



## **Investigating Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Initiatives on Consumer Buying Behavior: The Most Influential Factor**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept where companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis. A majority of the companies believe that the development of a CSR strategy can deliver real business benefits. Apparently, it has been shown that a company performing CSR successfully, not only benefits the community but gains more customers, increases employee productivity and the company's profits. Despite increasing emphasis on CSR in the marketplace, little is known about the effects of CSR initiatives on consumers and which of the CSR initiatives are the most influential to the company. Thus, this paper aims to investigate the influence of CSR initiatives towards consumer buying behavior and to identify which initiatives will be the most influential factor towards consumer buying behavior. A sampling procedure based on the convenience sampling technique was employed. A total of 230 structured questionnaires were distributed, with 190 returned for analysis. The results showed that there are significant relationships between environmental, human and safety and health initiatives with consumer buying behavior and subsequently human initiative is shown to be the most influential factors among the independent variables. The implication of these findings shows that the aspects of human factor should be given consideration and priority in the practice of CSR due to the influence on consumer buying behavior.*

**Keywords:** *Corporate Social Responsibility, CSR initiatives, consumer buying behavior*

### **INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is becoming an increasingly important activity to business nationally and internationally. As globalization accelerates and large corporations serve as global providers, these corporations have progressively recognized the benefits of providing CSR programmes in their various locations. CSR activities are now being undertaken throughout the globe. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) may be defined as the commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve their quality of life (Moir, 2001).

CSR varies among companies with each company outlining its own interpretation on corporate releases, publications and websites. In its broadest sense, CSR encompasses a wide range of activities which

commonly include product safety, community involvement, stakeholder engagement, and environmental management. Programmes are designed for an equally wide range of reasons often to derive legitimacy, reputation enhancement and management, and notions of corporate citizenship. In addition, Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2006) indicated that one broad framework used to categorize CSR initiatives includes actions under the domains of employee relations and diversity programmes, ethical material sourcing, product design, marketing programmes, the environment, human rights, and corporate governance.

Apparently, CSR activities do have influence on consumers' purchasing decisions and help companies to boost up sales and increase business profits. Many prior studies have indicated that CSR initiatives contribute a lot to stimulate sales (Harris & Thomas, 2000); improvements in employee commitment, retention and motivation, improved productivity, strengthened shareholder confidence as well as competitive advantage through differentiation (Smith & Langford, 2009). According to the results of a global survey in 2002 by Ernst & Young, 94 per cent of companies believe the development of a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategy can deliver real business benefits. However, only 11 per cent have made significant progress in implementing the strategy in their organization. Besides that, it has been shown, experimentally, that consumer knowledge of a firm's CSR initiatives may lead to a higher evaluation of the company and a more positive evaluation of the company's product (Rahizah, Farah & Kasmah, 2009). Thus, a company that performed CSR successfully not only benefits the community but also make the companies gain more customers, increase employee productivity and company profits.

Today, companies have allocated huge amounts of money in implementing CSR activities or programmes. The purpose of doing that is to build a positive image and to gain the public trust. Consumers are found to be more educated and possess high expectation towards companies. A company with a good image and reputation tends to be listed in the consumers' choice. According to Lafferty, Barbara and Ronald (1999), a positive corporate image is positively correlated to purchase intention and also helps consumers to differentiate between companies and their product or service offerings. Corporations that do not equip themselves with CSR activities will often be left behind with the increasing global competition and borderless markets, while international corporations with sound CSR activities grow stronger (Altman, 2007).

The experimental results of Mohr and Webb (2005) indicate that CSR has an important and positive influence on company evaluation and purchase intent. Researchers have investigated the interface between CSR and the customer broadly, and as the literature shows, this is truly a complex matter. Many surveys developed at an international level suggest that a positive relationship exists between a company's CSR actions and consumers' reaction to that company and its product (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Murray and Vogel (1997) investigated the effects of multiple programmes of socially responsible business practices on consumers, identifying that CSR programs resulted in improved attitudes towards the firm. Besides that, research by Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) supported suggestions that a company's efforts in multiple CSR domains had a direct positive effect on customers' company evaluations.

