

## A Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility and Advertising: A Case Study of Japanese Mobile Companies

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### Abstract

Consumer behavior research shows that implementing a CSR strategy positively affects customer loyalty and increases a company's bottom line. However, communicating these strategies to consumers remains a challenge. This research tries to contribute to the literature by focusing on the advertising component of CSR and testing the effectiveness of communicating CSR messages with the public. To this end, an experiment was conducted with the cooperation of consumers of Japanese mobile companies. Specifically, I introduce a modified framework that includes CSR Communication Model and CSR principles. The results indicate that consumers prioritize socially responsible companies if they have enough information about CSR programs. On the other hand, if the information is not available, consumers focus on other benefits, creating doubts about CSR effectiveness. Furthermore, the impact of CSR increases during disastrous events when demand for support arises.

**Keywords:** Corporate Social Responsibility, Advertising, Marketing, Mobile Companies, Japan

### 1. Introduction

In today's hyper-competitive and rapidly-changing environment, companies have to struggle to maintain their reputation advantages over others. As a result, many of them utilize Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a marketing tool for promoting their company's brand and winning over consumer loyalty (Maignan, Ferrell 2001; Liechtenstein, Drumwright, Braig 2004). Previous research defined CSR as voluntary policy companies integrate social, economic, and environmental issues into their business strategies (Deegan 2002). The point is that CSR could increase a company's market values by positively affecting its brand (Bhattacharya, Sen 2004; Du, Bhattacharya, Sen 2007; Bhattacharya, Sen, Korschun 2008; Podnar 2008; Pomeroy, Johnson 2009). On the side of consumers, Pomeroy and Johnson (2009) find that most people have expectations for companies to have an active position on pressing issues, but, at the same time, many do not trust a company's social standing (Pomeroy, Dolnicar 2009; Miltenberg 2013). This dilemma creates a necessity for companies to have different comprehensive communication channels.

Among the channels used to convey CSR messages, advertising is one of the most practical tools for reaching consumers (Pomeroy, Johnson 2009; Seele, Lock 2015; Illia, Romenti, Rodriguez-Canovas, Carroll 2017). In comparison to other channels, such as corporate reports or public statements, advertising provides an advantage by using audio and visual methods of communication. However, considering that advertising stays a controversial marketing approach, as it may raise doubts among consumers (Du et al. 2010), previous studies have mainly focused on inhibiting distrust toward advertising

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connected with cynicism about companies' intentions (Schlegelmilch, Pollach 2005; Van de Ven 2008; Dunn, Harness 2019). In this way, this paper provides valuable empirical input for the debate by examining CSR advertising's effectiveness.

Regarding the impact of CSR, Du et al. (2010) defined a conceptual framework for measuring CSR communication effectiveness. In this sense, a positive perception of a company's corporate social responsibility demonstrates a greater willingness to buy its products and, consequently, is associated with long-term loyalty and consumers' advocacy behavior. However, several researchers (Bhattacharya, Sen 2003; Pomeroy, Johnson 2009) highlight that it remains unclear whether companies can gain a competitive advantage through CSR, as consumers will first respond to advertising or price and then to CSR. In light of this, this paper utilizes the CSR Communication Model (Du et al. 2010) and CSR theory (Boulstridge, Carrigan 2000) to measure the impact of CSR advertising on the brand.

To the best of the author's knowledge, the literature on CSR theory and practice focuses on its impact in a Western context (Birch, Moon 2004). For this reason, this paper uses a case study of Japanese mobile companies' consumers (NTT Docomo, KDDI.au and Softbank Mobile) to fill an empirical gap in the academic literature on CSR activities perception in Japan.

## **2. CSR and communication**

In marketing, communications are critical when there is no customer experience or when the product is indistinguishable in terms of consumer characteristics. Depending on the ratio of these factors, specific characteristics of modality, strength, and attitude to the brand are formed (Thompson 2003).

