Corporate Social Infrastructure (CSI):

When Brands Become the Backbone of Prosocial Systems

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Abstract

As brands enter a "new era of responsibility," traditional paradigms such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) increasingly fail to capture the firm's emerging role as a structural backbone of social systems. This research introduces Corporate Social Infrastructure (CSI), a novel engagement framework in which firms provide structural governance and platform architecture that enable stakeholder-driven sustainable growth. Across two experimental studies, we show that CSI uniquely activates a psychological pathway involving functional indispensability and counterfactual dependence. When a firm operates as a structural enabler, cues of system failure history or system fragility serve as diagnostic moderators that heighten perceptions of the firm's functional indispensability. Recognizing the firm's structural necessity then triggers counterfactual reflections, leading consumers to consider how the prosocial system might deteriorate in the firm's absence. These "what if" cognitions amplify the perceived systemic value of the brand, ultimately increasing brand attitudes, perceived authenticity, trust, and support intentions toward the brand.

Keywords: Corporate social infrastructure, CSR, ESG, indispensability, counterfactual thinking, brand trust