Integrated Corporate Social Responsibility and Social Enterprise Synergy: A Multi-theoretic Perspective and Future Agenda

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Despite the fact that CSR and SEs pursue complementary objectives, their synergistic relationships have not been thoroughly examined. SEs are driven by their mission to generate enduring social value, whereas CSR initiatives are shaped by the pressures of institutional and stakeholder legitimacy. This study integrates theories of stakeholder, institutional legitimacy, and resource dependence to create a framework that elucidates the drivers and outcomes of CSR–SE partnerships. These collaborations not only improve the reputation, trust, and resources of SEs but also promote sustainability and facilitate cross-industry learning, thus contributing to the advancement of theory and practice in cross-sector cooperation.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, social enterprise, collaboration, theoretical perspective

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, a consequential transformation has occurred in the dynamics between industry and society (Majeed et al., 2025; Bilderback & Dunning, 2025; Gregoratti & Tornhill, 2025; Hatipoglu & Ertun, 2024). To confront urgent matters like poverty alleviation, inequality reduction, climate change, sustainable development, corporations, and mission-driven organizations, previously regarded as distinct sectors, are progressively intertwining. Social enterprises (SEs) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) have developed into two crucial mechanisms for tackling societal challenges in this transforming context (Oware et al., 2024; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2015). Despite their roots in different institutional logics, CSR as a business strategy driven by legitimacy and stakeholder responsiveness, and SEs as hybrid entities that merge entrepreneurial methods with social objectives, their convergence signifies an important understanding: no single actor, be it public or private, can successfully tackle intricate social and environmental challenges independently (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Oware et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2015). Instead, to have systemic and long-lasting impact, cross-sector collaboration is becoming more and more important (Ip et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2015).

CSR has grown into a popular strategic approach used by businesses to include environmental and social factors into their business plans (Gregoratti & Tornhill, 2025; Bilderback & Dunning, 2025; Qiao, 2023). CSR activities, which go beyond generosity or compliance, are presented as reactions to stakeholder expectations and institutional constraints, allowing businesses to establish credibility, improve their reputation, and maintain long-term competitiveness (Bilderback & Dunning, 2025; Oware et al., 2024). However, CSR has also been labelled as overly driven by the need to improve one's image, and occasionally falling short of producing significant, long-lasting societal change (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024). SEs, on the other hand, are mission-driven businesses that create for the benefit of society, frequently tackling underserved communities or institutional gaps (Gregoratti & Tornhill, 2025; Espinosa & Martinez-Lozada, 2025; Bhuiyan et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2015). The prior research emphasizes that SEs are acknowledged for their grassroots ideas and ability to solve problems in a context-specific manner, fusing the philosophy of non-profits with the effectiveness and focus on the market of corporations (Gregoratti & Tornhill, 2025; Bhuiyan et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2015). However, financial fragility, limited resources, and challenges in expanding their influence outside particular contexts sometimes limit SEs (Oware et al., 2024; Risi et al., 2023).

CSR–SE partnerships have become popular precisely in the area of complementary strengths and limits. Businesses may ground their CSR activities in genuine, mission-driven projects that appeal to stakeholders by working with SEs (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Mamo, 2025). SEs also derive benefits from their access to networks, market infrastructure, corporate resources, and technological skills (Clemens, 2025; Espinosa & Martinez-Lozada, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Willys et al., 2024; Hatipoglu & Ertun, 2024; Oware et al., 2024; Koppenjan et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2015). these collaborations foster a synergy that surpasses the combined contributions and has the ability to generate significant social value (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Oware et al., 2024; Yin & Jamali, 2021; Aggarwal & Jha, 2019). For example, Unilever and Grameen established a partnership in Bangladesh to broaden access to essential goods in rural areas and to empower local women entrepreneurs by combining the distribution and branding strengths of the company with Grameen's established community trust networks (Hoshino, 2023). A comparable case of the interplay between corporate investment and social enterprise innovation aimed at combating malnutrition while upholding commercial viability is Danone's partnership with Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus through Grameen Danone Foods (Lyne, 2023). Tata's engagement in corporate social responsibility through partnerships with rural social entrepreneurs in healthcare and livelihoods in India has highlighted how business endorsement can strengthen grassroots solutions, producing long-term benefits for disadvantaged groups (Suri & Singh, 2025). These instances demonstrate how CSR–SE synergy not only generates mutual benefits but also exerts influence at the field level, encouraging similar partnerships and elevating the standard for business involvement in sustainability.