The phenomenon of consumers' attitude to brands includes the social identification of the consumer, one's direction in the world of various goods and services, the removal of emotional stress in the context of "tyranny of choice" (Schwartz 2004), and others. This process also includes factors of the consumer's acquaintance with the product and marketing communications from the side of the brand.

According to Corporate Social Responsibility communication theory (Du et al. 2010), social support has emerged as a critical marketing tool to position the company's brand as an active part of society rather than a passive recipient of profit (Hilton 2003; Hachley, Tiwaskul 2006). However, debate arises when it comes to the impact of CSR on consumer attitudes. For example, Du et al. (2010) argue that a positive perception of a company's corporate social responsibility demonstrates a greater willingness to buy the company's products and, as a consequence, is associated with long-term loyalty and advocacy behavior (Figure 1).

(Du et al. 2010: 11)

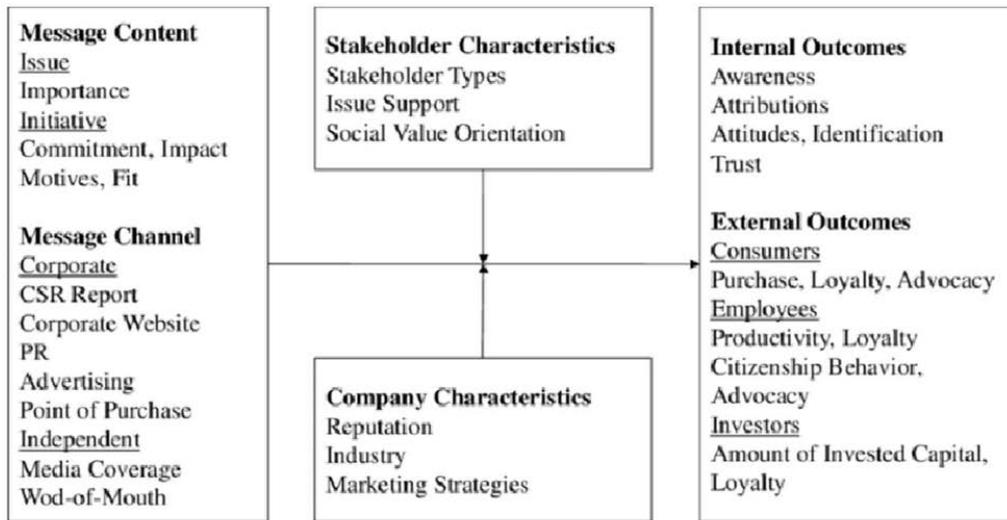


Figure 1: A framework of CSR communication

However, Bhattacharya, Good and Sardashti (2020) suggest that even if CSR helps distinguish a brand from others, the impact on attitudes toward a company is negligible. This is linked to the fact that customers do not want to pay much attention to external signs of quality in stable economic times (Melo, Galan 2011)

Among the tools used to communicate CSR, advertising is defined as corporate communication designed to improve a company's image (Pomering 2011). However, despite the growing use of CSR advertising in marketing communications, Pomering and Johnson (2009) pointed out that CSR advertising could cause negative reactions and consumer skepticism instead of fulfilling intended aims. For example, cynicism about companies' intentions or low trust in advertising (Schlegelmilch, Pollach 2005) can be detrimental to the effectiveness of social information. Moreover, a company will receive positive outcomes only if its CSR strategy is not copied by competitors (Hoppe, Lehmann-Grube 2001).

### 3. Disaster relief CSR

The concept of "disaster" can be interpreted differently depending on the subject that defines it. For example, from the perspective of private companies, "disaster" is the occurrence of an insured event that may lead to financial losses (Kousky, Kunreuther 2018). On the other hand, for a society, "disaster" represents the risk of losing property and health due to adverse natural phenomena (Botzen, Deschenes, Sanders 2019).

In Japan, interest in disaster response increased after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, followed by the economic crisis. As a result, companies had to rethink their relationship with consumers (Tanimoto 2002; Kambaiashi 2015). Therefore, in 2003, also known as "the first year of CSR," Japanese companies established CSR units and aimed to follow social interests (Hosoda, Suzuki 2015: 628).

