

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF A CSV CONCEPT FOR ACHIEVING FIRM COMPETITIVENESS IN HONG KONG CONSTRUCTION FIRMS

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The Hong Kong construction industry has both contributed to and benefited from the growth and development of the last decades. However, social and environmental challenges, particularly health and safety issues, manpower shortage, construction waste and landfill problems, pose significant constraints to the continued growth of the firms. Recent studies suggest that construction firms can embrace a ‘Creating Shared Value’ (CSV) concept to convert these issues into business opportunities and achieve long-term competitiveness. Despite this recognition, effort has not been made to investigate the CSV concept in construction management. Hence, this study aims to explore the CSV concept in the Hong Kong construction industry, and establish a link between the CSV concept and firm competitiveness using strategic management theory. This research employs multi-method approach, encompassing documents review and semi-structured interviews, adhering to the principles of building theory from the case study research and the grounded theory. Data are analysed qualitatively. The results show that construction practitioners have mixed attitudes toward the CSV concept and firm competitiveness. Various potential strategies that are in line with the CSV concept including the potential barriers in its implementation process are also identified.

Keywords: coding, competitiveness, grounded theory, shared value, thematic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The construction industry in Hong Kong (HK) has experienced various social and environmental challenges, specifically related to health and safety (H&S) issues, labour shortage, construction waste and landfill problems, and inefficient use of resources. These challenges pose significant constraints to the continued growth of the firms (HKCA and Construction Industry Group 2012), and may undermine the long-term competitiveness of the construction industry in HK (GovHK 2015).

Recent studies suggest that construction firms can embrace a ‘Creating Shared Value’ (CSV) concept in order to address the social and environmental issues and achieve long-term competitiveness (Awale and Rowlinson 2014; Porter and Kramer 2011). The CSV concept or ‘shared value’ is an alternative strategy that simultaneously creates both social and business values by reconceiving products/markets, redefining productivity in the value chain, and enabling local cluster development (Porter and Kramer 2011). It can help firms to better respond to societal, environmental, and market needs as well as business activities. Studies from other sectors (food, beverage, agriculture, pharmaceutical, health care, financial services, extractives, and natural

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resources) advocate that firms can enhance their competitiveness by embracing the CSV concept in their business strategy (Hills *et al.* 2012). Despite this recognition, management or organizational fields, especially, construction management, is silent on this topic and effort has not been made to investigate the CSV concept. In this respect, a study is needed to investigate the CSV concept in construction management. Hence, the key question is: How can construction firms achieve long-term competitiveness by implementing the CSV concept?

This research builds on our previous studies on the CSV concept and firm competitiveness (Awale and Rowlinson 2014; 2015a; 2015b). Hence, the CSV concept is used as a point of departure (Charmaz 2014). The specific objectives are to: (i) define and unfold the anatomy of the CSV concept, (ii) identify the potential means of the CSV concept, and (iii) explore critical views of construction practitioners toward the CSV concept for achieving firm competitiveness. It also establishes a link between the CSV concept and firm competitiveness using strategic management theory.

FIRM COMPETITIVENESS AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT IN CONSTRUCTION MANAGEMENT

Companies mainly focus on achieving economic values but they fail to integrate the social dimensions in their competitive process (Taatala *et al.* 2006). Organization and management scholars, especially construction managers give relatively less priority to social and environmental issues while accessing their competitiveness (Walsh *et al.* 2003). Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that firm's competitiveness based on economic dimension alone would be incomplete and those firms that fail to integrate social dimensions while accessing their competitiveness may not succeed in achieving business target and future growth. Therefore, the recent view of construction firms on competitiveness is mainly short- to medium-term focused whereas long-term goals are overlooked (Shenhar *et al.* 2001). Hence, in this study, firm competitiveness is operationalized as: 1) achieving business success, and 2) preparing for the future (Shenhar *et al.* 2001), which may be attained by addressing critical social and environmental issues of the firm (Porter and Kramer 2011).