The extant literature has found that it is difficult to keep up with the growing adoption of CSR–SE partnerships in practice. There is little theoretical integration because CSR and SEs are treated as separate research fields in a large segment of the literature (Oware et al., 2024; Clemens, 2025). The role of SEs as strategic partners in attaining social effect is often overlooked in CSR research, which tend to focus on stakeholder engagement, reporting procedures, or corporate objectives (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Willys et al., 2024). Conversely, SE research infrequently integrates SEs within extensive business ecosystems, prioritizing organizational hybridity, governance, and financial sustainability instead (Espinosa & Martinez-Lozada, 2025; Clemens, 2025; Willys et al., 2024; Hatipoglu & Ertun, 2024; Oware et al., 2024; Koppenjan et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2015). It is a prevalent approach to analyze overlaps through a singular theoretical framework. For example, stakeholder theory is employed to investigate responses to various expectations (Awa et al., 2024), whereas Institutional theory serves to elucidate the behavior of corporations in their quest for legitimacy (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Oware et al., 2024). Although these viewpoints yield significant insights, they fail to capture the intricate and constantly changing dynamics of CSR–SE partnerships.

To address this gap, a multi-faceted theoretical framework that combines diverse viewpoints is necessary. The intrinsic resource flows and capacity building within CSR–SE partnerships cannot be fully accounted for by institutional theory alone, yet it does shed light on the impact of regulatory, normative, and cultural-cognitive influences on corporate CSR adoption (Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2015). Stakeholder theory elucidates how companies respond to the diverse expectations of stakeholders regarding accountability and authenticity; however, it does not adequately explain the systemic feedback loops generated by partnerships (Awa et al., 2024). While it is often confined to outcomes at the firm level, the resource-based view (RBV) provides insight into how businesses (Wejesiri et al., 2025) and social enterprises (SEs) share complementary assets and skills (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025). However, this lens is still not often used in the literature. Legitimacy theory, on the other hand, contend that through visible, continuous engagement, CSR–SE partnerships effectively mitigate the danger of backlash and increase legitimacy by offering integrated stakeholder co-creation channels and joint-action authenticity (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Oware et al., 2024; Logue & Grimes, 2022; Koppenjan et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2020). By combining these viewpoints and additional others, researchers can gain a more comprehensive knowledge of the causes and mechanisms of CSR–SE relationships, their workings, and the results they produce at the organizational and societal levels.

By providing an integrated perspective of CSR–SE synergy through a multi-theoretic review, our study aims to further advance the scientific understanding in this evolving area in an integrated manner. It specifically aims to accomplish three connected goals. In order to find tensions and complementarities in collaborative dynamics, it first synthesizes disparate concepts from the CSR and SE literatures. Second, it creates a conceptual framework that explains the motivations, workings, and results of CSR–SE collaborations. This framework is based on institutional theory, stakeholder theory, RBV, and legitimacy theory. This concept demonstrates how partnerships foster mutual reinforcement: SEs gain access to networks, funding, and scaling prospects, while corporations acquire moral credibility and stakeholder authenticity. By increasing the bar for sustainability performance, sharing best practices, and creating feedback loops that increase systemic impact, these partnerships also help to define industry standards. Third, the study presents a future agenda for developing theory and practice by identifying research shortages in areas such as partnership governance, systemic outcome measurement, and the sustainability of long-term collaborations.

Overall, our study makes three significant contributions. Theoretically, it extends the literature on cross-sector partnerships by viewing CSR–SE synergy as a dynamic system of mutual reinforcement rather than a static dyadic arrangement, and it bridges disparate strands of CSR and SE research by providing a holistic lens that goes beyond single-theory analyses. In order to demonstrate how CSR–SE synergy manifests in practice and influences other domains, the article emphasizes the need of using real-world relationships, such as those between Unilever and Grameen, Danone and Yunus, and Tata and rural SE. From the practice-based viewpoint, the study offers managers guidance on how to create and maintain successful partnerships, stressing the importance of values congruence, cautious governance, and consideration of both firm-level and field-level results. The results show how CSR–SE partnerships can mobilize private-sector resources for the public good, supporting state-led programs and addressing institutional gaps. This is important information for policymakers (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025).

This is how the rest of the paper is structured. The theoretical underpinnings, intersections, and gaps in the literature on CSR and SEs are reviewed in Section 2. The integrated conceptual framework of CSR–SE synergy, which is based on legitimacy theory, stakeholder theory, RBV, and institutional theory, is presented in Section 3. A future research plan is outlined in Section 4, which also elaborates on the wider implications of CSR–SE cooperation for industry standards. Section 5 culminates in a summary of the contributions, focusing on the importance of an integrated perspective, and includes recommendations for furthering research and the application of CSR–SE synergy.

METHODOLOGY

Our research employs a conceptual and integrative framework to enhance the theoretical comprehension of the interplay between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social entrepreneurship (SE). Rather than relying on empirical data, conceptual research seeks to formulate theory or aid in theoretical advancement by critically synthesizing current studies and merging diverse perspectives

(Jaakkola, 2020; Snyder, 2019; MacInnis, 2011). Considering their established use in the CSR and SE areas, as well as their complementary capacity to shed light on the institutional, normative, strategic, and resource-based dynamics of the CSR-SE interface, distinct theoretical lenses were purposefully selected to achieve this aim: Institutional Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy Theory, and Resource Dependence Theory.

