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From Responsibility to Requirement: COVID, Cars, and the Future of Corporate Social Responsibility in Canada

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant impacts to the automotive manufacturing industry. Despite substantial financial uncertainty, disruptions to supply chains, and shutdowns of manufacturing operations, automotive firms supported crisis response efforts throughout the course of the pandemic. Drawing on interviews with all the consumer automotive manufacturing companies in Canada (Ford, General Motors, Honda, Stellantis, and Toyota) as well as the two largest global automotive parts suppliers operating in Canada (Linamar and Magna), we investigated whether voluntary corporate responses to COVID-19 will shape long-term corporate social responsibility programs or simply constitute one-off crisis management actions. Ultimately, we argue that while Canada's pandemic response efforts have benefitted from the voluntary involvement of automotive manufacturing companies, the limited coordination between stakeholders underscores the need for greater public sector oversight of the relationship between society and the private sector. To ensure preparedness for meeting new challenges, such as climate change, we call for the era of voluntary corporate social responsibility programs to yield to a period of corporate social requirements.

Keywords: automotive manufacturing sector; corporate social responsibility; COVID-19; disaster response

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1. Introduction

There is a vast collection of academic research on corporate social responsibility (CSR). Scholarship has been focused on defining the concept of CSR [1–4], charting its continued evolution [5–7], and underscoring the positive returns of CSR programs [8–18]. These areas of research have been hallmarks of sustainability and business ethics discourse, literature, and thought leadership for decades. Now, there is a growing body of work focused on CSR in the age of COVID-19 [19–26] and the future of CSR more broadly [27,28].

To support academic research on the continued evolution and future of CSR, and to address calls for greater research on the meso- and macro-level impacts of implementing CSR strategies [29], this paper examines whether voluntary corporate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic will shape long-term CSR programs in lieu of constituting one-off crisis management actions. In so doing, this research will provide theoretical and practical contributions to the study of CSR and how the relationship between the private sector and society may evolve in a post-pandemic landscape.

To address this objective, we first examine research on CSR prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as literature on greenwashing and corporate involvement in crisis response. In the subsequent methods section, we discuss why Canada's automotive manufacturing sector was chosen to be part of this study and how data collection with firms was conducted. Next, the aggregated results of data collection efforts with major firms in Canada's automotive manufacturing sector are presented—and notable findings are underscored.

Ultimately, our interviews with major firms in Canada's automotive manufacturing sector indicate that CSR programs have been expanded (both in terms of scope and resources); however, such changes are temporary in nature. To ensure the risk of existential

threats such as climate change are addressed, we conclude that there is a need to further explore transitioning from voluntary private sector participation in crisis response and ongoing community engagement to legislated CSR obligations. Such a shift would signal the end of CSR and introduce a new era of corporate social requirements.

2. Corporate Social Responsibility, COVID-19, and Crisis Response

CSR remains a vague concept despite the multitude of efforts to define the term. Existing scholarship denotes that the definition of CSR is varied [30,31] and continues to evolve over time [5,32]. For the purposes of this paper, the concept can simply be viewed as voluntary corporate initiatives that are: (a) distinct (but not disconnected) from the financial interest of a firm and (b) designed to support socio-economic and/or environmental issues [19]. It is important to stress that CSR initiatives are voluntary. Firms may support such initiatives to reflect corporate values, improve their reputation, and/or for potential financial gains. While some scholars link CSR initiatives with the long-term financial interests of a firm [5,31], this study is seeking to study efforts that are unrelated to operations and financial performance. While mitigating the impacts of the pandemic ultimately allow for the resumption of a business-as-usual operating environment, we argue that efforts to address existential threats to society go beyond traditional (and financially motivated) approaches to CSR.

The concept of CSR has evolved from the idea that corporations should behave responsibly for the sake of profits, to thinking that they should behave responsibly for the sake of people and the planet. In modern times, it is generally accepted that this business model is no longer tenable due to requirements to maintain a social license, consumer attitudes towards ethical business practices and products, and increased social expectations of firms stemming from employees, investors, and government stakeholders [33–46]. In response to increased expectations from a variety of stakeholders, it is common for firms to deploy a spectrum of CSR initiatives ranging from philanthropic endeavors, environmental initiatives, and integration of ethical business practices into their core operations.

However, the proliferation of CSR has been accompanied by increased use of greenwashing, wherein firms use misleading public communications initiatives to buttress their reputation while avoiding the cost associated with CSR—opting instead to continue with business as usual with little regard for environmental or social interests [47–49]. While there is concern about the use of greenwashing in corporate responses to COVID-19, the longevity and impact of these efforts will only be calculable once the pandemic has subsided. Existing literature on CSR during the pandemic has instead largely focused on how corporations have partnered with public sector, community, and international organizations to support response efforts [50–56]. An integral aspect of existing literature is the common theme of voluntary private sector involvement in response efforts, which signifies continued commitment to CSR during a period of substantial disruption to society, supply chains, and, in many cases, profits.

