

How to Implement Strategic CSR? A Mechanism Oriented to Corporate Responsible Competitiveness

Guangming Xiang*, Zheng He, and Lingtao Chen

University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu, China

Email: 202011150522@std.uestc.edu.cn (G.X.); hezh@uestc.edu.cn (Z.H.); 202111150514@std.uestc.edu.cn (L.T.C.)

*Corresponding author

Abstract—Strategic CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) has received a great deal of attention from both academic and practice communities. Yet not much research has been done on the direct integration of CSR into the main corporate business. With this goal in mind, this paper selects four social enterprises as a sample to analyze their specific mechanisms of implementing strategic CSR. By inducing the selected information, we found three categories of social value orientation, strategic embeddedness, and corporate responsible competitiveness. And we propose a specific mechanism of strategic CSR with the idea of organizational ambidexterity. In particular, corporate responsible competitiveness is a new type of competitiveness based on the use of CSR as a new means of competition in the marketplace. This paper contributes to the research of strategic CSR by indicating how CSR can be embedded in the main business. In addition, we also contribute to the research of organizational ambidexterity.

Keywords—strategic CSR, corporate responsible competitiveness, organizational ambidexterity, social enterprises

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the social impact of enterprises is constantly emphasized, both at the organizational level, industry level, and national level. Enterprises increasingly express their kindness through various ways of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), such as donations, voluntary services, and social innovation and entrepreneurship (RameshwarSaha & Sanyal, 2020). This behavior stems from the pressure of the external environment on the one hand, and is driven by internal factors on the other. First of all, China clearly stated the important role of market players in social governance in the Third Plenary Session of the 15th CPC (Communist Party of China) Central Committee. Second, the Shanghai and Shenzhen Stock Exchanges have strict disclosure requirements for some listed companies' social responsibility reports and updated the Listing Rules on January 7, 2022, respectively, to include CSR-related content for the first time. In addition, the improvement of social awareness also leads the public to expand their demands on firms

from simply the quality of their products to their ethical behavior and many other aspects. Of course, the individual characteristics of entrepreneurs and business needs are also important drivers for companies to participate in social value creation activities.

To make CSR more sustainable, scholars and practitioners try to put CSR at a strategic level [1], which has gained it increasing attention. This also makes social responsibility another means for companies to compete in the market. The research of strategic CSR calls on enterprises to integrate CSR into their process of strategic decision (Stoian and Gilman, 2017). In previous literature, the antecedents and outcomes of strategic CSR have been repeatedly explored and tested by both qualitatively and quantitatively (Apaydin *et al.*, 2021). Although strategic CSR has been shown to be very important for business development in most of the literature, these studies still consider CSR as a stand-alone activity (Apaydin *et al.*, 2021; Nejati *et al.*, 2017). And the pursuit of profit is always the nature of business. Such an effort tends to make companies focus too much on the economic benefits when implementing CSR at the expense of the social value they create. After all, the existing requirements for CSR disclosure are not perfect or strict enough. There are many opportunities for companies to say one thing and do another. In fact, many companies are doing just that. Unlike this separation, another view on strategic CSR is to integrate CSR into the main business (Bruyaka *et al.*, 2013). This is a typical scene of conflicts between different goals, which can be solved by organization ambidexterity. This kind of thought is more likely to prevent companies from forgoing or reducing social output due to economic pursuits. Unfortunately, this kind of view does not seem to have received enough attention.

