

**Young Consumers Perceptions towards CSR actions in the Retail Sector:
A Study in France and Norway**

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Abstract

This research explores how young consumers' perceive French and Norwegian food retailers' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The methodology applies in-depth interviews. French and Norwegian young consumers tend to link CSR mainly to ecology and less to social and economic issues. They also seem not fully aware of retailers' CSR communication efforts. In both cultural contexts, CSR related products are also associated to higher prices and often jeopardize low-income consumers.

Key words: Retailing, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Corporate communication, France-Norway

Résumé

Cette recherche explore la façon dont les jeunes consommateurs perçoivent les actions de Responsabilité Sociétale de l'Entreprise (RSE) mises en place dans la grande distribution alimentaire. La méthodologie est exploratoire et s'appuie sur des entretiens approfondis. Aussi bien en France qu'en Norvège, les jeunes associent davantage la RSE à la dimension écologique qu'aux dimensions sociale et économique. Ils ne sont par ailleurs pas très au courant des campagnes de communication sur le sujet. Dans les deux pays, les produits dits responsables sont également synonymes de prix plus élevés et semblent de ce fait peu adaptés aux consommateurs aux faibles revenus.

Mots-clés : Grande Distribution Alimentaire, Responsabilité Sociétale de l'Entreprise (RSE), Communication institutionnelle, France-Norvège

Résumé managérial

L'objectif premier de cette recherche est d'étudier les perceptions que les jeunes consommateurs ont des actions de RSE entreprises par les enseignes de distribution alimentaire. Ces dernières communiquent depuis le début des années 2000 sur ce type d'actions (comme par exemple Monoprix et son slogan « *Le développement d'accord mais seulement s'il est durable* » (2002) ou Carrefour qui lançait en 2004 la campagne « *Mieux consommer, c'est urgent* »). Les sites Internet regorgent également d'informations concernant les « actions responsables ». souvent regroupées dans un onglet « Développement Durable ».

Mais qu'en est-il de la perception de ces actions par les jeunes consommateurs ? L'étude exploratoire menée conjointement en France et en Norvège, montre que les consommateurs âgés de 18 à 25 ans ne semblent pas remarquer les actions de RSE mises en place. A peine remarquent-ils le remplacement des sacs plastique par des sacs moins polluants ou leur élimination par certains distributeurs. Une explication possible est que les distributeurs n'ont pas encore réussi à mettre en valeur les initiatives qu'ils prennent en matière de RSE, ce qui corrobore les résultats de recherches antérieures (Pomering and Dolnicar 2009). Une évolution des axes de communication s'avère alors nécessaire, avec pour objectif de rendre les actions plus visibles et plus compréhensibles pour les consommateurs.

Les supports de communication sont également à retravailler. Les jeunes consommateurs déclarent faire davantage attention à la communication sur le lieu de vente que sur les sites web, malgré leur grande familiarité avec Internet. Les distributeurs devraient donc mettre plus l'accent sur la communication dans les points de vente, qui devrait non seulement expliquer la variété et le contenu des actions entreprises mais aussi inciter les jeunes à aller s'informer sur leurs sites web.

Parallèlement, aussi bien en France qu'en Norvège, les jeunes consommateurs montrent une certaine méfiance à l'égard de l'engagement responsable des distributeurs dont ils pensent qu'ils sont opportunistes. Pour gagner en crédibilité, les distributeurs auraient intérêt à mettre en place une vraie stratégie RSE qui s'applique à tous les niveaux de l'entreprise. Ainsi, chaque action mise en valeur ne serait qu'une manifestation d'un tout cohérent et crédible. Les distributeurs pourraient aller jusqu'à jouer un rôle éducatif de sensibilisation vis-à-vis des jeunes (Auger et al. 2003).

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Introduction

CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) has become an important area in the business literature with an increasing number of articles in leading and specialized journals. At the same time, social responsibility spreads as a strategic issue for businesses (Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009). Unfortunately, many companies only start to feel concerned about CSR when their reputation suffers from non-performance or negative rumors. Firms, such as Coca Cola, Wal-Mart and Gap, have sometimes been criticized for their lack of commitment to social responsibility (www.marketingweek.co.uk, 2007). This type of neglecting corporate behavior could create a non-reversible damage for the brand image or change consumers' perceptions about the brand (Louppe, 2006). To neglect CSR issues is serious because consumers seem to award the responsible behavior of companies. In France, 65% of citizens prefer brands with an ethical engagement (Ethicity-Ademe, 2006). In the US, 74% of people would exponentially increase their shopping from brands that use cause-related marketing (www.coneinc.com). Consumers' increasing interest in CSR could lead them to reward or punish corporate brands accordingly, and thereby affect brand images.

