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Research Paper

Corporate Social Responsibility or Corporate Branding? Rhetoric of a Divergent Phenomenon

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Abstract
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is arguably one of the most misconstrued, misunderstood and misinterpreted concepts in today's business circles. While the practice of CSR dates back to the 1950s, modern CSR frameworks has been deeply rooted in pseudo practices and quasi business strategies that makes its distinction, implementation and assessment difficult. From the academic literature, the debate as to what exactly constitute CSR activity has received a growing number of scholars aligning in each of the contending divides: corporate social responsibility or corporate branding?Today, the quest by organizations to creating social impact or be perceived by society as responsible corporate citizens has led to the adoption of different greenwashing strategiesbranded as corporate social responsibility initiative. More importantly, the lack of clarity in the CSR implementation models has propelled a growing rhetorical criticism by scholars regarding what is the 'true' test of CSR. Using critical discourse analysis approach, this paper attempts at clearly positioning what is, and what is not corporate social responsibility. Furthermore, the paper highlights the salience in each of the commonly identifiableaspects of CSR: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropicresponsibilities. Our study also reveal that philanthropic activities dominate most of the activities that companies report as CSR.The paper has implications for theory and practice as it enriches the theoretical literature. From the managerial perspective, the paper provides insights into how organizations can properly embed this 'divergent' phenomenon into their overall business strategy to further advance the practice and acceptabilityof reported CSR outcomes by society.
Key Words: *Business Strategy, Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate branding, Corporate Philanthropy, Critical DiscourseAnalysis, Rhetorical criticism.*

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I. Introduction

The confusion surrounding the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practice is deeply rooted in the perception regarding the intention of practitioners. Is it genuine giving back to society by firms through ethical adherence, or a business strategy with eventual profit motive? The complexity in definition and motive of CSR practice has given rise to growing rhetoric of the CSR phenomenon. There is an increasing challenge of identifying and situating what organizations say they do in relation to CSR and what they actually do. From the extant literature, the topic of CSR has been captioned under many names, including strategic philanthropy, corporate citizenship, social responsibility and other monikers(Rangan, Chase and Karim, 2012; Carroll, 2016; Xu et al, 2021). The literature is awash with claims and counter claims about the intensions of firms in pursuing CSR activities. However, despite this confusion, many organizations have continued to embrace the practice of CSR, and the trend seems to progress along this trajectory.

The debate on corporate social responsibility has been going on for decades, without leading to a clearer understanding of the term (Scholmerich, 2013). According to Roseberry (2007), the call for CSR initiatives can be understood as deriving from the discourse of human rights,which is based on a legal paradigm of individual rights. However, early CSR literature revealthe adoption of soft laws, quasi-voluntary standards, and other novel incentives to move companies toward and beyond minimum regulatory goals in historically weak regulatory environments raises puzzling questions about their motivation, scope and potential (see for example, Ho, 2013).

II. Theoretical Underpinning

This paper employs rhetorical criticism as its theoretical underpinning. The archaic definition of rhetoric is the art and study on the use of language with persuasive effect in any given field (Suryani et al., 2014). Rhetorical criticism allows for new knowledge claims to be presented to other members of the discourse community(Martin-Martin and Burgess, 2004).While rhetorical criticism can induce deeper thinking into the subject phenomenon, it is a reflection of society. However, with particular reference to CSR phenomenon, it mirrors the diverse views regarding the practice and how practitioners use rhetoric in persuading and convincing stakeholders to believing in what they do. In fact, the growing interest in CSR research is significantly due tothe divergent views concerning what is, or what is not CSR.

III. Methodology

This study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. For corporate social responsibility, there is a gap between rhetoric and reality which require a critical approach to making meaning out of the complex, and often time, misunderstood concept. CDA is a qualitative analytical approach for critically describing, interpreting, and explaining the ways in which discourses construct, maintain, and legitimize social inequalities (Mullet, 2018; Cummings, 2020).As a social phenomenon, CSR falls within the realm of social reality. More importantly, a discussion on the subject of social reality requires the adoption of an approach that most appropriately convey the epistemological import of knowledge building. Chen and Wang (2016) explained that CDA has been applied to the investigation of various discourses to disclose social reality.

