

CSR as a Strategic Tool for Brand Differentiation

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ABSTRACT

From being a philanthropic activity, CSR has grown into a strategic tool that can help companies build a better market position while working toward societal well-being. Today, with increasing demands of consumers for ethics and sustainability, CSR is the way companies could differentiate themselves by aligning with customer values. From environmental sustainability to ethical supply chains, companies make up a brand differentiator that eventually fosters customer loyalty in business. CSR is not only a question of moral responsibility but also one that can be used to create a competitive advantage, assure much greater employee satisfaction, and long-term business sustainability. This paper will explore how CSR can be used to maximize brand reputation, foster customer loyalty, and guarantee competitive advantage.

Key Words: Corporate Social Responsibility, Brand Differentiation, Ethical Business Practices.

I. Introduction

Nowadays, CSR forms one of the most important sections of corporate strategy, enabling companies both to add to social welfare and improve their competitive advantages. In such contexts of higher social and ecological sensitivity of consumers, businesses develop under growing pressure for ethical and responsible behaviour (Grohmann, 2015). Today, corporate social responsibility is regarded not just as a kind of philanthropy, but as one of the effective tools in brand differentiation. Companies that can attach CSR to core business stand to have closer relationships with their customers, potential competitive advantage, and the building of a brand reputation. Through socially responsible initiatives that may include environmental sustainability, community involvement, and ethical sourcing, businesses help consumers to distinguish them through specific identities from other companies.

CSR also plays an important role in the formation of customer perception and loyalty. Today's consumers- especially millennials and Gen Z- display definite preferences for certain brands, listing businesses that express social consciousness as their top choices. The CSR initiatives affect purchasing decisions and build long-term trust with customers. In this way, CSR-investing companies can play leading roles in their industries, build differentiated advantages from their rivals, and attract a consumer group who makes purchasing decisions based on social considerations (Chen, 2015). Apart from customer-related benefits, CSR contributes to access to better human resources and has positive effects on staff attraction, employee morale, and the workplace

climate. Therefore, CSR is not only a moral duty but also a potent driver of business success and brand differentiation strategy that has become the crucial need of today's competitive marketplace.

II. Related Reviews

Grohmann and Bodur (2015) this study aimed to explore any differences between BSR and CSR, founded on the basis that at the brand level, consumer perceptions of social responsibility differ from those at the corporate level. To do this, the researchers in Study 1 first developed a BSR scale. The researchers then used it to test consumer perceptions of social responsibility for various product brands, even when those brands came from the same firm and competed in the same product category. In the remaining studies (3a–3c), they compared the predictive power of BSR with that of CSR in determining consumer reactions to product brands. Study 4 also investigated the consequence of social responsibility activities at the corporate entity level. Lastly, in Study 5, they could demonstrate that BSR was a far better predictor of brand-specific consequences, while CSR had a better relation with corporate-level outcomes. These findings confirm the conceptual distinction between BSR and CSR, and address the need to consider the brand level for social responsibility, particularly for those firms that adopt either mixed-branding or house-of-brands strategies in managing their brand portfolios. In so doing, this research contributes to the theoretical understanding developed to date in the literature regarding the distinct roles of BSR and CSR in shaping consumer behaviour, and provides managerial implications on how perceptions of social responsibility can be better managed across brands.

Chen et al. (2015) In this regard, the present study pursued to explore the inter-relationships that exist among consumer-company identification, brand prestige, purchase intention, and CSR. In this study, data from 252 college students were gathered through a self-report survey method. The instrument used in the survey was firstly established reliable and valid, followed by testing the proposed model using structural equation modelling. The results showed that CSR image had a major influence on brand prestige and consumer-company identification. Brand prestige also has been shown to have a significant positive impact on the extent of consumer identification with a firm. Such consumer identifications in turn also have a strong positive effect on the purchase intentions of the customers. As already stated, consumer-company identification is the mediator between the CSR image and the consumers' purchase intention according to this study. Therefore, an improved CSR image shall then result in enhanced consumer identification with the company, leading to high purchase intention.