Maignan (2001) claimed that CSR may induce consumer goodwill towards the organizations. Despite increasing emphasis on CSR in the marketplace, little is known about the effects of CSR initiatives on consumers (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) and it also does not highlight which of the CSR initiatives becomes the most influential one for the company. In view of this, the aim of this study is to examine the influence of CSR initiatives towards consumer buying behavior. The study will involve investigating whether the consumers considered the CSR initiatives including environmental initiatives, human initiatives and health initiatives provided by the organizations before associating themselves with those companies' products and services. Apart from that, this study also aims to identify which initiatives will be the most influential factor in consumer buying behavior.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, social responsibility means that a private corporation has a responsibility to society that goes beyond the production of goods and services at a profit (Davis, 1960). Actually, variety of different corporate social responsibility definitions have been suggested and applied. CSR is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis (European Commission, 2001).

Corporations that do not equip themselves with CSR activities will often be left behind with increasing global competition and borderless markets, while international corporations practising CSR activities grow stronger (Altman, 2007). CSR activities should enhance a corporation's image. According to Lafferty, Barbara and Ronald (1999), a positive corporate image positively correlates to purchase intention and also helps consumers to differentiate between companies and their product or service offerings. Therefore, loyalty and commitment from customers are likely to increase if companies act responsibly and accountably in terms of their social and environmental impact (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Pirsch, Gupta & Grau, 2007).

“CSR Initiatives” refer to various forms of company involvement with charitable causes and non profit activities (Lichtenstein, Minette & Bridgette 2004). These initiatives help companies to enhance consumer perception and consumer identification of the company. CSR has a positive effect on consumer evaluation of the company, whereby, when consumers perceive companies as behaving in a socially responsible manner, they are more attracted to purchase or use the product or services offered by that company. The company's initiatives must meet certain criteria in order to be defined as being CSR in nature, such as initiatives should go beyond common regulatory and conventional compliance. There should be interaction with the stakeholders - customers, suppliers, partners and the community. Social and environmental impact (e.g to minimise pollution, waste and being a nuisance to neighbours) should be integrated into the business operations. In addition, consideration for health and safety issues, good conditions of work and equal opportunity as well as a high standard of professionalism if it is a high risk occupation for workplace accidents are to be provided. In this study, CSR involved three important initiatives: environmental, human and safety and health.

As for the environmental initiatives, CSR can be seen as a business contribution to achieving sustainable development goals. It involves a business taking account the economic, social and environmental impacts it makes in the way it operates, in order to ensure a better quality of life for everyone of the present, and future generations. Environmental issues emphasize on preserving and conserving natural resources such as conducting recycling activities, noise reduction action plan to pursue noise improvement activities, water and process treatment and compliance with authority regulations and requirements. Many enterprises recognize the importance of their responsibilities towards the environment and take them seriously by setting targets to continually improving their performance. The current environmental issues in Malaysia are about air pollution, industrial and vehicular emissions, water pollution from sewage and deforestation. However, the government has made an international agreement to minimize pollution. This has been signed but not ratified. Malaysia has a very high environmental pollution mostly because of its industrial revolution. Malaysians do realize that this could become a major problem and are trying to reduce it. In addition, Malaysia has a natural hazard of flooding as well. That is the reason many companies nowadays are conducting activities which contribute to improvements of the environment. For instance, Honda produces hybrid cars which burn far less gas per mile and produce much less pollution ([www.allaboutthybridcars.com/suv-hybrid-autos.htm](http://www.allaboutthybridcars.com/suv-hybrid-autos.htm)).

Human initiatives include donations, sponsorships, and subsidies contributed by companies to socially benefit the community, society and nation. According to Rogojanu, A., Hristache, D., Tasnadi, et al., (2004), CSR is also reflected under the aspects of inter-human relationship, and is contributing in a

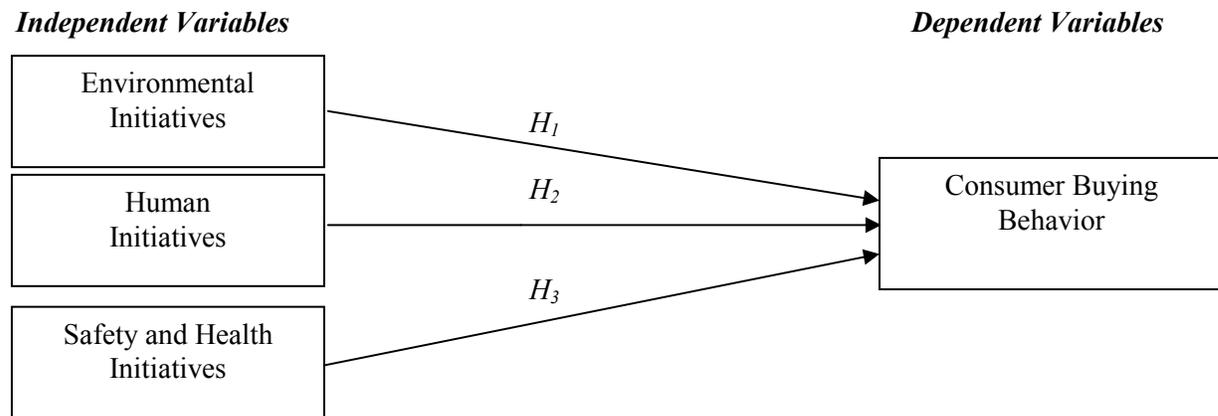
positive sense to the political and socio-economic health of society. Companies need to project a positive image to the public and to potential employees, as well as to investors.

