How CSR initiatives affect brand profile

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1 Understanding marketing and brand identity

As explained by Nathel and Weeks (1996), among the management fields, marketing raises the most controversy about ethics – ranging from false and misleading advertisements to pushing unethical products. However, marketing is discipline which serves as a tool for shaping consumer perceptions and attitudes toward a product, cause or a point of view. The inherent contradictions created by marketing have been explained by Drucker (1973), as he analysed how effective marketing would make selling redundant, and yet the emphasis on marketing for products has ultimately created a consumerist society.

Over the past decades, a great deal of effort has gone into understanding the factors that shape the needs and perceptions of consumers and markets. Singer et al. (1991) said that there is a significant danger that this collection of knowledge may be misused to mislead customers. It is in this context that ethical marketing assumes significance.

Mark-Herbert and von Schantz (2007) explain that branding is a simplifying symbol of the activities of a company, that helps stakeholders differentiate between competing and largely equivalent sales offers. Values such as a company's social initiatives and its ethical business conduct are intangible from the company's reputation itself. Therefore, the brand serves as a guarantee for communicated business values. The brand identity of a company is thus a cornerstone of its long-term strategy. The actions of a company, including its social initiatives, are offered credence by the brand. The brand, in turn, is strengthened by the company's actions in business and for the community.

Figure 1: Brand identity, ethical business activities and CSR reinforce each other to strengthen a company's model of sustainable business (Interpreted from Deetz (1995), Mark-Herbert and von Schantz (2007), Thompson (2002))

This paper aims to analyse the impact that social initiatives and CSR programmes by companies have on the perception of brands, and the consequent impact of marketing campaigns. Middlemiss (2003) explains that in context of governance failures and financial setbacks to major corporates in recent times, social initiatives such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes have been taking centre stage to provide sustainable, long-term brand value. Corporate responsibility has thus become a significant differentiator in improving and sustaining a positive perception of a company. To understand the relevance of social initiatives to marketing, let us understand the social context that present-day companies are operating in.

2 Social context

Some important changes of the past two decades have made it imperative for a company to focus on corporate social initiatives, if it aims to sustain its growth in a community. The proliferation of the World Wide Web and a marked shift to user-generated content has created high levels of awareness about global issues that affect human communities and the environment. In the past, companies were rewarded for earning high revenues and awarding high financial returns to stakeholders, with little or no consideration for the wider social and environmental impact of their activities (Brennan, 1991). Traditionally, companies have placed high emphasis on meeting financial commitments to their internal stakeholders, that is, their employees, management, Board of Directors and especially, their shareholders (Kotler, 2000).

Rising standards of living and improving levels of education in emerging economies have created large markets of consumers who are also a large pool of socially aware individuals. It is increasingly difficult for corporates and governments to control and manipulate and control the flow of information to their benefit. In search of social acceptance and legitimacy, companies use CSR initiatives as a means for communicating their ethical grounds for conducting business. As the economy has changed, standards of living have improved and global connectivity has created greater awareness about social and environmental issues, companies are realising that in order to churn profits sustainably, they need to focus on satisfying the expectation of their stakeholders, which also include their consumers, suppliers, distributors, the communities that they operate in, media, trade associations, ecosystems and the global society at large (Deetz, 1995).

A consequence has been the serious examination of ethics and business. It is universally understood that the goal of a business is to make profit and distribute returns to its stakeholders. Moreover, it is also widely accepted that the most profitable model of business is a sustainable one. There are two lines of thought emergent from this, as outlined below.

Newton (1986) outlined a concept called ‘good business is good ethics’. The concept implies that sustainable business, by its inherent nature, is beneficial to society. An axiom of this line of thought is that by virtue of actions involved in making a business profitable, an organisation has to conduct itself responsibly and sustainably in society, and avoid actions that are of detriment to the environment or to the community. A disadvantage of this belief system is that it is not unequivocally supported by evidence from research. Another disadvantage of this is that a business is never expected to pause and analyse the impact of its actions with seriousness, because of the assumption that its actions are inherently beneficial to the community.

Peters and Waterman (1982) outlined an alternate point of view, which explains that pursuing an ethical course of action is essential for the long term profitability of the company. This view states that an ethical model of business and integrity are important factors in establishing trust in the community and thereby, creating profitability. However, like the previous point of view, this perspective also lacks universal support from research findings. Moreover, Newton (1986) suggested that this is more likely to motivate businesses to appear to be ethical, rather than take sincere steps to be ethical.

