

Image management and competitive advantage of manufacturing firms in South-East, Nigeria

Madueke, Daniel C.
Ezenwakwelu, Charity A.
Department of Management
University of Nigeria

Nwanmuoh, Emmanuel E.
Department of Marketing
University of Nigeria

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Abstract

The key to acquire a favourable image and reputation is the management of an organisation's identity. The study examined the effect of corporate social responsibility on organisations' productivity, it also sought to ascertain the effect of corporate reputation on organisations' growth, as well as assess the effect of product differentiation on strategic advantage. The study adopted the survey research design which was conducted through the administration of a structured questionnaire designed on a five-point Likert scale format for ten selected manufacturing firms in South East, Nigeria. The sample size of 563 was derived from the population of 9038 employees of junior and senior category of the manufacturing firms. Findings from the logistic regression revealed that corporate social responsibility positively affected organizations' productivity; corporate reputation had a positive effect on organisations' growth; and product differentiation positively affected strategic advantage. The study affirmed that corporate image management is an essential key for obtaining and maintaining public trust. And that manufacturing firms in Nigeria should carry out corporate social responsibility to gain public trust and better image, which in the long run will increase patronage and profitability.

Corresponding author: Ezenwakwelu, Charity A

Email addresses for the corresponding author: charityezenwa80@yahoo.com

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1. Introduction

Corporate image can be traced back to the era of the evolution of the theory relating to corporate identity management since the 1950s (Balmer, 1998). Essentially, corporate image can be explained as the general notion consumers create as a result of accumulated feelings and involvement with an organisation which are stored in memory, transformed into a positive or negative meaning and recalled when the name of the organisation is mentioned (Hatch, Schultz, & Williamson, 2003). The key to acquire a favourable image and reputation is the management of an organisation's identity and this explains the importance of corporate image and its management. It has been recognized that images have direct and clear links with money, value, and profitability (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). No company can ignore corporate image since every organisation has an image (Bernstein, 2008). Whether the image is created consciously or unconsciously, it affects the behaviour of people, hence, knowledge of the corporate image helps managers direct their communication effort in a more efficient way (Bernstein, 2008). Corporate image is the eye of the receiver. It is simply the picture that an audience has of an organisation through the accumulation of all received messages. It is determined by all the company's actions. Corporate image is the combined impact made on the mind of an observer by all of a corporation's planned and unplanned visual and verbal communications as well as by outside influences (Gregory & Wiechman, 2010). When a

customer regards a company as a good community player, with honorable stakeholders, an innovator or added value creator, then your outgrowth is trusted, you have achieved a successive level of image (Gregory & Wiechman, 2010).

In today's competitive environment, there is a competitive pressure and the desire to be recognised and supported; corporations invest millions every year to strengthen their corporate images and reputations. Led by the best strategic thinking on the matter, business managers select those attributes of the organisation that is unique, authentic, and non-imitable, and look for alluring ways to project this image to the outside world as into the hearts and minds of their own employees (Hatch and Schultz 2004). Nowadays also, the notions of images, identities, and brands are gaining renewed attention among scholars and managers (Olins, 2005). It is more and more difficult to gain competitive advantage nowadays when products and services are becoming more similar. In those circumstances' companies, wanting to gain it, must utilize intangibles such as corporate identity, corporate branding, corporate image and corporate reputation (Balmer and Greyser, 2003). From a practitioners' point of view, as products and competitors proliferate, the most repeated names and images will dominate (Melewar and Saunders, 2000).

