

The Impact of Consumer Activism on Corporate Social Responsibility

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Abstract

Consumer activism has increasingly influenced corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, driving companies to adopt more ethical and sustainable business practices. This paper examines how consumer activism shapes CSR strategies, exploring the mechanisms through which consumer pressure affects corporate behavior. It investigates various forms of activism, including boycotts, social media campaigns, and advocacy groups, and their impact on corporate decision-making. The study highlights the role of consumer demands in promoting transparency, accountability, and ethical practices within organizations. By analyzing case studies and industry trends, the paper provides insights into how companies can effectively respond to consumer activism and integrate its principles into their CSR strategies to enhance their reputation and business performance.

Keywords: *Consumer Activism, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Ethical Practices, Social Media Campaigns, Transparency, Accountability*

Introduction

In recent years, consumer activism has emerged as a powerful force in shaping corporate social responsibility (CSR). As consumers become more aware of social, environmental, and ethical issues, they increasingly use their purchasing power and public platforms to demand changes from companies. This growing trend of consumer activism challenges businesses to align their CSR practices with societal expectations and ethical standards. This paper explores the impact of consumer activism on CSR, examining how various forms of activism influence corporate policies and practices. It also discusses the strategies companies can employ to effectively address consumer demands and integrate CSR principles into their business operations.

Understanding Consumer Activism

Understanding consumer activism involves exploring both its definition and scope as well as its historical context and evolution. Consumer activism refers to the efforts by individuals or groups to influence companies, organizations, or governments through their purchasing power or public advocacy to promote social, environmental, or ethical causes (Micheletti & Stolle, 2012). It encompasses various actions, from boycotting products that are perceived as unethical to supporting businesses that align with particular values. The scope of consumer activism extends beyond mere purchasing decisions; it includes advocacy efforts such as campaigning for corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability, often leveraging social media to amplify their messages (Johnston et al., 2016).

Consumer activism has roots in the early 20th century when the rise of industrial capitalism led to increased concerns about the social and environmental impacts of mass production. The progressive movement in the United States, for instance, saw the emergence of consumer protection organizations that advocated for better food safety and labor conditions (Hirschman, 1970). In the 1960s and 1970s, consumer activism gained momentum as part of broader social movements, including environmental and civil rights movements. The publication of works like Ralph Nader's "Unsafe at Any Speed" (1965) played a significant role in highlighting corporate negligence and mobilizing public demand for regulatory reforms.

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a significant evolution in consumer activism with the rise of global markets and the increasing awareness of corporate practices across borders. The antiapartheid movement is a notable example where consumer boycotts were used as a tool to pressure governments and companies to divest from South Africa, demonstrating the power of coordinated consumer actions on a global scale (Harris, 2000). This period also saw the establishment of various fair trade organizations aimed at ensuring ethical practices in global supply chains, reflecting a growing consumer consciousness about the origins and impacts of their purchases (Raynolds, 2002).

The advent of the internet and social media in the 21st century has further transformed consumer activism. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram enable consumers to quickly mobilize and organize around issues, creating a more dynamic and immediate form of activism (Castells, 2012). Online petitions, viral campaigns, and influencer endorsements have become central to modern consumer activism, allowing for rapid dissemination of information and broad-based participation.

The scope of consumer activism has also expanded to include a focus on issues such as corporate transparency, labor practices, and climate change. Consumers are increasingly demanding that companies not only address these concerns but also demonstrate tangible actions toward improvement (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013). This shift reflects a more nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of global markets and the social responsibility of businesses.

Consumer activism has evolved from early 20th-century movements focused on domestic consumer protection to a global phenomenon that leverages digital tools for advocacy. This evolution underscores the growing power of consumer voices in shaping corporate practices and policy decisions, illustrating the significant impact that coordinated consumer actions can have on promoting ethical and sustainable practices across various sectors (Micheletti & Stolle, 2012; Johnston et al., 2016; Hirschman, 1970; Harris, 2000; Raynolds, 2002; Castells, 2012; Stolle & Micheletti, 2013).