Mukhopadhyay and Ye (2016) The objective of the authors was to discuss the role of corporate social responsibility in product differentiation within a competitive market where a CSR-oriented firm is competing against a profit-maximizing non-CSR firm. They used a game-theoretic model to discuss this issue by showing different implications when a CSR firm does not only maximize its profit but also adds a social utility function to its objectives. They also analysed the effect of the technical cost advantage that may be enjoyed by the CSR firm, which would decrease its manufacturing costs, and how such a cost advantage interacts with the CSR activities. It also focused on the analysis of asymmetric information between the two competing firms. The findings showed that the implementation of CSR tended to reduce the level of product differentiation; thus, indicating CSR decreases a firm's ability to make its product distinctive in the market. From this, the researchers however established that a manufacturing cost advantage leads to increased product differentiation. It also tested the interaction of CSR activity with cost advantage, showing that this latter might balance the loss of product differentiation due to CSR activity. The study has contributed to an improved understanding of how CSR activities affect the competitive strategy-choice and market positioning.

Topal (2016) The main focus of the study of strategic CSR, brand reputation, and competitive advantage at organizations was aimed at gaining an understanding of the ways in which strategic CSR and brand reputation influence competitive advantage, especially from the perspective of employees. An exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted wherein qualitative analysis was first carried out, followed by quantitative analysis. In fact, the results showed diverging perceptions between management and non-management staff. The non-management staff was of the view that CSR would help gain a competitive advantage, but the

management argued on brand reputation being of high importance for maintaining competitiveness. Even though the management recognized the importance of CSR, it did not follow any strategic approach towards practicing CSR. The study concluded that both CSR and brand reputation need to be strategically analysed in organizations like ACME AB to ensure the highest level of competitive advantage, thereby responding efficiently to market fluctuations.

Marin et al. (2017) this study developed the strategic potential of CSR and its relationship with competitiveness because of the limited existing in-depth analysis of the underpinning mechanisms. This study investigated how innovation and investment determine the effect of CSR on competitiveness. The dynamics were assessed using an empirical analysis in a sample involving 236 businesses. Their findings indicated that CSR did not have a direct impact on competitiveness. Instead, innovation and investment were the factors that had a significant and indirect effect on the impact of CSR on competitiveness. In fact, innovation and investment fully mediated the relationship between CSR and competitiveness. The implications of this study emphasized that though CSR may not basically drive competitiveness, its effects are immensely heightened by innovation and investment. The paper also talks about implications of a theoretical and practical nature, limitations, and directions for future research. This study, published by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. and ERP Environment, helps achieve a finer understanding of the differential roles of innovation and investment in leveraging CSR for competitive advantage.

Fanti and Buccella (2017) The authors used a Cournot duopoly model with differentiated goods in order to analyse firms' strategic decisions about the adoption of Corporate Social Responsibility regulations. They seek insight into the way different product differentiation and the firms' concerns for social issues determine the type of emerging equilibria in this framework. The game-theoretic approach by the researchers unravelled a number of possible equilibria: a) all firms comply with CSR regulations, b) all firms maximize profit, c) asymmetric equilibria in which one firm adopts CSR while the other does not, and d) multiple symmetric equilibria. In contrast, Bertrand competition yielded universal profit maximization as the unique equilibrium that endowed the least desirable social welfare. The latter result is particularly surprising inasmuch as the received wisdom suggests that Bertrand competition is more socially friendly than Cournot competition. The paper provides some insights into the common empirical observation of disparate intensities of CSR across industries by showing one possible way in which different market structures may influence the extent to which CSR practices arise.

