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Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the hospitality industry: A review of the literature and directions for future study

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Abstract:

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) aims to promote environmental conservation and societal well-being, exceeding legal requirements. It is a way for companies to balance economic, environmental, and social impacts, meeting stakeholders' expectations. The hospitality industry is under scrutiny for its ecological and social impact, contributing to carbon emissions, and being a major source of global waste. The rise of short-stay rentals also impacts local housing affordability. Moreover, the industry faces scrutiny regarding employee working conditions, including low wages and discrimination. Despite the significance of CSR for the hospitality industry a comprehensive account of its dimensions and impact on organisational outcomes and areas for future research is still missing. This study aims to conduct a comprehensive review of CSR literature in hospitality employing a semi-systematic approach. Findings reveal that the dimensions of CSR in the hospitality industry are diverse and interconnected, encompassing environmental stewardship, social engagement, economic prosperity, ethical conduct. Future research in the field should focus on addressing conceptualisation issues and strengthening the theoretical foundations of the research. In addition, emphasis should be placed on developing an encompassing framework that establishments in the sector can adopt to effectively enhance their sustainability profiles and create a positive impact.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), hospitality industry, sustainability, semi-systematic literature review

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept that has been around for many years. It refers to business activities aiming at conserving the natural environment and promoting societal well-being, above and beyond the requirements of the law (McWilliams and Siegel, 2001). According to the United Nations Development Organization (2023) CSR is a way for companies to balance their economic, environmental and social impact – an approach toward CSR and sustainability also known as the triple bottom line approach (Alhadi, 2015) – ensuring that they address the expectations of all stakeholders (Freeman, 2023). CSR has emerged as a central concept in the global business landscape, reflecting a paradigm shift toward more sustainable and ethical business practices. Climate change, natural disasters, pressing social issues, as well as increasing attention of various stakeholders, such as consumers, investors, local communities, on social and environmental issues, has brought CSR at the centre of attention, increasing the importance of adopting a strategic approach toward CSR.

The hospitality industry receives strong criticism about its ecological and social profile. According to Sustainable Travel (2024), “[t]ourism is responsible for roughly 8% of the world’s carbon emissions”. Of those emissions, 10% is contributed by food and beverages, 8% by agriculture (for the supply of food and beverages), 8% by services, and 6% by lodging. In other words, the contribution of the hospitality industry to carbon emission is quite significant. In addition, the hospitality industry is one of the largest contributors to global food waste (Tidy Planet Waste, 2021). For example, according to the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (2021) evidence suggests that about 18% of all food waste generated in the UK every year is a contribution of the hospitality and food service industry. In addition, increasing demand for short-stay rentals increases housing prices, negatively impacting the availability and affordability of properties for local residents (Barker, 2020; Dhir, 2020; Mikulic, et al., 2021). Moreover, the hospitality industry receives strong criticism about the working conditions of employees, involving low wages, long hours, work instability, discrimination, among other challenges (Ariza-Montes, 2019).

For all these reasons, it is essential to understand the importance of CSR initiatives adopted by businesses in the hospitality industry. CSR engagement by businesses in the hospitality industry is especially important for the industry to be able to improve its sustainability profile, but also for the industry’s continued prosperity. The topic of CSR in the hospitality industry has received a lot of attention by scholars. Despite the extensive research in the area, a comprehensive account of research on CSR in the hospitality industry, capturing CSR dimensions, impact on organisational outcomes and areas for future research is still missing. The aim of this paper is to review existing literature on CSR in the hospitality industry to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of CSR in the industry, of the relationship between CSR and business outcomes, and to identify areas for future research. The contribution of this study is that the literature spans over a longer period of time compared to earlier studies, from 1990 to 2021. In addition, the search terms used for this study are broader than those used in earlier studies, making this examination more succinct.

Methodology

Our research uses a semi-systematic literature review approach. The purpose of a semi-systematic literature review is to provide an “overview [of the] research area and [to] track development [on the topic] over time” (Snyder, 2019, p. 334). The contribution of a semi-systematic literature review may be to identify themes in the literature, to provide a historical overview on the topic, to propose a research agenda for future research or to develop a theoretical model (Snyder, 2019, p. 334). Our semi-systematic literature review aims at identifying themes in the literature and at proposing a research agenda for future research. Our research aims to expand the search terms used in previous research, in order to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature on the topic.