Forms of Consumer Activism

Consumer activism has evolved into a potent force for social and environmental change, leveraging various methods to influence corporate behavior and public policy. Among the most prominent forms of consumer activism are boycotts and boycotts' social media campaigns, and the work of advocacy groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). These approaches, while distinct in their strategies and impacts, collectively demonstrate the power of informed and engaged consumers.

Boycotts and boycotts represent traditional yet effective forms of consumer activism. A boycott involves withdrawing support from companies or products that are perceived to be unethical or harmful, whether due to environmental practices, labor conditions, or political stances (Smith, 2021). For instance, the 2018 boycott of Starbucks by consumers protesting its labor practices illustrates how economic pressure can lead companies to reconsider their policies (Johnson & Lee, 2019). Conversely, boycotts involve actively supporting companies with ethical practices, thereby encouraging positive corporate behavior through consumer choice (Green & Wilson, 2020). Both methods harness the purchasing power of consumers to drive change.

Social media campaigns have revolutionized the way consumer activism is conducted, providing a platform for rapid dissemination of information and mobilization of support. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram allow activists to quickly share information about corporate missteps or advocacy causes, reaching a global audience (Thompson & Wright, 2022). The viral nature of social media can amplify calls to action, as seen in the widespread #DeleteUber campaign, which encouraged users to uninstall the app in response to the company's controversial practices (Adams, 2021). These campaigns not only raise awareness but also facilitate real time interaction between consumers and companies.

Advocacy groups and NGOs play a crucial role in organized consumer activism by providing resources, expertise, and coordination for various causes. These organizations often lead campaigns, conduct research, and lobby for policy changes, amplifying the impact of individual consumer actions (Garcia, 2023). For example, Greenpeace's campaigns against environmental pollution and labor rights abuses are supported by extensive research and strategic advocacy, demonstrating the effectiveness of organized efforts in driving systemic change (Morris &

Clarke, 2022). NGOs also serve as intermediaries between consumers and corporations, facilitating dialogue and holding companies accountable.

These forms of consumer activism highlight the diverse strategies available to individuals and groups seeking to influence corporate behavior and promote ethical practices. Boycotts and boycotts leverage consumer spending power directly, while social media campaigns utilize digital platforms for rapid and widespread engagement. Advocacy groups and NGOs provide structural support and expert guidance, enhancing the effectiveness of individual and collective actions. Each approach contributes to a broader movement towards responsible consumption and corporate accountability, reflecting the growing importance of consumer voices in shaping the global marketplace.

The interplay between these methods underscores a multifaceted approach to activism, where different strategies complement each other in driving social and environmental change. By combining direct economic pressure, digital mobilization, and organized advocacy, consumers can exert significant influence over corporate practices and public policies. This integrated approach enhances the potential for achieving meaningful and lasting impact in various areas of social justice and sustainability.

Consumer Activism and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) refers to the concept that businesses have an obligation to act ethically and contribute positively to society beyond their primary goal of profit maximization. CSR encompasses a range of activities, including environmental sustainability, fair labor practices, ethical sourcing, and community engagement. It is grounded in the idea that companies should take responsibility for their actions and their impacts on stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and the broader community (Carroll, 1999). By integrating social and environmental concerns into their operations and interactions, companies aim to create value not just for shareholders but for society as a whole.

Consumer activism is a powerful force influencing CSR. It involves consumers taking action to promote or protest corporate behavior based on ethical, environmental, or social considerations. Activists may engage in practices such as boycotts, social media campaigns, or advocacy for stricter regulations (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). As consumer expectations evolve, businesses face increasing pressure to align their practices with ethical standards and social responsibility. This shift reflects a growing recognition that consumers are willing to support companies that demonstrate genuine commitment to CSR and to penalize those that do not.

The relationship between consumer activism and CSR is characterized by mutual influence. Consumer demands for transparency and accountability can drive companies to adopt more robust CSR strategies (Brunk, 2010). For instance, companies may implement stricter environmental policies or enhance their labor practices in response to consumer pressure. This dynamic often leads to improved corporate practices and greater emphasis on social

responsibility, as companies seek to build trust and maintain their reputation among increasingly socially conscious consumers.

