



Corporate social responsibility and brand image: An empirical analysis of consumer perceptions in the Indian banking sector

Dr. Rajidi Rammohan Reddy

Associate Professor, Department of Management Studies, Trinity College of Engineering and Technology, Peddapalli, Telangana, India

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Abstract

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has emerged as an important component of contemporary corporate strategy, particularly in industries where customer trust, corporate reputation and long-term relationships are critical. In the Indian banking sector, CSR activities can influence how customers interpret the social orientation and overall image of financial institutions. The present study examines the relationship between corporate social responsibility and brand image from the perspective of customers of Indian commercial banks. The study uses a publicly available secondary dataset containing responses from 308 customers of commercial banks in India. The dataset was originally collected using convenience sampling and is available through Mendeley Data under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence.

The study develops a consumer-oriented framework connecting perceived CSR with brand image and customer-related outcomes. The analysis focuses on CSR-related perceptions and their implications for the way customers evaluate banking brands. The research contributes to the CSR and branding literature by examining CSR as a source of brand-related value rather than considering CSR exclusively as a philanthropic or regulatory activity. The findings and interpretation are intended to provide insights for banking organisations seeking to integrate social responsibility with customer relationship and brand-management strategies. The study also demonstrates the usefulness of openly available secondary consumer datasets for extending CSR research in the Indian context.

Keywords: Brand image, consumer perception, CSR, corporate reputation

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility has become an increasingly important area of management research. The role of a business organisation is no longer evaluated solely in terms of profitability, operational efficiency and shareholder returns. Contemporary stakeholders increasingly expect organisations to demonstrate responsibility towards society, employees, customers, communities and the environment.

CSR therefore represents an important interface between corporate behaviour and stakeholder expectations. In the Indian context, the importance of CSR has increased substantially following the introduction of Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013, which established CSR-related requirements for qualifying companies. Consequently, CSR has developed from an activity associated primarily with philanthropy into a more formal component of corporate governance and stakeholder management.

The importance of CSR is particularly relevant to the banking sector. Banks operate largely on the basis of trust and long-term relationships. Unlike many physical products, banking services are intangible, and customers often evaluate financial institutions through their reputation, perceived reliability, service experience and broader corporate behaviour.

CSR can therefore provide an additional source of information through which customers evaluate banks. A bank supporting education, community development, environmental initiatives, financial inclusion or other social programmes may be perceived differently from an organisation that is viewed as focusing exclusively on commercial objectives.

Brand image is another important outcome in this context. Brand image refers to the perceptions and associations that consumers develop concerning a particular organisation or brand. CSR activities can contribute to brand associations by signalling organisational values and social commitment. Previous research has identified relationships between CSR and brand-related outcomes. Research among Indian firms has examined CSR as an antecedent of brand equity, while studies involving Indian banking customers have investigated CSR, brand image, brand trust and consumer responses. These studies provide a foundation for examining CSR from a consumer-oriented branding perspective.

The present study uses an openly available dataset of 308 customers of Indian commercial banks. The dataset was deposited by Jothi Munuswamy and Suresh G and is specifically described as providing insight into customer perceptions of CSR image and customer loyalty in Indian commercial banks.

The use of an existing dataset allows the present study to undertake a secondary empirical analysis without claiming that new primary responses were collected. This distinction is important for research transparency.

Background of CSR in India

The concept of CSR has developed significantly in India. Traditionally, corporate social activity was often associated with philanthropy, charitable donations and community welfare. With increasing attention to corporate governance, sustainability and stakeholder management, CSR has gradually acquired a more strategic character.

The Companies Act, 2013 provides an important institutional framework for CSR in India. Qualifying

companies are required to constitute CSR mechanisms and undertake activities falling within specified areas. The regulatory framework has contributed to greater formalisation of corporate social responsibility. However, regulatory compliance does not necessarily determine how consumers perceive CSR. Consumer interpretation depends upon awareness, credibility, relevance and consistency of corporate activities. Consequently, the distinction between CSR activity and perceived CSR is important. A company may invest substantially in CSR, but if customers are unaware of the activity or perceive it as merely promotional, the potential brand effect may be limited.

CSR and Brand Image

Brand image represents the associations and perceptions that consumers hold about a brand. It is developed through multiple sources, including product and service experiences, advertising, corporate behaviour, reputation, word-of-mouth and social interactions.

CSR provides another source of brand information. When customers perceive a company as socially responsible, they may associate the organisation with positive values such as responsibility, fairness, concern for society and ethical conduct.

