



Five Senses for Effective and Sustainable Corporate Social Responsibility Strategy

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ABSTRACT

This study presents the five senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell) concept that enhances the corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy. It sheds light on the true CSR senses which are required by firms for better performance and sustainable development. The main approach for collecting information for discussion was the literature review focusing on topics such as CSR strategy, CSR activities, sustainability and sensemaking. A gap was found between what firms do and what are expected to deliver to the society in terms of CSR activities and requirements. Little was found on sensemaking and very little was found on CSR five senses while searching the literature. When these five CSR senses are incorporated in firms' strategy and activities, a better performance is expected to achieve. When firms work effectively to meet different stakeholders' needs and wants internally and externally, a better satisfaction level can be achieved, hence sustainable development is likely to be secured. These five CSR senses have not been sufficiently considered in the research literature. This study contributes to the CSR knowledge and practice in many venues by bridging the CSR gap which might exist in strategy and practice. Therefore, researchers and practitioners are expected to benefit from this study that can result in better CSR control and sustainable development.

Keywords: Five Senses, Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability, Sensemaking, Stakeholders

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1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) covers economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic activities and initiatives that the society expects from the firms (Carroll, 1991). The philanthropic responsibility reflects unrestricted expectations that the society expects from businesses at a specific point of time (Carroll, 2016). CSR is developed when firms incorporate social and environmental concerns of the society in their activities and interact with stakeholders voluntarily. It goes beyond fulfilling legal expectations to investing into human capital, stakeholders' relationships, and the environment. CSR supports policies and practices that businesses need to help them interact with different stakeholders of the society (Commission of the European Communities, 2001).

Social responsibility was defined by ISO (2010) as a firm's responsibility towards the society and the environment through

transparent and ethical behaviors that contribute to sustainable development by taking impactful decisions and conducting useful activities. It, therefore, reflects the well-being of the society and stakeholders' expectations. Büchner (2012) stated that CSR could be described as management attitude that has sustainable business by supporting society-related activities. Corporate sustainability, on the other hand, is a development in economic, social and ecological aspects, to meet the needs of present and future generations. It covers firm's responsibility towards the community.

For CSR activities to work well, firms need to employ a sensemaking perspective to decide what activities should be considered inside and outside the firms and to meet and manage different stakeholders' s expectations (Pater and Lierop, 2006). Cramer et al. (2006) stated that to adopt a sensemaking perspective of CSR, firms need to set clear goals, focus on the public perception, set clear policy and procedures and institutionalize

CSR concept in the corporate values and beliefs. The topic of CSR is usually discussed and linked with other topics such as corporate governance, ethics, and performance, yet few researchers have focused on real deliverables of CSR and its effectiveness to the different stakeholders within the society. “CSR” is mentioned almost in all firms’ materials, websites and events. “CSR” is used as a practice to protect environment, as a way of distinguishing business, and as a tool to promote the well-being of the society. Among all of these views, CSR, in practice, remains short of some senses as might be viewed by stakeholders.

Firms should engage in CSR activities for many reasons including moral obligation where they balance their business with social practices, sustainability where such practices meet the need of current and future generations and improving corporate image. Therefore, CSR activities are important to strengthen firms’ reputation to stay in business and ultimately reap more profits. Carroll (1991; 2016) and others discussed CSR dimensions such as economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic, but sustainability of these dimensions to firms remains a challenge. Even if these are well laid in the corporate strategy the implementation mechanism is still not clear or not well controlled. For this reason, there is a need to activate CSR dimensions and make them on the right track to seed what was planned for by employing what so called “five senses” of CSR. This paper sheds light on the true CSR senses as it tries to answer the question: How can CSR strategy be effective and sustainable? These senses are much similar to human approaches of perception which are sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. Research to date has not sufficiently focused on this important area of collective senses that can improve firm’s contributions to the society and at the same time improve its performance. Firms can only be effective and contributing well to the society, if they pass these basic but important criteria of senses. This paper contributes to the CSR knowledge and practice by bridging the CSR gap in strategy and practice for sustainable development. Before embarking to the five CSR senses, the following section presents general discussion on CSR and sensemaking.

