



An Enquiry into MNEs' CSR Practices: Literature Assessment, Managerial Implications, and Academic Perspectives

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Received: 5 September 2023 / Revised: 23 March 2024 / Accepted: 16 July 2024
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Abstract

As a result of growing concerns by stakeholder groups in different parts of the world for the economic, social, and environmental value created by multinational enterprises (MNEs), research has explored MNEs' corporate social responsibility (CSR). This article extends existing knowledge by steering through extant research on MNEs' CSR activities embedded in MNEs' international competitive behavior. The paper reviews 208 empirical studies conducted on this subject during the period 1997–2022 and offers a systematized analysis along aspects pertaining to theoretical perspectives, research design, scope, method, and thematic emphasis. It synthesizes existing knowledge in an integrative conceptual framework incorporating the key thematic priorities and the relations between them. It also provides an evaluation of the key managerial implications extracted from these studies by 114 managers of MNEs having their headquarters in the U.S.A., Germany, and China. Finally, it offers fruitful directions for future research based on the findings of a survey among 42 international business scholars with expertise in this field.

Keywords CSR · MNEs · International business · Literature review · Managerial implications · Academic views on future research direction

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1 Introduction

The involvement of multinational enterprises (MNEs) in various societal issues (e.g., natural environment, working conditions, ethical conduct) in different parts of the world has received attention by international business (IB) academics and practitioners alike during the last few decades (Park & Xiao, 2021). This can be attributed to an oxymoron situation characterizing MNEs: while these firms have been repeatedly accused of causing most of the problems societies face today due to acting in an irresponsible way (which in some cases is intentionally hidden through the adoption of various ‘social-washing’ practices) (Kotchen & Moon, 2012; Riera & Iborra, 2017), their large scale of operations and extensive geographic scope, coupled with the possession of sizeable financial, human, and technological resources, allows them to play a key role in reducing the negative impact of these problems through engaging in CSR practices. We analyze MNEs’ CSR as defined by Rodriguez-Gomez et al., (2020, p. 4). Although there are diverse definitions of CSR (for an overview of the history of CSR see Carroll, 2008), the term reflects the broad understanding of how companies voluntarily engage in creating economic, social, and environmental value to satisfy stakeholder demands (Chowdhury et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2021; Tarnovskaya et al., 2022). Thus, we refer to MNEs’ CSR activities in its broader understanding, reflecting the linkages between economic performance, shared values and business ethics, social issues, and environmental protection (Rodriguez-Gomez et al., 2020).

The dual role of MNEs, that is, to be responsible for some of these CSR crucial problems societies face, while at the same time being among the most powerful in providing solutions to them through CSR, has attracted a large volume of studies aiming to understand the various motivations, obstacles, strategies, and outcomes of their socially, environmentally and ethically responsible (or irresponsible) conduct when operating in international markets (Jamali et al., 2017; Pisani et al., 2017). Although the first signs of MNEs’ involvement in CSR activities can be traced a long time ago, it was only in the mid-1990s that the first academic articles were published on the subject. Since then, there has been an exponential growth of research focusing on the CSR practices of MNEs, reflecting the heightened importance gained by this topic among the international business academic community. However, this body of knowledge is very dynamic and hence, requiring an up-to-date critical review of MNEs’ CSR practices to facilitate theory advancement and further practice development (Sun et al., 2021).

Several attempts have been made in the past to review the literature focusing on the CSR activities of MNEs, with most prominent being those by Egri and Ralston (2008), Kolk and van Tulder (2010), Jamali and Karam (2016), and Sun et al. (2021) (see Appendix A for their method used, focus, and key findings). Egri and Ralston (2008) have provided a bibliographical categorization of CSR publications in mainstream international management journals, focusing on their geographic scope and thematic emphasis grouped in four key areas, namely, corporate social responsibility, environmental responsibility, ethics, and

governance. The authors conclude that CSR issues were under-represented in the international management literature (p. 325) and extend context-specific knowledge on: environmental management systems and business performance (Darnall et al., 2008); the motivations for corporate social and environmental responsibility of a Scandinavian MNE (Lynes & Andrachuk, 2008); social information within the intellectual capital report (Castilla Polo & Gallardo Vázquez, 2008); and provide an understanding on local legitimacy by MNEs in a specific industry context in Peru (Gifford & Kestler, 2008). Kolk and van Tulder (2010) have reviewed publications on MNE's CSR and sustainability concluding that there is an unbalanced geographical distribution of empirical research, whereas thematically 'CSR and ethics' and 'CSR and sustainable development' are seen as most important and upcoming themes in international business research. Notwithstanding, the authors point to limited availability of data on MNE's CSR and sustainability, and a pronounced location focus, which often accounts for the use of contextually embedded case studies emphasizing the role of institutions, industry dynamics, and consumer choice of products in relation to their attitude to CSR and type of market. The study used publications from four of the most prominent international business journals. Jamali and Karam's (2016) review has contextualized MNEs' CSR in activities performed in developing countries synthesizing extant research into five key themes, namely, institutional antecedents in the national business system, macro-level antecedents outside the national business system, multiplicity of actors involved in formal and informal governance, nuanced forms of CSR expressions, and varied scope of detrimental CSR consequences related to the level of development. The final review study by Sun et al. (2021) explores the theories, contexts, methods, and themes of studies focusing on MNEs' nonmarket strategy in cross-border institutional complexity, suggesting a framework of themes and sub-themes reflecting institutional complexity in relation to MNEs' corporate political activity, MNEs' strategic CSR, and the intersection of these themes. Based on the analysis and synthesis in this review, the authors suggest the adoption of a micro foundational perspective with four future research thrusts and identify key research questions, theoretical lenses, and possible methodologies. Nevertheless, the study leaves space for a more extensive and systematized approach to exploring MNE's CSR practices, as well as for understanding what MNEs' CSR managers think about research generated managerial implications, and how CSR researchers view future key research areas with a focus on CSR.

Despite valuable insights gained from these review efforts, some of them are outdated, others paid attention to few aspects of MNEs' CSR activities in specific contexts, while still others examined CSR in conjunction with other strategic behaviors of MNEs. There has also been limited attempt to examine evolutionary changes in this line of research over time to be able to establish trends. Moreover, only some of these reviews have explored aspects relating to the theories used and methodologies employed by the empirical research. Furthermore, practical implications derived from the studies reviewed have either neglected or partially addressed synthesizing managerial insights. Finally, although most of these reviews provided useful guidelines for future research, these are somewhat

out of date considering the dynamic nature of the CSR phenomenon in a rapidly transforming world.

This article aims to fill these needs in the literature and extend our understanding of MNEs' CSR practices. It provides an updated, in-depth, and extensive coverage of various issues related to the CSR practices of MNEs, identifies trends in the evolution of this line of research, and derives insights from both practitioners and academics specializing in this field. Specifically, we have three major goals to accomplish: (a) to review, evaluate, and establish trends on the theoretical, methodological, and thematic aspects of extant empirical research on MNEs' CSR activities from 1997 up to 2022; (b) to assimilate key managerial implications derived from the empirical studies reviewed, as well as evaluate their importance by MNE managers; and (c) to obtain the views of IB academics regarding recommended directions for future research on the subject.

We contribute to the IB and CSR literature in three major ways. First, we provide a rich inventory of knowledge on the MNE's CSR practices as integrated in their core strategy. By evaluating this body of research on theoretical, methodological, and thematic grounds, we offer useful insights to IB researchers to better design their studies and identify gaps that need to be filled. We also provide IB educators with a consolidated knowledge of the MNEs' CSR practices, that will help to enrich their teaching material with useful information. Additionally, we offer a chronological evolution of extant empirical research on issues relating to MNEs and their CSR over a 25-year period, which helps to establish trends and identify areas of future improvement. Tracking such evolutionary directions of knowledge will serve as a solid platform that will advance theory and practice on the subject.

Second, we propose a set of managerial implications extracted from the empirical studies included in our review, which are evaluated in terms of their importance by the managers of MNEs from different countries and augmented with additional input provided by them. This will help IB practitioners to acquire useful insights for identifying, understanding, and effectively handling various societal issues across different foreign markets, as well as crafting sound CSR strategies on a global scale. At the same time, they can recognize diverse factors that might inhibit or drive the whole CSR strategy process, from development to implementation, and its impact on financial and non-financial performance outcomes. Public policymakers in both home and host countries will also gain insights of how to better meet the needs of various stakeholder groups regarding societal issues, as well as collaborate with MNEs to formulate appropriate policies and programs.

Third, we suggest useful guidelines about future areas of research regarding the involvement of MNEs in CSR activities, which are derived from a survey among IB academics specializing on the subject. Their views, ideas, and suggestions as to how this field should progress, coupled with priorities that need to be set in investigating various thematic areas, are invaluable for both mature and neophyte researchers. Though this field of study has attracted the interest of many scholars for years now, there are still multiple issues focusing on the link between MNEs and CSR that require attention, while many other issues have emerged as a result of new developments, such as the recent coronavirus pandemic, the ongoing military confrontations, and hyper-inflationary pressures in the world economy.

The remaining parts of this article are organized as follows. First, we explain the method adopted to identify the empirical articles included in our review and the coding process followed. Then, we present a chronological analysis of the findings of this review, categorized into theoretical aspects, research design, scope, method, and thematic emphasis. In the next section, we summarize key managerial implications emerging from our review, augmented with insights from MNE practitioners. We then provide directions for future research based on input received from a survey among academics specializing in the field. In the final sections, we discuss our findings, draw conclusions, and explain the limitations of our study.

2 Review Method

2.1 Article Identification Process

Our review covered all empirical studies focusing on the CSR activities of MNEs that were published from 1997 (when the first empirical study on the subject appeared) till the end of 2022. To identify relevant articles, we took three steps (see Appendix B for a summary of the article identification and selection process). First, we systematically searched various electronic databases, namely the Web of Science, Scopus, ABI/Inform Collection (ProQuest), and EBSCO. In doing so, we used keywords, such as 'MNEs', 'MNCs', 'multinational enterprises', 'multinational companies', 'multinational firms', 'multinational organizations', 'transnational firms', 'global corporations', 'international firms', 'international business', and 'subsidiaries', which were combined with various CSR-related terms, such as 'CSR', 'environmental sustainability', 'corporate social responsibility', 'social responsibility', 'sustainability', 'corporate citizenship', 'corporate ethical behavior', 'corporate responsible behavior', and 'corporate social performance'. The outcome of this process was to identify 5385 articles.

We then proceeded with a manual check of the abstracts (and in some cases of the full content) of these publications to remove those that: (a) were irrelevant and/or beyond the scope of our study; (b) appeared in books, book chapters, conference proceedings, or practitioners' magazines; (c) had the form of an editorial comment, research note, reply, review, or meta-analysis; (d) were not of an empirical nature; (e) were not written in English language; and (f) referred to studies that were not published in journals contained in the 2021 Academic Journal Guide of the U.K. Chartered Association of Business Schools. The outcome of this clearance process was to reduce the total number of publications to 1,927. Of those, 1,738 articles were duplicates and had to be removed, resulting in a net sample of 189 articles.

Subsequently, we thoroughly examined the reference lists of these publications to identify relevant, eligible articles that were not traced from our electronic search, resulting in six additional articles. We also carefully checked the table of contents of various issues of the top eight journals specializing in international business, namely, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Journal of World Business*, *Global Strategy Journal*, *Management International Review*, *Journal of International Management*, *Journal of International Marketing*, *International Business Review*,

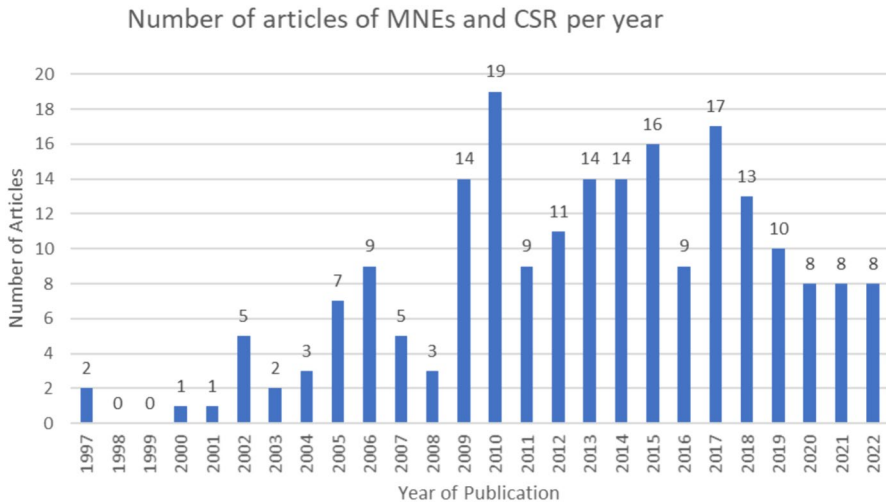


Fig. 1 Chronological evolution of empirical research on MNEs' CSR activities

and *International Marketing Review*, and spotted ten other relevant articles. Finally, we checked the reference lists of prior reviews on the subject (i.e., Egri & Ralston, 2008; Jamali & Karam, 2016; Kolk & van Tulder, 2010; Sun et al., 2021), revealing three extra articles suitable for our review.