Ben Youssef, et.al., (2018). A number of companies are trying to recognize corporate social responsibility as one of the core concepts of their brand marketing in relation to brand positioning strategies. Quite a significant amount of research has been carried out related to the effect of corporate social responsibility on large global brands and companies operating in business-to-consumer sectors. On the other hand, there is a paucity of empirical information about the significance of corporate social responsibility (CSR) for the marketing and branding strategies of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) operating in the business-to-distributor (B2D) sector. This paper therefore investigates how corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be incorporated into the brand marketing strategy of a small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) operating in the business-to-business (B2B) sector, as well as how CSR is evaluated in terms of brand perceptions and purchase intentions of business partners ($n = 25$). Utilising a qualitative research design that is based on an exploratory case study approach. Although the results indicate that industrial customers attach a fairly high level of importance to corporate social responsibility-or CSR-they nonetheless place product design and perceived product quality at the top of the purchase influencer list. A discussion of the theoretical and practical ramifications is included in the conclusion of this study.

Bhardwaj et al. (2018) That study, by Sen and Bhattacharya 2001, looked at the financial implications of CSR investments by firms belonging to a broad spectrum of industries such as health care, financial services, software, and consumer products. In light of mixed empirical evidence on the financial impact of CSR, the goal of their research was to examine the impact of CSR activities on consumers' purchase behaviour and their willingness to pay more for goods and services. Two types of CSR were identified: business ability relevant

CSR, CSR-CA, and company ability irrelevant CSR, CSR-NCA. They introduced the concept of indirect effects of CSR through expectation disconfirmation on customer utility, which was not considered in prior literature. The approach was to develop theoretical models which would assess when investments in CSR would have a positive or negative impact on the profitability of a firm. Their results showed that the financial performance effect of CSR depends on the type of CSR adopted and the particular conditions under which CSR activities were being implemented. The study has also underlined how growing consumer awareness and sensitivity to CSR evaluation can affect the optimal CSR strategies available to firms.

Bardos et al. (2020) This study focused on determining if corporate social responsibility is a sign of product quality and the effect it has on firm value through the means of product market perception. Utilizing a unique database, the authors researched the impacts of CSR activities, particular to those affecting areas of community involvement and the environment, on perceptions within the product market. The design of the research included studying if CSR applies to standardized products or industries classified as competitive. The findings of the study revealed that the visible CSR activities influenced the perceptions relating to product quality with greater influence in highly competitive industries. The study further revealed CSR, as indirectly improving firm value by enhancing market perceptions about its products. Thus, in this regard, the study identified product market perception to act as a channel through which CSR makes its contribution to the general value of the company.

Karim and Fayed (2020) The impact of Corporate Social Responsibility on brand image and brand equity was evaluated with regard to Unilever Bangladesh Limited. This study was conducted in order to perceive how CSR activities contribute to creating a competitive advantage through the Triple Bottom Line paradigm: economic, social, and environmental components. The plan of methodology was related to the survey from 124 participants. It was collected online due to the Covid-19 pandemic and used a convenience sampling method. Research went over the existing literature with the view of defining brand image and brand equity and establishing the hypothesis concerning the relationship of CSR components to these brand metrics. The findings highlighted that brand image significantly and positively mediates the effect of economic and social CSR activities on brand equity, while such mediation was not found in case of environmental CSR activities on brand equity. This present study presents the importance of economic and social CSR dimensions for improving brand equity; there is a possibility that the CSR initiatives of Unilever Bangladesh Limited will result in better consumer perception among those aligned with their Sustainable Living Plan.

Amin et al. (2021) The impact of the source of Corporate Social Responsibility on market outcomes has been studied, postulating that there are two sources: consumer-driven versus firm-led CSR initiatives. The aim was to understand how these alternative sources of CSR drive market dynamics and competitive advantage. The approach was theoretical, based on a framework that analysed CSR from the two viewpoints. With consumer-driven CSR, for instance, it was observed that companies engage in such practices primarily because consumers like them and are rewarding them with better market shares-a potential source of competitive advantage. This was then set against the backdrop of a Prisoner's Dilemma, where if all companies employed CSR, while market shares and prices would indeed stabilize, overall profits would eventually fall. On the contrary, firm-led CSR-where firms would implement CSR initiatives completely independently of pressure from consumers-created market effects reminiscent of a hypothetical market scenario where neither companies nor their consumers were concerned about CSR. The observation was made that firms would always eventually change their profit distribution in order to equilibrate the marginal value of CSR with the incentives in terms of finance granted to shareholders. These results indicated that although consumer-driven CSR might provide a competitive advantage, the general firm-led CSR provided market outcomes similar to no CSR interest whereby firms optimized their profit distribution based on CSR investments.

