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EDITORIAL

# Researching CSR and brands in the here and now: an integrative perspective

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**Abstract** The inclusion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in branding is becoming widespread both in research and practice. Companies engaging in CSR-related branding must adopt an integrative perspective on CSR branding by acting on CSR expectations and issues, considering CSR branding decisions and concentrating on relational brand elements and outcomes. The integrative perspective is illustrated in a model which serves as a framework for introducing the papers in this special issue. The papers address various topics in this model and bring up various relevant CSR branding considerations which should interest both researchers and managers in this area of study and practice.

**Keywords** CSR · Brands · CSR expectations · Engagement · Value

## Introduction

In the wake of globalisation, businesses are increasingly encouraged to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices aimed at making societal improvements. In many cases, they are compelled to do so due to the high expectations of their stakeholders, including consumers. Palazzo and Basu (2007) observe a shift in consumption patterns towards a more value-driven consumption, which is also changing the dynamics of branding. A transition has occurred in branding strategies—from emphasising the product-level features to communicating values and building a socially responsible brand. A 2017 CSR study (Cone Communications 2017) conducted among American consumers confirms the ever-increasing importance of CSR expectations and the socially oriented values of brands and companies. Indeed, CSR has become a major differentiator in consumers' minds; the longitudinal research exhibits a constant rise in consumers' readiness to purchase products that deliver social benefits. The data further demonstrate that consumers are using brand values as a filter for support or punishment via their buying behaviour (Cone Communications 2017). An examination of popular publications and professional sources can give us an idea of just how important an element of branding CSR has become for practitioners worldwide in the past few years. Typing the phrase 'CSR and brands' into the Google search engine provides almost 700,000 hits with such titles as 'Why Corporate Social Responsibility is Essential for Brand Strategy' (Hughes 2016); 'The Top 100 Companies for Brand Purpose. And Why CSR is Helping Brands Do Well by Doing Good' (Chahal 2015); '3 Ways Brands Can Use Corporate Social Responsibility Principles to Create Better Advertising' (Schwartz 2015); and 'Branding and CSR Go Together' (Raghavan and Gunewardene 2015).

The trend of relating CSR to branding strategies has been echoed in scholarly research, which provides various managerial implications for the development and implementation of a CSR brand (e.g. Lindgreen et al. 2012; Brunner and Langner 2017) and describes the benefits as well as caveats of such activities (e.g. Du et al. 2007; Balmer et al. 2011; van Rekom et al. 2013). Unlike the literature on CSR in general, the research on specific CSR topics related to branding is not as extensive; in fact, it is somewhat fragmented. Nonetheless, it does cover many

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different aspects relating to the questions raised in practice, such as consumer expectations and responses, consumer–brand values alignment, the fit between the CSR cause and brand, selecting relevant social issues for branding purposes and communicating the CSR brand (cf. Cone Communications 2017).

Following this, the aim of our introduction to the special issue on CSR and brands is to provide an integrative framework for how CSR can be of importance to branding. This will benefit researchers considering such topics as well as practitioners by facilitating their reflection on their branding practices related to CSR. Through this framework, the papers in this special issue, which add to the literature by addressing various specific questions attached to the broader CSR and branding topics, will be introduced.

## CSR and brands: brief insight

At the turn of the century, CSR—a concept which can be defined broadly as the responsible role of business in society, based on the assumption that no business can afford to operate in isolation from the society, its constituencies and the natural environment (e.g. Matten and Moon 2005)—has become an inseparable part of the corporate consciousness. As it is beneficial to the society and environment, CSR is not without benefits for the companies and brands. Various studies have documented these benefits through (1) consumer-related responses to CSR, such as higher brand identification, satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. Du et al. 2007; He and Li 2011; Lee et al. 2012); (2) increased brand reputation and brand equity (e.g. Lai et al. 2010; Hur et al. 2014); and (3) internal benefits, such as a stronger employer brand (e.g. Biswas and Suar 2016) and higher employee motivation and commitment (e.g. Skudiene and Auruskeviciene 2012). The evidence from the research, thus, implies that considering CSR secures a way towards long-term sustainable brand value (Middlemiss 2003).