IV. The Meaning and Concept of Corporate Social Responsibility

Several decades ago, Corporate social responsibility started off as voluntary giving by firms to society (Carroll, 2015; Kim, Yin & Lee, 2020). The term CSRmeans different things to different individuals and organizations. While the concept of CSR is becoming increasingly popular amongst organizations, the lack of a widely agreed definition contributed to misunderstandings and cynicism towards the concept itself (Wan-Jan, 2006; Gatti, *et al.*, 2019). From the academic literature, there is no one definition of CSR that is commonly accepted, and the lack of clarity makes it difficult to generalize the practice(Glavas, 2016). Researchers and practitioners have defined CSR according to their individual goals and persuasions. CSR is often understood as the voluntary actions firms take beyond legal compliance (Ho, 2013). Other scholars,forexample, Ismail (2009) define CSR as strategies corporations use in conducting their business in a way that is ethical, society friendly and beneficial to community in terms of development. For Hamidu, Haron and Amran (2015:1), CSR is: ‘’obligation to the society, stakeholders’ involvement, improving corporate image and reputation, economic development, ethical business practice, law abiding, voluntariness, human rights, environmental protection, transparency and accountability’’. And as Glavas (2016) argued, the absence of one commonly accepted definition of CSR and the lack of clarity presents a challenge of generalizing CSR results, making it even more important for scholars to precisely define what they mean by CSR in their respective studies.

On this note therefore, a working definition of CSR for this research is given as *‘the continuous efforts by firms in taking actions that minimizes negative impact of their activities on human, environmental and social issues on their host communities with expectations for business sustainability’*. Evidently, most CSR programmes and activities invariably contribute to long-run benefit to firms. For instance, if a firm for reasons of social irresponsibility loses its social licence to operate, this may eventually lead to loss of legitimacy and implications for business. Therefore, it is in the firms’ interest to show commitment by giving back to the society in which its business is domiciled. Unfortunately, however, determining which actions are with good intentions of improving the livelihood of the people within an area of businessis a complex and difficult process.

Much of the confusion and controversy over CSR, as pointed out by Lantos (2001), Gatti, *et al.* (2019) stem from a failure to distinguish among ethical, altruistic and strategic forms of CSR. While ethical CSR is based on the strong relationship between rights and ethical responsibilities in order to attain legitimacy (see for example SchiopoiuBurlea, Nastase and Dobrea, 2013), Lantos (2001) argue that for publicly held corporations, altruistic CSR which is philanthropic, and not a legitimate role of business, is immoral and unfair to shareholders. Lantos (2001) suggests that corporations’ efforts should rather be directed at strategic CSR aimed at achieving strategic business goals.

These divergent views have led to the practice of CSR entangled with rhetorical criticism, due largely to lack of universal definition of what CSR is(Glavas, 2016; Gatti*et al.,* 2019). An interesting aspect of CSR rhetoric is the ‘doing good’ and ‘doing well’ concept as opined byHategan et al (2018). In other words, companies that are doing well expresses their profitability by doing good to society.It is therefore arguable to say that when companies experience negative business outcomes, its disposition towards CSR is also ‘negatively’ affected. The correlation between profitability or ‘doing well’ and CSR only as an offshoot of a profitable performance by a firm is an indication of lack of CSR embeddedness in organizations corporate strategy. More importantly, equating doing good to society after an impressive bottom-line measured by profit performance is perhaps one of the main contributors to the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of CSR as a sustainable concept.How organizations manage its relationship with the stakeholders in such a way as to protect its corporate legitimacy has led many firms into adopting different strategies to appear responsible. The next section considers corporate branding as an age-long strategy that organizations adopt to keeping up with its social responsibility expectations.

V. Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Branding

Corporate branding is increasingly being combined with corporate social responsibility, and research fields on corporate branding and CSR appear to be ripe for additional research (Fetscherin and Usunier, 2012; Maon, Swaen & Roeck, 2021). The corporate brand is a valuable asset that encompasses the vision, core values, image and actions of the corporation (Sahri, 2011). However, pertinent questions to ask are: (1) why do organizations engage in CSR activity? Is it because they so love the people and society in which they do business? Or do they have something to gain from the practice? (2) Why do firms adopt some corporate branding or other 'quasi business' strategy to boost their social responsibility rhetoric? A critical evaluation and an attempt to answering these questions is important to understanding why the debate on CSR rhetoric has grown so deep and pervasive in the literature. During the era of Milton Friedman 's (1970) classical view theory of business, CSR was much at the background of business consideration. Wealth creation and profit maximization for the shareholders was the priority of firms. However, as businesses evolve under growing globalization and enabling technology that makes business comparison readily accessible, competition amongst businesses also witnessed asymmetric growth, thus triggering a new order in business – 'caring for your immediate community'. The evolution of CSR has also ushered into the business circle measures to promote social harmony with host communities. One of the strategiesthat firms adopt to continuously appear responsible in the eyes of the public so as to gain or maintain their corporate legitimacy is corporate branding (Mohan and Renuka, 2016).