Of course, private sector firms have supported disaster response and resilience efforts well before the COVID-19 pandemic [57–61]. For example, following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Wal-Mart pre-empted federal disaster response efforts by bringing truckloads of supplies to New Orleans communities impacted by flooding [62]. With this in mind, it has often been argued that the private sector is better equipped than other types of organizations to effectively mobilize resources following a disaster—demonstrating greater flexibility and swiftness to respond to crisis than public sector or non-governmental organizations [62–65]. Given these strengths and increasing involvement of corporations in responding to disasters, it is arguable that the private sector has become essential for ensuring effective disaster resilience and response [66–68]. Importantly, empirical studies on disaster response have shown that strong coordination between public and private sector stakeholders is essential for optimizing response to natural and man-made disasters [69–74].

While studies on CSR and disaster response have proliferated in recent years, a growing area of research is focused on how the global COVID-19 pandemic has influenced

CSR as well as the relationship between the private sector and society more broadly. Recent studies have documented the commercialization of the pandemic [75–77], the relationship between the pandemic and CSR expenditures [78,79], and, among many other subjects, the increased obligation of the private sector to support health and safety measures within and outside of the workplace [80–82]. Most notably, there is growing research on how the global pandemic has challenged traditional approaches to CSR—necessitating a move beyond voluntary CSR to more systematic forms of business that attend to essential human needs and goals [83–86]. Our study seeks to contribute to this growing discourse.

While large companies have assisted in COVID-19 response efforts, this paper demonstrates that such actions are only temporary and lacked material coordination between public and private sector stakeholders. Moreover, the goals of corporations and the goals of society may not always be aligned—thus continued reliance on voluntary corporate altruism may be unwise given the unfurling climate crisis. For these reasons, the possibility of regulating the relationship between society and the private sector—currently epitomized by CSR programs—needs to be taken further into consideration.

3. Methods

This study leverages a series of virtual interviews with automotive manufacturing firms operating in Canada to determine whether voluntary corporate responses to COVID-19 will shape long-term CSR programs in lieu of constituting one-off crisis management actions.

For context, Canada is home to five consumer automotive manufacturing firms: Ford, General Motors, Honda, Stellantis, and Toyota. There are over 150 suppliers registered with Canada's Automotive Parts Manufacturing Association, while the two largest parts suppliers in Canada (and two of the largest parts suppliers globally) are Linamar and Magna. There are three primary reasons why the Canadian automotive manufacturing sector was selected as the focus of this study.

First, although these companies are all locally incorporated in Canada, they are part of a wider, global network of production and supply chains. To that end, the experience of automotive original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and parts suppliers in Canada is conceivably shared by a wider, global corporate network.

Second, the Canadian automotive sector has national, regional, and global significance. The Canadian automotive manufacturing sector is the 11th largest in the world—contributing over $16 billion to Canada's gross domestic product and producing nearly 1.4 million vehicles in 2020 (1/10th of all vehicles manufactured in North America) (Canadian Vehicle Manufacturers' Association, n.d.). Therefore, the actions (or inactions) of the Canadian automotive sector have significant implications to Canada's economy and society, as well as North American trade flows.

Third, the number of stakeholders within Canada's automotive manufacturing sector is such that we could capture the experience of an entire sector of Canada's economy within this study. All the OEMs operating in Canada, as well as the two largest domestic and international automotive parts suppliers, participated in this research. The results of this study offer a definitive and comprehensive picture of the sector's responsiveness to the pandemic and future priorities regarding CSR.

In terms of data collection, the noted firms were engaged between the autumn of 2021 and winter of 2022. Senior external affairs representatives from each firm were sought for inclusion in this study due to their familiarity and direct involvement in the execution of pre-pandemic and pandemic CSR initiatives. Each participant was initially contacted through email and provided with the option of participating either through a structured interview or by providing written responses to defined questions. All but two firms (Honda and Stellantis) participated in an hour-long remote interview conducted online, instead opting to provide written responses. Follow-up requests for information, clarification, and confirmation were conducted via email.

In total, firms were asked 10 questions pertaining to their pandemic response efforts, the impact of the pandemic on operations, their partnerships with government, and the future of CSR programs. Participants were asked to verify information presented in this study in advance of publication; although, the findings and conclusions are entirely those of the authors of this study.

4. Findings and Results

The following section details the results of our interviews with automotive manufacturing firms and parts suppliers in Ontario, Canada. Table 1 provides a high-level overview of the results of our interviews with automotive manufacturing firms and suppliers. Sections 4.1–4.3 provide further analysis and information derived from interviews on pandemic response efforts, drivers for supporting pandemic response efforts, and permanent impacts of the pandemic on operations, respectively.

Table 1. Consolidated Interview Results.

