



Review

How global is international CSR research? Insights and recommendations from a systematic review



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Corporate social responsibility
Sustainability
Multinational
International business
Developing countries
Emerging countries

ABSTRACT

While studies on international corporate social responsibility (CSR) have expanded significantly, their true global nature can be questioned. We systematically review 494 articles in 31 journals over a 31-year period. We assess the embeddedness of CSR in international management/business (IB); analyze the coverage of developing, emerging, and developed countries; map the literature thematically; summarize key findings; discuss main empirical features; and identify unanswered questions, implications, and best practices. We find that international CSR research is far from being global and still emerging in ‘mainstream’ IB. This comprehensive review also helps to set an agenda for future international CSR scholarship.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has spread extensively within the global community on the part of both practitioners and researchers. In practice, a new institutional infrastructure of CSR has emerged, with a multitude of organizations across the public, corporate, and civil society sectors playing a role in its development (Waddock, 2008). In academia, scholars have also paid growing attention to CSR, which is defined for the purpose of this article as “context-specific organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders’ expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance” (Aguinis, 2011; p. 855; cf. Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). The latter part of the aforementioned definition—the triple bottom line or People, Planet, Profit—has sometimes been referred to specifically as sustainability (Kolk, 2010a). Several review articles have demonstrated this growing interest, both from a generic management/organization perspective (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016; Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2009) and a more specific international business/management angle (Doh & Lucea, 2013; Egri & Ralston, 2008; Holtbrügge & Dögl, 2012; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010; Kolk, 2016).

Remarkably, however, despite the stream of publications in international journals, the truly ‘international’ or, perhaps better, ‘global’ nature of this CSR research can be questioned. As pointed out in two reviews that covered international management/business (here abbreviated as IB) outlets during (part of) the 1990s and 2000s in particular (Egri & Ralston, 2008; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010), these journals showed only very limited mainstreaming of CSR, and this lack of attention was

most salient concerning developing countries and regions. As Egri and Ralston (2008, p. 325) aptly put it, “it is particularly troubling that there has been relatively little on-the-ground corporate responsibility research in countries where the need for corporate responsibility is most pressing due to greater poverty, environmental degradation, and institutional governance issues”; they therefore note the “urgent need to widen the geographic and cultural scope of international management research on corporate responsibility.” Thus, it is especially important to investigate CSR practices in developing countries because of the pervasive institutional voids that characterize these settings. Over the past few years, scholars have stressed the need to focus on such voids when assessing firms’ operations in developing regions in general (e.g., Mol, Stadler, & Ariño, 2017; Parmigiani & Rivera-Santos, 2015), and concerning their CSR practices in particular (e.g., Kolk, 2016). Specifically, recent research points to the potential role of CSR in bridging institutional voids in conflict-affected regions (Kolk & Lenfant, 2015) and with regard to the specific institutional logics at play in developing countries (Jamali, Karam, Yin, & Soundararajan, 2017). Based on these observations, we recognize the need for a comprehensive and up-to-date assessment of the extent to which international CSR research is truly global and, relatedly, the degree to which this body of research appropriately reflects the key issues faced by world business.

To fill this gap in the literature, this article systematically reviews the global nature of international CSR research published in 31 leading international journals over a period of 31 years (1985–2015) by considering (1) the embeddedness of this work in the field of IB; (2) the degree to which studies cover the range of countries around the world, with an emphasis on developing and emerging (versus developed)

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countries as three separate groupings; (3) the key findings in the literature, which are grouped into 12 broad themes; and (4) the main features of this published body of knowledge, as well as best practices. Based on this review, we also illuminate the gaps in the existing literature, and discuss the implications for research (institutes), management, policy, and publishing, with concrete suggestions for researchers active in this realm. In doing this, our study makes five key contributions to existing insights from CSR overview articles (see Section 1 of the online supplementary data that gives more details of those covering IB, as well as the most relevant recent ones from management more broadly).

First, in contrast to other reviews, we explicitly link CSR to key IB concepts and have selected only those studies that include both foci as the ones examined in more detail. Second, for this content analysis, we have taken the observations about the underexposure of developing countries in IB CSR research as a starting point to explicate, where possible, home- and host-country settings in the articles included in the sample. This enables an examination of the ‘source’ and ‘destination’ countries of the companies considered in the articles reviewed, as well as an assessment of the ‘global’ nature of international CSR research when considering this feature. Moreover, to further refine this frame, which focuses on geographic settings, we have specifically separated ‘developing’ countries from ‘emerging’ (and developed) ones, where possible. This additional step was inspired by Ramamurti’s commentary on Meyer’s (2004) *Journal of International Business Studies* Perspectives paper on foreign direct investment (FDI) in emerging economies, including its environmental and social impact. In his commentary, Ramamurti (2004, p. 278) underlined the need to distinguish the “dozens of developing countries that foreign investors have not (yet) found attractive” from “the handful” of emerging countries with growth potential “that receive the bulk of FDI.” We followed this distinction, given that it is highly relevant to appreciate the differences among the geographic settings of studies in the context of international CSR research. This is because it allows us to identify and discuss the few works that have focused on the least developed regions where the need for CSR practices is most pressing, as also remarked by Egri and Ralston (2008) in the aforementioned quote (cf. Kolk, 2016).

