Examining the Factors Contributing to Successful Corporate Social Responsibility Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore and identify the key organizational, strategic, and relational factors that contribute to the successful implementation of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies within Iranian organizations. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 CSR professionals and executives from diverse industries based in Tehran. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevant CSR experience. Interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's six-step method. Thematic analysis focused on identifying core themes and subthemes that reflect the perceived drivers of CSR success in organizational practice. Analysis revealed three main themes: Strategic Integration, Stakeholder Engagement, and Organizational Enablers. Strategic Integration included subthemes such as alignment with business goals, leadership commitment, cross-functional collaboration, and performance monitoring. Stakeholder Engagement encompassed community involvement, employee and customer participation, supplier collaboration, and transparent communication. Organizational Enablers involved a values-driven culture, learning and adaptation, employee empowerment, change management, and digital tools. Participants highlighted that successful CSR strategies are deeply embedded in organizational strategy, supported by leadership, resourced effectively, and characterized by continuous dialogue and trust-building with stakeholders. Numerous quotations illustrated the lived experiences and contextual challenges specific to Iranian CSR environments. The findings emphasize that CSR success is not merely the result of well-intentioned policies but of strategic alignment, inclusive stakeholder practices, and strong organizational foundations. These insights provide both theoretical contributions to CSR literature and practical guidance for managers aiming to enhance CSR outcomes, particularly in emerging market contexts.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; Strategic Integration; Stakeholder Engagement; Organizational Enablers; Qualitative Research; Iran; Thematic Analysis; NVivo; Leadership Commitment; Employee Empowerment.

Introduction

In recent decades, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has transformed from a peripheral business function into a central element of strategic management. Faced with increasing environmental degradation, socio-political demands for equity, and stakeholder expectations for transparency, organizations are no longer judged solely on financial performance but on their social and environmental conduct (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). CSR is defined as the voluntary integration of social and environmental concerns into business operations and stakeholder interactions (European Commission, 2011). This integration reflects a company's commitment to sustainable development, ethical practices, and community well-being. Despite widespread adoption, the success of CSR

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initiatives varies significantly across organizations, prompting scholars and practitioners to explore what internal and external factors contribute to effective CSR strategies.

The growing importance of CSR is linked to its potential to generate shared value. Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that companies can enhance their competitiveness while simultaneously advancing societal conditions in the regions where they operate. CSR is thus not merely a philanthropic obligation but a strategic asset that shapes consumer perceptions, attracts talent, fosters investor confidence, and ensures regulatory compliance (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Nevertheless, the practical implementation of CSR strategies often encounters significant challenges, including superficial commitment, lack of alignment with core business objectives, fragmented execution, and poor stakeholder engagement (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). These inconsistencies have spurred growing academic interest in the underlying mechanisms and contextual enablers that differentiate successful CSR initiatives from symbolic or ineffective efforts.

Multiple studies have attempted to identify the drivers of CSR success, with researchers pointing to factors such as organizational leadership, governance structures, employee engagement, and stakeholder dialogue (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Glavas, 2016). Yet, much of the literature remains quantitative and prescriptive, focusing on outcomes and correlations rather than capturing the nuanced perspectives of organizational actors engaged in CSR design and execution. Qualitative investigations, by contrast, can offer richer insight into how CSR is interpreted, negotiated, and operationalized across different organizational contexts (Jamali, 2008). These insights are critical for understanding the tacit processes and internal dynamics that underpin successful CSR strategies, particularly in non-Western or developing contexts where institutional environments may diverge from those in established economies.

In the Iranian business landscape, CSR has gained increasing attention over the past decade, particularly among organizations seeking to improve their reputation, align with international standards, and respond to local community needs (Rahdari, Sepasi, & Moradi, 2016). However, empirical investigations of CSR practices in Iran remain limited, with most studies focusing on policy implications or external stakeholder expectations (Yazdani & Murad, 2015). There is a significant gap in the literature regarding how Iranian companies internally conceptualize and manage CSR and what organizational factors contribute to strategy success. This qualitative study addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of CSR professionals and executives from various industries in Tehran.

