

Millennial Perceptions on Dimensions of Corporate Social Responsibility: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify millennial perceptions on dimensions of corporate social responsibility. In layman's terms, what do millennials know about corporate social responsibility and how do they feel about it. Millennials were asked to participate if they met a specific criterion: enrolled in a post-secondary business program and maintained an academic average of 70% or greater. Gender responses have been separated throughout the study to aid in identification of patterns. The first phase of the research involved semi-structured interviews with millennials that were not given any educational facts about CSR from the researcher. The second phase was to determine millennial thoughts on CSR after they had been informed and educated on what comprises a CSR plan. By identifying millennials' thoughts about CSR, themes can be formed on how educated they are on the topic and when they become educated, how each dimension of CSR ranks on a scale of personal importance. The research suggested that millennials were able to identify five dimensions of CSR and ranked environmental impact the most important aspect for companies to consider, followed by employee relations, product quality, community relations, and lastly diversity practices were found to be of least importance.

The results of this study will help provide literature for organizations on how to design a CSR plan to attract millennials to their workforce. Additionally, the resulting literature could be used by organization to attract millennials into purchasing their products or supporting their business operations.

Back ground and Literature Review

The millennial generation, born between 1980 and 2000 is now entering employment in vast numbers, and will shape the world of work for years to come. They are predicted to be the next **great generation**. Though just beginning to enter the workforce this group is already significantly impacting organizational leadership. Millennial's exhibit confidence, optimism, civic duty, sociability, street smarts, inclusivity, collaboration, and open-mindedness.(Johnson, S.A., & Romanello 2005) They value and fiercely guard the work-life balance. They are also the first generation to be born into the digital age and have had the highest gauge of parental involvement. Being born in the digital age gives Millennials a high level of technological competence, which greatly separates them from generation "X". With this being said, Millennial young adults clearly possess fundamentally different characteristics and traits from past generations. This generation requires a vital integration of technology use and communicative strategies (Tucker, 2006)

Previous research has found Millennials to be reared in a youth-centric culture, they are self-assured and civic-minded. With sophisticated social awareness, millennials believe community extends beyond their own backyard and feel empowered and compelled to make the world a better place (Millennial Case Study, 2006) Understanding this culture is the key to successfully recruiting Millennials. Although it is difficult to define it has been proven that a firms' reputation

can allow organizations to attract a bigger and more qualified applicant pool (Cable & Turban, 2003) This is where a firm can use Corporate Social Responsibility to gain acceptance.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is important because the social initiatives that organizations partake in are a contributor to their overall reputation. This is especially important for job applicants who view the organization's social policies as signals of what the working conditions within the organization will be like (Turban & Greening, 1997). We can now look at the affects CSR has on Millenials and business as a whole.

Previous research indicates that the millennial generation seems to be particularly susceptible to companies' corporate social responsibility (Geokhaji, E. Landstrom, A. 2015). Organizations that sensitively manage these relationships may more likely find CSR efforts to be an important source of competitive advantage and achieve long-term organizational success (Porter & Kramer, 2006). CSR has also been known support such things as: develop a generation of socially responsible leaders (Persons 2012), it is important in professional as well as educational accreditation (Lamoreaux and Bonner, 2009; Persons, 2012), and lastly correctly implemented CSR strategies have been widely recognized as good business practice (Ducassy 2012). The business implications of CSR make understanding millennial work values and career-expectations a crucial learning tool.

Evidence has suggested differences in generational work values are mixed (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Kowske *et al.*, 2010; Twenge *et al.*, 2010) and, given the enormous significance of social responsibility issues to societies worldwide, recording students' views and values is of fundamental importance.

Much has been written about the need for CSR education, particularly in postgraduate programs, far less attention has been paid to exploring the CSR values and attitudes of students at the undergraduate level (Leveson Lynne, A. Joiner Therese , 2014). With respect to the focus on millennial students, gauging the views of future generations of students is important towards the future of organizations.

Previous studies suggest that students and graduate job seekers are aware of five dimensions of CSR in particular – community relations, diversity practices, employee relations, product quality and environmental impact (Bauer and Aiman-Smith, 1996; Albinger and Freeman, 2000; Aiman-Smith et al., 2001; Backhaus et al., 2002; Szamosi, 2006; Behrend et al., 2009). It is important to build a further understanding, and further close the gap between predicted CSR dimensions and real attitudes exhibited by undergraduate-job seeking millennial's today. The researcher will produce literature as to why those five dimensions will be identified by millennials and millennials specific attitudes on each dimension.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to identify which dimensions of CSR post-secondary millennial's can identify and subsequently attribute most value towards. In order to effectively determine which CSR dimensions hold the most significance the researcher will ask millennial's to rank them in order of importance. Participants will provide information on a topic that has not been previously academically researched.

