

**THE IMPACT OF THE PERCEPTION OF CORPORATE SOCIAL
RESPONSIBILITY ON CONSUMER LOYALTY:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

NOURA HALHAL

Doctorante à la Faculté des Sciences juridiques, économiques et sociales, Agdal-Rabat,
Université Mohammed V de Rabat

halhaln@gmail.com

ABDELLAH HOUSSAINI

Professeur de l'Enseignement Supérieur à la Faculté des Sciences juridiques, économiques et
sociales, Kenitra, Université Ibn Tofail

housaini04@yahoo.fr

ABSTRACT

In the face of the recent intensification in social communication in the service sector, it is important to assess its impact on the perception and behaviors of consumers. The purpose of this article is first to understand the expectations of consumers with regard to social responsibility; second, to study the impact of philanthropic activities on consumers' loyalty. Our exploratory study of Moroccan consumers has allowed us to highlight the expectations of consumers in terms of CSR and to understand how these activities can impact their loyalty. Based on the review of the relevant literature and the results extracted from the study, we propose a model of theoretical analysis and hypotheses to be tested as part of empirical studies.

Key words :

Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR, consumer, loyalty, commitment, Perceived quality, service sector, Morocco

RESUME

**IMPACT DE LA PERCEPTION DES PRATIQUES SOCIETALES SUR LA
FIDELITE DU CONSOMMATEUR : ETUDE EXPLORATOIRE**

Ces dernières années, on remarque une intensification de la communication sociétale dans le secteur des services et face à ces messages, on peut s'interroger sur la perception du consommateur et son influence sur son attitude. L'objectif de cet article est de comprendre dans un premier temps les attentes des consommateurs en matière de responsabilité sociétale puis d'étudier l'impact des activités philanthropiques sur sa fidélité. Notre étude exploratoire réalisée auprès de consommateurs marocains nous a permis de mettre en lumière les attentes des consommateurs en matière de RSE mais également de voir dans quelles mesures ces activités peuvent impacter sa fidélité. A partir de la revue de la littérature et des résultats extraits de l'étude, nous proposons un modèle d'analyse théorique et des hypothèses à tester dans le cadre d'une future étude empirique.

Mots clés :

Responsabilité sociale des entreprises, RSE, consommateur, loyauté, fidélité, engagement, qualité perçue, Maroc

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, much research has focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR). This concept is based on the principle that companies, beyond their economic and legal obligations, have responsibilities toward their environment. For many years now, CSR practices have been strongly integrated into business strategies in several countries. Morocco is no exception; the country has been implementing an ambitious sustainable development policy (INDH, United Nations Charter, CSR Label of the CGEM, COP 22, National Strategy for Sustainable Development, etc.).

Most studies of the effects of CSR have highlighted the impact of societal practices on the economic and financial performance of companies but research on its effect on the consumer perception remains embryonic (Maignan and Ferrell, 2001; and Bhattacharya, 2004, Luo and Bhattacharya, 2006, Swaen and Chumpitaz, 2008). The Global CSR Study (2013) on the CSR perception by 10,000 consumers in 10 countries shows that consumers are increasingly aware of corporate abuses or excesses and of the power they can yield over corporate brands.

According to another study, consumers in developing countries are the most sensitive to CSR (Nielson, 2015). CSR activities, therefore, can influence positively or negatively consumer attitudes and behaviors toward the firm (Brown and Dacin 1997, Maignan and al 1999, Bhattacharya and Sen 2006, Swaen and Chumpitaz 2008, Mohr and al., 2001). It is the case in the services sector in particular because it is characterized by a higher degree of consumer loyalty, CSR activities can have a direct impact on consumer loyalty and the firm's image (Crespo, and Del Bosque, 2005; Sureshchandar and al., 2001). For this reason, we are witnessing an intensification of social communication on the part of mobile operators in Morocco and we may inquire about the responsiveness of the consumer to those corporate messages. To date, academic publications in such questions remain rare and it is important to explore the consumer's perception of social responsibility as a multidimensional concept as well as the impact of the philanthropic dimension on the consumer's loyalty.

