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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Essence of Corporate Social Responsibility Among Manufacturing Enterprises in Beijing, China: A Phenomenological Inquiry

BING XIAODING [1] and FERDINAND SOMIDO [2]
[12] *University of Perpetual Help Laguna*
Corresponding Author: BING XIAODING, **E-mail**: somido.ferdinand@uphsl.edu.ph

| ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an essential strategic approach for manufacturing enterprises seeking to balance economic performance with environmental sustainability and social responsibility. In China, the increasing emphasis on sustainable development and responsible corporate governance has heightened the importance of understanding how CSR is implemented within manufacturing organizations. This study explored the lived experiences of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practitioners among selected manufacturing enterprises in Beijing, China, with the aim of understanding the essence of CSR implementation in the context of organizational sustainability. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed to capture the experiences of five CSR practitioners who were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of CSR initiatives. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed eight interrelated themes that characterize successful CSR implementation: effective CSR leadership, community engagement and shared value creation, implementation challenges, CSR as a source of competitive advantage, organizational constraints, adaptive coping strategies, strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, and digital communication for stakeholder engagement. The results indicate that effective CSR implementation extends beyond regulatory compliance and philanthropy, requiring leadership commitment, stakeholder collaboration, employee participation, transparent governance, and alignment with organizational sustainability goals. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on CSR by providing empirical evidence from the Chinese manufacturing sector through the lived experiences of CSR practitioners. The findings offer practical insights for manufacturing enterprises, policymakers, and CSR professionals in strengthening CSR strategies that support sustainable business practices and long-term organizational performance.

| KEYWORDS

Corporate Social Responsibility; Manufacturing Enterprises; Phenomenology; Sustainability; Beijing, China; Stakeholder Engagement

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a strategic imperative for organizations operating in an increasingly competitive and sustainability-oriented global economy. Once regarded primarily as corporate philanthropy or voluntary charitable activities, CSR has evolved into a comprehensive management approach that integrates economic performance with environmental stewardship, ethical governance, and social responsibility. Organizations are now expected to create long-term value not only for shareholders but also for employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and the environment. Consequently, CSR has become an important mechanism through which businesses strengthen stakeholder trust, improve corporate reputation, enhance organizational resilience, and contribute to sustainable development (Carroll, 2016).

China's rapid industrialization has significantly transformed its economic landscape, making the country one of the world's largest manufacturing economies. While manufacturing has driven economic growth and technological advancement, it has also intensified concerns regarding environmental degradation, resource consumption, occupational health and safety, and corporate accountability. In response, the Chinese government has promoted high-quality economic development through policies emphasizing ecological civilization, green manufacturing, carbon neutrality, and sustainable industrial transformation. These national priorities have encouraged manufacturing enterprises to integrate Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles into their strategic and operational practices, positioning responsible business conduct as an essential component of long-term competitiveness.

Carroll's (2016) Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility remains one of the most influential theoretical foundations for understanding CSR. The framework proposes that organizations are expected to fulfill four interrelated responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic. Economic responsibility requires organizations to remain profitable and financially sustainable, while legal responsibility emphasizes compliance with applicable laws and regulatory standards. Ethical responsibility extends beyond legal obligations by encouraging organizations to uphold integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability. Philanthropic responsibility reflects voluntary initiatives that improve community well-being through education, environmental conservation, health promotion, and social development. Collectively, these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding responsible corporate behavior and sustainable organizational performance.

Within China's manufacturing sector, CSR has evolved beyond regulatory compliance toward the creation of shared value among organizations and society. Manufacturing enterprises increasingly invest in green technologies, intelligent manufacturing systems, sustainable supply chain management, employee development, and community engagement initiatives to align business objectives with national sustainability priorities. The growing integration of ESG principles further demonstrates that responsible corporate behavior is no longer viewed solely as a social obligation but as a strategic investment that contributes to organizational resilience and sustainable competitive advantage.