2. CSR AND SENSEMAKING

CSR requires firms, in addition to making profits, to take care of environment and the wellbeing of people internally and externally. The issue of sensemaking of CSR activities is very important. “CSR” could have five sensemaking approaches. First, pragmatic sensemaking that focuses on clear goals to implement, second, external sensemaking that focuses on public perception by disseminating results for sustainability, third, procedural sensemaking, that focuses on a systematic way for CSR implementation, fourth, policy-oriented sensemaking that focuses on putting CSR sustainability aspects in firm’s policy, and fifth, values-driven sensemaking, that focuses on inclusion of CSR in firm’s values and beliefs. Change agents play a vital role in the process of CSR sensemaking as they can stimulate people’s interest, organize CSR activities well, and make effective communication with different stakeholders (Cramer et al., 2006).

CSR improves firms’ competitive advantage, keeps business authorities engaged in corporate socially responsible practices,

enhances organizational sense of community, and improves performance. “CSR” was found to influence SMEs organizational commitment, and positively affects sustainability through organizational sense of community (D’Aprile and Talò, 2015). Firms are agents that have relationships with different stakeholders, where such firms employ CSR strategy that caters for and manages different groups’ interests. The emphasis on “CSR” has increased by the community to protect itself against any environment disasters, or unfavorable practices by multinational corporations (Estallo et al., 2007). Firms responsibilities go beyond making profit to cover well-being of many stakeholders such as employees, customers, suppliers and people in the society. “CSR” can take the responsibility to create value to firms’ economic, social and environmental initiatives and to respond to stakeholders’ inquiries with full transparency (Pater and Lierop, 2006).

Different stakeholders can be managed by adopting two perspectives, an “inside-out” and an “outside-in,” where they can move on the continuum between these two perspectives. Inside-out perspective works when a firm addresses issues such as its ambition and core competencies and then defines its social responsibilities. On the other hand, outside-in perspective of firm’s social responsibilities mainly views stakeholders’ claims. Taking these two perspectives into account, and to be more effective, a firm can form a third perspective that considers the interests of various stakeholders and at the same time its internal characteristics by employing a collective sensemaking process. People make sense of their environment and share information with others to protect themselves against any unfavorable practices. Sensemaking takes place when individuals and firms interact with others with the aim of sharing sense of reality. Therefore, a sensemaking perspective has a broader and more balanced view of the firm’s social responsibilities and can be considered as a bridge between the “inside-out” and “outside-in” perspectives of CSR (Pater and Lierop, 2006).

“CSR” is a form of corporate self-regulation where a firm considers the interests of different stakeholders and creates an impact on the environment, customers, employees, and community at large. Firms, therefore, are expected to encourage community growth, and eliminate harmful practices. “CSR” calls for the care of people and planet by the firm. Hence, firms should keep the public interest in mind and not only focusing on generating profits as firms derive their profit from the society and not the other way around. For these reasons, youth in India asked firms to pay attention to public welfare, environmental protection, sustainable development and labor welfare (Sharma and Sharma, 2011). “CSR” was found to have a significant impact on faculty job satisfaction, employee engagement, and organizational commitment in higher education institutions. “CSR” is considered as a management strategy that improves workforce commitment, and efficiency (Ahmad et al., 2017).

It is important for the youth to understand CSR concept and know its activities. Taking it from a students’ perspective, they must be informed of the benefits of CSR activities in order to make them interested to participate in such activities and go even beyond participating to planning and managing CSR initiatives.

If this value is well communicated to the younger generation, can undoubtedly have better impact on society in the long term (Ahmad, 2012). Benlemlih and Bitar (2018) found a significant relationship between CSR and investment efficiency, where CSR dimensions such as employee relations, product characteristics and environment played a most important role in improving investment efficiency. High CSR commitment helps increase investment efficiency for better financial performance. (Das, 2009) focused on the importance of having a clear plan for CSR activities by firms without neglecting making profits for all sizes of the businesses.

Devin and Richards (2018) examined CSR in the food supply chain and found that firms can be seen engaging in behaviors that are related to social responsibility, but in fact such firms plan to shift the problem of food waste somewhere else in the supply chain. The society expects firms to act responsibly when it comes to a food waste problem. Managing such problem to meet current and future food security goals is important to cope with the increase in people who are food insecure, and global population growth. Food donation is a favorable practice, but the problem still exists if the supply chain is not well managed as food retailers can move the problem elsewhere. Therefore, the researchers called for a stronger government regulation that makes the supply chain system more socially responsible for sustainable development.

