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Title: Understanding CSR from the Organizational Theory Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) enhances organizational accountability in a substantive manner or functions predominantly as a mechanism for impression management and greenwashing. The analysis evaluates CSR through four organizational theory perspectives: Rationalist, Pragmatist, Co-Constitutive, and Critical Management Studies (CMS) employing Lounsbury and Gehman's (2024) definition for the initial three perspectives. Each viewpoint sheds light on distinct mechanisms that render CSR practices either substantive or symbolic. Rationalist theories focus on aligning incentives and governance structures. Pragmatist theories focus on learning, experimentation, and stakeholder engagement. Co-Constitutive theories show how institutional environments shape CSR meanings and practices, while CMS exposes the political and ideological forces that constrain corporate responsibility. Collectively, these perspectives show that CSR is not inherently effective nor ineffective; its outcomes are contingent upon the overall arrangement of incentives, social dynamics, institutional expectations, and power relations. The paper concludes that CSR can lead to real responsibility, but only when certain organizational and institutional conditions are met that stop decoupling and limit its symbolic use.

Introduction

Despite being a fundamental concept in modern management, the significance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), continues to be debated. While its proponents argue that it promotes ethical conduct, long-term value creation, and stakeholder well-being, its critics warn that CSR is often just a tool for impression management or even greenwashing, and that it does not have any meaningful social or environmental net benefit. This then raises a critical question: Does the concept of CSR make organizations more responsible in a tangible way, or does it mostly serve to manage impressions?

The central theme of this paper is to investigate the efforts made to address that very question. I do this by exploring CSR through four principal organizational theory perspectives: Rationalist, Pragmatist, Co-Constitutive, and Critical Management Studies (CMS), the initial three of which have been well articulated by Lounsbury and Gehman (2024). Each viewpoint presents a unique ontological and epistemological framework, offering different explanations for which organizations adopt CSR, how the practice unfolds, and when responsibility becomes substantive rather than symbolic.

The Rationalist standpoint views organizations as efficiency-driven entities functioning within economic limitations. CSR is seen as a strategic investment that is shaped by incentives, risk management, and market discipline. When CSR is linked to a measurable financial outcome, tangible responsibility emerges. On the other hand, when incentives are weak, CSR becomes more of a symbolic gesture or an opportunistic tool for greenwashing.

The Pragmatist, conversely, perceives CSR as a continually evolving process of inquiry, learning, and stakeholder engagement that results in a feedback mechanism. Responsibility from this lens becomes tangible when organizations iteratively experiment, respond to the feedback, and revise their practices; however, akin to Rationalists, Pragmatists

too acknowledge that when learning becomes shallow, firms use CSR for impression management or adaptive greenwashing.

The Co-Constitutive perspective shifts the emphasis from individual choices to how organizations and their institutional contexts affect each other. In this perspective, CSR becomes tangible when cultural meanings, logics, practices, and sociomaterial arrangements embed responsibility into everyday organizational life. Yet co-constitutive processes, too, can lead to symbolism or greenwashing when decoupled structures are formed within the organization.

Lastly, the Critical Management view interrogates the power and ideological aspects of CSR. From this perspective, CSR serves as a mechanism of desensitization, reinforcing managerial control and legitimizing capitalist systems while avoiding deeper structural issues entirely. Tangible responsibility, in this perspective, arises not from voluntary corporate benevolence but through countervailing forces such as regulation, labour coalitions, and activist pressures.

When taken together, these four perspectives illustrate that CSR has both the potential to be either materially consequential or largely symbolic. The circumstances that enable CSR to foster authentic responsibility vary significantly among these four theoretical perspectives, highlighting the significance of incentives (rationalist), learning processes (pragmatist), institutional embedding (co-constitutive), and power dynamics (critical).

CSR Through the Lens of Rationalist Organization Theory

1. Introduction: The Rationalist Foundations of CSR

Rooted in utilitarian and economic traditions, the Rationalist Organization Theory portrays organizations as purposive and efficiency-seeking and operating in largely resource-scarce environments requiring good market discipline and calculative judgement (Scott & Davis., 2015; Lounsbury & Gehman., 2024). In this ontology, organizations are seen as rational entities aiming to optimize performance, usually assessed through measures of profitability, efficiency, or shareholder value. Decisions are considered to be instrumental, and the choice is selected based on its anticipated utility and constrained optimization (March & Simon., 1993). When viewed from these lenses, CSR is assessed not as a moral obligation but rather as an economic strategy. i.e. It is seen as a set of actions undertaken when it is anticipated to yield measurable returns, mitigate risk, or increase the firm's value.