Consequently, to assess the impact of CSR on consumers has become critical. However, most research initiatives in the CSR field tend to use a corporate perspective (Konrad et al., 2006). Although consumer studies are increasing, research on the impact of CSR on consumer attitudes and behavior remains topical (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008, Ramasamy & Yeung 2009). CSR issues are also being studied in the retail sector (Oppewal et al., 2006), with some studies addressing the CSR impact on consumer (Gupta & Pirsh, 2008).

In this research, we investigate further the impact of CSR on consumers in a retailing context. On one hand, we analyze how consumers perceive the notion of CSR. So far, there is a little knowledge about consumers' perceptions of CSR, and especially about general consumer awareness of CSR actions (Maignan, 2001 ; Pomeroy & Dolnicar 2008). Consumers' awareness is essential because it preconditions their ability to reward or punish firms (Kline & Dai, 2005). CSR awareness among consumers would also depend on retailers' efforts to communicate their CSR actions (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). On the other hand, as part of a wider research project, we compare young consumers in two countries; France and

Norway, and thereby investigate whether there is a cultural dimension to consumers' perceptions of CSR (Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009).

This paper is structured in five parts. First, we present the theoretical and conceptual background, with a focus on CSR consumer perceptions. Second, we give an overview of the research context. This part introduces the two countries where our research took place -France and Norway- with a summary of similarities and differences between them in general, and with regard to the retail sector. In line with our explorative objective, the third part explains the qualitative methodology applied in this research. In the fourth part, we examine the main results of the study before discussing them, with a comparison of findings in both contexts. Finally, managerial implications, research limitations and future studies are discussed.

1. Theoretical Framework: The CSR Concept and its Impact on Consumer

In order to explore CSR impact on consumers, our theoretical framework covers research on CSR, with a consumer viewpoint on one hand and a corporate perspective on the other hand.

1.1 CSR and Consumer Perceptions

In 2001, the European Commission defined CSR as “*a concept whereby companies decide voluntary to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment*” (Hartman et al., 2007; Castaldo et al., 2009).

Being socially responsible implies that a company, after identifying its stakeholder groups (ex. investors, employees, customers, suppliers, public organizations), should incorporate its needs and values within its strategic and operational decision-making process. To illustrate this, let's take the case of the French trading group Monoprix. Since 1990, this retail group has undertaken a CSR strategy that has become a true priority for the company. Its initiatives embrace a broad spectrum of actions such as: a mascot (more exactly a penguin) used in its communication campaigns, a claim “*The company thinks, buys and sells in a responsible way*”, promotion of fair-trade and organic brands like *Alter Eco* and *Monoprix Bio* and the use of transparent carrier bags with less ink and solvents.

The most important stakeholders (Companies, Investors and Consumers) can find simultaneous satisfaction in a policy guided by CSR. Their interaction is deeply influenced by

their specific ethical concerns. Firstly, companies seek to integrate economical, social and environmental goals in a process also called Sustainable Development (SD). This process is a global approach which states that long-term development is only feasible if the following three aspects are reconciled: Respect for the environment, social equity and economic profitability. Secondly, investors seek consistency between values and financial performance. Finally, consumers look for being informed about the production conditions of products bought.

When formulating a CSR strategy, organizations need to understand how consumers perceive CSR actions and how they react to them (Du et al., 2007). Previous research offers limited insights into consumers' notions of CSR and associated corporate behavior (Swaen & Chumpitaz, 2008). Earlier studies have also narrowed the conceptualization of CSR and have just examined only one or two related activities (Maignan, 2001). Scant research has explored general consumer awareness of CSR, perhaps because of the broad and complex nature of the concept (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2008).

Despite limited knowledge of consumers' perceptions of CSR, scholars consider CSR awareness as the required precondition if consumers are able to reward companies' ethical behavior (Kline & Dai, 2005). Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009) define CSR awareness as an independent variable to explain purchase behavior. Previous studies typically (implicitly) assume awareness of CSR actions, or have created it artificially in laboratories. In consequence, *"...it remains unclear whether real consumers are aware of CSR activities when facing real consumption decisions, leaving a gap in our understanding of the CSR-consumer nexus"* (Pomeroy & Dolnicar 2009: 286). Future research could benefit from exploratory approaches investigating how consumers perceive CSR and to what extent they are cognizant of this type of actions (Maignan, 2001).

