

Planer-Friedrich, Lisa; Sahm, Marco

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Why Firms Should Care for All Consumers

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Why Firms Should Care for All Consumers

Lisa Planer-Friedrich *
University of Bamberg

Marco Sahn**
University of Bamberg and CESifo

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Abstract

We compare the strategic potential of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Customer Orientation (CO) as commitments to larger quantities in Cournot competition, modeled as a multi-stage game. First, in addition to profits, firms can choose to care for the surplus of either all consumers (CSR) or their own customers only (CO). Second, they decide upon the weight of this additional objective. We find that firms prefer to care for all consumers, choosing positive levels of CSR. This result provides an explanation for the recent shift from CO to CSR in both, corporate culture and economic research.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; Customer Orientation; Cournot Duopoly; Commitment

JEL classification: D43, L13, L21

*Department of Economics, Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, Feldkirchenstraße 21, 96052 Bamberg, Germany, E-mail: lisa.planer-friedrich@uni-bamberg.de, Telephone: +49-951-863-2728, Fax: +49-951-863-5637.

**Department of Economics, Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg, Feldkirchenstraße 21, 96052 Bamberg, Germany, E-mail: marco.sahn@uni-bamberg.de, Telephone: +49-951-863-2728, Fax: +49-951-863-5637.

1 INTRODUCTION

Customer Orientation (CO), in the literature also referred to as Market Orientation (which typically includes CO) or Customer Satisfaction (which is often used as a synonym for CO), describes the corporate culture of focussing on the needs and wishes of the firms' buyers. Many authors, like Deshpandé et al. (1993) or Kohli and Jaworski (1990), have argued that such a focus on their *own customers* is beneficial for firms. More recently, however, other authors, like Eccles et al. (2014) or Flammer (2015), have found that firms benefit as well from applying the broader concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The term CSR includes all social and environmentally friendly activities of a firm beyond its legal requirements (Kitzmueller and Shimshack, 2012), implying the well-being of *all consumers*. In this paper, we compare the strategic potential of CO and CSR as commitments to larger quantities in Cournot competition. In particular, we address the question whether firms prefer to care only for their own customers (CO) or for all consumers (CSR).

Over the last 20 years, the focus has shifted from the narrow concept of CO to the broader idea of CSR in both, corporate culture and academic research. KPMG (2015) and PwC (2016) provide evidence for a related change in business practice. The KPMG Survey of Corporate Responsibility Reporting 2015 finds that in 1999 only 35% of the Global Fortune 250 firms reported on CSR. However already in 2008, 82% of the firms engaged in CSR reporting. While some of the most recent development may also be due to regulation by governments and stock exchanges, the reporting rate has increased even further in the last years and reached 92% in 2015. At the same time, narrower concepts of business practice such as CO have become outdated. In PwC's 19th Annual Global CEO survey (2016), the large majority of CEOs still names customers and clients as their top priority. However, not least because of consumers' changing prospect on firms, 84% of the CEOs realize that they should meet wider stakeholder expectations. Furthermore, 64% state that CSR is integrated in their business rather than representing a stand-alone program. While some firms engage in CSR activities only to satisfy consumer expectations, many firms also use CSR to position themselves strategically. Specifically, CEOs believe that five years from now, "the most successful organisations in their sector will have shifted their views and priorities in terms of recognising changing expectations and the value in addressing them, embedding corporate responsibility into their business, reporting on non-financial matters and taking the long-term view" (PwC, 2016).

Also in the academic literature, a clear shift of interest is evident when

comparing the scientific publications of the last 30 years on the two respective topics. In Figures 1 and 2, the numbers of publications containing the respective terms in their title or abstract are shown for each year since 1986.