Again, corporate image is the sum of expectations and impressions stakeholders have built up in their minds. The visual design of outputs is only one of several factors contributing to an organization's corporate image. Corporate identity is mainly under the control of the host organisation, corporate image, on the other hand, is formed within the minds of target audiences as a result of different received messages. Images can only be influenced by host organisations; it is exceedingly difficult to control of focus an image (Tomalin, 2003). Corporate image is a good competitive advantage tool used by organisations to achieve set out goals. Competitive advantage according to Porter (1996) is the ability of a company to achieve economic benefits in respect to the profits that can be achieved by a competitor in the market in the same industry. Companies that have a competitive advantage always had the ability to understand the changes in the structure of the market and is able to choose an effective marketing strategy. The corporate image is very important as it determines the success of an organization (Kapferer, 2008). People rather buy products or make use of services of an organisation that has 'a good name' and is well known, than an organisation they do not know or that has a bad reputation. Reputation is a sort of capital which is manageable and measurable, and it is part of the market value of the firm (Fombrun, 2002; Nyárády and Szeles, 2004). Consequently, corporate image management is to achieve a favourable image and reputation which leads to competitive advantage or "strategic advantage". Balmer (2005) asserts that a strong and favourable corporate image offers an organisational number of distinct benefits. Corporate image management is of crucial importance for an organisation that strives to achieve success. By clear and structured management, organisations are able to create an adaptable corporate identity, which means an identity that can manage to survive the environmental changes that have been going on in the past decades (Balmer & Gray, 2000). Apparently, corporate image is not just a discriminating factor in a progressively rising market competition, it enables consistency in consumer demand, value addition of product and services, higher financial margins or profitability, greater market visibility as well as attraction of high-quality personnel to the organization.

In the global and local markets, the necessity of adding value to products or services is being constantly emphasized, thus, building a positive corporate image is definitely an asset. However, unethical practices such as environmental pollution, the offering of substandard products, poor qualitative services, poor involvement in corporate social responsibilities, giving of misleading information, profiteering as well as dishonest services are some of the misconducts that can devalue organisations' image. These sharp practices have caused the customers to develop a negative image about manufacturing firms which on the long run affects the operations of these organizations, resulting in a high turnover of staff, low productivity, low patronage, reduced profitability and reduced interest of stakeholders. These issues trigger the following research questions: i. What is the effect of corporate social responsibility on organisations' productivity? ii. What effect has corporate reputation on organizations' growth? iii What is the effect of product differentiation on competitive advantage? Therefore, this study focuses on image management and competitive advantage of manufacturing firms in Southeast, Nigeria

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Organisations' Productivity

Holme and Watts (2000) define corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as the continuing commitment by businesses to behave ethically in business processes and contributes to socio-economic development while furthering the quality of life of the employees as well as the local or host community and the society at large. Corporate Social Responsibility simply refers to the obligations of companies to society, more specifically, obligations to stakeholders and those who influence corporate policies and practices (Khanifar, Nazari, Emami & Soltani, 2012). Companies participate in CSR in order to look better, feel better, do better and live longer (Kotler & Lee, 2005). These explanations imply that, by participating in CSR, firms, companies or organisations will look good in the view of potential customers, business colleagues, investors as well as the media.

While some researchers state that CSR improves the brand, others believe that organisations with a strong reputation for CSR will last longer. For instance, Chakraborty (2010) affirms that CSR performs its role as an internally embedded and self-regulating policy that help firms evaluate and maintain adherence to the law, ethical benchmarks or standards as well as international best practices. However, Moon (2011), posits that businesses are motivated to engage in CSR from self-preservation perspective, thus, superficial altruism. According to Forbes (2010), corporate social responsibility works in two ways, hence, the company gives back to society in turn while the people or consumers get to know about the company who helped them most and cater to their products and services – a symbiotic relationship. The practice of CSR is not uniform among all business entities but its objective of giving back to society is resonated across the various models employed by organisations. Consequently, Assadourian (2006) affirms that businesses have begun to accord high value and importance to responsible behaviour.

Corporate social responsibility initiatives have the potentials to benefit firms and organisations by enabling conditions which can raise the commitment and motivation of employees to become increasingly productive. On the other hand, it can also motivate the society and enhance patronage. Firms that engage in CSR activities tend to be more successful than those that fail to employ the tools and perspectives to enhance employee and consumer commitment. The benefits of these engagements cut across employee retention, better opportunities in recruitments, cost reduction, reduction of absenteeism, better skill development and of course motivation for continuous learning and self-development. Kramer and Porter (2006) describe the reasons for participating in CSR as including – moral obligation for businesses, desire for sustainability, need for license for continued operation, and value of reputation for any business outfit.

Most importantly, Kotler & Lee (2005) have an explicit economic view of the reason/s why companies participate in CSR described as – increased sales and market share, brand image and positive feeling from customers, enhanced image and clout (positive publications from business reports and magazines), improved brand positioning, increased ability to attract, motivate and retain employees, decreased operation costs and, increased interest for investors and financial analysts.