Instrumentation

The instrument for generating and accumulating data in this research study was semi-structured interviews. Additionally, one could argue that the interviewers acted as an instrument (Turner & Thompson, 2014). According to Moore (2008) the researcher has the ability to determine what information is necessary to be used in the study. The researcher will determine what themes and patterns can be identified with the collected and analyzed information.

Research Questions

In order to obtain the results needed to appropriately assess our research, a great deal of attention was placed into making sure participants provided: enough, reliable, relatable information. This meant involving questions which are both ambiguous, and require some sort of critical thinking. Scenario-based questions typically appeared in the interview process to help determine how participants would react to certain situations in relation to CSR.. The study began by asking open-ended questions(see below Q1 followed by Q2-6). This allowed participants to elaborate and explain true work values in great depth, while also mentioning their own personal experiences/preferences in certain scenarios. For the second part of our study participants were asked to rank the perceived dimensions of CSR to determine an order of personal importance. The ranked dimensions will be compared and contrasted with what participants perceived to be important to CSR from the first question set.(Q1-6) Below is a list of the questions used during the interview.**Q1: What does corporate social responsibility mean to you?**

Q2: Would you rather work for an organization with higher compensation or an organization with a spectacular work environment? Why would you choose one organization over the other?

Q3: You have been given an offer of employment for an organization. It has been publicly identified that this organizations' environmental practices are lagging in the industry. How would this affect your choice to work for the organization?

Q4: You are the hiring manager for an organization. Your superior has asked you to find a candidate whom fits a certain racial or gender profile. What actions would you take after instructed to do so?

Q5: A typical practice of community relations in CSR is to hirer local employees in order to give income back to the surrounding community and economy. What are your thoughts on this practice?

Q6: Think about a technological product that has lasted a more than adequate amount of time and one that has provided you a great amount of satisfaction but only lasted a short period. What impact does this have on the image you perceive for the organization that created these products?

S1: Rank the five dimensions of CSR in order of most to least important.

This open form of questioning allowed participants to voice personal thoughts, experiences, and ideas about the generality of CSR as well as the specific dimensions. Even when participants could not explicitly give the name for a dimension of CSR, this question provided the opportunity for them to discuss sub-dimensions related to the five main dimensions.

Study Limitations

During the study there were several limitations encountered. As the study was conducted through one-on-one interviews, participants were found through social connections of the researcher. In

turn, this placed a limit on the participant pool used in order to generate a clear consensus on how millennial's feel towards CSR. As the majority of participants attend or attended the same institution as the researcher, it may have provided skewed responses from participants.

Individuals residing within the same geographic location may have been exposed to similar cultural norms or values, which may cast their responses in a similar direction.

Secondly, several participants were unaware of the in-depth practices that organizations perform within CSR. Following a brief explanation, participants were able to generate a train of thought that led the researcher to record valid responses. It was extremely evident that participants were not educated on CSR and the corresponding dimensions, even though CSR is an avid topic within a post-secondary business degree or diploma.

Lastly, the participant pool that the researcher compiled did not display an accurate break up of males and females. As there were 21 males interviewed and 14 females, the researcher is led to the assumption that the final results from the study are favoured toward the responses provided by male participants. This may ultimately lead to an inaccurate depiction of how millennial's as a whole view CSR and what it means to them.

Participants

Of the 35 participants interviewed, 21 were male and 14 were female. Based on the study criteria, it was a requirement that each participant must have completed or been enrolled in a post-secondary business program. The age range within the participants was 18-24 years old, which led the researcher to formulate a variety of responses based on present/past experiences surrounding CSR. The differential in age proved to be beneficial in generating different

perspectives in respect to what CSR means and if it truly matters to millennial's. Additionally, it was required that each participant possessed an academic average of 70% or greater. As a researcher, it was assumed that students that met this threshold would be more educated and provided thorough responses to our research questions.

Validity and Reliability

A pilot study was conducted with a larger sample including participants from all educational backgrounds. Through this process it was clear that students not enlisted in a bachelor of commerce program lacked any knowledge about CSR. The non-bachelor of commerce participants could not provide adequate information to draw results from for the purpose of this study. The following is a response from a participant enrolled in a bachelor of science when asked what CSR mean to them:

I could not tell you anything about corporate socially responsibility. I have never heard those words in my life. I can guess that it is corporations being responsible for their social actions (Male, 21)

Similar answers were received from other non-commerce participants. These answers would not be valid towards the purpose of the study. Selected participants were given the opportunity to re-evaluate their answers for the interview to ensure that they properly understood the questions and responded correctly (McBrien, 2008).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process involved face-to-face and Skype interviews with the 35 participants. Participants were solicited through word of mouth and social media. Recruitment of participants and implementation of the interviews occurred over 2-3 weeks. The participant pool included only peers of those who administered the researcher.

