

**Influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on consumer's buying behaviour.
A study on selected Mobile phone operators in Bhubaneswar city.**

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Abstract

CSR is by no means a new idea, more companies than ever before are backing CSR initiatives such as corporate philanthropy, cause-related marketing, minority support programs, socially responsible employment, manufacturing practices and they are doing so with real financial and marketing muscle. The web sites of more than 80% of the fortune 500 companies address CSR issues, reflecting the pervasive belief among business leaders that in today's marketplace. CSR is not only an ethical/ideological imperative, but also an economic one. This growth shows that CSR proliferates on the board room agenda across many sectors and thus proves that modern corporations understand the need to give to their business a more holistic sense in order to ensure their viability. This paper starts with an introduction to the term of CSR presenting the main notions that have accompanied CSR through the years of its evolution. Thereafter, we present the literature review based on international studies on how CSR policies influence the consumers. In addition, we present some evidence based on empirical research that we conducted in the Utkal University as part of my Ph.D course; showing the extent that CSR initiatives of the Indian mobile phone operators influence students' buying decisions. Thereafter we emphasize to the few surveys that illustrate the discussion about CSR in India, especially in Bhubaneswar city. Finally, the paper concludes by showing the existing research gap in this field and suggests new research's directions.

Key Words: Corporate Social Responsibility; Consumer Buying Behaviour, Mobile Phone Operators

1. Introduction

In the last two decades we are witnessing a tremendous growth on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). More than eighty per cent (80%) of the fortune-500 companies address CSR issues on their websites (Esrock and Leichty 1998). CSR proliferates now powerfully on the boardroom agenda across many sectors suggesting that modern corporations understand the need to give to their business a more holistic sense in order to ensure their viability.

This paper highlights the neglected research area of CSR, focusing on the influence of CSR initiatives have on the consumer's behaviour. In the first phase, we try to unfold the notion of CSR realizing that no term has dominated in the international literature and we focus on the way CSR is being used and interpreted in India. Thereafter, we present a secondary analysis on the way CSR initiatives influence the consumers, counting on international relative studies. After that, we present some evidence based on past research that we conducted in Utkal University as part of Ph.D course; showing the extent that CSR initiatives of the Indian mobile phone operators influence students buying decisions. Moreover, before we conclude, we illustrate findings from the two relevant studies that deal with the CSR perceptions of the Indian public.

2. Data Source and Sampling

The data are both primary and secondary in nature and the knowledge has been obtained through various articles available on various websites.

In this paper we present the literature review based on international studies on how CSR policies influence the consumers. In addition, we present some evidence based on empirical research that we have made by taking random sample of 200 students perusing professional course at Utkal University which was a part of my Ph.D course work; showing the extent that CSR initiatives of the Indian mobile phone operators influence students buying decisions. Thereafter we emphasize to the few surveys that illustrate the discussion about CSR in India, especially in Bhubaneswar city.

3. Research Objectives

The objective of this Study is

1. To study whether the CSR initiative of a company has any influence on the buying decision.
2. To find out whether CSR activities of companies serving as a determinant of corporate success.

4. Research Methodology

The research commences by searching for the articles related to the topic CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), then having a detailed knowledge of the same. Then, studying the steps taken and efforts made in this field by various Indian telecom companies. Taking some examples of Indian companies and explaining the efforts made by listing their contributions. After identifying them, there is study of the results it had on the business and what positive results came out.

Then explaining by examples of various study that how it has lead to increase in profits and is one the reason of corporate success. Also there is special emphasis on an Indian company which can explain the topic better and help to achieve their objectives.

5. The Notion of Corporate Social Responsibility

In an attempt to accurately define the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility(CSR) we realise that no single conceptualization has dominated past research(Maignan and Ferrell 2004). We can say that CSR is the umbrella that covers a variety of theories such as *Corporate Citizenship; Stakeholder Theory; Corporate Philanthropy; Corporate Responsibility; Corporate Social Policy*. Of course, there differences among these concepts and in some cases; one theory is the continuation of another. However, in an endeavor to have a holistic view, this paper accepts all their similarities and interprets all concepts as one, using the term "CSR". Besides, this is the case in India where the term CSR, endorses all social and environmental, corporate actions. CSR evolved in India later than other countries like USA and UK. Because of that delay, all theories and discussions about CSR have been put aside and the term CSR was adopted generally describing all the relative corporate initiatives.

