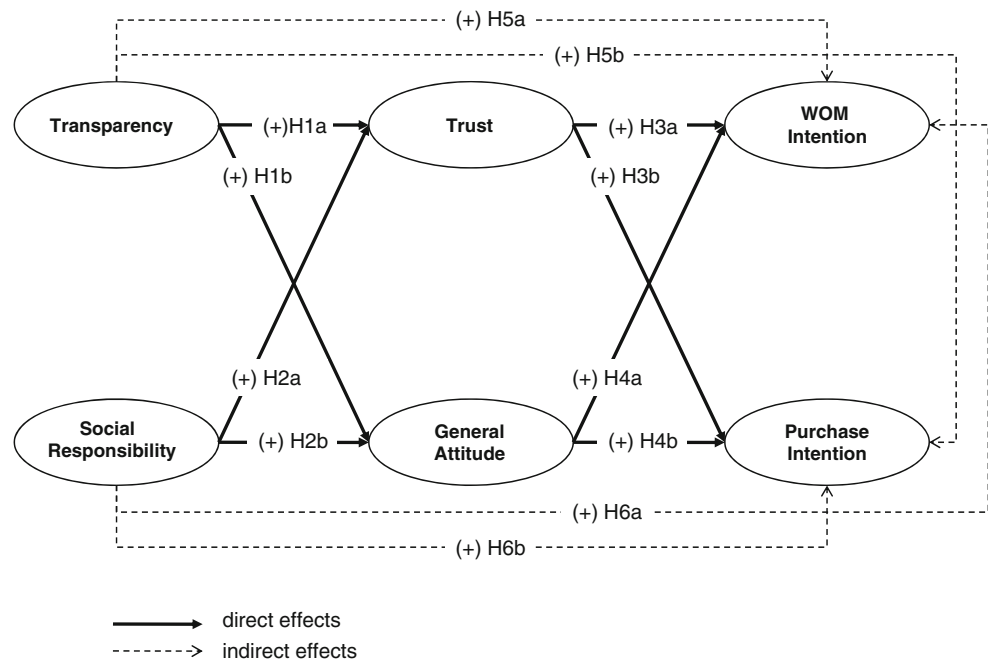
Studies have found that besides purchase intention, the intention to engage in negative or positive WOM can be influenced by consumer attitudes (Cheng et al. 2005, 2006). Lichtenstein et al. (2004) found that attitudes towards CSR indirectly affect consumer purchases mediated by the relationship that consumers have with corporations, measured as consumer-corporate identification. Further, attitudes play a significant mediator on the effects that many determinants (e.g., knowledge, value, concern, and affect) have on behavioral intentions in environmental and ethical consumption studies (Chan 2001; Marcketti and Shelley 2009; Pino et al. 2012; Vermeir and Verbeke 2008).

Measuring generalized attitudes or values may be helpful in understanding the psychology of ethical consumers, but when studying specific behavior, generalized attitudes may not be as useful as specific, behavior-related attitudes. For example, in their seminal work on the conceptualization and measurement of environmental concern, Fransson and Gärling (1999) point out that not all studies of the relationship between environmental attitudes and behavior have carefully measured attitude at the same level of specificity as the behavior, something confirmed as important by more recent studies (e.g. Tan 2011). For this reason, a more general attitude toward a company is still included based on TRA, but at the same time, the much more specific attitudinal variables related to transparency and social responsibility, along with specific belief related to trustworthiness, are included in the research model for this study, in order to enhance explanatory power of the model in predicting purchase and WOM intention.

Research Model and Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, we expected that consumers' assessments of a corporation's transparency and social responsibility would significantly influence not only their general attitudes about the corporation but also trust on the corporation, and in turn indirectly affect their intentions to purchase products from the company and share positive WOM with others. Based on the discussion, a research model (see Fig. 1) and hypotheses were developed.

- H1. Transparency positively affects trust (a) and general attitude (b).
- H2. Social responsibility positively affects trust (a) and general attitude (b).

Fig. 1 The research model and hypotheses

H3. Trust positively affects WOM intention (a) and purchase intention (b).