The final sample comprised 208 articles published in 57 academic journals shown in Appendix C, with the top five contributing journals being the *Journal of Business Ethics* (25.5%), *Journal of International Business Studies* (7.7%), *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* (6.7%), *Management International Review* (6.3%), and *Business and Society* (5.3%). For analytical purposes, the articles were grouped into three time periods, namely, 1997–2006 (14.4%), 2007–2014 (42.8%), and 2015–2022 (42.8%),¹ as well as divided into those published in low-tier (ABS 1 and 2) (19.7%) and top-tier journals (ABS 3, 4, and 4*) (80.3%). Figure 1 shows the chronological evolution of this research, which denotes a growing interest among IB scholars to investigate the subject, especially considering the intensification of social, environmental, and economic problems worldwide over the years.

2.2 Coding Process

Short-listed articles were subsequently content analyzed based on a coding protocol that incorporated five sections focusing on: (a) theoretical aspects, that is, number of

¹ The cut-off points for each time period were set based on the fact that: (a) 1997 was the year when the first article on CSR practices of MNEs appeared; (b) 2007 marked the year when the United Nations introduced the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); and (c) 2015 was the year when the United Nations Sustainability Development Agenda (incorporating 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)) was signed. Notably, MNEs were expected to play a key role in implementing both MDGs and SDGs.

theories, status of theories, and type of theory employed; (b) research design, that is, type of research design, variable association, temporal focus, and topical scope; (c) research scope, that is, number of countries covered, focal geographic region, number of industries, type of product, and unit of analysis; (d) research method, that is, sampling design, sample size, data collection method, and analytical method; and (e) thematic emphasis, that is, macro-environmental factors, industry influences, stakeholder pressures, organizational/managerial determinants, outward CSR strategy, inward CSR strategy, CSR approach, CSR communication activity, CSR performance outcomes, and miscellaneous issues.² The coding protocol was accompanied by a manual, which provided detailed explanations of each of the categories, variables, and items used.

Two of the co-authors were responsible for coding the content of the articles selected. However, before embarking on the full-scale coding, all co-authors discussed in detail the purpose of the study, the various categories of variables included in the coding protocol, and the specific items contained within each variable. Initially, both coders content analyzed a small number of articles, the coding was discussed to clarify any issues that emerged in the process, and after ensuring that any coding concerns were addressed, the two coders proceeded to code independently the full set of articles. With the completion of the coding, the research team compared and discussed the data sets obtained from the two coders, which revealed a very high inter-coder reliability score, ranging from a minimum of 89% to a maximum of 98% (depending on the specific item examined). When there were discrepancies, the two coders explained and justified their selected code to the research team, and then, following a thorough discussion, a commonly agreed code was reached. The finalized data set was subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics, taking the form of percentage frequencies.

3 Review Findings

3.1 Theoretical Aspects

Table 1 outlines the theoretical aspects of studies focusing on the CSR activities of MNEs. Three-tenths (30.3%) of these studies lacked a clear theoretical framework, indicating that much of the existing research (e.g., Amato & Amato, 2011) was conducted without a well-defined theoretical basis, which could be partly explained by the emergent state of CSR knowledge and practice (Egri & Ralston, 2008). However, there has been a noticeable improvement over time, with the share of studies without an explicit theoretical foundation decreasing from 53.3% during the period

² With regard to theoretical assessment, a preliminary content analysis of the articles selected identified 14 different theories, which provided the basis for their subsequent coding. Coding categories for the methodological assessment were derived from previous literature reviews (e.g., Aykol and Leonidou, 2015; Sun et al., 2021). Finally, the coding categories of the thematic assessment were extracted from previous review efforts on the subject (e.g., Eteokleous, Leonidou, & Katsikeas, 2016; Jamali and Karam, 2016) and purified after a consultation with a panel of academic experts in the field.

Table 1 Theoretical aspects of empirical studies focusing on MNEs' CSR activities

Issues related to theoretical aspects	Total (n=208)%	Time period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
Number of theories used						
One	52.9	30.1	49.5	64.0	39.0	56.3
Two	12.5	3.3	18.0	10.1	7.3	13.8
Three	3.8	10.0	2.2	3.4	–	4.8
Four or more	0.5	3.3	–	–	–	0.6
No Theory	30.3	53.3	30.3	22.5	53.7	24.5
Status of theories employed						
Existing theory	48.1	26.7	34.9	68.5	41.4	49.9
Theory extension	20.2	20.0	32.6	7.9	4.9	23.8
New theory	1.4	–	2.2	1.1	–	1.8
Theoretical perspective used^a						
Institutional theory	27.8	16.7	20.2	39.3	14.6	31.1
Stakeholder theory	14.8	13.3	16.9	13.5	17.1	14.4
Legitimacy theory	7.7	13.3	9.0	4.5	4.9	8.1
Resource-based view	3.8	–	4.5	4.5	2.4	4.1
Other	31.0	23.3	35.9	33.7	17.0	37.0

^aMultiple applications possible

1997–2006 to 22.5% in the period 2015–2022, which partly reflects increasing pressures by journal editors on authors to provide a theoretical reasoning of the CSR issues investigated. Of the studies that possessed a clear theoretical embeddedness, slightly more than a half (52.9%) employed a single theory (with an upward trend over time), as in the case of Aguilera-Caracuel et al.'s (2015) study, which applied Stakeholder theory to demonstrate that the extension of MNEs' activities to culturally distant countries provides an opportunity to tackle market-specific CSR demands and improve corporate social performance. However, the use of two theories or more was relatively limited (reported in 16.3% of the articles). For example, Beddewelaa and Herzig (2013) employed both Institutional theory and Legitimacy theory to uncover the barriers and enablers encountered by MNE subsidiaries in emerging countries when engaging in corporate social reporting. Notably, this over-reliance on a single theory may limit the depth and breadth of understanding the MNEs' engagement in CSR activities due to the complexity of the numerous factors involved across different levels of analysis (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). In contrast, a multi-theory approach can provide a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the subject (Mayer & Sparrowe, 2013), as well as allow for the testing of competing theories against each other (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

Approximately half (48.1%) of the studies reviewed were anchored in existing theories, with this being more evident in recently conducted research. This provides

a “safer approach” to researchers in their investigations, in the sense that traditional theories, like Institutional theory and Resource-based view, have received wide acceptance in doing research in both domestic and international contexts. Also, many researchers are familiar with these theories and therefore can be readily comprehended and applied in conducting CSR-related research among MNEs. Having an extension of an existing theory was reported by a fifth (20.2%) of the studies (albeit showing a sharp decline in the last period), with this usually taking the form of adding more constructs and topics to enrich the explanatory power of existing variables. For example, Wiig and Kolstad's (2010) study investigated how strategic CSR can be combined with Resource curse theory (Auty, 1993) to indicate that through CSR the effect of patronage can be facilitated in resource-rich countries. Limited attempts (e.g., Gifford & Kestler, 2008; Jamali, 2010) were made to develop a new theory (building mainly on Grounded theory) aiming to identify new themes and patterns, particularly focusing on the long-debated issue of standardization/localization of the MNE's CSR strategy.

The globally dispersed (HQs and subsidiary-driven) and multifaceted nature of MNEs' CSR activities has been responsible for the employment of a wide spectrum of theoretical platforms, which were mainly derived from the management, marketing, and economics disciplines. In total, fourteen different theories were identified by our review used within the context of MNEs and CSR, with the most commonly employed being Institutional theory (27.8%), Stakeholder theory (14.8%), Legitimacy theory (7.2%), and Resource-based view (3.8%). Notably, for those studies adopting a multi-theory perspective, the most frequent theoretical combinations were between Institutional theory and Legitimacy theory (e.g., Rathert, 2016), Institutional theory and the Resource-based view (e.g., Escobar & Vredenburg, 2011), Stakeholder theory and Legitimacy theory (e.g., Reimann et al., 2012), and between the Resource-based view and Institutional theory (e.g., Aguilera-Caracuel et al., 2012). Obviously, the employment of such theoretical paradigmatic pluralism is vital to better grasp the multiplicity and complexity of CSR issues faced by MNEs in the home and host markets, such as the role of HQs and their subsidiaries in developing and implementing the CSR strategy, the employment of localized CSR activities in view of different stakeholder requirements across foreign markets, and resource and competence heterogeneity in using CSR to overcome the liability of foreignness.

Regarding the most dominant theories, Institutional theory was primarily used to understand the various institutional forces (e.g., stringent institutional templates, informal institutions, norms of behavior) in the MNE's portfolio of operations and their effect on the adoption and implementation of CSR activities in multiple host countries (Marano & Kostova, 2016). In fact, there has been a growing adoption of this theory by researchers in recent years, signifying the important role of institutions in both home and host countries in shaping MNEs' CSR practices (Risi et al., 2023). By capitalizing on the concept of institutional isomorphism, this theory explores the tendency of organizations to conform to the norms and expectations of their institutional environment to gain legitimacy and social acceptance. In the context of MNEs, this may involve adopting CSR practices that are consistent with the norms and expectations of the home and/or host country. However, MNEs face “institutional duality”, as their subsidiaries

have to conform with host country pressures for legitimacy by adopting locally accepted practices and their HQ's pressures to be aligned with overall corporate CSR strategies and policies (Hillman & Wan, 2005).

Stakeholder theory argues that firms have different stakeholders and must consider those that can affect MNEs' CSR activities or are affected by the MNEs' CSR-related decisions. Such stakeholders include suppliers, customers, shareholders, investors, employees, local communities, political groups, governments, NGOs, and mass media. A central argument of this theory is that firms have an obligation to all stakeholders to act in their interest. It also highlights the notion of 'legitimacy' achieved with various stakeholders as a license to operate in the home and host markets, hence widely used to identify cross-country differences in the CSR practices of MNEs due to variations in stakeholder expectations (Jamali, 2010). These stem from differences in stakeholder power, interest, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell et al., 1997), which define the type of stakeholder in relation to the MNE. The adoption of CSR practices is thus informed by the motives of MNEs to achieve legitimacy with their global powerful stakeholders and align CSR initiatives with corporate values. In addition, host country stakeholders that have interest, local legitimacy, and urgency may place demands on local CSR activities to legitimate and support MNE operations in a foreign market location (Oyedele & Firat, 2018).

Legitimacy theory is rooted in the social contract between an MNE and the community in which the firm operates and benefits from local economic resources (Ghozali & Chariri, 2007). According to Sethi (1975) corporate "social responsibility implies bringing corporate behavior up to a level where it is congruent with the prevailing social norms, values, and expectations of performance" (p. 62) and it is prescriptive in nature being associated with firms trying to legitimize their economic activities with communities and the society at large. Consequently, to gain legitimacy, MNEs must develop ethical and sustainable business practices in an economical, socially responsible, and eco-friendly way. In addition, MNEs can indirectly strengthen their legitimacy as the value of the company can be enhanced in the eyes of investors and the wider society by genuinely disclosing their CSR practices. Some scholars (e.g., Ahmad & Sulaiman, 2004) also argue that the engagement of MNEs in CSR can minimize the legitimacy gap between their activities and the expectations of the society, as well as help to achieve better congruence with the values of the wider community in both home and host countries.

The Resource-based view (Barney, 1991), although widely used in other research areas of the IB field, was employed on a relatively limited scale. However, as some firm resources are rare, inimitable, valuable, and unique to organizations, certain CSR resources can be key for the MNE's competitive differentiation and advantage (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). This theory has been mostly used to study CSR as part of an overall MNE strategy, as it puts an emphasis on how CSR utilization can improve total performance without exploring CSR tensions at subsidiary and headquarter level due to resource and competence heterogeneity (Griffin & Mahon, 1997).