Methaq (2016) established that CSR promotes performance. Similarly, Bernstein (2008) posits that corporate social responsibility significantly enhances employee performance. Thus, the following hypothesis is presented H_1 : *Corporate social responsibility positively affects organisations' productivity.*

2.2 Corporate Reputation and Organizations' Growth

Reputation is the reflection of an organisation over time as seen through the eyes of its stakeholders (Saxton, 1998). Reputation is a stakeholder's overall evaluation of a company over time (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001). According to Bensiali (2011), corporate reputation is based on intangible aspects of an organisation's performance, culture, marketing and quality of products and services and takes time to spread. Basdeo, Smith, Grimm, Rindova & Derfus (2006), explained that reputation formation is a communication process in which industry context and actions of rivals influence how signals of focal firms affect its reputation. Since reputation is an intangible asset, external constituents may not fully observe the activities that may lead them to form the impression of a firm. Reputation is formed on perceptions, that it is an aggregate perception of all stakeholders, and that it combines a firm's past actions, current state, and prospects (Walker, 2010).

Moreover, there could be threats to a firm if it does not pay attention to build its reputation. The threats include bad behavior by executives, unsafe or defective products, customer complaints, employee

complaints, poor treatment of employees, poor handling of layoffs and/or termination (Burke, 2011). Notably, consumers have a low opinion of organisations especially in developing countries (Nigeria inclusive). In addition, there are more threats to a company's reputation today than previously (Burke, 2011).

Thus, corporate reputation is becoming more and more important in Nigeria where there is even more competition, poor product differentiation strategies, and pricing concerns in the service sector. Thus, building a highly regarded corporate reputation or corporate brand had become even more important.

Paul & James (2014) affirm that corporate reputation significantly affects organisational productivity. Also, Burke (2011) established that corporate reputation increases company's sales and profit. Thus, the second hypothesis is proposed – H_2 : *Corporate reputation has a positive effect on organisations' growth.*

2.3 Product Differentiation and Strategic Advantage

Product differentiation is a category of the two kinds of competitive advantage that may be available to a firm. Porter (1980) states that cost advantage and differentiation are the two strengths of a firm which can be applied in either broad or narrow scopes resulting in three generic strategies i.e. cost leadership, differentiation, and focus strategies. An organisation can differentiate itself from its competitors if it can offer something that is unique and valuable to its customers. Differentiation is about creating uniqueness and the principal uniqueness drivers according to Porter's viewpoint include policy choices, supplier and value chain linkages, timing, location, interrelationships, learning and spillovers, integration, scale, and institutional factors.

Cole (2008) posits that potential strategies for product or service differentiation include: product features and benefits, location(s), staff, operating procedures, price, customer incentive programs, guarantees and warranties, brand name recognition, goodwill, value-added products/services, extended growing/ operating season, soils, buildings, location, and landscape, water, access to irrigation and wetlands, weather, plants and animals, organisation and alliances, customer experience and quality. Deductively, a venture's most effective differentiation is the one that will bring the venture the greatest advantage. Porter (1990) affirms that it is important for a firm to differentiate itself among more than one dimension in order to reach the desired results

One way of achieving competitive advantage is through competency-based approaches in which an organisation tries to build differentiation as its core competence, which if peculiar to the organisation will be difficult for competitors to imitate. These strategies have a long-term benefit to the organisation especially if they are not easily duplicated. Differentiation builds competitive advantage by making customers more loyal, less price sensitive and less willing to consider other product alternatives (Johnson & Scholes, 2002). According to Rao (2011), the firm pursuing a high differentiation strategy along some key product's attribute or buyer need, can earmark its own strategic group within the industry in such a scenario, destructive price war can be avoided. Product quality helps the firm build its own reputation and demand that often gets translated into higher market share as well differentiation arises, and competition increasingly occurs on the bases of product improvements. This also causes the marketer to look at the user's preferences, the user's mode or choice of purchase and usage of products (consumption system or pattern), as well as related services. Each improvement adds cost, however, the improvement advantages soon become expected benefits and very crucial points of consideration in the process. For instance, today's hotel guests expect cable, satellite television with remote control and high-speed internet access or two phone lines, this means competitors must search for these other features and benefits (Jaquier, 2010).