In construction management, various theories exist for conducting the corresponding strategic management functions that assist firms to achieve long-term competitiveness (Green *et al.* 2008). For example, Porter's (1980; 1985) competitive theories postulate that a firm's competitive advantage comes from the competitive strategy adopted to cope with the competitive environment. Resource-based view (Barney 1991; Prahalad and Hamel 1990) suggests that competitive advantage can be achieved from the possession and utilization of firm-specific resources, capabilities and competencies. Kay's (1993) distinctive capabilities theory proposes that companies can improve their strength through distinctive structure of relationships with employees, customers, suppliers, contractors and subcontractors. Such distinctive capabilities include capacity to innovate, key internal and external relationships, and corporate branding and reputations. Lastly, Porter's (1998) cluster development approach emphasizes on the enhancement of related and supporting companies and institutions in the location where the company operates to achieve competitive advantage. Above theories focus on various success factors or competitive dimensions. However, from a strategic management perspective, these dimensions can mainly be linked to three significant views: the market-based view (Porter's competitive theories), the resource-based view

(resources-based theories), and the relational view (distinctive capabilities theory, and cluster development approach) as shown in figure 1.

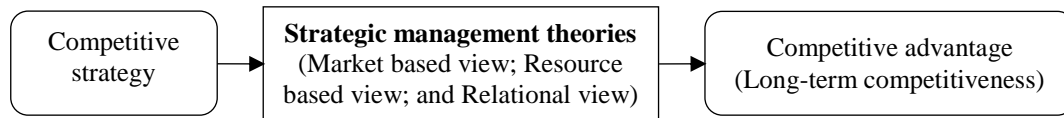


Figure 1: Application of strategic management theories in construction management

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research builds on our previous studies on the CSV concept and firm competitiveness (Awale and Rowlinson 2014; 2015a; 2015b), and adopts a symbolic interactionist (Corbin and Strauss 2008) and a constructivist/interpretive (Charmaz 2014) worldviews. It employs a multi-method approach in order to collect and analyse data, adhering to the principles of building theory from the case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989) and the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In contrast to Eisenhardt (1989), this study doesn't generate theory but elaborates and unfolds the anatomy of the existing theory. In contrast with Charmaz (2014) and Corbin and Strauss (2008), this research doesn't perform theoretical sampling (i.e., the next data collection was not guided by theoretical sampling). However, data collection and data analysis by some means went hand-in-hand.

Qualitative data collection

It includes preliminary interviews, documents review and in-depth interviews. Informal preliminary interviews with 6 industry experts were conducted at the monthly social industry networking gathering, which lasted from 5 to 10 minutes. The main purpose of this phase was to get a rough idea of how industry practitioners perceive and understand the CSV concept. It was learnt that the participants are unaware and have not heard of the CSV concept. However, they are unknowingly participating in activities that align with the CSV concept. Importantly, this phase facilitated design of interview questions, and rendered a great insight and direction for this research.

Documents such as latest sustainability and annual reports, homepage, publications and press releases, etc., from four different companies were reviewed. In this phase, critical issues and potential strategies adopted by the companies to address those issues were explored. The main purpose of the documents review was to generate case examples (Bowen 2009; Eisenhardt 1989). Since the review of the organization documents might not represent the actual practices of the companies, the possible dimensions were later discussed with the interview participants from the respective companies during the in-depth interview phase. The purpose was to get further clarifications, substantiate evidences, and determine the accuracy of information in the documents (Bowen 2009). Documents review also provided background information of the companies (Charmaz 2014).