It is worth noting that Corporate Social Responsibility is dealing with the attention of business to various matters such as community involvement, socially responsible products and processes, and socially responsible relations among the employees(ICSSR website 2003). Bowen (1995) argues that a corporation operates on a social responsible way when the corporation's aim to make profit is been achieved while the corporation acts respecting individual rights and justice, and honours the moral minimum (cited in Andriof and Waddock 2002).

6.The Relation between CSR Initiatives and the Consumers:

After the endeavour to understand the notion of CSR, we can see now the literature on studies that explore the relation among CSR initiatives and the consumers. The first worldwide survey on the expectations that the public has from corporations, was developed and coordinated by Environics in 1999 named '**The Millennium Poll on CSR**' and involved representative sample groups of 1,000 citizens from 23 respective countries globally. The survey revealed, among other things, that two third of citizens desire the companies' contribution to broader societal roles, setting higher ethical standards and helping the creation of a 'better' society.

Moreover, twenty percent(20%) of the consumers during the past twelve months had either rewarded or punished companies on the basis of their social performance and almost the same amount of consumers have considered doing so. The percentage of people that have actually engaged in such behavior reaches thirty-nine per cent (39%) in Northern Europe, with fourteen per cent (14%) having considered doing so. Furthermore, as the findings of the survey illustrate, half of the respondents get influenced in the way they perceive a company, according to its social performance. Similarly, on the findings of the Millennium Poll on CSR, Environics International conducted the 2002 CSR Monitor involving sample groups of 1,000 citizens from twenty five different countries. The results of the research show that one third of the consumers actively reward ethical corporate behaviour and in contrast punish the unethical one. In addition, thirty per cent (30%) of shareholders declared that they would sell off their shares in a company that acted in a socially irresponsible way; even if the earnings were important.

Furthermore, according to the **MORI research** conducted in 2003 on British public's views of Corporate Responsibility (2,026 adults), the majority of the respondents did not think that most companies listen and respond to public concerns on social and environmental matters although that was a vital issue for them (Dawkins 2004). At the same time thirty-eight per cent (38%) of the public, stated that when they decide to purchase it is very important for them that the company they are going to choose shows a high degree of social responsibility. Thus, answering the question 'when forming a decision about buying a product or service from a particular company or organisation, how important is it that it shows a high degree of social responsibility? Eighty-four per cent (84%) answered that it is important for them (38% answered very important and 46% fairly important). This percentage was seventy per cent(70%) in 1997 which shows that the consuming public has become more sophisticated and sceptical about its buying decisions.

Similarly, a **Walker survey** (1994) showed that half of the consumers are more likely to purchase from an organisation which has good social reputation, while six in ten are more likely to avoid an organisation with a bad reputation (Goodmoney website).

In addition, research conducted in 1999 by "**Fleishman-Hillard**", an international public relations agency, found that eighty-six per cent (86%) of the respondents would consider themselves more likely to buy a product or service if they learnt that the company which offers the product or service helps to improve society (Prpunditwebsite).

One of the most important surveys about American consumer attitudes towards CSR was conducted by **Roper Starch** Worldwide and Cone/Coughlin Communications in 1993 using as a sample of 2000 men and women aged 18 years or over (Cone/Roper 1994 cited in Simon 1995). Sixty-four per cent (64%) of the respondents stated that CSR should always be included in a firm's activities and eighty-five per cent (85%) declared that they would look more favourably upon a company that supports a cause they cared about. In addition, the survey shows that CSR attracts new customers, as seventy-six per cent (76%) would consider switching to brands that share their interest for the community (Jones 1997 cited in Maignan and Ferrel 2001). **Brown and Dacin** (1997) showed that a negative image of CSR can damage the consumer's valuation of a product or a service while in contrast a positive CSR image can improve