Another form of CSR initiative regards safety and health, where companies which implement this initiative will contribute a certain portion of their profit to improve the safety and health of society. For example, Avon's new campaign is "stop domestic violence". For every purchase of the stop domestic violence awareness t-shirt which costs RM23.00, RM1.00 will be donated to the "Avon Foundation for Women". Besides that, Avon also contributes to the Avon breast cancer awareness crusade. The Avon breast cancer crusade was launched in 1992 and has raised nearly \$700 million through various Avon crusade programmes that raise funds and awareness for breast cancer. From both these programmes, it is shown that safety and health are important dimensions of CSR and companies recognize that they cannot be good externally, if they have a poor social (safety and health) performance internally (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, Corporate Social Responsibility and Safety and Health at Work, 2004).

A number of researchers have investigated the degree to which consumers' associations regard a company's CSR as influencing them. (Berens, 2004; Berens et al., 2005; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Dacin & Brown, 2002; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Three research streams point out that CSR initiatives lead to greater customer satisfaction. According to stakeholder theory, Maignan and Farrell (2004), suggest that a company's action appeals to the multidimensionality of the consumer to be not only economic but also to a member of a family, community and country. Building on this, Daub and Ergenzinger (2005) proposed the term "generalized customer" to denote people who not only care about consumption experience but are also actual or potential members of various stakeholder groups that companies need to consider. Viewed in this way, such generalized customers are likely to be more satisfied buying products and services that socially responsible firms offer.

Researches have been done on investigating the impact of a company's CSR activities on consumer judgments of the products and brands, where, prior researches claimed that there is a positive relationship between a company's CSR actions and consumer's action toward the company and its products; as a company's CSR activity can influence purchase intentions both directly and indirectly (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Mohr, Webb and Harris (2001) also stated that consumers need to become aware of a company's level of social responsibility before this factor could impact on their purchasing decision.

As cited in Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2008), marketplace polls reported that consumers expect corporations to provide information about what they do, and they will support those corporations that pursue CSR initiatives. Environics International Ltd. in year 1999 had conducted a survey regarding consumer responses towards corporate social responsibility. The result of the survey indicated that Australians have the highest CSR consumer expectations from businesses. The findings of Creyer and Ross (1997), indicated that consumers regard ethical behavior as an important consideration during their purchase decisions. Tay (2005) concluded that as society becomes more affluent and faces an increase in the level of awareness among consumers, these consumers become more sensitive to the ways in which corporations behave, which in turn may influence their buying decision behavior.



**Figure 1**  
**Theoretical Framework Model**

From the model, this research posits the following hypotheses:

- $H_1$ : *There is a significant and positive relationship between environmental initiatives and consumer buying behaviour.*
- $H_2$ : *There is a significant and positive relationship between human initiatives and consumer buying behaviour.*
- $H_3$ : *There is a significant and positive relationship between safety and health initiatives and consumer buying behaviour.*