Earlier research also tends to affirm that there is a cultural dimension to consumers' perceptions of CSR (Maignan, 2001; Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009; Waldman et al 2006; Hu & Wang 2009 ; Schwartz, 1992). Some cultural dimensions are positively related to CSR, while others are negatively related (Waldman et al 2006; Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009). This highlights the importance of exploring consumers' CSR perceptions across cultural contexts.

1.2 *CSR and Corporate Communications*

In order to better understand CSR consumer perception, we must also look at it from a corporate perspective. Consumers have surprisingly little knowledge of ethical and social issues around which firms frame their CSR actions. This low CSR awareness could partly explain the disconnection observed between attitudes and actual purchase behavior. Another explanation could be that consumers have difficulties to acquire and store in memory CSR information (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). Nonetheless, consumer interest in certain domains is found to raise levels of CSR awareness (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Generally, companies fail to effectively communicate their CSR actions thereby, producing a weak consumer response. Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009) argue that companies should feel responsible for the low CSR awareness among consumers. This challenges firms to create consciousness linkages between CSR activities and corporate image (Kline & Dai, 2005). Nevertheless, consumers are in fact interested in learning more about firms' CSR programs, and seem to express support for firms that pursue CSR initiatives. It is then necessary to educate consumers to enable them to contextualize CSR programs minimizing difficulties in acquiring and storing CSR related information. When consumers are less familiar with certain social issues related to these programs, it is even more important to assume the role of educator on social issues to produce the desired effects on consumers (Auger et al., 2003). CSR related marketing communications would then be an opportunity to shape perceptions of organizational image and brand beliefs. These communications can shape a market differentiating strategy that builds brand equity, and leads to customer loyalty and other positive post-purchase outcomes.

However, CSR actions should not be advertised in the same way as products, services, or brands typically are (Schultz & Morsing, 2003). The sensitive nature of CSR communications represents a challenge to marketers because trust in the source is critical for a successful message. Morsing and Schultz (2006) found that consumers prefer CSR related communications in so-called minimal release channels (eg. annual reports and web sites) to the use of traditional media channels. Consumers are generally skeptical towards advertising, and react negatively if firms attempt to persuade them. They tend to perceive traditional advertising as "*...over-accentuating the good deeds of the company, which can lead to skepticism about the message, and cynicism towards the firm's motives*" (Pomeroy & Dolnicar 2009: 288). Furthermore, consumers may view CSR programs as cynically used to

promote corporate image, rather than to reflect the firm's real values and ethical commitment. The focus on CSR is clearly a value-added branding strategy which could also reinforce a firm's corporate positioning (Gupta, 2008, Blumenthal et al., 2003).

2. Research Context

This section describes and compares the core cultural values and the retailing sectors of France and Norway. This comparison aims to better situate the research context of this cross-cultural study.

2.1 Comparing French and Norwegian Cultural Values

As previously stated, earlier studies argue that there is a cultural dimension on how CSR is appraised (Maignan, 2001; Ramasamy & Yeung 2009; Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011). For these authors comparing young consumers across countries is appropriate to identify and categorize similarities and differences in their conceptions and perceptions of corporate social responsibility activities.

France and Norway belong to the European Community and hence share common economic and socio-cultural reality and background. They are both well-developed countries with respect to GNP per capita and they have well established welfare systems. The two countries also share some cultural characteristics, such as having a communitarian ideology (Lodge, 2009) which contrasts with the individualism prevailing in, for example, the US. In accordance with Lodge, a communitarian ideology takes a more organic and holistic view, and regards the community as more than the sum of its individuals in it and requires explicit definition of its needs and priorities. Therefore, communitarism emphasizes the needs of the community and the benefits of consensus.

Conversely, an individualistic ideology adopts an atomistic conception of society where individuals are the ultimate source of value and meaning, and where self-interests among the individuals drive the society. Hence, individualism values the short-term interests of individuals (Maignan, 2001). Given that France and Norway seem to share a communitarian perspective in general, consumers in those countries are likely to easily incorporate society's well-being (CSR) in their shopping decisions.

Even though it has been assumed that national cultures affect consumer behavior and judgments regarding CSR (Freeman and Hasnoui, 2011), this is not the only influence to take into account. Business sectors as well as corporate strategies could also persuade and shape consumers' mindsets in diverse ways. Since this research explores social responsibility activities in the retail sector, it would be useful to clarify the potential issues to look at in this specific sector across countries.

