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## The Impact of Internal Corporate Social Responsibility in Enhancing Competitive Advantage

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The aim of this research is to review research on competitive advantage. This study also reviews the dimensions through which internal corporate social responsibility can contribute towards enhancing the competitive advantage. Employee well-being as a dimension of internal corporate social responsibility is reviewed. This study elucidates the research gaps and potential relationships that may explain this theoretical framework.

**Design/ Methodology:** This study reviewed the literature for the variables of competitive advantage, and internal corporate social responsibility for the last 15 years in management and organizational studies. This review helps identify the gaps that might help explain the further study. **Findings:** This competitive advantage review, ICSR, creates a gap that is critical to organizations. This demonstrates that organizations engage in ICSR activities based on social exchange theory and a resource-based view that differentiates them from their competitors, leading to an improvement in competitive advantage.

**Research Limitations:** This research limitation is that only studies conducted within the past 15 years on internal corporate social responsibility and competitive advantage are considered. This study ignores the other variables that can increase competitive advantage in an organization. Another limitation of this review was it considers only studies that used the survey methods. **Practical Implications:** This review demonstrates that an organization-level policy can be developed to improve the internal social responsibility capabilities of companies as this is a reality as a competitive advantage can now no longer be gained through marketing the products. **Originality/ Value:** This is the first review that considers employee well-being as an important determinant of internal corporate social responsibility that can be used to enhance the competitive advantage of the firms. This review focuses on the studies that are conducted in the last 15 years around internal corporate social responsibility and competitive advantage.

**Keywords:** Internal Corporate Social Responsibility, Employee Well-Being, Competitive Advantage, Pakistan

### Introduction

The researcher in this paper provides a conceptual overview of two widely researched approaches: Internal Corporate Social Responsibility (ICSR) and Competitive Advantage,

based on an extensive literature review. Today, I-CSR creates differentiated certification authorities for an organization. However, ongoing research is increasingly positive (Zhao, 2019). The systematic review revealed two organizing themes: the role of I-CSR, the connection between I-CSR and the competitive advantage. This literature review reveals a new way to connect CSR to a potential edge as competitive advantage in the marketplace and the satisfaction of staff. CSR has gone from being merely a strategy to being an everyday action for businesses. Employee well-being is an essential part of CSR implementation and its sustainable competitive advantage (Korschun et al., 2014).

Research studies regarding internal corporate social responsibility (ICSR) are continually gaining popularity in investigations into businesses. Examining ICSR is very important in order to comprehend the success of a corporate entity and to encourage both new hires and staff retention (Obrad & Gherheş, 2018). Businesses are seeking out methods to foster a closer relationship with their personnel since contented and dedicated staff are the building blocks for an organization's success (Bakotić, 2016; Bayraktar & Şencan, 2017). Research into incorporation of ICSR within the realms of business, public relations, and organizational communication is a highly relevant topic in emerging nations (Gharleghi et al., 2018; Chan & Mohd, 2018). Furthermore, a competitive edge requires an equipped, skillful and committed labor force in order to make a knowledge economy. Gao (2019) pointed out that utilizing ICSR techniques can promote employee involvement. As a result, taking into consideration the components of ICSR in organizational processes can bring insight that aids in meeting the objectives of the field.

Employees in service sector organizations can provide a competitive advantage (Zameer, 2018). CSR promotes positive attitudes and behaviors among employees (Bauman & Skitka, 2012; Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). Employee attitudes that are beneficial to organizations range from a sense of belonging in their workplace (Zhu et al., 2014; Valentine & Fleischman, 2008; Roeck et al., 2014) to a sense of connectedness with the organization (Farooq et al., 2014; Mueller et al., 2012; Collier & Esteban, 2007; Dogl & Holtbrgge, 2014; Hofman & Newman, 2014). Zhuo (2017) emphasized that these benefits are an integral part of many businesses, as hard work and emotional commitment lead to greater financial success. Gond et al (2017) highlighted that, most researchers have found that the way an individual views CSR has a direct and consistent impact on their employees' positive attitudes.