After a brief presentation of the theoretical foundations of CSR, we will look at the literature on the impact of CSR on the consumer and then we will present the results of our exploratory study conducted in the mobile telecom sector, and finally we will present a conceptual model that can be tested in future research.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

After a brief presentation of the theoretical foundations of CSR, we will examine the literature on the impact of CSR on the consumer and we will study the variables of loyalty and trust that will be used in the framework of our proposed model.

1.1 CSR: ISSUES OF DEFINITION

There is no consensus on the definition of CSR and there is a multitude of approaches and definitions (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). The term Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) may imply corporate citizenship, corporate ethics, stakeholder management or sustainable development (Carroll and Shabana, 2010).

The conceptual model most commonly used to define CSR is Carroll's (1979) proposal, which identified four levels of social responsibility: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. Each subsequent level relies on the preceding one: the satisfaction of the first two levels is demanded by society, while that of the third is expected by the community (public opinion). Finally, the fourth level is voluntary / discretionary.

According to Freeman (1984), most definitions of CSR are based on two common ideas: the fact that companies have responsibilities that go beyond the pursuit of profit and law enforcement, and the fact that it concerns not only the company's shareholders, but also all its stakeholders. It defines stakeholders as "any group or individual that can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives". The company must therefore adjust its objectives to give each stakeholder a fair share of satisfaction.

Per this vision, stakeholders are identified as suppliers, customers, employees, investors, community, etc. They may constitute an aid or a danger to the organization. Gond and Mercier (2005) have drawn a classification of the theoretical currents that have studied CSR from stakeholder theory to the neo-institutional theory of legitimacy. Stakeholder theory allows the identification of all the partners of the company, their expectations, and the challenges involved in taking them into account in the management of the company. While the theory of legitimacy enables us to analyze the external factors that drive the commitment of companies, it claims that there is a social contract that compels companies to operate in accordance with the expectations of the society in which they are registered, and therefore to justify their actions with messages addressed to the relevant components of said society.

CSR then consists of implementing practices that are desired by the said environment in order to obtain the support of the latter and gain a special place within the community. Companies have therefore understood the value of communicating more precisely their social responsibility, either out of genuine conviction, or more opportunistically. Social communication thus enables them to achieve better economic performance, respond to stakeholder, gain legitimacy and integrate social considerations into their corporate identity (Swanson, 1995).

1.2 CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES OF CSR

In this section, we will highlight the different conclusions of the studies carried out within this field in order to assess the impact of CSR initiatives on consumers and how they can influence their attitudes. The individual may carry several identifications since he may be a consumer, a citizen, a family member, an employee or a shareholder. His perception can be affected by the dominance of any of these characteristics in a particular context. CSR activities may be seen as signals transmitted by the company to mitigate the uncertainties of the consumers (Swaen and Chumpitaz, 2008). Today's technologies make information transmission instantaneous allowing an almost immediate response from civil society.

The company can no longer hide its detrimental actions toward the environment or society, and it can also be sanctioned if the image it projects does not correspond with its actions (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). Consumers' boycotts depend on individual and collective factors: the consumer will participate in a boycott only if individual rewards are more important than the product desired, or if a substitute is available on the market (Klein, Smith and John, 2004). Some research shows that CSR information gives consumers clues about the company's value system which then might impact the consumer's behavior (Brown and Dacin, 1997). Several researchers are integrating the relational approach to study the effects of societal activities on consumers (Lapeyre and Bonnefont 2005, Lacey and Kenett-Hensel 2010). Since the work of Morgan and Hunt (1994), most researchers agree that engagement is a central variable in relationship marketing and plays a crucial role in describing and explaining re-purchase behavior (Grönroos 1994, Doney and Cannon 1997, Bozzo and al 2006). It is therefore a fundamental issue for both practitioners and researchers. De Los Salmones and al. (2005) distinguish three streams of research regarding loyalty: (1) as an observed behavior (repeated purchase sequence), but where a low level of repeat purchase may be due to external circumstances or a lack of alternatives; (2) as an attitudinal construction (positive word of