If firms would like to use CSR-related strategies as a source of competitive advantage, should first integrate CSR strategies with their core business and production and second, work for better allocation and utilization of resources (Hasan et al., 2018). Hussain and Attiq (2017) found that ethical leadership significantly influencing CSR. On the other hand, CSR was found to have a significant impact on trust and performance. Therefore, CSR activities reflect corporate culture, and if managed well, lead to better business efficiency and performance. Jaworska (2018) discussed the climate change in the context of CSR and environmental reporting in the oil industry and found that CSR reporting simulated commitment to climate change.

de Jonge (2018) discussed the domestic violence issue and linked it to CSR and warned of high business risk if firms ignore domestic violence in the workplace. Domestic violence (or even family violence) exists when a partner abuses his/her power during or after the relationship is over. There has been a recognition for the need for the business to play a role as important social actors, rather than only economic actors. Domestic violence is not a private issue anymore in the workplace. Therefore, it is important, at work, for an employee to have full support if a domestic violence situation exists. Businesses considering this issue are undoubtedly supporting the society and CSR activities.

Small businesses show commitment to CSR and integrate its activities with consistent value principles. They pay special attention to moral commitment to local community as part of social responsibility. Moral responsibility of business owners undoubtedly influences their prime stakeholders such as customers and community, which can be further enhanced into a larger social and economic change over the long term (Lange and Fenwick, 2018). Lee et al. (2018) studied the relationship

between (CSR)-related information and the value of stock recommendations developed by financial analysts and found that CSR-related reports improve the information environment. Furthermore, CSR reporting that covers market prices is important as it contains rich information helpful for stakeholders.

Malik and Kanwal (2018) studied the impact of CSR disclosure on financial performance of listed pharmaceutical firms and found that the average rate of disclosure is increasing annually, which indicates that more information disclosure in firms' annual reports is what the society expects. The willingness of firms to go beyond disclosing financial information to corporate social reporting makes such firms in the heart of the society. This responsiveness and proactiveness of firms are very important in the competitive world and make such firms to be different and unique as perceived by different stakeholders. Firms that plan and operate ethically and socially, will undoubtedly develop loyal customers and happy society at large. On the other hand, developing country multinational enterprises were found to follow a code of conduct and CSR initiatives more than their domestic counterparts. Interestingly, country multinational enterprises from poorer countries which were characterized with lower governance guidelines found to be more committed to the society (Preuss et al., 2016).

The relationship between consumer perceptions of four CSR aspects (economic, social, ecological and recycling) and buying behavior was examined by Rodrigues and Borges (2015) and found that recycling and environment mostly determined consumer buying decision. The purchase of the firm's products and services is determined by customer knowledge of firm's CSR activities. Therefore, CSR strategy is used to improve firms' image and brands that leads to attracting and retaining more customers. This is true when customers perceive and appreciate the value of social responsibilities practices. When customers are able to appreciate environmental aspects and put them as a priority of concern, firms can take this for their advantage by engaging in these aspects to positively influence the buying behavior.

De Roeck and Maon (2018) stated that firms often engage in CSR initiatives in an unfocused way without proper planning on how such initiatives affect different stakeholders' perceptions and behaviors. This might hinder firm's improvement in social and economic aspects. One of the solutions to make it better, firms to give high priority to their employees as they are the bridge between internal and external CSR activities that positively influences economic and social performance. For this reason, firms around the globe should give a special attention to the best ways to develop and conduct CSR activities that lead to improvements in economic and social value.

In this modern era, customer has more information and access to information. The excessive information turned the business environment into an intense competition. Business especially Islamic banks are facing competition due to inevitable growth in Islamic banking. It is essential for banks to retain customers and explore the tools to win customer loyalty (Shabbir et al., 2018). Firms are expected, in addition to making profits, to integrate

society's concerns into ongoing operations if they want to be good contributors in the society and at the same time create a good corporate reputation. "CSR" was found to be an important driver of corporate reputation as CSR affecting corporate reputation from the point of view of both important stakeholders and citizens. Therefore, good corporate reputation comes from the integration of CSR activities to strategies, programs and action plans, in a structural way that leads to better performance (Vlastelica et al., 2018).

Firms use CSR strategies to better interact with different stakeholders in the society with the aim of mutual understating and better environment. Firms are called to integrate CSR activities in their corporate vision, mission and practices, and make sure these are achieved (Lindgreen et al., 2010). For CSR activities to be effective (Kemp, 2011) suggested that firms' top management to be more aware of the importance of such activities when dealing with different stakeholders. Firms, sometime, find resistance from the society if such firms do not fully consider the effect and voice of the society on their performance. Therefore, firms should listen to the society and keep many issues into consideration. Top management leadership is important in initiating corporate responsibility toward the society. This requires defining stakeholders' key issues, developing and implementing policies and procedures, interacting with different stakeholders internally and externally, embedding firm's values and commitment to corporate responsibility, and being transparent to build confidence. In this way, firms' performance is determined, in addition to financial measure, based on social and environmental contributions.