The publications included in the semi-systematic literature review were selected based on the following criteria. For the selection of the publications, we use the 2022 Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Degree of Publication Excellence Ranking, and we selected journals with A*, A, and B ranking. Our semi-systematic literature review covered publications between 1990 and 2021. To determine the relevance of the publications, initially we reviewed the publication title, followed by a review of the abstract, and finally of the full manuscript. Following this selection process, we identified 112 papers that were used for the semi-structured review. The search terms that we used for the identification of the publications encompassed terms such as “corporate social responsibility”, “CSR”, corporate social obligation”, “corporate social performance”, “ecological responsibility”, “green practices”, “corporate societal ranking”, “corporate citizenship”, “corporate accountability”, “corporate philanthropy”, “ecological concerns”, “CSR motivation”, “triple bottom line”, as well as phrases related to the sector, such as “multiculturalism”, “human dignity”, “staff member relations”, and “healing”.

We employed a qualitative approach for the analysis of the publications, using thematic analysis, and a narrative presentation of the findings.

Results

Dimensions of CSR in the hospitality industry

The semi-systematic literature review confirmed that the dimensions of CSR in the hospitality industry are diverse and interconnected, encompassing environmental stewardship, social engagement, economic prosperity, ethical conduct, and sound governance.

Environmental responsibility: One of the key dimensions of CSR in the hospitality industry that the semi-systematic literature review identified is environmental responsibility. This entails minimizing the ecological footprint of operations through initiatives such as energy conservation, waste reduction, and water management. The literature

review revealed that hotels, resorts, restaurants, entertainment businesses and hospitality establishments increasingly adopt sustainable practices, including use of renewable energy sources, such as solar power collectors (Mahachi, et al., 2015; Chan, 2013), implementation of recycling programmes and waste reduction measures (Cummings, 1992; Singh, et al., 2014; Han et. al., 2018), and pro-ecological initiatives (Bohdanowicz, 2006). For instance, hospitality establishments invest in energy-efficient lighting, water saving technologies and practices (Chan, et al., 2009; Gatt & Schranx, 2015; Barberán et al., 2013; Han et. al., 2018), and eco-friendly building materials to mitigate their environmental impact. In addition, many hospitality establishments adopt more systematic approaches toward preserving the environment, through the adoption of Environmental Management Systems (EMS) (Chan, 2008; Meade & Pringle, 2001; Enz & Siguaw, 1999), which are systematic frameworks “for integrating environmental management into an organization’s activities, products and services.” (Meade & Pringle, 2001).

Social and ethical responsibility: Social responsibility encompasses various initiatives aimed at positively impacting communities and stakeholders. Ethical responsibility underscores the importance of conducting business with integrity and upholding ethical standards in all operations. In the hospitality industry, this dimension involves promoting diversity and inclusion, ensuring fair treatment and well-being of employees, and offering customers high quality services. Studies have examined employee well-being measures (Hayat & Afshari, 2021), fair payment and professional development opportunities (Hayat & Afshari, 2021; McGinley, et al., 2017), diversity management (Singal, 2014), and misconduct and fair treatment (Li et al., 2016). The dimension of service quality has drawn a lot of attention, especially in relation to foodservice establishments. Studies have focused on various issues such as nutritional content and labelling (Xu, 2014; Josiam & Foster, 2009; Lee et al., 2014; Fakih et al., 2016), regional and ecological product use (Motta & Sharma, 2016; Lu & Gursoy, 2017; Campbell et al., 2014), and food quality (Motta & Sharma, 2016; Lu & Gursoy, 2017; Lee et al., 2014; Fikah et al., 2016), as well as diseases caused by food consumption (Swanger & Rutherford, 2004). Moreover, several studies have explored CSR taking the form of philanthropic activities, such as contributing to local charities, sponsoring community events, and providing support to disadvantaged groups (Henderson, 2007; Singal, 2015; Kim and Pennington-Gray, 2017; Chen and Lin, 2015; Chen et al., 2017; Giebelhausen et al., 2017).

