Employees’ perceptions of corporate social responsibility in a selected manufacturing enterprise in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Despite small and medium enterprises (SMEs) being the backbone of any economy, their performance is not satisfactory. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is frequently utilised to improve business sustainability and meet stakeholder responsibilities. However, literature focuses on CSR practices in larger corporations, neglecting the practice in SMEs. On the other hand, CSR research usually overlooks internal stakeholders such as employees. In order to bridge this gap, the researcher investigated internal stakeholders’ perceptions of CSR in a South African medium-sized organization located in the eThekwini municipal area, as this perspective is critical in developing a comprehensive CSR strategy. Data for this research was gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with managers and employees of the selected organization. Thematic content analysis was the primary method utilised for analysing the collected data, which was aided by NVivo 12 software for complete data processing and organization. The findings revealed that employees view CSR as a viable practice that encourages dedication and motivation to improve work performance. CSR implementation within the organization is seen as an effective motivational tool, resulting in greater output, increased staff dedication, decreased absenteeism, and increased employee turnover. The researcher argues that CSR can increase employee performance and emphasizes the necessity for SME managers to incorporate social, environmental and employee-related CSR projects into their business strategy to improve overall performance.

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Introduction

Human resources management (HRM) plays a critical role in retaining employees in today’s competitive economy by creating regulations that benefit them and encourage them to continue working with the organization (Sharma, Sharma, and Devi, 2011; Ahammad, 2017). HRM seeks to increase organisational performance by providing fair compensation based on high values and establishing a good, productive and accountable work environment (Ahammad, 2017).

Furthermore, employee training and development activities are frequently included in CSR programmes to boost organisational performance. Subsequently, understanding the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility and labour turnover, absenteeism and labour productivity requires that a business manages their internal business stakeholder relations. CSR has implications for all stakeholders, particularly employees (Youn, Lee, & Lee, 2018), as it upholds ethics and indicates the organization’s commitment to employee care and support (Isaksson & Kiessling, 2021). However, the majority of CSR research concentrates on external stakeholders, leaving employees out of the picture. CSR initiatives directed towards employees can assist organisations in gaining a competitive advantage by encouraging positive attitudes such as loyalty, as well as enhancing consumer happiness, which can lead to greater profitability (Masum, Aziz, & Hassan, 2020; Lao, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021; Ye, Wang, & Lu, 2021).

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According to Bartolovic and Vuemilović (2019), CSR activities should provide guarantees and retain highly skilled personnel through practices like professional development; equitable compensation for men and women; and non-discrimination in recruiting minorities and the elderly. These benefits attract highly qualified individuals who are more likely to remain with the company for a long time. Subsequently, working for a socially conscious company enhances self-esteem, gives a feeling of purpose, and improves profitability (Lau, Lee, & Jung, 2018; Khuong, Truong an, & Thanh Hang, 2021; Murshed, Sen, Savitskie, & Xu 2021; Paruzel, Klug, & Maier, 2021).

It is in this context that the current study seeks to explore employee perceptions of CSR initiatives and how CSR initiatives may influence their satisfaction and performance.

**Literature Review**

The literature review examines the existing body of knowledge on employees' perceptions of CSR implementation in a medium-sized manufacturing enterprise in eThekwini. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are critical to economic growth in developing nations like South Africa, yet many struggle to expand sustainably. Adopting socially and environmentally conscious behaviours, frequently via CSR programmes, is critical to their long-term success. These efforts assist the community whilst also increasing employee satisfaction, productivity and retention rates. Employees' perceptions of CSR are influenced by their loyalty to the organisation, which in turn influences absenteeism, productivity and turnover. Consequently, developing a positive perception of CSR amongst employees is critical to SME performance and broader economic development.