The methodological approach we adopted comprised three interconnected steps. Initially, we engaged in a purposive identification of relevant theories, paying attention to their explanatory details and their resonance with earlier CSR-SE literature. Following this, the second step involved performing an integrative synthesis, adhering to the concepts of conceptual combination and theoretical integration, based on the justification and understanding of the authors through a systematic literature evaluation, highlighting convergences, divergences, and complementarities among theoretical perspectives (Cornelissen, 2017; 2025). The reasoning was grounded in the existing knowledge base concerning the available literature and the logical relationships established by all authors. This included the theories analyzed in light of the CSR-SE interface as detailed in the findings section below.

Thirdly, a framework was established by synthesizing fundamental concepts, mapping out connections, and developing propositions that together convey a multi-theoretic model of CSR-SE partnership. The procedure focused on clarity, parsimony, coherence, and boundary specification while avoiding excessive eclecticism, adhering to known criteria for theory creation in management research (Whetten, 1989; Suddaby, 2010) to ensure methodological rigor. In addition to providing a structured agenda for further empirical validation and scholarly investigation, the resulting framework gives a theoretically grounded lens to comprehensively view and understand CSR-SE synergy.

By combining stakeholder theory, institutional theory, legitimacy theory, and resource dependence theory, the suggested framework improves knowledge of the synergy between CSR and SEs and explains how businesses and SEs co-create value. It emphasizes how institutions, legitimacy spillovers, and pluralistic stakeholder salience all work together to push businesses away from symbolic CSR and into structural partnerships with SEs. Through dynamic interdependencies, these partnerships not only increase the pragmatic and moral legitimacy of SEs and businesses, but they also lessen resource vulnerabilities and promote resilient ecosystems of shared value. The study also highlights accountability, transparency, and institutional learning by integrating impact measurement tools such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) within the Triple Bottom Line framework. This positions CSR-SE partnerships as dynamic resource-based collaboration that align strategy, legitimacy, and sustainability for long-term societal transformation.

FINDINGS

Stakeholder Theory

According to Freeman's (1984) introduction of the Stakeholder Theory, companies must consider the interests of distinct stakeholder groups in order to succeed in the long run. It has been widely utilized in CSR research to demonstrate how stakeholder salience which is characterized by urgency, legitimacy, and power (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997) motivates businesses to co-create value with NGOs and communities (Maignan & Ferrell, 2004; Porter & Kramer, 2006) and engage in responsible practices. Since social entrepreneurs mostly depend on beneficiaries, funders, and communities for legitimacy and impact, stakeholder involvement is essential to SE's resource mobilization and participatory governance development (Mair & Martí, 2006; Austin, Stevenson & Wei-Skillern, 2006). Stakeholder theory illustrates how partnerships can connect corporate and SEs interests for CSR–SE synergy, but it frequently ignores power imbalances and offers no guidance on how to prioritize competing demands. Putting it another way, the stakeholder theory emphasizes how businesses must manage and balance the demands of many stakeholder groups, including communities, NGOs, shareholders, employees, suppliers, consumers, and regulators, according to how important they are in terms of authority, legitimacy, and urgency (Rugeiyamu & Ackim, 2025; Awa et al., 2024).

In essence, CSR is a tool for managing stakeholders. As they progress from providing basic information to forming strategic partnerships that tackle social and environmental issues, forward-thinking companies adhere to a stakeholder dialogue ladder (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997).

Stakeholder mentality is ingrained in SEs, where mission-driven choices are supported by in-depth interaction with individuals affected (Almaiman et al., 2024; Mu et al., 2024). Such stakeholder-savvy SEs increase stakeholder alignment for enterprises, boosting legitimacy, trust, and reputation when combined with corporate CSR. Moral depth is added by a justice viewpoint, which maintains value generation while also improving relational trust through fair treatment of key and marginalized stakeholders (Almaiman et al., 2024). While stakeholder claims are given priority they depend on regulatory and normative requirements; for example, external claims may motivate charity endeavors, while insider claims may spur sustainability measures (Awa et al., 2024; Almaiman et al., 2024; Mu et al., 2024).

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory highlights how coercive, normative, and mimetic forces create organizational practices governments, non-governmental organizations, industry standards, and peers all influence how businesses behave (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025). CSR is not wholly voluntary; it is often institutionalized as corporations emulate industry norms, comply with legislation, and match with society expectations (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al. 2024; Willys et al., 2024). Social entrepreneurs have the ability to fill institutional gaps or challenge existing ones, establishing new standards or serving as models (Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2015). Their genuine, mission-driven approach frequently serves as a model that shapes common CSR practice. Thus, SEs can facilitate a dynamic interaction by reshaping or supporting institutional expectations (Willys et al., 2024; Hatipoglu & Ertun, 2024; Oware et al., 2024; Koppenjan et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2015).