In this paper, we have structured our discussion as follows: First, we explain the link between CSR and competitive advantage and outline our research goals and methodology. Second, we examine how the integration of CSR into business practices can lead to a practical and coherent system of CSR levels, as demonstrated by a number of real-world cases. Finally, we present our conclusions and suggest possible directions for future research.

### **Objectives**

- To identify and review literature on ICSR and Competitive Advantage.
- Identifying and examining literature on employee wellbeing as ICSR and its impact on competitive advantage
- To develop a framework to review ICSR and Competitive Advantage.
- To investigate literature and identify gaps and areas for further research in ICSR and competitive advantage.

## Literature Review

### Internal Corporate Social

An important and much-discussed topic in the discussion about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is whether the adoption of CSR practices can improve a company's competitiveness (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Several studies have been conducted to examine the link between CSR and competitive advantage, commonly known as the business case for CSR. Most of these studies support the notion that there is a positive association between CSR and competitive advantage (Vilanova et al., 2009; Ghoul et al., 2011; Becchetti et al., 2012; Clarkson et al., 2008; Sharfman & Fernando, 2008). However, some studies have presented conflicting results (Hassel et al., 2005; Cordeiro et al., 1997) and some have perceived the relationship as neutral (Wagner, 2005; Nelling et al., 2009). The conflicting results have led to several meta-analyses of the existing literature (Orlitzky et al., 2003; Guenther et al., 2011; Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Griffin et al., 1997).

Most studies on corporate social responsibility (CSR) have primarily focused on developed countries in Europe and the United States (Saeidi et al., 2015; Raj et al., 2019). However, the implementation of CSR practices in developing countries differs significantly, and the results of CSR research in developed countries may not be applicable to developing countries (Huang et al., 2017; Boehe et al., 2010; Abugre & Nyuur, 2015; Bene et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic studies on CSR in developing countries confronted with acute social and environmental crises that pose unique CSR challenges and agendas in these contexts (Raj et al., 2019; Arli et al., 2010). The impact of internationalization activities on the relationship between I-CSR and competitiveness in these companies is still largely unexplored.

Despite the growing volume of research on the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) perceptions on positive employee outcomes, there is still limited knowledge on how CSR perceptions impact negative employee outcomes such as deviant attitudes and behaviors (Gond et al., 2017). While some studies have found that CSR practices can reduce emotional exhaustion (Watkins et al., 2015) and prevent cynicism (Sheel et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2011), few studies have assessed the impact of CSR examines for negative employee results. Although employees are increasingly expected to be involved in CSR, employee involvement in International Corporate Social Responsibility (I-CSR) is not well understood (Kim et al., 2010).

Orlitzky et al (2003) were among those who supported the concept that CSR can be mutually reinforcing in certain circumstances, e.g, Improving reputation. According to this view, improving CSR or corporate social performance can lead to greater corporate competitiveness or financial performance, and increased competitiveness enables the implementation of CSR measures. However, the mediating factors and their function in achieving this reinforcement are not well defined, and thus further research is needed to examine this relationship.

Orlitzky et al (2003) were among those who supported the concept that CSR can be mutually reinforcing in specific circumstances, such as enhancing reputation. According to this viewpoint, an improvement in CSR, or corporate social performance, can lead to greater competitiveness, or financial performance of firms, and increased competitiveness enables the implementation of CSR measures. However, the intermediary factors and their function in achieving this reinforcement are not well defined, and hence, further research is needed to explore this relationship.

### **Well-being of Employees**

Well-being can be defined as an employee's overall experience and functioning in the workplace, encompassing physical, social and mental well-being (Zahavy, 2008; Warr, 1987; Grant, 2007). Physical well-being relates to a person's ability to perform physical activities without limitations due to physical problems or pain (Ware et al., 1996), while mental well-being encompasses a person's ability to fulfill their own potential and to cope normally with stress, work efficiently and contribute to their community (Jahoda, 1988). Physical and mental health, then, relate not only to a person's state of health, but also to their ability to achieve optimal health. The present study addresses the physical, social and mental well-being of employees, as well-being plays a crucial role in creating a healthier organizational environment that supports employees to perform better (Hays et al., 2003; Larouche et al., 2020). Previous studies have also used wellbeing as a factor in improving employee performance (Larouche et al., 2020; Tudor et al., 2001; Daley, 1996).