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were also conducted with the industry practitioners, which facilitated the exploration of different subjective meanings and interpretations of the participants. A snowball sampling method was deployed to locate the participants because company practitioners were unlikely to take part without referral from their colleagues (Liamputtong 2009). At first, 2 participants were interviewed, who were approached based upon academic contacts. With their help and referral, other interested participants who might meet the criteria of the research were located. So, in total 17 in-depth interviews (lasting between one to two

and half hours) and 1 informal quick interview (lasting about 15 minutes) were conducted. Participants were from the strategic/management teams at business level, who have either direct involvement or responsibility to make business strategies in their respective firms. The participants were initially approached by e-mail for interview appointments. Written consents were taken from all participants prior to interviewing. All interviews were audio-recorded and verbatim. The demographic information of interviewees is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of companies and interviewees

Company	Company profile	Participants (Total 18)
General Contractor: Company A	Largest construction company in Hong Kong (HK) in terms of market share with a strong turnover of US 1,471 million and US\$ 1,592 million in 2012 and 2013 respectively	Total 8: Division commercial manager; Senior commercial manager; Senior environmental manager; Director - health, & safety and sustainability; Manager - CSR & sustainability; Contracts manager; Project director; and Project manager
Client: Company B	Power company in HK with a turnover of US\$ 1,354 million and total earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA) of US\$ 993 million in 2014	Total 2: System operations manager; and Deputy general manager
Client: Company C	Largest railway corporation in HK with a turnover of US\$ 4,989 million and total EBITDA of US\$ 1,856 million in 2013	Total 4: Manager - innovation and knowledge management; Senior manager - corporate responsibility; Construction safety advisor; and Manager - project safety
Building Contractor: Company D	Housing developer and building contractor in HK with a turnover of US\$ 691 and US\$ 622 million in 2012 and 2013 respectively	Total 4: Deputy general manager(a); Deputy General Manager(b); Construction manager; and CSR manager

Open-ended questions were designed and the participants were asked identical questions to enquire about their critical views. The main topics discussed were:

- critical social and environmental issues in their organization;
- strategies the companies are undertaking or might have undertaken to solve the social and environmental issues and generate business opportunities;
- challenges the company might face while implementing those activities;
- measurement of social and business values generated from those strategies;
- impetus (resources, supports, etc.) to implement those activities;
- benefits companies might get implementing such strategies;
- possible relationship between such strategies and competitiveness

Qualitative data analyses and empirical findings

Qualitative analyses are inductive and divided into three folds:

1st Phase analysis - documents analysis

This phase includes documents analysis (skimming, reading and interpretation), reinforced by the in-depth interviews, in order to identify relevant information in the documents and finally generate case examples (Eisenhardt 1989; Bowen 2009).

1st phase empirical findings: case examples

Multiple case examples were identified and few are listed in Table 2.

2nd Phase analysis - case and interview analysis

This phase includes qualitative analysis of the case examples using a case analysis process: with-in case and cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt 1989) and a constant comparison method (Corbin and Strauss 2008). The interviews were analysed using a thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2006), and coding and constant

comparison methods (Corbin and Strauss 2008). For the comprehensive description and analysis of the cases, and analysis of the interviews, refer to the recent papers by Awale and Rowlinson (2015a) and Awale and Rowlinson (2015b) respectively. The findings from the case analysis were triangulated with the findings from the interview data (Guba and Lincoln 1981) to generate resultant 2nd phase empirical findings.

Table 2: List of potential case examples

Potential case examples	Related to
Development of semi-automatic breaker rack, modification of bore pile head trimming method, and redesign of casings extractor	Health and safety (H&S)
Green treatment of marine mud to reduce construction waste	Waste and landfill issue
Contractor co-operative training scheme, and multi-skilling trainings	H&S; Labour shortage
Use of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) timber products	Ineffective use of resources
Development and use of mechanical steel system formwork	H&S; Construction waste
New blood trainings or trainings to develop talent pool; Local supplier and contractor development programs	Labour shortage; H&S
Industry-university collaboration (university sponsorship program)	Labour shortage
Training and involving low income people in the construction industry i.e., development of workforce from low income people	Labour shortage
Worker health and well-being program (on-site health screening events)	H&S

2nd phase empirical findings: potential strategies to achieve firm competitiveness

Table 3 depicts potential strategies that companies are implementing to address various social and environmental issues - mainly related to H&S issues, manpower shortage, and construction waste and landfill problems - in the HK construction industry. Interviewees also cited these strategies as potential reasons for the companies being able to achieve long-term competitiveness. It was also surprising to notice that these companies were unknowingly implementing such strategies, which generated both social and business values/benefits simultaneously.