Evident from the neoclassical and institutional-economic theories of the firm, such as transaction-cost economics, agency theory, and the resource-based view (RBV), rationalist approaches offer one of the earliest and persistent explanations of CSR behaviour. Each of these subcategories conceives CSR as a possible way to either align stakeholder interests or develop rare, valuable, and inimitable resources that yield sustainable competitive advantage (Barney., 1991; Jensen., 2002).

2. CSR as a form of Strategic Investment and Risk Management

2.1. CSR in Risk Mitigation

Empirical Studies conducted within these rationalist frameworks often illustrate that CSR functions as a form of reputational insurance or buffer (Godfrey., 2005; Godfrey, Merrill, & Hansen., 2009). As such, investments in CSR, when operationalized through measurable metrics such as product safety, employee relations, and environmental management, can mitigate the risk of litigation, regulatory sanctions, and reputational crises (Flammer., 2018).

By this logic, CSR can be tangibly responsible for internalizing social or environmental risks before they turn into financial losses.

From the perspective of agency theory, socially responsible governance mechanisms such as transparent reporting or sustainability committees can mitigate information asymmetries between managers and shareholders and thus constrain a moral hazard (Jensen & Meckling., 2019). Likewise, some transaction-cost economists, see information disclosures as a reliable signal that would lower the costs of monitoring (Williamson, 1989). These measurable outcomes of lower capital expenditures, fewer lawsuits, and improved market capitalization, when extended to the field of CSR, cannot be just categorized as impression management but rather tangible signs of responsibility.

2.2. CSR as a Competitive Differentiator

When viewed from a resource-based view, CSR is seen as a strategic ability that can give a company a long-term competitive edge if it meets Barney's (1991) VRIN criteria: it must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. Firms that embed CSR in their regular organizational routines develop reputational capital and stakeholder trust, which is hard for their competitors to emulate (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Barnett, 2000). Porter and Kramer's (2006) shared-value framework builds further on this idea: CSR investments that improves upon the community well-being or the environment can also cut costs and create new markets, which brings together social and economic performance.

Rationalist models thus consider CSR as tangible when closely linked to the firm's operations, especially when it has a direct impact on production, risk, or efficiency. Several CSR studies have shown that initiatives such as employee safety, product quality, and supply-chain sustainability correlate with a quantifiable improvement in social and financial performance (Brammer & Millington., 2008; Flammer, 2015). Conversely, symbolic

philanthropy unrelated to a firm's core business has a weaker or insignificant effect on the firm's value (Muller & Kraussl., 2011).

2.3. CSR and Market Discipline

One of the fundamental principles of the rationalist theory posits that markets regulate firms and thus consequently, managers engage in CSR solely when markets incentivize it or penalize its absence. Studies on market signalling and efficient-market theories demonstrate that capital markets integrate CSR information into risk assessments. Firms with strong, verified CSR profiles have less idiosyncratic risk and consequently a lower cost of equity capital (Dhaliwal et al., 2011). Event-study analyses demonstrate that firms with robust CSR reputations experience diminished stock-price declines following adverse events, aligning with the risk-mitigating effect of CSR and an evident financial payoff (Flammer., 2013; Lins et al., 2017).

Taken in this context, CSR is not mere impression management; it is an adaptive response to market signals. Market accountability is what links CSR to responsibility. Companies making false claims or greenwashing risk losing their reputation and legitimacy with investors and customers (Walker & Wan., 2012). Thus, even if a CSR initiative starts for the purposes of impression management, market competition, and discipline can force it into meaningful forms.

3. The boundary between Tangible Responsibility and Impression Management

3.1. The Risk of Symbolic Adoption

Due to the heavy emphasis on tangible efficiency in the rationalist theory, we can see why CSR would regress into mere symbolic compliance. As per agency theory, when managerial incentives do not match the interests of shareholders or stakeholders, CSR disclosures may serve to mask opportunism. For instance, CEOs may excessively invest in high-profile CSR initiatives to enhance their personal reputations or mitigate criticism (Petrenko et al., 2016).

Akin to managerial moral licensing, this phenomenon turns CSR from a means of risk mitigation to risk itself: i.e. a way to manage impressions that erodes trust when it is revealed.

Institutionalists characterize a comparable phenomenon in terms of decoupling: firms adopt CSR policies to gain legitimacy, yet neglect to execute corresponding practices (Meyer & Rowan., 1977). From a rationalist perspective, decoupling endures in contexts where oversight is expensive and sanctions are feeble. In competitive markets with clear metrics, like ESG ratings, symbolic CSR is less sustainable (at times even harmful) because investors can detect inconsistency between talk and walk (Christensen et al., 2021). In weakly regulated markets, firms may logically uphold symbolic CSR if the expenses of substantive compliance surpass the reputational advantages (Delmas & Burbano., 2011), that way even greenwashing makes behavioural sense under conditions of low scrutiny.