Chhabra and Guliani (2022) aimed to assess the role of CSR on brand building in recent times, more particularly in the light of Clause 135 of the Companies Act that made it compulsory for specific Indian companies to spend a certain percentage of their profit for CSR. This study has relied upon both primary and secondary sources for data on the analysis of the impact of CSR on brand image and stakeholder relationships.

Their analysis showed that CSR initiatives were positively related to brand enhancement. They thus opined that CSR should not be considered a mere compliance issue but rather as a strategic device to be used for brand development. Firms practicing CSR showed improved brand perception and stakeholder relationships, and thus, even companies not bound legally could adopt the CSR practice to gain these benefits.

Fatima and Elbanna (2023) reviewed the evolution of CSR implementation through a systematic review of 122 empirical articles. Considering the fact that CSR has been of great academic and managerial interest since the 1950s, its implementation remains underexplored and complex. Their study seeks to update the review of CSR literature with an integrated framework, taking into account the multidimensional and multi-level aspects of CSR implementation. In this paper, the authors developed a methodology of synthesis in which a review of existing research on the state of the practices of CSR was outlined, and the gaps in the literature were identified. Their findings established a call for future research to focus on multi-level studies, theory-supported research models, and contexts within developing economies. The proposed framework may further guide practitioners on how to design and implement a better CSR strategy and emphasize the importance of collaboration with CSR researchers and professionals to construct better CSR initiatives.

Amjadi and Talebi (2024) The authors intended to develop strategic reading by using CSR integrated with social-emotional learning in order to enhance the effectiveness of the method, especially for working-class students living in rural areas. This sample consisted of a total of forty-four students divided between the comparison group receiving traditional CSR and the experimental group receiving ECSR. Both groups were pre- and post-tested on reading comprehension, and interviews were conducted regarding the participants' thoughts about their reading strategies. The results also indicated that the ECSR group improved significantly in general reading comprehension while the CSR group did not. Closer examination of the reading test results showed that the ECSR group had an apparent lead in multiple-choice and cloze test format questions. The CSR group also did not post a gain in all test formats, including true-false, multiple-choice, matching, and cloze. On social-emotional and communication competencies, ECSR students also outperformed the CSR group. In general, the study found that the added emotional aspect in CSR made it more effective and thus one of the most successful approaches to reading instruction.

Ateeq and Milhem (2024) They have conclusively and deeply analysed the integration of ethical principles into corporate strategies and underlined their relevance to the contemporary business world. Their objective was to review several aspects of ethical integration that included ethical leadership, CSR, ethical decision-making in global aspects, and the problems created by the advancement of technology. The authors have done a critical review of the available literature to address these issues. The study identified that ethical leadership is the imperative factor in instilling a culture of integrity and transparency in the organization. CSR emerged as a significant strategic tool, capable of addressing issues of concern to society, at the same time enhancing the competitive advantage of any company. Ethical decision-making again presented a complex issue in the globalized economy, where reconciliation between the universe's ethical standard and cultural sensitivity needs to be maintained. Moreover, ethics management of the emerging technologies, like Artificial Intelligence and Big Data, were found crucial for business in today's modern age. These authors derived the conclusion that ethics in doing business are not exactly an obligation but an intrinsic part of a company's road to viability and long-term profitability. They impact customer loyalty and employee involvement thus key to betterment in the overall performance of the business at the global level.