CSR serves as a dual role of obligation and ethical guidance in developing economies, characterized by weak regulatory frameworks, institutional shortcomings, and principles like Ubuntu (Gregoratti & Tornhill, 2025). The significance of CSR in establishing legitimacy is increased by these institutional gaps; however, without moral reasoning to support it, there is a risk of superficial implementation (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Nguyen et al., 2015). Our study synthesizes institutional pressure with stakeholder salience to highlight how CSR-SE coalitions enable businesses to transition from compliance to adaptation by offering dynamic legitimacy paths that are specifically designed for various stakeholder cluster (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Willys et al., 2024; Hatipoglu & Ertun, 2024; Oware et al., 2024; Koppenjan et al., 2022).

Legitimacy Theory

Organizations seek to align their actions with social values and expectations through pragmatic (instrumental), moral, and cognitive legitimacy (Almaiman et al., 2024; Cosa, 2024). In emerging markets, businesses utilize legitimacy tactics that involve compliance for essential external endorsement and strategic adaptation to intentionally select CSR forms (like sustainability or philanthropy) to engage particular stakeholder clusters (Willys et al., 2024). They typically commence with moral legitimacy, as they are rooted in a social mission (Almaiman et al., 2024; Cosa, 2024). When businesses collaborate with them, there is a legitimacy spillover: SEs gain resources and scale, and enterprises gain authenticity (Almaiman et al., 2024). As a result, the collaboration increases both parties' credibility in the eyes of society and stakeholders.

Social enterprises (SEs) manage the conflict between practical demands (economic viability) and ethical goals (assisting marginalized communities) (Clemens, 2025; Spanuth & Urbano, 2024; Cosa, 2024). Instead of completely adhering or defying, they frequently use hybrid techniques to meet these conflicting norms. While pragmatic legitimacy aids in luring investors, partners, and clients, moral legitimacy gives SEs crucial credibility with beneficiaries and supporters (Spanuth & Urbano, 2024; Almaiman et al., 2024; Roor & Maas, 2024). The prior research highlights that there are tensions between hybrid identities (Cornforth, 2020). SEs occasionally give preference to one rationale over another (economic viability vs. mission), and this selective prioritizing can strengthen legitimacy in the early phases (Clemens, 2025; Roor & Maas, 2024). Our approach clarifies this by demonstrating how SEs' legitimacy strategy shifts from transactional (resource access) to relational (creating sustained institutional presence) when they collaborate with corporates (Spanuth & Urbano, 2024; Roor & Maas, 2024).

When CSR initiatives are collaborative and involves stakeholders in co-creation, as opposed to top-down broadcasting, firms gain greater legitimacy (Almaiman et al., 2024; Mamo, 2025). CSR messaging supported by stakeholders minimizes the impression of ambiguity and increases the moral and practical validity of businesses (Cosa, 2024). Although communications provide credibility, businesses run the danger of negative reaction if their promises are not supported by action, which is seen as risk management rather than straightforward advertising (Adeoye, 2024). We contend that through visible, continuous engagement, CSR–SE partnerships effectively mitigate the danger of backlash and increase legitimacy by offering integrated stakeholder co-creation channels and joint-action authenticity (Almaiman et al., 2024; Adeoye, 2024).

Resource Dependence Theory

According to Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), organizations rely on outside resources that are under the authority of other parties, which shapes interdependencies and power dynamics. RDT emphasizes how businesses work with governments, NGOs, and stakeholders in CSR to manage uncertainty, secure vital resources, and lessen reliance (Hillman, Withers & Collins, 2009). Put differently, RDT states that organizations are networks of resource-dependent units. Organizations improve autonomy and legitimacy by forming alliances, joint ventures, and mergers to lessen dependency (Wejesiri et al., 2025; Parwez & Ranjan, 2025). Consistent with this, Dacin, Dacin, and Matear (2010), SE describes how resource-constrained endeavors form partnerships with funders, businesses, and communities in order to obtain capital, expertise, and networks. RDT demonstrates how social entrepreneurs provide creativity, local expertise, and trust, while corporations supply finance, legitimacy, and scale for CSR–SE synergy. Resource scarcity frequently restricts the expansion of SEs (Parwez & Ranjan, 2025). They can acquire financial resources, distribution channels, and managerial expertise by working with corporations (Parwez & Ranjan, 2025; Oware et al., 2024; Willys et al., 2024; Koppenjan et al., 2022). On the other hand, businesses gain from SEs' social innovation, brand reputation, and community ties, therefore, each party lessens reliance through cooperation (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2015). As a result, strategic alliances reduce interdependence and promote long-term value generation in CSR-SE synergy.

SEs develop new models, which business firms adopt through collaborations via CSR thereby fostering social and innovative innovation (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025). Overall, to reduce dependency and strengthen organizational resilience, we characterize CSR-SE partnerships as resource-based partnerships and common centers of innovation, legitimacy, and resource distribution (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Willys et al., 2024; Hatipoglu & Ertun, 2024; Oware et al., 2024; Koppenjan et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2015).

