



## Small and Medium Enterprises – Propensity toward Corporate Social Responsibility

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**Abstract-** The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) is alive and flourishing in both academic as well as practitioner communities worldwide. Over the years, businesses have come under the increased pressure to engage in activities summed up as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Traditionally, most of the related theoretical perspectives on CSR have focused on large organizations and thereby ignore the very important area of research pertaining to SMEs engagement in CSR. As such it has previously been assumed that the applications of CSR in large organizations can be transposed to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which have nevertheless undermine the very foundation of CSR concept. In this view, the current paper advances the relevant research discourse in the areas of CSR, SMEs, and the intersection of CSR and SMEs. The overall paper discussion includes (a) the debate around defining CSR, (b) a brief history of CSR, (c) the motivations for participating in CSR, (d) the CSR literature's predominant focus on small medium companies. The discourse presented highlights the nuanced definitional orientation of CSR and the peculiarities of SMEs as to how they operate differently as compared to large organizations and that SMEs are not little big firms and thereby provides the ground for future endeavours in the field of CSR and SMEs.

**Keywords:** Corporate Social Responsibility, Small and Medium Enterprises, Large organizations

### I. CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: HISTORY AND DEFINITIONAL ORIENTATION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an increasingly popular topic in academic literature. The concept of CSR has formally been introduced by Bowen (1953) in his seminal book *Social Responsibility of the Businessman*. In the 1950's, CSR focused on three principles - the manager as a public trustee, the balancing of competing claims to corporate resources, and corporate philanthropy - without any reference to benefiting the business. Instead, Bowen (1953) presented CSR as a means to promoting a "better American society". Bowen's script on CSR embraced by some, but at the same time his approach also had vocal critics. Most notably, Nobel-prize laureate, Milton Friedman (1970) invoked agency theory to deride CSR as "an unfair and costly burden on shareholders" while reminding businesses that "there is one and only one social responsibility of business -- to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits" (p.33). While there are few contemporary proponents of agency theory that critique CSR, Friedman's influence is evidenced by continued widespread references to his work in the CSR literature. Despite the prominent Friedman critique, the field of CSR has evolved to become "almost universally sanctioned and promoted by all constituents in society from governments and corporations to non-governmental organizations and individual consumers" (Kotler & Lee, 2008, p. 53). While a few critics persist (Van Oosterhout & Heugens, 2006), CSR has proven to be a legitimate and enduring practice influencing businesses today.

However, discussions of the CSR topic do not always employ a consistent understanding or definition of CSR. In recent decades, the academic literature has presented multiple definitions and interpretations of CSR. Dahlsrud (2008) identified 37 definitions from 27 authors over a period of 23 years while acknowledging the actual number of definitions in circulation is likely much higher. In 2010, Archie Carroll, a prolific author on CSR since the 1970s, and Kareem Shabana identified an "appropriate definition to use" when they wrote, "The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (A. B. Carroll & Shabana, 2010, p. 89). An oft-cited McWilliams and Siegel (2001) paper acknowledged the confusion surrounding

CSR definitions but however defined CSR as “actions that appear to further some social good beyond the interests of the firm and that which is required by law” (p. 117). In their widely cited 2007 paper, Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, and Ganapathi defined CSR as “the firm’s considerations of, and response to, issues beyond the narrow economic, technical, and legal requirements of the firm to accomplish social (and environmental) benefits along with the traditional economic gains with the firm seeks.” (Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007, p. 837).

The definitional debate is heightened by the presence of other terms used in ways that appear synonymous with CSR. Margolis, Eifenbein, and Walsh (2007) discussed corporate social performance (CSP) as it relates to corporate financial performance (CFP). Aguilera et al. (2007) analyzed reactive social change and proactive social change, while Porter and Kramer (2006) discussed responsive CSR and strategic CSR. Carroll and Shabana (2010) addressed the overlapping concepts of corporate citizenship, business ethics, stakeholder management and sustainability. Elkington (1998) introduced the “triple bottom line” standard of reporting while Kinder, Lydenberg, Domini and Company provide the KLD Index for social performance. The term corporate social opportunity (CSO) references the commercial viability of CSR activities (Jenkins, 2009). This abundance of apparently related and often interchangeable terms only adds to the complexity of defining CSR, and consequently business managers are thereby experiencing challenges in adoption of CSR activities in an effectual manner (McWilliams, Siegel, & Wright, 2006). Such implications are more noticeable in the context of business entities particularly SMEs.