Despite these developments, implementing CSR remains a complex organizational process. Many organizations continue to encounter challenges in translating CSR policies into meaningful practices. Rangan et al. (2015) argued that CSR initiatives frequently remain disconnected from core business strategies, resulting in activities that emphasize compliance or corporate image rather than measurable social impact. Common implementation barriers include limited organizational resources, insufficient leadership commitment, inadequate stakeholder engagement, unclear performance indicators, and difficulties integrating sustainability objectives into business operations. These challenges suggest that successful CSR implementation depends not only on organizational policies but also on the experiences, competencies, and decision-making processes of those directly responsible for implementing CSR initiatives.

Although CSR has been extensively investigated in both developed and developing economies, much of the existing literature has relied on quantitative methods focusing on organizational performance, financial outcomes, stakeholder perceptions, and sustainability reporting. Comparatively fewer studies have employed qualitative phenomenological approaches that explore how CSR practitioners themselves experience the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of CSR programs. Understanding these lived experiences provides deeper insights into the practical realities of CSR implementation that may not be captured through quantitative indicators alone.

INPUT

Carroll's Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility

Economic Responsibility

Legal Responsibility

Ethical Responsibility

Philanthropic Responsibility

Participants

CSR Managers

CSR Officers

Sustainability/ESG Officers

CSR Coordinators

Manufacturing Enterprises in Beijing, China

PROCESS

Phenomenological Research Process

Participant Selection (Purposive Sampling)

In-depth Semi-Structured Interviews

Data Collection

Data Transcription

Coding of Significant Statements

Thematic Analysis

Theme Validation

Interpretation of the Essence of Lived Experiences

OUTPUT

The Essence of Corporate Social Responsibility Implementation Among Manufacturing Enterprises in Beijing, China

Resulting themes may include:

Effective CSR Leadership

Community Engagement

CSR Implementation Challenges

CSR as Competitive Advantage

Organizational Constraints

Coping and Adaptive Strategies

Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation

Digital Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Guided by Carroll's Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility, this study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of CSR practitioners from selected manufacturing enterprises in Beijing, China. Specifically, the study sought to understand how CSR practitioners interpret their roles, address implementation challenges, engage stakeholders, and integrate economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities into organizational practice. By examining these experiences, the study contributes to the growing body of CSR literature through an in-depth understanding of CSR implementation within China's manufacturing sector and provides practical implications for business leaders, policymakers, and organizations seeking to strengthen responsible business practices and sustainable organizational development.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practitioners in implementing CSR initiatives within manufacturing enterprises in Beijing, China. A phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because it seeks to uncover the meanings individuals assign to their experiences of a particular phenomenon, thereby providing a deeper understanding of CSR implementation from the perspective of those directly involved.

The participants consisted of five (5) CSR practitioners from selected manufacturing enterprises in Beijing, China. They were selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) direct involvement in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of CSR programs; (2) employment in a manufacturing enterprise operating in Beijing; and (3) a minimum of three (3) years of continuous experience in CSR implementation. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed sufficient knowledge and practical experience to provide rich and meaningful descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed from the research objectives and Carroll's Corporate Social Responsibility Pyramid. The open-ended nature of the interview questions encouraged participants to freely describe their experiences, perceptions, challenges, strategies, and best practices in implementing CSR initiatives. Each interview was conducted individually, recorded with the participants' consent, and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate comprehensive analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data, after which significant statements relevant to the research objectives were identified and coded. Similar codes were grouped into categories, leading to the emergence of themes that captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences. The identified themes were continuously reviewed, refined, and interpreted to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' narratives while remaining consistent with the study's phenomenological orientation.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted the qualitative criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data and participant validation of interview transcripts and thematic interpretations. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail of the research process, while confirmability was achieved through careful documentation of analytical decisions and reflexive interpretation of the data. Rich descriptions of the research context and participants' experiences were provided to facilitate transferability of the findings to similar organizational settings.

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and their voluntary participation before data collection commenced. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying organizational information. Participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. All collected data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic and research purposes.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis revealed eight interrelated themes that collectively describe the essence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) implementation among manufacturing enterprises in Beijing, China. These themes were synthesized into three major dimensions: **strategic leadership and stakeholder commitment**, **organizational challenges and adaptive practices**, and **CSR as a driver of sustainable organizational performance**.