Triple Bottom Line & Social Return Metrics

The perspective of Triple Bottom Line (TBL) considers people (social equality) and the planet (environmental responsibility) (Vázquez-Pacho et al., 2025; Kumari et al., 2025) in additional to profit making. The additional social and environmental pillars are frequently the focus of SEs and CSR programs that facilitates business firms in broadening their TBL reach (Abidin et al., 2025; NeeshaRChhabria & Lalwani, 2025). Putting differently, beyond monetary value, SROI emphasizes intangible advantages like environmental sustainability, capacity building, and community empowerment, allowing corporates and SEs to go beyond traditional CSR and toward quantifiable societal change. Consequently, the social value generated as a result of the TBL perspective can be assessed through instruments such as Social Return on Investment (SROI), which enhances the quantifiability, legitimacy, and accountability of cross-sector relationships with SEs (Fathin & Anggoro, 2025).

However, there are limitations associated with both TBL and SROI. One of the primary challenges in applying TBL is the need to balance the three dimensions; organizations may focus disproportionately on the economic pillar, giving minimal consideration to social and environmental factors, potentially leading to phenomena like "greenwashing" or "social washing." It is argued by critics that the reduction of intricate social outcomes into numerical values risks oversimplification and may obscure qualitative aspects of impact, such as empowerment, dignity, or cultural change, which are harder to measure. In a similar manner, SROI offers a systematic approach to monetizing social impact. Additionally, the absence of well-defined guidelines for assessing SROI often results in inconsistencies among companies, thereby diminishing credibility and comparability.

We propose that common SROI frameworks support accountability, collaborative learning, and embedded institutional standards in CSR–SE partnerships by acting as coordinating mechanisms (Abidin et al., 2025; NeeshaRChhabria & Lalwani, 2025; Fathin & Anggoro, 2025). However, an over-reliance on quantitative measures at the expense of contextual and qualitative insights may limit creativity or encourage SEs to work on more quantifiable rather than meaningful projects. Therefore, even though the combination of TBL and SROI improves legitimacy, transparency, and stakeholder alignment, it also calls for careful consideration of methodological constraints, measurement politics, and the possibility of using social value for corporate reputation rather than real societal change.

TABLE 1
MULTI-THEORETIC VIEW OF CSR AND SES

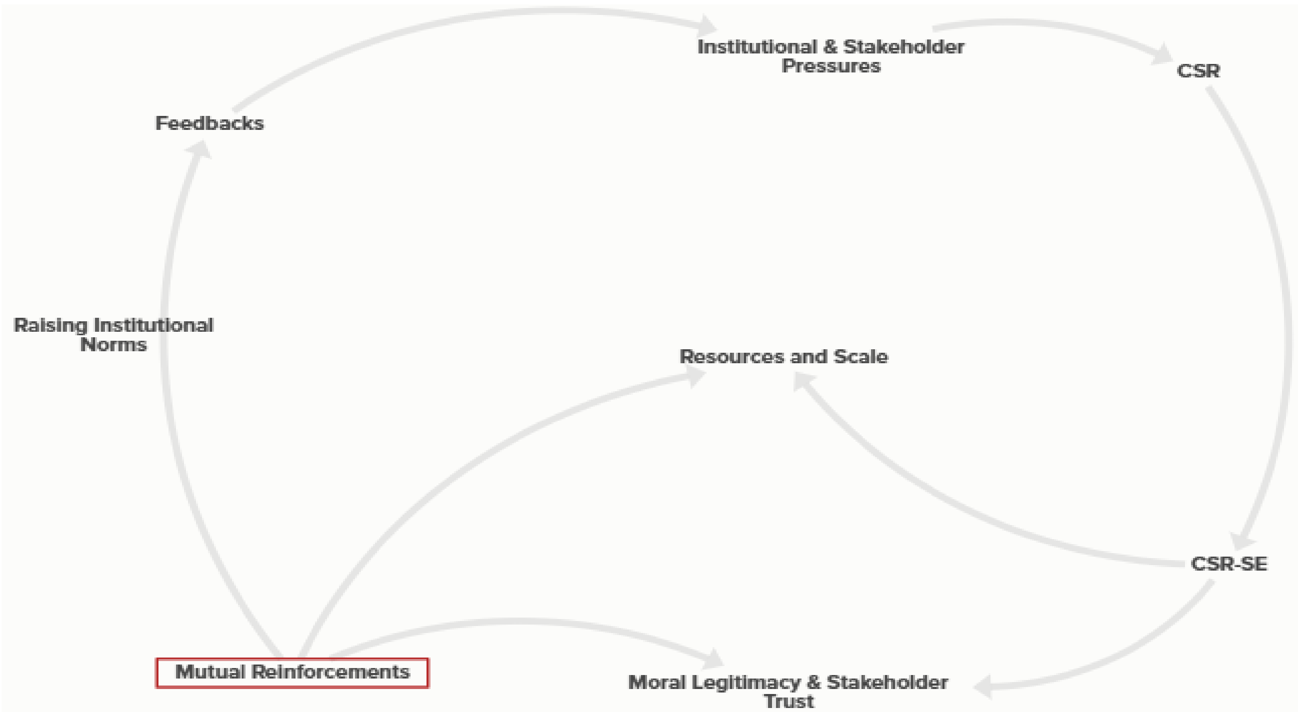
Theoretical Perspective	CSR role for Business Firms	Role of SEs	Overall Synergistic Outputs
Stakeholder Theory	*Utilizes CSR to interact with and meet the needs of important stakeholders.*	*Oversees stakeholder relations as a component of mission fulfillment.*	*Increases reputational capital, trust, and stakeholder alignment.*
Institutional Theory	*Adopts CSR in order to adhere to or emulate institutional standards.*	*Uses mission-driven authenticity to establish new standards.*	*CSR develops into true social engagement; the institutional field is realigned.*
Legitimacy Theory	*Uses CSR techniques to establish legitimacy.*	*Archaic of moral legitimacy.*	*Partnerships increase stakeholder trust by creating dual legitimacy.*
Resource Dependence Theory	*Ensures social legitimacy, community access, and innovation.*	*Acquires resources, including visibility, networks, and funds.*	*Minimizes dependency on one another and promotes long-term collaboration.*
TBL / SROI	*Uses CSR metrics to quantify and increase social and environmental impact.*	*Excels in impact measurement and social-environmental performance.*	*Transparency, accountability, and effect assessment are all improved by shared metrics.*