	OEMS					PART SUPPLIERS	
Question	**Ford**	**General Motors**	**Honda**	**Stellantis**	**Toyota**	**Linamar**	**Magna**
Did your company use its manufacturing capabilities to produce supplies for pandemic response efforts (e.g., masks, sanitizers, ventilators)?	Yes (Created industry standards, produced face shields, and provided engineering expertise for N95 mask production)	Yes (Production used to manufacture ventilators in the US and mask production in both the US and Canada)	No (No change to manufacturing; however, 3D printers used to make parts for face shields and human resources provided to third party)	Yes (Production of protective face masks)	No (No modification to manufacturing)	Yes (Production used to manufacture ventilators)	Yes (Created industry standards, re-purposed facilities to support supply of PPE, and supported ventilator programs)
If so: (a) How was this shift in production rationalized?	Senior leadership and employee directed	Employee directed	N/A	Senior leadership directed	N/A	Senior leadership directed	Senior leadership and employee directed
(b) Did your organization profit from manufacturing COVID-19 supplies?	No	No	No	No	No	Yes (Marginally)	No
(c) Did the provincial or federal government provide financial supports?	No	Yes (For Canadian production of masks)	No (Though labour subsidies were utilized)	No	No	Yes (For Canadian production of ventilators)	No
How was the firm's CSR program (operations unrelated to manufacturing operations) were used to support COVID-19 response efforts?	Donations (PPE); holiday on payments for customers	Donations (PPE); vaccine clinics for employees	Donations (financial and PPE); partnerships with PPE manufacturers	Donations (financial and PPE)	Donations along with logistical support for companies engaged in response efforts	Vaccine clinics; cleansing machines; key chains	Donations (PPE); Vaccine clinics
Has the pandemic permanently impacted: (a) manufacturing operations?	No	No	No	No	No	No	No

Table 1. *Cont.*

	OEMS					PART SUPPLIERS	
Question	**Ford**	**General Motors**	**Honda**	**Stellantis**	**Toyota**	**Linamar**	**Magna**
(b) corporate risk profile?	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
(c) CSR/community engagement initiatives?	No	No	No	No	Somewhat (New focus on operational efficiency of other organizations)	Somewhat	No
Were response efforts primarily Internally motivated or initiated due to external pressures?	Internally motivated (Employees and senior leadership)	Internally motivated (Employees)	Internally motivated	Internally motivated	Internally motivated	Internally motivated (Senior leadership)	Internally motivated (Senior leadership)
Do you believe that, because of the pandemic, there is increased societal expectations on your company to enable social good?	No change	Somewhat, but not the primary driver	Yes	No change	Somewhat, but not the primary driver	Somewhat, but not the primary driver	No change
Has your company advertised its COVID-19 response efforts? (y/n)	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Did your employees expect your organization to support COVID-19 response efforts? (low/med/high)	High	High	High	High	High	Medium	High
Did your customers expect your organization to support COVID-19 response efforts? (low/med/high)	High	Low	Medium	High	High	High	High
Did your investors expect your organization to support COVID-19 response efforts? (low/med/high)	High	High	Medium	Medium	High	Medium	High

4.1. COVID-19 Response Efforts

All automotive manufacturing companies in Canada supported COVID-19 response efforts. However, the pandemic's impact on core operations and use of manufacturing capabilities to support response efforts varied from company to company. Most of the organizations reviewed modified their production lines to manufacture supplies to assist in pandemic response (e.g., personal protective equipment and ventilators). Honda and Toyota were the outliers—solely leveraging their internal human resources and engineering skillsets to support external initiatives.

Pandemic response efforts included a mixture of direct manufacturing of pandemic supplies, use of supply chain to support medical equipment production, logistics, and donations. Further, all companies highlighted the use of corporate resources to protect the health and safety of employees. An overview of company-specific response efforts is noted in Table 2.

Table 2. Pandemic Response Efforts.