H4. General attitude positively affects WOM intention (a) and purchase intention (b).

H5. Transparency exerts indirect, positive effects on WOM intention (a) and purchase intention (b) mediated by trust and/or general attitude.

H6. Social responsibility exerts indirect, positive effects on WOM intention (a) and purchase intention (b) mediated by trust and/or general attitude.

Methodology

Measures and Sample

The constructs of interest for this study were measured with pre-existing scales from literature. *Transparency* was measured with a scale of consumer perceptions on transparency outlined in a previously published study (Hustvedt and Kang 2013). The scale consists of five items measuring a consumer's perception of a company's effort to be transparent on labor conditions in their production and manufacturing processes and honest in addressing sweatshop issues. *Social responsibility* was measured with a scale consisted of five items measuring a consumer's perception regarding a particular company's support of nonprofit organizations and its efforts to give back to the local community (Lichtenstein et al. 2004). *Trust* was measured with a scale consisted of four items measuring the degree to which a consumer believes that a

company will continue to deliver what it has promised (Erdem and Swait 2004). *General attitude* was measured with a scale consists of three items measuring a consumer's general opinion of a certain brand name company and its products (Sengupta and Johar 2002). *Purchase intention* was measured with a scale consisted of four items measuring the extent to which a consumer has positive inclinations with regard to purchasing products from a specific company or brand (Krishnamurthy and Sivaraman 2002). *WOM intention* was measured with a scale consisted of three items measuring a consumer's likelihood to suggest to others that they would buy from a particular company (Maxham and Netemeyer 2003). All of the constructs were measured based on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The complete list of the measurements is shown in Table 1. The reliability and validity of the measurements are reported in the following results section.

Data were collected using a set of online consumer panels in the US. The consumer panel sample was bought from a large online data company (Qualtrics) for ensuring the quality and validity of each response, and the target sample size was 300. A total of 7,600 invitations were sent out by Qualtrics for this survey in order to reach this target size. Panelists who initially followed the survey link numbered 770, of which 394 did not qualify or consent to complete the survey for this study and an additional 73 dropped out a various stages prior to completion. A total of 303 consumers both consented to and completed the survey, and were compensated with an incentive following completion. The demographic information of the 303 respondents is shown in (see Table 2).

Table 1 Instruments

Construct/Items	Coding	Source
Transparency		Hustvedt and Kang 2013
If I wanted to, I could easily find out about labor conditions in the factories _____ uses to make their product. ^a	TR1	
_____ would be honest and sincere in addressing the issue of sweatshop labor.	TR2	
I believe _____ doesn't have anything to hide.	TR3	
I can rely on _____ to solve the problem of sweatshops.	TR4	
_____ would make any effort to improve poor labor conditions in their factories.	TR5	
Social responsibility		Lichtenstein et al. 2004
_____ is committed to using a portion of its profits to help nonprofits.	SR1	
_____ gives back to the communities in which it does business.	SR2	
Local nonprofits benefit from _____'s contributions.	SR3	
_____ integrates charitable contributions into its business activities.	SR4	
_____ is interested in corporate giving.	SR5	
Trust		Erdem and Swait 2004
_____ does not pretend to be something it isn't.	TT1	
_____ 's product claims are believable.	TT2	
Over time, my experiences with _____ have led me to expect it to keep its promises, no more and no less.	TT3	
_____ has a name you can trust.	TT4	
_____ delivers what it promises.	TT5	
General attitude		Sengupta and Johar 2002
I think _____ is a very good brand (company).	AT1	
I think _____ is a very useful brand (company).	AT2	
My opinion of the _____ is very favorable.	AT3	
Word-of-mouth intention		Maxham and Netemeyer 2003
I am likely to spread positive word of mouth about _____.	WOM1	
I would recommend _____ products to my friends.	WOM2	
If my friends were looking to purchase shoes, I would tell them to try the _____.	WOM3	
Purchase intention		Krishnamurthy and Sivaraman 2002
I am likely to check reviews regarding _____ products.	PI1	
I am likely to consider _____ the next time I think about buying shoes.	PI2	
I am likely to ask the salesperson about _____ products the next time I visit a shoe store.	PI3	
I am likely to suggest _____ products to a friend.	PI4	