In recent years, CSR trends in Japan have changed in response to a series of events. For example, the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, prompted the need for

rapid response to natural disasters and an awareness of the importance of corporate risk management (Eweje, Sakaki 2015).

Another example, the coronavirus pandemic, represents a uniquely gruesome challenge for the everyday life of people, which raises a need for well-thought-out CSR initiatives (He, Harris 2020). Since the health impact of a pandemic is classed as a disaster, CSR is defined as corporate philanthropy that includes activities in a disaster (Wang, Tong, Takeuchi, George 2016). This statement is supported by the examples of leading mobile companies in Japan. For example, Docomo, KDDI.au and SoftBank have developed a new disaster preparedness system covering various areas. Their main goals are to ensure the safety of people and peace of mind by providing communication capabilities, responding as quickly as possible in disaster areas, and providing customer convenience during a disaster. In summary, companies decided to use CSR to solve such social problems (Eweje, Sakaki 2015), which led to CSR policies becoming socially desirable and beneficial for business (Eweje 2014).

#### **4. Development of a CSR framework**

The basic CSR model of Du et al. (2010) is used to develop a new proposed model incorporating a two-tier process and results framework. The model also integrates the CSR constructs defined by Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000) in the form of the impact of CSR on the brand. Overall, this paper recognizes that CSR advertising can influence brand acceptance (Pomeroy, Johnson 2009). However, so far, this assumption has not thoroughly been tested. Therefore, this model tries to explain the effectiveness of CSR advertising based on the cases of mobile companies in Japan and use the three CSR constructs: CSR Communication and advertising, Consumer's Decision-Making Process, and CSR Outcomes.

##### **4.1 CSR communication and advertising**

In Japan, responsible business philosophy implies that companies must consider the tripartite interests of sellers, buyers, and communities (Tanimoto 2013). However, according to the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (2010), although Japanese companies agree that CSR is an important tool in business management, they still perceive it as a required response to legal or social needs.

The CSR communication principle (Du et al. 2010), applied to advertisements for mobile companies in Japan, finds that one of the CSR initiatives in disaster relief activities also includes intentions regarding network reliability. Companies distinguish three basic work principles during emergencies: increasing the system's reliability, ensuring the necessary communication, and rapidly restoring communication services (NTT Docomo Sustainability Report 2020: 90). During a disaster, regular calls and data transmission/reception become impossible (hereafter "congestion") (Fouladgar, Parchami, Elmasri, Ghaderi 2017). To prevent this situation and to avoid a large-scale communication system failure due to congestion, companies create temporary communication channels and expand the range of radio waves (Softbank Sustainability Report 2020: 19).

Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) consider that consumers are aware of the need for CSR activities if they are consistent with the company's intentions. CSR advertisements for network reliability and CSR communications during disasters have common associations that are important in achieving consistency between the company and CSR activities. Thus, in the context of this article, the company's intention to protect communications during disasters is seen as a central topic for CSR advertising.

#### **4.2 Consumers' decision-making process**

When a company launches marketing strategies, consumer awareness plays a vital role in responding to company requests (Du et al. 2010). However, when people are exposed to CSR communication through advertising, they may experience low trust in advertising in general (Pomeroy, Johnson 2009) and skepticism about the credibility of companies' intentions (Pomeroy 2011). On the other hand, Carrigan, Szmigin and Wright (2004) note that consumers increasingly focus on ethical issues and avoid companies whose corporate brand appears insincere when making purchasing decisions.

In this sense, Du et al. (2010) pointed out in their theoretical work that the links between traditional standards of choice and buying attitudes are inconsistent. This theory requires further research; therefore, this paper proposes that the traditional standards of choice (price, quality, and brand awareness) would likely be the most critical decision factors rather than social activities. Considering previous studies, the theme of advertising, where CSR is not the main message, was promotional videos containing discounts for young people.