Despite the academic debate on CSR definitions, businesses do not always choose to use the CSR term. An analysis of CSR references on corporate websites found the preferred terms used by more than 80% of the Fortune 500 when discussing CSR were “community” and “environment”. Similarly, almost 60% of the Fortune 500 also used the terms “health and wellness,” “sustainability,” “diversity,” and “ethics” when referencing their CSR activities. Ironically, only 36% of the Fortune 500 used the term “corporate responsibility” on their website (Smith & Alexander, 2013). Vives (2006) found that SMEs in Latin America that were engaged in CSR were not aware of the concept of CSR so did not use this term even when discussing their CSR activities. In Jenkin’s (2006) study, the SMEs were selected as “exemplars of CSR” but the majority of participants were uncomfortable using the CSR term in reference to SMEs. He also found that SMEs did not use the term CSR, instead referencing the components of CSR such as environmental management, work-life balance, and community involvement.

## II. MOTIVATIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT IN CSR

The literature presents a myriad of motives for engaging in CSR including economic benefit, stakeholder management, and ethical duty. While there is ongoing discussion about the relative importance of the different motivators, much of the literature suggests CSR activities are driven by a combination of multiple motives.

### Ethical Motivations

Most CSR scholars acknowledge an ethical reason for engaging in CSR activity (Campbell, 2007; A. B. Carroll & Shabana, 2010). However, there are few proponents for a purely ethical motivation. Vogel (2005) claimed that “the old style CSR of the 1960’s and 1970’s was motivated by social consideration” (p.2) and “the new world of CSR emphasizes the link between CSR and corporate financial success” (p.3). In his early work Carroll (1979) proposed a pyramid with four ascending dimensions of CSR - economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary -and emphasized all were important. However, his later works focused mostly on the economic domain with more limited discussion of ethics (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). While the recent academic literature does not disregard the ethical motivations for responsible behavior, but it does not advocate CSR for purely ethical reasons (Aguilera, et al., 2007)

### Economic Motivations

Given the predominant financial interests of a business, it is not surprising that the majority of CSR research promotes economic motivators - both cost savings and revenue generation - for engaging in CSR. Carroll and Shabana’s (2010) article “The Business Case for Corporate Social Responsibility” specified four economic reasons to engage in CSR: 1) reduce risk and cost 2) strengthen legitimacy and reputation 3) build competitive advantage, and 4) create win-win situations through synergistic value creation. They concluded “Firms which engage in CSR activities will be rewarded by the market in economic and financial terms” (p. 101). Similarly, Devinney (2009) argued for both the cost savings and revenue benefits of CSR. He cautioned that CSR may have positive and negative consequences for society but identified multiple economic reasons why corporations and managers would take on CSR initiatives concluding that CSR would both improve profits and reduce risk. Even an industry study focused on privately held companies found cost management of resources among the top factors driving corporate responsibility (Thornton, 2008).

Some researchers argued for revenue generation as the principal motivator for CSR. Porter and Kramer (2006) proposed competitive advantage that leads to financial benefit as the primary reason for corporations to be socially responsible. They claimed that CSR “can be a source of opportunity, innovation and competitive advantage” (p. 80) instead of a cost, constraint or charitable deed. McWilliams and Siegel’s (2001) work proposed CSR as an investment in product differentiation that helps maximize revenue and profits.

#### Stakeholder Motivations

Much of the CSR literature references R. Edward Freeman’s 1984 work on stakeholder theory regarding “persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of corporate activity” (Donaldson & Preston, 1995, p. 67). Stakeholders are distinguished from shareholders with the understanding that they have different, and potentially conflicting, needs and demands. Stakeholder theory applied to CSR suggests that any group such as customers, employees, partners, suppliers, communities, or governments could motivate a corporation to behave responsibly.