3 Social marketing and business sustainability

Kotler (1972) stated that marketing is not merely pertinent to the organisation’s activities, but also to all transactions between the organisation and all stakeholders influenced by it. Marketing was defined as “the disciplined task of creating and offering values to others for the purpose of achieving a desired response.” Thus, social initiatives undertaken by a company are a powerful form of marketing, because their impact extends beyond the company’s employees and customers to the community that the firm operates in. Social initiatives, if pursued correctly, can have a greater impact on raising the profile of a brand, beyond conventional activities such as advertising and promotions.

Elkinton (1998) created the concept of the triple bottom line, which uses sustainability as a measure of success of a company. Sustainability, in turn, is measured as a function of the company's financial, environmental and social impact. It follows that the success of a business organisation is not simply a matter of its profits but the sustainability of its business and its impact on the community and ecological system it operates in.

Figure 2: Measuring the success of a company (Inspired by Elkinton (1998))

Mark-Herbert and von Schantz (2007) see the triple bottom line framework as an example of corporate role in corporate social responsibility initiatives as a means of legitimizing their activities. In face of increased public scrutiny of corporate actions, they explain that the triple bottom framework is a way of seeking acceptance from the community to operate in the long term.

Poolthong and Mandhachitara (2009) carried out research among 275 customers of retail banking in Thailand to study the impact of social responsibility initiatives on customer perception of service quality. The study found that corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have an impact on customer perceptions of service quality and also examine impact the level of trust and the attitudes of consumers toward a company. The study showed that perceived service quality is positively associated with brand effect mediated by trust. Thus, CSR initiatives play an important role in perceived service quality, which in turn, influences trust and brand effect. The study established that CSR is directly related to brand effect.

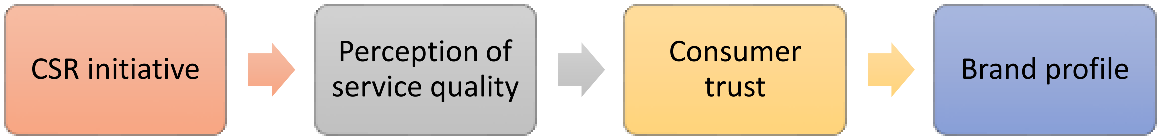

Figure 3: Relationship between social initiatives and brand profile. Interpreted from Poolthong and Mandhachitara (2009)

4 Rectifying unsustainable business practices

Houston (1986) explained that since the goal of a business practice is to make profit, a company is concerned with environmental issues or social well-being only to the extent that focus on these issues enhances its profitability. In other words, businesses are not likely to concern themselves with the impact of their activities on people or communities who are not stakeholders in the business. Brennan (1991) suggested that even if faced with an ethical dilemma, a business is more likely to choose a course of action that has the least impact on its profitability, and that businesses engage in unsustainable or unethical practices because the stakeholders of the business reward these practices.

Researchers studying business ethics and their impact on society have suggested a number of courses of action. Some of these are:

4.1 Adopting a different vocabulary for business activities

Brennan (1991) suggested that a reason why business practices afford little relevance to their social impact is because marketing vocabulary uses military and competitive terminology to describe its business environment. He suggests that even the use of terms such as 'social marketing' can influence the business to act in an unethical manner, since the use of this terminology creates the impression of doing enough for the well-being of the society. Thus, the vocabulary chosen for a business influences the perceived objectives of the business, and thereby makes the process of ethical business more challenging. Brennan (1991) therefore suggests using a less competitive terminology to incentivise business to be more socially responsible.

4.2 Examining the values that a business operates by

Chonko and Hunt (1986) suggested that it is incumbent upon the leadership of a business organisation to create a value system that incentivises ethical decision making at all levels of operation and facilitates ethical business practices. Weiss (1986) suggested that the key to changing a company’s culture and business practices is to change the value system of the business leadership and redefine the parameters of ‘corporate conscience’.

4.3 Apply normative principles

Hosmer (1988) suggested that in order to facilitate ethical conduct in business, the organisation’s leadership should be introduced to different systems of ethical analysis. It is important to note that these systems are primarily applicable in helping to resolve business dilemmas, and in helping to choose a course of action when more than one possibility is a profitable course of action. Hosmer suggested four normative principles that the management of a company can apply:

- **The Utilitarian Principle**: To act in a way that results in the greatest possible good for the largest number of stakeholders.