	How Were Resources Mobilized to Support COVID-19 Response Efforts?
Ford	- **Direct manufacturing of pandemic supplies:** Core operations did not change for vehicles and engine production. However, Ford did produce face shields at its manufacturing facility in Windsor, Ontario. - **Logistics:** Engineers in Ford's Oakville facility partnered with 3M in Brockville to help produce N95 masks. M3 has the manufacturing capacity to support production but lacked the engineering expertise to support re-tooling. Ford's engineering team supported debugging and optimizing production of N95 mask. Engineers also worked with GE on a similar project designed to support the production of ventilators. - **Donations:** Ford donated plant equipment to address PPE shortages in local hospitals and care facilities. In all, Ford donated over 2 million face shields within Ontario—and sold face shields to provincial and federal governments at cost.
General Motors (GM)	- **Direct manufacturing of pandemic supplies:** The company converted one of its own factories to become one of the earliest producers of ventilators working with government. Additionally, several plants in North America began production of facemasks, including GM's operations in Oshawa, Ontario. - **Use of supply chain to support medical equipment production:** In collaboration with companies such as Linamar, GM produced a significant volume of ventilator components. - **Logistics:** The company's CEO directed senior manufacturing staff to go to Seattle and work with a ventilator production company to expedite their internal manufacturing processes. GM staff reverse engineered ventilators to determine how the company's supply chain could replicate certain parts and recreate the ventilator supply chain. Moreover, General Motors partnered with local public health units by using their nursing staff and facility (at no cost) to help with vaccination efforts. GM previously supported flu shot campaigns—and were thus trained in vaccine administration.
Honda	- **Logistics:** Honda leveraged its engineering capacity to support building a negative pressure room in a local hospital, which supported the care for COVID-19 patients. Moreover, Honda worked with a local college and two local manufacturing companies to manufacture and ship face shields for front line workers across Canada. - **Donations:** Honda made financial donations to two local hospitals near their operations in Alliston, Ontario. Additionally, Honda facilitated donations of PPE to local community organizations.
Stellantis	- **Direct manufacturing of pandemic supplies:** Stellantis manufactured and donated nearly four million protective face masks monthly throughout the height of the initial waves of infection. Production capacity was installed in March of 2020 and the company began manufacturing face masks in the following weeks with initial distribution across Canada, the United States and Mexico. - **Donations:** Stellantis donated 1.million new protective face masks to Health Canada for distribution to Canadian frontline healthcare workers and first responders. In Canada, Stellantis donated over $270 thousand to non-profit organizations that provided roughly 200,000 meals for children in our plant communities of Windsor-Essex, Brampton and Etobicoke. Also, in June 2020 in Windsor, Stellantis helped kick off donations to the Windsor-Essex Miracle Food Drive, a community-lead campaign which eventually collected two million pounds of food.
Toyota	- **Logistics:** Toyota worked closely with the Government of Ontario to improve COVID-19 testing output and collection of samples and to provide input on the cleansing and sterilizing of N95 masks and the production of ventilators. Toyota designed and built UV light sterilization booths that were provided to local hospitals. Engineering teams worked on UV sterilization booths, ventilators, and utilized in-house 3D printers to manufacture components for face shields for Canadian Shield. In effect, Toyota's focus was on using their abilities to improve operational output of companies that were supporting efforts. - **Donations:** The company donated available resources to local hospitals—including N95 masks, gloves, and gowns used in their paint shops.

Table 2. *Cont.*

	How Were Resources Mobilized to Support COVID-19 Response Efforts?
Linamar	- **Direct manufacturing of pandemic supplies:** Linamar was directed by American customers (e.g., automotive OEMs) to produce parts for ventilators and then eventually began to make full, Canadian-made ventilators. - **Use of supply chain to support medical equipment production:** The company purchased PPE on behalf of the Government of Ontario when the province was unable to secure a purchase order.Logistics: Linamar ran a vaccination clinic in Guelph, Ontario, and supported the Guelph Hospital with supplies (e.g., masks, clips to open doors without touching doorknobs, creating UV cleansing machines). - **Donations:** Linamar made early (and substantial) donations to charitable organizations in China to help respond to the initial spread of the virus. The company also encouraged its employees to become directly involved in supporting local community groups engaged in PPE drives. Linamar also partnered with local health officials for opening vaccine clinics by supplying volunteers and sponsoring the clinics monetarily.
Magna	- **Direct manufacturing of pandemic supplies:** Magna purchased and retooled its own assembly lines to produce ventilators, face shields, and masks (both surgical masks and millions of KN95 and N95 masks) due to internal and global shortages. PPE was donated to local hospitals and various other facilities. Magna also partnered with government programs designed to produce ventilators, sterilizing devices, masks, face shields, and gowns. - **Use of supply chain to support medical equipment production:** The company leveraged global purchasing lines to procure and distribute medical equipment to local hospitals. - **Logistics:** Magna partnered with numerous municipal public health agencies to run vaccine clinics. Moreover, the company worked with industry groups to create an industry leading reopening strategy, which was a multidisciplinary re-opening plan designed to alter the dynamics of workplaces (e.g., workspace labour to support social distancing, health screening, redesigning assembly lines, managing global logistics to produce PPE). - **Donations:** Magna made PPE donations to local hospitals.

In all, each automotive manufacturing company (whether OEM or parts supplier) leveraged their internal resources to support pandemic response efforts. Notably, public sector involvement was limited and there was little coordination between the stakeholders in the automotive manufacturing sector.

Importantly, while some efforts, such as employee vaccine clinics, can be seen as initiatives designed to resume normal production during the pandemic (especially in jurisdictions such as Canada that require employees to be vaccinated), this study is most concerned with actions taken that are detached from conducting business as usual. For example, devoting manufacturing and human resources to produce health and safety supplies for community stakeholders did not aid in the production of vehicles. Per the definition of CSR provided in Section 2, such efforts are distinct from the financial interests of the firm and are entirely designed to support broader community wellbeing.