^a Item was deleted due to its low confirmatory factor loading

Each subject was asked a set of questions regarding three footwear brands: Nike, New Balance, and TOMS. We selected these three companies considering variation with a wide range of company properties such as familiarity, popularity, awareness, and perception regarding CSR efforts. By conducting an analysis on three diverse companies that presented a wide range of company properties within a same product category, we ensure to enhance the external validity of model testing. Based on the randomization function of the online survey software system, each subject was able to answer the set of questions regarding each company in a random order, preventing possible order effects. Thus a total of 909 responses (303 respondents \times 3 brands) were used for following data analysis.

Analysis

The model was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) in the AMOS version 19 software. SEM was selected for testing the research model in this study since it allows researchers to assess the causal positioning of a number of variables simultaneously, allowing measurement errors (Kline 2005). SEM is also a powerful analytic tool for researchers to clearly evaluate each variable's impact strength on the other (Kline 2005). The traditionally recommended two-step procedure for SEM (Anderson and Gerbing 1988) was followed: a measurement model and a structural model. First, we established a measurement

Table 2 Sample demographics

Demographics	Frequency	(%)
Gender		
Male	153	50.5
Female	150	49.5
Ethnicity		
Euro-American/Caucasian	241	79.5
African American	26	8.6
Hispanic/Latino (a)	17	5.6
Asian-American	11	3.6
Other	8	2.6
Marital status		
Married	168	55.4
Never married	70	23.1
Divorced/separated/widowed	68	21.5
Employment		
Full-time	144	47.5
Part-time	45	14.9
Unemployed/Retired	114	37.6
Highest level of education		
4-year college or graduate degree	140	46.2
High school degree or other	163	53.8
Annual household income		
Less than \$20,000	39	12.9
\$20,000–\$39,999	84	27.7
\$40,000–\$59,999	63	20.8
\$60,000–\$79,999	43	14.2
\$80,000–\$99,999	33	10.9
\$100,000 or up	41	13.5
Total Respondents	303 ^a	100

^a Median age = 42; ranged from 19 to 75; SD = 14.03

model and tested it through confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in order to evaluate measurement validity and identify measurement errors, by which reliability and validity of all measurements were ensured. Subsequently, we built a structural model and tested it to determine the linear relations among constructs of interest for hypothesis tests.

Results

Measurement Model

The measurement model included six latent variables along with their indicators. Two dummy variables of brands were also included in the measurement model to control possible brand effects. A CFA was conducted with a maximum likelihood estimation. One item from transparency (TR1) was deleted due to its low factor loading (<0.70). The

measurement model showed an acceptable model fit to the data: $\chi^2_{(df=273)} = 990.751$, $p = 0.000$; Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = 0.922; Adjusted GFI (AGFI) = 0.900; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.973; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = 0.963; Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.026; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.054. The thresholds for acceptable model fit indices are as follows: p value of Chi square greater than 0.05; GFI and AGFI greater than 0.90; CFI and NFI greater than 0.95; SRMR lower than 0.08; and RMSEA lower than 0.10 (c.f., Hu and Bentler 1999). The p value (0.000) of the Chi square was smaller than 0.05, and however it was typically resulted from the relatively large sample size, and all of the other indices suggested an acceptable fit of the model to the data. The complete properties of the measurement model are shown in Table 3.