#### **4.3 Consumers' attitudes**

The emotions and feelings of consumers concerning a particular product are an essential component of creating an attitude towards a brand (Schiffman 2012). Marketers often think of emotions and feelings as evaluative. In other words, they fix the individual's direct or global assessment of the installation object. Kim, Lim and Bhargava (1998) show that depending on emotional state, a positive or negative experience can be enhanced, directly impacting purchasing decisions. Relationships can be associated with specific groups, social events, or causes. Companies regularly mention the social events they sponsor in their advertisements to educate the public about the benefits they are trying to bring.

Consumer behavior research clearly shows that customer attitudes toward corporate social responsibility affect individual company performance, such as loyalty and positive reputation (Pomeroy, Johnson 2009; Pomeroy 2011). However, except those examining the impact of CSR on a brand (Bhattacharya, Sen 2004; Bhattacharya et al. 2020), the existing studies cited previously did not examine the specifics of CSR activities concerning the disaster. Since disasters can affect all aspects of society, including its economy (Ong, Mayer, Tost, Wellman 2019), companies should improve customer interactions when making strategic decisions such as corporate social responsibility.

Considering previous studies, this research investigates whether Japanese mobile companies' current investment in CSR is justified. According to Moliner, Monferrer-Tirado and Estrada-Guillen (2018), the disconnect between attitudes and outcomes is unclear, suggesting a discrepancy between consumers' thoughts and actions. This argument suggests that companies' current efforts to strengthen their reputation through CSR may be less effective than expected. Thus, the proposed design of this research can confirm or refute the results proposed in the previous literature, especially in terms of the impact on consumer buying behavior.

### **5. Methodology: Applying the CSR framework to mobile companies' practice**

Given the variety of models of corporate social responsibility and the lack of agreement on this matter (Schlegelmilch, Pollach 2005; Van de Ven 2008; Dunn, Harness 2019), this research has two key objectives. The first objective is to provide valuable empirical input to a useful debate about CSR advertising's effectiveness. The second objective is to fill an empirical gap in the academic literature on CSR activities perception in Japan. Specifically,

one research question ("How does public perception of CSR activities transmitted through advertising affect perception of corporate image?") frames this paper.

One case was selected (advertising for mobile companies in Japan) using two types of Docomo advertising (and that of KDDI and Softbank, the main competitors). In one case, the advertisement contained a CSR message, and in the other, it did not contain a CSR message. Moreover, there were questions regarding the company's image before and after advertisements were shown. Using variations of the two strategies across advertisements allows comparing the direct impact of advertising on consumers and their relationship to the company (Rahman 2014). Furthermore, consumers' level of engagement with a product is an essential factor in their responses to the purchase intent question (Suh, Yi 2006). Thus, target samples were limited to mobile operators.

This paper uses a mixed-method case study to examine Japanese advertising practices and corporate social responsibility. According to Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989), research based on mixed methods combines the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. In other words, a mixed-method approach will provide a better understanding of the research problem posed (Creswell, Creswell 2017). Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through online focus groups and questionnaires before and after focus groups. The gender distribution of 20 respondents was the same between women (50%) and men (50%). This is similar to the 2019 report of the Communication Usage Trend Survey developed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC 2018), which states that the number of mobile phone users in Japan over the age of 20 is 6.6% of women and 6.8% of men. In addition, all respondents received education at the bachelor's, Master's, or higher levels. This may reflect the fact that the data was collected at the University of Tsukuba.

The advertisements with CSR messages had themes of disaster relief activities. The advertisements without CSR had the theme of students' discounts.