mouth effect); and (3) as a cognitive character where the client is willing to pay more. The relational company aims to improve customer's satisfaction, trust and commitment through a positive perception of CSR and thus to retain its customers and raise them to the highest scale of the relationship (Gummesson 1999, Maignan and Ferrell 2004, Swaen and Vanhamme 2003). Through their empirical study in the mobile telephony sector, De Los Salmones and al. (2005) show that there is no significant direct relationship between CSR and consumer loyalty. On the other hand, there is an indirect significant relationship that is mediated by service evaluation (perceived quality of service). It should be noted that there may be a gap between the statements of individuals and the reality of their actions. The main reason for the difference between words and actions may be due to lack of consumer awareness of CSR policies. Thus, the difficulty for consumers to have reliable information on the actual behavior of companies leads to a low consumer awareness of their CSR activities (Vogel 2005, Sen and al., 2006). Communicating about CSR activities does not necessarily lead to positive effects in terms of consumer perception of the business (Sen and Bhattacharya 2001, Brown and Dacin 1997). It should be noted that consumer's attitudes are influenced more by negative than by positive information (Carrigan and Attalla 2001, Sen and Bhattacharya 2001). It is therefore important for companies that communicate their corporate activities to assess the overall effect of this type of communication very accurately. Companies communicating about their CSR activities must be prepared to handle criticisms and possible accusations of non-citizen behavior (Mohr and al., 2001).

1.3 RELATIONSHIP MARKETING THROUGH LOYALTY AND PERCEIVED QUALITY

Corporate Social behavior can therefore have an impact on perceived quality and, consequently, on loyalty (De Los Salmones and al., 2005).

1.3.1 PERCEIVED QUALITY

Perceived quality plays a major role in creating a lasting relationship between the business and the consumer. Perception of responsible behavior can have a direct impact on perceived quality (Sureshchandar and al., 2001). Several researchers believe that perceived quality is an antecedent to loyalty, and therefore there is a relationship between these two concepts (Zeithaml and al., 1996, Jones and al., 2000).

Perceived quality is an abstract concept whose measurement is not obvious. It can be defined as a superior overall judgment of the service (Zeithaml and al., 1988). Several models have

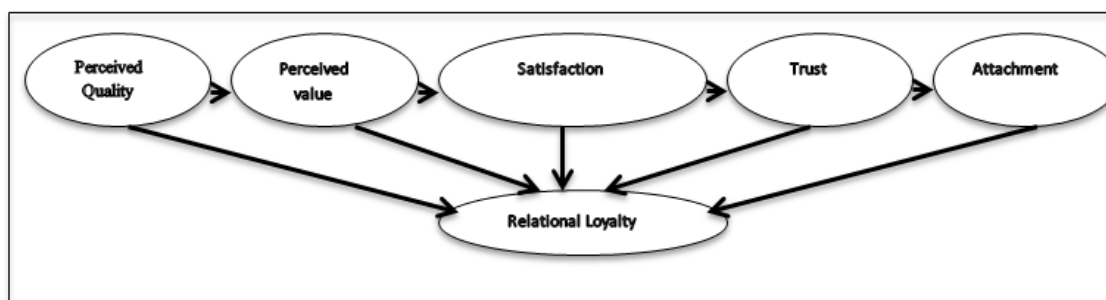
been proposed to present the quality of service. Generally, they can be classified into two types: those who are interested in the attributes of the service and those who deal with the structure of the service (Boyer and Nefzi, 2008). Grönroos (1984) distinguishes three dimensions to perceived quality that are the technical (content of the offer), the functional (how the service is rendered) and the image of the company (perception of the company). Several researchers have developed models to measure the perceived quality dimension and have integrated a dozen attributes: tangible elements, reliability, helpfulness, credibility, communication, security, competence, courtesy, consumer understanding and service accessibility (Parasuraman and al., 1985). Responsible corporate behavior can be viewed as an element that improves the quality of service (Brown and Dacin, 1997).