## RESEARCH METHOD

A descriptive research was carried out to measure several variables of interest such as environmental initiatives, human initiatives and safety and health initiatives with the use of a well designed questionnaire. A questionnaire was used to gather the information required for the study using a convenience sampling approach because of non-availability of a sampling frame. The questionnaire was divided into 6 sections; Section A (demographic), Section B (awareness of CSR), Section C (environmental), Section D (human), Section E (safety and health), Section F (consumer buying behavior). Responses to the items were made on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Agree to 7= Strongly Disagree). As the study aims to examine the influence of CSR initiatives on consumer buying behavior, our population of study consisted of consumers in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia without referring to any specific consumer group. The questionnaires were conveniently distributed to consumers in the 3 different states of Pahang, Terengganu and Kelantan. In total, 190 questionnaires were returned out of a total 230 distributed, representing a response rate of 82.6%; the high response being due to the fact that researchers were involved in the distribution and collection of questionnaires. Roscoe (1975) recommended that sample sizes larger than 30 and less than 500 are appropriate for most studies. Reliability Coefficients were used to test reliability or relevance of the questions asked in questionnaires according to the variables. According to the rule of thumb of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient (Nunnally, 1978), the reliability of data set is acceptable if Cronbach's Alpha is above 0.7. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the three independent variables and a dependent variable was 0.821. This result indicates that the measurements used in this study are statistically reliable. The descriptive statistics were used to calculate the frequency distribution of demographic variables. Besides that, the hypotheses were tested to show significant relationship between sample of respondents and the extent of variance in dependent variable as explained by the related independent variables.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Demographic Profile

This section presents the demographic profile of the general public who participated in this survey. Respondents were divided into five age categories: below 20, 21 to 30 years old, 31 to 40 years old, 41 to 50 years old and above 51. The majority of the respondents (38.9%) were between 21 to 30 years old during the survey period whereas those respondents who were above 51 were the minority. Out of 190 respondents, 43.7% were female and 56.3% were male. The majority of the sample was married with 50%, and only 47.9% of respondents single and followed by widows representing only 2.1% of the overall respondents.

**Table 1**  
**Profile of respondents**

Variable	Frequency	%
<b>Age</b>		
Below 20 years	32	16.8
21 – 30 years	74	38.9
31 – 40 years	53	27.9
41 – 50 years	29	15.3
51 and above	2	1.1
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	83	43.7
Male	107	56.3
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	91	47.9
Married	95	50.0
Widow	4	2.1
<b>Monthly Gross Income</b>		
Below RM1000	49	25.8
RM1000-RM1999	52	27.4
RM2000-RM2999	59	31.1
RM3000-RM3999	24	12.6
RM4000 and above	6	3.2
<b>Occupation</b>		
Private	40	21.1
Government Servant	90	47.4
Self-employed	27	14.2
Unemployed	30	15.8
Student	3	1.6
<b>Race</b>		
Malay	133	70.0
Chinese	33	17.4
Indian	24	12.6
<b>State of Origin</b>		
Kelantan	68	35.8
Terengganu	63	33.2
Pahang	59	31.1

Regarding the income level, the majority of the respondents earned RM2000 to RM2999 (31.1%) and as for the occupation of the respondents, the largest group of the respondents, which is 47.4% came from the government sector. 21.1% of the respondents came from the private sector, followed by unemployed respondents 15.8%, self-employed 14.2% and only 1.6% students. Malays were the highest percentage of the total respondents followed by the Chinese and Indians. Apparently, most of the respondents, namely 35.8% came from Kelantan, followed by Terengganu and Pahang.

### Consumer general perception on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The summary of the findings on the respondent’s general perceptions towards CSR is shown in Table 2. Apparently, 41.4% of the respondents were aware of CSR and 22.6% were not. The rest are not really sure about the existence of CSR. The findings also indicate that the majority of the respondents which is 36.3% seem to have moderately understood the concept of CSR and only 8.4% of the respondents indicated that they do not understand the concept of CSR at all. As for the CSR activities that the organizations had conducted in the respondents’ areas, community work/service and donation scored the highest, followed by natural disaster aid, environmental protection, and education sponsorship.

**Table 2**  
**Consumer general perception on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)**

<b>Awareness on CSR</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	41.4
No	22.6
Not sure	36.3
<b>Understand the concept of CSR</b>	<b>%</b>
Well understood	26.8
Moderately understood	36.3
Least understood	28.4
Not at all	8.4
<b>CSR activities that organizations had conducted in your area</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Community work/service	70
Donation	68
Education sponsorship	24
Environmental protection	39
Natural Disaster Aids	49
Sport sponsorship	5
Produce safe and quality products	8
Maximizing shareholders’ value	2

Maximizing shareholders’ value became the activity least chosen by the respondents, indicating that respondents thought organizations should put society on the front row rather than maximizing their shareholders’ value. Besides that, the findings show that donation is one of the popular CSR activities or initiatives that the organizations are always involved with and it is consistent with the findings of Dahl and Lavack (1995).