CSR-related branding falls under the 'strategic CSR' umbrella. Strategic CSR suggests that companies need to use 'organisational core competencies and resources to address key stakeholders' interests and to achieve both organisational and social benefits' (McAlister and Ferrell 2002, p. 690), and it is based on implementation and generated effects in terms of value creation (Marques-Mendes and Santos 2016). As branding has become a powerful tool for modern companies to attract and retain customers and is now central to firms' competitive strategies (Werther and Chandler 2005), brands represent important carriers of CSR. The idea of CSR as a 'brand ingredient' suggests the need to align CSR with the brand values, identity and personality (Kitchin 2003; van Rekom et al. 2013) in order to secure the brand's capacity to reflect the values for which consumers are increasingly searching when buying brands (Palazzo and Basu 2007). Consequently, CSR in branding also represents a value generator 'through market differentiation at the product and firm levels' (Lindgreen et al. 2012, p. 966). All in all, CSR in branding is aimed at creating both business value and a positive social impact.

As noted by Du et al. (2007) and Brunner and Langner (2017), brands employ different approaches and strategies in terms of the extent to which they use their CSR activities to position the brands in the minds of consumers and towards their competitors. The number of brands that are associated with a certain cause or that integrate some of the CSR values into their personality has grown in recent years, and the majority of well-known global brands are following this path (e.g. Reputation Institute 2016). Some brands, such as Patagonia and Ben & Jerry's, have even gone beyond that by aligning their whole business and brand strategy with CSR (Brunner and Langner 2017). Positioning themselves solely through CSR enabled them to develop into socially responsible brands (Du et al. 2007). Despite the level of CSR–brand integration, the idea is to consider CSR as a coherent part of how the brand behaves. The aim is to understand CSR as an integrative part of a brand—and not only as an instrument for improving sales or reputation—with all the implications and consequences that result from such a strategic shift.

Scholars tend to agree that building and nurturing a CSR-based brand is not an easy task and that the approaches to delivering such a brand are layered with complexities (Lindgreen et al. 2012). As suggested by researchers who have tackled varied aspects of CSR and branding in the last ten years or so (e.g. Du et al. 2007; Currás-Pérez et al. 2009; van Rekom et al. 2013; Andersen and Nielsen 2014), there are several things that need to be considered in the process of CSR branding. We have grouped them into three distinct but interrelated levels. First, following the notion that a CSR brand is stakeholder-based (Lindgreen et al. 2012), the CSR-based branding process must acknowledge that the consumers—and potentially competitors and investors—are not the only stakeholders of the brand and thus overcome the myopic understanding of branding and marketing in the CSR times (Smith et al. 2010a). In relation to this, a CSR-based brand is exposed to a complexity of social issues, which can be addressed once the CSR expectations of stakeholders are known and understood (Polonsky and Jevons 2006). Second, the growing integration of social responsibility and strategic aspects of branding demands a change in perspective on a managerial level: CSR must move from a minimal brand 'add-on' to a strategic necessity (Werther and Chandler 2005) entailing, for instance, considerations

about the substance of brand values and personality, positioning, communication and appearance. Lastly, CSR-based branding should be done in anticipation of the responses of all relevant stakeholders and primarily consumers. These responses come in the forms of perceptions and judgements, but also by ways of engagement, dialogue and co-creation. In short, a CSR-based brand must 'enable socially responsible behaviour and decisions among stakeholders' (Andersen and Nielsen 2014, p. 203), which in turn influences the (re)shaping of their CSR-related expectations and their inclination towards specific social issues. On that note, a CSR brand needs to enable a sustainable lifestyle for its stakeholders (Andersen and Nielsen 2014).

## An integrative perspective on CSR and branding

This section builds on the above-presented idea of three levels of building and managing CSR-based brand. It gives a brief conception of the levels, and in connecting them, provides an integrative perspective on CSR-based branding. The integrative model illustrating its three components related to (1) CSR expectations and issues, (2) CSR branding decisions and (3) relational brand elements and outcomes is shown in Fig. 1.

### CSR expectations and social issues

It has been argued many times that CSR is a dynamic concept; as such, it is dependent not only on the different contexts in which it is practised but also on temporal dynamics (Rasche et al. 2017). Due to ever-changing public expectations, the baseline for acceptable corporate activities also changes; first, it becomes desired or expected, then institutionalised and, in some cases, regulated (Rivoli and Waddock 2011). In short, 'there is no generalizable agenda of CSR issues that is valid independent of these time-context dynamics' (Rasche et al. 2017, p. 12). CSR expectations and social issues—'the causes to which CSR is invoked or addressed' (Moon et al. 2017, p. 33)—are thus closely related.