Firms can be volatile if they neglect to meet their social responsibilities towards the expectations of staff, customers, society and environment. This negligence happens when firms focus only on shareholder value, devalue the importance of stakeholder dialogue, and regard CSR as part of marketing or public relations only (Büchner, 2012). "CSR" has gained attention as a tool to enhance corporate image (Shabbir et al., 2018). To have competitive edge, firms need to be seen as good employers from employees' perspective, offer fair products from customers' perspective, and be generous and environmentally sound from society's perspective. Therefore, firms' decisions should be based on these stakeholders and not only shareholders (Büchner, 2012).

Corporate social irresponsibility can exist with CSR if managers' decisions are described as immoral. Corporate social irresponsibility can be overwhelming especially when it is related to the environment (Popa and Salanță, 2014). Firms are said to work fairly well towards the society if they treat their employees well, respect consumers' rights and interests, secure natural resources, ensure production processes are socially and ecologically sound, comply with labor standards, invest in education and training, promote cultural diversity, engage in fair competition, prevent corruption, and maintain transparency in corporate governance (Büchner, 2012).

"CSR" is an instrument that brings competitive advantage to the firm in the short and long terms by interacting with the society. To make CSR work well, an element of sustainability should be

incorporated into firm's strategies for better financial performance, better image and improved stakeholders' relations (Büchner, 2012). A study was conducted in the context of Islamic banks and found that CSR activities significantly increase customer loyalty and brand image. Incorporating CSR in business policy of Islamic banks can enhance customer loyalty. This can be in two loyalty dimensions; attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty. This shows the power of CSR, if implemented correctly, on the loyalty of one of the main stakeholders, the customers (Shabbir et al., 2018).

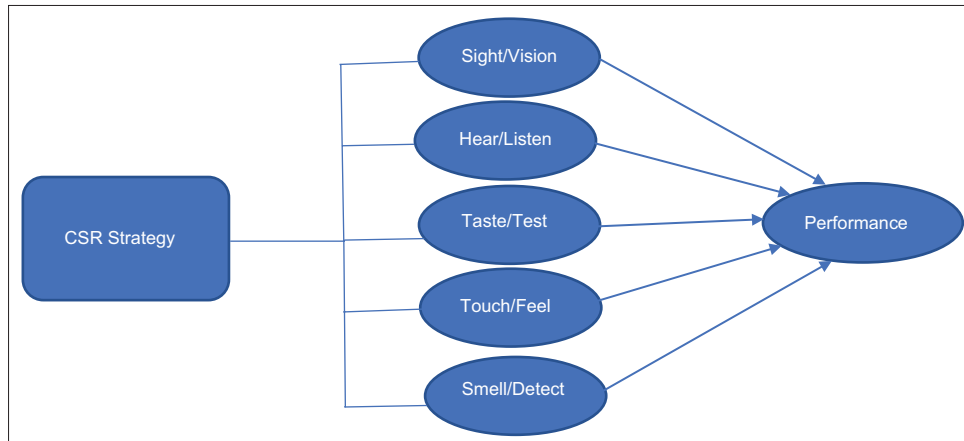
Stakeholders such as investors, customers, suppliers, employees, and community should drive the development of CSR strategy. This will make the CSR strategy more stakeholders' oriented, and robust with a high success rate. For this reason, a stakeholder systems model was developed to include the identification of stakeholder groups, analysis of factors that influence board decisions, evaluation of stakeholder satisfaction, and assessments of CSR. If firms adjust CSR philosophy and practice according to different stakeholders' feedback, they will definitely have better corporate social performance (Mason and Simmons, 2014).

Cruz and Pedrozo (2009) studied challenges facing multinational companies when managing (CSR) strategies. These challenges were represented by three main dimensions namely governance structure, corporate ethics and organizational learning. For governance structure, it was suggested that various departments of the firm to be involved in CSR activities to produce better output, and to open an effective dialogue with stakeholders. With regards to corporate ethics, CSR strategy to be developed with clearly defined CSR objectives that integrate social and environmental issues in order to improve firm's CSR performance. Organizational learning focuses on awareness-building and information exchange of CSR initiatives internally and externally. Awareness activities are encouraged to improve effectiveness of CSR activities. Büchner (2012) focused on the concept of corporate governance on reconciling the interests of all firm's stakeholders to ensure transparency and good contributions to the society.