product evaluations. Hence, CSR can create the context where the consumer develops purchase intentions because he/she has a positive image for the company. A survey conducted by **Creyer and Ross** in 1997 highlighted the way consumers think about corporate responsibility issues and the factors that influence their purchase decisions. Among others, consumers reported that they expect corporations to behave ethically; they included the ethicality of a firm as one of the key factors they take into account when buying and they are ready to reward ethical actions by paying higher prices for a product from an ethical company. In the same direction, the **UK TGI survey** for 2002 indicated that sixty-seven per cent (67%) of respondents agree with the statement 'it is important that a company acts ethically' (Bmrb website, a). One of the few studies that focused on students' attitudes towards CSR was conducted by the **Pathfinder Research Group** which worked on the responses of 772 students in eight countries (Goodmoney website). Eight in ten students said they were trying to recycle on campus and seven in ten preferred products and packaging that was environmental safe while fifty-eight per cent (58%) reported their willingness to pay slightly more for these kinds of products. Likewise, a survey involving over 1.000 students worldwide revealed that CSR is one of the important issues that students take into consideration when forming an impression about a corporation (Globescan website). The same research also indicates that CSR has a crucial role in the students' future employment decisions as one in two students claim that they would not apply for a job with an irresponsible company. It is notable, that especially the North American and the West European students engage CSR actively in their purchase decisions as the majority claims to have punished a company that behaved in a socially irresponsible manner.

In contrast to the above arguments, we can find evidence suggesting an opposite view. It has been argued that consumers do not feel strongly about corporate ethics, which can be illustrated by three factors (Millard Brown website). Firstly, if social responsibility was an important issue; the market share of most ethical brands would not be so small (only few of the 'ethical' brands take a share in the market of over 3 per cent (2004). In addition, research shows that an overall link between corporate perceptions and the consumer's apprehension of brands does not exist. For instance, although 'Nike' received one of the lowest corporate reputation scores in a BRAND study, it received at the same time one of the highest bonding scores in the market. Similarly, whereas in a research by "Millward Brown" in 2002, some seventy-five percent (75%) of the sample of UK consumers had boycotted a brand or chosen to purchase a brand stating as a criterion the way the company behaves, a significant number of consumers did not include ethics in the reasons that made them take such decision. The awareness among the public for social and environmental corporate practices is very low (Dawkins 2004). Only thirty per cent (30%) are able to name a company that they think is particularly ethically, environmentally or socially responsible and only thirty-seven per cent (37%) can name a particular company that has practices to help society or the community. MORI research may indicate that the Western consumer has become more sophisticated and sceptical but a sophisticated consumer does not force consume ethically (Titus and Bradford 1996). It is notable that the majority of the public is merely expressing concerns about these issues but does not place ethical considerations above other criteria regarding buying decisions. As a previous survey of MORI (2000) for the Co-operative bank shows, only 5% of the public puts ethical considerations as the most important criterion for buying a product or service (cited in Dawkins 2004). In addition, although the MORI research (2003) shows thirty-eight per cent (38%) of respondents thinking as very important the social responsibility of a firm when buying, it is notable that the equivalent percentage in the research of 2001 was forty-six per cent (46%). Some may argue that this decline means that public lost its interest in CSR issues. However, the writers of the MORI research justify this downshift because of the difficult economic times after the September 11th terrorist attacks and the company scandals that reduced people's trust such as the Enron and Worldcom cases (Dawkins, 2004).

7. Personal Research on this Field

In an endeavour to contribute filling the above vague research gap, we conducted research in 2014 as part of our Ph.D course in the department of Business Administration at Utkal University. We examined the extent that CSR initiatives of the Indian mobile phone operators influence students buying decisions. In order to do that we analyzed secondary data material from companies' documentation; conducted semi structured interviews with the CSR managers of two mobile phone operators (Vodafone and Airtel) and dispensed questionnaires to postgraduate students of the Utkal University (students studying professional courses). Some of the findings are going to be presented next as a continuation to our above discussion. When we asked the students to choose from a list and rank their key decision criteria for choosing an operator, call debits was the most common criterion and the most important one.

Table-1

Please select and rank which of the following were your key decision criteria for choosing an operator:		
Decision Criteria		% of respondents (rounded up) R stands for Rank
1	Call debits	44% (R1-38.67, R2-4, R3-1.33)
2	Network and masts	20%
3	Operator's responsible performance	06%
4	Customer service	05%
5	Offers on handset	10%
6	Other	15%

As in **Table-1** illustrates, forty-four per cent (44%) of the respondents considered as a criterion the call debits of the operators (38.67% had rank it first; 4%second and 1.33% third). It is significant that the responsible performance of the mobile phone operators was a criterion only for less than six per cent (6%) but from the people that chose it; four in five had it as the most important. The social performance of the operators was the least important criterion that people take into consideration when they choose an operator, left behind customer service, offers on handset, network and call debits.

