

Corporate Social Responsibility employer branding and employee attraction and retention: review of literature and research agenda

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Abstract

This paper concerns Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) employer branding and its impact on employee attraction and retention, seeking to systematize academic knowledge about their interconnections and links to other important management issues. We made a systematic literature review focusing on empirical papers published in academic journals over the last 10 years, which enabled us to identify the directions of contemporary research, commonly used methodologies and contexts explored. It shows that CSR initiatives are increasingly recognized as a critical dimension of employer branding. Alignment of CSR practices and employer branding strategies is essential for attracting top talent. We also observed a strong link between CSR and employer attractiveness, career development, organizational identification, corporate reputation and person-organization fit, which underscores the multifaceted nature of CSR employer branding. It has been found that CSR researchers predominantly use quantitative methodologies in their studies and tend to explore the firms that work in the IT industry. The paper discusses the current state of CSR employer branding research and outlines possible avenues for future studies.

Keywords

Corporate social responsibility, CSR, employer branding, employer brand, employee attraction, employee retention

JEL: M14, M50, M54, D23.

Introduction

The importance and value of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which often gives a business potential advantage over competitors has been recognized by both academic and non-academic sources, including media, experts and commentators. Positive effects of corporate social responsibility have been observed in firms' financial performance (Cho et al., 2019), employee engagement (Bapat & Upadhyay, 2021) and other areas. Benefits from CSR have caused many companies to incorporate CSR-related initiatives into their strategy and business processes; some of them began to use CSR for building a stronger company brand. It often happens, however, that the rising popularity of the concept also leads to inappropriate organizational behavior: some companies only create an image of being socially responsible, without adjusting their strategies in accordance with CSR postulates. This is likely to result in hurting the brand of the company instead of strengthening it (Anselmsson et al., 2016), which will decrease its appeal not only to customers and clients, but also to the current and potential employees.

Many companies launch their CSR initiatives primarily to engage and retain their workforce and also to attract new talented and highly-skilled employees. Successful use of CSR as a tool for boosting the brand within the company requires careful planning and attention to detail. It is especially important because employees can be considered key internal stakeholders, who represent the brand and contribute to its quality (Lindgreen et al., 2016). In this paper we will examine the complicated interplay between corporate social responsibility initiatives, company brands and its employees, both current and potential.

The central concept of this research is employer branding; its main target is the employees, unlike that of the general brand of the company, which mostly interacts with consumers and other stakeholders. By focusing on the publications describing how the CSR and employer branding of the companies are integrated in order to create better employee retention and attraction outcomes, we systematize the existing knowledge, analyze research approaches and point out the links to related concepts, thus addressing the gap in the academic research into corporate social responsibility, employer branding and employee retention and attraction. The paper will contribute to the theoretical knowledge of how CSR practices of organizations can be used to enhance the employer branding. It will also provide a clear picture of connections between CSR employer branding and other HR management concepts, which should have practical implications for improving employee attraction and retention through high-quality HRM strategies. Finally, we outline possible directions for future research.

Researchers from the BRICS countries have thoroughly explored the concept of employer branding. The Chinese scholars, for instance, determined the criteria for assessing employer brands (Lee et al., 2018), considered the dimensions of employer branding in Chinese context (Zhu et al., 2014), detected relationships between employer brand, organizational attractiveness and talent management

(Jiang & Iles, 2011) and investigated the elements of an ideal employer brand (Yuan et al., 2020). In India, too, there is ample research into employer branding, including the study of employer branding factors in Indian context (Aggarwal, 2015), assessment of its impact on employee engagement (Chawla, 2020), analysis of executives' views on employer branding (Biswas & Suar, 2018) and exploration of the so-called digital employer branding (Patra et al., 2019). Brazilian scholars looked into the connection between employer branding and organizational culture (da Silva et al., 2024), employer brand's influence on career choices (Oltremari et al., 2019) and generational perspective of employer attractiveness with implications for employer branding (Reis & Braga, 2016). The attention to employer branding is also evident in South Africa, where this phenomenon is analyzed as a strategic reputation management tool (Potgieter & Doubell, 2018). Botha et al. (2011) built predictive models for talent attraction and retention; Mouton and Bussin (2019) assessed the effect of employer branding on retention (Mouton & Bussin, 2019). In Iran and Egypt, the researchers have focused on designing models of employer branding (Shakeri et al., 2023; Zohreh Bojnourdi et al., 2024) and investigating its specifics in particular industries (Kamel, 2022; Saghari et al., 2024). In the United Arab Emirates, the research weighed the significance of CSR for employee value proposition (Agha & Fitzsimmons, 2022); Ethiopian scholars explored employer branding of universities (Mognehodie et al., 2018; Tibebe et al., 2018). Employer branding appears to enjoy considerable attention of the international academic community and we believe that our study can contribute to the bulk of knowledge about this important phenomenon, which differs across countries with their specific business cultures.