To fill the gap, this paper applies multiple case studies to grounded the mechanism of strategic CSR based on organization ambidexterity. Since there is not much research in this area, we need to conduct an in-depth theoretical exploration. To meet this requirement of embeddedness of social and economic values, we have taken four social enterprises as our sample. During the multi-case analysis, we integrate the ideas of organizational ambidexterity. We consider that CSR

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changes the way companies compete with each other, the results of their performance should not be separated social or economic outputs, but rather integrated. Finally, this article proposes a mechanism model for a neglected genre of strategic CSR and proposes a new type of competitiveness. Moreover, we found that there are two types of corporate responsible competitiveness: responsible innovation and responsible consumption. Based on this, this article contributes to both strategic CSR and organizational ambidexterity. Moreover, our research has significant implications for firms implementing strategic CSR.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility

As market players, enterprises have to compete in the market to improve their viability, and for whatever reason they participate in social value creation activities, they naturally want it to benefit their own competitiveness. Scholars represented by Porter and Kramer (Porter & Kramer, 2006) and McWilliams and Siegel (McWilliams & Siegel, 2011) have conducted an in-depth analysis of corporate social value creation activities from the perspective of strategic CSR, arguing that corporate interests and social welfare are not a zero-sum relationship, but a symbiotic one, and that strategic CSR fulfillment can provide sustainable competitive advantages for companies. Of the two views of strategic CSR, one emphasizes the proactive and long-term nature of companies when implementing CSR activities, and this is the type that is now commonly accepted and studied. The other emphasizes the integration of social values with the main business (Bruyaka *et al.*, 2013).

Existing research suggests that the antecedent conditions for strategic CSR in companies consist of two main internal and external drivers. For external drivers, the first is the pressure from stakeholders which has been mentioned in much of the literature (Lopez-Gamero & Molina-Azorin, 2016). Consumers, suppliers, communities, etc. are directly or indirectly connected to the company. They also want to be treated in the same way as other stakeholders and have their interests protected. And companies have to do the same, or at least they will behave as those stakeholders expect them to, because business operations are inextricably linked to those stakeholders. The second is institutional pressure (Pedersen & Gwozdz, 2014). Enterprises are part of social and economic life and need to comply with established social norms so that they can gain legitimacy. Of course, changes in the external environment can also lead to CSR behavior in companies. When the global economy is in recession, for example, they can gain a better reputation and image through such behavior (Lee *et al.*, 2016). For internal drivers, some individual characteristics of the executive team can lead to a company's willingness to put effort into CSR, including experiences, and values (RameshwarSaha & Sanyal, 2020; Siltaloppi *et al.*, 2021). For example, the CEO's personal experience makes him or her more empathetic and thus

willing to address some social or environmental issues from a corporate perspective.

When implementing strategic CSR, it is generally considered to bring more sustainable competitiveness to the company. The output of strategic CSR for companies encompasses many aspects of business development. First are some indicators that are directly related to economic performance. The most frequent and common is financial performance, which has been repeatedly formalized as having a positive correlation with strategic CSR. Profitability, sales growth, and market share are all included (Papadas *et al.*, 2019). Such studies usually use an empirical approach and obtain data through questionnaires. There are also several capital market metrics that are used as a result of strategic CSR, such as capital investment, stock returns, and market value (Jeong *et al.*, 2018). Also, existing studies have examined some elements that are closely related to corporate development as the result of strategic CSR. On the one hand, there are some enterprise capabilities, including the ability to adapt, innovate, manage, research and development, etc (Papadas *et al.*, 2019; Marin *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, there are some development advantages, such as cost advantages, productivity, barriers to entry, etc.

B. Organizational Ambidexterity

Organizational ambidexterity is the ability of an organization to manage two different or even conflicting goals (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010). Companies will face many such situations, such as the competition between the industrial life cycle and product cycle, the choice between innovation needs and survival pressure, the conflict between social influence and economic profit. Scholars indicate many methods to solve the tension relationships, as well as facilitate performance (Jan *et al.*, 2019). For instance, structural separation, and integration could play a role (Jan *et al.*, 2019; Aoki & Wilhelm, 2017). Organizational ambidexterity is now often used in corporate strategy research to support decision-making in the face of complex environments, and has been proven to be increasingly significant for the sustainable competitive advantage of companies. Recent studies of technological innovation, social innovation, social entrepreneurship, human resource management, and corporate sustainability also often involve organizational ambidexterity (Bodwell & Chermack, 2010; Aoki & Wilhelm, 2017).