3.2 Research Design

Table 2 presents the results relating to the research design of the studies reviewed. Regarding research approach, studies were almost equally divided between those following a quantitative approach (46.6%) and those employing qualitative research (43.8%). However, although the latter was more prevalent in articles published during the period 1997–2006, the emphasis has changed during recent years with about three-fifths (59.6%) of the studies published during the period 2015–2022 being quantitative. This tendency toward more quantitative research can be justified by the fact that in a rather new research area, as in the case of CSR activities of MNEs, studies tend to be inductive, theory generating, and qualitative, whereas with the growing maturity of a research area, studies usually become more deductive, theory testing, and quantitative. Also, the increasing availability of large databases (e.g., Thomson Reuters' ASSET4) covering issues relating to CSR aspects of MNEs has provided a further stimulus for conducting quantitative studies using secondary data (Pisani et al., 2017). However, although the adoption of a mixed-method approach could provide richer answers to key research questions due to its ability to cross-verify findings from combining qualitative with quantitative information, this was employed by only a small proportion (i.e., 9.7%) of the studies reviewed. This is the case, for example, of Preuss's et al., (2016) study, which adopted an exploratory mixed method design to examine the impact of developing country-based MNEs' degree of internationalization on the adoption of different codes of conduct across various geographic regions.

In terms of variable association, the majority (59.6%) of the studies investigating the CSR activities of MNEs adopted a descriptive rather than a causal approach. However, the proportion of causal studies increased dramatically over time, from only 30.0% in the period 1997–2006 to more than half (55.1%) in the period 2015–2022, signifying the need for examining cause-and-effect relationships among the numerous variables involved, such as drivers, outcomes, and moderators of CSR. This is a natural development observed also in the wider IB field, where scholars often use descriptive research to have an initial overview of a novel phenomenon by trying to understand its characteristics (Nielsen et al., 2020). As the research area matures and there is more available information, researchers tend to ask questions about causality to gain a more in-depth knowledge of the relationships between constructs.

In terms of temporal focus, the overwhelming majority (80.8%) of the studies had a cross-sectional nature, meaning that data were collected at a single point in time. However, the dynamic nature of CSR activities, coupled with the fact that cause-and-effect relationships between constructs require some time to elapse, necessitate longitudinal research, which, however, was the case of only 19.2% of the articles reviewed. This is probably due to time and financial constraints encountered by researchers not only in this line of research, but also in the wider IB field, which makes them opt for the more convenient cross-sectional approach (Hult et al., 2008). Despite these constraints, our analysis shows a gradual increase in the proportion of longitudinal studies, from 16.7% in the period 1997–2006 to 24.7% in the most recent time period. In fact, longitudinal research was highly observed in the case of

Table 2 Research design of empirical studies focusing on MNEs' CSR activities

Issues related to research design	Total (n = 208) %	Time period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
Research method						
Quantitative	46.6	30.0	39.3	59.6	46.3	46.7
Qualitative	43.8	63.3	49.5	31.4	51.2	41.9
Mixed-methods	9.6	6.7	11.2	9.0	2.5	11.4
Variable association						
Descriptive	59.6	70.0	70.8	44.9	63.4	58.7
Causal	40.4	30.0	29.2	55.1	36.6	41.3
Temporal focus						
Cross-sectional	80.8	83.3	85.4	75.3	73.2	82.6
Longitudinal	19.2	16.7	14.6	24.7	26.8	17.4
Topical scope ^a						
Statistical analysis	39.4	33.3	35.9	44.9	26.8	42.5
Case study	19.7	26.7	21.4	15.7	24.4	18.5
Interview	21.6	26.7	24.7	16.9	24.4	21.0
Reports/websites/codes of conduct	27.4	36.7	22.5	29.2	39.0	24.6
Other	6.3	13.3	6.7	3.4	0.5	6.6

^aMultiple applications possible

causal studies using mainly secondary databases, aiming to establish causality, such as between CSR strategy and performance (e.g., Jiang et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2023).

The topical scope of the studies reviewed was highly dominated by statistical analysis (reported in 39.4% of the articles), which was usually found in studies adopting a causal approach. Thus, following the upward trend observed in causal research, statistical analysis also rose over time, reaching 44.9% during the period 2015–2022. A notable characteristic of this line of research is the extensive use of company reports, websites, and, in some cases, written codes of conduct, mentioned in 27.4% of the articles reviewed. For example Zhao et al. (2014) draw on organizational documents, media articles, and research reports to explore why MNEs frequently encounter CSR crises in emerging markets, while Perego and Kolk (2012) use company reports to explore how MNEs adopt assurance practices to develop and sustain organizational accountability for CSR. Despite the usefulness of secondary information, its use fell over time, from 36.7% in 1997–2004 to 29.2% in 2015–2022, which is surprising given the importance of text mining and natural language processing as approaches to answer 'sensitive' research questions, such as those related to CSR (Kobayashi et al., 2018; Pandey & Pandey, 2019; Schmiedel et al., 2019). Notably, about two-fifths (19.7%) of the articles employed case studies, while more than a fifth (21.6%) used in-depth interviews, aiming to obtain more insightful information regarding the CSR practices of MNEs.

3.3 Research Scope

Table 3 provides an overview of the scope of research conducted on the CSR activities of MNEs. As regards the number of countries covered, more than two-fifths (45.2%) of the studies focused on a single country, with an upward trend observed (from 36.7% in the early phases of this research to 49.4% during the period 2015–2022). Here, the purpose was mainly to explore CSR developments by solely concentrating on MNEs originating from a single country or operating within a specific host country. However, the problem with single-country studies is that they may introduce a biased perspective, as selected countries may have unique characteristics, regulations, or cultural norms that influence MNEs' CSR practices differently compared to other countries, limiting in this way the generalizability of findings (Franke & Richey, 2010). Other studies (representing 38.4% of the total) adopted a multi-country approach (usually covering three countries or more), with the purpose of drawing comparisons of MNEs' CSR practices across different countries (e.g., Bu et al., 2023) and/or unpack how different cultural and institutional contexts affect these practices (e.g., Carney et al., 2022).

The primary focal geographic region of this research was Asia, reported by about half (48.1%) of the studies, with this region experiencing an increasing attention over the years. This reflects the growing significance of the various emerging markets in the area (particularly China), as well as the increasing role in international trade played by MNEs originating from countries in this region. Europe (particularly the United Kingdom) and North America (particularly the U.S.A) were also well-studied geographic regions, reported by 33.2% and 26.0% of the studies respectively.

Table 3 Research scope of empirical studies focusing on MNEs' CSR activities

Issues related to research scope	Total (n=208) %	Time period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
Number of countries covered						
One country	45.2	36.7	43.8	49.4	41.4	46.1
Two countries	13.9	3.3	14.6	16.9	17.1	13.2
Three countries or more	24.5	33.3	30.3	15.7	17.1	26.3
Not specified	16.3	26.7	11.2	18.0	24.4	14.4
Focal geographic region^a						
Asia	48.1	43.3	42.7	55.1	39.0	50.3
Europe	33.2	46.7	41.6	20.2	31.7	33.5
North America	26.0	50.0	28.1	15.7	24.4	26.3
Latin America	17.3	26.7	23.6	7.9	12.2	18.6
Africa	11.5	10.0	12.4	11.2	12.2	11.4
Oceania	1.9	6.7	1.1	1.1	4.9	1.2
Not specified	9.1	–	5.6	15.7	14.6	7.8
Number of industries covered						
One	26.4	26.7	28.1	24.7	31.7	25.1
Two to four industries	13.0	13.3	18.0	7.9	14.6	12.6
Five to nine industries	13.9	3.3	13.5	18.0	4.9	16.5
Ten industries or more	29.3	43.3	28.1	25.8	19.5	31.6
Not specified	7.7	10.0	3.4	11.2	9.8	7.1
Not applicable	9.6	3.3	9.0	12.4	19.5	7.1
Type of products focus^a						
Oil/mining products	20.7	26.7	16.9	22.5	21.9	20.4
Consumer products	50.0	50.0	53.9	46.1	41.4	53.9
Industrial goods	43.8	63.3	39.3	41.6	43.9	43.7
Services	38.5	36.7	42.7	34.8	24.4	41.9
Not specified	22.1	16.7	16.9	29.2	31.7	19.8
Unit of analysis^a						
Headquarters	55.3	70.0	47.2	58.4	63.4	53.3
Subsidiary unit	41.8	26.7	37.1	40.4	26.8	45.5
Regional headquarters	8.7	13.3	7.9	7.9	7.3	8.4
Other	3.8	–	6.7	2.2	7.3	4.2
Not specified	3.4	16.7	2.2	–	7.3	2.4

^aMultiple applications possible

However, as opposed to Asia, research interest in these regions experienced a decrease over time. Latin American countries (particularly Brazil and Argentina) were in the focus of only more than a sixth (17.3%) of the studies, which again experienced decreasing attention over time, and the same was also true with regard to Oceania, which was the focus of only a tiny proportion (1.9%) of studies.

Our review revealed a great variation in the number of industries covered in this line of research. More than a quarter (26.4%) of the studies reviewed focused exclusively on a single industry, with the purpose of examining industry-specific issues concerning CSR or exploring how MNEs in specific industrial sectors leverage CSR. Some common examples of single industries examined were retailing (e.g., Barin-Cruz & Boehe, 2010), banking (e.g., Campbell et al., 2012), and mining (e.g., Yakovleva & Vazquez-Brust, 2012). Two to four industries or five to nine industries was the focus of 13.0% and 13.9% of the studies respectively, while the largest proportion (39.3%) of studies investigated ten countries or more (although experiencing a slight decrease over time). This growing emphasis on multi-industry studies is justifiable on three major grounds: (a) the need to identify differences in MNEs' CSR activities across different industrial sectors; (b) the extensive use of secondary research using large databases that include a wealth of information on wide variety of industries; and (c) the need to provide a credible generalization of the research findings obtained (Franke & Richey, 2010).

In terms of product focus, the emphasis was mainly on consumer goods (50.0% of the studies), while industrial goods represented 43.3% of the total. Emphasis was mainly put on the oil/mining industry (20.7% of the studies), attributable to this industry's harmful impact on the environment, as well as increasing pressures by governments, regulatory bodies, and activists on firms in this sector to behave in a more socially responsible manner. The service sector, especially banking, hospitality, and retailing, experienced a relatively high research attention (reported by 38.5% of the studies). This reflects the growing importance of service firms in the global economy and their significant engagement in FDI activities, which makes them increasingly exposed to societal problems in host countries.

In more than half (55.3%) of studies, the unit of analysis was the MNEs' HQs, where strategic decisions are made for the firm's involvement in CSR activities and how these are implemented (either on a standardized or localized basis) across their entire network of subsidiaries (e.g., Asmussen & Fosfuri, 2019; Filatotchev & Stahl, 2015; Jamali et al., 2020). However, there was a high proportion (41.8%) of studies that focused on the subsidiary level, which is not surprising given the fact that MNEs are best seen as differentiated networks consisting of a set of semi-autonomous units that can vary in their CSR activities depending on the idiosyncrasies of each host market (Ciabuschi et al., 2012). Regional HQs is the unit of analysis of only a small proportion of studies (8.7%), reflecting the desire of some MNEs to better coordinate and manage their operations (including those relating to CSR) in specific geographic regions of strategic importance, such as the Far East (Mahnke et al., 2012).

3.4 Research Method

Table 4 provides an overview of the research method used in the studies focusing on MNEs' CSR practices. Sampling design relied in the majority (29.3%) of cases on non-probability samples, usually taking the form of convenience sampling, snowball sampling, and purposive criterion sampling (e.g., Bondy et al., 2012; El-Bassiouny & Letmathe, 2018). Probability sampling, such as systematic cluster sampling, was less frequently employed (by 7.2% of the studies), with this being more evident in studies aiming to draw statistical inferences about a larger population. Although non-probability sampling is more convenient and cost-effective than probability sampling, it may introduce bias that affects sample representativeness and make research findings less generalizable to the total population (Aykol & Leonidou, 2015). Notably, there was also a smaller proportion of studies (12.5% of the total) that covered the whole population.

Sample sizes varied significantly, depending on the type of study used. As expected, studies adopting a qualitative approach, used relatively small sample sizes, usually comprising less than 99 units. These had mainly the form of case studies or in-depth interviews, aiming to obtain rich, contextualized understanding of specific aspects related to MNEs' CSR, rather than having statistical generalizability. Relatively small sample sizes were also utilized in the case of studies using reports/web-sites/codes of conduct, aiming to extract information regarding the CSR activities of MNEs. However, regarding quantitative studies, the tendency was to employ larger samples (usually exceeding the 200 mark), with a notable number of studies, usually those using data extracted from secondary sources, having sample sizes exceeding 500 units. A case in point is Jiang et al.'s (2020) study which analyzed 3,496 foreign subsidiaries across 67 countries to investigate the relationship between parent firm's CSR strategy and subsidiary performance.