3.2. Quantifying Tangibility

The rationalist paradigm's strength is its insistence on measurement. Responsibility becomes tangible when CSR interventions are observable and verifiable- through performance metrics, audits, or certifications. Tangibility of CSR is therefore dependent on the degree to which CSR can be operationalized in financial or risk terms. Current empirical work utilizes various measures such as ESG scores, Tobin's Q, ROA or cost of capital to operationalize these variables (Barnett & Salomon., 2012). These models consistently indicate positive effects for substantive CSR dimensions and null or negative effects for symbolic ones, suggesting the market's ability to differentiate between responsible practice and impression management (Walker & Wan., 2012; Christensen et al., 2021).

Alternatively, a purely rationalist interpretation risks circularity. Can CSR be only considered “tangible” when it affects profits, and does it “matter” only if markets perceive it as valuable or otherwise? As you can see, the rationalist interpretation draws out a utilitarian

logic that sidelines the moral, ecological, and distributive dimensions of responsibility (Margolis & Walsh, 2003). So, while rationalist frameworks make CSR tangible in an economic sense, they may very well under-specify details of its moral content.

4. Mechanisms that Convert Symbolic CSR into Tangible Responsibility

4.1. Governance, Incentives, and Signalling

Rationalists would see CSR becoming more tangible through good governance structures and incentive systems. When internal controls ensure managers act in the best interests of stakeholders and when external market signals support those commitments, responsibility becomes a part of the organizational system rather than just a symbolic gesture. Strong corporate governance can make CSR work. Firms with robust sustainability practices assign board oversight, link executive pay to sustainability goals, and institutionalize stakeholder engagement over a longer time frame (Eccles et al., 2014). On the market side, voluntary CSR disclosure can improve information dissemination and lower firms' cost of capital (Dhaliwal et al., 2011; Healy & Palepu., 2001). Nonetheless, disclosures can be used strategically: corporations may accentuate favourable CSR narratives while minimizing deficiencies, aligning with impression management and potential greenwashing (Cho et al., 2012; Lyon & Montgomery., 2015), or even dissociate communication from actual practices in response to significant institutional or political pressures (Hawn & Ioannou., 2016; Marquis & Qian., 2014). A rationalist governance perspective endorses both scenarios: credible commitments that make CSR tangible under robust incentives and oversight, and symbolic signalling when the benefits of appearing responsible outweigh the costs of genuine responsibility.

4.2. Information Transparency and Market Feedback

From a rationalist standpoint, information transparency is vital for making CSR economically significant. By reducing information asymmetry, credible CSR reporting allows

markets to reward firms that internalize their social and environmental risks. Firms that voluntarily share their sustainability metrics pay less for equity capital (Dhaliwal et al., 2011) and gain more trust from investors because there is less information asymmetry (Healy & Palepu., 2011). Strong CSR performance is also linked to better access to financing (Cheng et al., 2014) and more trust in the market, which helps firms through economic downturns (Lins et al., 2017). More transparency allows investors to see the true value of CSR and thus put a price on responsibility, allowing firms to create tangible CSR interventions instead of moral posturing.

However, transparency also invites selective signalling. When the benefits of disclosure outweigh the costs of CSR implementation, companies would rationalize prioritizing favourable narratives while downplaying their deficiencies (Cho et al., 2012). Studies indicate that greenwashing and symbolic reporting will persist in weakly monitored corporate governance structures (Delmas & Burbano., 2011; Lyon & Montgomery., 2015). Market mechanisms can thus work both ways: they can either institutionalize responsibility (when stakeholders verify information) or reward superficial virtue when appearances alone satisfy rational expectations.

4.3. Integration with Core Operations

So far, we have seen how a rationalist paradigm would favour high-sustainability firms in institutionalizing board oversight, linking pay to sustainability metrics, and adopting longer-term planning horizons that embed CSR as part of their strategic control (Eccles., et al 2014). This leads to the final act of integrating CSR with a firm's core operations. When sustainability goals are in line with resource use and risk management, responsibility becomes an efficiency-enhancing pursuit rather than an optional cost. As such, markets then reward CSR activities that are financially important, or linked to core cash flows, the most (Khan et al., 2016).

However, integration remains largely symbolic. Several firms have departments dedicated to dealing with sustainability, but these are kept isolated from core firm-level decision-making (Hawn & Ioannou., 2016). Rationalist logics would frame this decoupling as a response to cost-benefit analysis: when reputational gains surpass operational expenses, firms inherently favour the semblance of responsibility over the costs of undertaking said responsibility. Robust external auditing and assurance systems can mitigate this issue by rendering any symbolic compliance a costly endeavour (Simnett et al., 2009).