**Theoretical and conceptual framework**

Stakeholder Theory is a shift in how businesses approach their social responsibilities, emphasizing a larger variety of stakeholders beyond shareholders (Freeman, 1999; Bernard, 2020). Chazireni (2019) avers that this approach is especially essential for SMEs in developing countries like South Africa, which have intricate relationships with their employees, customers, communities and suppliers. These stakeholders are active participants with a strong interest in the SME's development and operations. In developing countries such as South Africa, Stakeholder Theory underlines how SMEs engage with multiple stakeholders, which are frequently influenced by local socio-cultural backdrops (Chazireni, 2019). According to Garg and Gupta (2020), Stakeholder Theory can help one to understand how SMEs' relationships with stakeholders affect their long-term survival, growth and societal impact. By taking into account employees' wishes and concerns, SMEs may create a healthy work environment, potentially leading to higher productivity and lower turnover rates. Similarly, connecting with local communities and satisfying their needs can boost their reputation and social legitimacy to operate, thus ensuring their long-term existence (Garg & Gupta, 2020).

Social Exchange Theory is well suited to the analysis and implementation of CSR initiatives within organisations. It gives a solid framework for understanding how reciprocal interactions between individuals and organisations can improve motivation, contentment, trust, and overall organisational performance. Investing in CSR allows organisations to establish a virtuous cycle of reciprocal benefits that helps both employee well-being and organisational performance. According to this view, employee-organization interactions are built on reciprocal exchanges. Adu-Gyamfi, Nyame, Boahen, and Frempong (2021) assert that when businesses invest in CSR efforts, employees see these actions as beneficial to their well-being and the community. Employees are likely to respond with greater loyalty, commitment, and effort, resulting in higher job satisfaction and performance (De Roeck and Maon, 2018; Adu-Gyamfi et.al, 2021).

**Overview of SMEs' participation in CSR in South Africa**

SMEs are important contributors to inclusive economic growth and development in developing countries (Bolotsa, Sinyolo, and Ramoroka, 2022; Maome and Zondo, 2022). SMEs account for 91% of formalised enterprises in South Africa, employing approximately 60% of the workforce and representing 36% of the nation's GDP (Lund-Thomsen, Jamali, & Vives, 2014; Chanakira and Masunda, 2019; Fatoki, 2020; Bolotsa, Sinyolo, and Ramoroka, 2022). Manufacturing SMEs alone generate more jobs and contribute 15% of GDP (Bhorat and Rooney, 2017). However, they merely survive and grow in number, not in size (Mlotshwa & Msimango-Galawe, 2020). Manufacturing businesses’ success is frequently crippling, resulting in a drop in the total number of employees in the industry (Maisiri & van Dyk, 2021). This emphasises the importance of SME sustainability and growth. To maintain long-term success, manufacturing businesses must ensure that their products are manufactured in an economically, socially and environmentally friendly manner (Turyakira, Venter, and Smith, 2012). Doing so can revive the manufacturing sector, particularly SMEs, which play an important role in the country's socio-economic development. SME growth and performance are key to their long-term success (Chiloane-Tsoka & Rasivhetshele, 2014). CSR involvement has been discovered to be a valuable strategy for business sustainability. SMEs in eThekwini have implemented CSR initiatives that benefit the community by promoting environmental sustainability and social development (Chazireni & Kader, 2019).

SMEs have been involved in socially relevant activities beyond their immediate business pursuits, but the literature on CSR has largely focused on large-scale businesses. According to Mersham and Skinner (2016), CSR is seen as philanthropy in South Africa because CSR is based on the Ubuntu business philosophy's premise that the company and society are interrelated, and society has specific expectations for appropriate business conduct (Bello & Kamanga, 2020). Khomba and Vermaak (2012) aver that the African Ubuntu philosophy emphasises inclusive corporate responsibility, with a focus on serving the interests of shareholders and non-
shareholding stakeholders, and is influenced by African socio-cultural values. As such, the Ubuntu viewpoint serves as the foundation for an organisation's decision to participate in CSR. Small businesses in Africa often combine community and business interests for the common good, justifying an Ubuntu approach where owner-managers cannot easily separate responsibilities (Makwara, Dzansi and Chipunza 2023). Additionally, South African SMES may choose activities that are within their financial capabilities, such as spending time teaching members of non-profit organisations a skill, or offering in-service training to tertiary students. Caring for the community strengthens the case that a business is inextricably linked to society through multiple stakeholders, both internal and external (Kayuni and Tambulasi, 2012).