Strategic integration is a recurring theme in the CSR literature. Scholars emphasize the need to embed CSR into core business functions rather than treating it as a peripheral activity (Galbreath, 2010). When CSR aligns with the organization's mission, it is more likely to be viewed as a legitimate and necessary investment rather than a discretionary cost. Evidence suggests that companies that integrate CSR into strategic planning tend to realize long-term benefits in brand loyalty, market positioning, and risk mitigation (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009). Strategic alignment also facilitates internal coordination and resource allocation, allowing CSR initiatives to receive sustained attention and support. However, alignment alone is insufficient without committed leadership. Top management must champion CSR by embedding ethical values into the organizational culture and communicating a clear vision (Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006). Leadership commitment legitimizes CSR internally and inspires employee participation.

Stakeholder engagement is another cornerstone of effective CSR. According to Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, organizations must balance the interests of diverse groups, including customers, employees, suppliers, and communities. Engaging stakeholders in CSR planning and execution ensures that initiatives are relevant, context-

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sensitive, and co-created rather than imposed (Greenwood, 2007). Moreover, stakeholder engagement enhances trust, transparency, and mutual accountability—qualities that are essential for sustaining long-term relationships (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). In practice, however, stakeholder engagement often remains superficial or limited to tokenistic activities such as one-way communication or selective partnerships. Successful CSR strategies move beyond public relations and foster genuine collaboration with internal and external stakeholders.

The internal organizational environment also plays a vital role. A values-driven culture can serve as a fertile ground for CSR by encouraging ethical decision-making, pro-social behavior, and accountability (Bauman & Skitka, 2012). Organizational enablers such as employee empowerment, continuous learning, change management, and technological support are essential for operationalizing CSR on a daily basis. Employees must feel that their contributions to CSR are recognized and that they have the autonomy to innovate within ethical boundaries (Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). Additionally, organizations that institutionalize feedback loops and iterative learning are more likely to adapt CSR practices in response to stakeholder feedback and contextual changes (Pedersen, 2006). Digital tools, performance dashboards, and real-time monitoring systems can further streamline CSR implementation and evaluation.

Despite growing theoretical consensus on these enabling factors, few empirical studies offer a comprehensive, context-specific understanding of how they manifest within organizations. Most existing frameworks are developed in Western contexts and may not fully capture the complexities of CSR in emerging economies, where regulatory pressures, cultural values, and socio-political dynamics differ. This study contributes to the literature by exploring CSR practices in Iranian companies, with a focus on identifying the key factors that practitioners perceive as essential to CSR strategy success. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What organizational and strategic factors do CSR practitioners in Tehran consider crucial for the successful implementation of CSR strategies? and (2) How do internal processes and stakeholder relationships influence CSR outcomes in this context?

Using a qualitative methodology, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 20 CSR professionals across various industries in Tehran. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the organizational realities of CSR implementation. Through thematic analysis supported by NVivo software, the study identifies and organizes factors into coherent themes and subthemes, offering practical insights for managers, policymakers, and scholars. In doing so, the research not only contributes to theory-building in CSR literature but also provides actionable recommendations for organizations seeking to improve the effectiveness of their CSR strategies in complex socio-economic environments.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study adopted a qualitative research design using a content-focused exploratory approach to investigate the factors contributing to successful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies. The qualitative methodology was selected due to its effectiveness in capturing rich, in-depth insights from participants about organizational practices and strategic processes. A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants who possessed extensive experience and professional involvement in CSR initiatives across various industries in

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Tehran. The final sample consisted of 20 participants, including CSR managers, sustainability officers, corporate executives, and policy advisors from private and semi-public companies actively engaged in CSR-related activities.