5. Critical Appraisal: The Numeric Limitations of Rationalism

Rationalist models elucidate the economic manifestations of CSR through markets and incentives, yet they diminish the normative and power-laden dimensions. By limiting responsibility to quantifiable returns, they risk validating minimal compliance or utilitarian virtues only. Critical and institutional scholars often argue that CSR, when viewed through the lens of rationalism, often reinforces managerial and shareholder dominance rather than reforming accountability frameworks (Bromley & Powell., 2012; Ergene et al., 2021).

Moreover, market feedback is inherently flawed since investors can easily misprice long-term environmental or social risks, and firms with greater signalling resources can benefit more through symbolic disclosures. Insufficient oversight renders greenwashing the economically viable choice (Delmas & Burbano., 2011). Rationalism thus often explains how CSR can be made more tangible but not why it should be pursued beyond shareholder value.

In short, rationalism shows both the potential for CSR to be effective and the trap of trying to manage impressions. Its contribution lies in showing that responsibility becomes tangible when it is economically incentivized, measured, and enforced, but it also warns that without all 3 conditions, CSR may only remain as a carefully rationalized facade.

CSR Through the Lens of Pragmatist Organization Theory

1. Introduction: Pragmatism and the Situated Practice of Responsibility

Directly opposing the Rationalist perspective, the Pragmatist organization theory sees CSR more as an evolving practice than a static policy or an investment plan. As a practice, CSR is thus able to grow through interaction, learning, and adjustment. Grounded in the American pragmatist tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, this viewpoint repudiates static notions of organizations as rational calculators but instead treats them as communities of inquiry embedded within their environments (Lounsbury & Gehman., 2024). Thus, taken from this perspective, responsibility can neither be predetermined nor instrumental; instead, it is discovered/rediscovered and constructed/reconstructed through practice. Pragmatism reconceptualizes CSR as an ongoing process of problem-solving and meaning-making, in which ethical, environmental, and social issues are regarded as experiments within the organizational learning (Ansell., 2011, Hengst et al., 2020).

From a pragmatist point of view, the answer to our main research question depends on how companies deal with uncertainty and feedback. When firms see CSR as an ongoing process that is shaped by dealing with stakeholders and learning from past mistakes, they start to take on “real” responsibility. Conversely, CSR becomes performative or symbolic when the learning processes are shallow, i.e. when the firms manage meaning without altering their underlying practices (Lyon & Montgomery., 2015).

2. CSR as an Evolving Process of Learning and Adaptation.

2.1.Organizational Learning and Bounded Rationality

Pragmatist theory views CSR not as a set plan. Instead, it is seen as a form of adaptive learning process shaped by the organization's routines, feedback, and bounded rationality. Instead of assuming perfect information, firms respond to environmental and stakeholder feedback through incremental adjustments consistent with the behavioural theory of the firm

(Cyert & March., 2020). Studies by Greave (2003) and Gavetti et al., (2012) provide a pragmatic reason. Firms only change habits when their results don't match their goals. In CSR, this means recalibrating their commitments when social or environmental outcomes do not match their goals.

Studies indicate that organizations pilot CSR initiatives in a specific domain to assess how stakeholders react, and subsequently expand those that prove to be successful. For instance, Delmas and Toffel (2008) show how environmental learning processes turn external pressures into more effective internal systems, and Gond et al., (2012) illustrate how adding sustainability metrics to management control systems encourages ongoing reflection and enhancements. These examples reveal CSR not as a compliance or branding mechanism, but as a dynamic system for asking questions that responds to the contextual complexities.

2.2. Reflexivity and Stakeholder Engagement

Pragmatist CSR relies on interactive communication among various stakeholders: customers, employees, NGOs, and regulators, who hold competing definitions of the term “responsibility”. Stakeholders are not mere observers, but participants in collective sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson., 2014). Morsing and Schultz (2006) identify three CSR communication strategies: information, response, and involvement. They contend that only the involvement strategy promotes authentic dialogue and learning. Similarly, Noland and Phillips (2010) contend that stakeholder engagement built on discourse ethics promotes mutual understanding instead of strategic manipulation.

When firms treat CSR discourses as ongoing experiments instead of PR stunts, responsibility takes a tangible form: organizations learn what it means to be socially responsible, and stakeholders help set realistic performance standards. However, the same

dialogue can be appropriated for symbolic signalling; for example, when consultations occur but power imbalances stifle authentic expression (Banerjee., 2007).