Sharma et al (2016) found that employee well-being encompasses both physical and psychological aspects. Well-being is not only a concern of the individual employee, but a decisive factor for the success of a company. Danna and Griffin (1999) found that poor employee well-being can have negative effects on physical and mental health, leading to higher health insurance costs and reduced worker productivity. In addition, employee well-being has been shown to influence employee attitudes and behavior (Sharma et al., 2016; Hrabe & Szalacha, 2013; Danna & Griffin, 1999). By implementing CSR initiatives, organizations can improve their reputation and relationships with stakeholders, which can increase their social legitimacy and reduce the risk of negative public scrutiny. This can ultimately lead to better business performance and financial results. In addition, CSR initiatives that focus on employee well-being can contribute to higher job satisfaction, motivation and productivity, which can further improve organizational performance. Tamm et al (2010) found that CSR activities positively affect employee well-being in terms of job satisfaction, organizational engagement and work motivation. This supports the idea that CSR can have a positive impact not only on external stakeholders but also on internal stakeholders such as employees.

### **Wellbeing of Employees (ICSR) and Competitive Advantage**

Employee wellbeing has become a crucial topic in research as companies focus on gaining a competitive advantage in the new global economy. In this economy, workers are an essential factor in achieving this advantage, especially in the knowledge-based economy where knowledge is a vital resource. Well-being at work, which affects the emotional, mental and psychological aspects of employee life, has become a central aspect of this employee orientation. It is important to note that workplace well-being encompasses not only individual employee well-being, but also the overall organizational climate and culture, which can affect employee well-being. These include factors such as workload, job requirements and resources, work-life balance, job security, social support, and opportunities for professional development and growth (Saks et al., 2006; Wright et al., 1998). Improving employee well-being at work can lead to numerous benefits for organizations, including increased employee engagement and satisfaction, reduced turnover and absenteeism, and improved organizational performance (Wright et al., 1998; Burton, 2010).

For the past decade, there has been growing interest among scientists in the concept of well-being, which is defined as an individual's positive evaluation of their life based on global life satisfaction and a balance of positive and negative emotions. This is particularly

important for the sustainable development of organizations, as employee well-being has been linked to various outcomes such as knowledge sharing, innovative behavior, work performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, productivity, and lower turnover intention. These findings underscore the importance of prioritizing employee well-being for sustainable organizational performance (Gordon et al., 2019; Liboreiro et al., 2019; Paul et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2017; Diener et al., 2009; Kuykendall & Tay, 2015). Maryam's (2019) study aims to explore the impact of different corporate CSR initiatives on the competitive advantage of corporations. The research indicates that certain CSR activities have different effects on employee behavior depending on whether they are self-focused or individually focused. Thus, the study suggests that companies should tailor their CSR strategies to align with their employees' priorities in order to achieve competitive advantage.

Hameed, Ruiz, Arain, and Farooq (2016) conducted a study to investigate the impact of a company's CSR activities on its employees, specifically exploring whether internal and external CSR activities have different effects on employee behavior and how certain types of CSR activities influence employee behavior. The researchers identified a gap in the literature regarding the underlying mechanisms that explain how CSR affects employee behavior. The study found that external CSR activities positively influenced external prestige, employee engagement in organizational CSR activities, and employee identification with the organization, while internal CSR activities did not contribute to employee identification. However, treating employees well through internal CSR activities, such as workplace programs, strengthened their self-image. The study emphasized the importance of internal CSR strategies for the benefits of managers and the company, as a productive workforce created a competitive advantage that improved business performance. The study supports the strategic implications of CSR and its potential competitive advantages for companies.

Ali and colleagues (2010) conducted a study to examine the effect of corporate social responsibility on employee engagement and performance. They found that companies should view CSR as an investment rather than an expense in order to maintain sustainable growth and gain a competitive advantage. The authors argue that CSR can enhance relationships with all stakeholders, mitigate conflict, and foster collaboration and loyalty. Through their study, they aimed to address a gap in the literature regarding the relationship between CSR and employee engagement and performance.