Participants were selected based on their direct knowledge of CSR planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Diversity in organizational sector (e.g., manufacturing, services, finance, and energy), company size, and managerial levels was considered to enhance the transferability of findings. All participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the study and provided informed consent prior to data collection.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person and, in some cases, via secure online platforms due to scheduling constraints. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. Key topics covered included CSR strategy formulation, stakeholder engagement, leadership commitment, performance evaluation, and barriers to success. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached—that is, when no new themes or insights emerged from the data.

Data analysis

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software for systematic coding and thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was performed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) initial code generation, (3) theme searching, (4) theme reviewing, (5) theme defining and naming, and (6) report production. Open coding was conducted first to identify recurring concepts, which were then grouped into subthemes and overarching themes reflecting the core factors behind successful CSR strategies. Throughout the analysis process, efforts were made to ensure credibility, dependability, and confirmability by applying triangulation, peer debriefing, and audit trail documentation.

Findings and Results

Theme 1: Strategic Integration of CSR

Alignment with Business Goals

Participants emphasized the necessity of aligning CSR strategies with the organization's core business objectives. Many described how successful CSR programs stem from a clear integration with strategic planning processes and organizational performance metrics. A sustainability manager noted, "When CSR becomes part of how we define success—not something separate—it actually gets done." Concepts such as balancing profit with sustainability, incorporating CSR into long-term planning, and designing performance KPIs for CSR were repeatedly highlighted.

Leadership Commitment

Strong leadership support emerged as a vital enabler of effective CSR. Participants noted that executive involvement is essential for legitimizing CSR within the organization and encouraging buy-in at all levels. One CSR coordinator mentioned, "Our CEO talks about sustainability in every shareholder meeting—it signals how important it is to the entire company." Codes under this subtheme included executive sponsorship, CSR vision communication, and leadership role modeling.

Cross-functional Collaboration

The integration of CSR across departments was cited as a key facilitator of holistic CSR implementation. Participants described coordinated efforts between departments such as marketing, HR, operations, and compliance to ensure CSR initiatives are cohesive. "We have a task force with people from every unit—it breaks silos and makes CSR a shared responsibility," shared one participant. Open codes included interdepartmental roles, communication flow, and unified planning processes.

Performance Monitoring

The importance of measuring and tracking CSR efforts was underscored across interviews. Participants stressed using data and regular review cycles to assess the effectiveness of CSR strategies. As one manager expressed, "You can't improve what you don't measure—our CSR dashboard helps us see what's working." Key practices involved using CSR KPIs, reviewing metrics periodically, and making data-driven decisions.

Resource Allocation

Allocating sufficient financial, human, and time resources was repeatedly mentioned as a critical determinant of CSR success. Several participants reported that their organizations had set aside a dedicated CSR budget and hired specialized staff. "When CSR is underfunded, it becomes symbolic—it needs real investment to make a difference," said a sustainability officer. Concepts included dedicated budget, skilled personnel, and strategic investments.

Policy and Governance Structure

Formalizing CSR through governance mechanisms was also considered essential. Participants spoke about structured reporting lines, dedicated CSR units, and documented policies. "We have a CSR committee that reports directly to the board—this makes us accountable and aligned," one participant noted. Concepts included formal CSR policies, oversight committees, and clarity in accountability.

Innovation in CSR

CSR innovation, including the creation of novel solutions and proactive stakeholder initiatives, was mentioned as a sign of maturity. One participant commented, "We encourage teams to try new ideas—even if they fail. That's how we discovered our best community program." Open codes included experimentation, social innovation, and creative stakeholder engagement.

Theme 2: Stakeholder Engagement

Community Involvement

Engaging local communities was described as both a moral obligation and a strategic necessity. Participants emphasized listening to community needs and co-creating solutions. "We don't just donate—we ask what they need and partner to deliver it," said one CSR director. Themes included community partnerships, local needs assessments, and long-term social commitments.