This line of research is characterized by a wide variety of data collection methods, with CSR reports providing the most common source of information (mentioned in 33.2% of the studies). However, the use of this source showed a steady decrease over time, from 36.7% during the period 1997–2006 to 25.8% in the period 2015–2022. This can be probably attributed to increasing accusations of “social-washing” and “social-hushing” that often leads to problems of over-reporting or under-reporting of the firm's CSR activities respectively (Falchi et al., 2022; Mahoney et al., 2013). The second most frequent data collection method were questionnaires, using mail (13.0%), personal (11.1%), or electronic (6.3%) modes of contact. More than a quarter (26.9%) of the studies employed databases (experiencing an upward trend over time), with the most common being that of Thomson Reuters' ASSET4 (e.g., Bu et al., 2023; Carney et al., 2022; Graafland & Noorderhaven, 2020) and Sustainalytics (e.g., Fiaschi et al., 2017; Surroca et al., 2013). In-depth interviews were used by 19.2% of the studies (e.g., Rodgers et al., 2019; Yin & Jamali, 2016), providing useful material to develop company case studies. For example, Obara and Peattie (2018) used semi-structured interviewing to explore the views and experiences of HR professionals in 22 UK-based multinational firms, who were also involved in developing their company's CSR approach in relation to human resources. Another 16.8% of the studies content-analyzed websites to derive information regarding

Table 4 Research method of empirical studies focusing on MNEs' CSR activities

Issues related to research method	Total (n = 208) %	Time period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
Sampling design						
Probability	7.2	3.3	5.6	10.1	12.2	6.0
Non-probability	29.3	26.7	32.6	27.0	31.7	28.7
Whole population	12.5	10.0	4.5	21.3	12.2	12.6
Not specified	3.4	–	3.4	4.5	9.8	1.8
Not applicable	47.6	60.0	53.9	37.1	34.1	50.9
Sample size						
Quantitative studies						
Up to 99	10.6	–	10.1	14.6	9.7	10.8
100–249	15.4	16.7	13.4	16.9	19.5	14.4
259–499	9.1	10.0	9.0	9.0	7.3	9.6
500 or more	10.6	6.7	4.5	18.0	7.3	11.4
Not specified	0.5	–	–	1.1	–	0.6
Qualitative studies						
Up to 99	23.6	30.0	24.7	20.2	12.2	23.9
100–249	4.3	–	4.5	5.6	–	3.0
259–499	0.5	–	–	1.1	–	3.6
500 or more	1.0	–	–	2.2	–	1.2
Not specified	1.9	–	2.3	2.3	4.9	–
Reports/websites/codes of conduct						
Up to 99	16.8	23.3	20.2	11.2	19.5	16.1
100–249	3.9	–	5.6	3.4	2.4	4.2
259–499	0.5	–	1.1	–	–	6.0
500 or more	2.4	3.3	2.3	2.3	–	3.0
Not specified	2.4	10.0	2.3	–	7.3	1.2
Data collection method^a						
Maill questionnaire	13.0	20.0	13.5	10.1	9.7	13.8
Electronic questionnaire	6.3	6.7	4.5	7.9	9.7	5.4
Personal questionnaire	11.1	3.3	11.2	13.5	12.2	11.4
In-depth interviews	19.2	23.3	24.7	12.4	19.5	19.1
Databases	26.9	6.7	19.1	41.6	19.5	28.7
Websites	17.8	10.0	24.7	13.5	9.7	19.8
Reports	33.2	36.7	39.3	25.8	34.1	32.9
Media articles	5.8	3.3	6.7	5.6	–	7.2
Other	8.7	20.0	6.7	6.7	9.7	8.4
Not specified	0.5	–	1.1	–	–	0.6

Table 4 (continued)

Issues related to research method	Total (n = 208) %	Time period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
Statistical method used						
Descriptive statistics	7.7	16.7	6.7	5.6	9.7	7.2
Uni-/bivariate	2.9	–	3.4	3.4	2.4	3.0
Multivariate	15.4	6.7	19.1	14.6	12.2	16.1
Modeling	24.5	13.3	11.2	41.6	24.5	24.6
Not applicable	49.5	63.3	59.6	34.8	51.2	49.1

^aMultiple applications possible

MNEs' CSR activities. A case in point is Jose and Lee's (2007) study, which analyzed the content of corporate website disclosures concerning environmental leadership, planning, structure, and control issues. Other data sources, such as media articles and internal company records (e.g., meeting minutes), were rarely used.

Statistical analysis had mainly the form of advanced modeling (reported by 24.5% of the studies and showing an upward trend over time), which reflects a growing need to better grasp the complex relationships between the variables involved in MNEs' CSR activities, as well as to account for confounding factors that may impact research findings. Structural equation modeling (e.g., Reimann et al., 2015) and multivariate statistical methods, such as hierarchical regression analysis (e.g., Zheng et al., 2015), three-stage least squares (e.g., Durand & Jacqueminet, 2015), and Heckman's two-stage selection models (e.g., Liu et al., 2018), were reported by 24.5% and 15.4% of the studies reviewed respectively.

3.5 Thematic Focus

Table 5 shows the topics on which research on the MNEs' CSR activities focused. These were classified into ten broad categories, namely, macro-environmental factors, industry-related influences, stakeholder pressures, organizational/managerial determinants, outward CSR strategy, inward CSR strategy, CSR approaches, CSR communication activity, CSR performance outcomes, and miscellaneous.

Macro-environmental factors (mentioned in 68.3% of the studies) was the third most dominant thematic area, with the underlying premise being the need to consider the role of wider contextual factors in designing MNEs' CSR activities across countries (Carney et al., 2022). Of those, the most widely examined were 'institutional factors', reported in 21.6% of the studies, which implies that the existence of a developed and mature institutional environment in foreign markets is likely to incentivize MNEs to engage in CSR practices (Zhao et al., 2014), while MNEs tend not to be so much socially responsible in countries where institutional arrangements are weak or absent (Kim et al., 2018). The role of 'political-legal forces', such as

Table 5 Thematic emphasis of empirical studies focusing on MNEs' CSR activities

Issues related to thematic emphasis	Total (n = 208) %	Time Period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
Macro-environmental factors	68.3	60.0	80.9	58.4	36.6	76.1
Institutional factors	21.6	10.0	23.6	23.6	4.9	25.7
Political-legal forces	17.8	16.7	18.0	18.0	17.1	17.9
Socio-cultural aspects	17.3	23.3	20.2	12.4	7.3	19.8
Economic factors	6.7	10.0	10.1	2.2	7.3	6.7
Physical/natural environment	1.9	–	4.5	–	–	2.4
Other	2.9	–	4.5	2.2	–	3.6
Industry-related influences	23.1	23.3	23.6	22.5	9.8	26.3
International standards/codes	13.0	10.0	10.1	16.9	2.5	15.5
Industry characteristics/practices	8.2	10.0	10.1	5.6	7.3	8.4
Other	1.9	3.3	3.3	–	–	2.4
Stakeholder pressures	27.9	46.7	23.6	25.8	19.5	29.9
Special interest groups	14.9	13.3	18.0	12.4	9.9	16.1
Local community actions	3.8	10.0	2.2	3.4	2.4	4.2
Mass/social media	3.8	10.0	2.2	3.4	2.4	4.2
Customer pressures	2.9	6.7	1.1	3.4	2.4	3.0
Other	2.4	6.7	2.2	3.4	2.4	2.4
Organizational/managerial determinants	69.4	60.0	54.9	87.6	46.3	76.9
Firm multinationality/internationalization	12.5	10.0	9.7	18.0	7.2	13.8
Headquarter characteristics	12.0	10.0	10.7	14.6	4.9	15.0
Subsidiary characteristics	11.5	3.3	11.7	10.1	12.2	8.4
Corporate governance issues	9.1	10.0	10.7	10.1	7.3	15.0

Table 5 (continued)

Issues related to thematic emphasis	Total (n = 208) %	Time Period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
HQ–subsidiary relationship	5.3	3.3	3.9	7.9	2.4	5.9
Managerial factors	5.3	10.0	4.5	4.5	2.4	5.9
Other	11.1	13.3	5.6	15.7	7.3	11.9
Outward CR strategy	76.9	66.7	73.0	84.3	43.9	85.0
Environmental issues	21.6	3.3	20.2	27.0	21.9	21.5
Community/social issues	17.8	13.3	16.9	20.2	9.8	19.8
Business ethicality	15.4	20.0	13.5	15.7	2.4	18.5
Human rights respect	9.1	3.3	9.0	11.2	4.9	10.2
Other	13.0	20.0	13.5	10.1	4.9	15.0
Inward CR strategy	34.1	16.7	34.8	39.3	21.9	36.5
Employee rights/labor policies	19.2	6.7	20.2	22.5	12.2	20.9
Internal code of conduct	6.3	6.7	7.9	4.5	7.3	6.0
Diversity issues	4.3	3.3	1.1	7.9	2.4	4.8
Other	3.8	–	5.6	3.4	–	4.8
CR approaches	17.8	13.3	15.7	21.3	9.8	19.7
Standardization versus adaptation	8.2	6.7	5.6	11.2	–	10.1
Proactiveness versus reactiveness	4.8	3.3	4.5	5.6	9.8	3.6
Other	4.8	3.3	5.6	4.5	–	6.0
CR communication activity	18.8	33.3	23.6	9.0	21.9	20.3
Social reporting/disclosure	12.0	13.3	13.5	7.9	14.6	11.3
Websites	2.9	6.7	3.4	1.1	2.4	3.0
Other	6.3	3.3	6.7	4.5	4.9	6.0

Table 5 (continued)

Issues related to thematic emphasis	Total (n = 208) %	Time Period			Journal quality	
		1997–2006 (n ₁ = 30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ = 89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ = 89) %	Low-tier (n ₃ = 41) %	Top-tier (n ₃ = 167) %
CR performance outcomes	24.0	16.7	13.5	37.1	43.9	19.1
Social/environmental performance	7.2	6.7	4.5	10.1	14.6	5.4
Financial/economic performance	4.3	6.7	2.2	5.6	12.2	2.4
Reputational performance	3.8	–	3.4	5.6	4.9	3.5
Market/customer performance	2.4	3.3	1.1	3.4	2.4	2.4
Other	6.3	–	2.2	12.4	9.8	5.4
Miscellaneous	15.4	10.0	20.2	11.2	4.9	17.9

government corruption, regulatory intensity, and political stability, in designing and implementing CSR activities by MNEs was also addressed by more than a sixth (17.8%) of the studies reviewed. ‘Socio-cultural aspects’ were also linked to MNEs’ CSR practices in another 17.3% of the studies, focusing mainly on the cultural orientation of MNEs and cultural distance between home and host countries (Campbell et al., 2012; Jung & Lee, 2018). Issues relating to ‘economic factors’ (e.g., economic inequalities) and the ‘physical/natural environment’ received much less attention (reported by 6.7% and 1.9% of the studies respectively).

The role of industry-related influences on the CSR activities of MNEs was the object of more than a fifth (23.1%) of the studies reviewed. Particular attention in this category was placed on ‘international standards/codes’ (13.0% of the studies), such as the UN Global Compact and Global Reporting Initiative, that act as certification mechanisms and exert pressures on MNEs to conform to their standards to achieve legitimacy in host markets (Ullah et al., 2021). Another 8.2% of the studies referred to the importance of ‘industry characteristics and practices’ as key influences on MNEs’ CSR behavior. For example, Durand and Jacqueminet (2015) found that local industry rivals, as external peers, lead the subsidiary to conform with norms prevailing in the host market, which may deviate it from the CSR priorities set by its HQs. Other industry-related factors, such as the role of national business systems impacting the adoption of codes of conduct (Bondy et al., 2012), attracted little research attention.

More than a quarter (27.9%) of the studies reviewed addressed the pressures of various stakeholder groups on MNEs regarding socially responsible issues. Of those, the role played by ‘special interest groups’, such as consumer associations, employee unions, and environmental groups, was the most frequently examined (14.9% of the studies). Although such pressures can increase the adoption of CSR practices by MNEs, it was shown that some firms tend to move their socially irresponsible practices (e.g., polluting the environment) to subsidiaries located in countries with lower pressures (also referred to as ‘pollution havens’) (Surroca et al., 2013). Local community actions were also investigated, albeit to a much lesser extent (3.8% of the studies). For example, Yang and Rivers (2009) demonstrated how community voice in the host country is likely to affect MNEs’ subsidiaries to adapt their CSR activities to host market conditions to gain external legitimacy. Despite the crucial role played by mass/social media in criticizing the MNEs’ CSR practices, this was the object of a small proportion of studies (3.8% of the total), focusing mainly on the host country’s media freedom and information needs of stakeholders in sending CSR-related messages (Jiang et al., 2020). Limited research (2.9% of the studies) also dealt with customer pressures, examining mainly the key role played by buyers in host markets in influencing MNEs to follow a responsive or strategic CSR approach (e.g., Rhee et al., 2018). Surprisingly, the role of suppliers, investors, and other stakeholder groups in influencing MNEs to adopt a corporate responsible behavior was rarely examined.