2.2 Comparing French and Norwegian Retail Sectors

France, with a population of 65 million inhabitants in 2012, has been a pioneer in retailing, launching different types of formats: hypermarkets, convenience stores and discount-stores (Benoun & Héliès-Hassid, 1995; Sternquist, 2007). By 1963, the first French hypermarket had already opened. Nowadays, the French retailing sector has a considerable market size and is Europe's second largest retail market, after Germany. One of the top French retailers, Carrefour, is the second largest retailer in the world and seven other French retailers are among the 100 largest in the world.

Norway, with a current population of almost 5 million inhabitants and despite being a wealthy country, does not have the local growth and the widespread international food retail market that France has. The latter has effectively expanded internationally exporting its innovative store formats and ideas. Nevertheless, though Norwegian food retailers are less international, they have also put into action some strategic moves into other Nordic and the Baltic countries. Four retailing groups dominate the Norwegian retail sector (Norges Gruppen, REMA 1000, ICA, COOP). The low-price discounters, the most common store format in Norway, represent 53 % of total sales, while hypermarkets only represent 6 % of total sales (Einarsson, 2008; Report 11/2011). The Norwegian retail market is therefore atypical in the sense that sales through discounters exceed sales through supermarkets (Moreau, 2007; Report 11/2011).

French retailers have developed complete and innovative private labels, introducing organic, premium and local food brands. The share of French private labels is high (30% to 50 %¹) and is increasing relative to national brands. Norway has the lowest share of private labels (11%) in Nordic countries and is slightly below the European average. Compared to

¹ Casino and Intermarché have 50 % sales of PL, while Carrefour has 30 % of total sales by volume (www.privatelabelmag.com)

France, in Norway there is a limited variety in the food supply, especially in dairy and meat products. For this type of products, the assortment in France is more than double.

Norwegian retailers are just beginning to develop with respect to corporate branding, some of them through private labels, such as organic and premium brands (e.g. Coop Norge). French retailers are more highly developed in that respect, approaching British retailers, presumed to be the best retailers in the world (Sternquist, 2007).

However, the linkage between retailers' corporate values and the concept of CSR is still diffuse in the two countries. Appendixes 1 and 2 list, respectively, the major French and Norwegian retailers as well as their corporate values identified in their websites. In the case of France, values that seem more directly related to CSR are: Responsibility (Carrefour), Solidarity (Carrefour and Casino) and Social Utility (E. Leclerc). Norwegian retailers' corporate values that look more closely related to the CSR commitment are: Responsible, Creating Value (Norges Gruppen), High Business Ethics (REMA1000), Safe (ICA) and Empathy & Honesty (COOP). However, none of the corporate values displayed correspond straightforwardly with the wordings: "*social responsibility*" and/or "*sustainable development commitment*". Although the corporate websites analysis done for this research corroborated the interest of food retailers to communicate on CSR, neither French or Norwegian retailers were applying explicit terms to associate CSR to their corporate values chart, at least until this study was completed.

3. Methodology

The main objective of this article is to explore young consumers' perceptions of French and Norwegian food retailers' CSR initiatives. With this explorative objective in mind, we have chosen a qualitative approach, with eight interviews in France and eight interviews in Norway. The interviewees were undergraduates, men and women, aged 18 to 25. Interviews were held in the respective respondents' business schools and were recorded with the participant's permission.

The interview guideline was first pretested for another research held by two of the authors in France (Cacho-Elizondo & Loussaïef, 2010). The pretest showed that young French people are more familiar with SD concept than with CSR. Our cross-country study started up in France and was replicated in Norway. Questions and concepts used in the

interviews were therefore first adapted to a French context. As the France based research team found that young French consumers were more familiar with the concept of SD than CSR, the former term being used in interviews. In Norway, of the term SD was initially used but had sometimes the term CSR was introduced because students were more familiar with it. It can be noted that differences in awareness of these two concepts across countries may have influenced our results.

The guideline is composed of two main topics. First, we examine how consumers perceive or interpret the CSR concept and its three dimensions (Cf. Porter and Kramer, 2006). This part starts with the CSR concept in general but mainly focuses on perceptions associated to firms. The second part covers the perceived CSR actions implemented by French or Norwegian food retailers. The aim of this part is to understand if respondents can spontaneously give examples of retailers CSR actions and eventually how they think about these actions.

The interviews were conducted by two local researchers, one directing the interview and the other taking notes and questioning when necessary. The eight French interviews took place in Paris and the eight Norwegian interviews were held in Bergen. The sample used represents the number of respondents that were necessary to achieve a position whereby each of the emergent categories and relationships was saturated (Glaser, 1978). This form of theoretical sampling ensures that the emergent theory is fully developed and not lacking in density or precision (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), despite the apparently small number of interviews (N=16). Recorded interviews were then coded by the two researchers, following a classical methodology in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Codes were kept if the coefficient of correlation between the two local researchers was over 80%.