Given the acceptable model fit of the measurement model, reliability and validity of all measurements were examined. First, all the measurements exhibited a satisfactory level of reliability by demonstrating that both Cronbach' alpha (α) and composite reliability exceeded the recommended 0.70 and 0.50 threshold respectively (c.f. Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Secondly, convergent validity was assessed to ensure that each latent variable in the model was well represented by its own indicators. All CFA loadings exceeded the recommended 0.70 threshold while SMC for all items were greater than recommended 0.50 threshold (c.f., Fornell and Larcker 1981). Lastly, discriminant validity was established using the procedures outlined by Fornell and Larcker (1981). In order to demonstrate discriminant validity, the average variance-extracted estimate (AVE) of each latent variable must exceed squared correlations between latent variables (see Table 4). The existence of discriminant validity suggested that all six latent variables were distinctive constructs from each other. Therefore, both convergent validity and discriminant validity were established.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Tests

Given the successful confirmation of measurement reliability and validity, the fit of the structural model was then estimated. A test model was built based on the proposed research model and hypotheses. Transparency and social responsibility were specified as exogenous latent variables while other four latent variables served as endogenous latent variables. The structural model also included two dummy variables of brand companies, which were treated as exogenous variables. By including dummy variables of brands in the model, possible brand effects were controlled. Overall, the structural model fit was acceptable: $\chi^2_{(df=281)} = 1022.066$, $p = 0.000$; GFI = 0.919; AGFI = 0.899;

Table 3 The properties of the measurement model

	M	SD	CFA Loading ^a	SMC ^b	<i>t</i> value	α	Composite reliability ^c	AVE ^d
Transparency						0.925	0.950	0.825
TR1	3.12	0.914	Deleted	Deleted	Deleted			
TR2	3.18	0.783	0.894	0.799	–			
TR3	3.26	0.828	0.870	0.757	37.570***			
TR4	3.02	0.837	0.830	0.689	34.123***			
TR5	3.17	0.789	0.885	0.782	38.927***			
Social responsibility						0.963	0.979	0.905
SR1	3.14	0.763	0.877	0.769	–			
SR2	3.18	0.746	0.932	0.869	43.812***			
SR3	3.14	0.708	0.932	0.869	43.811***			
SR4	3.19	0.740	0.944	0.892	45.271***			
SR5	3.16	0.738	0.897	0.804	39.984***			
Trust						0.951	0.965	0.846
TT1	3.46	0.803	0.929	0.863	–			
TT2	3.45	0.808	0.916	0.839	49.056***			
TT3	3.34	0.906	0.825	0.681	36.978***			
TT4	3.56	0.863	0.915	0.836	48.781***			
TT5	3.43	0.823	0.883	0.780	43.945***			
General attitude						0.952	0.959	0.888
AT1	3.59	0.916	0.948	0.898	–			
AT2	3.52	0.911	0.943	0.888	57.876***			
AT3	3.54	0.942	0.909	0.826	50.717***			
WOM intention						0.955	0.946	0.854
WOM1	3.07	1.094	0.911	0.829	–			
WOM2	3.06	1.152	0.964	0.930	54.518***			
WOM3	2.99	1.136	0.938	0.881	50.106***			
Purchase intention						0.917	0.883	0.655
PI1	2.83	1.181	0.852	0.725	–			
PI2	3.12	1.202	0.883	0.779	35.284***			
PI3	2.87	1.180	0.753	0.567	27.104***			
PI4	2.93	1.199	0.916	0.839	37.736***			

^a Confirmatory factor loading; standardized estimate

^b Squared multiple correlations

^c $(\sum \text{std. Loadings})^2 / (\sum \text{std. Loadings})^2 + \sum \text{measurement error}$

^d Average variance-extracted estimate = $\sum \text{std. Loadings}^2 / \sum \text{std. Loadings}^2 + \sum \text{measurement error}$

*** $p < 0.001$

CFI = 0.972 NFI = 0.962; RMR = 0.028, RMSEA = 0.054. In addition, modification indices (MIs) showed no critical problems of misfit. The structural model test results are shown in Fig. 2.

Given the acceptable model fit, the linear relationships among latent variables were examined. The effects of transparency on trust ($\gamma = 0.475$, $p < 0.01$) and general attitude ($\gamma = 0.515$, $p < 0.01$) were both significant. Thus both H1a and H1b were supported. The effects of social responsibility on trust ($\gamma = 0.171$, $p < 0.01$) and general attitude ($\gamma = 0.166$, $p < 0.01$) were also significant. Thus

H2a and H2b were supported. The results exhibit significant effects of trust on WOM intention ($\gamma = 0.536$, $p < 0.01$) as well as on purchase intention ($\gamma = 0.471$, $p < 0.01$). Similarly, general attitude has a significant effect on WOM intention ($\gamma = 0.270$, $p < 0.01$) and purchase intention ($\gamma = 0.325$, $p < 0.01$). Thus H3 and H4 were fully supported.