Before proceeding to the literature review and research agenda, it is essential to explicate the core concepts of the study, namely: corporate social responsibility, employer branding, employee retention and attraction.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Defining CSR may be rather challenging despite its long-standing popularity because the scholars and business executives have not agreed on any one definition yet. The reason probably lies in the varying nature of the issues the concept encompasses: CSR is related to such complex dynamic systems as ecology, society and economics (Sheehy, 2015). The first definitions of CSR in business and management were probably offered by Carroll (1979), who posited that CSR should include economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, which seem to have led to a new research agenda as the ethical and philanthropic responsibilities started to be considered "beyond compliance". Corporate social responsibility issues attracted more and more attention and this approach became most popular. Later, Robbins (1994) identified CSR as business firm's obligations beyond those required by the law and economics to pursue long-term goals that are good for society. This definition depicts the essence of CSR, so we accepted it as a basis for our choice of literature.

Employer branding

Characteristics of employer branding are similar to those of CSR and other sustainability policies. In the words of Theurer et al. (2016), employer branding is a fragmented field with heterogeneous interpretations of the concept and its scope. It is important to differentiate between the two seemingly identical concepts: employer brand and employer branding. The former is best described by Ambler and Barrow (1996) who define it as a package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by and associated with the employing company. This is a classical definition of employer brand, which, however, is not universally accepted. As concerns employer branding, it is as a process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, or, more specifically, promotion of a unique and attractive image of the employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This process normally involves application of marketing strategies.

Employee retention and attraction

The terms “employee retention” and “employee attraction” very often go together in the academic literature. The major difference between them is that retention targets the current employees and attraction is aimed at potential, prospective employees. The theory behind the employee retention was formulated by Das and Baruah (2013) who understand it as encouraging employees to remain in the organization for a long period of time. The encouragement can take various forms; corporate social responsibility and employer branding are often used for that purpose. Employee attraction, in its turn, can be defined as “ways in which companies seek out potential employees”. For employer attraction to be successful, organizations need to have employer attractiveness, which can be defined as “envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization” (Berthon et al., 2005). This means that to seek out employees and attract them, the company needs to make sure that they are informed about these benefits.

Another important term is “CSR employer branding”. It perfectly conveys the specific focus we strive to investigate, i.e. the role of social responsibility practices in employer branding of companies that seek to improve their attraction and retention outcomes.

The research questions related to the interplay of corporate social responsibility, employer branding and employee retention and attraction, are the following:

- RQ1. What are the main topics discussed in the literature on CSR employer branding, regarding employee retention and attraction?
- RQ2. Which business industries most often serve as research context for research into CSR employer branding, with its connection to employee attraction and retention?
- RQ3. Which methods are employed for studying CSR employer branding, with its connection to employee attraction and retention?

- RQ4. What are the directions for future research in the field of CSR employer branding, with its connection to employee attraction and retention?

Methodology

To conduct the review of literature and research agenda in the field of CSR employer branding, we followed the approach recommended by Natalicchio et al. (2014). It includes the selection of keywords for the search in the article databases and subsequent development of exclusion criteria for the obtained materials.

In the process of selection it was essential to find the relevant articles for the review; we have chosen 4 main keywords for the database search, or, to be precise, three words and one word combination: “CSR”, “employer branding”, “retention” and “attraction”. We did not specifically use the phrases “employee retention” and “employee attraction” because the popular way of communicating these notions is actually “employee retention and attraction”. The final keyword formula, which was fed into the search engines of the relevant academic databases, looked as follows:

“CSR” AND “employer branding” AND “retention” AND “attraction”.

The choice of databases and articles for the search was to some extent limited because many prominent databases are now inaccessible in Russia. Nevertheless, we aimed to make this review as complete as it is possible in the current circumstances of limited access. Below is the list of databases that were searched to find relevant publications:

- Elsevier ScienceDirect
- Emerald Insight
- Sage Journals
- SpringerLink
- Wiley Online Library
- MDPI
- Cambridge University Press
- Taylor & Francis

In addition to these databases, we conducted a search with the same keyword formula using the Google Scholar engine to detect publications available through the websites of research journals in which they are published, or via other, minor databases.

As far as the selection criteria are concerned, it is necessary to point out, that the keyword search in the databases was not limited to the words in the titles, abstracts and keywords of the papers. We also searched for the keywords in the main body of the texts, because these could offer most valuable insights. To make sure that such insights are not overlooked, we decided to check the articles which could potentially be useful for the review, but remove them from the final list of literature if they only mentioned the key terms without contributing ideas or information relevant to our study. This helped eliminate a significant number of papers but several publications

became part of the analysis exclusively because of this approach, thus proving its benefits.

We have selected research papers that belong to the field of economics and management, are written in English and published in academic journals not before 2014. These are primarily empirical studies but the so-called conceptual papers are also considered because of their potential value for understanding the phenomena in question.