As competition intensifies, product design offers a potential way to differentiate and position a company's products and services. Therefore, the rising prices, breakthroughs in technology and swift-paced markets are not adequate! Product design or redesign may just be a factor that could offer a firm or an organisation its competitive advantage or edge over competitors. Design itself involves all the distinct characteristics or traits which affect the way a product appears, appeals, feels and fits its role (functions) with regards to customer needs. This aspect is exceptionally significant in the making and marketing goods and services. The designer must figure out how much to invest in form, feature development, performance, durability, reliability, reparability, and style (Jaquier, 2010).

According to Kotler (2009), sellers may face abundance of differentiation possibilities including form, features, customization, performance quality, conformance quality, durability, reliability, reparability and style and when a physical product cannot easily be differentiated, the key to competition success may lie in adding valued services and improving their quality. The main service differentiation is ordering, ease delivery, installation, customer training, customer consulting, maintenance and repair. Noticeably, when customers perceive a product or service as better than the rest offered, they become more willing to pay a premium price relative to the price they will pay for competing offerings. Ade (2012) posits that the firm's ability to maintain rivals to imitate and outperform. Thus, sustainable competitive advantage that differentiates a firm from its rivals has become an intangible asset along with corporate image.

Stuart (2010) posits that product differentiation increases a company's profitability. Balmer and Gray (2000) established that product differentiation encourages and project a good company image. Accordingly, the third hypothesis is presented. *H₃. Product differentiation positively affects strategic advantage.*

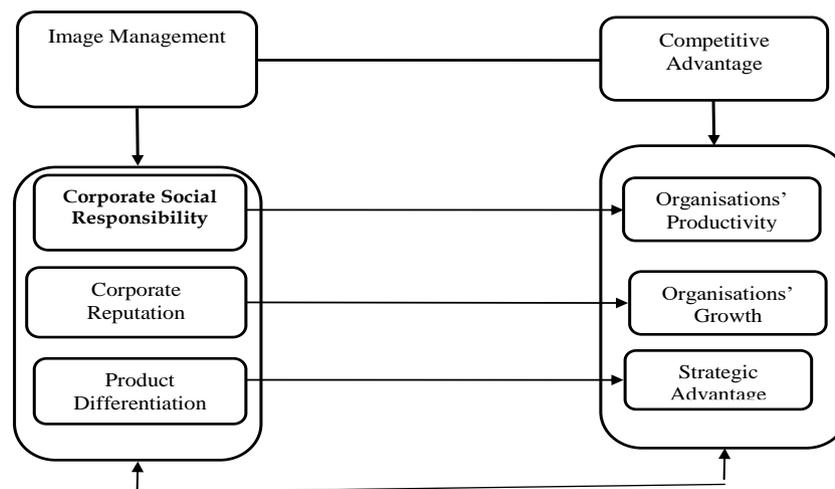


Fig 2.1 Conceptual Model of Image Management and Competitive Advantage

3. Previous Work

Okocha, Otika and Osuagwu (2019) conducted a study on the relationship between corporate image and competitive advantage in Mobile Telecommunication Industry in Nigeria. The objectives were to ascertain the relationship between corporate image and firm's competitive advantage, determine the relationship between corporate identity and the firm's competitive advantage, and assess the relationship between corporate reputation and competitive advantage. The cross-sectional survey design was adopted. Spearman rank correlation coefficient analytical tool was used for hypotheses testing. The results revealed that there was a significant relationship between corporate image and firm's competitive advantage, there was a strong relationship between corporate reputation and competitive advantage, and there was also a significant relationship between corporate identity and the firm's competitive advantage. The study concluded that corporate image provides access to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopted the survey design. The survey involves the use of questionnaire that is administered to a sample. The questionnaire was structured on five-point Likert scale format. Secondary data were collected from books, journals, and internet sources. The target population consists of 9038 employees of junior and senior category of the manufacturing firms in southeast, Nigeria. A sample size of 563 was derived using Cochran's formula at 5% error tolerance and 95% level of confidence. The validation of the instrument was undertaken by five experts, three from the academia and two from the industry. The test-retest was carried out for reliability test and thereafter subjected to test with Spearman rank order correlation technique which yielded a correlation coefficient of 0.83 indicating a high degree of items consistency. Out of 563 copies of the questionnaire that were distributed, 506 copies representing

(89.88%) were returned while 57 copies representing (10.12%) were not returned. The hypotheses were tested with ordinal logistic regression on Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 20.0) software. Ordinal logistic regression was suitable for testing the hypotheses because of the use of questionnaire that provides ordinal data which represent people's opinion, and which cannot be predicted.