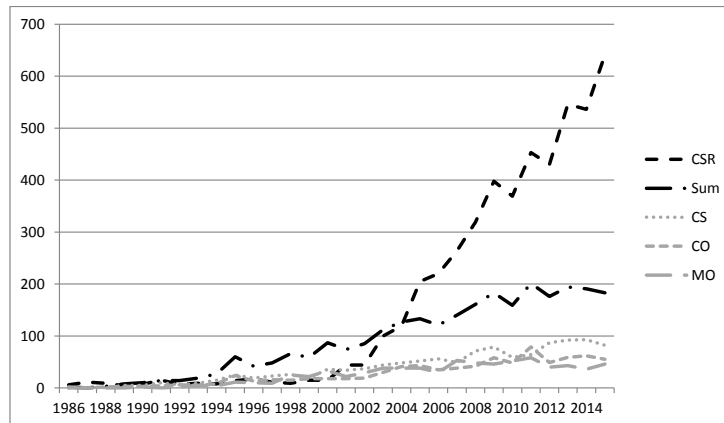


Figure 1: Related publications in EBSCO database

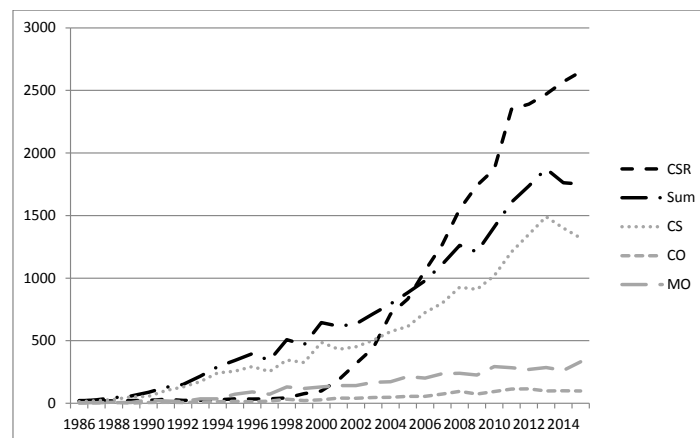


Figure 2: Related papers on Google Scholar

While Figure 1 shows only articles published in peer-reviewed journals found in the database Business Source Complete of EBSCO, Figure 2 displays all papers found by search with Google Scholar. We compare the number of articles on CSR with the sum of articles on the three related terms CO, Market Orientation and Customer Satisfaction. Both figures show a very similar picture. 30 years ago, the number of publications on both concepts of corporate culture was very low. Research on CO has grown steadily over the last

three decades. In contrast, interest in Corporate Social Responsibility didn't increase until 15 years ago, but since then has done so at a much higher rate. Consequently, publications on CSR have outnumbered publications on CO by far in the last years, proving that CSR has overtaken CO in terms of popularity as a research topic.

Our paper offers a theoretical explanation for this shift in interest from CO to CSR. We model CO as introduced by Königstein and Müller (2001), including the weighted surplus of its own customers into the objective function of a firm.¹ As Königstein and Müller (2001) show, CO will outperform pure profit maximization in Cournot competition, because it enables firms to commit to larger quantities. In order to model CSR, we include the weighted surplus of *all consumers* rather than that of its *own customers* only into the objective function of a firm (Goering, 2008a, Kopel and Brand, 2012, Kopel et al., 2014).² Care for consumers constitutes an example from the wide range of possible socially responsible activities.³ Although this is a narrow notion of CSR, it is still wider than that of CO by Königstein and Müller (2001). Just as CO, CSR serves as a commitment to larger quantities in Cournot competition, and thus yields a strategic advantage over pure profit maximizing rivals (Kopel and Brand, 2012, Kopel et al., 2014).

In order to explore and compare the strategic potential of the two corporate cultures, we consider a duopoly market for some homogeneous good with linear demand and constant marginal costs. We stick to the standard assumption of profit maximization but model competition between the two symmetric firms as a three-stage game. In the first stage, the firms simultaneously determine their corporate culture, choosing either CSR or CO. In the second stage, the firms simultaneously specify the extent of engagement into CSR/CO, hiring an executive who is known to have an appropriate concern. In the third stage, the firms' executives simultaneously decide upon output in order to maximize their objective functions.

Solving the game by backward induction for its subgame perfect equi-

¹Brekke et al. (2012) have recently used the same objective function in order to express the altruism of a firm.

²Two recent working papers, *Mixed industry outcomes in oligopoly markets with socially concerned firms* by Kopel and Lamantia (2016) as well as *Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility* by Planer-Friedrich and Sahn (2016), follow the same approach to model CSR. Lambertini (2013), Lambertini and Tampieri (2012, 2015) and Lambertini et al. (2016) include both consumer surplus and some environmental externality in the objective function of a socially responsible firm. More generally, including consumer surplus in the objective function of a firm is a well established way of taking non-profit motives into account; see e.g. Goering (2007, 2008b), Lien (2002) or Saha (2014).

