

# A METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEM: “CREATED ARTIFICIAL AWARENESS” IN CSR RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

*When studies on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are examined, it is seen that most of the studies assume awareness of CSR or create artificial awareness. This is a methodological problem and can be named as “Created Artificial Awareness”. “Created Artificial Awareness” can be defined as generating subjects’ awareness for CSR projects of brands by providing examples through the use of scenarios and / or survey items that include CSR related expressions when collecting data for CSR studies. In this research, two studies were conducted to highlight the effect of “Created Artificial Awareness”. The first objective of the research is to explore real awareness levels of young consumers for CSR projects of the brands they preferred. For this purpose, an open-ended questionnaire was used and participants were asked for explaining the reasons of preference for a brand in Study 1. The main interest is to explore the rate of CSR as a reason of preference without “Created Artificial Awareness” effect. The second objective of the research is to reveal the difference between two studies that have methodological differences in terms of “Created Artificial Awareness”. For this purpose, in Study 2, a close-ended questionnaire that measures attribute preferences including CSR attributes was conducted to the same sample. The results of two studies were compared. The last research objective is to display the effect of “Need for Social Desirability” on indication of CSR related attributes as a reason of preference when “Created Artificial Awareness” effect is in charge due to the close-ended questions.*

**Keywords:** CSR, created artificial awareness, open-ended questionnaires, close-ended questionnaires, social desirability

## INTRODUCTION

Companies can contribute to the society and environment through developing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes and supporting non-profit organizations. Another reason to develop and support CSR campaigns is to serve company related objectives such as creation of positive brand image and enlargement of the target market. On the other hand, effectiveness of CSR projects to reach company related objectives has been a controversial issue. Results of some of the studies support the idea that attitudes of consumers toward CSR projects are positive and consumers prefer the brands of companies that develop CSR projects. On the other hand, consumers can feel suspicious about companies’ CSR activities according to the findings of other studies. The latter question whether CSR projects really have positive effects on brand images and consumer preferences. Both group of studies assume that consumers are aware of CSR or create artificial awareness by providing examples through the use of scenarios in experimental research or survey items that include CSR related expressions. (Mohr et.al., 2001: 48). The main interest of this study is to explore the differences in CSR related answers of consumers depending on creating or not creating artificial awareness during data collection procedure.

In this context, the study begins by a literature review of the effect of awareness creation and social desirability on CSR related answers. Objective of the research, sampling and data collection procedures, data analysis, and findings will take place at second section. The results of the analyses will be discussed and recommendation will be provided at the last section.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When studies on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) are examined, it is seen that most of the studies assume awareness of CSR or create artificial awareness by providing examples through the use of scenarios and / or survey items that include CSR related expressions. (Mohr et.al., 2001: 48; Van den Brink et.al, 2006; Barone et.al., 2007; Abrantes Ferreira et.al, 2010; Öberseder et.al., 2011: 449; Folse et.al., 2010; Li et.al., 2013; Kaur, 2013: 60, Šarčević and Jakupović, 2013; Green and Pelozo, 2014). This

is a methodological problem and can be named as “Created Artificial Awareness”. “Created Artificial Awareness” can be defined as generating subjects’ awareness for CSR projects of brands by providing examples through the use of scenarios and / or survey items that include CSR related expressions when collecting data for CSR studies. As known, the effect of social desirability is a commonly encountered problem in self-administered questionnaires (Reynolds, 1982: 119). When awareness for CSR is created through leading close-ended questions artificially, people can answer questions in a socially acceptable manner that do not reflect their real attitude in order to be appreciated by the society (Karaşar and Eğilmiş, 2016: 87). In other words, they can hide their negative attitudes toward CSR projects. More importantly, they may answer all the statements as if they are aware of CSR initiatives of companies even they do not have any idea about the concept of CSR or CSR projects of a given company. Although awareness is generally created during research process, it is unclear whether real consumers are aware of CSR activities when facing real consumption decisions (Pomeroy and Dolnicar, 2008: 286). If consumer awareness is low, the effect of CSR initiatives on purchasing behaviour may be only of theoretical, not practical, relevance (Pomeroy and Dolnicar, 2008: 286).

Consumers may not notice CSR campaigns of businesses due to several reasons. Problems in communicating CSR programmes may be one of these reasons (Dawkins, 2004: 108). On the other hand, consumers may not be aware of CSR initiatives although companies communicate them effectively (Pomeroy and Dolnicar, 2008: 289). CSR campaigns may not yield expected reaction, if general awareness level of consumers for the social and ethical issues is low. (Auger et. al., 2003: 299). Similarly, social issues that businesses engage with through their CSR programmes may have low salience for the target market and therefore, communication of CSR campaigns may not exceed the threshold of consumer perception (Pomeroy ve Dolnicar, 2008: 297). Pomeroy and Dolnicar asked participants to match CSR projects of Australian banks with the related bank names in their study (2008: 292). The study revealed that 2/3 of the matches were incorrect. Further, general awareness levels of consumers for the social issues and correct matches were correlated, positively.