4.2. Pandemic Partnerships and Profits

Despite the manufacturing capabilities and resources of Canada's automotive manufacturing sector, the federal and provincial governments did not make significant overtures to coordinate responses from stakeholders.

In the case of General Motors and Linamar, government financial support was used to leverage manufacturing capabilities to support pandemic response efforts. The federal government created a financial partnership with General Motors to support mask production. Linamar, alternatively, worked with the Government of Ontario (through the Ontario Together Fund) and the Government of Canada to finance the production of ventilators. Further, the Government of Canada did make labour subsidies available to the private sector to support job retention during pandemic lockdowns; however, such subsidies (though used by automotive manufacturing companies) were not specifically leveraged to support pandemic response efforts.

Only Linamar recorded a very slight financial margin from supporting the production of medical equipment. As most of the equipment produced by these companies was donated, the primary revenue source for supporting response efforts were from government subsidies. Marginal profits were not capitalized upon and were redirected towards administrative, facility, and labor costs. Overall, these companies expected to lose money through participation in these efforts.

The limited partnership opportunities, government supports, and opportunities to profit on supporting response efforts indicate that the automotive manufacturing sector was engaged in altruistic corporate actions during the height of the pandemic. As the subsequent section details, these voluntary efforts were not driven (or coordinated) by government pressures—but by a series of internal considerations.

4.3. Source of COVID-19 Response Efforts

Understanding why these organizations decided to expend resources on addressing the pandemic is important. Early in the pandemic, the United States government compelled automotive manufacturing companies to support the production of medical supplies under the *Defence Production Act* [87]. However, companies operating in Canada faced no such requirement. With no government mandate and limited financial supports in place, corporate pandemic response efforts within Canada's automotive manufacturing sector were voluntary and entirely driven by internal factors.

Based on data collected in this study, Canada's automotive manufacturing sector supported pandemic response efforts due to the expectations of a variety of stakeholders—namely senior leadership, employees, investors, and customers. While these stakeholders are commonly identified as drivers for robust CSR programs in academic literature, this study demonstrates the convergence of these stakeholders compelled voluntary corporate responses to the pandemic that yielded no positive financial or marketing impact on the firm's operations.

Table 3 outlines each company's rationale for engaging in pandemic response efforts. Importantly, these actions were distinct from their core operations, provided limited (if any) financial benefit, were not coordinated by central government stakeholders, and were not used in major promotional advertising campaigns.

Table 3. Drivers for Supporting Pandemic Response Efforts.

	How Were COVID-19 Response Efforts Rationalized?
Ford	- **Drivers for supporting response efforts:** Ford's response efforts were internally motivated—for example, the production of face shields was initiated by employees. Overall, Ford saw synergy in response efforts and an overarching desire to continue vehicle production. - **COVID-19 and increasing societal expectations of the company to enable social good:** Ford does not anticipate the pandemic to result in creased societal pressures to enable social good. The company believes its CSR profile was strong leading into the pandemic, which positioned the organization to mobilize an effective series of initiatives designed to support public health efforts—and continue vehicle production. - **Advertising response efforts:** The company highlighted the efforts of its employees over social media; however, pandemic response efforts were not integrated into formal marketing campaigns. - **Employee expectations:** Employee expectations to support response efforts were high. Ford noted their history of providing community supports and a highly positive reaction from employees when the company began production and broader support for pandemic response efforts. - **Customer expectations:** Though difficult to measure, Ford believes customer expectations of the company to respond to the pandemic were high. To support customers directly, Ford provided a holiday on vehicle payments. - **Investor expectations:** Though difficult to measure, Ford believes investor expectations of the company to respond to the pandemic were high—and the company has reportedly received positive feedback from shareholders.