1.3.2 LOYALTY

Loyalty is the focus of many practitioners and marketers (Zeithaml and al., 1996). It is considered as a source of value creation for the company. There are three approaches of the concept of loyalty: the behavioral, the attitudinal and the relational. The behavioral approach manifests through the choice of one brand over another (Brown, 1952). Thus, a customer is considered to be loyal to a brand when he buys it regularly (Webster, 1992). However, there are significantly different currents of thought within this paradigm. According to Bass (1974), the purchase decision by customers depends on a very large number of variables that make repeated purchasing behavior a phenomenon that is difficult to explain. The concept of repeated purchases developed later, considering them more as an act in the process of evaluation, preferably of several brands (Jacoby and Kyner, 1973). According to Webster (1992), the customer is looking for a decrease in the cost of acquisition, which does not imply loyalty or even commitment to a brand. The behavioral approach therefore makes it possible to describe rather than explain the behavior of the client. Jacoby and Kyner (1973) defined loyalty as "deliberate redemption behavior that results from a psychological attachment to the brand". This approach can also incorporate word of mouth attitude in the construction of loyalty (Biong, 1993). Loyalty thus integrates a dimension that is both behavioral and attitudinal. However, attitudinal measures do not take into account the evolutionary and dynamic nature of loyalty (Fournier and Yao, 1997), such as the evolution of a client's status or the variation of his purchasing power. In the relational approach, loyalty translates into a strong customer commitment that materializes through frequent purchases of a preferred brand over the long run. It is a process that begins with cognitive loyalty (resulting from satisfaction and

evaluation), then through affective loyalty (reinforced by cumulative satisfaction), then by conative loyalty (intention to remain faithful) and, finally, loyalty to action (resistance to counter persuasion and tolerance to dissatisfaction) (Oliver, 1999). Aurier, Benavent and N'Goala (2001) explain the construction of the customer relationship through a chain of variables that have a direct and indirect effect on loyalty (see Figure 1 below).

Figure N°1 Construction of the relational loyalty



Source : Aurier, Benavent and N'Goala, 2001

The relational approach is limited because it marginalizes behavioral loyalty (Claudon and Danon, 1994).

2. EXPLORATORY STUDY

2.1 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In the services mobile phone sector, relationship marketing is very important because it is not just about acquiring new customers but developing and maintaining a long-term relationship (De Los Salmones, Del Bosque, I., 2011). In Morocco, three operators (IAM, Orange and Inwi) share a market where the penetration rate reaches 127% at the end of September 2017 (ANRT, 2017). These companies are active in social responsibility and communicate on different media about their CSR activities. For our exploratory study, we opted for a qualitative approach that is generally a prerequisite for any empirical study. The aim is to become more familiar with the research question, to evaluate the opportunities and constraints on the ground, to clarify the theoretical concepts or to explain research hypotheses (Lambin, 1990). For this reason, we adopted the method of semi-structured individual interviews from a guide of interviews conducted from June to October 2017. The sample was as diversified, as possible, in terms of gender and age.

Table 1: Sample Descriptive Statistics

Gender	
Men	50%
Woman	50%
Age	
18-25	19%
26-35	31%
36-45	27%
46 and more	23%

The interview guide was organized according to three themes:

- Concept and dimensions of perceived CSR
- Perception of the CSR philanthropic dimension by the consumer
- Impact of CSR on the consumer's attitude

The interviews, which lasted an average of 30 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. We carried out a thematic content analysis from N'VIVO 11.4 software which allowed us to collect, organize and analyze the interviews. For our analysis, we followed a mixed method: we pre-established a reading grid from the literature review that we enriched as we went through the coding phase (Thiétart, 2014). The content was divided into analysis units (sentences, portions of sentences or groups of sentences). Each unit of analysis was thus classified into categories or subcategories (nodes and sub-nodes in the software). Finally, we counted the units of analysis in each of the categories in order to deduce their importance, and then conducted a more qualitative analysis based on selected verbatim, whose objective is to assess the relevance of the themes.