Consumers’ positive reactions to CSR activities depend on their awareness of these initiatives (Mohr v.d., 2001: 48; Bhattacharya ve Sen, 2004: 14). Low levels of awareness as well as the effect of social desirability can explain the gap between self-expressed attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, preference of consumers for a specific brand does not guarantee that they are aware of its CSR initiatives. In other words, CSR projects may not have any effect on brand preference if consumers are not aware of them.

Following these views, two studies were conducted to highlight the effect of “Created Artificial Awareness” in this research. The research has both exploratory and descriptive objectives. The first objective is to explore the real awareness levels of young consumers for the CSR projects of the brands they preferred. For this purpose, in Study 1, an open-ended questionnaire was used and participants were asked for explaining the reasons of preference for a brand. The main interest of Study 1 is to explore the rate of CSR as a reason of preference without “Created Artificial Awareness” effect. Since an open-ended questionnaire was used, there was no any leading effect that resulted in “Created Artificial Awareness”.

The second exploratory objective of the research is to reveal the difference between two studies that have methodological differences in terms of “Created Artificial Awareness”. For this purpose, in Study 2, a close-ended questionnaire that measures attribute preferences including CSR attributes was conducted to the same sample. The results of two studies were compared.

The second survey also included social desirability scale, so the need for social desirability was also measured. The final research objective is to display the effect of need for social desirability on indication of CSR related attributes as a reason of preference when “Created Artificial Awareness” is induced through close-ended questions. Previous literature stated that the need for social desirability may result in giving socially desirable answers. Hence,

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a positive correlation between degree of social desirability and indication of CSR related attributes as a reason of preference.

The most important contribution of this research is to define a new concept called as “Created Artificial Awareness” which may be an important methodological problem affecting the reliability of CSR researches. Two studies also have a two-way contribution to the literature. First of all, the effect of CSR campaigns on preference of young consumers without “Created Artificial Awareness” was investigated.

Secondly, the effect of “Created Artificial Awareness” induced by close-ended questions was examined by comparing the results of two studies. Additionally, the influence of “Need for Social Desirability” on young consumers’ answers to close-ended questions was also measured. If young consumers do not express CSR projects as one of the attribute preferences without aid, the future research are suggested to focus on the reasons of low-level of awareness. CSR support requires allocation of company resources and therefore, should produce positive results on behalf of the company and its brands as well as the society.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Study 1

In Study 1, an open-ended questionnaire was used and participants were asked for explaining the reasons of preference for a brand. The main interest of Study 1 is to explore the rate of CSR as a reason of preference without “Created Artificial Awareness” effect. Since an open-ended questionnaire was used, there was no any leading effect that resulted in “Created Artificial Awareness”.

#### *Sampling and Data Collection*

Turkish university students between 17 and 23 years old were determined as the population of this study. Young consumers with a high degree of education are the newest customer segment for companies. For this reason, marketing managers should understand the factors affecting their purchasing behavior. Convenience sampling method was used due to the limits of time and other resources. 510 students were answered the first survey containing an open-ended question to explain reasons of preference in January 2017 (Table 1). Open-ended questions are purified from any leading effect, so participants wrote their reasons of preference as they remember. Number of useable survey was 492.

Participants wrote the reasons of their preference for Starbucks brand since it was difficult to conduct the research for all brands. Starbucks was also selected since it is one of the most favourite brand of young consumers and engages in many CSR initiatives such as Fair Trade practices, environmental projects, cooperation with a local non-profit organization called as Tohum Otizim Vakfi and supporting local education through Kardeş Okullar Projesi. Participants who have never visited Starbucks was excluded from the study.

**Table 1: Survey with Open-Ended Question**

Do you visit Starbucks? If YES, please write the reasons of why you prefer Starbucks.
Please select frequency of your visit.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Everyday</li> <li>b) Two / three times in a week</li> <li>c) Once a week</li> <li>d) Two / three times in a month</li> <li>e) Once a month</li> <li>f) Other.....</li> </ul>
Average spending in each visit. _____

## Data Analysis

Answers of participants to the open-ended question were read, classified and coded (Table 2). Accordingly, the reasons of preference for Starbucks can be classified as reasons *related to product attributes* (quality of the coffee, taste of the coffee, presentation of the coffee, variety of products, freshness, cleanness and so on); *related to service* (speed service, self-service, dialog with employees, quick change of products not liked, individualization, use of customer's name and so on); *related to store environment* (comfortable area, warm area, not being interrupted, proper area to work and so on) and *other reasons* (price, socialization, popular place, global brand, convenient location and so on). CSR initiatives of Starbucks was listed as a reason of preference just by 3 participants.