- **Kant's Categorical Imperative**: To choose a course of action that may apply universally to other instances – as a rule for a future course of action.

- **Personal Justice**: If there is more than one feasible course of action, make a decision which holds greater benefit for the most underprivileged section of society.

- **Personal Liberty**: Act in a way that does not compromise the ability of other members of society to live in freedom and to maximise their chances of leading lives of self-fulfilment and self-development.

4.4 Apply rules of thumb

Aside from the above listed normative principles, the management of a company can apply simpler rules of thumb for resolving ethical dilemmas. Some of these rules were listed by Peter and Olson (1987):

- **The Golden Rule**: Managers should make decisions such that the impact of the decision is not adverse to another party. As per the principles of the Golden Rule, the management should act in such a way that they will not be averse to be subjected to a similar action.

- **The Professional Ethic**: Management should choose a course of action that will be condoned by a neutral panel of professional peers.

- **The TV Test**: The management should choose a course of action that would be defensible to society at large, for instance, if they were to justify their decisions on national TV.

4.5 Use a checklist

Nash (1981) recommended the use of a checklist for resolving moral dilemmas and choosing an ethical course of action for a business. The checklist recommends that the problem being faced by the business be described accurately. The definition of the problem should also be accurate from the point of view of a neutral party, or an affected individual, organisation or community. Next, the checklist recommends a root cause analysis of the quandary, attempting to identify the cause of the problem and thereby attempt to rectify it. The decision maker is advised to introspect into his or her loyalties, as an individual and as a member of the corporation. The manager is advised to understand his or her reasons for making the decision, and to analyse how the actual impact of the decision will be similar to or different from the intended outcome. Next, the checklist advises the manager to study whom the decision will be impacting, and what kind of negative repercussions it might have for them. The checklist advises the decision maker to take the aggrieved parties into confidence, if possible. The decision maker is advised to consider the long-term implications of the course of action, and to analyse if the long-term impacts will be adverse and contrary to the expected gain in the short term. The decision maker is advised to choose a course of action which can be justified to the Board of Directors, to the higher management, employees, the community that the business operates in and society at large.

5 Ethical marketing and social programmes

Research by Mark-Herbert and von Schantz (2007) found that where the stated principles of a company differ from its real-life actions, the platform for creating a strong brand identity is limited. Without a strong brand identity, the company cannot sustain its social initiatives and build a loyal customer base. Therefore, with a reputation for unethical conduct, the very sustainability of a business model is brought into question.

Thompson (2002) recommended the creation of a holistic marketing ecosystem in which diverse initiatives of a company support each other to raise the profile of a brand. According to Thompson (2002), ethical marketing is essential for moving beyond a calculated focus on a target market and reaching out to new markets within the community. The outcomes of the research indicate that in order to improve the profile of the brand and widen the market for the company’s products, the marketing strategy must abandon deceptive promises in favour of connecting with the community through honest and creative messages.

Honest communication in marketing is the solution to the enduring problem of depersonalisation in the relationship between a company and its customers.

It follows that if creativity and sincere initiatives are essential for more effective marketing of products, then corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are a powerful tool for marketing. The appropriate CSR initiatives are creative as well as an honest form of communication with the society. Section 7 *(Factors affecting the impact of social initiatives)* explores the characteristics that make a social outreach programme effective and raise the brand profile.

6 The relevance of corporate social responsibility programmes

In his research on corporate social responsibility programmes, Lewis (2003) collected data from a range of stakeholder audiences across different markets and demographics to find that a company's social initiatives have become a fundamental criterion in the stakeholder's perception of a company. Stakeholders not only include the consumers of the company's products, but also the wider community that the company's market exists in, and the regulatory bodies that influence its business environment. In the past, it was acceptable for companies to single-mindedly pursue maximising profit and providing high financial returns to stakeholders, with little or no consideration for the wider social and environmental impact of their activities (Brennan, 1991). Improved standards of living for people across the world and the advent of user-generated content on the World Wide Web means that consumers today are concerned with the social and environmental footprint of the companies that they patronise. A company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have thus become an important concern and an ever-growing factor in stakeholder expectations.