Upon completion of the study, only 2 males indicated that they had worked for or currently work for an organization that plays an active role in CSR. This led the researcher to hypothesize there could be a significant correlation between workplace involvement in CSR and strong views toward the importance of CSR displayed by organizations.

When asked the initial question of “What does corporate social responsibility mean to you” the interviewers noted if the participants were able to successful identify any of the predetermined dimensions of CSR. Male and female responses have been separated to aid in the identification of patterns and themes.

Analysis of Pre-determined Dimensions of CSR					
	Employee Relations	Diversity Practices	Product Quality	Environmental Impact	Community Relations
Male	16	2	5	18	15
Female	8	2	4	13	11
Total	24	4	9	31	26
Respondent Rate	69%	11%	26%	89%	74%

From the above table, the two most remarkable statistics are that 89% of participants identified environmental impact or a sub-theme related to the dimensions.

It is extremely important for corporations to be aware of environmental issues, and make the best efforts towards helping environment (Female, 22)

The second significant statistic is that 13 out of 14 females identified environmental impact. It is evident that the female participants interviewed have the greatest knowledge on this dimension.

Since I am from the University of Guelph which is an agriculture school I have had to write at least one paper involving the environment. It is also a serious issue in today with climate change and the impact it is going to have on our future

(Female, 19)

A pattern can be recognized from this information. Education, in and out of the post-secondary institution will decide whether a respondent can successfully identify a dimension of CSR. Community and employee relations were the second and third most identified dimensions of CSR.

Companies like Tim Hortons and McDonalds receive so much money from us that they need to give back to the community to thank people for making them the billionaire companies that they are today (Male, 23)

A happy worker is an efficient worker. An angry or upset person is not going to do the job you want them to do (Male, 22)

Personal experience has a large impact on the ability of participants to identify dimensions of CSR. The environment, commercials online or televised for Tim Horton's charities, and past work experience were recalled from multiple participants. The exposure to these dimensions is the explanation behind these statistics. Although this may sound like a trivial theme it provides an important data to draw conclusions from. Participants whom have been involved in these dimensions could successfully identify them. Therefore, diversity practices and product quality

must have a low amount of exposure to the participants. The majority of the participants were Caucasian males who are not a targeted group for diversity practices which is the reasoning behind why they could not identify the dimension. Product quality was identified poorly due to the simple fact that the participants did not know it was a dimension of CSR. The following is a quote from a participant after being told that product quality is one of the five dimensions:

I would have never guessed that. I assumed that corporate social responsibility only involved people and the environment related to corporations, not the products they sold (Male, 23)

Participants were educated on the five dimensions of CSR near the end of the interview to obtain answers for the last segment of the research. Statement 1 asked participants to rate each dimensions of CSR in order from most to least important. Again, male and female responses have been separated to identify patterns based on gender. A weighted formula was applied to determine a ranking system for the dimensions. The most important dimension was assigned a value of five and the least important a value of one (1st=5, 2nd=4, 3rd=3, 4th=2 5th=1). The associated sum of the rankings applied with the formula will determine the overall consensus of what the millennial participants perceive are the most to least important dimensions of CSR.

Weighted Dimensions of CSR (Male)						
	Rank 1st	Rank 2nd	Rank 3rd	Rank 4th	Rank 5th	Total Score
Community Relations	0	0	2	16	3	41
Diversity Practices	0	0	1	2	18	25
Employee Relations	4	13	4	0	0	84
Product Quality	3	2	13	3	0	68
Environmental Impact	14	6	1	0	0	97

Weighted Dimensions of CSR (Female)						
	Rank 1st	Rank 2nd	Rank 3rd	Rank 4th	Rank 5th	Total Score

Community Relations	0	2	4	3	5	31
Diversity Practices	0	0	1	6	7	22
Employee Relations	2	8	3	1	0	53
Product Quality	1	2	5	4	2	38
Environmental Impact	11	2	1	0	0	66

Weighted Dimensions of CSR (Male & Female)						
	Rank 1st	Rank 2nd	Rank 3rd	Rank 4th	Rank 5th	Total Score
Community Relations	0	2	6	19	8	72
Diversity Practices	0	0	2	8	25	47
Employee Relations	6	21	7	1	0	137
Product Quality	4	4	18	7	2	106
Environmental Impact	25	8	2	0	0	163

The order of perceived importance is as follows; Environmental impact, employee relations, product quality, community relations, and diversity practices. Since there was a larger quantity of males in the participant pool it is reasonable that their ranking order matches the order of males and females combined. Females however ranked diversity practices as being 4th and 5th most important. This could be a consequence of females being underrepresented in the workforce, which can be acknowledged in certain industries such as information technology (Tapia, 2004). Environmental impact is the most important dimension as it was the most identified. The researcher can clearly perceive that environmental issues are the most prominent and important dimension of CSR to the millennial participants.