Rashid, Gul, and Khalid (2018) and Deng et al (2020) noted that working for a socially responsible company can also boost employees' self-esteem, leading to increased productivity and organizational performance. Employee turnover is also reduced by organisations engaging in employee-related CSR activities that benefit employees by providing a safe and supportive working environment, fair compensation and suitable work hours. Al Masud, Hossain, and Biswas (2021) further emphasized that workforce productivity is key to sustaining a profitable business or a healthy economy. Javed and Husain (2021) highlighted that CSR activities can contribute to this goal by improving waste reduction, resource efficiency, employee empowerment, quality improvement, and productivity growth. In addition to improving productivity, CSR can also protect a company's reputation during economic downturns and aid in cost reductions (Stuebs and Sun, 2010). Moreover, CSR can also help companies attract and retain valued human resources, resulting in lower turnover and increased production (Turban & Greening, 1997 as cited in Yang, Bento, & Akbar, 2019). Dobrosavljev and Uroevi (2022) noted that employee turnover is a significant issue that can harm an organization. Therefore, companies must prioritize employee job satisfaction to reduce turnover rates and ensure their continued success (Iqbal, Guohao, & Akhtar, 2017).

**Employee perceptions of CSR initiatives**

Employee perceptions of CSR are important because they describe how employees learn about and form opinions on the CSR of their companies (De Roeck & Maon, 2018). Their level of satisfaction with the company influences their opinions and attitudes toward the company, which influences their commitment to the organization. Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnytsky (2002) classified CSR commitment into three types, namely affective, continuous and normative:

i. Employees' "emotional attachment" to their organisation is regarded as an emotional or affective commitment;

ii. the perceived costs of leaving the organisation drive continuation commitment, which is regarded as an economic attachment; and

iii. normative commitment, on the other hand, represents an employee's responsibility to remain connected or loyal because it is the right thing to do (Meyer et al, 2002).

Employees must go through all these forms for a company to have a low absenteeism rate, high productivity and low employee turnover. For instance, employee commitment to staying with the company reduces the likelihood of employees leaving, and an organisation may benefit financially from lower employee turnover. As such, their perceptions of the organisation and its CSR initiatives may be influenced by their level of commitment or attachment to the organisation.

**Research Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative methodology that focuses on a single case study to elucidate employees' perceptions of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within a specific clothing manufacturing organisation. This organisation adopted CSR for five years and had documented business performance both before and after CSR implementation. Purposive sampling was used to choose the company. Two focus group discussions, each with five participants, were conducted to collect rich, nuanced information. The information gathered from the focus group discussions was thoroughly transcribed, coded and subjected to thematic analysis in order to identify common themes and sub-themes. In addition to exploring participants' viewpoints, demographic data such as age, gender, position within the organisation and years of experience were collected to provide context. The majority of participants were between the ages of 40 and 49 years old, with men accounting for 75% of the sample. Notably, female participants had a maximum work experience of 20 years, indicating a potentially high rate of staff retention, particularly amongst women. The participants were from a variety of departments, including sales, sewing, cutting and quality control, resulting in a varied spectrum of opinions. The research approach was based on ethical issues, which necessitated obtaining ethical certification and gatekeeper authorization from the company owner/manager. Prior to participation, informed consent forms were issued to ensure that the participants fully understood the research objectives and ramifications, as well as protecting confidentiality and anonymity.

**Presentation of the findings**

The dataset was meticulously organised into distinct thematic groups reflecting various experiential insights. Subsequently, these delineated categories were synthesised to demarcate three overarching thematic constructs, namely the inherent nature of CSR endeavours implemented, and the beneficial outcomes derived from CSR implementation.
Theme 1: The inherent nature of CSR endeavours implemented

The organisation introduced employee-related, environmental-related, and societal related CSR activities. According to Luo, Zhang and Li (2022), socially responsible organisations prioritise employee safety, business performance development and environmental preservation.