Table 3. *Cont.*

	How Were COVID-19 Response Efforts Rationalized?
General Motors	- **Drivers for supporting response efforts:** In the USA, General Motors was legally compelled to support the production of medical supplies; however, in Canada, the company acted based on the direction of senior leadership and the expectations of its employees. Notably, GM also worked closely with labour unions to coordinate and execute response initiatives. - **COVID-19 and increasing societal expectations of the company to enable social good:** General Motors believes that COVID-19 has increased societal expectations of the company; however, climate change is a source of significantly more pressure. Given the company's carbon footprint in Canada, GM's overarching focus is on retooling and redefining its product line to support net zero emissions and reduce the impacts of climate change. - **Advertising response efforts:** Response efforts were not integrated into GM's advertising; however, the company has received a significant amount of media coverage—and has also hosted federal ministers at its production facility to support awareness and communications of joint response efforts. GM has also incorporated their COVID response into their social media content. - **Employee expectations:** GM noted high expectations from its employees to support response efforts; however, the firm also noted that employees consistently (and rightfully) expect the firm to support a broad range of CSR initiatives. This expectation is heightened during times of emergency. - **Customer expectations:** From a customer perspective, GM's focus was on ensuring a safe experience at its dealerships. Ensuring COVID-compliant distancing protocols for its sales and service departments was the primary area of customer expectations. That said, GM noted a lift in brand recognition as part of its response to COVID-19. - **Investor expectations:** Investors of General Motors expect the firm to support broader transformations beyond COVID-19, with a focus on mitigating and adapting to climate change. In effect, investors expect GM to position itself to be resilient and lead transformational change—whether in response to COVID-19 or climate change.
Honda	- **Drivers for supporting response efforts:** Response efforts were rationalized by internal motivations—though there was no one specific driver. - **COVID-19 and increasing societal expectations of the company to enable social good:** Honda representatives indicated that it is likely for firms to face increased pressure to enable social good following the pandemic. To that end, the firm will look for opportunity to support continued CSR initiatives—though has no formal (or public) plan for reorganizing its CSR program. - **Advertising response efforts:** The company did not integrate its COVID-19 response efforts into formal advertising campaigns. - **Employee expectations:** Employee expectations for the organization to support pandemic response efforts were high—and Honda has indicated that feedback from this stakeholder group was appreciative of the series of actions undertaken to support public health measures. - **Customer expectations:** Customer expectations for supporting financial relief efforts (in terms of vehicle financing) were high. However, customer expectations to enable wider societal good were somewhat lower—while there was a desire to align organizational and customer values, the overall focus of customers was tied to the financial relationship they had with the company. - **Investor expectations:** Like customer expectations, investor feedback was generally focused on ensuring the financial considerations of customers were accounted for—enabling broader societal initiatives was a secondary matter.
Stellantis	- **Drivers for supporting response efforts:** Stellantis noted that their response to the pandemic was driven by internal stakeholders and their longstanding corporate culture resulted in a corporate response commensurate with community need. - **COVID-19 and increasing societal expectations of the company to enable social good:** Stellantis did not indicate an expectation of increased societal expectations for firms already engaging with their communities. - **Advertising response efforts:** Awareness of response efforts were primarily communicated through internal corporate communications. The company did, however, include customer financial relief programs in a formal market campaign. - **Employee expectations:** Stellantis noted a longstanding expectation among its employees to give back to their communities—as well as positive feedback from its staff for supporting response efforts. - **Customer expectations:** Stellantis noted a longstanding expectation among its customers to support community engagement efforts—as well as positive feedback from its customers for supporting response efforts. - **Investor expectations:** Stellantis noted that pandemic response efforts were largely driven by its senior leadership team—investor pressures were thus limited but feedback has been positive.

Table 3. *Cont.*

	How Were COVID-19 Response Efforts Rationalized?
Toyota	- **Drivers for supporting response efforts:** Response efforts were guided by internal, senior leadership. In effect, the organization approached government rather than awaiting requests for support or guidance. - **COVID-19 and increasing societal expectations of the company to enable social good:** It was noted that societal expectations of large firms were already growing prior to the pandemic. Accordingly, the pandemic has created a heightened awareness of the role of corporations in society. - **Advertising response efforts:** Toyota did not directly incorporate COVID-19 response efforts into its advertising. However, recipients of donations (e.g., the Canadian Shield) did release press statements highlighting Toyota's support. - **Employee expectations:** Employee expectations for supporting response efforts were high. It was noted that Toyota's Canadian production was interrupted from March to May 2020 as a result of the pandemic; during this time, employee expectations of the firm to support community wellbeing and mitigate the impacts of the pandemic (in order to resume production) was palpable. Employees expected the firm to support a safe return to work as well as broader efforts to keep communities protected. - **Customer expectations:** From a sales perspective, customer expectations were not a primary driver of supporting response efforts. Instead, Toyota's focus during COVID-19 has been on relief efforts that support existing customers (e.g., programs for fiscal burdens stemming from financing and car loans). - **Investor expectations:** There has been a longstanding recognition from investors that Toyota should support positive, meaningful contributions to the wellbeing of the communities where the company operates.
Linamar	- **Drivers for supporting response efforts:** Unique to the Canadian automotive sector, Linamar is a family business. As such, the Hasenfratz family (who lead the company) have played a strong role in driving the company to support response efforts. - **COVID-19 and increasing societal expectations of the company to enable social good:** Linamar was aware of a trend in expecting more of private and publicly traded businesses before the pandemic hit—and believes that it utilized the pandemic as an opportunity for the company to respond to those pressures and demonstrate the organization's ability to serve its community. In effect, COVID-19 is not the primary driver for expanding its CSR program; but instead, the company credits continued changes driven by societal and shareholder expectations. - **Advertising response efforts:** Linamar was the only company to integrate its response efforts into external communications. The company generally doesn't showcase their CSR efforts; however, shareholders supported greater participation in public relations during the pandemic. While Linamar did not explicitly integrate its efforts into advertising, the company did release several communications to satisfy shareholder communications requirements. - **Employee expectations:** The primary expectation of employees was related to occupational health and safety. To that end, the firm supported PPE and vaccine deployment. The majority of the company's employees were vaccinated at their in-house vaccine clinic. Overall, employee expectation to support broader response efforts were low, as the firm was proactive in supporting community and global response efforts (thereby negating pressures from employees). - **Customer expectations:** Linamar's OEM customers had high expectations and reached out to the firm to get involved in supporting efforts within the automotive sector. Notably, Linamar's relationship with OEMs, such as Ford and GM, has strengthened during the pandemic—and the firm notes that suppliers who shut down and were unable to respond to the pandemic have had material impacts on their operations and OEM-relationships. Non-automotive sector customers did not have material expectations for involvement in response efforts. - **Investor expectations:** Similar to the employee response, the company reacted so quickly that investor expectations followed (and matched) existing actions. To that end, senior leadership set the bar for investor expectations.