2.2 RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

2.2.1 CSR PERCEPTION: DEFINITION AND CSR DIMENSIONS

The analysis of consumer interviews allows us to draw a map of how a responsible company is perceived. We identified the most relevant dimensions from a statistical analysis that allowed us to produce the following Table 1:

Table 2. Perception of CSR by Moroccan consumers

	Sources	Percentage
Responsibility toward employees	17	65%
Maximization of profits	14	54%
Job creations	10	38%
Contribution to the welfare of the community	9	35%
Responsibility toward the environment	8	31%
Contribution to economic growth	5	19%
Legal Responsibility	4	15%
Support for cultural and social events	3	12%
Provision of goods and services	3	12%
Responsibility toward consumers	3	12%
Ethical Responsibility	3	12%

Spontaneously, 65% of respondents believed that the company was responsible for its employees, that is to say that it must treat them fairly, ensure their well-being, provide them with social security, and a retirement pension. This belief was reflected in the respondents' statements as illustrated by the following :

"A company is a structure that employs people and must listen to its employees, that is to say, it must ensure their well-being, provide them with favorable working conditions. Whether within the job or outside work, it is also to accompany them in their social activities and all that is related to their well-being, their health, etc. " (Female, 40 years old)

Respondents also stated that the company is responsible for making a profit (54%), and creating jobs (38%), it's also obligated to the community it services (35%) and to the environment in which it operates (31%). We then asked about their appreciation of each of the dimensions of CSR as defined by Carroll (1979): Economic, ethical, legal and philanthropic. The ethical and legal dimensions were grouped together because their boundaries are not always evident to the consumer. Table 2 presents the perception of the different dimensions of CSR:

Table 3 : Perception of CSR dimensions

	Sources	Percentage
Economic Responsibility		
Maximization of profits	14	54%
Job Creations	12	46%
Contribution to the economic growth	6	23%
Legal and Ethic Responsibility		
Responsibility toward the environment	22	85%
Respect of the norms and laws	11	42%
Respect of the employees	11	42%
Respect of ethics and principles	7	27%
Philanthropic Responsibility		
Contribution to the welfare of the community	11	42%
Contribution in improving the environment	5	19%
Concerned about the well-being of its employees	3	12%

We note that beyond the maximization of profit, three themes emerge: employees, the environment and the community. We found this idea in this interview:

"The company must have a responsible and integrated approach, it goes through all the points: the economic, social and environmental. A company must be truly responsible and sustainable in its environment." (Female, 36 years old)

Regarding philanthropic responsibility, corporate initiatives in favor of the community or the environment must be consistent with the companies' identity or sector of activity and must provide a real benefit for the community or employees. This response is representative of this idea:

"Any activity must reflect the identity of the company; it must make sense. It seems odd that a tobacco company supports sports. For a company to be well managed, it must have its business model, but also its values and a certain vision of the world." (Male, 41 years)

2.2.2 PERCEPTION OF COMPANIES WITH CSR ACTIVITIES IN MOROCCO

65% of respondents spontaneously identified companies with CSR activities in Morocco: 42% mentioned telecom operators, 23% mentioned the *Office Chérifien des Phosphates* (OCP) and 12% listed banks. The companies generally mentioned are those that undertake actions in favor of the community/society and who communicate about them (festivals, sports, support of associations, social engagement programs, etc.). Below is the statistical breakdown regarding the perception of socially responsible companies in our sample:

Table 4 : Perception of social companies

	Sources	Percentage
Perception of companies with CSR activities	17	65%
No perception	9	35%

The motivations of the companies mentioned were the improvement of their visibility, the reduction of their negative impact on the environment or the improvement of the well-being of the community. We found this idea in this interview:

"IAM for sport. Inwi dir iddik, it was a good action because young people worked in their area. Samir and OCP have made public green spaces. OCP finances many associations." (Female, 28 years old)