Lewis (2003) argued that social initiatives do not necessarily have a positive impact on the brand's perception. If a social initiative is executed poorly, or if an inappropriate CSR initiative is chosen for a product or a market, then the company's contribution to the cause may be deemed as phony and negatively affect the prestige of the brand. This paper applies research by Porter and Cramer (2006) to analyse this phenomenon in Section 8 *(Challenges in pursuing CSR initiatives)*. Despite being a threat to companies' reputation and prosperity, support for social causes also represents an opportunity, as it presents a potential basis for repairing damaged trust between a business and the community it operates in.

7 Factors affecting the impact of social initiatives

7.1 Fit between the company and the cause

Research by Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) and independently, by Porter and Kramer (2006) revealed that that the most significant factor in shaping consumer perception by investing in social initiatives is to support causes which are congruent with the overall product, service or brand identity of the company. Companies can commit the error of associating CSR projects with charity or with broad associations, such as being "socially responsible." The enhancement of consumer perception of a brand, far from being a simple transfer of positive affect from sponsored causes to sponsoring firms, depends on the perception of a company utilising its business model itself for social betterment. The researchers have found that sponsoring social initiatives is a means for reinforcing the brand's positioning by differentiating it among other companies with CSR programmes. Supporting a cause that is congruent with a firm's specific associations can reinforce the firm's positioning, influence consumer liking for the brand, and improve the firm's equity. In addition, research by Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006) also found that if a company's CSR activity is congruent with its brand identity, its image remains largely unaffected despite promotional efforts by competitors for at least a year.

7.2 Nature of the cause

Planken et al. (2013) carried out research in developed and emerging economies (Holland and India) to study global attitudes toward corporate social initiatives and CSR platforms. Although the research was limited to highly educated consumers, they found that stakeholder attitudes toward social initiatives are similar across developed and emerging economies. Consumers attach greater importance to social initiatives pertaining to legal and ethical causes. Ethical causes that attract the attention of consumers include social programmes directed toward underprivileged sections of the society, and programmes focussing on environmental issues such as pollution, deforestation and climate change. By contrast, purely philanthropic or charitable initiatives have little impact on the perception of the company. Consumers are influenced by CSR initiatives which utilise the company's technological expertise for the betterment of society, instead of financial support for causes unrelated to the company's area of activities.

7.3 Level of product involvement

Research by van den Brink et al. (2006) showed that strategic marketing campaigns including CSR initiatives were more effective on consumers if the products were low involvement products. Low involvement products are defined as products which can be purchased with a low degree of time spent in decision making, lower level of research and lower emotional involvement, on account of factors such as the product being low priced or with a limited period of utility. Examples would be a bar of chocolate or a music CD. High involvement products, on the other hand, involve considerable research and deliberation on part of the consumer, and are utilised over a long period of time once purchased – for example, a car or a high-end electronics appliance. The research showed that no form of CSR initiative, either strategic, tactical, short or long term, locally focused or global in approach was effective enough to influence consumer perceptions of brands for high involvement products. Thus, CSR campaigns are more effective as product differentiators for products with low involvement.

7.4 Media

As explained in Section 3 (*Social marketing and business sustainability*), Mark-Herbert and von Schantz (2007) see the triple bottom line framework as a way of seeking acceptance from the community to operate their business sustainably. Therefore, it is implied that corporate actions are largely irrelevant unless they are communicated to a wider audience. Therefore, the media is an important stakeholder in the actions of a company. The corporate platform is affected, not only by actions, but also by corporate documentation of its operations and media perception. Their research found that corporate strategy is influenced by the verdicts that media draws upon its policies and actions. They found that the impact of positive ethical measures is rendered ineffective by poorly timed media interactions, or it coinciding with negative events concerning the company, which are highlighted to a greater degree by the media.

7.5 Geographic region

Research by Planken (2013) in India showed that CSR initiatives had been largely ineffective in connecting with communities because of their focus on charitable causes. The research showed that CSR communication about charitable causes created a positive perception of the company when the activities were carried out in parts of the world distinct from that of the target audience. On the other hand, social initiatives in the same geographic region were more effective when they applied the relevant technological expertise of the company, instead of purely financial assistance to non-profits for causes unrelated to their area of business.