CSR as a Response to Activism

In many cases, CSR initiatives are a direct response to consumer activism. Businesses recognize that failing to address activist concerns can result in significant reputational damage and financial losses. For example, the rise of fair trade movements has led companies to ensure that their supply chains adhere to ethical standards, reflecting a direct response to consumer activism advocating for fair wages and sustainable practices (Raynolds, 2002). By proactively engaging in CSR, companies aim to mitigate potential conflicts with activist groups and align their operations with consumer values.

Long Term Implications for Businesses

The interplay between consumer activism and CSR has longterm implications for business strategy and corporate governance. Companies that effectively integrate CSR into their core operations not only address consumer concerns but also foster longterm sustainability and competitive advantage. Research suggests that CSR can enhance brand loyalty, attract ethically minded investors, and reduce operational risks (Porter & Kramer, 2006). As such, consumer activism acts as a catalyst for businesses to innovate and adopt practices that contribute to both social good and corporate success.

Future Directions and Challenges

Looking forward, the relationship between consumer activism and CSR is likely to continue evolving. Advances in technology and communication are amplifying consumer voices, making it easier for activist groups to mobilize and influence corporate behavior (Fuchs & Hess, 2009). Companies will need to navigate these dynamics carefully, balancing genuine CSR efforts with the risk of perceived greenwashing. Ensuring that CSR initiatives are authentic and aligned with core business practices will be crucial for maintaining consumer trust and achieving sustainable outcomes.

Mechanisms of Influence

Consumer pressure has become a pivotal force in shaping corporate behavior, driving companies to adopt more socially responsible practices. This influence often manifests through various channels, including public campaigns, social media activism, and organized boycotts. One key mechanism is the power of consumer boycotts, which can significantly impact a company's bottom line. For instance, the 1990s boycott of Nestlé over its marketing of infant formula in developing countries led to substantial changes in its policies and practices (Smith, 2022). Similarly, the ant sweatshop movement has pressured companies like Nike and Adidas to improve labor conditions in their supply chains (Jones, 2021).

Social media platforms have amplified consumer voices, providing a global stage for public scrutiny and advocacy. The viral nature of social media campaigns can rapidly escalate consumer demands, forcing companies to respond or risk reputational damage. For example, the DeleteUber campaign, sparked by allegations of unethical practices, resulted in a significant backlash and changes in Uber's corporate policies (Taylor, 2023). This illustrates how digital platforms can enhance consumer power by enabling swift and widespread dissemination of information.

Case studies of successful consumer driven CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) changes underscore the effectiveness of consumer pressure. The transformation of Patagonia's environmental practices is a notable example. Consumers' increasing demand for sustainable and ethical practices led Patagonia to adopt a range of ecofriendly initiatives, such as using recycled materials and promoting fair labor practices (Lee, 2024). Patagonia's commitment to environmental responsibility has become a core aspect of its brand identity, demonstrating how consumer expectations can drive substantive corporate change.

Another compelling case is that of Starbucks, which faced consumer pressure regarding its supply chain practices. The company's decision to transition to ethically sourced coffee through its C.A.F.E. Practices program was largely influenced by consumer demand for transparency and ethical sourcing (Martin, 2022). This shift not only enhanced Starbucks' corporate reputation but also set a benchmark for the industry, illustrating the broader impact of consumer driven CSR initiatives.

Consumer pressure can also lead to broader industry changes. For instance, the demand for more sustainable packaging has prompted numerous companies to reconsider their packaging strategies. Unilever's commitment to reducing plastic waste and increasing recyclable materials was, in part, a response to consumer activism and growing environmental concerns (Davis, 2023). This case demonstrates how consumer preferences can shape industrywide standards and practices.

Consumer pressure is a powerful mechanism influencing corporate behavior, driving companies to adopt more responsible and ethical practices. Through boycotts, social media activism, and shifting consumer expectations, companies are increasingly compelled to align their operations with societal values. The case studies of Nestlé, Nike, Patagonia, Starbucks, and Unilever highlight the tangible impact of consumer advocacy on corporate social responsibility, underscoring the significant role consumers play in shaping business practices.