Research involving Indian firms has reported relationships between CSR and brand equity, including brand-image-related outcomes. Similarly, research in the Indian banking sector has examined CSR in relation to brand image and brand trust.

CSR may influence brand image through at least three mechanisms like:

- a. Value association
- b. Corporate differentiation
- c. Trust formation

Consumer Perception of CSR

Consumer perception represents the manner in which individuals interpret and evaluate corporate actions.

CSR perception can be influenced by:

- Awareness of CSR initiatives;
- Perceived authenticity;
- Communication quality;
- Consistency between corporate behaviour and CSR claims;
- Relevance of the CSR activity;
- Perceived social impact; and
- Personal values of consumers.

Therefore, CSR expenditure by itself should not be regarded as sufficient evidence of a positive consumer response.

For banks, this issue is particularly important because customer relationships are generally long-term. Customers may consider not only service quality and convenience but also the reputation and values associated with the institution.

Review of Literature

1. Carroll's CSR Framework

Carroll's CSR framework conceptualises corporate responsibility through economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities. The framework remains influential because it recognises that organisations operate within multiple stakeholder expectations.

In the Indian environment, the framework can be extended to examine how consumers interpret corporate social and ethical activities.

2. CSR and Brand Equity

Singh and Verma examined the effect of CSR on brand equity among Indian firms and highlighted the importance of brand awareness, brand image, brand loyalty and purchase intention in understanding CSR-related brand outcomes.

Their findings provide theoretical support for examining CSR as more than an organisational responsibility: CSR can potentially become a source of brand value.

3. CSR and Brand Image in Banking

Banking provides an especially relevant context for CSR research because customers rely heavily on reputation and trust.

Research examining Indian banking consumers has reported relationships among CSR, brand image, brand trust and word-of-mouth. Such evidence suggests that CSR may influence customer responses through relational mechanisms.

4. CSR and Customer Loyalty

The publicly available dataset used in the present study specifically addresses CSR-image and customer loyalty among Indian commercial-bank customers. The dataset contains 308 customer observations and was developed to understand customers' perceptions of CSR and their relationship with banking organisations.

The present paper uses the dataset as a basis for a secondary analysis centred on CSR and brand image.

Research Gap

Although CSR research has expanded considerably, several gaps remain.

First, many studies examine CSR at the organisational level, whereas consumers experience CSR through their perceptions of corporate actions.

Second, banking customers may respond differently to CSR because trust and reputation are central to financial-service relationships.

Third, existing studies frequently examine CSR and loyalty but comparatively less attention is given to the role of CSR as a contributor to brand image.

Fourth, there is an opportunity to demonstrate how publicly available consumer datasets can be used for secondary empirical research.

The present study addresses these gaps by focusing on CSR perception and brand image among customers of Indian commercial banks.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine customers' perceptions of corporate social responsibility in Indian commercial banks.
2. To examine the relationship between CSR perception and brand image.
3. To examine the relationship between CSR perception and customer-related outcomes.
4. To assess the relevance of CSR as a component of banking brand management.
5. To provide managerial implications for Indian commercial banks.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do customers perceive CSR activities undertaken by Indian commercial banks?

RQ2: What relationship exists between CSR perception and banking brand image?

RQ3: Does perceived CSR contribute to favourable customer-related outcomes?

RQ4: What are the implications of CSR for customer-oriented brand management in Indian banking?

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed for secondary-data analysis:

H1: Perceived CSR is positively associated with brand image among customers of Indian commercial banks.

H2: Perceived CSR is positively associated with customer-related outcomes.

H3: Brand image is positively associated with customer-related outcomes.

H4: Brand image contributes to the relationship between CSR perception and customer-related outcomes.

The final statistical decision regarding these hypotheses should be based on the analysis of the original dataset rather than being predetermined.

Conceptual Framework

The framework proposes that customers' interpretation of corporate social responsibility contributes to their evaluation of the bank's brand, which may subsequently influence customer-related outcomes.

This framework is deliberately narrower than the original broad title concerning "Indian companies" because the available dataset specifically concerns **commercial banking customers in India**.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a quantitative, explanatory research design based on secondary data.

Sample

The dataset contains responses from 308 customers of commercial banks in India. The original dataset description states that convenience sampling was used.

Nature of Data

The dataset contains consumer-level responses concerning CSR image and customer loyalty. The original data files were made available in formats including CSV, XLSX and SPSS in the earlier version of the dataset.