### **Case selection**

Japan is an example of a country with extensive mobile phone usage. This is supported by statistics from 2020, which showed that the total value of mobile contracts was 183.26 million yen (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2020). Therefore, the telecommunication industry occupies a central place in the daily lives of people in Japan. However, mobile companies are also part of society, and to maintain a successful business, they must respond to social changes (Oliver, Lepri, Sterly, Lambiotte 2020). For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic presents unprecedented challenges to governments and societies around the world. Attracting customers through the provision of high guarantees and functionality is becoming insufficient, so companies use their obligations to society, especially in CSR activities. One of the main components of CSR is to bring a human face to business structures, conveying empathy, understanding and support, both moral and financial, to those who need it most (Bartik et al. 2020). According to Oliver et al. (2020), data from mobile operators represent a critical arsenal of tools to support public health action in the early, middle, and late stages of the disaster. In addition, more people are staying at home due to the spread of the virus, leading to increased Internet use. Thus, mobile companies can play a crucial role in leading the recovery from disasters and emergencies.

### **Data collection**

As part of the qualitative paradigm, this paper uses three focus groups as a primary data collection method to benefit interaction between respondents. For the analysis and

interpretation of the data, a thematic analysis was used, which uses the resources of grounded theory. This method of collecting primary information helps to obtain extensive and deep knowledge about the research problem. For example, it can help in understanding the phenomenon of consumer attitudes towards corporate social responsibility. During the focus group's discussion, several questions were included to eliminate the manipulation factor and ensure adequate identification of the participants. At the end of the study, an ad relevance test was conducted to verify that the strategy used did not influence the participants' discussion.

## 6. Analysis of findings

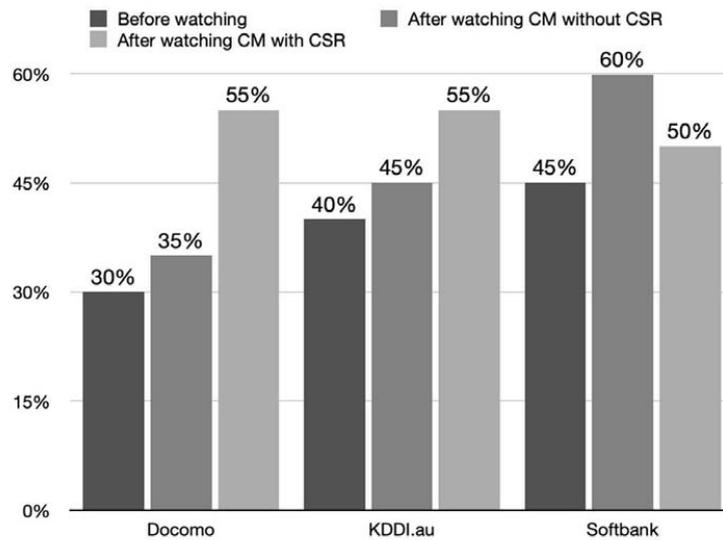


Figure 2: Overall Opinion on Advertisements

Overall opinion (Figure 2): After watching the Docomo advertisement with CSR, 55% of respondents found it good compared with advertisements without CSR (35%) and before watching any advertisement (30%). Regarding the KDDI.au ads, an almost identical percentage of respondents reported that both advertisements with CSR (55%) and without (45%) were good. However, the opposite results were observed in the Softbank case, where 10% fewer respondents found the CSR advertisement better than the one without CSR (60%).