Source: Authors' compilation

Strengthening Feedback Loops and Causal Paths

The main goal of corporate CSR programs is to align decisions with stakeholder requirements and institutional expectations. These efforts are generally driven by institutional stakeholder demands. Corporate firms' significant partnering with SEs results in increased social impact and boost their own reputation (Abidin et al., 2025; NeeshaRChhabria & Lalwani, 2025; Wejesiri et al., 2025; Parwez & Ranjan, 2025; Fathin & Anggoro, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024; Willys et al., 2024). These partnerships produce win-win outcomes: SEs have access to critical resources, size, and networks, while corporate firms enhance their stakeholder authenticity and moral credibility (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Almaiman et al., 2024; Cosa, 2024 Oware et al., 2024). By raising the bar for the industry and influencing other businesses, this mutually beneficial interaction improves the efficacy of CSR-SE partnerships and reactivates the cycle at a higher level of sustainability (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024).

FIGURE 1
FEEDBACK LOOP MODEL OF CSR-SE SYNERGY



Source: Authors' compilation

DISCUSSION

Our proposed framework deepens and enriches the existing body of knowledge concerning the synergy of CSR and SEs in terms of detailing dynamics, engagement mechanisms, and impact flows and simultaneously contributes to the current intellectual heritage of CSR-SEs synergy with stronger insights, clearer linkages, and powerful practical applications.

Due to pluralistic stakeholder salience, which includes the views of marginalized populations (whose salience originates from power, legitimacy, and urgency), corporations have shifted from traditional CSR to strategic cooperation with SEs, as explained by stakeholder theory (Awa et al., 2024; (Almaiman et al., 2024). However, institutional pressures and stakeholder salience are frequently treated independently in the research that currently exists (Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Oware et al., 2024). By demonstrating how institutional pressures (regulatory, normative, and cognitive) influence whether stakeholder claims are persuasive, we contribute to the field by directing businesses toward partnerships with SEs as a means of compliance and proactive adaptation (Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Oware et al., 2024; Logue & Grimes, 2022). Consistent with this, we offer a theoretical extension in terms of combining stakeholder salience with institutional pillars to highlight how businesses shift from meeting explicit requests (compliance) to collaborating for co-creating solutions through strategic alliances subtlety that is not as evident in extant literature.

Similarly, we also noted that augmentation in perceived appropriateness through CSR is localized by legitimacy theory (Spanuth & Urbano, 2024; Almaiman et al., 2024; Roor & Maas, 2024). In line with this, businesses in emerging markets employ sustainability (internal legitimacy) and charity (external legitimacy) to gain support from distinct stakeholders (Roor & Maas, 2024; Adeoye, 2024). Based on our proposed framework, it becomes evident that collaborating with SEs is a legitimacy-based spillover mechanism rather than merely a nominal exchange for business firms. While business firms acquire moral legitimacy through association, SEs improve pragmatic legitimacy through resources and scaling (Spanuth & Urbano, 2024; Cosa, 2024). This dual legitimacy enhancement elevates CSR above reputational cues to concrete, shared-value activities that are quite significant for the CSR-SE synergy (Almaiman et al., 2024; Adeoye, 2024). Based on this, we extend upon the existing conceptualization by providing a deeper understanding of how partnerships result in long-lasting changes in institutional norms moving CSR from symbolic to structural by developing a dynamic model of bilateral legitimacy spillover.