CSR issues refer to many societal and environmental levels: they can be based on certain trends, such as climate change, related to specific events, such as the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster, or connected to welfare questions, political questions and consumer preferences, such as fair trade, or attached to the consequences of production and commercial operations of companies (Moon et al. 2017). The diversity of issues brings about the complexity of addressing them. A consideration for CSR-based brands is, therefore, how many issues on which a brand should have a clearly stated position, the scope of the issues that should determine the brand's CSR policies and how such policies can be designed (Polonsky and Jevons 2006).

Rivoli and Waddock (2011) suggest that the dynamics of CSR resemble the life cycle of a public issue, which is of importance for establishing a CSR-based brand. These dynamics are also relevant to the many stakeholders for whom a company is trying to build a CSR-based brand. Companies normally address a specific issue once it has already gained wide public attention and created expectations among stakeholders, who have begun to raise concerns about the issue (Rivoli and Waddock 2011). However, there are a few exceptions where a CSR brand can participate in activism and become engaged in an issue at the earliest stage. An example is the clothing brand Patagonia, which has been involved in grassroots movements and the first to raise the flag about certain environmental or societal problems, which subsequently became a core part of its business operations and CSR politics (Rowledge et al. 1999). However, the strategy of evoking anti-brand rhetoric and activism can be very risky (Palazzo and Basu 2007); thus, such a brand requires a strong CSR foundation to prevent any potential backlash. No matter the 'level of social consciousness' a specific CSR-based brand exhibits, each one needs to find a way to express sensitivity to the changing CSR values and expectations and 'incorporate CSR viewpoints into strategic and branding decisions to anticipate tomorrow's values as well' (Werther and Chandler 2005, p. 320).

### Establishing and nurturing a CSR-based brand

The literature on CSR and brands provides some evidence of an association between CSR-related and ethical elements and the product-level branding's reliance on the nature of the product itself and its production (e.g. fair trade, organic; Bertilsson 2014). However, in practice, CSR is mostly linked to the corporate brand level through the promise that corporate behaviour can be 'measured against the branded values' (Palazzo and Basu 2007, p. 337). The essential function of a brand is to engage in a dialogue with consumers and other stakeholders, to build trust. Through this relational function, CSR and the brand are interrelated (Lindgreen et al. 2012). According to Werther and Chandler (2005), brands are being increasingly seen as the central points of a firm's value and, as such, are in need of some kind of assurance. CSR can be perceived as such assurance, as a 'CSR mindset throughout the organization heightens the brand–user bond, reducing the brand's vulnerability to internal management' (Werther and Chandler 2005, p. 321). Therefore, CSR enables a brand to be 'stronger' vis-à-vis competitors and substitutes.

Assuming that CSR is well-integrated in the corporate business strategy, first, establishing a successful CSR brand