**Table 2: Classification of Answers to Open-Ended Question**

Reasons to Prefer	f	%
<b>Product Related Preference Attributes</b>		
Taste of coffee	290	58.9
Quality of coffee	169	34.3
Variety of products	155	31.5
Taste of other products	84	17.1
Freshness, hygien	44	8.9
Flexibility of cartoon cups	38	7.7
Standardized taste	28	5.7
Shape of cartoon cups	27	5.5
Thermos cups	21	4.3
<b>Store Environment Related Preference Attributes</b>		
Convenient locations	118	24
Comfortable area	106	21.5
No disturbance	102	20.7
Decoration / ambiance	101	20.5
Opportunity to socialize	72	14.6
Proper to study	50	10.2
Free wi-fi	31	6.3
<b>Service Related Preference Attributes</b>		
Dialog with employees	88	17.9
Speed of service	77	15.7
Self-service	60	12.2
<b>Brand Related Preference Attributes</b>		
Global brand	71	14.4
Populer place	38	7.7
High-quality of customers	29	5.9
<b>Individualization Related Preference Attributes</b>		
Preparation of customized coffee	42	8.5
Writing the name on cups / calling by name	21	4.3
<b>CSR Related Preference Items</b>	3	0.006

## Findings

The analysis of open-ended questions resulted that, in reality, CSR initiatives are not a reason to prefer a brand for the young consumers. Young consumers listed only the product attributes directly related to their hedonic concerns, without the effect of "Created Artificial Awareness". They are not aware of CSR initiatives of Starbucks or their awareness levels are very low so that they cannot recall CSR activities of the company to list as a reason of preference without the effect of "Created Artificial Awareness".

## Study 2

In Study 2, a close-ended questionnaire that measures attribute preferences including CSR attributes was conducted to the same sample. The results of two studies were compared.

## Sampling and Data Collection

342 students who can be reached of the same sample answered a second survey formed by close-ended quesitons related to attribute preferences in May 2017. Attribute Preference Scale (Table 3) was adopted from previous work related to restaurant quality perception at the literature (Stevens et.al, 1995: 59; Yüksel and Yüksel: 2002: 60; Akgün and Yalım; 2015: 133; Lee et.al., 2007: 6). Classification of the

answers from the first survey also helped to determine restaurant attributes listed in the second survey. The survey also contained items of Social Desirability Scale (Karaşar and Eğılmiş, 2016: 95). This scale was translated from Turkish to English (Table 4). 5-point Likert Scales were used to measure all items. Number of useable survey was 316.

**Table 3: Close-Ended Questions: Attribute Preference Scale**

<p><b>I prefer Starbucks because;</b> coffees are delicious. restaurant locations are convenient. of quick correction of anything wrong. I like to be called by my name. they support Tohum Otizm Vakfı. prices are reasonable. coffees are high quality. of comfortable area. staff is helpful. taste of other products are also good. decoration is beautiful. it is popular. of price-quality balance. it is a proper place to study or arrange meetings. they prepare products hygienically its atmosphere is attractive. they are sensitive toward protection of environment. their products are fresh. of wi-fi. the staff is competent and trained. the products are healthy. of speed service. of their support for Kardeş Okullar Projesi. of great variety of products. it is a clean place. I like writing my name on the cartoon cups. of standardized taste. nobody disturbs me. of global brand image. I like the shape of cups, plates and so on. it is self-service. of its Fair Trade understanding. flexibility of cartoon cups to move. a proper cafe to socialize. the staff is polite. other customers are high-class. of individualization opportunity of products. of their support for social responsibility projects.</p>
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**Table 4: Social Desirability Scale**

<p>Approval of my opinion by others is important for me.          How my image is perceived by others is important for me.          I work to be appreciated and admired.          Approval of my behavior by others is important for me.          I focus on facial expressions of people to understand whether they approve me or not.          I pay attention to my behaviors in order not to be evaluated negatively by others.          I try to change my behaviors that are not approved by others.          I try to highlight my strenghts.          If someone has a negative attitude toward me, I try to change his attitudes.          I hide my negative emotions because I fear of not being approved.          The expectations of others affect my decisions that I made.          I avoid from things that are not approved by others.          I give up my own wishes becuae I think others' interpretations.          If others laugh to a joke, I also laugh even I don't think it's a funny one.          I avoid from rejecting the opinions that are accepted by the majority even I think they are not true.          I feel humiliated if I am rejected.          I prefer to hide my negative aspects.          My heart is broken when others evaluate me negatively.          I fear of making mistake in social occasions.          I feel worthless when others do not approve me.          I avoid from being criticised.          I worry about how others evaluate my behaviors.          It is difficult for me to start a new work without consulting with others.          I am easily influenced by the behaviors of others.          I feel uncomfortable if I think others do not like me.</p>
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### *Data Analysis*

The mean value for the items regarding CSR initiatives of Starbucks listed in Attribute Preference Scale is 4.1 (Table 5). Mean of social desirability items were calculated for each participant. Then, a correlation analysis was conducted to test the relationship between social desirability and CSR related preference factors. Accordingly, a significant correlation was found between social desirability and CSR related preference factors ( $r= 0,63, p=0,001$ ). Therefore,  $H_1$  was accepted.