Table 3. *Cont.*

	How Were COVID-19 Response Efforts Rationalized?
Magna	- **Drivers for supporting response efforts:** Magna has allocated 2% of pre-tax profits to CSR and broader charitable initiatives. As such, the firm's senior leadership has previously—and during the pandemic—worked with employees to set expectations for community engagement. In other words, COVID-19 response efforts were guided by internal factors rather than government intervention. - **COVID-19 and increasing societal expectations of the company to enable social good:** Unlike the other firms included in this study, Magna believes that societal expectations of large firms have remained unchanged during the pandemic. - **Advertising response efforts:** Magna's efforts were internally communicated to employees and customers. However, there were no public advertising campaigns. - **Employee expectations:** Magna employees have a high expectation of the firm to support community engagement initiatives. In turn, the firm fosters an understanding that employees are primary stakeholders in the business—and thus acts on employee expectations. In addition to providing a safe work environment, Magna also responded to employee expectations for rapid antigen testing programs as well as paid time off for testing and vaccination. In this sense, the firm was well ahead of government requirements of the private sector in terms of human resource requirements during COVID-19. - **Customer expectations:** In a similar manner to Linamar, Magna noted that expectations of customers within the automotive sector were significant—and were a motivator in Magna's response efforts. - **Investor expectations:** While the interviewee was unable to directly comment on investor expectations, it was noted that the firm's share price has done well over the pandemic—an indication of confidence in the firm.

4.4. Permanent Impacts of COVID-19 on Operations

The pandemic has slowed manufacturing and reoriented the CSR activities of firms within Canada's automotive manufacturing sector. However, all companies have indicated that automotive production and CSR programs will return to a pre-pandemic equilibrium. For instance, Ford, Honda, and Stellantis all cited that the pandemic will not have a long-term impact on their manufacturing operations nor their CSR programs.

General Motors anticipates its operations and CSR will not refocus because of the pandemic. In effect, the organization believes it cannot run an effective CSR program if focus is continuously displaced. Accordingly, maintaining effective working relationships with community stakeholders will allow the firm to support ongoing CSR initiatives as well as leverage such relationships during times of crisis. In terms of operations, the firm did note that it is moving more towards hybrid work environments for non-production staff; however, such changes do not stray from the company's strategic direction. In terms of corporate risk profile, GM has noted that it is refocusing efforts on vulnerabilities within its just-in-time supply chain (as seen in the shortage of semi-conductor chips). To that end, risk proofing efforts with suppliers is a renewed area of focus for the organization.

Toyota indicated that the pandemic has not impacted the company's long term manufacturing strategy. Notably, any competitive disadvantage Toyota's Canadian operations faced were shared globally—within other Toyota facilities and between other OEMs. In terms of material shifts to its CSR program, one notable change stemming from the pandemic is Toyota's partnering with local companies wherein the firm provided its internal expertise and skillsets to support the production and logistics of other firms. Such efforts are expected to continue beyond the pandemic—and the firm is committed to expanding its support services rather than expanding its philanthropic endeavors. In effect, Toyota is seeking to proffer its unique internal skillsets to community organizations and firms directly involved in crisis response.

Similarly, Linamar did not believe the pandemic had a material impact on the company's long-term operations or CSR program. However, the pandemic did result in three notable changes to their operations. First, the firm believes that its foray into producing health sciences equipment has opened new growth opportunities—though the company is still exploring the feasibility of production. Second, the organization's corporate risk profile now integrates a focus on how events such as pandemics can impact trade flows and influence protectionist policies. Third, while the pandemic will not shift the organization's

CSR portfolio, it is understood that the pandemic has resulted in stronger relationships with community stakeholders, which the firm seeks to maintain and leverage going forward.

Lastly, Magna was unsure whether the pandemic will result in permanent changes to its operations or CSR program. While its facilities are operating with increased occupational health and safety provisions, it is unclear whether such changes are probable to remain long term. That said, the firm does not anticipate material changes to its operational focus. As a result of the limited impact to operations and previous commitments to high health and safety standards, the firm's corporate risk profile is unchanged because of the pandemic. In terms of impacts to their CSR program, the only notable shift in operations was a new focus on philanthropic efforts to support health organizations that have a focus on pandemic relief (which diverted resources from other organizations). The firm hopes to rebalance its corporate social investments in favor of a holistic approach to community engagement as the pandemic subsides.