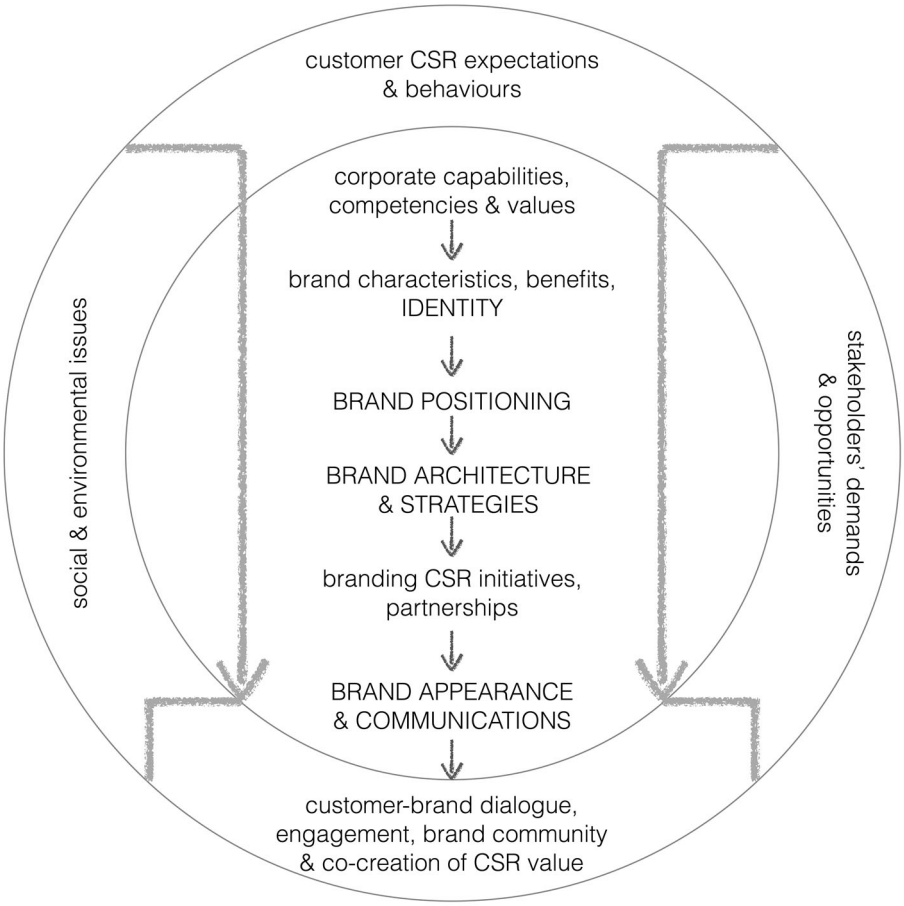


**Fig. 1** Integrative model of CSR branding

relies on brand positioning and value proposition. Brand positioning is the first step towards determining the ways in which CSR will be expressed—it can be either implicit or explicit—and how CSR will be related to other brand values (Brüggenwirth 2006). CSR is mostly expressed through brand associations related to brand personality and values (Hoeffler and Keller 2002), and managers must, therefore, determine which role CSR should play in brand positioning. Most brands have no tendency to become CSR leaders, but they use CSR as the environment in which their brand proposition is delivered (Brüggenwirth 2006).

From this point, we can distinguish three approaches to integrating CSR in a brand (Brunner and Langner 2017). First, CSR should be at the *core* of brand positioning; in other words, a brand is positioned primarily according to CSR criteria. Well-known examples of such brands would be the above-mentioned clothing brand Patagonia, the ice cream brand Ben & Jerry's and Natura, a leading cosmetic company from Brazil for which sustainability has been a guiding principle since the brand was established in the late 1960s. Second, CSR can be a *supplement* to the brand's positioning. According to Brunner and Langner (2017), brands following this strategy extend their original positioning via CSR activities. This can occur due to the stakeholders' demands and to avoid certain risks (defensive approach) or to reinforce a CSR-oriented business strategy (offensive approach) (Brüggenwirth 2006). Today, many well-known global consumer brands fall into this category; some examples would be Unilever, Danone, H&M and Ikea. Finally, CSR is *not a part* of brand positioning. This does not mean that a company is not practising CSR; however, customers do not necessarily evaluate a brand's CSR background as crucial, and the company does not communicate it. In such cases, CSR can still help the brand in some respects; for example, Nike is using sustainable innovation as the core for developing its products, but the brand itself is still strongly positioned to pitch an inspirational lifestyle and is, hence, not directly communicating CSR- or sustainability-related values.

Most brands leverage their CSR-related equity through CSR initiatives aimed at addressing certain social issues. Hoeffler and Keller (2002) propose that the best ways to select the issues a brand should address and be associated with are commonality or complementarity. Commonality refers to selecting a social issue that shares similar associations with the brand; this way, the brand will benefit by bolstering existing or intended associations that customers have with the brand. Complementarity, however, refers to

an attempt to augment the existing knowledge related to a certain issue which is not necessarily closely aligned with the core activities of a brand, and it allows for creating more unique associations and the stronger differentiation of the brand (Hoeffler and Keller 2002). This strategy can be slightly risky in certain circumstances; for example, when CSR is not an integral part of the brand positioning, then customers might see the complementarity strategy as a result of the extrinsic motivation of the brand merely to achieve a better position vis-à-vis the competition with an isolated endeavour to address an issue not strongly related to the brand (Du et al. 2007).

In terms of branding its CSR initiatives and partnering with causes focused on certain social issues, again, there are three possibilities: (1) it can create its own brand for a cause (and establish a new organisation that would deliver benefits to the society); (2) it can select the co-branding option by associating the brand with an existing cause or an organisation; or (3) a joint-branded relationship can be forged which reflects a hybrid approach of partnering with an existing organisation and branding explicitly a selected programme that addresses a specific issue (Hoeffler and Keller 2002).