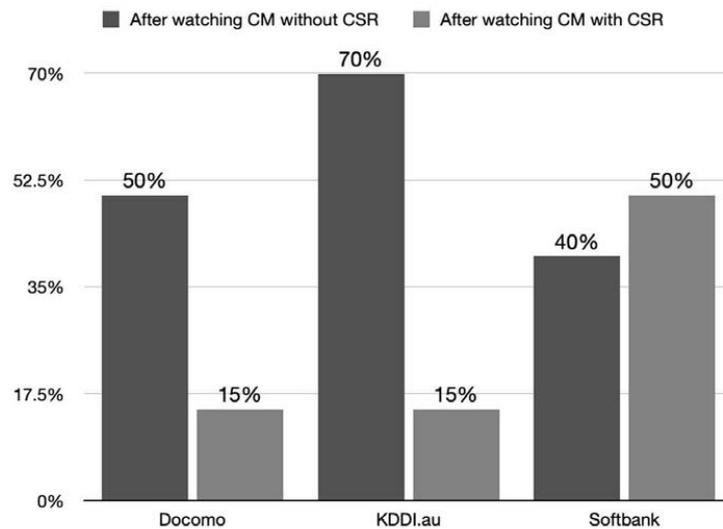


Figure 3: Uniqueness of Advertisements

Uniqueness (Figure 3): Half of the respondents (50%) found the Docomo advertisement without CSR unique compared to the one with CSR (15%). The same results can be seen in the analysis of the KDDI.au CSR advertisement, where 55% fewer respondents found it unique compared with advertisements without CSR (70%). On the other hand, most respondents (50%) found the Softbank advertisement unique, compared to the advertisement without CSR (40%).

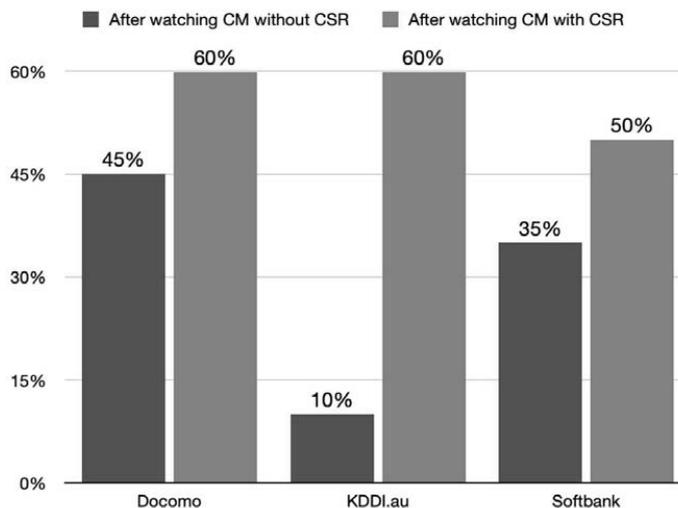


Figure 4: Relevance of Advertisements

Relevance (Figure 4): Interestingly, even though the Docomo advertisement dedicated to student discounts was considered more "unique," 60% of respondents claim that CSR advertisement is relevant to them. This is 15% more compared to the advertisement without CSR. As for KDDI.au, only 10% of respondents agreed that the advertisement without CSR messages is relevant for them, compared with the CSR advertisement (60%). The same results can be seen in the analysis of the Softbank advertisement: half (50%) of respondents agreed that CSR advertisement is relevant for them. In comparison, only 35% of respondents considered advertising without CSR as such.

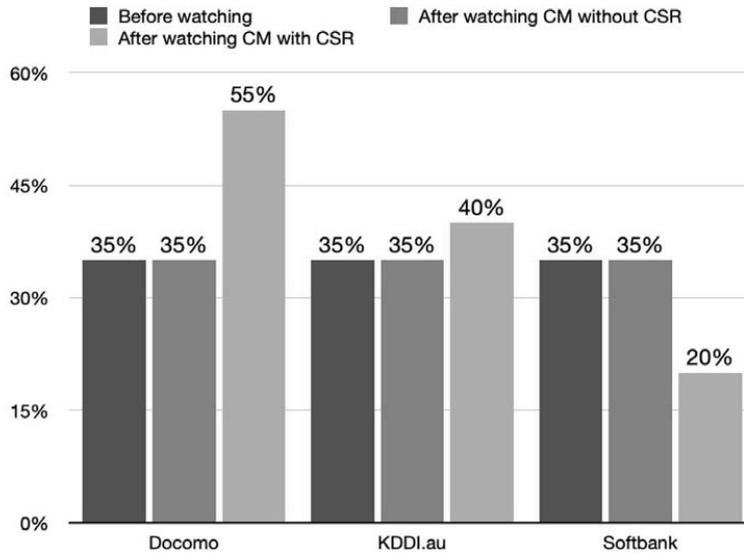


Figure 5: Purchase intent

Purchase Intent (Figure 5): The majority of respondents (55%) answered that they would like to purchase Docomo's products after watching its advertisement containing a CSR message. However, 35% of respondents also expressed their interest after watching the advertisement without CSR. Regarding the KDDI.au advertisement, 40% of respondents wanted to try the company's products or services after watching advertisements with CSR. Moreover, similarly to Docomo's case, 35% of respondents wanted to purchase from the company after watching the advertisement without CSR. On the other hand, a different opinion was expressed after watching the Softbank advertisement. Only 20% intended to buy after watching the advertisement with CSR and 35% after watching the advertisement without CSR.