3. The Boundary between Learning and Symbolism

3.1.The Pragmatic Risk of Surface Learning

Pragmatism valorizes adaptability and flexibility, but this strength can also be a weakness when learning becomes shallow and focused on legitimacy instead of change. Firms may use feedback loops to improve their image instead of addressing underlying sustainability issues. Or, by learning what to say instead of what to change, create hypocritical sustainability reports (Cho et al., 2015). Lyon and Montgomery (2015) show how businesses shift the timing and framing of disclosures to achieve a balance between reputational advantages and minimal operational expenses.

In this way, the pragmatist theory includes both real learning and reflexive greenwashing: actors engage, gather feedback, and adjust their behaviour, but their motivation may still be self-serving rather than ethical. Pragmatism recognizes the processual uncertainty of CSR. Depending on whether the reflection deepens or stalls, CSR can either bring about real change or keep the symbolism going.

3.2.Institutionalized Experimentation and Organizational Routine

Over time, sustained CSR activities may institutionalize experimentation as a standard organizational practice. Arjaliés and Mundy (2013) illustrate that incorporation of CSR into control systems can align innovation with accountability, thereby turning intangible values into measurable objectives while preserving the learning process. When CSR is an ongoing component of how an organization operates and gives feedback on performance, it becomes real instead of a one-off episodic event. This is how institutionalized reflexivity leads to real accountability.

4. Mechanisms that Make Pragmatist CSR Tangible

4.1. Reflexive Dialogue and Participatory Learning

CSR becomes genuinely responsible when communication is reflexive. This indicates that organizations not only listen but also adjust their beliefs and practices accordingly.

Pragmatists believe that learning requires feedback that is transformative rather than merely informative (Ansell., 2011). By creating spaces for actors to collaboratively reframe issues, CSR initiatives can evolve into genuine, diverse participatory frameworks. This perspective corresponds with Ferraro, Etzion, and Gehman (2015), who characterize “robust action” strategies (multivocal inscription and distributed experimentation) as essential for tackling complex societal issues.

Nonetheless, when reflexivity is constrained by managerial oversight or due to superficial participation, the process regresses to instrumental learning and maintaining existing hierarchies. Thus, in the pragmatist framework, the calibre of inquiry determines whether CSR promotes responsibility or deteriorates into impression management.

4.2. Integration with Organizational Systems

An alternative mechanism to make CSR tangible is to integrate CSR into managerial and operational systems and align learning processes with decision-making structures. When sustainability metrics affect an organization’s budgeting, R&D, or incentive designs, CSR commitments will have real outcomes. Adding environmental and social controls to fundamental business processes makes it less likely that talk and action would decouple (Gond et al., 2012; Delmas & Toffel., 2008).

Conversely, when CSR discourses are confined to just public relations or philanthropic units, they largely stay symbolic and non-transformative. Pragmatism emphasizes that responsibility is not merely proclaimed; it is manifested through the experimental integration of ideals with practices.

5. Critical Appraisal: The Limits of Pragmatism

The Pragmatist organizational theory offers a middle ground between the calculative nature of rationalist theories and the cultural determinism of co-constitutive theories. It helps us understand how organizations can learn to act responsibly within their practical limitations. When feedback, experimentation, and stakeholder engagement lead to real behavioural changes, CSR becomes tangible. However, this perspective poses an inherent epistemological optimism that dialogue and learning will naturally yield results. It is this, naivety, that at times might neglect existing power dynamics, ideological capture, and the political economy of CSR (Banerjee., 2007).

In the absence of structural accountability or external sanctions, learnings may devolve into mere adaptive hypocrisy, marked by a superficial appearance of responsiveness while the status quo persists (Cho et al., 2012). Pragmatism helps us understand how CSR can go from an idea to practice; it also reminds us that inquiry without ethical commitment may serve to enhance symbolic legitimacy. CSR thus attains substantive responsibility only when reflective learning reorients the organization's purpose from survival to shared consequences.

CSR through the Co-Constitutive Organizational Theory Lens

1. Introduction: The Co-Constitutive Foundations of CSR

The co-constitutive perspective perceives organizations and their environments to be mutually shaping systems. This way of thinking posits that organizations and societies shape each other through shared meanings, norms, and practices. It doesn't assume that firms function within fixed economic or social contexts (Lounsbury & Gehman., 2024; Meyer & Jepperson., 2000). CSR, in this sense, is not simply a managerial choice or a strategic enhancement; it is part of a broader cultural process through which organizations and their stakeholders define what it actually means to be “responsible”.