7.6 Length of the CSR campaign

van den Brink et al. (2006) carried out an experiment on 240 participants to determine the impact of various factors on the effectiveness of a CSR campaign. They found that brand loyalty for a product increases significantly under the effect of strategic marketing campaigns, so long as these campaigns occur over the long term. Short term cause related campaigns of any nature were not found to have a significant impact on brand loyalty.

7.7 Level of social awareness in the target market

Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) studied the specific circumstances CSR initiatives work, including its specific timing, mode of delivery and targeted community. The research analysed data from market polls that confirmed the link between increasing corporate social responsibility (CSR) and increased purchase behaviour on part of consumers. The findings revealed that the impact of social initiatives is not merely dependent on the company, such as its brand, its chosen cause or the quality of its products. On the other hand, the success of a CSR initiative is influenced in equal measure by individual-specific factors, such as the support of consumers for the causes and their opinions about their validity and their general beliefs about the importance of corporate social responsibility programmes.

The research also found that the reactions of consumers to CSR initiatives are influenced by the congruence between consumer's perceptions of the social initiatives, the characters and belief systems of the consumers and the value system communicated by the company. The importance of this congruence was emphasised by the finding that even well-intended social initiatives can fail if they are not sensitive to the belief systems of the community. Without adequate awareness in the market, CSR initiatives can, under certain conditions, decrease consumers' intentions to buy a company's products.

7.8 Global reach of the brand

Madden et al. (2012) explain that the global or holistic impression of a brand can have an effect on its perception in specific, local instances. Thus, the global impression of the brand or its performance perceptions of an attribute can have an impact on the value and perception of the brand in an unrelated geographic region or performance attribute. The research studied diverse markets including Argentina (developing Latin American market), China (emerging economy), Spain (west European economy), and USA (developed economy) and found that despite differing cultural backgrounds and levels of market maturity, consumers across the markets exhibited bias in terms of perceived product quality and the positivity of social impacts between competing brands. The study found that this bias was more strongly influenced by perceived and actual product quality than by the social initiatives of the company. Moreover, Becker-Olsen et al. (2011) have found that the global reach of a brand has a positive impact on its quality perception (further details below). Thus, for two products of equivalent quality and functionality, a local CSR initiative backed by global promotion of this initiative has a positive impact on the consumer perception of the brand.

Research by Becker-Olsen et al. (2011) studied the impact of social initiatives on the perception of a company and the brand perception among consumers in Mexico (a developing economy) and the United States (a developed economy). The research verified the postulations of the global brand positioning theory and verified that consumer perceptions are enhanced if a brand is viewed as global. The results showed that although sensitivity to local issues and cultural differences was appreciated by consumers, brands which emphasised the global nature of their CSR campaigns engender more positive perceptions across multiple dimensions.

All the factors explained in the above sections are summarised in the below figure:

Factors positively impacting CSR	Factors negatively impacting CSR
Strong fit between the cause and corporate area of expertise	Poor fit between cause and area of expertise
Legal, social or environmental cause	Philanthropic or charitable cause
Low level of product involvement	High level of product involvement
Positive coverage in the media	No or low media coverage
Diverse geographic regions of impact	Local impact
Long-term CSR campaign	Short term or tactical CSR campaign
High level of social awareness. High education levels among consumers	Low levels of social awareness and education among consumers
Globalised brand and global impact of CSR	Local brand and local impact of CSR

Figure 4: Impact of various factors on CSR initiatives

8 Challenges in pursuing CSR initiatives

Porter and Cramer (2006) state that there are four broad justifications for a corporate to invest in social initiatives. These are moral obligation, sustainability, license to operate and reputation.

The concept of moral obligation implies that companies, being generators of value, have an obligation to conduct their operations in such a way so as to be to the benefit of the community they operate in, and not to its detriment. However, moral right and wrong is not always clear in the business environment. What is acceptable and legal in one geographic region – for instance, sharing customer information with the government – may be considered unethical in another country. Moral obligation often cannot help decide between multiple avenues for investment in choosing the more ‘ethical’ option.

The justification for sustainability is that the operations of a company should not jeopardise the ability of the company to conduct these actions in the future, or the ability of the community to function normally in the future. Sustainability is concerned with ensuring the availability of resources to future generations. A part of sustainability is reducing wastage, which also makes the company's operations more efficient. However, investments in sustainable practices can also affect the bottom-line of the company. Secondly, some business models may be inherently unsustainable and harmful to the environment – for example, coal production.