Employee Involvement

Employees were identified as internal stakeholders who can significantly influence CSR outcomes. Many organizations had set up volunteer programs and CSR champion networks to encourage grassroots participation. "Our staff feel proud when they participate—it builds a CSR culture from the inside," remarked a participant. Common practices included involving staff in CSR planning and encouraging bottom-up feedback.

Customer Participation

Some participants highlighted customer-facing CSR efforts such as offering ethical product options or involving customers in charitable campaigns. "We label our green products and even ask customers which causes we should

support," one marketing manager explained. Concepts included CSR branding, consumer education, and interactive campaigns.

Supplier Collaboration

Responsible sourcing and collaborative sustainability efforts with suppliers were seen as essential for extending CSR impact across the value chain. A supply chain director stated, "We include ethical criteria in procurement and work with suppliers to help them improve." Elements discussed included supplier audits, joint projects, and sustainability clauses.

Transparency and Communication

Transparent communication, both internally and externally, was described as key to building credibility. Participants noted publishing CSR reports, using social media, and involving the public in dialogue. "We post all our CSR milestones online—people can see and comment," said a communications lead. Practices included public reporting, open feedback loops, and inclusive messaging.

Stakeholder Trust and Relationships

Trust was described as the cornerstone of sustainable stakeholder relationships. This was built through consistent communication, mutual respect, and culturally sensitive practices. "We've worked with the same local NGOs for years—it's a relationship, not just a project," one executive noted. Keywords included consistency, honesty, and mutual benefit.

Theme 3: Organizational Enablers

Organizational Culture

The presence of a values-driven culture was repeatedly cited as a factor that sustains CSR beyond compliance. "CSR fits naturally when you already have a culture of doing the right thing," said one HR leader. Key cultural aspects included shared ethical values, an internalized CSR mindset, and trust within teams.

Learning and Adaptation

CSR success was often seen as a learning process, with adaptation playing a key role. Organizations that embraced mistakes and refined their practices were better at evolving. "Some projects failed—but we learned and changed fast," a sustainability analyst reported. Concepts included feedback use, benchmarking, and continuous improvement.

Employee Empowerment

Empowering employees to take initiative and contribute ideas to CSR was a recurrent theme. One participant shared, "We reward people who bring CSR ideas—some of our best programs came from interns." This subtheme included autonomy, ownership, and recognition.

Change Management

Implementing CSR changes within organizations required effective change management strategies. Participants emphasized the need to handle resistance and communicate benefits clearly. "It's not always easy—some people resist—but we frame CSR as part of our evolution," one respondent explained.

Technology and Tools

The use of digital tools to manage, track, and communicate CSR was noted as an operational enabler. Interviewees mentioned dashboards, analytics software, and digital platforms for engagement. "NVivo helps us analyze stakeholder feedback fast—we can act quickly," one participant said. Technologies were used to streamline monitoring, enhance communication, and manage feedback.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the key factors that contribute to successful Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies, as perceived by CSR practitioners and executives in Tehran-based organizations. The findings yielded three major themes: strategic integration, stakeholder engagement, and organizational enablers, each comprising multiple subthemes that reflect the complexity of CSR implementation in practice. These findings align with and expand upon previous scholarly literature, while also offering contextualized insights specific to the Iranian organizational environment.

The first theme, strategic integration, emerged as a foundational factor in effective CSR practices. Participants emphasized the importance of aligning CSR with core business strategies, a finding that resonates with Galbreath's (2010) assertion that CSR must be embedded into an organization's strategic architecture to create enduring value. This alignment allows CSR initiatives to move beyond symbolic gestures and become central to long-term planning and risk mitigation (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Leadership commitment was also widely cited by interviewees as crucial to CSR success. Consistent with Waldman, Siegel, and Javidan (2006), who argue that transformational leadership is a key driver of CSR legitimacy, this study confirms that when executives model ethical behavior and visibly support CSR, employees are more likely to engage in and value these efforts.