Results

The five dimensions of CSR were discussed by participants with varying degrees and a unified theme for personal importance of the dimensions was identified post-interview.

Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations

Upon completion of the research study, it was evident that the five predetermined dimensions of CSR are intertwined in the conscious decisions and thoughts of millennials towards organizations.

Community Relations

Cone Inc., described millennials as the most “civic minded consumers to date” (Guarnieri, R. Kao, T. 2008). The responses generated through the current research study displayed similarities in comparison to previously conducted research. It was apparent that a high level of value is placed on community relations towards organizations amongst millennials. Drawing from the researchers findings, 74% of the research participants mentioned some form of community relations when asked, “What does CSR mean to you?” This was prior to the participants being provided further education on the five predetermined dimensions of CSR.

Based on a response to Q5, it is clear that organizations should not choose to hire employees based on geographic locations.

“I do not believe in hiring locally in order to meet a certain quota, you should be hiring the individual best fit for the position and give them the option to relocate” (Male, 20)

This study can provide recommendations to organizations into the future on how to best suit the needs and wants of the millennial workforce. Additionally, two participants directly stated that effectively giving back to the surrounding community in which the organization operates is crucial in order to achieve a desirable level of sustainability.

“From McDonald’s Houses, to Tim Hortons sponsoring local soccer teams, giving back to the community is a must.” (Female, 22)

“I would feel more inclined to work for or purchase products from organizations that partake in community events” (Female, 21)

Although this dimension was the second most identified, it placed fourth on a scale of 5 after the participants were educated on the 4 other dimensions. Conclusions can be drawn that millennials abundantly witness community relations in their lives but do not hold as much value towards it.

Diversity Practices

As diversity practices were only mentioned following the initial interview question by 11% of the respondents. The researcher is led to believe that the millennial's lack of prior knowledge behind this dimension is the reasoning behind the low response rate. In a world influenced by rapid changes and both ethnic and workplace diversity (Buckley et al., 2001) it is crucial that millennials are aware of this given dimension that is shifting the landscape of hiring practices performed by organizations. The globalization of organizations and the resulting increase in the number of expatriate managers and the cultural diversity of employees have increased the importance of this skill or ability (Friedman, 2007). Diversity is looked upon on a global scale; in turn millennial's may be more inclined to support and associate with organizations that display effective diversity practices.

When asked Q4, the researcher received three responses that were in direct correlation as to why diversity practices placed fifth on the weighted dimensions scale.

“Although this is not classical racism, it is not appropriate in today's world” (Male, 21)

“Organizations should be focused on the work the employees perform, not on race or gender” (Female, 21)

“I would not feel comfortable interviewing a person for a position knowing that they are only here because our organization had to fill a certain race or gender quota.” (Male, 23)

Millennial's views on diversity practices are opposing to what previous literature would suggest. The researcher was able to draw the conclusion that participants interviewed within the study would ultimately

choose to remove this specific dimension from CSR practices. As there was no correlation between past research conducted and the current study, this dimension holds no value to the millennial participants.

Employee Relations

Based on the initial response rate of 69%, it was evident that the majority of the participants (both male and female) were aware of this dimension in relation to CSR. This created a strong foundation to build upon as far as extracting further information surrounding this topic from the participants.

Within the dimension of employee relations, there are several sub-dimensions that it can be broken down into. In order to illustrate thoughts surrounding employee relation's practices, participants were asked if they would prefer to work for an organization that offers a larger compensation package or an organization that displays a spectacular work environment. By asking Q2, it led the researcher to gauge whether participants placed value on the monetary sub dimensions of employee relations or organization's workplace as a whole. Responses given by two participants led the researcher to develop the consensus that the millennial's within the study valued larger compensation packages over an organization that was recognized for their working environment.