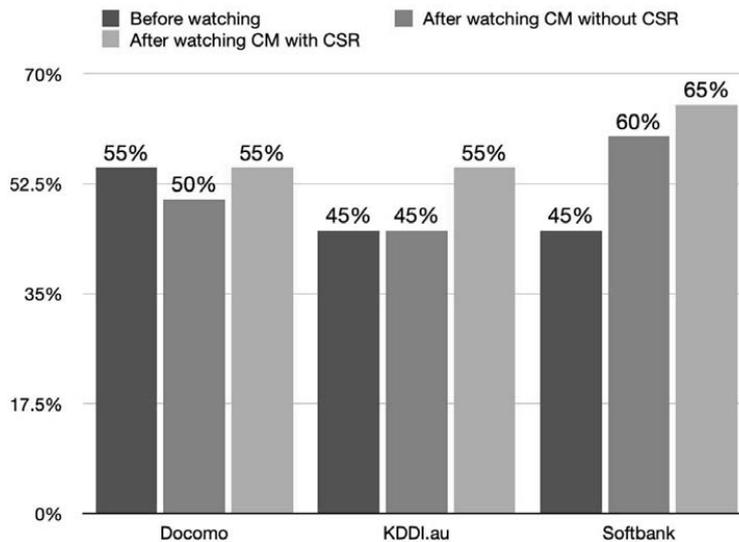


Figure 6: Social Image

Social Image (Figure 6): Before watching the advertisement from Docomo, 55% of

respondents were already convinced that the company was socially responsible. However, after watching advertising without CSR, the effect decreased by 10% and remained unchanged after watching the CSR advertisement. In the case of KDDI.au, after watching the advertisements, minimal difference was observed in advertisements with (55%) and without CSR messages (45%). Testing advertisements from Softbank demonstrates similar results. More than half of respondents (65%) found the company socially responsible after watching advertisements with CSR messages and after advertisements without CSR messages (60%).

Overall opinion on the company: Regarding Docomo, the results show that there is no difference toward the company, between the two cases with and without CSR advertisements (55%). In contrast, the analysis of KDDI.au indicates significant changes after watching advertisements with (55%) and without (30%) CSR. On the other hand, after watching the Softbank advertisement with CSR messaging, 65% of respondents considered the company good compared to the advertisement without CSR (60%).

## **7. Results**

Unlike previous studies in the field of CSR, direct mention of the term "corporate social responsibility" most often aroused weak interest in respondents and a reluctant desire to communicate on the topic. However, all respondents were able to express their opinions after the term was rephrased. They all agreed that mobile phone companies in Japan should not be viewed only as economic constituents of society but constituting an indisputable social foundation. The results confirm that CSR messaging positively affects attitudes towards a company and on advertising itself in general. This means that CSR advertising can act as an image indicator for strengthening and improving corporate culture.

Until now, opinions about CSR advertising as a marketing tool have been controversial. The most common skepticism in marketing communications stems from the belief that it is not profitable for a company to provide genuine social support. This research has proposed that companies' CSR strategies may be less effective than expected, but the results obtained show that CSR advertising is an effective way to manage a company's image. However, this conclusion applies only to a state where the impact of a disaster increased the need to keep in touch. Moreover, when creating an advertisement, it is necessary to consider the peculiarities of consumer thinking. Accordingly, for achieving advertising success, a CSR message should be combined with a creative strategy.