Table 1: Analyses of Respondents' Responses

S/N	Options	A	SA	D	SD	U	Total
1	To determine the effect of corporate social responsibility on organisations' productivity.						
i	Organisations' productivity could be enhanced by corporate social responsibility	100	387	10	5	4	506
ii	Corporate social responsibility can attract community support which encourages productivity in the organisation	200	276	20	7	3	506
iii	Customers patronise companies that carry out their corporate social responsibility and hence increase their profitability	191	300	10	4	1	506
iv	Corporate social responsibility can improve better life and standard of living within the community which patronise companies' products	200	301	3	2	0	506
	Grand Total/ Percentage	1955(96.59)		61(3.01%)		8(0.40%)	2,024
2	To assess the effect of corporate reputation on organisations' growth.	A	SA	D	SD	U	Total
i	Corporate reputation can affect organisations' growth	404	75	20	4	3	506
ii	Good workplace environment can improve firms' productivity	300	166	21	10	9	506
iii	Adherence to ethical standards boosts profitability	45	447	9	2	3	506
iv	Good product and consumer relations enhance productivity	12	490	2	1	1	506
	Grand Total/ Percentage	1939(95.80%)		69 (3.41%)		16(0.79%)	2,024
3	To ascertain the effect of product differentiation on strategic advantage.	A	SA	D	SD	U	Total
i	Product differentiation procures strategic advantage on the firms.	310	134	27	30	5	506
ii	High product quality enhances competitive edge	400	95	7	4	0	506
iii	Improved design of products maximizes competitive advantage	94	392	11	6	3	506
iv	Product innovation and unique product enhance sales growth	400	93	6	2	5	506
	Grand Total/ Percentage	1918(94.763%)		93 (4.595%)		13(0.642%)	2,024

Source: Field Survey, 2019.

5. Analyses of Results

H₁: Corporate social responsibility positively affects organisations' productivity.

The responses obtained from the questions asked to determine the effect of corporate social responsibility on organisations' productivity reveals that 1,955 (96.59%) of the respondents agree that corporate social responsibility affects organisations' productivity. Thus, 61 (3.01%) of the respondents disagree while 8 (0.40%) of the respondents are undecided.

Table 2: Parameter Estimate from ordinal logistic regression test for hypothesis (1)

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	Df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold [ORGPRO = 37]	63.452	21.523	69.112	3	.022	63.452	65.146
Location [Social men = 338]	73.524	12.064	65.045	3	.002	73.524	76.362
[Environ = 155]	82.402	9.222	71.526	3	.000	82.402	83.551
[Ecoempower =236]	79.185	5.425	58.785	3	.011	61.112	64.883

Link function: Logit.

The result in Table 2 reveals that corporate social responsibility positively affects organisations' productivity. With an increase in the probability of increased productivity at the odds ratio of 63.452 (95% CI, 63.452 to 65.146), Wald $\chi^2(1) = 69.112$, $p = 0.022 < 0.05$. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis which states that corporate social responsibility positively affects organisations' productivity is hereby accepted and the null hypothesis is rejected.

H₂: Corporate reputation has a positive effect on organisations' growth.

The responses derived from the questions asked to ascertain the effect of corporate reputation on organisations' growth indicates that 1939(95.80%) of the respondents agree that corporate reputation affects organisations' growth. Thus, 69(3.41%) of the respondents disagree while 16(0.79%) of the respondents are undecided.

Table 3: Parameter Estimate from ordinal logistic regression test for hypothesis (2)

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold [FMGROWTH = 172]	56.018	5.203	62.837	1	.024	56.018	60.567
Location [Corprep= 429]	69.171	22.650	74.010	1	.007	69.171	72.909

Link function: Logit.

The result in Table 3 reveals that corporate reputation has a positive effect on organisations' growth. With an increase in the probability of increased growth at the odds ratio of 69.171 (95% CI, 69.171 to 72.909), Wald $\chi^2(1) = 74.010$, $p = 0.007 < 0.05$. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis which states that corporate reputation has a positive effect on organizations' growth is hereby accepted and the null hypothesis is rejected.