In the same way, we also embraced the perspective of Resource Dependence Theory for understanding the synergy of the dynamics between CSR-SE interactions. Our research highlights that CSR-SE connections inadvertently reduce the vulnerabilities of both parties: corporations gain innovation, market reach, and stakeholder embeddedness; SEs gain access to finance, networks, and expertise (Wejesiri et al., 2025; Parwez & Ranjan, 2025; Budi Riharjo et al., 2025; Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025; Rangsungnoen et al., 2024). Further, our study significantly demonstrates how multiparty resource interdependence firm, SE, stakeholder network, and institutional context allows for co-evolving ecosystems of shared value, whereas previous research has mostly concentrated on dyadic dependency (Wejesiri et al., 2025; Parwez & Ranjan, 2025; Ghafran & Yasmin, 2025). Overall, based on the resource dependence theory, we propose how organizations continuously adjust dependencies while mutually strengthening autonomy and legitimacy by conceptualizing CSR-SE relationships as dynamic resource coalitions.

Further, by connecting the Triple Bottom Line concept to metrics like Social Return on Investment (SROI), our paper builds upon the concept and encourages accountability and transparency in CSR-SE cooperation (Kumari et al., 2025; NeeshaRChhabria & Lalwani, 2025; Fathin & Anggoro, 2025). This is consistent with new governance strategies focused on measurements (Fathin & Anggoro, 2025). Thus, by providing a formalized method for businesses and social enterprises to collaborate on investing in impact measurement, this viewpoint moves beyond the general rhetoric of the Triple Bottom Line and creates collaborative feedback loops that influence policy development (Kumari et al., 2025; Abidin et al., 2025; NeeshaRChhabria & Lalwani, 2025; Fathin & Anggoro, 2025; Scelles et al., 2024). In conclusion, we present a mechanism for theoretical co-evolution driven by metrics, showcasing how formal measurement systems can act as catalytic inputs for institutional learning, norm creation, and strategic alignment.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

Despite the heightened interest in the dual approaches of CSR and SEs, the literature concerning their synergistic interaction remains fragmented. This scenario presents a notable opportunity for further scholarly exploration. Our multi-theoretic viewpoint presented in the study can be expanded upon in a number of intriguing ways that can improve methodological techniques, enhance theoretical understanding, and increase the applicability of CSR–SE synergy research.

First, more thorough theoretical integration and expansion are required. Future research should include other viewpoints like dynamic capabilities (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), social capital (Adler & Kwon, 2002), and shared value creation (Porter & Kramer, 2011) in order to capture the dynamic and complex nature of cross-sector partnerships, even though stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1988), legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995), and resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) offer a solid basis. Furthermore, a more thorough understanding of how CSR–SE synergies develop across various layers of analysis would be made possible by cross-level theorization that links micro-level dynamics (such as leadership orientations, employee engagement, and individual values) with meso-level partnership structures and macro-level institutional environments (Doh et al., 2019).

Second, methodological developments that can address empirical constraints should be another line of research in future scientific inquiry in the area of CSR-SE synergy. The advancement of CSR-SE collaborations can be traced through longitudinal designs (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012), and contextual variables can be examined through comparative studies across various industries and geographic regions.

Both the depth of relationships and systemic patterns can be captured by employing mixed-method approaches that merge quantitative techniques such as social network analysis with detailed qualitative methods (Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007). Moreover, thorough and diverse evaluations of partnership effectiveness can be obtained through the design and utilization of hybrid impact assessment tools, such as blended Social Return on Investment (SROI) and Triple Bottom Line (TBL) frameworks (Emerson, Wachowicz & Chun, 2000; Vázquez-Pacho et al., 2025).

Thirdly, increased empirical investigation into the underlying mechanisms is required to provide insight into the fundamental dynamics of CSR–SE collaboration. Future researchers should look at the negotiation, transfer, and long-term sustainability of various resource exchanges, including financial, human, relational, and symbolic (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009). Similarly, to comprehend how differences in resources, legitimacy, influence -impact partnership governance and results, more focus on power asymmetries is required (Dahan, Doh, Oetzel, & Yaziji, 2010). Examining how these partnerships promote social innovation, generate scalable solutions, and aid in industry-wide changes is a particularly significant line of research (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014).

Fourth, emphasis should be placed on a stakeholder-centric viewpoint. Although they are still underrepresented in the current discourse, the opinions of beneficiary groups and underprivileged populations are essential for assessing the genuineness and inclusivity of CSR–SE synergies (Mair, Battilana, & Cardenas, 2012). Future research could also look into how stakeholder salience changes over the course of a partnership (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) and how customers and employees who are frequently disregarded affect how collaboration is perceived and how it turns out (Bhattacharya, Korschun, & Sen, 2009).

Fifth, institutional and global contexts are becoming more and more important in research. How various institutional frameworks influence the extent and character of CSR–SE collaborations can be revealed through comparative study of various policy environments, cultural contexts, and governance systems (Campbell, 2007). Similarly, as CSR–SE partnerships are frequently included into broader multi-actor systems that comprise governments, NGOs, and impact investors, more focus should be placed on ecosystemic dynamics (Kolk, Rivera-Santos, & Rufín, 2014). Richer insights into the governance of cross-sector collaboration can be obtained by modeling these ecosystems. Overall, to advance our research agenda, researchers must go beyond isolated ideas and develop a more comprehensive, methodologically varied, and critically reflective body of work. By doing this, the field may improve its theoretical underpinnings and provide practical practice-oriented techniques, guaranteeing that CSR–SE partnerships are transformative instruments for long-term social and environmental change rather than just instrumental agreements.