Organizational/managerial determinants of MNEs’ CSR activities was the second most widely studied area, reported by almost seven-tenths (69.4%) of the studies reviewed. Here, the most frequent factor examined was the level and scope of the MNEs’ multinationality/internationalization (12.5% of the studies),

with various researchers (e.g., Liu et al., 2018; Marano et al., 2017; Miska et al., 2016) stressing that the MNE's degree of internationalization affects the level and local responsiveness of its CSR activities in a host market. HQs' characteristics also received adequate attention (12.0% of the studies), with an increasing emphasis over time, focusing mainly on how the MNE's CSR affects its global operations (e.g., Morsing & Roepstorff, 2015). Another set of studies (11.5% of the total) dealt with the effect of subsidiary characteristics, such as size, age, and ownership status, on practicing CSR in a host country. For example, Reimann et al., (2015) found that subsidiary size and experience have no influence on the negative effect of administrative distance between home and host country and CSR commitment. A smaller proportion (9.1%) of studies paid particular attention to corporate governance-related issues, such as the potential firm's governance risk of corruption and its impact on CSR (e.g., Lopatta et al., 2017). The 'relationship between HQs and their subsidiaries' in adopting CSR practices was examined by only 5.3% of the studies (e.g., Barin-Cruz and Boehe, 2010; Dahms et al., 2022), although a slight increasing trend was observed. Surprisingly, little research emphasis (4.8% of the studies) was put on the role of managerial factors, examining mainly the role of characteristics (e.g., Dahms, 2020), attitudes (e.g., Pedersen, 2011), and leadership styles (e.g., Vigneau, 2020) of MNEs' managers in initiating and implementing CSR activities.

The vast majority (76.9%) of the studies reviewed covered specific outward-looking aspects of CSR strategy, with environmental issues and environmentally irresponsible behavior of MNEs (e.g., pollution, waste geographical dispersion to less developed countries, energy wastage) being the most investigated (21.6% of the studies). Community-related matters, such as sponsorship of events, money contribution to local communities, and supporting school programs/students, also received adequate emphasis (17.8% of the studies). Issues relating to business ethics was the object of 15.4% of the studies, referring mainly to means for corruption avoidance, transparency in business transactions, and transferring ethical codes to subsidiaries. Much less attention (9.1% of the total) was paid to human rights respect, with this often related to respecting the human rights of the MNE's collaborating partners (e.g., Macassa et al., 2022; Tashman et al., 2019).

Compared to outward-looking CSR strategy, factors relating to the inward-looking CSR strategy of MNEs were less investigated (34.1% of the studies). Of those, employee rights/labor policies was the most widely examined (19.2% of the studies), especially in recent years, with the emphasis centering mainly on employee training, employee well-being/care programs, and occupational health and safety. Various aspects relating to MNEs' internal code of conduct, such as transparency, respect in collaborating with peers, and integrity in serving customers, were examined on a less frequent basis (6.3% of the studies). Despite growing public concern in host countries for MNEs to embrace people's differences in terms of gender, race, nationality, and religion, issues relating to diversity received marginal research attention (3.8% of the studies).

MNEs' CSR approaches was the focus of 17.8% of the studies reviewed, with the emphasis primarily put on whether to standardize or adapt the CSR activity across different countries (8.2% of the studies). This is because operating in different

locations worldwide, MNEs face the challenge of balancing local and global CSR, as they have to take into consideration diverse local environments and socio-economic contexts (e.g., regulatory regimes, cultural norms, wider societal and community expectations), while maintaining consistency across the global corporation (Aguilera-Caracuel & Guerrero-Villegas, 2018). In relation to this, Filatotchev and Stahl (2015) proposed a transnational CSR approach, whereby the MNE creates and follows a global template for its CSR activities that ensures consistency across countries, while allowing local subsidiaries to adapt this template according to local needs and circumstances. Another common dilemma faced by MNEs is the adoption of a proactive or reactive stance toward CSR, examined by 4.8% of the studies, with most of them (e.g., Tolmie et al., 2020) showing a tendency by MNEs for a more reactive approach. However, while a proactive approach is adopted voluntarily and goes beyond the minimum regulatory requirements to contribute positively to society, the reactive approach is mostly driven by regulatory compliance and stakeholder pressures.

CSR communication activity by MNEs was investigated by approximately a fifth (18.8%) of the studies reviewed, signifying its important role in protecting or enhancing company reputation and safeguarding positive relationships with various stakeholder groups (Du et al., 2010). CSR reporting/disclosure was the major issue discussed in this category (12.0% of the studies), mainly because it provides a trust-building strategy, whereby various stakeholders can be informed about the MNE's CSR initiatives, evaluate its impact, and reward or punish it accordingly. For example, Tashman et al. (2019) specifically focused on CSR decoupling and found that MNEs from countries with pervasive institutional voids are more likely to engage in symbolic CSR reporting, exaggerating in ways that do not correspond with their actual CSR performance. Websites were reported by a small proportion (2.9%) of studies as an important medium to communicate MNEs' CSR communication efforts. A few other studies dealt with other communication approaches used by MNEs, such as social media, mass media, and press releases.

The final category, *CSR performance outcomes*, was the focus of approximately a fourth (24.0%) of the studies reviewed. Here, four major types of performance were examined, namely, social/environmental performance (7.2%), financial performance (4.3%), reputational performance (3.8%), and market/customer performance (2.4%). While many studies (e.g., Aguilera-Caracuel & Guerrero-Villegas, 2017; Jiang et al., 2020; Kane et al., 2022; Scuotto et al., 2022) found a positive association of the MNEs' CSR activities with each of these types of performance, some other studies (e.g., Le et al., 2023; Scuotto et al., 2022) revealed negative results. The latter has been attributed to the fact that the various stakeholders are not adequately aware or value the MNE's CSR activities (Du et al., 2010; Shin et al., 2023), as well as to variations in the nature of institutional or cultural factors in the home and host countries (Scuotto et al., 2022). For example, while CSR was found to have a significant positive effect on financial performance in Anglo-Saxon and Asian institutional contexts, this was found to harm performance in a Germanic context (Martínez-Ferrero & Frias-Aceituno, 2015).

4 Managerial Implications of Research on the MNEs' CSR Activities

Table 6 summarizes the managerial implications of the CSR activities of MNEs, which were extracted from the studies reviewed. Altogether 34 specific implication areas were identified which were evaluated in terms of their importance (using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important) by managers of MNEs having their HQs in in the U.S.A., Germany, and China. In 2023, these were the leading countries in international trade in terms of exporting and foreign direct investment (FDI) outflow stock (Statista, 2023; FDI Intelligence, 2024). Based on publicly available data (e.g., Disfold.com <https://disfold.com/germany/companies/Germany>. Accessed 4 Jan 2024, Stockanalysiscap.com, and Companiesmarketcap.com) on companies with the highest market capitalization in these three countries, we sent a request to a random sample of 150 MNEs in each country, asking for their managers' assistance in evaluating the managerial implications derived from the articles reviewed, specifically targeting the manager responsible for the firm's CSR activities. After two reminder requests and following further clarification about the purpose and value of the survey, we managed to receive 129 responses of which only 114 were fully completed (37 from Chinese MNEs, 39 from U.S. MNEs, and 38 from German MNEs).

Overall, the survey findings underscore the necessity for MNEs to cultivate a capacity to harness and implement socially responsible insights into their global subsidiaries, thereby fostering a continual enhancement of CSR practices. Moreover, it was stressed that MNEs must embrace a proactive approach to ensure responsible and sustainable business practices that transcend mere legal obligations. Participant managers considered as the most critical implications of extant research those revolving around the pivotal role of MNEs serving as change agents in driving positive transformations in the sustainable development of the countries they operate in. While balancing global standardized CSR initiatives with local adaptations were found to be important, implications concerning the engagement of grassroots initiatives to elevate the CSR performance of MNEs in international markets were deemed of a lesser significance.

Apart from the assessment of the thirty-four specific managerial implications, managers were asked to sum up the practical implications they considered as most important for their MNE, which resulted in broad areas, which are elaborated below.

Embedding CSR values in organizational culture. Values related to CSR activities, such as fighting corruption and other business malpractices, employee engagement in social responsibility, and CSR-related human resource strategy, were considered important to be embedded in the MNE's organizational culture since this will pay off in the long run. In connection to this, a U.S. manager noted that MNEs need to set an example of a genuine involvement in CSR practices to the local communities they operate in, while the manager of a Chinese MNE reported that helping to improve the social infrastructure (e.g., medical, educational, nutritional) in less-developed countries can be rewarding in achieving better reputation among local stakeholders and increasing local business opportunities.

Table 6 Practitioners' evaluation of key managerial implications derived from empirical research on MNEs' CSR*

Managerial implications	Total (n = 114)	MNE's HQs' base		
		USA (n = 39)	Germany (n = 38)	China (n = 37)
Develop capabilities to capture and internalize learning on CSR issues generated across the various subsidiaries	4.3	3.9	4.6	4.4
Take an active role in the host market by fighting against irresponsible practices (e.g., corruption) and avoiding engagement in bad business practices	4.2	4.3	4.5	3.8
Adopt a self-seeking behavior toward improving social responsibility in foreign countries, rather than merely adhering to regulations	4.0	3.8	4.0	4.2
Be careful about globalizing the CSR programs, because they may weaken the MNE's ability to serve effectively the needs of domestic stakeholders in individual countries	3.9	2.9	4.6	4.3
To successfully implement CSR strategies, MNEs need to embody appropriate ethical, social, and other values in their organizational culture	3.9	3.2	4.6	3.9
Strategically release the quantity and quality of information about the company's CSR performance as a means to gain acceptance and support from host country stakeholders	3.9	3.6	4.2	4.0
In designing a CSR strategy, try to strike a balance between internal efficiency gains and external legitimacy pressures	3.9	3.5	4.0	4.1
Consider not only the external aspects of the value chain (e.g., government), but also internal aspects, such as diversity and equality, privacy, and well-being	3.9	3.8	4.0	3.9
Customize CSR activities to target specific groups in foreign countries, taking into consideration their value systems and country of origin attitudes	3.9	3.6	4.2	4.0
Try to develop MNE wide competencies/skills that can effectively combine the strategic capabilities at the HQs with the local knowledge of overseas subsidiaries	3.8	2.8	4.3	4.3
When expanding into foreign markets, consider possible institutional distance (between home and host country) implications on CSR activities	3.7	2.8	4.2	4.1
Build CR activities around specific capabilities, expertise, and knowledge of subsidiaries to create value and gain legitimacy in foreign markets	3.7	3.2	4.0	3.9
Focus on those social issues in host countries, which you can best accommodate with available resources and capabilities	3.5	2.8	4.1	3.5

Table 6 (continued)

Managerial implications	Total (n = 114)	MNE's HQs' base		
		USA (n = 39)	Germany (n = 38)	China (n = 37)
Strengthen the MNE's position in the foreign market by adopting CSR initiatives that exploit host country's government incentives relating to societal issues	3.5	3.1	3.9	3.6
Design CSR strategies linking financial performance of the MNE to social and environmental performance	3.3	3.1	3.3	3.6
The CSR strategy needs to reflect not only on issues pertaining to its legitimacy within host countries, but also on the views of the wider range of stakeholders in these countries	3.2	2.5	3.2	3.8
Make effective use of the government and other stakeholders in the host country, because apart from regulating conditions and/or influencing public opinion about social issues, may lead to positive business outcomes	3.1	3.0	3.1	3.3
Integrate CSR practices with other supply chain members in order to ensure honesty, transparency, and true commitment to socially responsible behavior in host markets	3.1	3.1	3.2	3.0
Assess CSR attributes consumers value most at the host country level, and design CSR strategies accordingly	3.1	3.0	3.2	3.0
Optimize the right balance between CSR practice standardization and allowing local heterogeneity	3.1	2.6	3.6	3.2
Extend global CSR standards beyond developed markets, to emerging countries where CSR activity is not so prevalent	3.0	3.1	2.9	3.0
Increase awareness for corporate accountability among consumers, employees, and the general public in host markets to facilitate enhancement of social/environmental performance	2.9	2.9	3.0	2.7
To ensure the transparency of CSR practices, as well as to have a better monitoring and evaluation, measure social return on investment	2.8	2.5	2.9	3.0
Reduce inequality gaps within the MNE through better in-house education and training provision	2.7	2.4	2.6	3.1
Employ a higher number of outside directors and external members on the MNE's board, to improve CSR reporting and transparency	2.7	2.9	2.6	2.7

Table 6 (continued)

Managerial implications	Total (n = 114)	MNE's HQs' base		
		USA (n = 39)	Germany (n = 38)	China (n = 37)
Establish channels of communication and dialogue between managers and employees in the foreign market to avoid mishaps and listen to potential needs to develop a more customized CSR strategy for the host environment	2.5	2.4	2.3	2.7
Align the firm's CSR-related projects with local needs and cooperate with people from the local community for their implementation	2.5	2.2	2.3	2.9
CSR programs should be an important component of the MNEs' international expansion strategy, especially when attempting to enter emerging markets suffering from high poverty levels and scarcity of public services	2.4	2.0	2.4	2.7
Sustain the loyalty-generation potential of CSR investments in remote areas by identifying communication strategies able to address consumers demands in a transparent and reliable way	2.4	2.2	2.4	2.6
MNE social performance in foreign markets can be enhanced by hiring local managers with a sensitivity to social issues	2.2	2.1	2.4	2.0
When the HQs suffer from high reputation risks, foreign subsidiary managers need to design and implement CSR activities to minimize the negative effects of such risks in the markets they operate	2.2	1.8	2.0	2.8
Act proactively to develop bottom-up CSR initiatives to improve engagement with the local communities in host markets	2.1	2.0	2.3	1.9
Foreign subsidiaries should not be treated as geographically dispersed agents of the HQs for CSR issues, but operate as goal-disparate units with their own external stakeholder networks	1.7	1.2	1.5	2.3
MNEs can boost their CSR global performance by hiring altruistic managers in foreign subsidiary positions	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.1

*Based on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = not important at all to 5 = very important

Understanding local institutional requirements. Extant research suggests that managers should be aware of and carefully consider the institutional distance in view of the laws, rules, and cultural-cognitive specificities of host and home markets in developing the MNE's CSR approaches. This implies that MNEs need to understand the local institutional requirements to CSR and consider the diversity of actors existing in the host country's wider community when operating subsidiaries abroad. For example, a manager of a U.S. MNE operating in African countries underscored the importance of the views of tribal chiefs in shaping his firm's CSR activities in this region as they are key to understanding local social behavior and needs.