Finally, the findings confirm that even though the respondents welcomed good corporate behavior, the price factor remained more critical. The study also revealed an interesting point regarding the effect of an individual's economic position on the choice of the company. According to the results, practical factors such as price or recommendation are essential for consumers who pay independently for their mobile phones. On the other hand, service and company image are more important for financially dependent consumers.

Thus, it can be concluded that the introduction of new technologies and the development of communication with the consumer is associated with significant investments and is one of the priority problems for a mobile company. In this regard, increasing the duration of some discounts and programs, especially the period characterized by tremendous opportunities, could be relevant. Likewise, forming an effective communication policy will help responsible companies receive additional benefits from raising consumer awareness of CSR activities.

The findings were applied to the model presented by Du et al. (2010) (Figure 1). The resulting model (Figure 7) shows the areas where the earlier model demonstrates the driving forces behind the perception of CSR communication.

(Developed for this research based on Du et al. (2010), Boulstridge & Carrigan (2000) and Pomeroy & Johnson (2009))

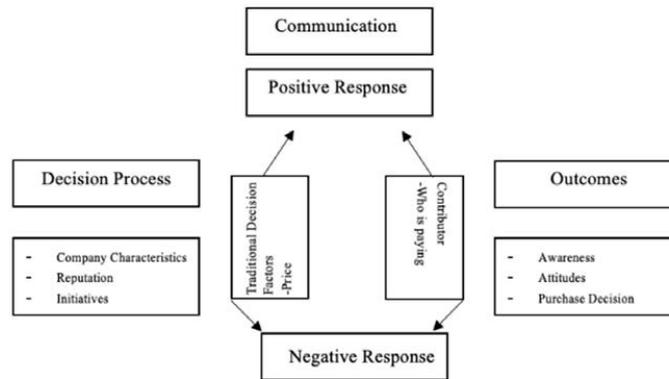


Figure 7: Developed CSR communication

## 8. Discussion

What makes the proposed CSR structure unique is the environment in which CSR advertising operates. While companies or marketers may not prevent disaster, they can limit its negative impact by engaging in CSR activities. Using CSR in an environment where the customer needs social support can effectively strengthen brand communication.

According to Bendell and Ng (2009), environmental pollution and health problems drive companies to use CSR in Asia. Although CSR research in Western countries has been extensively developed over several decades, consumers' CSR perception in Asian societies, especially in Japan, has been minimal. This study complements the literature by empirically examining consumer perceptions of corporate social responsibility advertising and its impact on purchasing decisions in Japan.

Another element that makes the current context unique is the presence of additional advertising tools compared with CSR. Early research has already raised the question that CSR is undoubtedly crucial for companies in communicating with consumers, but they also recognize that price or quality often takes precedence. This argument also guides this study. Combining the elements presented makes this area an interesting forum for CSR research and developing a framework for developing a strategy in practice. Thus, this study contributes to a better understanding of the gap between primary attitudes and behavior: consumers report a positive attitude towards a company that uses CSR, but this positive attitude is not reflected in actual buying behavior. While a company's corporate image is a factor that can influence attitudes towards the company, other factors have a more significant impact, thereby limiting the direct impact of corporate responsibility. This distinction between attitude and actual behavior allows us to look at consumer participation in CSR communication from a different angle.

In conclusion, the proposed framework adapts the principles of the CSR Communication Model by Du et al. (2010) and the CSR principles of Boulstridge and Carrigan (2000),

applying them to the practice of Japanese companies. The revised structure introduces an essential aspect of choice and reflects the need for further study. Thus, the impact in corporate social responsibility is far from unambiguous and depends on several different factors, including the environment in which the consumer is located and the level of his interest in other advertising tools. In addition, it is essential to consider the country's cultural characteristics, as this is an integral part of the impact on CSR communication.

Further research may apply this concept to other marketing tool processes besides advertising. This will help test the robustness and generalizability of the proposed model. In addition, applying the model to company practice could help improve the development of a CSR strategy by identifying the inherent strengths and weaknesses of initiatives and creating opportunities for companies to be more socially responsible.

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