4. Main Results

In this part, we present our main findings, examining consumers' perceptions of CSR, highlighting the relation between retailing and CSR and discussing those results.

4.1 Consumers' Perceptions of the CSR notion

Among young French consumers, the CSR concept is mainly associated to ecology, environment, nature, pollution, energy and recycling. That is, the mental association that

appears spontaneously and repetitively is the ecological aspect of CSR. The social and economic aspects only appear when the interviewers encourage additional information recall. The terms associated to the economic aspect do not refer to CSR profitability but mainly to global development. French consumers associate CSR issues mostly with the national or global level. When they are asked to come up with CSR associations related to firms, they use examples from industries and agriculture, as it appears more natural to associate CSR with industries involved in production and distribution of natural resources. The French respondents do not mention retailers.

Norwegian consumers associate all three aspects of the CSR notion: ecology, social and economic. Yet, as in the case of France, the first association was mainly related to the ecology aspect, like environment, energy, recycling, pollution and organic products. And some respondents need additional information from the interviewers in order to bring forward associations to all three aspects of the CSR concept. However, Norwegians have richer associations related to the social aspect, and it comes easily for most of them. The economic aspect is equally well known, and two respondents associate CSR above all, with economical issues focusing on effectiveness and profit at the firm level. In contrast to the French, most Norwegians first associate CSR issues at the firm level, then they mention issues at the national and global level. When giving examples of CSR related to firms, they mention different industries and businesses: oil and gas, hotels, telephone companies, coffee houses, but also retailers: Body Shop, H&M, Wal-Mart and IKEA.

The Ecology Aspect

Table 1A presents the cited perceptions of the ecology aspect from both countries. It can be noticed that there are many similarities across the two samples namely related to environmental production, pollution reduction, waste minimizing, recycling and energy economy. Ecology issues are important in France and Norway because of both national and international commitments. It is therefore not surprising that the ecology aspect is top of mind for young consumers. There are however some differences, for example, the French mentioned: *Green political parties* and *water treatment*. These issues seem less relevant in Norway. Norwegians have associations related to legal matters: *sustainability reporting* and *ethical rules for investment related to environment*. Last, most French respondents mention associated CSR with a more global orientation, such as a *worldwide focus* and a *planet*

without frontiers. These more global concerns related to ecology are less current in the Norwegian sample.

Table 1A: Cited Perceptions of the Ecology Aspect of CSR

<i>ECOLOGY</i>	
<i>French Consumers</i>	<i>Norwegian Consumers</i>
Environnemental protection	Environmental protection
Pollution reduction	Pollution reduction
Waste sorting	Waste minimizing
Recycling	Recycling
Organic products	Organic products
New materials (ex. bio-ethanol)	Respect for nature
Water treatment	Animal welfare
Energy economy	Energy economy
Energy companies (e.g. EDF)	Better preservation of resources
Green political parties	Environmental production
Worldwide focus	Sustainability reporting
Planet, without frontiers	Ethical rules for investment related to environment

The Social Aspect

Below, we present perceptions of the social aspect of CSR. Table 1B shows quite similar associations in the two samples. As noted above, French consumers only come up with these associations when helped by the interviewer, while Norwegians spontaneously utter associations related to the social aspect.

Norwegians' perceptions mainly relate to challenges in the governance of global value chains, such as ensuring ethical business relations with suppliers and good working conditions in production plants in third world countries (e.g. avoid child labor). They mention concrete Norwegian and international companies that have experienced an image crisis related to Media coverage of unsatisfying supplier working conditions (e.g. Telenor, Friele, Nike). Consumers also mention fair trade products and explain the related concept to encompass both social and economic aspects. Some consumers also mention employees working conditions in Norway as well.

Only a few of the French respondents come up with concrete examples of social aspects related to CSR. Issues mentioned are: French employees working conditions (e.g. the human factor, hiring immigrants and acceptable wages), working conditions for small suppliers in developing countries, fair trade products (e.g. Max Havelaar), sustainable production in developing countries (socially and economically), justice in global value chains, ethical business and the conciliation of production and people's health.