Within Carroll and Shabana’s (2010) economic justification of CSR, they acknowledged the relevance of stakeholders including shareholders, activists, governments, and consumers. Their work claimed, “Effective CSR rests on developing the appropriate CSR strategy where CSR activities are those directed at improving stakeholder relations” (p. 101). Barnett (2007) also claimed that firms benefit from meeting the needs of their stakeholders. He wrote, “CSR increases the trustworthiness of a firm and so strengthens relationships with important stakeholders” (p. 796). In their comprehensive review of CSR, Aguinis and Glavas (2012) found “firms engage in CSR due to institutional pressures, particularly from stakeholders Aguilera et al. (2007) found stakeholders pressured firms into CSR based on self-interest, relations, and morals. Since the 1990’s most CSR literature has incorporated some reference to stakeholders. In 2008, Freeman even proposed that the term corporate social responsibility be replaced with “corporate stakeholder responsibility”

#### Complementary Motivations - Ethical, Economic and Stakeholder

It is important to note that the ethical, economic, and stakeholder motivations are not inherently in opposition to each other. Many CSR activities that are driven by economics would also appease stakeholders and be ethically sound and many socially responsible behaviors addressing stakeholder demands would be ethical and have economic benefits. A research forum dedicated to Stakeholders and Social Responsibility noted this relationship when it debated “whether organizations pursue the satisfaction of stakeholder interests for economic reasons or simply because doing so has intrinsic merit” (Harrison & Freeman, 1999, p. 479). Harrison and Freeman (1999) also concluded; “one of the original ideas behind the stakeholder management approach was to try to find a way to integrate the economic and the social” suggesting that ethical, economic, and stakeholder motivations are inherently interrelated (p. 484).

### III. CSR AND BUSINESS FIRMS: SIZE MATTERS

A revival of an increased interest in CSR can be well - observed at the beginning of 21st century due to the involvement of large organizations in fraudulent activities (Fassin, 2008). This mounted the external pressure on business firms to engage in socially responsible practices. Consequently, to date the preponderance of CSR research has focused on large, publicly traded companies (Jenkins, 2004; Morsing & Perrini, 2009; Vázquez-Carrasco & López-Pérez, 2013). For instance, majority of the CSR articles have referenced Ford (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003), Nike (Zadek, 2007), UPS (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), Microsoft (Brown & Dacin, 1997), and Nestle (Porter & Kramer, 2006). These companies provide compelling examples but further reinforce the notion that the existing CSR research is applicable to large companies and thereby neglect the engagement of SMEs in CSR domain.

However, despite the common exclusion of SMEs in CSR research, several prominent researchers recognized the potential implications of firm size on CSR activity. Unfortunately, this line of research has produced contradictory findings. Some research found CSR is relevant for all size firms. Orlitzky’s (2001) meta-analysis of approximately 15,000 observations concluded, “both large and small firms can benefit from CSR” (p.176). Similarly, Grayson (2007) found that CSR principles are applicable to all size business entities. Other research has found that smaller firms are less likely to engage in CSR. Waddock and Graves (1997) stated smaller firms may not exhibit as many overt socially responsible behaviors as do larger firms. In addition, Cowen et al. (1987) also concluded that the onus to be socially responsible falls on larger firms rather than small firms.

On the contrary, a few research studies have also found SMEs are more likely to engage in CSR. Madden et al. (2006) found many smaller firms tend to be involved in CSR activities in some way. In addition, Murillo and Lozano (2006) and Sarbutts (2003) both studies found that SMEs are better at promoting socially responsible practices. Udayasankar (2008) concluded, “very small and very large firms are equally

motivated to participate in CSR” suggesting a U-shaped relationship with medium-sized firms at the bottom (p. 167). Finally, Lepoutre and Heene (2006) referenced the ambiguity around firm size and corporate social responsibility further validating the need for more research in this area. Parallel to this, the 2004 report of the SME Roundtable of the European Multi-stakeholder Forum on CSR noted that “we know relatively little about the scale and impact of CSR amongst SMEs – and much better baseline data is required”