### Mean and Standard Deviation of Variables Measured

The mean value for the independent variables varies from as low as 4.5979 to as high as 6.0716 with standard deviation varying from 0.7056 to 0.8505. Since human initiatives had the highest mean of 6.0716, it shows that majority of the respondents considered this aspect as important compared to others. In terms of consumer buying behavior, the mean score was 5.9224 with a standard deviation of 0.8390.

**Table 3**  
**Mean and Standard Deviation of the Variables in the Study**

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Environmental initiatives	4.5979	0.8505
Human initiatives	6.0716	0.7437
Safety and health initiatives	5.9158	0.7056
Consumer buying behavior	5.9224	0.8390

**Test of Relationship between Variables**

Multiple linear regressions were used to measure the strength of association (linear relationship) between consumer buying behavior and CSR initiatives. Based on the model summary of multiple regressions in Table 3, the multiple value of R is 0.735. Since multiple R is positive in value, therefore, there is a positive linear relationship between environmental, human, safety and health initiatives and consumer buying behavior. According to the model summary, R square is equal to 0.541 which indicates that there is a moderate linear relationship between CSR initiatives and consumer buying behavior. 54.1% of the dependent variables can be explained by independent variables, whereas another 45.9% of dependent variables might be explained by other related factors.

**Table 4**  
**Model Summary of Multiple Regressions**

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	Std. Error of the Estimate
CSR Initiatives → CBB	.735(a)	0.541	.533	.57315

Note: CSR Initiatives: corporate social responsibility initiatives which include environmental, human, safety & health  
 CBB : consumer buying behavior

**Table 5**  
**ANOVA<sup>b</sup> of Multiple Regressions**

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
CSR Initiatives → CBB	Regression	71.942	3	23.981	73.000	.000 <sup>a</sup>
	Residual	61.101	186	.328		
Total		133.042	189			

Note: <sup>a</sup>. Predictors (CSR Initiatives): (Constant), safety and health, environmental, human

<sup>b</sup>. Dependent Variable (CBB): consumerbuyingbehavior

**Table 6**  
**Coefficients<sup>a</sup> of Multiple Regressions**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	Beta	Std. Error	Beta		
CSR Initiatives → CBB					
(Constant)	.189	.390		.484	.629
Environmental	.238	.052	.241	4.567	.000
Human	.435	.085	.366	5.109	.000
Safety & Health	.341	.080	.302	4.255	.000

Note : <sup>a</sup> Dependent Variable: consumerbuyingbehavior (CBB)

The F statistic in the ANOVA analysis indicates significant relationship in the regression model when the p-value is less than 0.05. The above table also revealed that all three independent variables namely environmental initiative, human initiative and safety and health initiative were found to have a significant relationship with consumer buying behavior, in other words all the CSR initiatives have significantly influenced consumer buying behavior. According to the unstandardized beta coefficient in Table 6, human initiative was found to be the most influential variable since regression coefficient value is the highest among other initiatives which is 0.435. 9. Theory explains that a higher coefficient indicates a greater impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to investigate whether the developed framework can be validated for consumer buying behavior, which is whether CSR initiatives such as environment, human and safety and health initiatives act as influencing factors on consumer buying behavior. The data obtained from this study revealed that there is a direct and positive effect of all CSR initiatives on consumer buying behaviour. The result also indicates that all CSR initiatives have a significant relationship with consumer buying behavior. This is actually supported by prior researches' claim that there is a positive relationship between a company's CSR actions and consumers' action towards the company and its products; as a company's CSR activity can influence purchase intentions both directly and indirectly (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). In addition, human initiative was found to be the most influential variable since its regression coefficient of 0.435 is the highest among the initiatives.

In this study, the major caveat relates to the sample. With only 190 usable respondents, this sample size might limit the external validity of the findings. Besides that, the area covered for the study was limited to the east coast area of Peninsular Malaysia. Thus, it cannot be generalized to the whole population. In the light of this, the number of respondents and the coverage research area should be extended for future research to improve the validity of the findings. For further research, it is recommended that researchers examine how the human component of CSR influences consumer buying behavior and to what extent do human initiatives play a role in buying behavior decisions. In addition, researchers can also enhance future research in terms of examining significant differences between the demographic factor and awareness of CSR among consumers.

From the practical standpoint, the findings obtained from this research seem to suggest that all managers, manufacturers or even retailers take into consideration all the CSR initiatives especially when it comes to initiating business, policy making or even marketing strategy. Besides managers also need to place human initiative on the priority list of corporate social responsibility activities since it is the most influential factor influencing consumer buying behavior and enhances the overall performance of a company.

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