Corporate brand, according to Balmer and Gray (2003), is a valuable resource: one that provides an entity with a sustainable, competitive advantage if specific criteria are met (Wang& Sengupta,2016). These criteria are defined in terms of an economic theory known as "the resource-based view of the firm" (Balmer and Gray, 2003: 991), which as Balmer and Gray (2003) explained, is characterized by value, rarity, durability, inappropriatability, imperfect imitability, and imperfect substitutability regarding firm's sustainable competitive advantage. Moreover, CSR has become so important that many organizations, as Khan et al (2012) argued, have re-branded their core values to include social responsibility. By engaging in CSR activities, companies can not only generate favourable stakeholder attitudes and better support behaviours but also, over the long run, build corporate image, strengthen stakeholder–company relationships, and enhance stakeholders' advocacy behaviours (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen, 2010).As Blumenthal and Bergstrom (2003: 327)notes, "branding has gone from a simple image-production scheme to a massive organisational alignment tool and CSR is rapidly catching up". Also, finding by Torelli, Monga and Kaikati (2012) implicate brand concepts as a key factor in how consumers respond to CSR activities.

According to Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2007), all CSR initiatives are created equal: a brand that positions itself on CSR, integrating its CSR strategy with its core business strategy, is more likely than brands that merely engage in CSR to reap a range of CSR-specific benefits in the consumer domain. The argument by Kitchin (2003) that true CSR is ultimately a process of business and brand adaptation lend credence to views by scholars such as Blumenthal and Bergstrom (2003) that most CSR efforts are all brand alignment tool (Zayyad, 2021).Although corporate brand strategy can be beneficial, if it is not managed accurately and thoroughly, the branding organization can suffer losses (Shahri, 2011). These arguments are supported by Hur, Kim and Woo (2014) whose study findings showed that CSR has a direct positive effect on corporate brand credibility and corporate reputation.More importantly, the challenge of identifying which activities are genuine corporate social responsibility has heightened CSR rhetorical criticism and the resultant reality gap seen in the literature. The next section considers the phenomenon of CSR rhetoric and the reality gap.

VI. CSR rhetoric and reality gap

Corporate social responsibility is, largely, an abusive practice. Most of what is reported by firms as CSR isn't CSR after all. While Friedman (1970) view about business and society doesn't seem tenable in today's globalized world, the pseudo practices being touted as CSR by firms has only deepened the confusion and the rhetorical criticism already overtaking the CSR practice conundrum. Although there is a strong moral case for CSR, Loosemore and Phua (2010) notes that the business case for CSR is certainly not irrefutable. In recent years, businesses increasingly have been viewed as major cause of social, environmental, and economic problems (Porter and Kramer, 2018). Also, companies are widely perceived to be prospering at the expense of the broader community (Porter and Kramer, 2018). While a better understanding of how to integrate CSR into business strategy is needed with ever increasing momentum towards sustainability as a business driver, it is often difficult to untangle the rhetoric from reality in the CSR debate (Loosemore and Phua, 2010).

CSR is a social obligation expected of firms operating within a given society. While the practice of CSR is not intended to replace the role of government in providing the basic needs of the citizenry, it is nevertheless a critical developmental tool. CSR should complement government efforts and further advance socio-economic and environmental sustainability. But the paradox, however, is that CSR practice has witnessed varied forms and models that has seen the concept being misconstrued, misunderstood and misinterpreted in today's business circles.

Also, different CSR paradoxes has been identified in the literature. For instance, Frankeltal (2001) considers the paradoxes inherent in the phrase "corporate social responsibility" to include procedures of corporate governance, the market's view of organizations' ethical stances, the lack of clear definition, acceptance or denial, the lack of formal mechanisms for taking responsibility and the placing and priority that most organizations give to social responsibility. Furthermore, philanthropy, in the context of CSR, creates several paradoxes for the business as a result of lack of clarity of definitions as to what distinguished corporate philanthropy from CSR (Diener, 2013). The five paradoxes of corporate philanthropy identified by Diener (2013) include: the motive paradox, the action-inaction paradox, the advertising paradox, the stakeholder paradox, and the funding paradox.But, despite the numerous literatures discussing different types of paradoxes within the CSR field, Frankental (2001: 18) argue that 'until these paradoxes are properly addressed, corporate social responsibility can legitimately be branded an invention of PR'.

The rhetorical nuances created by the different CSR paradoxes has widened the reality gap as far as CSR practice is concerned. How do stakeholders, especially host communities, evaluate the CSR activities of firms and how do they measure what level of trustworthiness to place on these activities? While different interpretations and intensions has been attributed to CSR practice, recent findings by Agudelo, Johannsdottir, and Davídsdottir (2019) show that the understanding of corporate responsibility has evolved from being limited to the generation of profit to include a broader set of responsibilities to the latest belief that the main responsibility of companies should be the generation of shared value. However, the concept of shared value, incidentally, is expressed more in theory than in practice.