In existing studies, a large number of factors have been used as antecedent conditions to verify their relationship with organizational ambidexterity. The degree of differentiation, enabling formalization, and environmental dynamics have been demonstrated by empirical means to have a positive impact on organizational ambidexterity (Pertusa-Ortega & Molina-Azorin, 2018). Because these complex, ever-changing environments force companies to deal with multiple situations and goals at once, or their growth will be hindered. In addition, the strategic proactiveness, and the dual orientation of the organization also affects the ambidexterity of the organization. Because strategically

proactive companies are usually not satisfied with the status quo, they constantly pursue new products, markets, or business models. The changes brought about by this opportunity pursuit can better resolve the conflict between exploration and exploitation (Kafetzopoulos, 2017). Gopinath, Nawaz, Gajenderan, and Balasubramaniyan (Gopinath *et al.*, 2021) also point out that perceived organizational support and emotional things can lead to a stronger ambidexterity of the organization. Conversely, the formation of organizational ambidexterity can be hindered by a number of factors, including centralization, and coercive formalization. Companies are prone to inertia when faced with such relatively fixed environments, processes and goals, and they may also believe that they don't need the ability to manage different goals at the same time. Of course, such relationships are subject to the moderating effects of organizational capacity, organizational resources, etc.

Economic outcomes and financial performance are often mentioned in outcome studies of organizational ambidexterity, especially in empirical studies (Alatwi *et al.*, 2021). After all, these are the most important indicators that determine the development status of a company, and it is much easier to measure. There are also some studies that focus on organizational creativity and organizational resilience (Raschke, 2020).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study uses multiple case studies for the following reasons. (1) Although there have been numerous studies on strategic CSR, the genre of integrating social responsibility and main business is still under research. For the time being, there is no ready-made and systematic theoretical framework. Case studies are known to provide an in-depth analysis of the reasons behind the phenomenon. (2) This paper aims to explore the mechanism of strategic CSR when integrating social impact into their core business. Multi-case analysis can accurately describe the different conceptualizations and their interrelationships, and provide a solid foundation for theoretical construction.

B. Sample Selection

The aim of this paper is to explore the mechanism of strategic CSR from an ambidextrous perspective. Therefore, it is necessary that the case subjects already have similar integration practices. But it is not wise to search for case subjects aimlessly, as China's micro and small enterprises reach 48 million in 2021. By matching connotation and practice, we find that social enterprises are currently recognized as a best practice for integrating social and economic value. They are solving social problems through market means. In order to achieve the research objectives, we selected four representative social enterprises for the study, whose profiles are as follows.

1) Case 1

The company is concerned with the serious problem of China's modernization process, namely the issue of old

age. It was established in 2009 by a team with diverse backgrounds. This company currently focuses on the field of aging-friendly renovation and has developed thousands of aging-friendly products, which are applicable to almost all home life scenarios including bathrooms, kitchens, living rooms, and bedrooms. They have also developed a series of intelligent products to monitor the health data of the elderly.

2) Case 2

This company has been committed to ecological conservation, and its business covers a number of elements such as ecological restoration, art, science, and cultural communication, and has achieved very impressive achievements. This company has completed integrated ecological restoration construction from research, and design to construction in more than 20 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions in China. This company has become a leader in the industry after seven years of development and has developed a unique business model.

3) Case 3

This enterprise is invested and established by the local neighborhood committee. It together with the community, businesses and residents to form a remediation alliance. On the one hand, it has transformed the local community, solving the problems of poor cityscape, prominent safety hazards and illegal construction. On the other hand, it provides a constant impetus for community development by meeting community service needs and developing community benefits.