Discussions with respect to the 2nd phase empirical findings

Table 3 provides a notion of the firms using alternative strategies (potential strategies) to create tangible business opportunities by tackling social and environmental issues. In fact, there is a shift in companies' focus towards developing innovative approaches that address the critical issues in profitable ways. These companies may not have achieved both social and business values including competitiveness if they have approached the issues through compliance, philanthropic, corporate giving, ethical or responsible mind-set (Porter and Kramer 2006). Such approaches not just become defensive (Berns *et al.* 2009) but also largely fail to deal with key challenges in business-society relationship (Porter and Kramer 2006; 2011). Instead, the companies have prioritized the critical issues that have significant impact on their business operation, and proactively developed the potential strategies to address them. These potential strategies have emerged from companies' motive to solve social and environmental issues and simultaneously obtain social and business benefits including business success, and future growth and development. There is a manifestation of a compelling business case for a value creation and a long-term sustainability (Berns *et al.* 2009). Hence, such potential strategies can be considered as in line with the CSV concept (Awale and Rowlinson 2014; Porter and Kramer 2011).

Table 3a: Potential strategies to address construction waste and landfill problems

CSV-competitiveness model		Details
Social and environmental issues	Waste and landfill problems	Construction waste; Pressure to dumping sites and landfill areas; Damage to marine environment due to excess dumping of contaminated mud; etc.
Potential strategies	Reconceiving product	Development of innovative product or construction method (e.g. use of mechanical steel system formwork to minimize the timber waste and increase the usability of formwork)
	Redefining productivity	Building of own crushing plant to reuse concrete waste as aggregate and sand; Recycling of concrete waste at the batching plant (e.g. development of new concrete for eco pavement blocks, road pavements); Green treatment of marine mud (e.g. converting contaminated mud to suitable backfills)
Benefits of potential strategies	Social benefits	Reduce in construction waste and landfill pressure; Reduced in raw materials use; Improved marine environment; Availability of new land (reclamation of land)
	Business benefits	Improved productivity (e.g. mechanized steel formwork is quick and easy compared to traditional timber only formwork); Cost savings (e.g. reduce in transportation cost and waste disposal charge); Reduced logistical and operating costs; Increased revenue
Long-term competitiveness	Business success Prepare for the future	(1) Win more projects (e.g. due to the innovative ideas); (2) Improved profitability and growth of the company (3) New source of revenue; (4) New market creation or creation of new product line; (5) Leaders in new market and ideas (e.g. marine mud treatment concept has now become a norm in government specifications); (6) Product differentiation and strong entry barriers; (7) Earn client and government's recognitions

Table 3b: Potential strategies to address health and safety (H&S) related issues

CSV-competitiveness model		Details
Social and environmental issues	H&S related issues	H&S of workers (e.g. risk to workers working at height; site accidents, injuries, and fatalities; ageing of the workers; unknown health history of workers); H&S of subcontractors and suppliers (e.g. incompetent subcontractors and suppliers); Unsafe workplace (e.g. unsafe site entry and exit of vehicles; safety of road pedestrians in the vicinity of project); etc.
Potential strategies	Reconceiving product or service	Development of innovative product or modification of equipment and tools (e.g. semi-automatic breaker rack); Development of innovative construction method or modification of construction process (e.g. development of bore pile head trimming method; redesign of the casings extractor without the working platform; mechanical steel system formwork)
	Local cluster development	Safety trainings for workers, suppliers/subcontractor; Local supplier and contractor development programs; On-site periodic health screening of workers to explore serious common diseases; Proactive community engagement and awareness programs
Benefits of potential strategies	Social benefits	Improved safety records (e.g. minimize risk to workers working at height); Less accidents and injuries; Safe working environments (e.g. improved safety of road pedestrians, safety of vehicles); Safer, improved and capable subcontractor and suppliers; Safer industry
	Business benefits	Improvement in work efficiency and productivity; Safer method; Cost savings (e.g. lower insurance rate); Increased revenue; Secure supply and continuity of work from suppliers/subcontractors; Commercial gain or monetary return (e.g. contractors/suppliers quote less price for same quality service or product); Safety excellence awards (recognition); Improved reputation and markings; Good relationships with labour department
Long-term competitiveness	Business success Prepare for the future	(8) Improved profitability; (9) Win more contracts or projects; (10) Increase in market share (11) Access to new source of revenue or revenue growth; (12) Leaders in innovative safe products and processes i.e., championing new practices; (13) Attraction of new comers due to the safe nature of construction; (14) Retention of workers; (15) Access to capable subcontractors and suppliers; (16) Improved external relationship and public acceptance