Developing absorptive capacity in relation to CSR. Realized absorptive capacity by MNEs related to learning from the best CSR practices of their subsidiaries was also considered highly important. This is relevant in view of the key MNE advantage of internalization according to Dunning's Eclectic paradigm, as it is regarded a higher-order complex capability that can enhance the firm's competitive edge. In relation to this, the manager of a German MNE praised the subsidiaries of his company in China and Latin America that had given different, locally flavored views on appropriate CSR activities helping the HQs to adopt them in other subsidiaries across South-East Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.

Considering value systems in CSR strategy design. MNEs use CSR activities to communicate to and target specific groups of customers. Hence, it is important to clearly understand their social values, particularly the attributes they value mostly and effectively serve their needs. Such understanding can also increase local acceptance of and gain support for the MNE, as well as more proactively engage local stakeholders in its CSR strategy design and implementation. For example, a U.S. manager stated that to address customer needs in foreign markets, his company systematically considered local social values, identified niches that corresponded to these values, and aligned the MNE's niche positioning strategy with a socially responsible behavior.

Balancing standardized and localized CSR initiatives. MNEs' CSR activities are supported by heterogeneous organizational resources and capabilities, whereby there can be tensions between them due to the dual nature of embeddedness of subsidiaries and multiple embeddedness of the MNE as a whole. Hence, managers need to ensure transparency and commitment to socially responsible behavior in host markets and use a balance of standardized and localized CSR initiatives for a more efficient use of resources/capabilities to effectively deliver on the KPIs set. A case in point is a German MNE, whose manager said that it had a set of global standardized CSR practices that increase resource/capability efficiency, while at the same time considering unique local needs in each foreign market to adapt some of its CSR dimensions accordingly.

Engaging the supply chain to CSR standards. MNEs often act as orchestrators of value chains, placing them in a position to integrate CSR practices with other supply chain members to ensure honesty, transparency, and true commitment to socially responsible behavior. This can have a positive effect on the legitimacy of the MNE's supply chains and ecosystem actors, as well as enhance performance outcomes. As mentioned by some U.S. managers, MNEs had a decisive role in setting the right

CSR standards that needed to be adhered to not only by their subsidiaries, but also by all actors involved in their global supply chains.

Promoting social innovation. MNEs can adopt a social innovation role, which can bring significant positive social changes through: (a) their impact on institutional players and stakeholders in both home and foreign countries; (b) their investments in specific host markets having less-developed CSR institutional frameworks, where they can bring more advanced home country-defined CSR norms; and (c) their potential to influence public opinion related to social causes using special education programs, communication campaigns, and community events.

Contributing to social giving. Corporate giving is a key part of an MNE's social role. Although this is much stronger in the context of the home market, there is also a good potential for developing similar CSR social giving in host markets. The adoption of CSR activities by MNEs ensuring community benefits relies on the understanding that social and community benefits are part of the contract between society and MNEs. A manager of a Chinese MNE reported that his company engaged in various actions aiming to help people in poor countries by giving money and books to schools, buying medical equipment for hospitals, contributing to securing clean water, and creating employment opportunities for youngsters to take them out of poverty.

Coping with CSR-related tensions. Integrating CSR into the MNE's business activities is fraught with tensions, which arise from its efforts to implement CSR ideas, policies, and practices simultaneously with the pursuit of financial goals (Siltaoppi et al., 2021). These tensions relate to: (a) the need for profitability and the increasing requirements for investment in CSR or in meeting the U.N. sustainability development goals (SDGs), especially when business conditions worsen; (b) the claims for CSR activities and responsibility and the real actions of MNEs in countries with weak institutional systems; and (c) the challenge between "saying good" (usually connected with 'social washing') versus "doing good" through the use of genuinely conducted CSR activities. Coping with such tensions is a central element in the strategic CSR integration process in MNEs.

5 Academics' Views Regarding Future Research

As the literature on CSR activities in MNEs continues to evolve, there are still many unanswered questions that require further research. To identify new research directions, we developed a questionnaire containing broad thematic categories derived, aiming to obtain the views of academic experts in the field with regard to: (a) the importance attached to these thematic categories in terms of future research; (b) the priorities that need to be set with regard to their implementation; and (c) the specific research topics that should be in the focus of future studies (see Appendix D). The questionnaire was electronically sent to authors who contributed articles included in our review and this was accompanied by an invitation letter explaining the purpose of the study and giving instructions of how to answer the various questions. Following two reminders, we managed to receive 42 completed responses, the results of which are presented below.

Twenty (i.e., 47.6%) of the participant scholars reported that macro-environmental influences should be the area where future emphasis should be put, signifying the increasing pressures on MNEs to achieve a strategic fit with external forces. As one academic put it: "It is definitely not the same for an MNE to operate in a Catholic versus a Muslim environment or in a context with high versus low poverty levels, or where there is institutional independence and transparency versus high levels of corruption". Some promising areas suggested by academics here are the following: to what degree does foreign government effectiveness influence the establishment and enforcement of CSR-related standards? What are the impacts of the newly established laws in certain countries (e.g., charity laws in China) on the MNEs' CSR activities? How do cross-cultural differences influence the adaptation of MNEs' CSR practices across countries? How do the current global inflationary pressures (and in some countries recession) affect the MNEs' CSR practices? How does the nature of economic activity in host countries influence the legitimacy of MNEs' CSR activities? How can MNEs accommodate potentially incompatible CSR goals relating to different stakeholder groups from diverse countries?

Future research on industry-related influences on MNEs' CSR was proposed by only three (7.1%) of the participant academics. The relatively low emphasis on this category is surprising given the fact that usually specific CSR activities are highly correlated to the nature of the industry sector of the MNE. Some potential research areas recommended are the following: the role of industry-specific capabilities required by MNEs to accommodate different CSR needs of government and non-government stakeholders across countries; the extent to which MNEs can gain strategic advantage by developing joint ventures with domestic firms in the same industry in the host country; the way in which the CSR practices of foreign competitors in the host market and their level of reputation exercise pressure on MNEs' subsidiaries to also pursue CSR activities; and the level of adoption of an international code of conduct in a specific industry and the degree to which this is implemented by MNEs across different countries.

Eighteen (i.e., 42.8%) of the participant academics emphasized the need for more research on *stakeholder pressures*. Some suggested areas for future research in this category are: exploring how social group pressure (e.g., consumer boycotts) can affect MNEs' CSR activities across countries; examining the role of media (especially social media) in shaping the CSR agendas and responses of MNEs; investigating the impact of supplier collaboration practices on MNEs' CSR activities; focusing on how buyers' familiarity and experience with MNE's brands influence CSR expectations; disentangling the different effects of various stakeholders' home country on MNEs' CSR activities in foreign markets; understanding how MNEs deal with different social movements or resistance from local communities. More research was also suggested on how MNEs collaborate with NGOs, civil society, and consumer associations to improve the sustainability of the entire global value chain (Liu & Heugens, 2023).

The need for further research on organizational/managerial determinants of MNEs' CSR behavior was mentioned by seventeen (i.e., 40.4%) of the respondents. Some important research questions recommended were the following: what

decision-making processes take place across HQs and their subsidiaries with regard to tensions between global and local CSR strategies? How does diversity in MNE's board of directors influence the level and nature of its CSR activity? How can subsidiaries' nature and degree of specialization in the value chain pose CSR coordination challenges in the MNE? How do global CSR strategies spread within the MNE and why some diffuse while others do not? What are the MNE organizational structures needed to meaningfully accommodate social challenges (e.g., biodiversity) across countries? With regard to managerial factors particular emphasis was suggested to put on investigating: the type of social skills required by MNEs' managers to better understand the needs of people and the environment in foreign countries regarding CSR issues; the leadership styles facilitating the spread of the CSR concept within MNEs; and differences in managerial values and/or cultural background influencing the level of commitment and content of CSR strategy implementation among MNE subsidiaries.

Emphasis on various dimensions of the MNEs *outward-looking CSR strategy* was reported by ten (23.8%) of the academic respondents. Some fruitful research questions raised in this category are the following: how can MNEs provide solutions to accommodate specific environmental challenges such as climate change? How can MNEs reduce their environmental footprint in host countries? How do MNEs collaborate with political actors (e.g., foreign governments, MPs, NGOs) to lobby CSR-related regulations in host countries? What specific community projects are more suitable for MNEs to participate in emerging and developing countries? How can various MNE supply chain partners (e.g., suppliers, distributors, buyers) in host countries contribute to its outward-looking CSR initiatives?

Nine (21.4%) of the participant scholars mentioned that additional research should be conducted on the inward-looking CSR strategy of MNEs. Some suggested that particular attention should be put on: adjustments in the MNE's health and safety issues required in the post-Covid-19 era (Crane & Matten, 2021); the impact of MNEs' financial responsibility/transparency on its external partners and stakeholders; the degree to which host country conditions influence subsidiaries to harmonize and comply with HQs' code of conduct; the way in which MNE's inward-looking CSR practices can affect the development of outward-looking CSR practices and vice versa; and the cost of improving employee rights across MNEs' supply chains.

Further research on MNEs' approaches to CSR was suggested by ten (23.8%) of the respondents, with the following recommendations made: what are the motives (e.g., social legitimacy) of MNEs to proactively include CSR aspects in their overall business strategy? What are the factors driving MNEs to decentralize their CSR initiatives? How can MNEs design and monitor their internal organizational structures to build resilience through CSR to combat potential crises? How can MNEs' business models be aligned with CSR principles?

Whereas CSR communication was a topic that attracted adequate research attention in the past, only two (i.e., 4.7%) of the participant academics considered this important to warrant further investigation. This is surprising, especially considering the conducive role of communication in realizing the potential benefits derived

from CSR activities, including enhancing corporate reputation, building trust with stakeholders, and attracting and retaining customers, employees, and investors. Some suggested future research areas in this category include, but are not limited to: whether published social and environmental reports by MNEs are indeed aligned with their actual social and environmental performance; the use of social media and/or websites by MNEs and their subsidiaries to inform partners, customers, and the public about their CSR activities; and types of communication activities (e.g., labeling, certification, events) pursued by MNEs to inform target audiences about their CSR achievements.

CSR performance outcomes was the final category examined, with twelve (i.e., 28.6%) of the respondents considering this worthy of future investigation. Suggested future research areas were: What are the implications of MNE's CSR practices in terms of improving host countries' economic growth and community welfare? What is the optimum combination of global versus local MNE's CSR strategy on business performance using fit analysis? How do different CSR practices influence the legitimacy of an MNE? How is legitimacy accumulation in a host country achieved over time? How can MNEs and subsidiaries build a global CSR branding strategy to enhance their reputation? How do the internal and external dimensions of MNE's CSR strategy affect specific performance dimensions differently? How can the real impact of MNE's CSR activities on society (e.g., poverty alleviation, reduced hunger levels, improved human wellbeing) be accurately measured?