#### IV. RESEARCH ON CSR AND SMES: GLOBAL TRENDS

Spurred by Jenkins 2004 critique of existing CSR theory ignoring small and medium businesses, a few scholars such as Jenkins, Murillo, Spence, and Tencati began addressing CSR specifically for SMEs. Their works attempted to address how “the grandness of the small business is overshadowed by a focus on the more conspicuous merits or scandals or large multinational companies” (Morsing & Perrini, 2009). Consequently, a relevant literature review started to upfront in 2004 publications. However, a large uptick in CSR SMEs publications and the number of published articles swelled and thereby trended higher in the year 2009 (Vázquez-Carrasco & López-Pérez, 2013)

##### Geographic Focus

In 2006, The Journal of Business Ethics published a special issue focused on the knowledge gap for CSR and SMEs. This issue included empirical studies in Spain (Murillo & Lozano, 2006) and the United Kingdom (Jenkins, 2006), an action-research project in England (Roberts, Lawson, & Nicholls, 2006) and a theoretical perspective from Italy (Perrini, 2006) - all based in Europe. A resulting paper analyzed CSR and small business with a “distinctively European perspective on the topic” (Spence & Painter-Morland, 2010, p. 534). The ensuing studies on CSR in SMEs expanded globally to include a study of motivations in India (Roy, Vyas, & Jain, 2013), an exploratory study in Singapore (Lee, Mak, & Pang, 2012), a survey in Hong Kong (Welford, 2007) and Kazakhstan (Baisakalova, 2012), an analysis in Latin America (Vives, 2006) and exploratory research in Lebanon (Jamali, 2008; Jamali, Sidani, & El-Asmar, 2009). While these studies provide compelling and actionable findings, there is clearly a void of research around SMEs in the United States. In fact, a search on corporate social responsibility in small business or small and medium enterprises using the Business Source Premier database returned zero results for the United States. It is interesting to note this geographic disparity does not hold for CSR research in general. In fact, scholars have claimed most general CSR studies rely on Western models and perspectives and apply a Western lens (Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014). However, CSR literature related to SMEs in the context of other parts of the world is negligible.

##### Global Differences

While SMEs around the world share many of the same challenges with CSR, there are inherently “cultural, economic, social, and political factors that affect the role of business” (Jamali, Karam, Yin, & Soundararajan, 2017). For instance, the multiple studies in Italy were in response to the Italian Government’s 2002 CSR initiative to “foster the proactive role of Italian enterprises, with great attention on SME involvement” (Tencati, Perrini, & Pogutz, 2004). A study of SME CSR in Singapore concluded the government provides “the impetus for CSR engagement” (Lee, et al., 2012) while research in Kazakhstan found “there is a strong political will to promote and practice CSR” (Baisakalova, 2012). As Prieto-Carron, Lund-Thomsen, Chan, Muro, and Bhushan (2006) noted, “If CSR initiatives are to be legitimate, their content and implementation should be adapted to the particular country or region in which they are taking place” (p.977). While this research study does not specifically address the role of culture or government in CSR for SMEs, the global differences further validate the need for research based in the other parts of the world.

#### V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current study endeavors to highlight the nuanced definitional orientation of CSR and the peculiarities of SMEs as to how they operate differently as compared to large organizations and that SMEs are not little big firms. As evident from existing literature that no matter CSR concept has received the heightened attention both in academia as well as business world but yet the very literature is nascent in the field of CSR and SMEs. Nevertheless, the year 2009 saw a large uptick in SME CSR publications and the number of published articles has continuously trended higher (Vázquez-Carrasco & López-Pérez, 2013) but still there is a room for further in –depth exploration, (a) what ‘term’ should be used for SMEs engagement in CSR activities, (b) SMEs are not merely miniature version of large organizations, and that the prevailing CSR frameworks and models of large organizations cannot be scaled down to fit SMEs, (c) and lastly global differences should be taken into consideration while doing research in the field of CSR and SMEs.



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