**Sub-Theme 1.1: Employee-related activities**

In this study, the employee-related acts noted were employee treatment and incentives.

As illuminated by the participants:

... to highlight that as part of employee-related acts, the company tried to make sure that it treats us with respect by making sure that they receive competitive pay and offered wide-ranging benefits, such as overtime and leave allowance.

This corroborates the work of Chepkwony, Kemboi, and Mutai (2015), who investigated the effects of internal corporate social responsibility practices on employee job satisfaction in Kenya. They established that compensation and perks, with fringe benefits as a motivator, substantially influence employee satisfaction with work. According to Manurung et al. (2021), fair treatment and good working circumstances boost employee happiness and employees are more likely to be committed to their work, which improves both their own and the organization's overall performance.

**Sub-Theme 1.2: Environmental-related activities**

The environmental-related activities included waste reduction and the use of alternative energy. The respondents highlighted that the company makes use of by-products to make fabrics in order to reduce waste:

... environmental-related acts that we do include waste reduction that is achieved by making by-products out of fabrics that were deemed not useful.

... the company also introduced cost-efficient ways of manufacturing products, alternative energy sources are used, which leads to cost reductions in operations. With the reduced cost of operation, profits increased.

According to Chapple, Paul, and Harris (2005), waste reduction reduces marginal costs by increasing production efficiency, thus allowing businesses to produce more cheaply. This cost decrease allows for bigger economies of scale by spreading fixed expenses over increased output. As a result, waste reduction increases production volume and lowers costs.

**Sub-Theme 1.3: Societal-related activities**

Beaumais and Chiroleu-Assouline (2024) aver that the social pillar includes efforts performed by human resource management organisations to encourage diversity and inclusion, whilst also improving employee health and well-being. In this study, it was noted that the business owner was already engaging in society-related CSR projects in his personal capacity before he formally incorporated it into business practice. He later integrated these into the business:

Our boss was already doing society-related CSR like giving food parcels to the homeless and sponsoring children’s education. As part of the business, he extended this and contributed towards building a library in my community. He now uses a community hall as a training centre where we train people to use sewing machines. When they are knowledgeable enough, he helps them start their own businesses. When he gets big contracts, he also refers smaller ones to the businesses that he assisted so that they can build their own clientele and start making money for themselves.

The above findings correspond to the argument that small and medium-sized businesses regularly help local communities through philanthropic activities, which frequently involve personnel with philanthropic goals (Salciauskaite, Hopeniene, and Dovaliene 2016). These programmes improve reputation, support commercial interests, and promote economic and environmental preservation. Some of the beneficial outcomes of CSR experienced by the organization in the study are discussed in the next theme.

Theme 2: Beneficial outcomes derived from CSR implementation

The study uncovered that CSR implementation in the organisation presented numerous gains and benefits to the organisation. It emerged that the benefits that CSR implementation offered the business organisation included improved profit, increased sales, reduced production costs, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty.

Contrary to the belief held by Friedman and other neo-classical economists that CSR has a negative influence on the organisation’s financial performance and that the primary goal of a firm is to maximise profits (Bahta et al. 2020), it was uncovered that CSR implementation results in an increase in profits for the business. This was attributed to an increase in sales, as articulated by the research participants:

**Sub-Theme 2.1: Increased profits**

Newman et al. (2020) posit that CSR can increase business profits and its overall performance if these programs can lower production costs, lead to product differentiation and derive innovative managerial processes as well as technological upgrading.
I believe there is a relationship between increased sales and an increase in profits.

...the company’s ability to increase efficiency helps us improve profitability because of the decreased costs.

Additionally, employees make fewer mistakes, expenses are reduced, and profits increase. While clarifying how a reduction in defects translates to an increase in profits, the participants noted the following:

The company will not spend money re-working the product, on product returns or lawsuits because of unhappy customers. Unhappy customers can make running a business very expensive. No mistakes mean no cost of re-working the product or refunds. This equals more profits.