³Other models of CSR take different stakeholders of a firm into account, e.g. workers (Becchetti et al., 2016).

librium (SPE), we find that both firms choose CSR as their corporate culture, putting positive weight on the surplus of all consumers. In this sense, CSR outperforms CO. To gain some intuition, note that the surplus of all consumers includes the surplus of the firm’s own customers, both being increasing and convex functions of the firm’s output. The socially responsible firm thus derives, *ceteris paribus*, a larger marginal benefit from its output. This implies that CSR provides a stronger commitment to large quantities than CO. In consideration of the growing importance of strategic aspects in industrial organization and management (Tahai and Meyer, 1999), the result provides an explanation why the focus in corporate culture has recently shifted from CO to CSR.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: In Chapter 2, we present the formal model of strategic competition as a three-stage game. Solving it by backward induction in Chapter 3, we demonstrate the superiority of CSR over CO. Chapter 4 summarizes and briefly discusses three possible extensions: heterogeneous costs, differentiated products, and evolutionary stability as an alternative solution concept.

2 THE MODEL

We consider Cournot competition between two profit maximizing firms on the market for some homogeneous good with normalized linear inverse demand $p = 1 - (q_1 + q_2)$, where p denotes the price of the good and q_i denotes the output of firm $i \in \{1, 2\}$. Marginal costs of production are constant, identical for both firms, and, for simplicity, normalized to zero. Duopoly competition is modeled as a three-stage game Γ .

In the first stage, the firms simultaneously take the fundamental decision on their corporate culture to be either socially responsible, indexed by S , or customer oriented, indexed by C . This choice can be thought of as signing an appropriate corporate charter. Formally, CSR differs from CO in the respective objective function V_i : In addition to profits π_i , the former contains the surplus of *all consumers*, denoted by CS (e.g. Kopel et al., 2014), whereas the latter only contains the surplus of the firm’s *own customers*, denoted by C_i (e.g. Königstein and Müller, 2001), i.e.

$$V_i^S = \pi_i + \theta_i^S \cdot CS = [1 - (q_i + q_j)]q_i + \frac{1}{2} \cdot \theta_i^S \cdot (q_i + q_j)^2, \quad (1)$$

$$V_i^C = \pi_i + \theta_i^C \cdot C_i = [1 - (q_i + q_j)]q_i + \frac{1}{2} \cdot \theta_i^C \cdot q_i^2. \quad (2)$$

In the second stage, the firms simultaneously choose their level of CSR or CO, i.e. the weight $\theta_i^S \geq 0$ or $\theta_i^C \geq 0$ they put on consumer surplus CS or customer surplus C_i . This could be realized by hiring an executive manager with appropriate preferences, known as strategic delegation – see the seminal papers by Fershtman and Judd (1987), Vickers (1985) and Sklivas (1987). Allowing for zero weights, our model includes the ordinary case of pure profit maximization.⁴ In the third stage, firms’ executives decide simultaneously on the output levels $q_i \geq 0$ in order to maximize their objective functions V_i .

This sequence of decisions reflects the fact that fundamental corporate culture is adjusted less frequently than personnel politics, which, in turn, is adjusted less frequently than output.

3 ANALYSIS

We solve game Γ by backward induction for its SPE. To this end, we distinguish the three different constellations that may arise after the first stage.

3.1 Competition between two CSR firms

First suppose that both firms have chosen CSR as corporate culture at the first stage and each firm $i \in \{1, 2\}$ has chosen its CSR level θ_i^S at the second stage. At the third stage, firm i chooses its output q_i in order to maximize its objective function (1) for any given weight θ_j^S of the rival firm. From the first-order condition $\partial V_i^S / \partial q_i = 0$ we derive firm i ’s best response:

$$q_i(q_j) = \frac{1 - (1 - \theta_i^S)q_j}{(2 - \theta_i^S)}.$$

Inserting one reaction function into the other, we compute the equilibrium quantity of firm $i \in \{1, 2\}$ as a function of θ_i^S and θ_j^S :

$$q_i = \frac{1 + \theta_i^S - \theta_j^S}{3 - (\theta_i^S + \theta_j^S)}.$$

At the second stage, each firm anticipates these quantities and the corresponding price and chooses the CSR level θ_i^S in order to maximize the corresponding profit

$$\pi_i = [1 - (q_i + q_j)]q_i = \frac{(1 - \theta_j^S)^2 - (\theta_i^S)^2}{(3 - \theta_i^S - \theta_j^S)^2}.$$

⁴Varying θ_i^C between 0 and 1 is equivalent to varying t between 1 and 1/2 in the model of Königstein and Müller (2001). However, the additional restriction $\theta_i^C \leq 1$ is not necessary because, in equilibrium, it will always be fulfilled.