2.2.3 CSR PERCEPTION OF MOBILE OPERATORS

- Perception of CSR activities of mobile operators:

When consumers are asked about the responsible activities of mobile operators, 65% perceive activities that are part of the company's social responsibility. In the case of mobile operators, the actions cited are generally part of the philanthropy category. Below is the table detailing the perception of responsible activities:

Table 5: Perception activities about CSR of mobile operators

	Sources	Percentage
Organize or support Music Festivals	13	76%
Supports activities toward environment	5	29%
Supports sport events	4	24%
Support charitable and social projects	2	12%
Support Art	2	12%
Improve the well-being of its employees	1	6%

In fact, respondents who perceive the CSR activities of mobile operators mainly cite sponsorship or the organization of festivals (76%), activities in favor of the environment (29%) or support for sports events (24%).

- Perceived credibility of CSR activities of mobile operators

Concerning the credibility of the CSR actions of telecom operators, the speeches are mixed since only 42% of the respondents find the actions credible, 42% find the actions non-credible and 15% have no opinion.

Those who perceive the actions undertaken by their telecom operator credible, consider that all areas of action are important and that even if it brings visibility to the operator (advertising), it improves the well-being of the company because the art, culture and sport are important areas. Below is a speech that illustrates this idea:

"It takes a bit of everything to make a world. You cannot sacrifice a festival at the expense of building a hospital. It takes a balanced whole for everyone to find something. " (Male, 21 years old)

For those who believe these actions to be non-credible, they think that there are other priorities in Morocco, that it is rather to improve their brand image and that the actions must be part of a long-term strategy. One-off actions are considered insufficient.

- CSR and loyalty:

When we asked the interviewees to tell us about responsible actions that could be undertaken by their telecom operator and that would improve their relationship in the long term, they mainly cited the support to disadvantaged populations (50%), actions that would strengthen

education and training (35%) or actions in favor of the environment (27%) Below is the table detailing the CSR expectations of consumers:

Table 6: Consumer expectations of their mobile operator

	Sources	Percentage
Support charitable and social projects	13	50%
Support in Education and training initiatives	9	35%
Supports activities toward environment	7	27%
Supports cultural and sport events	4	15%
Long term social Strategy	4	15%
Improve the well-being of its employees	2	8%
IT Innovation	1	4%
Without opinion	1	4%

Respondents would like to feel coherence and sincerity in the approach of their mobile operator with lasting effects over time. Because of their national coverage and turnover, they believe that the operator has the opportunity to undertake major actions that would really change the lives of Moroccans in the long term (aid to disadvantaged populations, percentage of recruitment of handicapped people, neighborhood libraries, etc.). This idea described in the speech bellow:

"I would like to feel my operator more committed to helping disadvantaged people get out of their precarious situation. This is a responsible, social action that seems very important to me. It's an action for me that's worth a lot. It could relocate certain of its activities in several disadvantaged regions which suffer unemployment." (Female, 28 years old)

- Consumer willingness to change his mobile operator

92% of respondents say they are ready to leave their mobile operator if it has bad practices vis-à-vis the community, the environment or its employees. Nevertheless, there are nuances in their speech since 52% of respondents condition the change of operator to the evidence regarding the misbehavior and its seriousness and 8% if the competitors offer the same quality of service. Below is the table that details the data:

Table 7: Intention to boycott the mobile operator

	Sources	Percentage
Sanction if the severity of the action proved	13	52%
Unconditional punishment	8	32%
No sanction	2	8%
Sanction conditioned by equal quality in the competitors	2	8%
Without opinion	1	4%

Interviewees generally believe that the market is liquid and that it is easy to switch operators. However, they are suspicious of an announcement effect and wish to have proof of the non-responsible behavior and that competitors do not do the same thing. For the moment, they believe that the practices are similar between the different actors in the market and that none stands out. The following statement illustrates this conclusion:

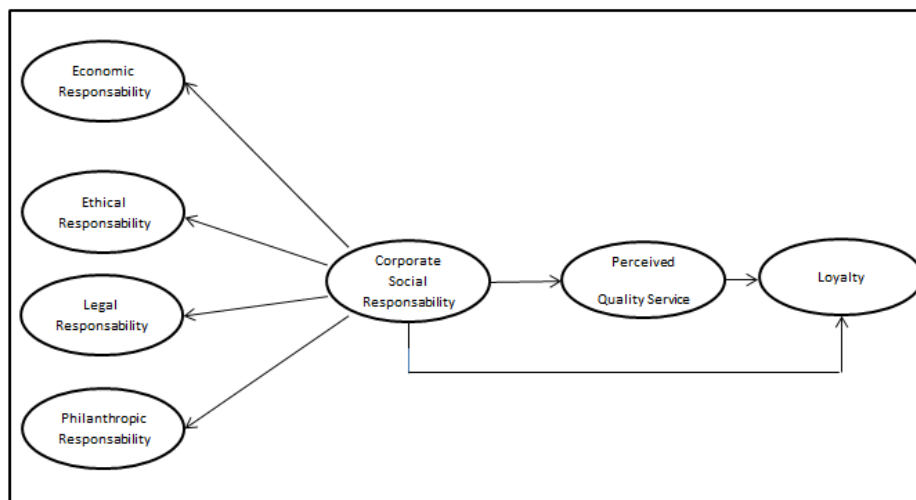
"If tomorrow, there is one that stands out from others in good or bad, in a snap of fingers, we are in the other and then we do not talk about it. Hoping that many people will do the same and that will set the tone but today they are all the same." (Male, 40 years old)

Those who are not ready to change operator (8%), believe that the most important for them is service and price. They are not willing to sacrifice their relationship with the operator for moral principles.

3. PROPOSITION OF A THEORETICAL MODEL

Following our review of the literature and the qualitative study, we propose a theoretical model (Figure 2) that relates the dimensions of the CSR as defined by Carroll (1979) and the variables of perceived quality and loyalty. An operator that stands out from its competitors by its perceived responsibility will see its ranking improve and so will the level of its customers' loyalty. However, perceived CSR would have a positive impact on the customer only if the quality of service is ensured. Below is the proposed model:

Figure N°2: Proposition of a conceptual model



We can test the following hypotheses:

- H1: CSR behavior has a direct and positive influence on loyalty
- H2: CSR behavior has a direct and positive influence on perceived quality
- H3: Perceived quality has a direct and positive influence on loyalty
- H4: Perceived quality mediates the link between CSR and consumer loyalty

The conclusion of each of these hypotheses can be different for each dimension of the CSR.

CONCLUSION

Consumers are becoming better informed and appear to be more sensitive to respect for the ethical, social and environmental values of companies. They have the power to sanction or reward companies according to the social behavior of the latter. Through the various academic researches, it emerges that CSR activities can positively or negatively influence the attitudes and behaviors of consumers toward companies. The purpose of our exploratory research was to understand the concept of CSR from the consumer's standpoint and to understand how the philanthropic activities of telecom operator can impact his/her loyalty. We have been able to draw a map of the way in which the Moroccan consumer perceives a responsible company. The latter perceives the main social responsibilities of the company to be mainly responsibility toward its employees, economic responsibility, responsibility toward the community and responsibility vis-à-vis the environment. Telecom operators communicate about their societal activities and the majority of consumers perceive it. Nevertheless, the credibility of their activities is varied since they are often considered as communication operations. Customer's

loyalty would increase if they felt a coherence and sincerity in the process. With regard to philanthropic activities, consumers expect telecom operators to support disadvantaged populations and education and to undertake actions in favor of the environment. During our fieldwork, we found that the concept of CSR is difficult to define. The consumer may feel secure insecure with the concept of CSR and to address this issue we have integrated into our interview guide a section that deals with economic, social and environmental themes. We noticed that consumers with high levels of education could more easily understand it.

In the context of future research, it may be interesting to study empirically the impact of the perception of CSR as a multidimensional concept of consumer loyalty.

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