This perspective draws heavily from phenomenology, institutional theory, and practice theory. While phenomenology highlights how people and institutions create meaning through lived experiences, Institutional theory explains how legitimacy and norms shape organizational behaviour (Meyer & Rowan., 1977), and Practice theory adds that organizational life consists of recurring patterns of action, material tools, and routines that generate and perpetuate social realities (Orlikowski., 2007; Smets, Morris, & Greenwood., 2012).

Through this lens, CSR is no longer about just doing good or avoiding harm but rather about how responsibility itself is defined and enacted upon daily. Thus, from this perspective, CSR can create tangible social and environmental improvements when it redefines what is considered legitimate and valuable. Though it can also stay performative when it reproduces moral language without altering the underlying practices or power structures (Cho et al., 2015; Banerjee., 2007). The question then to be asked here is, when and how do CSR meanings, metrics, and practices get co-produced in ways that bind firms to tangible change versus enabling impression management?

2. CSR as culturally and institutionally co-produced

2.1. Logics and categories that compel practice

Institutional logics (a key aspect of the co-constitutive perspective) research shows that firms operate amid multiple, sometimes conflicting, cultural rule systems (e.g. market, profession, community, etc). CSR becomes more popular when ideas that value taking care of the environment and society become important and shape what people think is right (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011; Besharov & Smith., 2014). For instance, the growth of climate-focused and human rights logics in many fields has changed what is considered an acceptable strategy and disclosure, thereby shifting board agendas, targets, and supplier requirements. In such situations, deviating from the emergent logic would risk legitimacy penalties, which increases the likelihood that CSR requires real changes rather than mere rhetoric.

2.2. Sociomaterial practices: embedding responsibility in tools and routines

A co-constitutive lens also insists that responsibility becomes tangible when it is built into sociomaterial frameworks (Orlikowski & Scott., 2008; Orlikowski., 2007). Such artifacts do not just “reflect” values but also shape who pays attention to what, when, and with what consequences. Ethnographic and longitudinal studies in general practice theory, illustrate the diffusion and transformation of field norms through local practices (Smets, Morris, & Greenwood., 2012). In CSR, this would be akin to carbon accounting systems that link production planning to emissions budgets or due diligence tools that stop a purchase order until human rights checks have been completed. These are just a few mechanistic examples that leave material traces and leave less room for “green talk” without “green do”.

2.3. Performativity: when theories and metrics make the world they describe

Another fundamental aspect of the co-constitutive perspective is performativity, and in terms of CSR, it would extend to how CSR isn’t just described but performed. Research on performativity shows that frameworks, formulas, labels, and ratings can all be used to

coordinate behaviour, which can create the very markets or practices they claim to describe (Marti & Gond., 2018). In CSR, taxonomies (e.g. scientifically derived targets), disclosure frameworks, or supplier codes can all be considered performative. When they are widely adopted, they reorganize incentives, skills, and status, thus pushing firms toward new sustainability capabilities that make responsibility more real. But of course, performativity can go both ways: if poorly specified, certain metrics can invite cheating and symbolic compliance.

3. When co-constitution doesn't work: decoupling and facade building

Just as strong as the co-constitutive lens is explaining how tangible CSR and real responsibility are co-created, it is equally robust in elucidating why CSR occasionally remains symbolic. While classic work shows how organizations use formal structures to look legitimate (Meyer & Rowan., 1977), more recent studies show the process of decoupling, where both institutional and performative actions are kept isolated from organizational operations so there isn't much change on the ground (Bromley & Powell., 2012). While decoupling involves isolation, façade building pertains to the use of prevailing logics to appropriate responsibility discourses, thereby transforming them into reputational capital while continuing to preserve the old ways (Banerjee., 2007). The motivations are still the same, when field pressures value appearance over process change (for financial reasons or otherwise), co-constitution perpetuates superficial environmental discourses and limited action.

4. How CSR becomes tangible under a Co-Constitutive Lens

4.1. Embedding Responsibility into Logics, Routines, and Sociomaterial Arrangements

One of the main ways in which CSR becomes deeply impactful, in the co-constitutive lens, is when emerging institutional logics, such as climate stewardship, human rights, and employee wellbeing, are integrated into daily routines, roles, and technologies that influence

organizational behaviour (Thornton et al., 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011). Responsibility is no longer considered important just because firms “commit” to it, but also because it becomes part of the organization's practice architecture. For example, procurement rules being linked to suppliers' labour standards, workflow gates that require emissions or due diligence checks. Sociomaterial study shows that tools like dashboards and tracking systems don't just record metrics; they also change what employees focus on and which deviations invoke a sense of accountability in them (Orlikowski & Scott., 2008; Smets et al., 2012). Under these conditions, it is hard to avoid accountability because it is built into the very core of the organization's operations.