The first-order condition $\partial\pi_i/\partial\theta_i^S = 0$ yields the best response

$$\theta_i^S(\theta_j^S) = \frac{(1 - \theta_j^S)^2}{3 - \theta_j^S}. \quad (3)$$

Using the symmetry of firms, we compute the equilibrium weights on consumer surplus $\theta_i^S = \theta^{SS} := (5 - \sqrt{17})/4 \approx 0.219$ as well as the corresponding quantities $q_i = q^{SS} \approx 0.3903$ and profits $\pi_i = \pi^{SS} \approx 0.0856$ for $i \in \{1, 2\}$.

3.2 Competition between one CSR firm and one CO firm

Now suppose that one firm, S , has chosen CSR, whereas the other firm, C , has chosen CO as corporate culture at the first stage. Further suppose that each firm $i \in \{S, C\}$ has chosen its weight θ^i at the second stage. At the third stage, firm $i \in \{S, C\}$ chooses its output q^i in order to maximize its objective function V^i for any given weight θ^j of firm $j \neq i$, where V^S and V^C are given by (1) and (2). From the first-order conditions $\partial V^i/\partial q^i = 0$ we derive the best response functions

$$q^S(q^C) = \frac{1 - (1 - \theta^S)q^C}{2 - \theta^S} \quad \text{and} \quad q^C(q^S) = \frac{1 - q^S}{2 - \theta^C}.$$

Solving for the equilibrium quantities as functions of θ^S and θ^C yields

$$q^S = \frac{1 - \theta^C + \theta^S}{3 - 2\theta^C - \theta^S + \theta^S\theta^C} \quad \text{and} \quad q^C = \frac{1 - \theta^S}{3 - 2\theta^C - \theta^S + \theta^S\theta^C}.$$

At the second stage, the firms maximize their anticipated profits

$$\begin{aligned} \pi^S &= \frac{(1 - \theta^C)(1 - \theta^C + \theta^S\theta^C - (\theta^S)^2)}{(3 - 2\theta^C - \theta^S + \theta^S\theta^C)^2}, \\ \pi^C &= \frac{(1 - \theta^C)(1 - \theta^S)^2}{(3 - 2\theta^C - \theta^S + \theta^S\theta^C)^2} \end{aligned}$$

by the simultaneous choice of θ^S and θ^C , respectively. From the first order conditions $\partial\pi^i/\partial\theta^i = 0$ for $i \in \{S, C\}$, we derive the firms' best response functions

$$\theta^S(\theta^C) = \frac{1}{3 - \theta^C} \quad \text{and} \quad \theta^C(\theta^S) = \frac{1 - \theta^S}{2 - \theta^S}.$$

Solving this system of equations yields $\theta^S = \theta^C = \theta^{SC} := (3 - \sqrt{5})/2 \approx 0.382$. Although the two firms are not symmetric, both choose the same level

of responsibility in equilibrium. Due to their differing objective functions, however, the firms produce different quantities of the good:

$$q^S = \frac{1}{3(1 - \theta^{SC}) + (\theta^{SC})^2} = \frac{1}{2} > \frac{\sqrt{5} - 1}{4} = \frac{1 - \theta^{SC}}{3(1 - \theta^{SC}) + (\theta^{SC})^2} = q^C.$$

Intuitively, because both C_i and CS are increasing and convex functions of the firm's own output, $C_i < CS$ implies that a marginal increase in output is, ceteris paribus, more valuable for the CSR firm than for the CO firm. Put differently, CSR offers a stronger commitment to increase output than CO. Consequently, the CSR firm also makes higher profits than the CO firm:

$$\pi^S = \frac{(1 - \theta^{SC})^2}{[3(1 - \theta^{SC}) + (\theta^{SC})^2]^2} > \frac{(1 - \theta^{SC})^3}{[3(1 - \theta^{SC}) + (\theta^{SC})^2]^2} = \pi^C.$$

3.3 Competition between two CO firms

Finally suppose that both firms have chosen CO as corporate culture at the first stage and each firm $i \in \{1, 2\}$ has chosen its CO level θ_i^C at the second stage. At the third stage, firm i chooses its output q_i in order to maximize its objective function (2) for any given weight θ_j^C of the rival firm. From the first-order condition $\partial V_i^C / \partial q_i = 0$ we derive firm i 's best response:

$$q_i(q_j) = \frac{1 - q_j}{2 - \theta_i^C}.$$

Inserting one reaction function into the other, we compute the equilibrium quantity of firm $i \in \{1, 2\}$ as a function of θ_i^C and θ_j^C :

$$q_i = \frac{1 - \theta_j^C}{3 - 2\theta_i^C - 2\theta_j^C + \theta_i^C \theta_j^C}.$$