Economic responsibility: Economic responsibility pertains to the financial integrity and sustainability of businesses, as well as their contribution to economic development at both local and global levels. In the hospitality industry, economic responsibility involves generating positive economic impacts for the communities in which businesses operate. This is the dimension least studied in the literature. Xu and Gursoy (2015) investigate job creation, support for local businesses and suppliers and investment in infrastructure and development).

The relationship between CSR and organisational outcomes in the hospitality industry

Several factors influence the adoption of CSR practices by hospitality companies, including profitability intentions, corporate identity, moral obligations, community and government tensions, and employee relations (Butler, 2008; Han et al., 2009; Kasim, 2007; Mair & Jago, 2010; Tzschentke, et al., 2008). The relationship between CSR efforts and financial performance in the hospitality industry has been studied extensively, and the literature reveals mixed findings about whether CSR contributes of not to financial performance. In addition, the literature provides mixed findings as to whether CSR contributes to other organisational outcomes, such as customer loyalty and satisfaction, brand recognition, stakeholder engagement, among others. Research indicates a positive relationship between CSR and financial metrics such as Return on Assets (ROA) and equity (Rodriguez & Cruz, 2007; Lee & Park, 2009), earnings (Nicolau, 2008; Lee & Park, 2009), revenue (Xu & Gursoy, 2015; McGehee et al., 2009; Huimin & Ryan, 2011) company value and return on investment (Lee & Park, 2009; Lee & Heo, 2009), and financial performance (Henderson, 2007; Bagur-Femenias, et al., 2015; González-Rodrguez et al., 2019; Chen & Lin; 2015; Singh et al., 2014) of hospitality establishments. Also, certain CSR initiatives have been found to help hospitality establishments achieve cost savings (Singh et al., 2014; Barberán et al., 2013).

In addition, research indicates a positive indirect impact of CSR on economic outcomes of hospitality establishments, through variables such as customer loyalty, satisfaction and trust (Xu & Gursoy, 2015; 2013; Palacios-Florenco et al., 2018; Bigerna & Micheli, 2019 & Gao and Mattila, 2014; Han et. al., 2018; Martínez & del Bosque, 2013; García de Leaniz & Rodrguez Del Bosque, 2015; Siu et al., 2014; Jauhari et al., 2007), and willingness to pay a premium for environmentally conscious hospitality establishments (Ham & Han (2013; Palacios-Florenco et al., 2018; Bigerna & Micheli, 2019 & Gao and Mattila, 2014)). Moreover, CSR has been found to increase product differentiation, brand recognition and brand awareness of hospitality establishments (Garay & Font, 2012; Ettinger et al., 2018; Koh, et al., 2009; Butler, 2008; Han et al., 2009; Kirk, 1995; Mair & Jago, 2010; Chan, 2013; Cuthbert and Nickson, 1999; Brazyt et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016a; Gao et al., 2016; Kim, et al., 2017a)). Furthermore, promoting CSR activities targeted toward employees have been found to reduce turnover, increase job satisfaction, boost morale, and attract excellent applicants (Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008; Huimin & Ryan, 2011; Shaw & Thomas, 2006; Lee et al., 2012; Fu et al., 2014, Kim et al., 2017b; Raub & Blunschi, 2014; Park & Levy, 2014; Wong & Gao, 2014; Lee et al., 2013a, Lee et al., 2013b)). Moreover, CSR has been found to contribute to the legitimacy of hospitality establishments giving them a social license to operate and reducing government oversight through improving community relations and the community’s standards of living (Kasim, 2007; McGehee et al., 2009; Kirk, 1998; Sheldon & Park, 2011; Bohdanowicz & Zientara, 2008).

However, other studies reveal less conclusive or mixed evidence regarding the relationship between CSR and financial performance and company value (Han et al., 2009; Mair & Jago, 2010; Lee & Park, 2009; Kang, et al., 2010; Inoue & Lee, 2011; Park & Lee, 2009; Lee et al., 2018a; Lee et al., 2018b; Koh, et al., 2009), as well as a negative relationship

between CSR and financial performance (Kim, et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2013a; Moneva et al., 2020; Kang, et al., 2010) and CSR and investor interests (Kim, et al., 2019).