Table 1B: Cited Perceptions of the Social Aspect of CSR

<i>SOCIAL</i>	
<i>French Consumers</i>	<i>Norwegian Consumers</i>
Better working conditions (suppliers in developing countries)	Better working conditions (suppliers in developing countries)
Harmony	Against child labor
Sharing among generations	Sharing among generations
Equality of opportunity	Ethical business principles
Fair trade commerce	Fair trade commerce
People respect	People respect
Human factor oriented	Support/donations to local society, universities
Workforce diversity	Ethical rules for investment related to social issues (pension fond)
Justice	Local community development
Equity among countries	

The Economic Aspect

The French and the Norwegian samples differ largely with respect to the economic aspect of CSR (Table 1C). As previously noted, French consumers associate CSR issues (all three aspects) mainly with the national and global level whereas most Norwegians first associate CSR to the firm level and secondly, to the national and global levels. With regard to the economic aspect, French consumers do not refer to CSR profitability but mainly to global development. Norwegian consumers relate profitability with both the firm and the global development (e.g. developing countries).

Table 1C: Cited perceptions of the Economic Aspect of CSR

<i>ECONOMIC</i>	
<i>French Consumers</i>	<i>Norwegian Consumers</i>
Long-term development	Competitiveness at a business level
Third-world countries	Survive as a company (profitability)
Continuous development	Logistics and technological improvements (to increase profitability)
Fair trade commerce	Company development
Subcontracting	Cost savings
New technologies	Economic development in third world countries
	Fair trade commerce
	Long term economic development

4.2 Linking Retailing and CSR

As explained above, French respondents have in general weak associations to social and economic aspects of CSR, and they have problems to think about CSR at the firm level. When they make associations, it is more natural for them to link CSR to industry and agriculture over retailing. Norwegian respondents generally have richer associations to economic and social aspects as well as to firms. Some Norwegians also mention spontaneously retailers when asked about general CSR notions.

Yet, both samples have problems to link CSR and retailing, and it is even more difficult towards food retailing. Young consumers across countries think the relation between CSR and retailing is doubtful, and they question why retailers should engage in CSR. French and Norwegian consumers are not convinced that retailers have a true commitment in their CSR actions. As the following quotes illustrate: “...it is no doubt that they just do it because of profit” (Norwegian) and “... just to make more money?” (French). On the other side, consumers across the two countries are positive to retailers’ (future) engagement in CSR: “I don’ think they do anything about corporate social responsibility but it would be a worthwhile thing if they do it” (French).

Consumers in both countries mention one common CSR action done by retailers, namely the replacement of plastic bags to more environmentally friendly bags (e.g. bio degradable, solid textiles) in stores. In France, nearly all interviewees come up with the example of plastic bags, and have also high awareness related to this issue (e.g. the amount of

the problem of plastic bags globally, and that it is important to solve it). In Norway, only 4 consumers mention plastic bags and 2 have high awareness about the issue. The higher awareness in France could be due to French retailers' higher engagement over Norwegian. France and EC's engagement in the debate about a future legislation to forbid plastic bags could also be one explanatory factor. Norway has not made any commitments to forbid plastic bags. French respondents suggest that retailers have taken a leader and educator role towards the issue of plastic bags, and perceive their actions as important. In Norway retailers' engagement is limited to sell alternative bags to plastic bags – but there are no real attempts to reduce the volume of plastic bags. Despite the difference in awareness across the two countries, the issue of plastic bags has been noticed by young consumers. This CSR action seems easy to observe, acquire and retain by consumers.

French consumers also mention other actions carried out by retailers: “...*help small producers in developing countries, provide better working conditions, offer low prices, encourage recycling, care about family and promote economies of energy, water and paper*”. However, the identification of retailers' CSR actions is not straightforward. Even though some respondents recognize that French retailers make an effort to communicate about their engagement, they complain about the lack of visibility of these communications.

Furthermore, respondents find it difficult to imagine other innovative CSR actions that retailers could implement in the future, indicating a lack of awareness of this topic. Another explanation could be that they do not easily make the retailing-CSR link or that they do not feel a need to take a more active role in proposing actions to retailers. It is important to notice that we adopt a general and open approach to CSR actions and not to specific CSR actions or programs.

Norwegians also have problems linking CSR and food retailers. Yet, when probing more questions related to food retailing, most of the respondents mention organic and fair trade products and link those products to CSR. The Norwegian respondents also mention the introduction and labeling of healthy food and actions to minimize waste. Some respondents say they need more information to be convinced about the benefits of CSR related products, such as organic and fair trade products. One Norwegian says: “*It could be fine with ecological products, but then it may not be enough food for everybody in the world*”. While Norwegians have a positive attitude towards fair trade products, some also request more information related to real benefits for producers in developing countries.