### The relational outcomes of a CSR brand

The research done by Du et al. (2007) indicates that CSR positioning is something brands should consider in the longer term, as it has more *relational* than *transactional* benefits for both consumers and companies. Similarly, Hoeffler and Keller (2002) argue that two important steps in building CSR-related brand equity and long-term reputational capital are creating a sense of brand community and inviting brand engagement. 'This suggests that CSR positioning is less a short term sales generating mechanism as it is one that deepens customer relationships over time, creating brand advocates or champions' (Du et al. 2007, p. 237). Following this line of thought and acknowledging that the number of consumers with strong self-expression values is increasing (e.g. Cone Communications 2017), value-based branding that includes CSR attracts consumers who perceive their own values as similar, whereby the CSR brand becomes a means to shape and express identity and provides a source of self-definition (Bhattacharya and Sen 2003; Palazzo and Basu 2007).

Moreover, consumers, sensing the congruence between the brand values and their own, are eager to enhance their engagement in the CSR efforts (Cone Communications 2017). Herein lie not just the opportunities for CSR brands to address the co-creation of value related to CSR but also the caveats of neglecting consumers' broader life goals that could potentially lead to anti-brand activism. This is a trend found specifically within new generations of consumers, such as millennials, who are more likely to hold brands accountable in terms of the results of their activities and communications and are willing to take action in researching the company's CSR practices. Additionally, these consumers are actively engaged in conversations about CSR (Cone Communications 2017).

The development of digital media has facilitated the transformation of consumers—and other stakeholders—from a passive audience to active players, who are increasingly becoming co-creators of value in terms of CSR. Additionally, there is evidence that companies are increasingly using their brands to (co)create social value, which is also one of the reasons for marketing to engage in CSR (Murphy et al. 2013). Furthermore, changes in consumption patterns (Palazzo and Basu 2007) imply the importance of the role of personal and societal values in value co-creation: 'in this sense the co-creation of value is a reciprocal process where perceptions of value may be conditioned by consideration of responsibility' (Williams and Aitken 2011, p. 445) or, said in a more concise manner, 'value is determined by values' (Williams and Aitken 2011, p. 451). Subsequently, the consumer's stake in a CSR brand is related to a license to consume and to the distinctiveness of the consumer's lifestyle, while the scripts—the dialogical relations between the consumer and the brand that reside in the consumer's generic role in relation to the brand—are set in experience and engagement with a CSR-based brand (Johansen and Nielsen 2011).

Thus, CSR-related brands must acknowledge the need for broader CSR processes that will transform the lifestyles of consumers; further, they must recognise that their clients play other roles in society, such as those of employee, community member, supporter of non-governmental organisations or investor—roles that influence how people organise their personal lives (van Rekom et al. 2013). Therefore, it is important for CSR-related brands to convey an understanding of the interrelated aspects of consumption and life values to face the challenge of fulfilling the promises made to the entire set of stakeholders (Palazzo and Basu 2007, p. 343) by integrating the portfolio of corporate and brand activities.

## Structure of the special issue

With an interesting position on CSR expectations and social issues, 'Redefining Fit: Examining CSR Company–Issue Fit in Stigmatized Industries', by Lucinda Austin and Barbara Miller Gaither, observes that brands need to be sensitive and prudent when it comes to selecting and addressing social issues and that consumers' responses may be rather unpredictable, especially when the company is part of a stigmatised industry. While consumers may care

more for a specific CSR issue that also has a high fit with the 'stigmatised' brand, at the same time, they may express considerable scepticism, negative attitudes and fewer supportive intentions for the brand. On that note, this study empirically affirms the conceptual underpinnings by van Rekom et al. (2013) about cost-based CSR being a hygiene factor; that is, 'they are punished by doing wrong, but they do not really prosper by doing right' (p. 809).

In 'Society or the Environment? Understanding How Consumers Evaluate Brand Messages about CSR Activities', Sara Hanson, Lan Jiang, Jun Ye and Nagesh Murthy argue about the importance of understanding the CSR issue's complexity in terms of its relation to the brand's tangible characteristics. Using a field experiment and surveys, their study supports the idea that firms should integrate the complexity of CSR issues into operational activities and communication (Polonsky and Jevons 2006). It further suggests that brands with more intangible offerings are better aligned with social domain issues, while brands with tangible products are perceived better in terms of CSR when related to environmental domain issues.