In this study, CSR is used for employees because I-CSR practices relate to employees (Rupp and Mallory, 2015). This focus is on employees because they are viewed as critical internal stakeholders of the organization. The author postulates that socially responsible or irresponsible behavior has serious consequences for employees (Dakwa, 2018). Several studies have examined the link between CSR and employee engagement (Dakwa et al., 2018; Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Greening et al., 2000; Shen & Benson, 2016; Hur et al., 2016; Rettab et al., 2019; Suh, 2016) and reached broadly similar conclusions.

Internal CSR activities are related to all the internal operations of the company (Brammer et al., 2007). The I-CSR variables in this study comprise of Well-beings of employees, Work environment, workplace flexibility and employee empowerment. Sixteen items will use to measure CSR's variables.

The primary focus of this study is on I-CSR practices related to employees, as employees are considered critical internal stakeholders of the organization, and socially responsible or irresponsible behavior can have serious consequences for them. Previous research has established a link between CSR and employee engagement, with similar conclusions reached

in several studies (Dakwa et al., 2018; Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Greening et al., 2000; Shen & Benson, 2016; Hur et al., 2016; Rettab et al., 2019; Suh, 2016).

Furthermore, internal CSR activities pertain to all the internal operations of a company, as highlighted in prior research (Brammer et al., 2007). The I-CSR variables of this study are focused on employee well-being, work environment, workplace flexibility, and employee empowerment, and will be measured using sixteen items.

## Theories of I-CSR and Competitive Advantage

### Social Exchange Theory

According to social exchange theory (Tusi et al., 1997; Blau, 1964), interdependent parties create obligations through a series of interactions. In the case of employers and employees, the relationship is often referred to as a social exchange, with an exchange taking place on both sides (Shore et al., 2006). When employers show benevolence, they create an obligation for workers to retaliate in some way (Aryee et al., 2002). This study highlights the use of social exchange theory to analyze the impact of corporate social responsibility on employee attitudes and behaviors, such as: g. employee engagement (Slattery et al., 2010). Social exchange theory is important because it takes into account a range of employee attitudes and behaviors. Although most studies on CSR and employee engagement based on social exchange theory have focused on Western societies, this theory provides valuable insights for organizations (Slattery et al., 2010).

### Resourced based View Theory

Resource-based view (RBV) theory is a widely accepted perspective in strategic management that emphasizes the role of resources, skills, and core competencies as the primary source of competitive advantage (Selznick, 1957; Priem & Butler, 2001). This theory provides a clear definition of organizational resources and capabilities and explains how they contribute to the sustainable competitive advantage that organizations can achieve (Barney, 1991, 2001). According to Ambroisini and Bowman (2009), the RBV theory deals with how companies can generate sustainable competitive advantages. While the literature on this theory is still in its early stages, more definitive answers will emerge as empirical research accumulates (Newbert, 2007). RBV theory focuses on the firm as a critical unit of analysis, and competitive advantage is defined as an organization's ability to gain a defensible position against its competitors (Spanos and Lioukas, 2001; Li et al., 2008).