4.2. Performativity: Devices and Identity Structures that Bind Action

For performativity in CSR to make real changes, we can look towards widely adopted devices such as science-based targets or standardized carbon accounting rules, to reshape how firms evaluate investments and design products. In such cases, CSR becomes consequential by binding the device to an industry standard that cannot be overlooked. Similarly, CSR also becomes tangible when cultural meanings and organizational identities get bound to concrete systems of evaluation, coordination, and accountability, thus making “responsibility” not merely something firms would say, but something they are institutionally required and are equipped to do.

5. Critical Appraisal: The Limits of the Co-Constitutive Lens

From a co-constitutive perspective, CSR can indeed enhance organizational responsibility in a tangible way, but only when meanings, measures, and material practices are co-designed so that “being responsible” is built into the organizational DNA. In situations where field pressures, categories, and devices reward talk over tools, CSR more often manages impressions. Thus, the task is not to ask whether firms “really want” to be responsible in an abstract sense, but rather to analyze and shape the institutional logics, sociomaterial

architectures, and performative devices in such a way that responsibility becomes the path of least resistance and greenwashing becomes the path with the greatest difficulty.

Critical Management Perspective on CSR

1. Introduction: The Critical Management Perspective in CSR

Of the four organizational theory perspectives we have discussed so far, the Critical Management Perspective perhaps offers the most profound skeptical approach to CSR. The primary argument is that you cannot understand CSR without looking at how it works with ideology, power, and the political economy. Critical thinkers do not see CSR as a way to build trust with stakeholders or create shared value. Instead, they look at how CSR talk and actions strengthen managerial power, support capitalist systems, and take politics out of the harms businesses do (Adler et al., 2007; Banerjee., 2007). In this view, CSR often represents powerful ways to control how employees, customers, and the public see businesses. It depicts companies as moral agents even when their core operations cause social inequality or environmental damage (Fleming & Jones., 2012; Shamir., 2008). Yet, the critical tradition, despite its name, does not dismiss CSR entirely; instead, it highlights the structural conditions that render CSR materially consequential, particularly when firms face opposing forces from social movements, labour groups, or regulatory bodies.

2. How CSR is Discussed in Critical Management Papers

2.1.CSR as Depoliticization and Ideological Work

Critical Management scholars consistently argue that CSR transforms political questions, such as labour rights, environmental justice, and inequality, into managerial concerns that organizations opt to tackle on their own terms (Banerjee., 2007). Problems that arise from power imbalances become part of businesses' communication plans that stress moral commitment rather than systemic change. In this manner, CSR discourses operate as an ideological initiative designed to portray corporations as socially responsible citizens (or eager to be) and perpetuating the belief that capitalism is self-correcting, thereby concealing the political struggles and regulatory interventions that would otherwise challenge corporate power (Shamir., 2008).

2.2.CSR as a Mechanism of Organizational Control

Another recurrent theme in the study of CSR from the critical management perspective is that CSR operates as a technology of managerial governance. Fleming and Jones (2012) show how firms embed CSR values of sustainability, ethics, and social responsibility to shape culture, assess performance, and create corporate narratives that control employees and align their emotional commitments with organizational goals. CSR, thus, isn't just a way to redistribute perks or fix structural problems; it's part of a bigger system that secures employee consent and suppresses dissent. Also, critical scholars show that initiatives like meeting supplier standards and getting ethical certifications often maintain unequal global power relationships by focusing on Western consumer morality and corporate branding while largely ignoring the underlying inequities in the supply chain (Banerjee., 2007; Shamir., 2008).

3. The boundary between Tangible Responsibility and Impression Management

3.1.CSR as Symbolic Legitimacy and Greenwashing

Critical scholars contend that CSR frequently serves as a mechanism for symbolic legitimacy rather than substantive organizational transformation. Because CSR and sustainability reporting are mostly optional and up to the firms, they can be selective on how they decide to portray the positive or negative impacts. Sustainability reporting can be an example of “organized hypocrisy”, where firms create facades of responsibility that coexist with unchanged underlying practices. From this perspective, greenwashing is not merely a moral failing, but a structurally foreseeable consequence of voluntary disclosure frameworks and competitive market dynamics. As you would have noticed, much of the research done and explored in symbolic legitimacy and greenwashing via other perspectives follows much of the critical management perspective as well.