4) Case 4

This enterprise is a professional makerspace focusing on modern agricultural verticals. It mainly serves small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises founded by college students, returning migrant workers and veterans. It provides them with a full range of services such as consulting, property, business, exhibition, information and finance.

C. Data Collection

To ensure the validity of the study, this paper collects data through three ways. First, we conducted face-to-face interviews with these four social enterprises to understand their development history, strategic planning, competitive advantages and social values through semi-structured interviews (as shown in the Appendix), so as to clarify their social and economic value embedding ideas. Interviews were conducted with founders and management to ensure the authenticity and integrity of information related to the strategic decision process. Second, we also collected relevant case studies published by social enterprise certification organizations to understand the development process of these enterprises. In addition, we also collected information from the sample companies' homepages, official WeChat accounts and other public channels.

IV. CASE ANALYSIS

After completing the data collection, we consolidated and cross-checked the information obtained from the four

cases to ensure that the information truly reflected the strategic CSR decision-making process of the company. In this paper, the collected information is coded using the three-stage coding procedure of grounded theory. To ensure the reliability of the study, the primary data were first organized and coded by two authors independently. The coding results were then repeatedly discussed and questioned, and once controversial coding was encountered, a third author would then make the determination. Specifically, we went through the following steps.

First, open coding, which requires the authors to conceptualize the source material by organizing and inducing. We obtained a total of 17 initial categories during the process, which helped us gain insight into the strategic CSR implementation process. Second, axial coding. The authors need to perform cluster analysis based on the results of open coding as a way to find the intrinsic connections between the categories and to combine them. In this paper, seven fundamental categories were obtained after clarifying the logical relationships among the 17 initial categories. Third, selective coding. This step requires further categorization of the results of the axial coding. The fundamental categories were combined based on a theoretically grounded analytical framework, such as the “condition-action-performance” logic. We got three core categories in this step (as shown in Table I). Finally, the theoretical model was constructed through the analysis and comparison between cases. We will then elaborate on the categories and the relationships between them.

TABLE I. INITIAL, FUNDAMENTAL, AND CORE CATEGORIES

Core categories	Fundamental categories	Initial categories
Social value orientation	Institutional calling	Policy guidance, Changes in the market environment
	Social experience	Work Experiences, Family Experiences, Life Experiences
	Opportunity identification	Entrepreneurial alertness, Knowledge utilization
Strategic embeddedness	Leveraging industrial attributes	Leverage industry social attributes, Responding to the government’s call
	Products differentiation	Products focus on social issues, Products to alleviate social problems, Products to meet unmet demands
Corporate responsible competitiveness	Responsible consumption	Purchase intention, Purchase preference, Willingness to spread
	Responsible innovation	Green innovation, Social innovation

A. Social Value Orientation

Social value orientation emphasizes the business activities implemented by the enterprise as a result of social value or the economic value arising from social value. Both internal and external dimensions are included in this article. In social entrepreneurial activities, external factors usually come from formal or informal institutions, such as certain policies or market environments. This can lead to the active involvement of the firm in the social value creation process.

“In response to the aging population, the Chinese government has issued a series of policies that include community access, financial subsidies, and more. And the industry itself is in a state of oversupply.” (Founder, Case 1)

For internal initiatives, it is often a reflection of the personal characteristic of management. When management has the same experience as the group or individual in need, they feel their pain more and understand their needs better. And when managers' values are more inclined toward compassion and kindness, they will also be more proactive in engaging in social issues.

“We started as a traditional senior care service, and it was only later that we focused on age-appropriate modifications. Once we helped an elderly couple live independently through program design, they cried and told us they hadn’t stood in front of a window with their own strength for a long time. We were overwhelmed with happiness and pride.” (Public interview, Case 1)

Opportunity identification is the identification by the top management team of opportunities applicable to its own development from social or environmental issues. This can happen before starting a business or during the course of business operations. Executives are keenly aware of the market opportunities that exist in social issues and are quick to act on them. Even if they only hear bits and pieces of information occasionally, they can seize the potential value in them. They can even leverage it to their advantage and generate ongoing creativity.