At the second stage, each firm anticipates these quantities and the corresponding price and chooses the CO level θ_i^C in order to maximize the corresponding profit

$$\pi_i = \frac{(1 - \theta_j^C)(1 - \theta_i^C - \theta_j^C + \theta_i^C \theta_j^C)}{(3 - 2\theta_i^C - 2\theta_j^C + \theta_i^C \theta_j^C)^2}.$$

The first-order condition $\partial \pi_i / \partial \theta_i^C = 0$ yields the best response

$$\theta_i^C(\theta_j^C) = \frac{1}{2 - \theta_j^C}. \quad (4)$$

Using the symmetry of firms, we compute the equilibrium weights on customer surplus $\theta_i^C = \theta^{CC} := 1$ as well as the corresponding quantities $q_i =$

$q^{CC} := 1/2$ and profits $\pi_i = \pi^{CC} := 0$ for $i \in \{1, 2\}$. With homogeneous goods, Cournot competition between two CO firms leads to the same efficient allocation as perfect competition, i.e. zero profits and maximum consumer surplus.⁵

3.4 Choosing corporate culture: CSR or CO?

Combining the results from the three scenarios, we now examine the firms' decisions on corporate culture in the first stage. The possible actions and the corresponding continuation payoffs are represented in Table 1. Obviously, CSR is a dominant action for both firms.

		Firm 2			
		CSR		CO	
Firm 1	CSR	$\pi^{SS} \approx 0.0856$	$\pi^{SS} \approx 0.0856$	$\pi^S \approx 0.0955$	$\pi^C \approx 0.0590$
	CO	$\pi^C \approx 0.0590$	$\pi^S \approx 0.0955$	$\pi^{CC} = 0$	$\pi^{CC} = 0$

Table 1: Normal form representation of the first stage decisions

Proposition 1 *In the unique SPE of game Γ , both firms will choose CSR as their corporate culture, put positive weight θ^{SS} on consumer surplus, and produce output q^{SS} , thereby making positive profits π^{SS} .*

As explained in Section 3.2, CSR provides a stronger commitment to large quantities than CO. Moreover, a CSR firm does not only suffer from a rise in the rival's quantity due to decreasing price and profit, but, unlike a CO firm, also benefits from it due to increasing consumer surplus. Compared to a CO firm, this makes a CSR firm react less aggressive to an increase in the rival's θ , i.e. to a tougher commitment to large quantities by the rival. Indeed, as the respective reaction functions (3) and (4) show, CSR levels are strategic substitutes, whereas CO levels are strategic complements. As a result, competition with CSR is less severe than with CO and allows for positive profits.

4 DISCUSSION

Comparing the strategic potential of CO and CSR as commitments to larger quantities in Cournot competition, we have shown that firms prefer to care for all consumers rather than for own customers only, choosing positive levels

⁵The result $\theta^{CC} = 1$ is equivalent to the finding that $t^* = 1/2$ for homogeneous goods ($\gamma = 1$) in the model of Königstein and Müller (2001).

of CSR. In view of the growing importance of strategic issues in management (Tahai and Meyer, 1999), the strategic advantage of CSR over CO contributes to an explanation for the recent shift in corporate culture from CO to CSR.

Surprisingly, this shift is associated with a decrease in welfare as measured by total surplus or consumer surplus. In our simple model, both, total surplus and consumer surplus, increase if and only if aggregate output $q_1 + q_2$ increases (as long as it does not exceed 1). Comparing the three different scenarios of Sections 3.1 to 3.3, we find that aggregate output is largest for competition between two CO firms ($q_1 + q_2 = 1$) and smallest for competition between two CSR firms ($q_1 + q_2 \approx 0.7806$). Intuitively, the fact that a firm cares not only for its own but all consumers softens competition. Weaker competition, however, implies higher prices and a reduction in welfare.

The superiority of CSR over CO has been shown under the assumptions of symmetric firms, homogeneous goods, and sequential decisions about the nature of corporate culture and the level of engagement. In what follows, we briefly argue that the main result will hold even if we relax these assumptions.