As a concept-based practice, CSR by firms has received increasing criticism concerning its implementation frameworks. In most societies, companies are generally implementing community development programs that are incapable of alleviating rural hardship and are coordinating destructive displacement exercises (Hilson, 2006).While there is lack of embeddedness of CSR in firms' overall business strategy, Agudelo, Johannsdottir, and Davídsdottir (2019) explained that there is a link between social expectations of corporate behavior and the way in which CSR is understood and implemented.

Another classification of CSR rhetorical categories is that identified by Marrais (2012) which include values rhetoric to develop moral legitimacy, normative rhetoric to improve cognitive legitimacy, and instrumental rhetoric to enhance pragmatic legitimacy.Carollo and Guerci (2017) on their part identified five broad rhetorical repertoires to include: the motor of change,the business-oriented, the fatalist, the idealist and the CSR bookkeeper. Furthermore, Carollo and Guerci (2017) study show that organizations do not appear to be in a hurry to changing from some of the complex and haphazard CSR practices that have altruistic motives. Many organizations have embraced aspects of CSR in response to public concern and allegations of unethical and improper business practice (Ouppara, Vickers and Fallon, 2011). However, in some instances, CSR is arguably undertaken to evoke positive public relations outcomes and enhanced profits, with many claiming that CSR activity involves more rhetoric than reality (Ouppara, Vickers and Fallon, 2011).

CSR has also been used as a reactionary tool by firms to address areas of public concern, which if left unchecked, could have a backlash on organizations. As argued by Nielsen and Thomsen (2018), managers do explore avenues for persuading and convincing stakeholders through rhetoric. Nielsen and Thomsen (2018) opined that practices and activities related to perceiving stakeholders' expectations, needs and requirements are assumed to be most effective for corporations aiming at building or maintaining legitimacy. Such legitimacy has an over-riding socio-economic and environmental motives by organizations. Local communities for example confer the social license to operate (SLO) to firms. The SLO are implicit in nature, and can be withdrawn by local communities with consequences of loss of legitimacy if they perceive that such firms are not living up to expectation. Of the many ethical corporate marketing practices, many firms use corporate CSR communication to enhance their corporate image, which according to Parguel, Benoit-Moreau and Larceneux (2011) encourages 'greenwashing' and may make CSR initiatives less effective.

As earlier explained, a fundamental aspect of CSR practice is public perception, therefore, organizations are always working to maintain or improve on how society perceive their CSR activities. According to Mazutis and Slawinski (2015), two core dimensions of authenticity that impact stakeholder perceptions of CSR are distinctiveness and social connectedness. Mazutis and Slawinski (2015) explained that while distinctiveness captures the extent to which a firm's CSR activities are aligned with their core mission, vision and values, social connectedness refers to the degree to which an organization's CSR efforts are embedded in a larger social context. Firms strive to promote those activities it feels are easy to attract positive perception rather than sustainable benefit to society. But the question, again is, are firms doing ‘good’ to society as they claim in their various CSR policy documents? This is a reality gap that will remain a contentious issue in the CSR debate for a long time to come.

VII. Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Philanthropy

One of the early scholars to advance the frontiers of corporate social responsibility knowledge is Archie B. Carroll. Carroll (1991) developed a CSR pyramid which distinguished different components of CSR to include: Economic responsibility which enjoined firms to be profitable. The economic responsibility is the foundation upon which all other responsibilities rest. No business will proceed to execute other (social) responsibilities if it is not operating profitably. Next on the Carroll’s 4-level pyramid is legal responsibility – imploring firms to obey the law. CSR is going beyond what the law requires. This means companies should do good over and above obeying the law. At the third level of Carroll’s pyramid is ethical responsibility – this is principally about avoiding harm to society i.e. doing what is right. And finally, at the pinnacle of Carrol’s model is philanthropic responsibility – this is about firms being good corporate citizens. Interesting as Carroll’s (1991) pyramid of CSR may seem, opinions amongst scholars remain deeply divided about how to effectively delineate the boundaries within the various responsibility components as advocated by Carroll (Visser, 2005 &Masoud, 2017). For example, what is corporate social responsibility? And what is corporate philanthropy? What significance should be accorded to each of these responsibility levels and what order should they follow?