“We found that any of the existing science activities were rather boring, so we also integrated storytelling and situational demonstrations to stimulate visitors from multiple senses, including sight, sound and touch.” (CEO, Case 2)

B. Strategic Embeddedness

Strategic embeddedness refers to the degree of alignment between the social value created by a company and its economic activities, including product differentiation derived from social value and leveraging industrial attributes. This approach can effectively mitigate the conflicts between social impact and profit pursuit. Facing the industry with highly social attributes, the companies have many opportunities to take advantage of these natural attributes in their production operations, such as the fact that the industry is now under strong government or public attention, or that the industry is derived from a social issue. These companies are not necessarily differentiated by their social value, as there is usually a sufficient market for their industry.

“The country is very concerned about ecological protection, and has proposed a series of protection policies and invested a lot of money. And national awareness is still developing. Therefore, there are a lot of problems that need to be solved, and we have developed many businesses based on this.” (Official WeChat account, Case 2)

Product differentiation means that companies usually mitigate social or environmental problems through their main products or services, thus realizing the duality of social and economic value. In other words, this

differentiation often comes from social value, rather than functions and other product dimensions. These companies are in industries that do not necessarily have very strong natural social attributes. Moreover, the industry is likely to be already in a strong competitive position, and companies can differentiate themselves well by embedding social value in their products or services.

“We are different from other makerspaces in that we focus on small and micro startup teams in agriculture and have helped over a hundred teams. Our work has not only led to the development of some rural areas, but has also ensured our own economic income.” (Founder, Case 4)

C. Corporate Responsible Competitiveness

We believe that corporate responsibility competitiveness is the ultimate advantage developed during the implementation of strategic CSR, and that it represents the market feedback on the social impact of a company. We define it as the socio-economic advantages that companies generate by embedding social value into their dominant products or services. It is different from traditional corporate competitiveness in that it highlights social and economic values simultaneously. According to the grounded approach, this paper found two categories of corporate responsible competitiveness.

Responsible consumption refers to product sales due to the social value of their own production operations. This category emphasizes purchases made by consumers with a purpose that revolves around the product and where the product itself has great value to the consumer. It differs from traditional CSR research in which consumers make goodwill purchases due to unrelated main business actions such as corporate donations and volunteer activities.

“Many local agricultural startup teams are willing to move into our space and have us help with financial subsidy applications, operational training, and even financing advice. Although we charge fees, they also profit, and we even benefit many poor areas as a result.” (Public Case Sharing, Case 4)

Responsible innovation is the ability of product or service innovation that is generated by a company for social or environmental purposes. Different from traditional technical and non-technical changes, this innovative behavior is aimed at satisfying groups that are afflicted by social problems. And it is an important driver that enables the sustainability of these social enterprises.

“Our community governance model is different from most communities. We shaped our business through community issues and community resources and have been able to create a virtuous circle. The enterprise is currently funded by kiosk rental fees and stall management fees. And all of these funds are used for public management and community benefit.” (Manager, Case 3)

D. The Construction of Theoretical Model

Based on the categories of grounded theory and their logical relationships, we developed a model of the mechanism for strategic CSR when a company embeds

CSR in its main business (as shown in Fig. 1). The logical framework of the entire model is based on the “driver-behavior-performance” approach. And, because of the expectation of their own development, companies constantly analyze performance results to identify and target what is good for the business, thus creating a positive feedback mechanism for continuous value creation.