In the context of leveraging brand equity through CSR initiatives, Lynn Rohwer and Martina Topić, in 'The Communication of Corporate-NGO Partnerships: Analysis of Sainsbury's Collaboration with Comic Relief', explore the case of a cross-sector partnership between a corporate brand and an NGO. They stress the importance of communication which enables the company to place the partnership in line with the overall brand identity, thus employing the commonality approach (Hoeffler and Keller 2002). This leads not only to a positive evaluation by consumers but also to strong support from internal stakeholders—the employees. The paper concludes by suggesting that in order to build a stronger CSR-based brand, companies should not only co-brand partnerships but also consider how to embed the values of such partnerships in the brand to ensure that CSR becomes a strong supplement to the brand positioning (Brunner and Langner 2017).

Jasmina Ilicic, Stacey M. Baxter and Alicia Kulczynski address the importance of co-branding partnerships for enhancing the CSR efforts of a brand. In 'Keeping it Real: Examining the Influence of Co-Branding Authenticity in Cause-Related Marketing', their experiments demonstrate how celebrity social responsibility increases the perception of co-branding authenticity, which has an impact on purchase intention. On one hand, their research shows how brands can find innovative ways to explore co-branding options to enhance the CSR elements of a brand. On the other hand, while confirming that the authenticity of CSR co-branding is influenced by customers' self-transcendence values, it also stresses how important it is for a CSR brand to consider the changing values context from which customers' CSR expectations are evolving.

In 'Does CSR Matter?: A Longitudinal Analysis of Product Reviews for CSR-Associated Brands', Becky R. Ford and Cynthia Stohl investigate the relationship between brands' CSR and consumer responses. The results of their longitudinal content analysis of online customer reviews are complex and mixed, and add to the literature on the integration of CSR and brands (Brunner and Langner 2017). Despite the fact that consumers differentiate between brands on the basis of CSR and may exhibit loyalty to a brand with a CSR core, such loyalty is not significantly higher compared to a brand for which CSR is a supplement at best. One of the takeaways from their study is that it is the salience of CSR in the eyes of the consumer that is associated with greater brand loyalty, and that a conscientious or CSR brand will not automatically gain more loyal customers, which brings important implications for CSR-based communication as well.

Finally, in 'Comparing the Relative Importance of Sustainability as a Consumer Purchase Criterion of Food and Clothing in the Retail Sector', Ragna Nilssen, Geoff Bick and Russell Abratt provide insight into how sustainability-related factors were considered in the buying decisions of consumers in the cases of clothing and food. The results of the conjoint analysis suggest that sustainability-related factors play a considerably more important role in the consumer purchase decision regarding food compared to clothing. The results further suggest the relevance of the context in which brands exert their sustainability efforts. The responses of consumers in the case of clothing highlight the importance for marketing and branding to acknowledge the possible harmful consequences of marketing through addressing the harm that consumers may do when they buy products made under problematic environmental and working conditions (Smith et al. 2010b, p. 618). On that account, the CSR brand is responsible for engaging consumers in a reciprocal process of value co-creation so that the consumers can better understand the environmental and social effects of their decisions (Smith et al. 2010b).

## Concluding remarks

As the papers in this special issue reveal, issues related to CSR and brands represent a relevant area of research, both for scholars and practitioners. The findings of the studies included in this special issue illustrate the various perspectives and ways in which organisations can address CSR and relate it to their branding endeavours, and which can be pursued by acknowledging the interconnection of three important levels of CSR branding. Moreover, the studies explore the responses of consumers to CSR branding initiatives, which offer valuable insight for future managerial decisions. Accordingly, this special issue may

raise managers' awareness of the multidimensionality and interrelatedness of different levels and aspects that are reflected in the integrative model. Not only must managers understand the complexity of determining the types of CSR issues and initiatives to pitch in but they must be aware that linking their brands with CSR will require cautious consideration of the internal CSR resources on which to build the CSR branding process while avoiding a potential backlash from stakeholders. Besides, the studies in this special issue may assist managers with evaluating the importance of engaging consumers and other stakeholders in the process of communicating CSR and co-creating the value of CSR and the best approach to doing this. Ultimately, we look forward to continued and ongoing research in the areas included in the integrative model of CSR branding awaiting to be researched.

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