Table 3c: Potential strategies to address manpower shortage

CSV-competitiveness model		Detail
Social and environmental issues	Manpower shortage	Lack of skilled-workers (e.g., welders, bar benders, scaffolders, etc.); Lack of direct construction labours; Shortage of young talents; Difficulty in attracting, recruiting and retaining young workers; Ageing of construction workers; Suppliers and subcontractors lacking required manpower resource (incompetent and incapable subcontractors); etc.
Potential strategies	Reconceiving product	Development of innovative product/method (e.g. mechanical steel system formwork to use unskilled workers instead of welders)
	Local cluster development	Multi-skilling trainings, training own workers, new blood trainings and youth development programs to develop skills and attract young talents; Industry-university collaboration (e.g. fellowship-training scheme, graduate trainings); Development of workforce from the local community and low income people (e.g. training and hiring of local people in the vicinity of project and prepare them for the jobs); Contractor Co-operative Training Scheme
Benefits of potential strategies	Social benefits	Employees get talent and high incomes; Students get skills and high payment job; Improved education, job skills and competences; New job creation; Low-income people get decent jobs; Subcontractor and suppliers gain capabilities
	Business benefits	Reduced costs (e.g. instead of costly welders low paid workers could be used); Access to talent pools (e.g. secure supply of skilled and sustainable workforce); Access to local and natural talents (know-hows) ; Improved distribution infrastructure (e.g. competitive construction industry; capable subcontractors and suppliers; improved contractor performance); Lower rates and quotations from suppliers and subcontractor as they become competent and competitive
Long-term competitiveness	Prepare for the future	(17) First-mover advantage (championing new practices); (18) Retention of workers; (19) Gain additional capabilities, skills and competencies; (20) Building new and secure capabilities for the future (e.g. sustainable workforce, suppliers and subcontractors); (21) Access to university graduates; (22) strong entry barriers

A CSV concept: an alternative strategy

The CSV concept is defined as policies and operating practices that creates business values by tackling or converting social issues into tangible business opportunities by using three means: (i) reconceiving products/services and markets, (ii) redefining productivity in the value chain, and (iii) enabling local cluster development (Porter and Kramer 2011). The first means focuses on meeting the unmet needs and reaching unserved customers by designing and determining new products/services. It also helps companies to identify new markets and opportunities. The second pillar includes new approaches to energy and resource use, logistics, and procurement. It improves efficiency and productivity of business operations. Lastly, the third pillar focuses on improving the external environment of the company, enhancing skills through trainings, and strengthening local stakeholders. In this sense, the CSV concept is an alternative strategy to achieve long-term competitiveness, which focuses on integration of a social purpose into companies’ business operations. Figure 2 depicts the CSV concept for achieving firm competitiveness (Awale and Rowlinson 2014).