3. DISCUSSION

From the above review, it has become clear how important CSR and sensemaking approaches are to the society. This paper attempts to answer the following question: How can CSR strategy be effective and sustainable? To tackle this question, we apply the five senses of CSR, similar to the human senses which are sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. Being good by firms in these five senses criteria enable them to gently and effectively achieve CSR strategy as these senses support the CSR dimensions such as economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. The first sense is the "sight" or vision that makes the firm envision what society sees. To make this happens, CSR should be envisioned and incorporated in the corporate strategy. Stakeholders want a firm to envision its social responsibility toward the society, internally and externally. Therefore, CSR should be incorporated in the corporate strategy and be an integral part of it. All CSR activities of the firm along with challenges that should be overcome to be mapped in the corporate strategy for the firm to contribute well in raising up the well-being of the society.

Figure 1: Conceptual model



The second sense is “hearing” or listening to what the society needs and wants. This requires having an effective channel of communication to hear stakeholders’ voice. Different internal and external stakeholders want a firm to listen to their queries with regard to social responsibility activities. This is only possible when a firm establishes and maintains a good communication process to listen and respond to existing and potential enquires of the different stakeholders and work on meeting them. The third sense is “tasting” or testing where a firm develops a mechanism to detect consequences of its products offered. In other words, it tests the potential products and finds out their effect on the society. The ability to launch what the customers want brings competitive advantage to the firm. Likewise, with different stakeholders, satisfying their needs and wants come from sensing and testing offerings that are acceptable to the stakeholders.

The fourth sense is “touching” or feeling where the firm plans to touch the stakeholders’ true feelings by staying in touch with them. Touching stakeholders’ desires requires firms to be close to them, balance what can be offered with what they want and working on achieving that. The fifth sense is “smelling” or detecting which shows the level of firm’s ability to detect what stakeholders’ like or dislike. The firm’s ability to detect harmful practices or stakeholders’ resentment and avoid them for better environment will matter to the society. Ecological and environmental issues are the concern of the different stakeholders in the society and firms which take care of this dimension is better off in terms of acceptance by the society. If stakeholders in the society perceive that such a firm takes into consideration and honestly works on meeting these different senses, there is no reason not to deal, praise or accept its practices and offerings. Therefore, passing these five CSR senses can put a firm, be local or global, at a forefront as might be perceived by the society. These are illustrated in the conceptual model, Figure 1.

4. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

(CSR) dimensions such as economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic are very important for the firm and society. A sensemaking perspective of CSR is crucial for firms to plan and implement CSR activities internally and externally. It requires putting together all firm’s operational and strategic aspects

including firm’s policy, procedures, goals and values in a way that leads to better competitive advantage. “CSR” activities are more than PR practices if firms want to have a true and positive impact on the society. It also needs firm’s commitment to build good trust with the society. “CSR” collective activities that are derived from caproate strategy and well implemented, will improve firm’s performance. For CSR dimensions to work well and activities to be impactful, there is a need to incorporate the five senses to the CSR strategy similar to the human senses concept.

For this purpose, a conceptual model was developed that calls for the firm’s need to envision from the society perspective what social responsibility activities are to be conducted. Hearing is the ability to listen to what society needs and wants so they can reach to mutual understanding and agreement. Tasting is the ability to test firm’s offerings in a transparent way to avoid any damage or harm to the society. Touching, is the ability for the firm to stay in touch with the society’s matters and concerns. Smelling is the ability of the firm to detect what stakeholders’ likes and dislikes especially with the issues of ecology and environment. Putting all these senses together will make the firm in a better shape in fulfilling the society’s needs and wants and ensuring the main CSR dimensions of economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic are in harmony with stakeholders’ expectations and requirements. Such harmony between firm’s CSR activities, when five CSR senses are employed, with the society will lead to more acceptance by the society and also improve firm’s performance.

These five CSR senses have not been sufficiently considered in the research literature. This study contributes to the CSR knowledge and practice in many venues by bridging the CSR gap in strategy and practice for sustainable development. These senses, similar to human senses are working together, and if these are well functioned, will lead to better efficiency and effectiveness. By considering this concept, CSR literature will be enhanced, and CSR dimensions and approaches will be supported. In practice, firms which consider these five CSR senses in their strategy and activities, are expected to achieve better performance by being the voice of society which ultimately leads to stakeholders’ satisfaction. This shows that CSR is not only limited to one department, i.e., PR but goes beyond that to reflect the corporate philosophy in interacting and serving the community for better

today and tomorrow. Only from these positive and favorable firm's practices, supported by the five CSR senses, sustainability can be achieved.

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