Visser (2005) criticized the relevance of Carroll ‘s (1991) model for not taking into cognizance the developing countries context in situating the different responsibility levels, especially those relating to ethics and philanthropy. According to Visser (2005), CSR in Africa is still at an early stage of maturity, sometimes even equating CSR and philanthropy, rather than the more embedded approaches now common in developed countries. Visser (2005) conclude that Carroll’s Pyramid may not be the best model for understanding CSR in general, and CSR in Africa in particular and therefore call for research into alternative CSR theories and frameworks.Masoud (2017) integrated the models of Carroll and Visser to produce the International Pyramid Model of CSR, which acknowledges the relative importance of economic, glocal, legal and ethical, and philanthropic aspects of the CSR concept. According to Masoud (2017), the primary innovation in the International Pyramid is the development of ‘glocal’ responsibilities, relating to the environment, socio-cultural matters, technology users, and political rights. On their part, Jamali and Mirshak (2007) opined that the lack of a systematic, focused, and institutionalized approach to CSR, particularly in a developing country like Lebanon, is still grounded in the context of philanthropic action. In the midst of these criticisms, Carroll (2016) revisited the 1991 model and commented on issues that were not emphasized in the earlier model noting that ethics, for instance, permeates the pyramid amongst other issues. Despite this later position, CSR practice as explained by Jamali and Mirshak (2007) is largely dominated by philanthropic activities.

Corporate philanthropy is a phenomenon which associates the business sector with the social sector, and is quickly becoming a viable strategic option in development of marketing strategies (Fioravante, 2010; Arco-Castro et al, 2020).However, the philanthropic responsibilities of corporations are ill-defined, and as a consequence, led to paradoxes and negative results for corporations (Diener, 2013). Fioravante (2010) suggests that firms looking to further brand development, market recognition, and enhanced customer perceptions can integrate philanthropic initiatives throughout the planning process. Arco-Castro et al (2020) study found that markets respond positively to philanthropic activities. Thus, as corporate philanthropy evolves, it may become more strategic and integrate more closely with a company’s business priorities (Rangan, Chase and Karim, 2012).Again, corporate philanthropy, which is closely related to marketing phenomenon, provides a cogent social and economic approach to furthering the myriad of business agendas necessary to have market sustainability (Fioravante, 2010).

Most of the activities advertised by firms as CSR are philanthropic in nature and generally have economic and social colouration. However, following Carroll’s (1991) CSR pyramid which identified the key aspects of CSR including economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, Schouten, Graafland and Kaptein (2014) explained that the CSR attitudes of firmssignificantly affect some types of CSR behaviours. As a voluntary practice, organizations have the discretion to determine what constitute their CSR activity. This voluntariness is responsible for the reluctance by firms to engage in sustainable CSR practices.

VIII. Conclusion

The lure by firms to appear responsible before stakeholders has led to the adoption of different pseudo and quasi business strategies in place of Corporate Social Responsibility. Today, there are as many definitions of CSR concepts as there as CSR researchers. The many definitions of CSR mean that different strategies are adopted across different contexts. While the practice of CSR largely originated from simple act of corporate giving, the growth in social responsibility demand by stakeholders have extended the corporate giving act to a more widely accepted practice – corporate philanthropy. However, as has been discussed in the literature, corporate philanthropy is arguably motivated by the need by firms to re-brand. Thus, a more intriguing question becomes unavoidable: what exactly is corporate branding? How is it different from corporate social responsibility? How is the practice of CSR affected by this closely linked phenomenon? How do the various paradoxes created by corporate philanthropy and corporate branding influence CSR? It is instructive to note that the rhetoric that has dominated the CSR literature is principally due to the confusion in delineating what is corporate social responsibility on one hand, and the twin social phenomena – corporate philanthropy and corporate branding on the other.

In the context of this study, the paper attempts to wrap the discussions on two literal poles – what is corporate social responsibility, and what CSR is not. From a practical perspective, CSR means embeddedness, inclusiveness, shared value that also takes into consideration the interests of business and community, a sustainable process, proactive, and long term strategy. At the other end of the pole is what CSR is not. A practice is not social responsibility if it generally adopts a reactionary approach to addressing social issues. Furthermore, if it lacks embeddedness, its focus is short-term, lacks a clear policy, and treats stakeholders in isolation, then it is not CSR. However, as is been contested in the many literatures, it is inherently difficult to identify, classify or even implement policies that will be seen to conform with the tenets of good CSR practice without a clear strategy. Such strategy should indicate what sustainable measures firms should adopt to minimize the level of rhetoric that presently characterize CSR practice. But, despite these fundamental clarifications and the attempt to properly situate firms' response to the needs of society, the debate regarding what actions are regarded by stakeholders as corporate social responsibility is far from over.

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