5. Discussion

To varying degrees, the pandemic has resulted in impacts to production within Canada's automotive manufacturing sector. OEMs, such as Toyota, had their production completely halted for weeks whereas parts suppliers were generally able to continue with reduced capacity during periods of increased pandemic restrictions. Despite the impact to automotive production, Canada's automotive sector provided a mélange of manufacturing, financial, and logistical supports to support public health initiatives.

While widespread activity in supporting pandemic relief efforts is encouraging, data collected as part of this study reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a minimal impact on how automotive manufacturing firms manage their CSR programs going forward. In effect, voluntary corporate responses to COVID-19 will not shape long-term CSR programs or indicate a broader change in corporate culture—and generally represent a series of one-off crisis management actions. The current fixation on supporting response efforts will eventually yield to pre-existing areas of focus for community engagement and there will be little change to the long-term composition of the global firms' CSR programs.

The actions of Canada's automotive sector are commendable. It is concerning, however, that the pandemic response efforts from the automotive manufacturing sector were almost entirely internally motivated and executed—with little overarching coordination from provincial or federal jurisdictions. Of equal concern, there was no indication of synchronization of efforts between companies operating in the sector despite a track record of collaboration between OEMs on manufacturing and research ventures. The lack of coordination among a small, common set of stakeholders to respond to a crisis is particularly concerning given the mounting risks pertaining to public health and climate change.

Corporate social responsibility includes activities by a firm intended to benefit the societies and environments in which it operates. Though it may also bring benefits to the firm, CSR is not a legal requirement. Climate change and its associated risks will impact society in ways that may require more than traditional voluntary and limited corporate crisis response efforts. While firms worldwide have instituted approaches to mitigating the risks associated with climate change, there is still a risk of under-reaction on the part of private sector companies. Climate change poses an existential risk to societies around the world, but in the absence of requirements enforced by governments, private sector companies may elect not to invest sufficiently in risk mitigation until actual damage occurs. Such a scenario aligns with claims that neoliberalism limits state capacity to mitigate and adapt to climate change [88]. Accordingly, if the marketplace and/or internal stakeholders cannot sufficiently incentivize private enterprise to prepare and respond to challenges and pending disasters, then more transformational changes will be required that allow government to compel action and coordinate efforts.

Considering the existential risks posed by climate change, there is an apparent need for a fundamental change to the relationship between private sector actors and governments to support the advancement and protection of societal wellbeing. The public and private

sectors must work together for the benefit of society. However, as seen in the Canadian automotive manufacturing sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have largely deferred to corporations to facilitate adaptation and resilience through voluntary action. This responsibility relies on companies' willingness and capacity to act, which may be limited in the face of—among other considerations—financial constraints, potential liability, and a shift in risk perception among top decision makers.

6. Conclusions

This study leveraged qualitative interviews with global automotive manufacturing firms operating in Canada to examine whether voluntary corporate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic will shape the long-term trajectory of CSR programs.

We first provided a concise review of existing literature on CSR, which stressed avid involvement of the private sector in supporting crisis response. It was asserted that voluntary private sector crisis response efforts have established CSR programs as critical in supporting and protecting communities in times of crisis despite concerns pertaining to greenwashing.

Subsequently, we summarized the results of our interviews with all the automotive OEMs operating in Canada (Ford, General Motors, Honda, Stellantis, and Toyota) as well as the largest domestic and international parts suppliers (Linamar and Magna). We reported how and why automotive manufacturing firms supported pandemic response efforts and questioned the stakeholders about how the pandemic would impact their corporate social responsibility programs moving forward.

We conclude that voluntary corporate responses to COVID-19 will not shape long-term CSR programs in Canada's automotive manufacturing sector. Despite the significant accomplishments of private sector responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the noted firms are not planning to materially alter their pre-pandemic approach to CSR. With the understanding that region-specific contextual factors such as political ideology influence the implementation of CSR [89], further research is required across sectors and countries to determine whether these findings are applicable on a greater scale. If so, the role of the private sector in advancing societal wellbeing will remain unchanged in a post-pandemic world.

To that end, we believe there is an opportunity for further scholarship and policy development focused on examining the continued evolution of CSR during and exiting the COVID-19 pandemic. As the growing risks associated with climate change require a level of coordination that voluntary and reactionary CSR initiatives may be unable to provide, the degree to which governments guide or compel corporate collaboration in preparing for and responding to crisis requires consideration. The need for continued alignment between public and private sector actors will only intensify as future public health and climate risks materialize. We thus urge researchers and policymakers to consider the mechanics and merits of retiring corporate social responsibility and welcoming an era corporate social requirement.

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