6 Conclusions and Directions

One central conclusion that can be drawn from our study is that the CSR activities of MNEs is a crucial area of research, characterized by rising theoretical maturity, increasing methodological sophistication, and rich empirical insights, which has provided valuable knowledge for both IB scholars and practitioners.³ Notably, there has been a gradual shift of this line of research from a tactical focus, associated with MNEs' CSR role in host markets and the pressures exerted by institutional and stakeholder forces, to a more strategic view of CSR, such as, shaping the MNE's competitive strategy in gaining sustainable competitive advantage and superior performance. The integration of CSR in the core business strategy of MNEs can be attributed to various external (e.g., growing public/customer

³ Our analysis by journal type (i.e., low-tier versus top-tier), with the exception of thematic areas, has shown few, but remarkable differences. With regard to *theoretical background*, articles in low-tier journals were more atheoretic and used less frequently the Institutional theory compared to articles in top-tier journals. For *research design* issues, there was more emphasis in low-tier journals on studies that had a qualitative and longitudinal nature and using reports/websites/codes of conduct. In terms of *research scope*, articles in top-tier journals had a greater focus on Asian countries, covered a wider number of industries, and paid more attention to services. Considering *research method*, articles in top-tier journals employed larger sample sizes and made greater use of databases. Finally, significant variations were observed in *thematic areas*, with articles in top-tier journals showing greater emphasis on all areas examined, with the exception of corporate performance for which articles in low-tier journals exhibited a greater coverage.

concern, stringent government regulations, intensified activists' movements) and internal (e.g., shareholders' pressures, special sensitivities of corporate governance members, employee movements) factors focusing on various societal issues, such as protecting the environment, promoting diversity, and ensuring health and safety.

Our theoretical assessment revealed an extensive use of theory-anchored research, indicative of the need to understand the multiplicity of drivers, outcomes, and moderators of MNEs' CSR activities from different perspectives, taking into consideration the complexity of contextual embeddedness of MNEs' HQs and subsidiaries. In fact, there was a great diversity of theories employed by scholars, with the most frequent being Institutional theory, Stakeholder theory, and Legitimacy theory. Although these theories, derived from mainstream business research, were successfully employed to capture various facets of MNEs' engagement in socially responsible activities, there is still room to expand their application into other areas, as well as adapt them to the specific nuances of these firms. For example, Beamish and Chakravarti (2021) called for a renewed interest in the explanatory power of the Resource-based view to theoretically frame and empirically explore "the resources and capabilities that drive effective MNE CSR outcomes" (p. 1872). There is also an opportunity to explore the CSR activities of MNEs by employing relevant theories from other disciplines, such as imprinting theory, Free energy theory, and Complexity theory. These can be used to explore strategic CSR as a source of achieving a long-term competitive advantage by MNEs in various industries or geographic regions, but also to better understand CSR specificity within the context of different community norms and values. Moreover, Social identity theory, arguing that people relate to individuals with similar values to their own and deliver to their expectations (Gao & Yang, 2016; Schaefer et al., 2019), can be applied to explore CSR and stakeholders. In addition, as managers of MNEs seek personal recognition for their performance, knowledge, and authority, Stewardship theory (Muth & Donaldson, 1998) may also offer avenues for better understanding management decision-making MNEs' CSR about undertaking CSR activities.

Concerning research design, the trend to change the emphasis from qualitative to quantitative approaches, coupled with the shift from descriptive to causal studies, indicate that research on the subject is increasingly moving from an exploratory to a maturity stage. However, despite the exponential growth of this line of research, there is still a heavy dominance of cross-sectional studies, which prevents capturing the dynamic interactions between the variables examined, usually undertaken by longitudinal research. The latter is vital because some time needs to elapse between drivers and MNEs' CSR activities, as well as between these activities and their outcomes. The use of longitudinal studies would also be useful to address issues of reverse causality, such as examining whether MNE CSR activities yield higher performance results or it is because of their higher performance that MNEs can afford to invest in CSR initiatives. It was also interesting to see that the studies reviewed employed, and sometimes combined, a wide range of primary (e.g., in-depth interviews) and secondary (e.g., CSR company reports) research tools, which has helped to better understand the issues

under investigation. Future research needs to prioritize the use of mixed methods (Turner et al., 2015), particularly employing designs that commence with qualitative research to conceptualize constructs and identify relationships to generate hypotheses, followed by a quantitative study to test these hypotheses and assess their external validity.

In terms of research scope, our review has shown that there has been a shift in the geographic focus of studies, from Europe and North America to Asia. Although Asian countries, particularly China and India, are expected to attract further CSR research due their increasing share in international trade (both as suppliers or buyers), there are other geographic regions, like Latin America and Africa, that should also warrant future investigation due to their rising market importance. The empirical studies reviewed were also inclined to adopt a multi-industry approach and provided a relatively balanced coverage of different industrial sectors, ranging from consumer to industrial goods and from products to services. This is a positive sign that should continue in future research to capture differences in MNEs' socially responsible practices caused by industry differences. Regarding the unit of analysis, although the MNEs' involvement in CSR activities was examined from different angles, namely HQs, regional offices, and subsidiaries, these were used in isolation from each other, thus necessitating future studies to combine them together in a single research setting.

Regarding research method, our analysis revealed that research on the subject was heavily based on non-probability sampling designs, while probability samples were less frequently employed. This, coupled with the fact that most studies had relatively small sample sizes, raises concerns as to the generalizability of research findings to the total population. There is a need therefore for the employment of larger samples to be selected preferably in a random way. The fact that studies in this field adopted a wide array of data collection methods, ranging from reports and website analysis to survey questionnaires and databases, offers insightful information on MNEs' CSR activities from different perspectives. Hence, this practice should be also encouraged in future research, especially when combining multiple data collection methods within the same study to provide an all-encompassed assessment of the specific CSR topic examined. Interestingly, data collected were mainly analyzed using advanced statistical techniques to capture the complex associations among constructs. However, the fact that MNEs' CSR activities have different repercussions on various parties, the use of multi-level statistical methods, bringing together data from different actors (e.g., companies, customers, policymakers) within a single study would make the analysis more complete.

On the thematic side, this body of research covered a wide range of issues relating to the CSR activities of MNEs. Figure 2 provides a conceptual framework which synthesizes these thematic issues in terms of antecedents, mediators, outcomes, and moderators. The overemphasis of studies on the effect of macro-environmental factors, particularly those that are related to the institutional environment, coupled with industry standards and pressures exerted by various stakeholder groups, determine the degree of adoption of CSR practices by MNEs. Apart from external forces, a wide range of organizational/managerial factors act as drivers or moderators of MNEs' CSR. Our analysis revealed many different aspects of CSR strategies

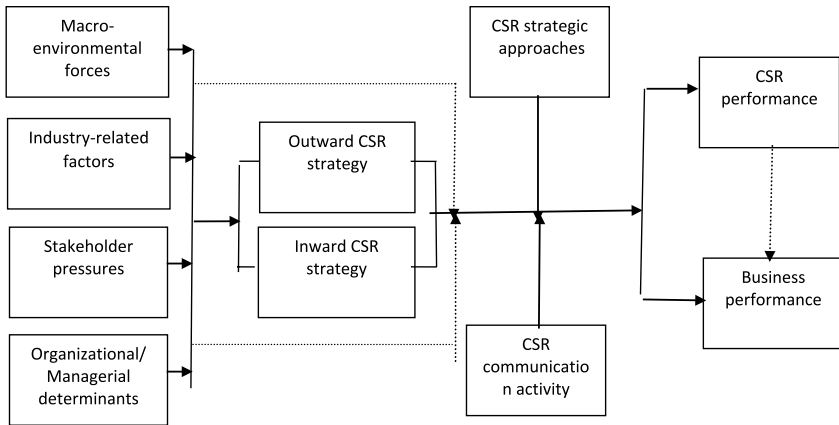


Fig. 2 Conceptual framework of antecedents, outcomes, and moderators of MNEs' CSR

covered by the studies reviewed, categorized into outward-looking and inward-looking, although the former attracted more research attention than the latter, possibly because their effects are more feasible and visible. The classic IB strategic dilemma of standardization/localization has also attracted growing research attention in the case of CSR, as well as the role of adopting a voluntary or reactive stance towards it. The role of communicating MNEs' CSR achievements was underscored in our review, although drawing at the same time attention to problems caused by various 'social-washing' incidents. Finally, a sizeable number of studies tried to connect the CSR activities of MNEs with their performance outcomes, which in some cases revealed mixed results. This raises some important questions regarding the role of contingent factors on corporate performance, such as variations in local stakeholders' awareness and perceptions of MNEs' CSR initiatives across countries (Jiang et al., 2020; Shin et al., 2023). Also, since CSR activities may affect differently performance, it would be illuminating to examine which specific activities influence specific types of performance (e.g., reputational, product-market, financial, financial market), as well as specific dimensions within each type.

The findings of extant empirical research on MNEs CSR generated many useful managerial implications. However, when asking MNE managers about their importance, not all of these implications were evaluated in the same way across MNEs from the three countries examined. For example, managers of German MNEs considered the need to align the values of organizational culture to CSR strategy and activities, add a more localized flavor in their CSR programs, and develop capabilities to capture and internalize CSR knowledge gained from the subsidiary network as the most important implications. In contrast, for managers of U.S. MNEs, the most important implication was for subsidiaries to have a more active social role in host markets and avoid any form of irresponsible behavior. Despite these differences, there was a convergence of views as to the importance attached to most managerial implications examined, stressing the fact that irrespective of MNEs' home country, CSR-related issues impact on the firm's strategic decisions.

The academic insights gained from the survey among the authors of articles reviewed indicate that there are novel ways for widening and deepening knowledge in this line of research in the future. Some areas that were well-researched in the past, such as macro-environmental factors, stakeholder influences, and CSR performance implications, are still considered hot areas for future investigations, while others, like CSR communication, are not regarded as priority research areas. Of course, the findings of our academic survey should be treated with caution due to the existence of possible self-selection bias and the fact that not all authors agreed to participate in our survey.

In sum, our study has shown that this body of knowledge is gradually moving from an exploration phase to a more formalized, established phase, gaining an important position within the overall IB discipline. With the accelerated growth of societal problems around the world, coupled with increasing public concern, intensifying regulations, and growing government intervention to minimize them, more research is expected to be channeled on the subject in the future. This will require periodic assessments of the accumulated knowledge using the tripartite methodology adopted in the present study (which combines a literature review, managerial insights, and academic views). It also necessitates the establishment of a 'think-tank' where various interested parties (e.g., scholars, managers, policymakers) can regularly meet to exchange views on how this knowledge can be fruitfully used to benefit both businesses and society in a real 'win-win' situation.

7 Study Limitations

The findings of our study need to be seen within the context of several limitations that provide ideas for further efforts to consolidate knowledge on the subject. First, our review has adopted a firm perspective to CSR issues, while there were studies that investigated the views of other groups, such as consumers, communities, and governments, regarding the socially responsible behavior of MNEs. Hence, to have an all-round picture on the subject, it would be useful to also review these non-managerial studies.

Being a multidimensional construct, CSR comprises various specialized aspects, such as those pertaining to social, environmental, and economic matters. However, studies focusing exclusively on individual dimensions were excluded from our review because these dealt with very specific and detailed issues that could be the object of other more specialized reviews. For example, Leonidou and Leonidou (2011) provided a review and assessment of 530 articles specifically focusing on environmental marketing and management.

The fact that, for quality control purposes, we excluded studies appearing in articles not included in the ABS Journal list, as well as from conference proceedings, monographs, dissertations, theses, chapters, and books, might have limited the possibility of adding some extra useful input to our analysis. Moreover, additional material on the link between MNEs and CSR could also be found in publications written in languages other than English, which were excluded from our review due to linguistic constraints.

Since our aim was to assess empirical research on MNEs' CSR activities, conceptual articles were excluded from our analysis. However, our literature search process identified several articles having a conceptual focus that contain a wealth of information and useful insights regarding the socially responsible behavior of MNEs. It would be interesting therefore to assimilate and organize this knowledge in a way to augment the findings of this review.

We analyzed all articles eligible for our review using the traditional approach of content analysis, which relied on manual coding procedures. Although we adopted a rigorous and careful process in analyzing the content of these articles, we understand that the employment of various computer-based software programs for qualitative analysis (e.g., NVivo, CATPAC, Qualrus) could yield additional insightful information about the CSR practices of MNEs. Such analysis would offer more in-depth insights into specific aspects of MNEs' CSR behavior, such as better understanding of the factors driving the decision to standardize or adapt the CSR strategy in foreign markets, and its impact on business performance.