Third, in our analysis, we also embraced a theme-based logic that allowed us to proceed systematically in the content analysis of sampled studies and identify 12 broad themes that we have used to summarize the key findings obtained in the literature. By doing so, our work contributes to a nuanced understanding of the extent to which international CSR research appropriately reflects issues faced in the global business arena. Our fourth contribution consists of a specific analysis of the data sources used in the empirical articles in our sample, given the often-noted dearth of sufficient data and databases concerning CSR in developing and emerging countries in particular (see, e.g., Egri & Ralston, 2008; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010; Kolk, 2016). The various sources are explicated and listed in order to indicate how often they have been used, also with the objective to inspire researchers interested in the theme and suggest possible sources for them. Moreover, to offer further suggestions based on recent ‘best practices’, we have examined the latest 100 international CSR articles to summarize the recommendations for company managers and policy-makers and give an overview of unanswered questions and un(der)researched topics. This adds to the insights provided in Section 1 of the online supplementary data from the eight review articles that we considered most relevant for the purpose of this paper.

Our fifth and final contribution stems from the fact that our systematic review provides a much more up-to-date and comprehensive insight into the ‘state of the art’ than the earlier articles in this realm (see the overview in Section 1 of the online supplementary data). For this study, we have taken a period of 31 years, including 2015, and three sets of journals—the leading ones in management, in CSR, and in IB. Our broader journal coverage than other IB reviews (Doh & Lucea, 2013; Egri & Ralston, 2008; Holtbrügge & Dögl, 2012; Kolk & Van

Tulder, 2010; Kolk, 2016) recognizes the fact that IB research is sometimes published in non-IB outlets in both generic management and CSR-focused journals. Our choice to include the latter set responds to Egri and Ralston (2008), who suggested such a separate analysis of specialized CSR journals in addition to the one focused on IB.¹

The structure of this article is as follows. We first explain the key methodological choices taken for our systematic review (cf. Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003), including the selection of journals and keywords regarding CSR and IB, the identification of the sample, and the analysis. Section 3 presents and explains the results of this review, which is divided into five sub-sections. Respectively, these sub-sections deal with the basic characteristics of international CSR research and its embeddedness in IB; the ‘global’ nature of international CSR research; key findings and broad themes covered in the literature; data sources and empirics; and directions for research, unanswered questions, and implications, also for policy-makers and managers, as derived from the set of the most recent studies. The final section reviews our main results and elaborates on best practices for scholars, business schools, and practitioners aiming to further and mainstream international CSR research.

2. Methodology

2.1. Sample

In terms of the scope of the review, we focused on articles that appeared in peer-reviewed academic journals, excluding other types of publications, such as books or conference proceedings. We based our selection of journals on relevant earlier reviews that focused on CSR (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Egri & Ralston, 2008; Holtbrügge & Dögl, 2012; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010), topical issues in IB (Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2016), and the international dimension of management (Pisani, 2009; Werner, 2002) (the list of selected journals can be found in Table 1). Thus, we included outlets that are considered to be the leading publishers of management research in general, thereby basing our selection on widely accepted lists of top management journals included in previous articles (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin, 1992; Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2016; Pisani, 2009; Werner, 2002). We also included a set of leading specialized CSR journals whose primary focus is therefore on business and society themes broadly defined, including ethics, sustainability, and social responsibility.² The third and final set of outlets in our sample obviously consists of IB journals.³ The inclusion of these distinct sub-categories of journals was necessary to guarantee the comprehensiveness of our coverage of high-quality research focused on international CSR.

We used Thomson Reuters’ *Web of Knowledge* and EBSCOhost’s *Business Source Premier* databases to search for articles from the journals selected. Given our intention to review the entire literature on international

¹ Interestingly, we only recalled their recommendation when one of our reviewers specifically pointed out some limitations in our initial, first-round journal selection. We are very grateful to all three reviewers and the editor for their feedback, particularly for pushing us to extend the ‘best practices’ analysis and the scope of our article.

² To identify this second set of journals, we grounded our choice on existing literature reviews that considered *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Business & Society*, and *Journal of Business Ethics* as a restricted group of renowned top-tier journals in this realm (Beets, Lewis, & Brower, 2016; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010). Moreover, we included *Business Ethics: A European Review*, *Business Strategy and the Environment*, *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, and *Organization & Environment*, as these outlets are also generally considered leading specialized CSR journals (Egri & Ralston, 2008), in view also of their inclusion in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI) and their related insertion in recent reviews focusing on key international journals (Kolk & Rivera-Santos, 2016).

³ In addition to *Journal of International Business Studies*, most IB-focused reviews have included *Journal of World Business* and *Management International Review* (Kumar & Kundu, 2004), *International Business Review* (Chan, Fung, & Leung, 2006; Kolk & Van Tulder, 2010) as well as *International Marketing Review*, *Journal of International Marketing*, and *Journal of International Management* (DuBois & Reeb, 2000; Treviño, Mixon, Funk, & Inkpen, 2010; Xu, Yalcinkaya, & Seggie, 2008). To this set of seven ‘core’ IB journals, we decided to add the most recent addition to the field, i.e., *Global Strategy Journal* (Tüselmann, Sinkovics, & Pishchulov, 2016).

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