## Methods and Framework

### Research Framework

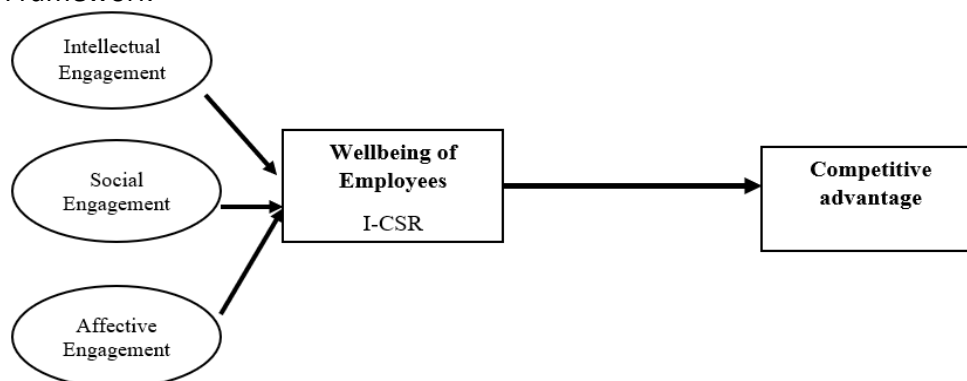


Fig 1: Review framework

The study is a conceptual study reviewing current available research based on the framework in Figure 1. The above literature review was conducted to identify and review current trends in the research area according to the framework. To develop the framework review, this research identified several research papers in the field of ICSR and competitive advantage. After studying the papers, they were broken down into common areas of positive or negative impact, e.g. intellectual engagement, social engagement, affective engagement and employee engagement. Then the most common themes were selected to develop the framework in Figure 1, which served as the basis for the literature review. To this end, a number of articles have been shortlisted and reviewed to provide an area for further research and development around ICSR and competitive advantage. After the review was conducted, the discussion and conclusion were formed to summarize the findings and areas of further research.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to conduct a literature review on the relationship between internal corporate social responsibility (ICSR) and competitive advantage (CA). The study shed light on how CA can be generated through ICSR activities and emphasized the importance of organizational competencies in achieving competitive advantage. ICSR helps to effectively fulfil organizations mandate. The theoretical implication of this study is that to support Resource Based View theory and Social Exchange Theory as it has casted more light on ICSR through which an organization can attain a sustainable competitive advantage. This finding supports the essence of value, rarity, non-imitability for purposes of galvanizing competitive advantage.

In order to increase their competitive advantage, companies are recommended to prioritize ICSR and employee well-being strategies. In addition, responsible organizations should prioritize ICSR and consider the social welfare of their employees.

The study's findings have several theoretical implications that can contribute to the development of strategic management theories. Firstly, the study supports and extends the resource-based view (RBV) by emphasizing the importance of competencies as a means for organizations to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. The RBV suggests that firms with unique and valuable resources can sustain a competitive advantage over their rivals. The study highlights how competencies can contribute to this advantage by providing firms with a set of skills that are difficult to replicate by their competitors.

Secondly, the study identifies skills as a non-reproducible and rare resource that can create value and lead to competitive advantage. This finding is consistent with the RBV, which posits that resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) can provide a firm with a competitive advantage. The study highlights the importance of skills as a VRIN resource and emphasizes the need for firms to invest in developing the skills of their employees.

Lastly, the study underscores the importance of considering stakeholders and their well-being, which is consistent with stakeholder theory. Stakeholder theory suggests that firms have a responsibility to consider the interests of all stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and the wider community. The study highlights the importance of developing employee competencies and skills, which can contribute to their well-being and enhance their value to the organization.

Overall, the study's insights can have significant implications for the strategic management of organizations and the development of their competitive advantages. The



study highlights the importance of investing in employee competencies and skills, which can contribute to the creation of sustainable competitive advantages. The study also underscores the need for firms to consider the interests of their stakeholders and the importance of their well-being. These findings can inform strategic decision-making and provide a framework for firms to develop their competitive advantages in a sustainable and socially responsible manner.

In conclusion, this study has identified several limitations that present opportunities for future research in the specific area of ICSR. Cultural differences and external factors, such as industry regulations, political frameworks, and social norms, were not considered in this study, and could be explored in future research to deepen our understanding of ICSR implementation in management. Additionally, while this study focused on the positive impact of ICSR on competitive advantage, future research could delve into the potential negative impact of ICSR on financial performance. By addressing these limitations, future research could advance our comprehension of the relationship between ICSR and competitive advantage. Overall, these findings underscore the importance of continued research in ICSR and its impact on management practices.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the significance of implementing ICSR in promoting growth and achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. Companies should prioritize the well-being of their employees and provide them with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their roles. The importance of ICSR as a major agenda for governments and businesses cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, further research is encouraged to deepen our understanding of the practice of ICSR by companies. Future studies, both quantitative and qualitative, could complement this research and provide more insight into the effective implementation of ICSR. As competition in the market continues to increase, companies must prioritize ICSR to stay relevant and promote sustainable growth.

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