In order to test indirect effects of transparency (H5) and social responsibility (H6) on WOM intention and purchase intention, direct and indirect effects of the model were examined through decomposition tests using the

Table 4 Discriminant validity testing matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Transparency	0.825					
Social responsibility	0.741	0.905				
Trust	0.581	0.533	0.846			
General attitude	0.651	0.598	0.732	0.888		
Word-of-mouth intention	0.483	0.459	0.626	0.622	0.854	
Purchase intention	0.497	0.472	0.688	0.644	0.767	0.655

The numbers along the diagonal line represent the average variance-extracted estimates (AVEs). Below the diagonal line are correlations between constructs. All correlation coefficients are significant at $\alpha = 0.05$ level

1 Transparency, 2 Social responsibility, 3 Trust, 4 General attitude, 5 Word-of-mouth intention, 6 Purchase intention

bootstrapping method. The bootstrapping method, one of the most valid and powerful methods for testing indirect effects, was used, as bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals produce reliable inferences for indirect effects (Arbuckle 2009; Hays 2009). Direct effects were non-significant, but significant indirect effects of transparency as well as social responsibility were evident on WOM intention and purchase intention (see Table 5). This result confirmed the role of trust and general attitude as mediators in the paths from transparency and social responsibility to WOM intention and purchase intention. Thus H5 and H6 were fully supported.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand the role of consumers’ subjective evaluations of a company’s efforts as being both transparent and socially responsible in the consumer-corporation relationship. The results of this study make an

Table 5 Decomposition of total, direct, and indirect effects for testing hypothesis 5 and 6

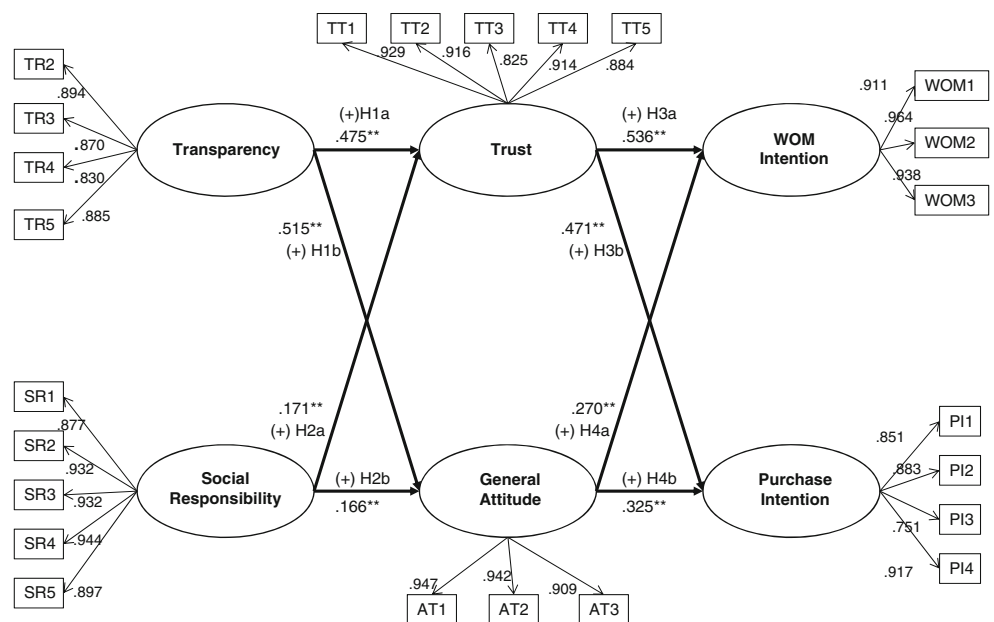
Path	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect
Transparency → WOM intention	0.371	-0.005	0.376*
Transparency → Purchase intention	0.360	-0.004	0.364*
Social responsibility → WOM intention	0.187	0.059	0.128*
Social responsibility → Purchase intention	0.207	0.084	0.123*