Cross-functional collaboration further enhances strategic coherence by ensuring that CSR is not isolated within one department but diffused across organizational units. As Pedersen (2006) notes, integrative mechanisms such as cross-departmental committees facilitate knowledge sharing and cohesive action. The emphasis on performance monitoring, through the use of CSR-specific key performance indicators (KPIs), also aligns with Bhattacharya, Korschun, and Sen's (2009) findings on the importance of feedback loops and measurement systems in sustaining CSR initiatives. Similarly, resource allocation and governance structures emerged as critical enablers, reflecting Aguinis and Glavas's (2012) observation that without dedicated financial, human, and structural resources, CSR is unlikely to move from rhetoric to reality.

Interestingly, innovation in CSR—characterized by social experimentation, creative engagement strategies, and learning from failure—was mentioned by many participants as a differentiating factor. This finding echoes Jamali and Mirshak's (2007) argument that localized innovation and flexibility allow organizations to adapt CSR practices to cultural and institutional constraints, which is particularly relevant in developing contexts such as Iran.

The second major theme centered on stakeholder engagement, reinforcing Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, which posits that long-term organizational success depends on satisfying the interests of diverse stakeholder groups. Participants consistently stressed the value of **community involvement**, describing partnerships and participatory planning processes that align with Morsing and Schultz's (2006) model of stakeholder involvement, in which dialogue and co-creation replace top-down approaches.

Employee involvement was also widely emphasized, with participants citing volunteerism, CSR champions, and internal communication as pathways to build a CSR-oriented culture. This aligns with Rodrigo and Arenas's (2008) findings that employees who are involved in CSR are more likely to experience higher engagement, organizational pride, and job satisfaction. Similarly, involving customers in CSR through product labeling, ethical branding, and feedback loops mirrors Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen's (2010) work on CSR communication and its impact on consumer loyalty and trust.

Supply chain engagement, another key subtheme, reflects the extension of CSR responsibilities across the value chain—a concern emphasized in studies by Blowfield and Dolan (2008), who argue that supplier collaboration is necessary to achieve systemic sustainability outcomes. Transparency and communication were cited as essential for building stakeholder trust. Participants described using reports, digital platforms, and community events to disclose CSR actions and receive feedback. These practices reflect Greenwood's (2007) emphasis on stakeholder responsiveness and two-way engagement. Ultimately, stakeholder trust was viewed as the linchpin of successful CSR, built through consistency, transparency, and mutual benefit—a conclusion consistent with Glavas's (2016) argument that trust is foundational to stakeholder relationships in CSR.

The third theme, organizational enablers, highlighted the internal conditions that support or hinder CSR implementation. A values-driven culture was frequently mentioned as essential, corroborating Bauman and Skitka's (2012) claim that ethical climates within organizations foster intrinsic CSR motivation. This study found that in organizations where CSR aligned with pre-existing cultural norms, initiatives were more likely to be sustained and accepted.

Another enabling factor was the organization's ability to learn and adapt. Participants shared stories of failed initiatives that later evolved into successful programs through iterative learning—a process supported by Pedersen (2006), who stresses the importance of organizational learning in dynamic CSR environments. Empowering employees to take initiative and suggest CSR ideas was also considered important. This reflects the findings of Buciuniene and Kazlauskaite (2012), who argue that employee autonomy and recognition are key drivers of innovation and engagement in CSR.

Change management practices were frequently mentioned, particularly in relation to overcoming resistance. Participants highlighted the need to communicate the business case for CSR and gradually implement changes—a perspective aligned with Kotter's (1996) model of change management, which stresses the role of clear communication, stakeholder inclusion, and incremental transitions. Finally, technology and tools such as digital dashboards and data analytics platforms were seen as important enablers, streamlining CSR performance tracking and improving responsiveness. This supports contemporary CSR literature emphasizing digital transformation as a facilitator of accountability and stakeholder interaction (Ellerup Nielsen & Thomsen, 2009).

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

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In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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