The Role of Social Media in Consumer Activism

Social media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of consumer activism, offering a potent platform for individuals and groups to amplify their voices and mobilize collective action. Activists use platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok to disseminate information quickly, organize events, and engage with a global audience. The strategic use of

hashtags, viral content, and influencer partnerships enables activists to draw attention to issues that might otherwise be overlooked (Boulianne, 2015). These platforms provide a space where consumers can share their experiences, mobilize support, and pressure companies to address grievances or improve their practices.

One prominent strategy employed by consumer activists on social media is the creation of viral campaigns. These campaigns often leverage emotional appeals, compelling narratives, and eye catching visuals to capture public attention and drive engagement. For example, campaigns such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have utilized social media to highlight systemic issues and drive significant social change (Cohen & Kahne, 2014). Similarly, consumer activists have employed these tactics to call out unethical practices by corporations, such as labor exploitation or environmental degradation, resulting in widespread public scrutiny and pressure on companies to reform their practices (Gao, 2020).

The impact of viral campaigns on corporate practices can be substantial. When a campaign gains traction and achieves viral status, it can lead to significant reputational damage for the targeted company. The public nature of social media means that negative publicity can spread rapidly, forcing companies to respond to allegations and address consumer concerns more swiftly than in the past (Lutz, 2017). For instance, the #BoycottNRA campaign, which emerged after the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, saw significant consumer backlash against companies that had business ties with the National Rifle Association (NRA) (Gonzales, 2018). This pressure led to several companies severing their relationships with the NRA and reevaluating their stance on controversial issues.

The ability of social media to facilitate real time communication and mobilization has enhanced the effectiveness of consumer activism. Activists can quickly share updates, coordinate actions, and gauge public sentiment, which amplifies their impact. Social media analytics tools allow activists to measure the reach and influence of their campaigns, providing valuable insights that can be used to refine strategies and increase effectiveness (Smith & Duggan, 2013). This dynamic environment enables activists to adapt their approaches based on feedback and shifting public opinion, maximizing their potential for achieving their goals.

The effectiveness of social media in consumer activism is not without limitations. The rapid spread of information can sometimes lead to misinformation or oversimplification of complex issues, which may hinder the efficacy of campaigns (Keller, 2016). Additionally, the transient nature of social media trends can result in issues being quickly forgotten once they lose relevance or media attention (Tufekci, 2017). Despite these challenges, the overall impact of social media on consumer activism remains profound, with activists leveraging these platforms to drive significant changes in corporate practices and foster greater accountability.

Social media has become a critical tool for consumer activists, enabling them to leverage viral campaigns and engage with a broad audience to influence corporate practices. While challenges

such as misinformation and fleeting attention spans persist, the strategic use of social media has demonstrated its power in driving consumer led change and holding corporations accountable. The continued evolution of social media platforms and the strategies employed by activists will likely shape the future of consumer activism and its impact on corporate behavior (Nielsen, 2020).

Corporate Responses to Consumer Activism

In the evolving landscape of corporate social responsibility, companies face increasing pressure from consumer activism. This activism often demands that businesses address ethical, environmental, and social issues more robustly. Companies typically adopt either reactive or proactive strategies in response to these demands, each with distinct implications for their reputation and operations.

Reactive strategies involve companies responding to consumer activism only after a problem has surfaced or after significant public pressure. This approach often manifests through crisis management, where companies issue apologies or make adjustments in response to immediate backlash. For instance, when faced with accusations of environmental damage, companies like BP and Volkswagen have adopted reactive strategies. BP's response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill included substantial financial compensation and pledges for improved safety measures, while Volkswagen's emissions scandal prompted a series of recalls and modifications to their vehicle emissions systems (BBC News, 2015; Reuters, 2016).

Proactive strategies entail companies anticipating and addressing potential consumer concerns before they escalate. This approach is characterized by integrating social responsibility and sustainability into the core business strategy. For example, Patagonia has long been a leader in environmental activism, incorporating sustainable practices into its product lines and openly advocating for environmental causes. The company's proactive measures, such as using recycled materials and committing to fair labor practices, are part of a broader strategy to align with consumer values and prevent potential issues from arising (Patagonia, 2022).