3.2.Conditions Under which CSR becomes Tangible

Even from a critical point of view, CSR is not always seen as purely symbolic. Instead, responsibility is thought to become more real when companies are under a lot of external

pressure that raises the cost of inaction more expensive. Wright and Nyberg (2017) illustrate that corporate climate initiatives are often translated into “business as usual.” However, they do emphasize that regulatory limitations, public scrutiny, and activist involvement influence the extent to which firms can dilute or defer substantial change. Studies on transnational private regulation arrive at similar conclusions: Bartley (2007) records how labour and human rights campaigns, along with coalitions of NGOs and threats to reputations, helped create global labour standards and monitoring systems in clothing supply chains. These campaigns helped create labour standards, even though power imbalances continued to exist. From this critical viewpoint, CSR transitions from impression management to tangible responsibility, not due to corporations embracing moral obligations, but rather because external pressures render non-compliance more perilous than implementing at least some significant reforms.

4. Mechanisms that Make CSR Tangible in a Critical Perspective

4.1. Countervailing Power and Institutional Constraint

From a Critical Management perspective, the main mechanism via which CSR is made “real” is through a countervailing power, not corporate benevolence. Banerjee (2007) argues that conventional CSR is significantly limited by shareholder value imperatives and thus unlikely, on its own, to confront underlying structures of exploitation. Substantive changes usually happen when regulatory systems, activist networks, and transnational campaigns limit the freedom of corporations. Shamir (2008), goes on to show how contemporary governance regimes “responsibilize” corporations by embedding moral language in market and legal frameworks, even as they continue to offload responsibilities from states to firms and individuals.

4.2. Democratization and Worker Voice as Drivers of Responsibility

Another mechanism by which CSR is made tangible from a critical perspective is the democratization of corporate governance and the strengthening of the worker or community voice. Instead of assuming that CSR works when managers plan it (rationalist), or when there is interdepartmental communication about it (co-constitutive), or when organizations experiment with it (pragmatist), critical scholars say that responsibility becomes real when the people most affected by corporate actions gain institutionalized power. Take, for example, the research conducted by Donaghey and Reinecke (2018). They did a systematic comparison of the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety with the corporate-led Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. Their results show that binding agreements with trade unions and worker representatives are more effective in fixing problems than working with management-controlled voluntary programs. From this viewpoint, CSR is more than just about public relations. Voice, participation, and accountability frameworks are restructured to enable workers and impacted communities to influence priorities, oversee compliance, and, most importantly, challenge managerial decisions.

5. Critical Appraisal: Limitations of the Critical Management Perspective

Though the critical management approach offers powerful tools for inquiry, it does have notable limitations. Its deep skepticism regarding corporate motives and market-oriented solutions might lead to an interpretive bias that assumes CSR is inherently ideological. This leaves little conceptual room to acknowledge empirically documented cases of incremental improvement, hybrid organizing, or reformist coalitions within firms. The critical management perspective, by focusing on structures of domination and capital accumulation, forces a sort of tunnel vision in viewing corporations as monolithic actors. This severely downplays the internal heterogeneity, competing logics, and contested practices that other perspectives have documented. Nonetheless, the critical perspective remains vital for inquiry into CSR initiatives. It continues to acknowledge the unsettling prospect that, in the absence

of structural constraints and democratization, CSR may devolve into impression management and greenwashing.

Conclusion

This paper inquired whether CSR makes organizations more responsible in a tangible way or whether it primarily serves as a tool for impression management or even greenwashing. Evaluating this question through four organizational theory perspectives reveals that the answer is not universal. It is, unfortunately, contingent upon the mechanisms emphasized by each perspective. Thus, the short answer is, “it depends”.

From a Rationalist perspective, CSR only makes sense when incentives, oversight, and governance frameworks align responsibility with economic advantage; failing this, it readily transforms into mere symbolism. The Pragmatist viewpoint demonstrates that CSR can generate genuine transformation via iterative learning, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative problem-solving; however, these same adaptive mechanisms may institutionalize superficial practices if the learning remains shallow. The Co-Constitutive perspective emphasizes how organizations and their institutional environments shape each other: CSR becomes tangible when embedded in cultural expectations and organizational identity, yet impression management can endure when decoupling practices can distinguish rhetoric from action. Lastly, the Critical Management perspective emphasizes that meaningful CSR seldom emerges from voluntary initiatives alone; instead, it typically requires countervailing power, regulation, or democratized structural inequalities and limits symbolic appropriation.

These perspectives, together, indicate that CSR is neither inherently transformative nor inherently deceptive. Instead, its effect is contingent upon the arrangement of incentives, learning processes, institutional interpretations, and power relations surrounding it. It's only when CSR is analyzed through various theoretical perspectives that we are able to attain a more comprehensive insight into why CSR can occasionally be the driver for meaningful responsibility and, at other times, a vehicle for reputational maintenance. Ultimately,

meaningful responsibility emerges not from CSR as a concept alone, but from the organizational, institutional, and political contexts that shape its implementation.

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