For simplicity, we have assumed that constant marginal costs of production equal $c = 0$ for both firms. It is straightforward to show that the firms' decisions on the level of commitment in stage 2 are not affected by the marginal cost parameter c as long as it is identical for both firms. As a consequence, a common marginal cost parameter only scales down profits but has no impact on the strategic decision between CSR and CO in stage 1. Allowing for asymmetric marginal costs, in their working paper on *Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility*, Planer-Friedrich and Sahm (2016) find that the strategic interaction reinforces the cost advantage in the sense that the low-cost firm chooses a higher level of commitment than the high-cost firm and thereby increases its relative profitability compared to the regular Cournot equilibrium without commitment opportunities. Since this effect on the firms' decisions in stage 2 is stable across the three scenarios of Sections 3.1 to 3.3, CSR will remain a dominant strategy for both firms in stage 1 even if they have different marginal costs: intuitively, the low-cost firm uses CSR to further expand its advantage while the high-cost firm uses CSR to compensate for its disadvantage.

In their model of Cournot competition between two CO firms, Königstein and Müller (2001) incorporate the possibility of differentiated products. They find, however, that incentives to commit to large quantities are the stronger, the less differentiated the products are.⁶ This is intuitive: With fully differ-

⁶In the language of their model, the equilibrium weight on customer surplus $1 - t^*$ increases in the degree of homogeneity γ (Königstein and Müller, 2001, Proposition 1): it is zero ($1 - t^* = 0$) for independent products ($\gamma = 0$) and largest ($1 - t^* = 1/2$) for perfect substitutes ($\gamma = 1$).

entiated goods, the two firms are monopolists on two independent markets and do not need any strategic quantity commitment. The less differentiated the products are, however, the fiercer the competition between the firms and the stronger their strategic motives to commit to large outputs. Focusing on the extreme case of homogeneous goods for which the commitment incentives are strongest, we thus conjecture that, qualitatively, the superiority of CSR over CO as a commitment device will hold in markets with differentiated products as well. Because the commitment incentives are weaker then, quantitatively, the advantage of CSR over CO will be less pronounced and vanish in the limit as the markets become independent.

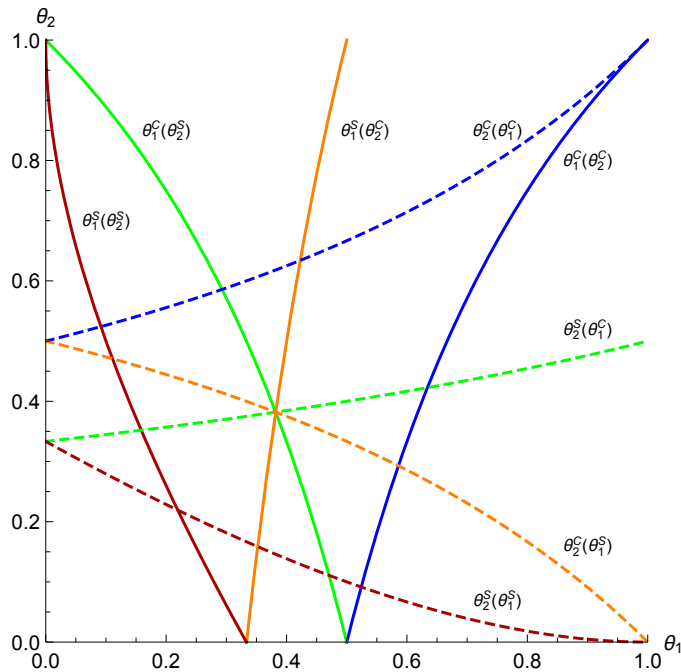


Figure 3: Best Response Correspondences

Our analysis builds on a sequential set-up with three stages. Alternatively, we can consider a two-stage game in which the firms decide about their type of corporate culture and their level of commitment simultaneously in stage 1, and about their output in stage 2. For each choice θ_j^k , $k \in \{S, C\}$ of his opponent j , player i has then two best responses as depicted in Figure 3: CSR level $\theta_i^S(\theta_j^k)$ and CO level $\theta_i^C(\theta_j^k)$. The modified game thus has four SPE which are represented by the intersections of same-color best responses in Figure 3. The respective payoffs correspond to those given in Table 1. While none of the four equilibria is evolutionary stable under the indirect

evolutionary approach,⁷ the two symmetric ones are neutrally stable with the symmetric CSR equilibrium Pareto-dominating the symmetric CO equilibrium (from the firms' perspective). Following this refinement strategy, the result that CSR outperforms CO is robust.

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⁷The indirect evolutionary approach has been introduced by Güth and Yaari (1992) and employed by Königstein and Müller (2001) in order to analyze competition between two CO firms.

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