To conclude, young Norwegian consumers lack information about CSR actions in food retailing and potential positive consequences of such actions. Most Norwegians think retailers make little effort to educate consumers on this regard. The main source of information is observation in stores while shopping, few find information through retailers' websites or other websites (e.g. newspapers). None of the respondents is proactively seeking information about CSR in retailing. The largest part of food retailers' communication on CSR policies seems to be on websites; exceptions are communication campaigns in other media (TV, newspapers) on specific product launches that can be associated to CSR.

4.3 Discussion

In the sections above, we have presented French and Norwegian young consumers' perceptions of the CSR concept: the ecology, the social and the economic aspects. We identified both similarities and differences between the two countries. Our results support previous research that emphasizes the cultural dimension of consumers' CSR perceptions (Maignan, 2001, Ramasamy & Yeung, 2009). Although CSR has existed as a name for over 70 years, governments, firms, and other stakeholders across countries do not adopt the concept in a universal manner (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011). Dahlsrud (2008) argue that because CSR is a socially constructed concept, it can not be defined universally. Gjølberg (2010) claims that CSR can not be separated from its contextual factors.

Perceptions of CSR are influenced by semiotic interpretations and political, cultural and social aspects from each country. In a similar vein, other scholars explain that both national culture and culture of the firm strongly affect the development and application of CSR (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011).

As in the Anglo-American world, the French state has played a leading role in the field of CSR, and has focused on changes through legislation (Berthoin Antal & Sobczak, 2007; Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011). France imposed already in 1977 a corporate social report ("bilan social") where firms were obliged to report on employee-related matters (134 indicators). Later on, in 2001, with the legislation on New Economic Regulations, the scope of reporting broadens to include the impact of business on the natural environment and social aspects. It is interesting to note that the French state requires firms to submit their reports on CSR to government authorities, and not to publish it to a wider audience. Some authors (e.g. Berthoin Antal & Sobczak, 2007) explain this practice by the lack of transparency in French society.

Until today, legislation is a major tool to stimulate CSR in French firms. Yet, international developments in the CSR field influence France CSR practices more and more. One example is the French state engagement in the UN initiative; Global Compact in 2002. Another is the gradual adoption of the Anglo-American principal of transparency, but there are still weaknesses related to the amount of information provided by firms and the use of it by stakeholders.

France also tends to use the concept of Sustainable Development in addition to CSR. The majority of websites deal with SD that is perceived in France to include CSR. No French domain deals exclusively with CSR (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011). SD is linked with CSR, and can be defined to overlap the latter “...but noting that both include elements that are separate and apart from each other” (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011: 422). One difference is that CSR concept deals particularly with firms while SD includes further actors than firms emphasizing the needs of human beings (Freeman & Hasnaoui 2011: 422). As a matter of fact, this study used the SD concept with young consumers. We argue that the above discussion can explain some of the results from the French sample, more specifically consumers’ problems to associate CSR to the firm level and difficulties to come up with social and economic aspects. We think that the leading role of the French state and its focus on legislation to obtain changes among firms has reduced the proactive role of firms in adopting CSR on a voluntary basis.

Moreover, French people expect that the state has the primary role to provide the general welfare in society, and are therefore unfamiliar with the American tradition of corporate philanthropy. Lack of transparency on French firms’ engagements may also lower awareness about these issues. The wide use of SD over CSR may also have influenced French consumers to disassociate it from firms. This could explain the tendency of French consumers to associate CSR mainly to ecology and to the national and global levels.

The Norwegian government has equally played a central role in the adoption of CSR, more specifically in 1988 with KOMpakt, the “Consultative Body for Human rights and Norwegian Economic Involvement Abroad” (Gjølberg 2010). The government established KOMpakt to assist Norwegian companies operating in countries with widespread violations of human rights. Hence, the domestic domain is excluded from the official approach to CSR. Later, the thematic focus has broadened on the Global Compact principles.

Now, the official CSR approach “...appears to be integrated into the marketing project seeking to brand Norway as a humanitarian superpower” (Gjøølberg 2010: 213). To obtain Norwegian foreign policy goals, cooperation with business is seen as necessary and natural. Another prominent institutional trait of the Norwegian CSR policy is the ethical screening² of investments made by the Norwegian Pension Fund³. A Council of Ethics supervise the investments of assets abroad to avoid unethical acts, and has contributed to high public awareness of CSR.