Table-2

When you think about responsible business you have in mind a business which:		
Decision Criteria Scale		% of respondents
1	There is no evidence against it proving that behaves responsible to its stakeholders	13%
2	Adopts Social Responsibility policies	22%
3	Both of the above	61%
4	Other	04%

As **Table-2** shows, more than twenty-one per cent (22%) of the respondents think that a responsible business is a business that adopts social responsibility policies while thirteen per cent (13%) compromises if there is no evidence of irresponsible behaviour against it. Yet, the vast majority (61%) has in mind when thinking of a responsible business a business that there is no evidence against it proving that behaves irresponsible to its stakeholders but at the same time adopts CSR policies.

Table-3

To what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statement: An organisation that does not adopt CSR policies is not acting with responsibility towards its stakeholders.	
Decision Criteria scale	
% of respondents (rounded up)	
1	Agree
2	Slightly agree
3	Neutral
4	Slightly disagree
5	Disagree
6	Unsure

The vast majority of the students confirmed the importance that CSR has on the way they see a business. As we can observe in **Table-3** almost seven in ten of the respondents tend to agree that an organisation that does not adopt CSR policies is not acting responsibly to its stakeholders. In fact thirty-nine per cent (40%) agreed with that and twenty-nine per cent (29%) slightly agreed. In contrast, only fourteen percent (15%) disagreed and seven per cent (7%) disagreed slightly.

Table-4

Buying reactions on the basis of social performance	
Q1-Would you boycott a mobile phone operator if evidence showed that it behaves irresponsibly to its stakeholders?	
Q2-Would you choose a specific phone operator in order to encourage and reward particular Social Responsibility practices?	
Decision Criteria scale	
% of respondents (rounded up)	
1	Yes
2	Probably Yes
3	Unsure
4	Probably Not
5	No

In addition, as our findings demonstrate as in the **Table-4** we can see most of the respondents showed how important is for them that a company behaves responsibly and claimed that they would change their purchase decisions and boycott a mobile phone operator if they would realize that it behaved irresponsibly to its stakeholders. Thus, half of the students said they would probably do that and thirteen per cent (14%) stated they would. Two in ten are not sure if they would boycott an irresponsible mobile phone operator and only near three per cent (3%) said they would not do that while thirteen per cent (13%) said they would probably not. However, things were different when students were asked if they would choose a specific mobile phone operator in order to encourage and reward particular CSR practices Again, the majority said they would do that with forty-two per cent (44%)stating that they probably would and thirteen per cent (13%) stating that they would. The percentage of those who were unsure was twelve per cent (12%) and the ones saying they would probably not engage in such behaviour reached twenty-six per cent(26%) while students who answered a straight no, were equal to five per cent (5%).The responses to the above two questions are presented in correlation in Table-4.

Table-5
Mobile phone operators' score on social performance in percentage

Answers MP Operators	Very good	Good	Neutral	Bad	Very bad
AirTel	3.13	15.13	74.69	3.56	3.49
Aircel	3.17	17.46	71.78	3.59	4.00
BSNL	0	4.84	87.10	3.23	4.84
Idea	0	4.92	88.52	3.28	3.28
Vodafone	11.11	14.29	68.25	4.76	1.59

Moreover, as we clearly see in **Table-5**, most of the respondents could not distinguish the responsible performance of the mobile phone operators and they scored them as 'neutral' on an average of seventy eight per cent (78%). In the best position on the respondents' view seems to be Vodafone which has been scored 'neutral' from "only "sixty-eight per cent (68%) while one in ten scored Vodafone's social performance as 'very good' -and fourteen per cent (14%) scored it as 'good'. In the next positions seems to follow Aircel and Airtel where the 'neutral' evaluation of social performance is near seventy-one (71%) and seventy-four per cent (74%) respectively. In the case of Airtel, fifteen per cent (15%) graded it as 'good' and BSNL per cent (3%)as 'very good'. In Aircel's case seventeen per cent (17%) scored it as 'good' while BSNL per cent (3%) as 'very good'. However, it is noteworthy that Airtel and Aircel had been scored 'bad' and 'very bad' from the least respondents (3.56% and 3.49%, 3.59% and 4.00%respectively) while Vodafone's social performance was scored as 'bad' and 'very bad' from six per cent (4.76% and 1.59%). BSNL, Idea scored 'very good 'from the respondents as (4.84% and 3.28 respectively) but almost five per cent (5%) scored BSNL and Idea as 'good'.