All coefficients are standardized estimates

* $p < 0.05$ (bias-corrected percentile method)

important contribution to the field of business ethics and brand management because it is one of the first studies that present a tested model demonstrating the relationships between transparency, social responsibility, trust, general

Fig. 2 Structural model test results



attitude, WOM intention, and purchase intention. While research such as Singh et al. (2012) examined brand trust, perceptions of brand CSR and attitudes towards the brand, this model goes further by including perceived transparency of CSR efforts, purchase intentions and WOM intentions to build a more complete model of the relationship between trust and the benefits of CSR efforts. The results show that consumers' perception of a corporation's efforts to be transparent about production and labor conditions and to be socially responsible by giving back to the local community plays a critical role in building consumers' trust and positive attitude toward the corporation and in turn developing their intentions to purchase from the corporation and spread positive WOM about the corporation and its products.

Given that the literature on trust in a business setting such as Castaldo et al. (2010) has identified competence and integrity as vital components of trust it is not surprising that model testing revealed that consumer perception of transparency was a strong factor that positively influenced trust (H1a) and in addition, general attitude (H1b). The results thus suggest that the level of a company's transparency, as perceived by a consumer, especially in addressing sweatshop issues and/or labor conditions, can play a valid and significant role in building trust and positive attitude toward the company. Furthermore, the direct and indirect effect testing confirmed that transparency also indirectly influenced both WOM intention (H5a) and purchase intention (H5a). The results suggest that trust and positive attitudes built between the company and the consumer due to transparency about CSR efforts can be linked to the consumer's intent to consider a purchase from the company as well as to deliver a positive opinion to others. The results provide concrete, empirical evidence confirming the suggestions by CSR scholars (Kitchin 2003; Waddock 2004) that transparency plays a positive role in the customer-company relationship.

The results also demonstrated that trust (H3a and H3b) and general attitudes (H4a and H4b) directly affected WOM intention as well as purchase intention, by playing a role as mediators in paths from transparency and social responsibility to behavioral intentions. In fact, the effect sizes of trust on both behavioral intentions (WOM and purchase) were greater than ones of attitude. The results confirm the previous research suggesting that trust is a critical component to enhance brand purchase, loyalty, and positive WOM (Chaudhuri and Holbrook 2001; Fournier and Yao 1997; Maxham and Netemeyer 2003; Morgan and Hunt 1994). But beyond that, the results show how building trust with consumers by being honest about something important but difficult, like improving conditions in the factory, can pay off down the line.

Along with the strong impact of transparency, the results also showed that social responsibility was a valid predictor of trust (H2a) and general attitude (H2b), and indirectly, a predictor of behavioral intentions including WOM (H6a) and purchase (H6b). However, while all the paths from social responsibility to all other variables of interest were significant, the effect sizes of social responsibility on trust and general attitude were both much smaller than those of transparency. One reason for the smaller effects may be that the measure of social responsibility used in this study reflects a company's efforts toward corporate giving and charitable contributions, rather than an overall embracing of social responsible efforts by a company. Ultimately, the results suggest that an effort to be transparent and honest, more than charitable, plays an important role in becoming a more trustworthy and favorable company to consumers, which empirically supports the suggestion of McDonald and Rundle-Thiele (2008) that consumers value improving labor conditions over community support activities.

From a theoretical perspective, this study presents valuable implications by extending a traditional attitude-behavioral intention model (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975) to include transparency, social responsibility, and trust along with attitude as valid predictors of behavioral intention. In addition to the development and testing of a model that expands understanding of the antecedents of purchase intentions, the model presented in this study included WOM intention. Such extension is meaningful because many studies applying the attitude-behavioral intention model in social responsibility were limited to the exploration of purchase intentions (Hyllegard et al. 2012; Yan et al. 2010). WOM is growing only more critical in a world where the attitudes of "friends" about corporate behavior are only a "click" away (Chu and Kim 2011).