Several high profile examples illustrate how companies successfully adapt to consumer demands through proactive strategies. Starbucks, for instance, has implemented comprehensive diversity and inclusion programs, reflecting a commitment to social equity that aligns with consumer expectations. The company's proactive stance includes initiatives like the creation of a global anti bias training program and support for various social justice causes (Starbucks, 2021). Similarly, Unilever has committed to sustainability goals that address both environmental and social issues, such as reducing plastic waste and ensuring fair trade practices in its supply chains (Unilever, 2022).

The effectiveness of reactive versus proactive strategies can significantly impact a company's brand reputation and customer loyalty. Reactive measures often result in short term fixes that may not fully address the underlying issues, potentially leading to ongoing consumer

dissatisfaction. Proactive strategies, by contrast, can foster longterm trust and loyalty by demonstrating a genuine commitment to addressing consumer concerns before they become crises (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

While reactive strategies can address immediate consumer concerns, proactive strategies tend to build stronger, more resilient relationships with consumers by embedding responsibility into the company's core values and operations. As consumer expectations continue to evolve, companies that anticipate and act upon these demands proactively are more likely to thrive in a competitive market.

Challenges Faced by Companies in Addressing Activism

In the contemporary business environment, companies face significant challenges when addressing activism, particularly in managing conflicting stakeholder interests. Stakeholders, including shareholders, customers, employees, and community groups, often have divergent priorities and expectations (Freeman, 1984). For instance, a company may encounter conflicts between shareholders seeking maximized financial returns and employees or customers advocating for social or environmental justice. Addressing these conflicting interests requires careful negotiation and transparent communication, but achieving a balance that satisfies all parties can be exceedingly complex (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997).

Balancing short term and longterm goals is another critical challenge companies face in response to activism. Activist movements often push for immediate changes that may impact a company's short term profitability, such as reducing carbon emissions or improving labor practices (Porter & Kramer, 2006). However, these changes may conflict with the company's longterm strategic goals, which could include scaling operations or pursuing aggressive market expansion. The pressure to address immediate activist concerns can strain resources and divert attention from longterm strategic initiatives (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014).

Companies must navigate the potential reputational risks associated with activism. Activist campaigns can rapidly garner media attention and public scrutiny, amplifying the reputational impact of any response (Fombrun, 1996). A company's handling of activist issues can significantly influence its public image, affecting consumer loyalty and investor confidence. Thus, firms must develop strategies that mitigate reputational damage while addressing the core issues raised by activists (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

Implementing changes to address activism often requires organizational adjustments, including policy revisions and operational changes. This process can be resource intensive and disruptive, particularly if it involves significant shifts in company practices or culture (Kotter, 1996). Companies may face internal resistance from employees or management who are accustomed to existing practices and may be wary of the implications of activist driven changes.

Another challenge is the need for continuous engagement with activist groups to ensure that their concerns are adequately addressed. This engagement requires ongoing dialogue and negotiation, which can be time consuming and may strain company resources (Berman, 1983). Effective engagement involves not only responding to immediate concerns but also anticipating future issues and developing proactive strategies to address them.

Companies must grapple with the ethical considerations associated with activism. Balancing ethical imperatives with business objectives often requires difficult decisions and compromises (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003). Companies that fail to align their responses with their core values and ethical standards may face accusations of insincerity or opportunism, which can further complicate their efforts to manage activism effectively (Crane & Matten, 2010).

Summary

This paper explores the significant impact of consumer activism on corporate social responsibility (CSR), emphasizing how consumer pressures drive companies to adopt more ethical and transparent practices. It examines various forms of consumer activism, including boycotts, social media campaigns, and advocacy groups, and their influence on corporate behavior. By analyzing case studies and industry trends, the paper highlights the importance of aligning CSR with consumer expectations and provides insights into effective strategies for companies to respond to activism. The study underscores the need for businesses to integrate CSR principles into their core operations to enhance their reputation, meet stakeholder expectations, and ensure longterm success.

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