Furthermore, the findings of the questionnaire reveal the low level of awareness that public has about particular CSR practices. Near seventy-eight per cent (78%)responded that they were not familiar with any CSR practices that mobile phone operators have. Sixteen per cent (16%) were able to recognize a CSR practice of Vodafone while ten and nine per cent could recognize a CSR policy from Airtel and Aircel respectively. It is notable that only 1, 45 per cent was familiar with a CSR practice of BSNL and Idea.

In addition, close to one third of the respondents think that most mobile phone operators in India respond to public concerns on social and environmental issues with five per cent (5%) to agree with this statement and twenty-four per cent (24%) to agree slightly. More than half of the respondents were unsure about this while twelve per cent (12%) slightly disagreed and five per cent (5%) disagreed. However, one third of the respondents did not think that most India's mobile phone operators are doing their best to meet their social and environmental responsibilities. Almost one in two respondents was unsure whereas twenty per cent (20%) believed that the Indian mobile phone operators are doing their best in this field. The respondents' opinion varied about the information given out from mobile phone operators regarding their responsible behaviour. More than one third trusted this information with thirty-four per cent (34%) stating that they probably trust it and only 1, 5 per cent trusts it completely. Less than thirty per cent (30%) were unsure whether they trust or not this information while thirty-five (35%) per cent reported that they probably do not trust it and 1.5 per cent does not trust it at all.

We observed that the majority of students would be expected to boycott a mobile phone operator if evidence showed that it behaved irresponsibly to its stakeholders. But for the students, irresponsible behaviour means that mobile phone operators do not use CSR practices. In fact, students confirmed the above point directly when seven in ten stated that an organisation that does not adopt CSR policies is acting irresponsibly to its stakeholders (Table-3). That implies that they would boycott a mobile phone operator that does not include CSR in its business. In parallel, more than half of the students stated that they would prefer a mobile phone operator in order to encourage its particular CSR practices.

Nevertheless, only less than six per cent (6%) used the responsible performance as criterion to choose the mobile phone operator they were using. We believe that the answer to this ambiguity is the fact that most students do not have any knowledge for the CSR initiatives of the mobile phone operators. As we saw, the vast majority believes that the mobile phone operators' social performance is neutral and is not able to recognize CSR initiatives of those companies. However, our findings imply that the buying decisions of the students would be influenced if they had knowledge about CSR. So, most students not only would prefer a mobile phone operator if they knew that adopts CSR practices but at the same time they would boycott one operator that does not use CSR initiatives.

8. Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to highlight the undeveloped research area of Corporate Social Responsibility focusing on the extent the CSR initiatives influence the consumers. Firstly, we wanted to elaborate the notion of CSR as a concept and tool that has been evolved through the decades. We observed a lack of a leading term in the literature and that CSR is being used as an idea that covers a variety of actions and suggested behaviour. Moreover, we debated the difficulty in tracing the socially responsible business and discussed briefly the CSR evolution in India, where CSR is used as an impulse that adopts all relative theories. Thereafter, we highlighted the area that the title of this paper indicated. What the relation between CSR and the consumers is? We reviewed past studies on this research field and realized that contradictory findings exist. There is research evidence proving that consumers really care about CSR initiatives when buying but at the same time other studies undermine such positive relation. Thus, the title's question is hard to be answered with a straightforward way and we proved theories suggesting that there is a lack of consensus on the way the public appreciates CSR and on the way CSR influence buying decisions. Thereafter we presented briefly some findings of personal research in this field conducted as part of the Ph.D course in Business Administration. Noticing among others, according to our findings, that the buying decisions of the students would have been influenced if they had better knowledge about CSR issues. It is important to notice that the development of CSR does not equally occur around the globe and so the value of worldwide percentages in general and not for each country in particular is questionable.

Ensuing to the above, we presented briefly some relative findings from the few studies that focus on the way Indian public deals with CSR issues so casually. It is notable that Indian citizens-consumers make progress regarding their sensitivity and their reactions to CSR related topics. The relation between Indian public and CSR and especially the extent that CSR initiatives influence buying decisions has not been studied in an adequate way, offering space and incentives for further research. CSR would play an empowered role in the new governance models of Indian coming years, therefore studies in this field are needed in order to understand its dynamics.

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