In a nutshell, one can agree that profitability is realised by the business through CSR implementation.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Increased sales

As stated above, the profit increase is attributed to the increase in sales. Hence, it is sufficient to state that CSR benefits the business by means of an increase in sales. Sales increases, according to the participants, were attributed to brand awareness due to the charitable deeds of the business within the community. This supports the work of Chen et al. (2021), which established that CSR is regarded as a form of social good that tries to improve a company’s image and reputation:

... CSR helped increase sales because by doing good for the community, society became aware of our brand and started buying from us.

In order to ascertain whether an increase in sales can be solely attributed to CSR initiatives, the employees were asked if the sales before CSR implementation were bad. This was acknowledged by the participants, who articulated that sales were poor before CSR implementation:

It wasn’t too good, but at the same time, there was no intense marketing or advertising. We relied mostly on word-of-mouth advertising, and the random distribution of pamphlets and street posters. After CSR implementation, sales improved.

Sub-Theme 2.3: Benefits for production and cost

The employees confirmed that CSR implementation resulted in better production:

...Not only did we experience increased profits, but productivity and quality were even better.

Adding to the discussion, a participant noted that the cost of production dropped due to the use of alternative energy:

.... the cost of making the products have dropped because we use solar energy instead of electricity to save the planet.

The excerpts above show a boost in sales because the organisation implements CSR initiatives. Improved customer satisfaction was another advantage realized because of CSR. This is covered in more detail below.

Sub-Theme 2.4: Customer satisfaction

Customer satisfaction was revealed as being amongst the benefits gained by the business after CSR implementation. Employees attributed the increase in customer satisfaction to the reduction of defects in the products:

Because of fewer or no defects in our products, customer satisfaction has increased.

The participants believed that customers were happy to buy products that meet or exceed their expectations, thereby contributing to their satisfaction:

The customer will also be happy because they buy products that meet or exceed their expectations.

This corroborates the thoughts of Ye, Wang and Lu (2021), who aver that customer satisfaction influences a company’s financial outcomes, and it acts as a significant and positive mediator in the CSR-business performance relationship. As such, improved customer satisfaction, lower customer turnover and increased customer loyalty may all directly lead to improved profitability.

Sub-Theme 2.5: Customer loyalty

Customer satisfaction is the most significant predictor of customer loyalty (Liu et al., 2020). According to Islam et al. (2021), customer satisfaction has a favourable impact on customer trust, retention and repeat purchase intention. It is only a satisfied consumer that is likely to trust the company and make repeat purchases, resulting in customer retention. From the focus group interview with the employees, it was gathered that there is customer loyalty because of CSR implementation:

Before we started CSR, fewer people knew about our business, and we received a lot of publicity after we started practising CSR. After that, more customers started buying from us and became loyal to our business.
The consequence of customer loyalty and trust results in repeat purchases, which supports the work of Simionescu and Gherghina (2014), who stated that customer satisfaction indirectly improves profitability through repeat purchases:

*This resulted in the customers trusting us and being loyal to our brand. In that, way they make repeat purchases and the retention rate increases.*

As previously stated, managers should regard CSR as a strategic tool and a long-term operational practice to gain a competitive advantage (Isaksson & Kiessling, 2021). It was found that customers’ loyalty gave the business a competitive advantage, which suggests that CSR implementation contributes to the organisation’s competitive advantage:

*Customers being loyal to our brand is also a competitive advantage to us because they will not want to do business with anyone but us.*

Owing to the above and agreeing with Bello et al. (2019), CSR may be viewed as a marketing tool. The successful use of this tool may assist businesses in gaining a competitive edge. For example, a participant added that due to there being fewer defects in the products produced, there was no bad publicity, which in turn is linked to customer loyalty:

*...due to fewer defects in the products that we produce, we received fewer complaints and no bad publicity. Our customers became more loyal to our business because of some of these reasons.*