The enhanced model presented in this study improves the explanatory power of the antecedents of consumers' behavioral intentions toward a company within the sustainable consumption context. More importantly perhaps, this enhanced model points to a way that CSR efforts can be tied to improvements in the relationship with consumers. Popular additions to the traditional attitude-behavioral intention model have included variables such as perceived behavioral control or self-identity as an ethical consumer, variables that would be difficult for a brand to plan to influence. Increasing the consumer perception of transparency, however, is something that a corporation can directly tackle through their communication strategies, as suggested by the results of Hyllegard et al. (2012). In fact, because the results of this study demonstrate that while attitude plays a mediating role in trust, trust may ultimately be more valuable in predicting consumer intention when examining ethical behavior, brand managers should consider how they are communicating CSR efforts right along

with their other brand management when going after markets that include ethical consumers. Of course, future research of corporate ethical behavior should consider the role of trust when consumer behavior involves purchasing products from well-loved companies with widely known labor issues such as those experienced recently in the electronics industry.

To summarize the practical implications, this study provides insights for consumer organizations and non-profit public associations (such as the FLA) that have already put extensive efforts into pushing corporations to improve their transparency on labor issues by demonstrating the fundamental nature of this transparency in the consumer-company relationship. For example, the FLA keeps a database of the results of factory inspections and remediation on their website. While these transparency efforts are laudable in an of themselves, the results of this study suggest that asking the corporations to assist in communicating the efforts more directly to consumers will allow consumers to have increased trust in the participating corporations. Policy makers and educators who take a leadership role in raising awareness of fair labor or sweatshop issues with the confidence that consumers who take an interest ethical concerns are directly benefiting from increased transparency in making their everyday purchase decisions. Educated consumers, in turn, would play a role as opinion leaders for other consumer followers, using WOM (increasingly social media), to bring attention to the level of transparency being created around CSR efforts.

In addition, these results can provide additional reassurance for companies that are considering or even hesitating to invest their resources in more sustainable business practices. Talking about improving factory conditions can be difficult because it involves admitting that the conditions need to be improved. However, the results of this study suggest that this difficult conversation itself can create benefits in the relationship with consumers. When adopting a consumer-centric philosophy, a company must naturally look at consumer perceptions of its CSR efforts, instead of just focusing on executive decisions. Placing consumer need for transparency at the heart of CSR decisions, while ultimately being faithful to the very concept of being responsible to all stakeholders (including consumers), allows the company to allocate its resources more effectively towards socially responsible activities that build trust and favorable attitudes among its customers and indirectly increase sales and positive reputations.

Limitations and Future Research

This study demonstrates that transparency is a significant and powerful antecedent of trust and attitudes. Future

research should include the role that both transparency and trust play in the selection of companies by consumers as the target of their activism, be it boycotts or consumer activism that seeks to reward transparent or trusted companies with “carrot mobs” (large groups of customers making purchases).

Further, in this study social responsibility reflected the concept of giving back to community and helping non-profit organizations. Future research may explore consumers attitudes towards other aspects of CSR such as consumers’ perception regarding pro-environmental efforts in its overall supply chain or company efforts to managing consumer information and privacy. These different dimensions of social responsibility initiatives should also be examined in with view to understanding how such efforts play a role in shaping consumers’ trust, attitude, behavior, and ultimately, the construct of transparency.

The research model developed in this study was tested using a sample limited to an online panel of consumers, which is considered representative for US adult consumers. This method has gained in popularity due to the accessibility it provides to a large number of random samples as well as the high quality of responses of each consumer. However, the responses rate for this method as a whole is necessarily low, due to the nature of online surveys (Evans and Mathur 2005; Monroe and Adams 2012) that includes the use of various filtering methods (e.g., a consent form, attention and validation questions) and ease of prompt dropping out at various stages. This trade-off between quality of responses and representativeness is a limitation of the general application of the results, which must be acknowledged in any survey of this type.

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