III. CSR as a Strategic Business Tool

Enhancing Brand Reputation: CSR initiatives allow businesses to project a positive image of their commitment to ethical practices (*Mukhopadhyay, 2016*). This will make stakeholders believe in the company's trust when some of the environmental and social problems would be put into consideration, all for the benefit of strengthening their brand reputation by setting them apart from competitors seen as irresponsible.

Driving Customer Loyalty: First, customers-like younger generations especially-prefer brands that reflect their values. When CSR is engrained in the core strategies of a company, long-term loyalty and trust are earned. Customers would therefore be supportive of brands showing ethical and socially responsible practices and would then choose and use them more.

Competitive Differentiation: What makes CSR such a singular competitive advantage is that it puts companies forth as leaders and beacons of ethical business. This means brands can only be truly distinctive in their CSR projects, such as sustainability projects or community projects. This will help them stand out in a crowded marketplace full of noise and attract like-minded consumers (*Topal, 2016*).

Attracting and Retaining Talent: CSR is also a talent magnet-just as many consumers flock to companies they know are keeping up with the demands for social responsibility, employees more and more seek to work at places that match up with their values. Good CSR programs improve employee engagement, happiness, and longevity while benefitting the business environment.

Long-term Business Sustainability: CSR is also the way to ensure business sustainability by managing ESG risks. A company which starts today to implement measures of CSR into its practice creates fewer risks for any unforeseeable future, secures its compliance with regulations, and demonstrates its adaptability to fit the future demands of the market and society.

IV. Consumer Demand for Ethical Business Practices

The consumer drives business ethics and shapes corporate strategy in today's global market. Knowledge on environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical labour practice has increased; thus, the modern consumer- millennial and Gen Z- seek to be increasingly entangled with values-driven brands that exhibit the following: full disclosure of supply chain, sustainable sourcing, fair labours, and environmentally conscious products and services (*Marin, 2017*). Business ethics have ceased to be optional; they are fast becoming one of the main determinants in the purchasing decision. Brands not taking up ethical practices are at a risk of losing their consumer base and eventually the market share to competitors that align with the growing demand for social responsibility. This trend in consumer behaviour is further driven by the use of social media, allowing the consumer to hold companies accountable for any actions seen as unethical that ultimately create public outrage or "cancel culture" if their expectations are not met. Meanwhile, incentives for companies to include ethical practices throughout their core business models include increased customer loyalty, positive brand perception, and improved engagement with the target audience. These companies also reveal some corporate social responsibility by participating in carbon footprint reduction, community building, diversity and inclusion, and speaking for reasonable wages (*Chhabra, 2022*). Ethical business practices transcend the relationship with the customers to reach the investment priorities of investors and partnership decisions who are more concerned with long-term sustainability than quick profits. Consumer demand for ethics in business has now become an integral constituent of modern business strategy. Companies are, therefore, having to rethink operations, product offerings, and values that would help meet evolving expectations from the social conscience of consumers in their pursuit to stay ahead of an increasingly ethical marketplace.

V. Brand Differentiation Through CSR

Unique Brand Identity: CSR allows business entities to have differentiated brand identity through commitment to various social and environmental issues. Businesses imbued with a true sense of CSR find their competitive niche among businesses once the values of the customers are blended with those of their corporations. In such light, through effective practices, such as sustainability, charitable giving, or ethical sourcing, companies distinguish themselves from competitors who only focus on profit-making. This distinct identity will not only appeal to consumers but also solidify brand loyalty, as customers are most likely to continue with brands that reflect their ethical beliefs and values, thus building long-lasting relationships.

Increased Customer Loyalty: CSR-driven brand differentiation develops a better emotional feeling among consumers, including loyalty. People are ever ready to stay with a company that takes an active interest in and is responsible for ensuring the well-being of society through environmental conservation, social justice, or community development. Brands show such a prospect of responsibility to customers who value ethical consumption. This gives birth to trust and loyalty, assisting in repeating purchases and long-lasting customer relationships. Often, strong CSR initiatives by brands are supported, and the business finds that spreading word-of-mouth marketing and creating organic growth toward brand recognition come through positive feelings.