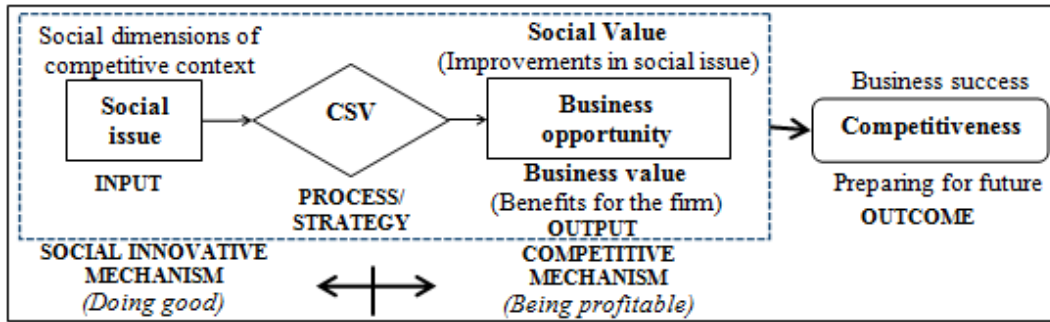


Figure 2: A CSV-competitiveness model (Awale and Rowlinson 2014)

Differences between traditional CSR and the CSV concept

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the CSV concept are both based on the same overlapping concept - “doing good by doing well”. CSR is about being responsible whereas CSV is about creating new values. CSR states that companies should be profitable, obey laws, be ethical, and be a good corporate citizen (Carroll 1991). These perspectives are reactive, defensive and lack active strategic choices within companies. Hence, CSR is limited to react against external pressure, mainly to satisfy stakeholder’s needs and maintain the firm’s reputation (Porter and Kramer 2006). It is typically an afterthought on how businesses operate and often remains at the periphery of business operation. In contrast, the firms embracing the CSV concept advance business operations proactively and place critical issues at the core of their business operations (Awale and Rowlinson 2014).

3rd phase Analysis - interview analysis

This phase includes analysis of interview data to explore the views of the participants towards the CSV concept for achieving firm competitiveness (Awale and Rowlinson 2015b). The analysis was similar to the interview analysis in the 2nd phase.

3rd phase empirical findings: views of the participants

Mixed perceptions regarding the CSV concept and firm competitiveness have been observed. However, the participants believe that firms can achieve long-term competitiveness through adoption of the CSV concept (Awale and Rowlinson 2015b).

a) Meanings and classifications of the CSV concept

The participants perceived that the CSV concept can be internal or external to the company, which may be well implemented by established companies than start-ups. It is pragmatic and context-based. It is a differentiation or a focus strategy that embraces the perspectives of the strategic management theories. It is a nascent concept that overlaps with strategic CSR, social innovation, and value co-creation concepts.

b) Challenges to implement the CSV concept

The participants expressed various possible challenges in implementing the CSV concept, which are mainly related to the government (ineffective and incompatible policy, rules and regulations; slow approval process; lack of long-term planning; slow to change etc.) and the nature of the construction industry (traditional mind-set; culture; structure; etc.). Besides, high investment cost, requirement of skilled personnel, laborious paper and administrative works, no marking system, volatility of market supply and demand may also hinder implementation of the CSV concept.

c) Linkage between the CSV concept and firm competitiveness

Based upon the strategic management theory, the competitive dimensions in Table 3 could be re-arranged as shown in Table 4, which provides a basic linkage between the CSV concept and firm competitiveness.

Table 4: Basic relationship between the CSV concept and the long-term competitiveness

Competitive theories: the strategic management perspective	Long-term competitive dimensions
Market-Based View (Porter 1980; 1985)	(1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (6), (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), (17), (22)
Resource-Based View (Barney 1991; Prahalad and Hamel 1990)	(13), (14), (18), (19), (20), (21)
Relational View (Kay 1993; Porter 1998)	(7), (15), (16)

CONCLUSIONS

This study explores the perceptions of construction industry practitioners, and defines and unfolds the anatomy of the CSV concept using a qualitative methodology. It also relates the CSV concept with firm competitiveness using strategic management theory. Although the participants are unaware of the CSV concept, they are unknowingly applying the CSV concept. Despite some hindrances and difficulties to implement the CSV concept, the practitioners perceive that construction firms can adopt the CSV concept to convert social and environmental issues into business opportunities and achieve long-term competitiveness. For this, the companies must integrate a social perspective into their core competitive frameworks while developing their business strategies. It is expected that the findings of this study will enhance our understanding of shared value creation. Furthermore, it highlights the effectiveness of social and psychological research methods in construction management research.

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