**Table 5: Mean Values of Items of Attribute Preference Scale**

Items	Mean
Coffees are delicious.	4.3
Coffees are high quality.	4.6
Taste of other products are also good.	3.9
They prepare products hygienically.	3.7
Their products are fresh.	3.9
The products are healthy.	3.5
Because of great variety of products.	4.3
Because of standardized taste.	3.6
Because I like the shape of cups, plates and so on.	4.1
Because of the flexibility of cartoon cups to move.	3.7
<b>Mean for Product Related Preference Items</b>	<b>4.0</b>
Restaurant locations are convenient.	4.5
Because of comfortable area.	4.4
Decoration is beautiful.	4.3
Its atmosphere is attractive.	4.4
It is a clean place.	3.8
Because of wi-fi.	4.1
It is a proper place to study or arrange meetings.	4.4
Nobody disturbs me.	4.1
A proper cafe to socialize.	3.8
<b>Mean for Store Environment Related Preference Items</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Because of quick correction of anything wrong.	3.8
Because of speed service.	4.5
It is self-service.	3.9
The staff is helpful.	4.2
The staff is polite.	4.3
The staff is competent and trained.	4.6
<b>Mean for Service Related Preference Items</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Prices are reasonable.	3.5
Because of price-quality balance.	3.8
<b>Mean for Price Related Preference Items</b>	<b>3.7</b>
It is popular.	4.4
Because of global brand image.	4.2
Other customers are high-class.	3.9
<b>Mean for Brand Related Preference Items</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Because of individualization opportunity of products.	3.8
I like writing my name on the cartoon cups.	3.9
I like to be called by my name.	3.5
<b>Mean for Individualization Related Preference Items</b>	<b>3.7</b>
Because of their support for social responsibility projects.	4.5
Because they support Tohum Otizm Vakfi.	3.8
They are sensitive toward protection of environment.	4.2
Because of their support for Kardeş Okullar projesi.	3.9
Because of its Fair Trade understanding.	3.8
<b>Mean for CSR Related Preference Items</b>	<b>4.1</b>

## Findings

Mean values of CSR related items in the second survey which included Attribute Preference Scale, were very high. Explicit statements resulted in “Created Artificial Awareness” for the company’s CSR initiatives. As a result, participants selected CSR related factors as reasons of their preference when they were given close-ended statements.

A significant correlation was found between social desirability and CSR related preference factors. This indicates the effect of social desirability is on charge when people answer CSR related preference items. Participants with high need of social desirability tend to indicate high degrees of agreement for the CSR related preference items when “Created Artificial Awareness” is induced through research methodology.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

The most important contribution of this research is to define a new concept called as “Created Artificial Awareness” which may be an important methodological problem affecting the reliability of CSR

researches. Results of this research shows that consumers may give socially desirable answers when “Created Artificial Awareness” is induced due to the data collection methods. Therefore, practitioners should evaluate the results of studies that include direct questions regarding CSR initiatives carefully when they determine CSR strategies.

When young consumers asked to explain reasons of preference without “Created Artificial Awareness”, they almost did not write anything about CSR features. This result can be accepted as an indicator of no or low awareness. CSR support requires allocation of company resources and should produce positive results on behalf of the company and its brands as well as the society. Therefore, managers are suggested to focus on how consumer awareness for CSR activities can be increased. Development of more effective communication programmes, use of social media, cooperating with government and educational institutions to increase general consciousness and sensitivity of the young people for social and environmental problems seem like good starting points. Segmentation of the young market by their interest in specific societal and environmental issues can be another strategy to increase the effectiveness of CSR actions.

Future research are suggested to focus on the reasons of low-level of awareness. Studies that research general awareness levels of consumers for the social and environmental issues can be suggested as a good starting point. Additionally studies to explore specific CSR related interests of young consumers can be interesting.

This study has some limitations. Therefore, researchers should be careful when they evaluate the results. First of all, the scope of the study is limited to only one service company so findings might not be transferable to other organizations. Secondly, the sample includes only young university students reached by convenience sampling. The level of CSR awareness of other consumer groups can be different although artificial awareness is not created. Thirdly, the effect of culture should be taken into consideration. The results can be different in other countries. Finally, although Starbucks implements a large scope of CSR types, consumers may still have higher levels of awareness for other CSR types.

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