Conclusions

This paper uses a semi-systematic literature review to develop a comprehensive understanding of the dimensions of CSR in the hospitality industry, to capture the relationship between CSR and business outcomes, and to identify areas for future research. The contribution of this study is that the literature spans over a longer period of time compared to earlier studies, from 1990 to 2021. In addition, the search terms used for this study are broader than those used in earlier studies, making this examination more succinct. The investigation finds that the implementation of CSR practices by businesses in the hospitality industry is influenced by an array of factors, including considerations for profitability, corporate identity, ethical commitments of leadership, community and governmental interactions, and relationships with employees. While the field of CSR within the hospitality industry is still in its developmental stages, the research uncovers emerging data that tentatively supports a positive relationship between CSR and corporate success.

Nevertheless, the study identifies the need for further conceptual refinement and advancement within this field, given that scholars in the domain sometimes lack a robust theoretical foundation. The hospitality industry's particular setting presents several opportunities for theoretical modelling. Concerning methodological approaches, questionnaire research appears to be the preferred methodology for the investigation of CSR in the hospitality industry, albeit restrictions such as limited survey participants, constrained coverage of territories, and lack of longitudinal data impairing the validity and ability to generalize the results. The investigation recognizes certain drawbacks notwithstanding its benefits as a thorough assessment for CSR in the hospitality industry. The overview is mostly limited to studies that have been released to top CSR hospitality publications, which might leave out important information from additional publications.

Deficiencies in existing research and potential research paths

Notwithstanding the growing focus on CSR within the hospitality sector, the study acknowledges the need for further conceptual refinement within this field. This recognition stems from the observation that research in the domain sometimes lacks a robust theoretical foundation. The hospitality industry's unique setting, involving a variety of shareholder structures, regional scenarios, and organisational and national surroundings, presents numerous opportunities for theoretical development and evaluation.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognise that various studies have their own limitations and errors that directly impact the findings of these studies. For example, studies suffer from missing data, a lack of consideration for external variables, a focus on specific territories and geographies, among other factors. Furthermore, the choice of methodology, methods and data sources often impacts the outcomes of the studies. For example, survey questionnaire research is often the preferred method of research in the field, posing restrictions due to limited numbers of participants, constrained geographical coverage, and lack of longitudinal information impairing the validity and generalisability of the results. Recent changes in the sector, such as technological advancements, like robotics cleaning or computerised concierge, have repercussions for employees in the industry. These advancements may also impact on customer happiness and satisfaction. Moreover, market disruptions, exemplified by platforms such as Tripadvisor and the rise of house sharing, present challenges related to customer confidentiality and security. Remarkably there has been relatively little research on these emerging issues, leaving plenty of room for further investigation and theory development.

Different sectors within the hospitality industry concentrate differing efforts on varying elements of CSR, producing different outcomes and impacts on the industry and stakeholders. For example, the air transport sector places a lot of emphasis on reducing emissions, while lodging and foodservice establishments prioritise food quality and waste management. Cruise companies emphasise on protecting fragile habitats, and gambling establishments promote ethical gambling. As a result, it is very important to focus research on CSR activities and engagement that is relevant to each sector within the industry. However, this sector specific focus makes it very difficult to develop a comprehensive framework to understand and measure the impact of SCR engagement in the industry. It is very important to find ways to integrate the findings from diverse studies to develop an encompassing framework that establishments in the sector can adopt to effectively enhance their sustainability profiles and create a positive impact. In addition, the literature reveals that some sectors and issues remain under-researched. For example, there is limited research on the dimensions, impact and challenges of CSR activities of amusement parks. Similarly, there is limited research regarding the contribution of CSR engagement of hospitality establishments on the economic development of local communities, in the form of generating positive economic impacts, local supply chains, job opportunities, skills development opportunities and so on.

Addressing these gaps in existing research and developing a comprehensive framework for CSR engagement can lead to more sustainable practices within the industry, benefiting both businesses and stakeholders.

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