The Norwegian CSR approach may explain Norwegians high awareness of the three aspects of CSR and their awareness about firms achievements in the CSR field, both Norwegian and international firms. The Norwegian CSR focus on firms operating abroad might have influenced their perceptions of CSR to be about firms and the governance gap in the global economy (Gjøølberg 2010). In addition, Norway has traditionally been close to the Anglo-American world, in the domains of politics, culture and research. France, in contrast, has been more distanced from Anglo-American politics, research and culture (Freeman & Hasnaoui, 2011). These facts may also explain why Norwegians understand CSR in a more Anglo-American way than French consumers. To conclude, to compare consumers perceptions cross-country is challenging because consumers understand the concept of CSR differently.

5. Managerial Implications, Limits and Future Research

First results show young consumers have a weak knowledge about retailers’ actions in terms of CSR. Spontaneously, in both countries, they perceive mainly the replacement of plastic bags as the only important CSR action. One explanation could be retailers’ ineffective efforts to communicate their actions – this is a matter supported in previous research (Pomering and Dolnicar 2009). This implies that retailers should strengthen their communication efforts to make their CSR actions more visible and understandable for consumers.

² Violations of fundamental humanitarian principles, serious violations of human rights, gross corruption or severe environmental damages (Norwegian Ministry of Finance, 2010)

³ A fund based on the substantial revenues of the petroleum sector in Norway.

Moreover, it seems that consumers mostly observe communication about CSR actions in stores, and frequently tend to overlook CSR information on websites or through advertising. Retailers should therefore emphasize communication of CSR actions in all the touch-points with customers and use more creative advertising to increase traffic to their websites and social networks where this information is shared. However, it would also be necessary to multiply the number of social responsible actions to harvest the benefits of this commitment at the social, the ecological and the financial level.

On the other hand, young consumers in both countries were suspicious about retailers' real commitment to CSR. In general, there is a belief that food retailers only show CSR interest due to a profit-driven motive. In that regard, retailers should better integrate their CSR policies in their overall brand strategy and spread their CSR initiatives internally and externally to become more credible in the eyes of consumers and also employees.

Yet, young consumers would like to be better informed about retailers' actions: This knowledge could enhance their purchase intentions toward CSR related products and strengthen their relationship with retailers. Actors in the retailing sector could benefit from an increased communication effort. The difficulty of young consumers to associate retailers and CSR could also be related to general problems to retain CSR information in memory (Pomering and Dolnicar 2009). To solve this, retailers could adopt an educator role on these social issues (Auger et al. 2003).

This research has the natural limits inherent to a qualitative and explorative approach. Future research should examine possible country specific traits, such as politics, socio-cultural aspects, history etc. in order to explain differences in CSR engagement in the retailer sector.

It would also be relevant to test deeply, qualitatively and quantitatively, the proposed contributions and to apply the findings to a particular retailer. Using its own data base of loyal clients, it would be possible to see if the awareness of CSR actions is correlated to the level of loyalty and satisfaction.

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Appendix 1: Corporate Values of the Main French Food Retailers

Retailer Group	Food Retailer Brands	Corporate Values
Carrefour	Carrefour Franprix Shopi Dia Ed Champion 8 à huit Ooshop	Freedom Responsibility Sharing Respect Integrity Solidarity Progress
Auchan	Auchan Les Halles d'Auchan Atac Simply Market Easymarché Fredy Eurobounta Auchandirect	Trust Sharing Progress
E. Leclerc	E.Leclerc Système U	Independence Social utility
Les Mousquetaires	Intermarché Ecomarché Netto	Engagement Trust Proximity
Cora	Cora Match Profi Houra.fr	Respect Honesty Cordiality Trust
Casino	Géant Casino Super Casino Monoprix Monop' Inno Petit Casino Petit Casino 24h Vival Spar Leader Price	Quality Proximity and Adaptability Solidarity and Equity Dialogue, Exchange and Listening

Appendix 2: Corporate Values of the Main Norwegian Food Retailers

Retailer	Food Retailer Brands	Corporate Values
Norges Gruppen	Joker Kiwi Spar / Eurospar Meny Ultra	Responsible Consumer-oriented Creating Value Inspiring Dynamic
REMA1000	REMA1000	Focus on the Core of our Business Concept High Business Ethics No Debts Motivate People to share a Winning Culture Think Positively and Being Pro-active Talk to Each Other – Not about Each Other The Customer is King Wish to have Fun and be Profitable
ICA	Ica Local Store Ica Supermarket Ica Maxi	Safe Modern Inspiring Personal Engaging
COOP	Coop Prix Coop Mega Coop OBS	Faith in the Business Concept Want to have an Impact Empathy Honesty Innovative