The findings of our review could be augmented with input from other methods of analysis focusing on the intercept of MNEs and CSR, such as bibliometric analysis. This can take, for example, the form of: (a) bibliographic coupling, which can allow for a deeper understanding of interdisciplinary knowledge integration within the IB literature on CSR, shedding light on the extent to which this line of research adopts a multidisciplinary approach; (b) co-citation analysis, which can analyze the frequency with which publications are cited together in other publications to identify clusters of related research on MNEs' CSR activities; and (c) social network analysis, which can unveil collaborative networks among researchers and institutions, as well as help to identify key contributors and influential groups investigating MNEs' CSR practices.

Finally, the accumulation of a large amount of empirical knowledge on the subject can provide the input for a meta-analysis focusing on specific areas, such as the effect of specific drivers (e.g., internal and external) on inward and outward CSR strategy and its subsequent impact on financial and non-financial performance. The associations between these constructs could be moderated by various factors, such as institutional, cultural, and economic differences among countries, while the period the study was conducted, the product type, and the MNE's country-base could be used as controls. It would also be useful to examine the effect of the different research methodologies adopted by studies in the field to possibly explain variations in their research findings.

Appendix

See Tables 7, 8, 9 and questionnaire for academics.

Table 7 Summary of review studies focusing on MNEs' CSR activities

Study	Method	Focus	Key findings
Egri & Ralston (2008)	Review of 321 articles found in 13 international business/management journals Articles published during the period 1998–2007	Examination of the spread of CSR as a topic of interest in international business/management journals Categorization of articles based on theme, orientation, research methodology, and focal country/regions	Ethics was the most studied subject, followed by corporate governance, environmental issues, and CSR Only a small proportion articles focused on CSR The USA was the major country investigated Research on the CSR activities of MNEs, although still at an embryonic stage, has shown growth tendencies Research emphasis was primarily on issues relating to the environment, employee rights, corruption, and sustainable development in a Western economy context Specific exogenous events (e.g., the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development in Rio) have stimulated academic interest in researching CSR issues
Kolk & van Tulder (2010)	Review of CSR or sustainable development issues in 1700 articles published in the top four international business/management journals The period under review was from 1990 to 2008	Identifying the frequency of investigating different issues pertaining to CSR and sustainable development	There are different forms of CSR expression by MNEs when operating in developing countries, which are determined by differences in local environmental forces Various multi-level factors and actors residing within formal and informal governance systems of developing countries influence CSR contextualization by MNEs
Jamali & Karam (2016)	Multilevel review of 452 articles published during the period 1990–2015	Investigating how CSR is perceived and implemented by MNEs when operating in developing countries Understanding the antecedents and consequences of MNEs' CSR activities and policies in developing countries Adoption of an institutional, organizational, and individual level of analysis of the articles reviewed	

Table 7 (continued)

Study	Method	Focus	Key findings
Sun et al. (2021)	<p>Review of 367 articles focusing on non-market strategies of MNEs relating to CSR, covering the period from 2000 to 2020</p> <p>The articles were published in leading international business/management, journals at the interface of business and society, and journals from economics, finance, political science, and sociology</p>	<p>Investigation of the MNEs' corporate political activity (CPA), strategic corporate social responsibility (SCSR), and the way these are integrated</p> <p>Analysis of the articles by journal/year, thematic focus (CPA and SCSR), research method, country/region covered, and theoretical perspective</p>	<p>Most of the articles focused on CSR, while a small proportion dealt with CSR and political activity</p> <p>The majority of articles were published during the period 2011–2020 and had an empirical nature</p> <p>China provided the most highly investigated geographic area, followed by the USA and Western Europe</p> <p>Institutional Theory and its variants was the most widely used theory</p>

Table 7 (continued)

Study	Method	Focus	Key findings
This study	<p>Review of 208 empirical articles focusing on the MNEs' CSR activities published in the UK</p> <p>ABS list of journals</p> <p>Covered a time period from 1997 up to 2022</p> <p>Survey among 114 managers from MNEs HQs based in China, Germany, and the US</p> <p>Survey among 42 IB academics specializing on MNEs and CSR</p>	<p>Articles were evaluated on aspects pertaining to theoretical perspectives, research design, research scope, research method, and thematic emphasis</p> <p>Employment of a chronological analysis and journal quality analysis of the issues examined</p> <p>MNE managers evaluated the managerial implications extracted from the studies reviewed</p> <p>IB academics provided suggestions for future research</p>	<p>An increasing number of studies are theoretically anchored, with institutional, stakeholder, and legitimacy theories being the most widely adopted</p> <p>Change of emphasis from qualitative to quantitative research, shift from descriptive to causal research, heavy dominance of a cross-sectional studies, and employment of a diverse topical scope</p> <p>Mainly single-country and multi-industry studies, focusing primarily on Asia and Europe</p> <p>Mainly probability studies, with data extracted primarily from secondary databases and reports, and increasing use of advanced statistical analysis</p> <p>Thematically, externally related forces were mostly examined as to their effect on the overall MNEs CSR strategy followed by organizational/managerial factors</p> <p>Identification of 34 managerial implications, with a high convergence of views of MNE managers across the three countries examined</p> <p>Emphasis for more research on issues pertaining to macro-environmental factors, stakeholder pressures, and organizational/managerial determinants</p>

Table 8 Identification process of articles focusing on MNEs' CSR activities*A. Eligibility criteria for identifying relevant literature*

Peer-reviewed articles published in journals included in the Academic Journal Guide issued by the U.K.

Chartered Association of Business Schools (ABS)

Articles having an empirical nature

Articles written in English language

Articles published during the period from 1997 to 2022

B. Exclusion criteria

Editorial comments, research notes, reply notes

Conceptual papers, case studies

Reviews, meta-analyses, bibliometrics

Conference proceedings

Books, book chapters, articles in books

Monographs, theses, dissertations

C. Search strategy

Use of various electronic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, ABI/Inform Collection (ProQuest), and EBSCO

Searching titles, abstracts, and keyword fields of several electronic databases, namely, ABI/ProQuest, ScienceDirect, EBSCO, and Web of Science, using the following keywords: 'MNEs', 'MNCs', 'multinational enterprises', 'multinational companies', 'multinational firms', 'multinational organizations', 'transnational firms', 'global corporations', 'international firms', 'international business', and 'subsidiaries', which were combined with various CSR-related terms, such as 'CSR', 'environmental sustainability', 'corporate social responsibility', 'social responsibility', 'sustainability', 'corporate citizenship', 'corporate ethical behavior', 'corporate responsible behavior', and 'corporate social performance'

D. Search results

Identification of articles from initial searching: $n = 5385$

Exclusion of articles not fulfilling the eligibility criteria set: $n = 3458$

Articles omitted due to duplication: $n = 1738$

Additional articles identified from cross-checking article reference lists: $n = 6$

Additional articles identified after manually checking the table of contents of the top eight IB journals: $n = 10$

Additional articles checking the reference lists of prior reviews on the subject: $n = 3$

Final sample of articles obtained for coding: $n = 208$

Table 9 Journal contribution to articles focusing on MNEs' CSR activities

Academic journals	Total (n=208) %	Time period		
		1997–2006 (n ₁ =30) %	2007–2014 (n ₂ =89) %	2015–2022 (n ₃ =89) %
Journal of Business Ethics	25.5	20.0	38.2	14.6
Journal of International Business Studies	7.7	16.7	3.4	9.0
Corporate Social Responsibility & Environmental Management	6.7	3.3	6.7	7.9
Management International Review	6.3	–	6.7	7.9
Business and Society	5.3	13.3	5.6	2.2
International Business Review	3.8	–	7.9	1.1
Journal of Cleaner Production	2.9	3.3	–	5.6
Journal of International Management	2.4	3.3	2.2	2.2
International Marketing Review	2.4	–	–	5.6
Corporate Governance: An International Review	2.4	–	5.6	–
Business Strategy and the Environment	2.4	3.3	1.1	3.4
Journal of Management Studies	2.4	–	2.2	3.4
European Management Journal	1.9	10.0	–	1.1
Business Ethics Quarterly	1.9	–	–	4.5
Journal of World Business	1.9	–	–	4.5
Long Range Planning	1.4	–	1.1	2.2
Business Ethics: A European Review	1.4	3.3	2.2	–
Other	21.3	23.5	17.1	24.8

Questionnaire for Academics

Q.1 Please select three of the broad thematic areas referring to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR of multinational firms—MNEs) shown in the following table that you think will be of great importance for future research in this field (you may specify broad thematic areas not included in this list).

Q.2 Within each of the three thematic areas selected, please specify three topics that in your opinion should be given particular attention by future researchers (you may propose other specific topics not included in this list).

Q.3 Please elaborate some specific subject(s) that in your opinion would be representative for the investigation of the three topics selected in future research.

Please tick the appropriate box.

Q.1 Prioritization of broad thematic areas	Q.2 Proposed specific topics for investigation	Q.3 Proposed specific subjects for future research
Macro factors driving CSR in MNEs	Political-legal factors Socio-cultural factors Institutional factors Economic factors Physical factors Technological factors Other (please specify):	
Meso factors driving CSR in MNEs	Industry characteristics/best practices International standards/codes National business systems Certification bodies Other (please specify):	
Micro factors driving CSR in MNEs	Pressure groups Local community Mass/social media Customers Investors/shareholders Suppliers Other (please specify):	
Organizational characteristics of MNEs	Company multinationality/internationalization Headquarter characteristics Governance issues Subsidiary characteristics Headquarter-subsidiary relationship Other (please specify):	
Managerial characteristics of MNEs	Managerial traits Managerial attitudes Leadership styles Other (please specify):	
Internal CSR strategy dimensions of MNEs	Employee rights/labor policies Internal code of conduct Diversity Health and safety Other (please specify):	
External CSR strategy dimensions of MNEs	Environmental issues Ethicality Community/social issues Human rights respect Positive political activity/involvement Other (please specify):	

Q.1 Prioritization of broad thematic areas	Q.2 Proposed specific topics for investigation	Q.3 Proposed specific subjects for future research
CSR strategic approach adopted by MNEs	CSR standardization/adaptation Proactive/reactive CSR Other (please specify):	
MNEs' CSR Communications	Social reporting/disclosure Websites Social media /mass media Other (please specify):	
Performance outcomes of MNEs' CSR strategies or practices	Social/environmental performance Market/customer performance Financial/economic performance Reputational performance Other (please specify):	
Other (please specify)	Other (please specify): Other (please specify): Other (please specify):	

The questionnaire contains two sections: the first one includes the broad thematic areas referring to CSR activities of multinational activities and the second one includes the proposed specific topics for investigation and proposed specific subjects for future research. The broad thematic areas of CSR activities are explained below:

- Macro factors driving CSR in MNEs: the broad contextual forces shaping MNEs' CSR strategy, for example the political and legal forces, as well as institutional, economic, physical, socio-cultural and technological factors, either of the country or area in which the MNEs are situated or of the wider context (e.g. economic recession, Covid-19, corruption, International NGOs and healthcare systems).
- Meso-factors driving CSR in MNEs: forces associated with the MNEs' task environment, including industry characteristics and best practices, international standards and codes, national business systems and certification bodies (e.g. industry standards and initiatives, GRI reporting).
- Micro factors driving CSR in MNEs: comprises of specific stakeholder factors that can exert direct pressure or influence on CSR-related decisions of MNEs, such as the investors, the local community, suppliers and customers.
- Organizational characteristics of MNEs: internal factors residing at the organizational level of either the headquarters or the subsidiaries or factors characterizing their relationship, for example the level of internationalization of the company or governance issues (e.g. headquarters' international reputation, organizational learning).
- Managerial characteristics of MNEs: includes managerial attitudes and traits towards CSR, as well as the type of leadership styles adopted in MNEs (e.g. managers' international experience).

- Internal CSR strategy dimensions of MNEs: it includes all those CSR activities addressing the firm's stakeholder internal needs, such as the employees' rights and labor policies, the internal code of conduct development and content, diversity policies and health and safety procedures (e.g. gender issues, avoiding child labor).
- External CSR strategy dimensions of MNEs: all those CSR activities addressing the stakeholders' socially responsible issues related to environmental and community issues, as well as general ethical behavior (e.g. consumer protection, charities).
- CSR strategic approach adopted by MNEs: the MNEs' strategic decisions on how to implement CSR, including proactive or reactive strategy approaches, localization or standardization of CSR practices (e.g. economic and social adaptation, societal marketing and legitimacy).
- MNEs' CSR Communications: all those types of communication channels that the MNEs follow to increase awareness of their CSR activities, including the MNEs' website content, the employment of social media and CSR reporting (e.g. mission statements, communication strategies for developing countries).
- Performance outcomes of MNEs' CSR strategies or practices: the MNEs' social, environmental, reputational, market and financial performance as a result of the companies' CSR strategies and practices (e.g. customer satisfaction, education for agricultural production).
- Other: any other relevant issues relevant to the implementation of CSR practices by MNEs which do not fall into the aforementioned broad categories. Funding Open access funding provided by Aalborg University.

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