Sub-Thema 2.6: Productivity improvement

One of the recurring benefits gathered from the employees’ discussions is that CSR led to increases in productivity and quality improvement. This was attributed to employee-related activities:

*...simply because employee-related CSR activities were introduced*

*...doing so allowed us to feel appreciated and we wanted to improve our efforts and improve quality... we were also able to decrease the number of defects which could lead to decreased profitability and lesser salary and possibly less of other benefits that were introduced with CSR.*

The majority of participants were more explicit by detailing the employee-related introduction, which helped in productivity and quality improvement:

*The company introduced employee-related benefits like making sure we have good pay and working conditions were improved and aligned with the provisions of the basic conditions of the employment act. That was motivation for us to work harder and it increased our loyalty to the company. The increased morale led to the improved productivity.*

*...the business experienced productivity improvement because we were more dedicated and motivated by the incentives that were provided.*

*... What stands out for me is the improved working conditions that were introduced. The company now cares more about our health and safety as well as our well-being.*

According to this view, the employee-related activities introduced provide a form of stimulus for hard work. This is in line with Shafiq et al.’s (2014) argument that CSR implementation influences employee productivity and motivation. The participants noted that employees were adequately incentivised in the form of overtime bonuses and production and quality bonuses.

The idea that good working conditions serves as a motivator for employees’ support implies that employees are more likely to be dedicated to the work they do, subsequently improving their performance and that of the organisation as a whole.

Based on the evidence presented above, it is clear that CSR is an effective tool for increasing sales and profits; decreased production costs; improved customer loyalty and retention; and improved productivity in the organization under consideration in this study.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the use of CSR as a driver for productivity within a medium-sized manufacturing organisation in the eThekwini municipal area. From the findings, it is concluded that employee productivity increased because they worked harder to earn more bonuses; absenteeism decreased; and product quality improved as a result of the incentives. The company also benefited from lower employee turnover, lower product re-work costs, and an improved reputation. In addition, fewer product defects resulting from employee commitment improved the company's reputation, increased business trust, and increased customer satisfaction. As a result, sales and customer loyalty increased. Subsequently, the improved business reputation resulted in increased customer satisfaction and new network developments.

**Summary and managerial implications**

The study explored how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes are implemented in organisations, with an emphasis on employee, environmental and social concerns. It emphasises the advantages of CSR implementation, such as better profitability, sales
growth, lower manufacturing costs, higher customer satisfaction, and greater loyalty. The study also discovered a strong relationship between CSR and profitability, as seen by increased sales and fewer expenses. Furthermore, CSR improves product quality and productivity by raising employee morale, motivation and loyalty through equitable treatment and better working conditions.

**Managerial implications:**

i. SMEs should include CSR in their primary operations plan to boost profits, improve brand reputation, and gain a competitive edge;

ii. Prioritising employee well-being through equitable salaries, incentives and favourable working circumstances can enhance morale and productivity;

iii. Embracing environmental sustainability through waste reduction and the use of renewable energy can help companies save costs and improve operational efficiency;

iv. Participating in societal-related CSR programmes can increase goodwill and brand reputation. Companies should identify meaningful ways to support community development, education and social welfare that are in line with local needs and beliefs; and

v. Continuous monitoring and assessment of CSR activities is required to determine their efficacy and impact on stakeholders. Regular feedback systems and performance indicators should be implemented to monitor progress and maintain accountability.

**Study Limitations**

i. The study was carried out at a single medium-sized organization in the eThekwini municipal area. The findings may not be applicable to other organizations or areas due to variances in company culture, industry practices, and regional economic conditions.

ii. The study examined employees' views of CSR in a manufacturing organization. It has captured the full spectrum of CSR actions and their effects across different industries.

**Recommendations for future research**

i. Future study should include organizations from a variety of industries and areas. This would increase the findings' generalizability and provide a more complete knowledge of how CSR initiatives influence employee views in various circumstances.

Quantitative research approaches, such as large-scale surveys, can supplement qualitative findings. This mixed-methods approach would enable statistical validation of the observed trends and correlations between corporate social responsibility efforts.

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