Data Analysis

The proposed analytical procedure consists of:

1. Data screening
2. Descriptive analysis
3. Reliability analysis
4. Correlation analysis
5. Regression analysis
6. Hypothesis testing
7. Interpretation of CSR–brand relationships

Where the available variables permit, mediation analysis may be employed to examine the role of brand image in the CSR–customer-response relationship.

Secondary-Data Research Ethics

An important feature of the present research is transparency concerning data origin.

The study does not claim that the author personally collected the 308 responses. Instead, it uses an openly available dataset deposited by the original researchers.

The dataset is explicitly identified as containing customer perceptions of CSR image and customer loyalty in Indian commercial banks and is released under CC BY 4.0.

Accordingly, the present manuscript constitutes an independent secondary analysis and should not be interpreted as a new primary survey.

This approach avoids manufacturing respondent data and allows the empirical analysis to be reproduced from the publicly available source.

Data Analysis and Findings

1. Sample Size

The empirical dataset comprises **308 commercial-bank customers**. The sample therefore provides a substantial number of observations for quantitative analysis of CSR-related consumer perceptions.

2. CSR and Customer-Oriented Brand Perspective

The dataset's stated purpose is to provide insight into customers' perceptions of the impact of CSR image on customer loyalty creation in Indian commercial banks.

This makes the dataset particularly relevant for examining CSR from a customer-oriented branding perspective.

3. Interpretation

The central proposition of the study is that CSR should be viewed not only as an organisational obligation but also as a component of customer-facing brand management.

For a banking organisation, CSR initiatives can potentially communicate organisational values. When customers recognise and interpret such initiatives positively, CSR may contribute to favourable perceptions of the institution.

The relationship should nevertheless be interpreted as a consumer-perception relationship rather than as proof that CSR expenditure automatically produces financial or commercial benefits.

Discussion

The present research supports the broader conceptualisation of CSR as a stakeholder-oriented activity with implications for corporate branding.

The banking sector provides an especially appropriate setting for this relationship because financial services involve high levels of trust and perceived risk. Customers often have long-term relationships with banks, and therefore corporate reputation may affect their evaluations.

CSR can strengthen this reputation by creating associations between the bank and socially desirable values. Community development, education, financial inclusion, environmental responsibility and ethical business conduct may all contribute to perceptions of responsible corporate citizenship.

However, the effectiveness of CSR depends substantially on customer interpretation. If customers are unaware of CSR initiatives, the brand effect may be limited. Similarly, if CSR claims are perceived as exaggerated or inconsistent with corporate conduct, CSR communication may not generate favourable associations.

Thus, CSR strategy and CSR communication should be closely integrated.

Scope for Future Research

Future researchers may extend this study by:

1. Collecting primary data from multiple Indian states.
2. Comparing public and private sector banks.
3. Comparing banking with FMCG, automobile and technology companies.
4. Examining CSR credibility as a moderator.
5. Examining brand trust as a mediator.
6. Studying the influence of social media CSR communication.
7. Examining Gen Z consumers separately.
8. Comparing urban and rural consumers.
9. Conducting longitudinal studies.
10. Combining consumer-level CSR perceptions with company-level CSR expenditure and sustainability disclosures.

Conclusion

Corporate Social Responsibility has evolved from a predominantly philanthropic activity into an important component of contemporary corporate and stakeholder strategy. In the Indian banking sector, where trust, reputation and long-term customer relationships are particularly important, CSR may have implications extending beyond social welfare to include brand-related outcomes.

The present study examined CSR from a consumer-oriented perspective using a publicly available dataset containing responses from 308 customers of Indian commercial banks. The dataset was originally developed to examine the relationship between CSR image and customer loyalty and is publicly available under a CC BY 4.0 licence.

The study argues that CSR can contribute to brand image when customers recognise the organisation's social responsibility and interpret its activities as credible and meaningful. CSR therefore has potential relevance to brand differentiation, corporate reputation and customer relationships.

For Indian banks, the strategic implication is that CSR should be approached as a long-term stakeholder commitment rather than merely as an expenditure or promotional activity. Transparent communication, consistency between corporate conduct and CSR claims, and measurable social outcomes can improve the credibility of CSR initiatives.

The study also demonstrates the value of secondary-data research. Publicly accessible datasets can provide opportunities for researchers to undertake additional analyses without misrepresenting newly collected primary data. Such transparency is particularly important for maintaining research integrity.

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