H₃. Product differentiation positively affects strategic advantage.

The responses obtained from the questions asked to determine the effect of product differentiation on strategic advantage reveals that 1,918 (94.763%) of the respondents agree that product differentiation affects strategic advantage. Thus, 93(4.595%) of the respondents disagree while 13 (0.642%) of the respondents are undecided.

Table 4: Parameter Estimate from ordinal logistic regression test for hypothesis (3)

	Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold [COMPTAD= 63]	62.620	11.701	43.113	3	.013	62.620	64.365
Location [Suprod_quality = 92]	73.901	9.118	61.529	3	.004	73.901	75.117
[Prod_design = 129]	82.006	18.445	73.101	3	.000	82.006	86.802
[Unique_prod = 188]	64.212	15.781	49.226	3	.020	64.212	66.088

Link function: Logit.

The parameter estimates in table (4) reveals that product differentiation positively affects strategic advantage. With an increase in the probability of increased advantage at the odds ratio of 62.620 (95% CI, 62.620 to 64.365), Wald $\chi^2(1) = 43.113$, $p = 0.013 < 0.05$. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis which states

that product differentiation positively affects strategic advantage is hereby accepted and the null hypothesis is rejected.

6. Discussion of Results

According to our first objective which examined the effect of corporate social responsibility on organisations' productivity, the result from the ordinal logistic regression revealed that corporate social responsibility positively affected organisations' productivity ($\beta = 63.452$, $p = 0.022 < 0.05$). Thus, the alternative hypothesis which states that corporate social responsibility positively affects organisations' productivity was accepted and the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that sustained corporate social responsibility is pivotal to optimal productivity in organisations. Methaq (2016) established that corporate social responsibility promotes performance. Bernstein (2008) posits that corporate social responsibility significantly enhances employee performance.

Moreover, the study also ascertained the effect of corporate reputation on organisations' growth which is our second objective. The result revealed that corporate reputation had a positive effect on organisations' growth ($\beta = 69.171$, $p = 0.007 < 0.05$). This implies that corporate reputation plays an integral role in the growth of organisations. Paul & James (2014) affirmed that corporate reputation significantly affects organisational productivity. Burke (2011) states that corporate reputation increases company's sales and profit.

Finally, the study examined the effect of product differentiation on strategic advantage. The result from the ordinal logistic regression test revealed that product differentiation positively affected strategic advantage ($\beta = 62.620$, $p = 0.013 < 0.05$). Therefore, the alternative hypothesis which states that product differentiation positively affects strategic advantage was accepted and the null hypothesis was rejected. This finding relates to the fact that organisations could procure strategic advantage by leveraging on the many beneficial dimensions of product differentiation such as product innovation and improved product design. Stuart, (2010) posits that product differentiation increases a company's profitability. Balmer and Gray (2000) established that product differentiation enhances the image of a company.

Conclusion

Corporate image management is an essential key for obtaining and maintaining public trust. It involves actions taken with the intention to create, maintain, and gain public trust. Every organisation has its own image when it is properly developed and managed, could reflect in the firm's level of commitment to quality, excellence and good relationship with its stakeholders including current and potential customers, present employees and future employees, competitors and investors, governing bodies and the general public at large. Corporate image is a tool which an organisation uses in gaining strategic advantage. Companies that are successful, invest heavily in creating sustainable competitive advantage as it is the single most dependent contributor that gives an above-average level of profitability.

Recommendations

The study proffers the following recommendations

- i. Manufacturing firms should carry out corporate social responsibility so as to engender public trust, which in the long run will increase customers' patronages and profitability of the firms.
- ii. Manufacturing firms should create a corporate reputation that will attract customers to patronize their products with the belief that the products have superior quality.
- iii. Manufacturing firms should adopt product differentiation as a competitive strategy for winning customers over from rivals in the market.

Limitations

The study had a limitation for having not explored the following relevant topics: goodwill, corporate window dressing and the danger of 'Greenwashing' organisation living off old reputation, and the role of confirmation bias. Future researchers should explore the listed topics in researches on corporate reputation and organisation's growth, product differentiation and strategic advantage.

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