Strategic Leadership and Stakeholder Commitment

The findings demonstrate that successful CSR implementation begins with effective leadership and a clear organizational commitment to responsible business practices. Participants consistently emphasized that CSR practitioners must possess strategic competence, ethical leadership, and strong communication skills to effectively implement sustainability initiatives. Beyond technical expertise, they highlighted the importance of fostering collaboration among employees, communities, government agencies, suppliers, and other stakeholders to achieve meaningful social and environmental outcomes. Community engagement emerged as a fundamental aspect of CSR, with participants describing CSR as creating shared value through environmental protection, employee volunteerism, educational support, and community development initiatives. These findings support Carroll's (2016) assertion that organizations fulfill their economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities by integrating stakeholder interests into organizational decision-making.

Organizational Challenges and Adaptive Practices

Despite growing organizational commitment to CSR, participants acknowledged several challenges that hinder effective implementation. Limited financial resources, insufficient organizational support, evolving regulatory requirements, and varying stakeholder expectations were identified as common barriers. Participants emphasized that overcoming these challenges requires adaptive leadership, systematic planning, continuous monitoring, and organizational learning. They further noted that successful CSR implementation depends on clearly defined policies, dedicated financial resources, employee participation, and effective governance structures. Digital communication and social media were also recognized as valuable tools for enhancing stakeholder engagement, promoting transparency, and communicating CSR achievements. These findings are consistent with previous studies suggesting that CSR implementation becomes more effective when supported by strategic planning, leadership commitment, and organizational capability rather than isolated philanthropic activities.

CSR as a Driver of Sustainable Organizational Performance

The participants viewed CSR not merely as a regulatory obligation or charitable activity but as a strategic investment that contributes to long-term organizational success. They emphasized that responsible business practices strengthen corporate reputation, increase stakeholder trust, improve employee engagement, and create competitive advantage while supporting environmental sustainability and community development. Participants further recognized that integrating CSR into organizational strategy enables manufacturing enterprises to balance profitability with social responsibility and environmental stewardship. These findings reinforce Carroll's Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility by demonstrating that sustainable organizational performance is achieved when economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities are integrated into everyday business operations. Within the context of Beijing's manufacturing sector, the study suggests that CSR has evolved into a strategic management approach that supports innovation, sustainable industrial development, and China's broader agenda for high-quality economic growth.

Overall, the findings reveal that the essence of CSR implementation extends beyond compliance and philanthropy toward creating long-term value for organizations and society. Effective CSR implementation requires visionary leadership, stakeholder collaboration, continuous organizational learning, and the integration of sustainability principles into strategic decision-making. The lived experiences of CSR practitioners provide empirical evidence that responsible corporate behavior contributes not only to organizational resilience and competitiveness but also to sustainable economic, environmental, and social development.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practitioners from selected manufacturing enterprises in Beijing, China. The findings demonstrate that effective CSR implementation extends beyond regulatory compliance and philanthropic activities, evolving into a strategic organizational function that integrates economic performance, ethical governance, environmental sustainability, and stakeholder engagement. The emergent themes highlight the importance of leadership commitment, employee participation, community collaboration, systematic planning, and continuous monitoring in achieving meaningful and sustainable CSR outcomes.

Anchored in Carroll's Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility, the study confirms that organizations create long-term value when economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities are embedded within organizational strategies and daily operations. By providing an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of CSR practitioners, the study contributes to the growing body of CSR literature and offers valuable insights into how manufacturing enterprises in Beijing can strengthen responsible business practices while supporting sustainable industrial development and long-term organizational competitiveness.

Recommendations

The findings suggest that manufacturing enterprises should integrate CSR into their core business strategies by strengthening leadership commitment, allocating adequate organizational resources, and promoting active employee and stakeholder participation. Organizations are likewise encouraged to establish systematic mechanisms for planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating CSR initiatives while leveraging digital communication platforms to enhance transparency, stakeholder engagement, and public accountability.

From a policy perspective, government agencies and industry associations may further strengthen CSR implementation by promoting collaborative partnerships, encouraging the adoption of sustainable manufacturing practices, and supporting initiatives aligned with China's sustainable development agenda. Future research may expand the scope of this study by including larger participant groups, different industrial sectors, or multiple regions across China and by employing mixed-methods or comparative research designs to further examine the organizational and societal impacts of CSR implementation.

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