Licence to operate means that every company not only needs official permission from governments and local regulatory bodies to operate, but also the tacit approval of their stakeholders and the communities that they operate in. This makes excellent sense for the business because it allows the company to smoothly operate in an unfamiliar market in the long-term. However, the company risks turning outsiders into stakeholders who can influence strategic business decisions such as its investments, its market positioning or its attitude toward competitors.

Fomburn and van Riel (2004) introduced the concept of 'Reputational Capital'. They defined reputational capital as a stock of perpetual and social assets which derive their value from the quality of relationships that a company builds with its stakeholders and the resultant regard in which the company is held. Companies are often strongly motivated to sponsor social initiatives in order to raise their reputational capital. However, pursuing an improvement in reputation can be an expensive proposition with vague strategic benefits. Certain companies inherently suffer from poor reputation due to the nature of the industry they operate in – for example, weapons manufacture, industrial chemicals, petroleum, etc. Attempts to sponsor social initiatives to improve reputation run the risk of being viewed as manipulation. Moreover, in case of a disaster, the function of public relations cannot be replaced by existing reputational capital (Porter and Cramer, 2006).

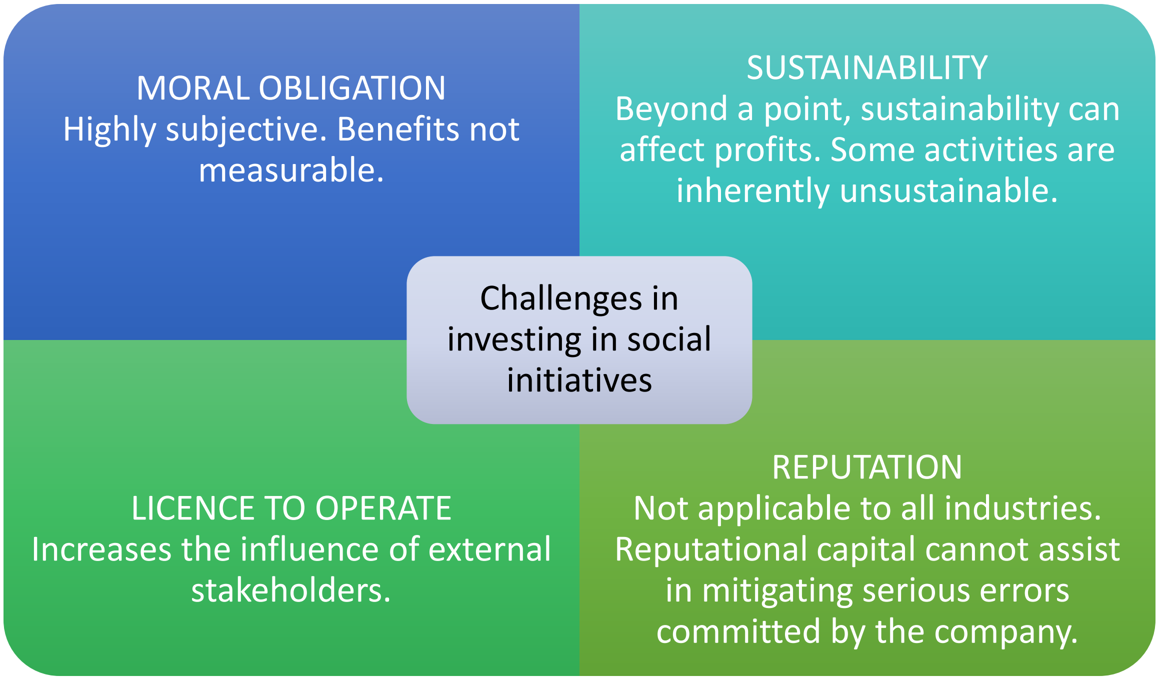

Figure 5: Challenges in investing in social initiatives. (Interpreted from Porter and Cramer, 2006)

9 Conclusion

In this paper, we have analysed various factors which affect the consumer perception of a brand and a company, and how it can be improved with the appropriate application of corporate social responsibility programmes. We have also explored what influences the effectiveness of CSR programmes, the advantages of different possibilities of their application and the challenges in implementing the same. Social initiatives are not only a powerful tool for building a sustainable brand reputation, but also a force of positive change in society. With the right use of social initiatives, the association between corporates and communities can transform into a synergistic relationship that provides long-term material and intangible benefits to both.

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