Typically, embedding social value in a company depends on three factors: the experience and opportunity identification of the senior management team, as well as the institutional calling. These factors lead to proactive and relevant strategic decisions. After this, companies either embed social values in their products or enter an industry with natural social attributes, such as the aging industry. In this way, economic and social values can be integrated to a greater extent, which is a good way to help firms to be ambidextrous. Throughout the process, such integrated behavior leads to increased innovation for the company. And of course, as the company continues to uncover unmet needs related to social issues, its sales and leadership will be better. Moreover, responsible innovation and consumption can contribute to each other. In these performances, the ability of responsible innovation will, in turn, contribute to the development of the company’s products and contributes to better meeting consumer needs and solving social problems. Responsible consumption represents market feedback on corporate decisions, which enables companies to make strategic decisions with confidence and consistently identify more entrepreneurial opportunities related to social issues.

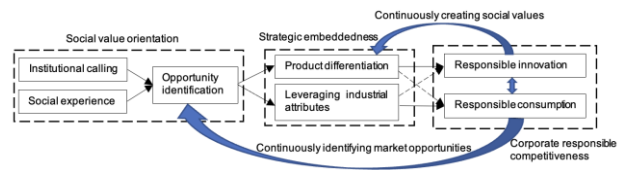


Fig. 1. Mechanism model of strategic CSR.

V. CONCLUSION

To explore a neglected branch of strategic CSR, this paper applies a multi-case analysis to conduct an in-depth analysis of the strategic decision-making processes of four social enterprises, and presents the mechanism model of strategic CSR. In fact, it also represents the formation path of new corporate competitiveness (corporate responsible competitiveness) that companies acquire when they embed social responsibility in their main business. This approach leads to better organizational ambidexterity. And, we did not only define this new concept of competitiveness, but also point out its two types, including responsible innovation and responsible consumption.

The contribution of this article contains two main parts. First, this article contributes to strategic CSR by exploring mechanisms to embed social values in the main business. Existing research on strategic CSR has focused on the antecedent conditions of its formation and its impact on corporate performance, but not much research

has been done on the overall mechanism. And existing research has more often called for a proactive approach to CSR in the long-term management of corporate operations, which does have benefits for corporate development and performance, but this usually comes from the spillover effects of corporate legitimacy. As another branch of strategic CSR mentioned in the existing studies, this article can reduce the uncontrollable nature of this spillover effect (Bruyaka *et al.*, 2013). Second, this article also bridges the gap between the organizational ambidexterity studies. The existing literature on organization ambidexterity is diverse, but most of it emphasizes the benefits of organizational ambidexterity for business development, but does not explore enough about how to achieve this ambidexterity (Pertusa-Ortega and Molina-Azorin, 2018). This article suggests reducing the value distance between the two conflicts and aligning them.

This article also has some practical implications for companies' CSR strategies. Companies now engage in CSR activities mainly in response to external pressure to gain legitimacy. But not all companies recognize the actual role of CSR, because in practice it is difficult to judge the actual change in performance. Some companies even consider CSR to be a burden for them because it costs them extra. But the approach in this article allows companies to conduct CSR activities in a fully market-based manner and will be more sustainable due to the embedded social and economic value.

This paper still has some limitations that can be improved in future studies. First, the theoretical model of this article can be verified empirically. Secondly, since this study is still in its preliminary stage, we have chosen a more specific sample. The sample could be extended to more types of organizations in the future.

APPENDIX A SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW OUTLINE

The main questions of semi-structured interviews are as follows:

1. Please briefly introduce the basic information of your company?
2. Can you tell us more about the background of the company and its founder?
3. How do you identify social problems and entrepreneurial opportunities in the entrepreneurial process?
4. Can you give us a brief overview of the financial operations here? What are the sources of revenue for your business?
5. Can you briefly explain what are the main business and service areas of your company? If there are competitors in the same industry, how do they differ from the models of competitors in the same industry in the market?
6. Can you elaborate on the main products of your social enterprise? And what social needs are addressed by the product or service? What methods are utilized in solving social problems or needs?
7. In what ways does your company make social value greater or scale up in solving social problems?

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Guangming Xiang conducted the research and wrote the paper; Zheng He and Lingtao Chen collected the data and suggested changes to the article; all authors had approved the final version.

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