Enhanced Competitive Edge: Having CSR embedded at the core of a brand strategy really gives it considerable competitive leverage, especially in those product categories where all other differentiators have become irrelevant. It can be anything—from green manufacturing processes to community-oriented programs—which separates them from companies that do not invest in social responsibility. This does not only appeal to socially conscious consumers but also attunes the brand to changing market trends whereby ethical considerations are increasingly becoming important. As more and more companies implement CSR, leading companies in social impact get favour by establishing themselves as innovators and industry leaders, retaining a unique differential advantage (*Fatima, 2023*).

VI. Influence on Customer Perception and Loyalty

Building Trust and Positive Perception: CSR significantly impacts the customers' perceptions about the brand, and socially responsible companies are usually viewed in a very positive manner. Issues such as ethical practices, sustainability, and welfare that become important to an organization will lead customers to perceive it as trustworthy and fitting to their private values. High integrity enhances transparency, which is an essential view, especially in today's world when people want authenticity. For example, eco-friendly brands or the ones contributing to social causes draw in those consumers who believe in the same values of sustainability or social causes. This, in turn, converts feelings into brand love and makes customers more likely to patronize such businesses over others that do not have such initiatives.

Fostering Long-Term Loyalty: CSR initiatives have a significant impact on developing long-term customer loyalty. Consumers observe brands investing valuable resources in causes in which they, too, believe and thus build emotional bonds—a classic case of repeat purchases and brand advocacy. Customers will stay with a brand sharing their values by believing their purchase decisions positively affect societal change. This loyalty gets further fortified, as the brand's continuous CSR initiatives assure customers that it's not a one-time thing for which they should be grateful. In time, loyal customers will act as ambassadors of the brand: word of mouth, improving customer retention, reduction of costs related to the acquisition of customers (*Amjadi, 2024*).

VI. Internal and External Benefits of CSR

Internal Benefits of CSR: On the other hand, CSR provides tremendous internal benefits for a positive work environment and employee engagement. Employees are usually more attracted to organizations that show clear concern for ethical values, social causes, and environmental sustainability. Such congruence of corporate values with personal beliefs strengthens job satisfaction, morale, and loyalty, thereby possibly leading to greater retention and reduced turnover. In addition, most CSR activities develop a sense of pride and meaning in the employees as a result of observing ways in which their work makes them agents of valuable social change. Engagement in corporate social responsibility also develops team spirit in the company because employees work toward an objective that reflects company values. Accordingly, this keeps workers together and motivated.

External Benefits of CSR: Externally, CSR enhances a company's social image and reputation; through better engagement, businesses can have improved relations with customers, partners, and stakeholders. A well-implemented CSR program involves companies with social and environmental issues that are of interest to consumers and investors alike. For sure, consumers are willing to pay more for brands that reflect their values and ethics, which leads to customer loyalty and increased market share. Moreover, such CSR activities involve the creation of fundamental partnerships with NGOs, governments, and other organizations that can create an expanded presence for a company within the marketplace. Good CSR practices help companies ensure greater consistency with regulatory demands and minimize risks, responsive leaders within the industry, and support long-term financial viability (Ateeq, 2024).

VII. Conclusion

The point of differentiation that CSR brings into a business strategy today includes both internal and external benefits other than financial returns. Some of the internal benefits include increased employee engagement and satisfaction to guarantee a good atmosphere in the workplace. On the other hand, external benefits would normally involve brand reputation and the potential of raising customers into trusting it and being loyal to their brands through time. Basically, with the increasing demand from consumers for companies to conduct ethical business, CSR-driven differentiation provides strategic competitive advantage in an increasingly values-driven marketplace. Ultimately, CSR will reinforce a company's marketplace position and provide long-term sustainability amidst changing societal and environmental expectations. With CSR, brands can lead industries while driving positive societal change.

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