“At this point in time in my life, money is always my main concern; making it and having enough to support myself. Although I do care about other factors of CSR, they do not directly impact my life for better” (Male, 21)

“Although other dimensions of CSR are important to me, I have to go with the money as that is what puts food on my table” (Male, 22)

Based on responses from participants and employee relations ranking second on the list of importance, future employers cannot overlook this dimension. Organizations can interpret the research gathered from this study to adjust practices accordingly. If a large portion of participants places significant emphasis,

organizations should adjust accordingly to best-fit future millennial employees. In order to “attract and hire new employees who have the abilities, skills, and experiences that will help an organization achieve its goals” (Jones & George, 2009) organizations must display an appealing workplace to future millennial employees.

Product Quality

From buying products associated with a cause they care about... millennials are more universally engaged in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts (PR Newswire Association, 2015). Although previous research indicates that millennials show a high level of engagement amongst CSR efforts in relation to product quality, only 26% of participants mentioned this dimension following the initial question. As mentioned previously, the lack of knowledge surrounding the topic of CSR and the corresponding dimensions may be the reasoning behind the low response rate. Based on the responses given to Q6, it was apparent that two participants in particular held strong feelings towards this dimension.

“I believe companies should give consumers a product that lasts, nothing is worse than spending your hard earned money on something to have break down too soon. I also will choose to purchase products from an organization that improves quality of life for their workers and other citizens around the world. An example would be TOMS, every shoe purchased gives a pair to a child in need” (Male, 22)

“I have had a phone die on me within months and will never purchase a product from that company every again. My laptop has lasted over 5 years and will continue to purchase Microsoft based products. Bill Gates believes so much in the quality of his products that he can give all his money away because he knows his products will continuously give him profits.” (Female, 21)

The researcher can infer that the physical quality of the product will affect purchasing habits as well as the perception of how the millennial participants view the organization. In addition, product quality is not limited to personal use of the product but also the organizations beliefs in their products and how the products affect other human's quality of life. This shares similarities to community involvement without the fact that the people benefiting from the organization are not in the surrounding area from where the company operates.

As product quality placed third on the list of importance to participants, it is not one of the two the main dimensions of CSR that organizations should exert as much effort towards. This information can be of particular use to organizations, in the sense of creating or developing a CSR plan that best suits the needs and wants of future employees; millennials.

Environmental Impact

Lastly, the final dimension of CSR that commanded the highest response rate was environmental impact. This may be a result of consistent exposure in the media to the ongoing global issues affecting the planet negatively. 89% of participants provided a response centered on the idea of environmental issues and the obligations of organization's to actively participate in the direction of a sustainable future. In turn, it came as no surprise that participants ranked this dimension first in comparison to the other four dimensions. Based on the responses given to Q3, the researcher was able to make the assumption that millennial's value and want to associate them with organization's that are aware of environmental issues. As well as, partake in actions that positively impact the environment.

“Corporations that do not display awareness or a desire to help lower their negative impacts towards the environment are not desirable for me to be involved with.

Professionally speaking, I would look for different employment opportunities if I was

given a job offer from a corporation that had a history of poor environmental involvement” (Male, 22)

“I would never consider working for a company that had a negative reputation toward their environmental impact” (Female, 21)

As the environmental impact dimension of CSR held the most weight to a large portion of the study participants, this is important information to organizations. An organization's image may incorporate a number of components such as good corporate citizenship, progressive labor practices, an emphasis on diversity, sponsorship of cultural activities, and pro-environmental practices (Aiman-Smith et al., 2001). Based on the research gathered from the study, pro-environmental practices do not only appeal to participants, but millennial's will also be inclined to work for and associate themselves with organizations that contribute positively to the surrounding environment.

Summary

The qualitative study explored millennial perceptions on CSR and the dimensions that compose a CSR plan. To develop the necessary information required for the study, millennials participated in semi structured interviews composed of multiple open and closed questions.

Previous literature suggested five possible dimensions of corporate social responsibility. These same five dimensions were identified by participants (number of participants who identified a dimension over total participants) in the study: environmental impact (89%), community relations (74%), employee relations (69%), product quality (26%), and diversity practices (11%).

The participants were then asked to rate aforementioned dimensions in order of importance.

After applying the statistical formula the rankings from most to least important are as follows; environmental impact, employee relations, product quality, community relations, and diversity

practices. The order of these dimensions can be used by organizations to build a CSR plan that can attract millennials as they become the next generation of consumers and possible candidates for employment. As well, participants provided an in depth analysis of what sub-dimensions should be included in each main dimension. Diversity practices should not be included in an organizations CSR based on the research collected. Community involvement should not include the hiring practice of employing local members of the surrounding community.

This qualitative study should inspire other researchers to develop literature on how millennials perceive CSR on a global scale.

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