IMPLICATIONS

Our study offers a dynamic process model by combining distinct theoretical perspectives for exploring and advancing the understanding on CSR-SE synergy. We majorly present resource coalition dynamics and bilateral legitimacy spillover as new theoretical line of inquiry for understanding the CSR-SE interactions. Consistent with this, we offer several implications for practitioners, academics, and policy makers.

For practitioners: Stakeholder theory emphasizes to managers of social enterprises and corporate social responsibility initiatives the significance of identifying and involving a variety of stakeholder groups, including beneficiaries, suppliers, employees, regulators, and financiers, in addition to end users. This multi-stakeholder approach helps practitioners convey their social goal to a wider group of participants and promotes the production of shared value. Organizations should strive for both compliance (fulfilling explicit CSR requirements) and strategic adaptation (moving beyond basic compliance to prioritize sustainable and meaningful CSR forms), according to legitimacy theory. Older altruistic methods, for example, could appease external stakeholders, but integrating sustainability into core business processes helps establish credibility with partners and staff. According to resource dependence theory, social entrepreneurs can view CSR partnerships with corporations, SEs, and grant-makers as strategic partnerships that help them mobilize vital resources and lessen their reliance on a single source of funding, increasing their legitimacy and autonomy. Last but not least, practitioners can manage, illustrate, and improve their social impact by implementing integrated measuring frameworks like the triple bottom line and monetizing social outcomes with SROI. This helps to support decisions that are based on both purpose and financial sustainability.

For Academicians: Scholars can create integrative frameworks that utilize legitimacy, institutional, stakeholder, and resource dependence theories to explain how and when businesses participate in substantive vs symbolic corporate social responsibility. CSR–social enterprise hybrids are shaped by highly structured mandates, norms, and organizational fields, as may be shown by comparing research across national or regulatory contexts (particularly emerging economies). Paths toward institutional legitimacy and innovation can be found through longitudinal research that examines financial dependencies such as corporate grants vs NGOs and their effects on strategy evolution. Furthermore, strong cross-context assessments of impact and operational success can be supported by improving performance measures that align SROI, TBL, and social accounting.

For Policymakers: Similar to frameworks like India's NVGs and Section 135 which go beyond spending regulations to stress outcome-based accountability policymakers can create incentives that reward high-impact CSR that is in line with the triple bottom line and SROI principles. According to institutional theory, the external environment can be shaped by normative (societal), mimetic (peer-driven), and coercive (legal) forces to support transparency, standardized reporting (such as GRI or SROI frameworks), and benchmarking techniques that raise CSR standards. Additionally, through cooperative governance and demand-driven impact verification that prioritizes beneficiary voices, assisting multi-stakeholder ecosystems which connect social entrepreneurs, businesses, NGOs, and local governments can promote shared value.

CONCLUSION

This study shows how a strong model of sustainable value creation may be produced by properly combining social enterprise with corporate social responsibility. Organizations can go beyond simple generosity and create shared value by integrating social purpose into the very fabric of their operations. This aligns with the triple bottom line approach, which balances financial, social, and environmental goals. Notably, social enterprises seamlessly embed corporate social responsibility (CSR) within their business models by reinvesting profits to generate social benefits and fostering creativity, scalability, and legitimacy. Additionally, the SROI framework presents a practical method for assessing social outcomes through financial proxies and stakeholder-informed metrics, thereby increasing transparency, and supporting strategic decision-making. For organizations looking to evaluate impact clearly and consistently, its socially oriented accuracy generally makes it more actionable, despite its constraints relative to more comprehensive measurement instruments. This holistic approach illustrates how organizations engage with stakeholders, attain legitimacy, respond to institutional challenges, and strategically mobilize resources, referencing theories such as stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, institutional theory, and resource-dependence theory. The integration of these components results in a true and sustainable synergy between CSR and social enterprises. This requires assessing critical issues, incorporating impact into strategic frameworks, and harmonizing stakeholder expectations with essential operations for practitioners. Scholars are encouraged to delve into cross-national, comparative, and longitudinal studies to enhance impact measures and integrative theories. To support these initiatives, policymakers must back multi-sectoral networks that cultivate collaborative and context-sensitive approaches, standardized reporting systems, and outcome-focused CSR regulations. In conclusion, an integrated strategy for combining CSR and social enterprise offers a theoretically valid and practical framework. By employing this strategy, organizations can achieve measurable social benefits, sustainable innovation, and institutional legitimacy, demonstrating that social enterprise and corporate social responsibility work in tandem to create a revolutionary model for long-term impact.

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