We did not include bachelor and master's degree papers, articles published in conference proceedings, book chapters, literature reviews or bibliometric analyses because of our focus on empirical research papers. The exclusion criteria are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Exclusion criteria for academic research

EXCLUSION CRITERIA
Language other than English
Publication prior to 2014
Bachelor or Master Thesis level
Book chapters, Conference Proceedings, Reviews or Bibliometric Analyses
Key Concepts not linked to relevant ideas or analyses

Results

Before discussing the selected literature we will outline the process that led us to the final set of articles, and then give an overview of their key characteristics, thus starting to address the posed research questions, before elaborating on them in detail in the discussion chapter. Initially, we found 409 articles. After checking the contents of each of these papers, we selected 116 articles which contained all the chosen keywords and appeared valuable for our review. Then we applied to them our exclusion criteria and were left with 37 articles, which were subjected to the reviewing. Table 2 below illustrates this process.

Table 2. Exclusion criteria and number of papers excluded based on each criterion

EXCLUSION CRITERIA	NUMBER OF PAPERS EXCLUDED
Language other than English	1
Publication prior to 2014	3
Bachelor or Master Thesis Level of Publication	9
Book Chapter, Conference Proceedings, Review or Bibliometric Analysis Type of Publication	25
Key Concepts not linked to relevant ideas or analyses	41

Besides these, several papers were excluded simply because they were duplicates found in different databases. The exact number of such papers is 4.

In the next section we present our findings on, first, the key themes and concepts found in the articles analyzing CSR employer branding with its connection to employee attraction and retention; second, the industries which serve as contexts for such studies; third, the distribution of articles between the selected databases. We also explain the methodology used in these papers.

Related concepts and themes

In this chapter, we present the concepts, which appear to be connected with the CSR employer branding and represent the current directions of research in the field. We give a list of such concepts and themes in the table below.

Table 3. Concepts and theories related to CSR employer branding

CONCEPT	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
Employer (organizational) attractiveness	4
Career development (growth)	4
Organizational identification	3
Corporate (company) reputation	3
Person-organization fit	3
Social identity theory	3
Signaling theory	2
Job satisfaction	2
Employee benefits	2
SMEs	2
Ethics	2
Employee motivation	1
Employee engagement	1
Intention to stay	1
Intention to apply	1
Intent to join	1
Employer resilience	1
Employer originality (innovativeness)	1
Sensemaking	1
Employee brand personality appeal	1
Employer familiarity	1
Employer image	1

Table 3. Continued

CONCEPT	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
Employer of choice	1
Talent management	1
Organization pursuit intention	1
Employer brand equity	1
Employee turnover	1
Psychological contract	1
Organizational performance	1
Organizational prestige	1
Sustainable HRM	1

To systematize the concepts and theories presented above we attribute the concepts to the two key actors in the process of CSR employer branding – organization or employee (current and potential). The division will be based on the simple premise: whether the given concept exists at organizational or individual (employee) level. For instance, “corporate reputation” is clearly an organizational characteristic, while “intention to stay” refers to an individual employee’s thinking. The third category includes the terms and phenomena which exist both at the organizational and individual levels.

Tables 4, 5 and 6 below present the concepts belonging to organizational, individual, and both organizational and individual levels, respectively.

Table 4. Concepts, themes and theories of organizational level

CONCEPT
Employer (organizational) attractiveness
Corporate (company) reputation
Employer resilience
Employer originality (innovativeness)
Employer familiarity
Employer image
Employer of choice
Employer brand equity
Employee turnover
Organizational performance
Organizational prestige
Sustainable HRM

Table 5. Concepts, themes and theories of individual employee level

CONCEPT
Career development (growth)
Organizational identification
Employee benefits
Social identity theory
Job satisfaction
Employee motivation
Employee engagement
Intention to stay
Intention to apply
Intent to join
Employee brand personality appeal
Organization pursuit intention

Table 6. Concepts, themes and theories consistent with both organizational and employee level

CONCEPT
Person-organization fit
Signaling theory
Talent management
Psychological contract

Several frequently mentioned concepts were not included in any of the three tables. These are SMEs, ethics and sensemaking. We left them out because, firstly, none of the them is directly related to CSR employer branding and employee attraction and retention. In the selected studies, SMEs are the contexts in which employer branding and employee attraction and retention occur. As concerns ethics, although some of the researchers consider ethics to be an element of CSR, the concept of ethics does not seem to have a direct connection with employer branding. The third concept, sensemaking, refers to a theory which indeed can be linked to the employer branding and employee attraction and retention; however, it is widely used to analyze and describe organizational processes that do not focus specifically on the employer and employee relations.

Use of methodology

As shown in Table 7, most papers selected for the analysis used quantitative and qualitative methods or a combination of the two, but we also considered conceptual papers.

Table 7. Methodologies used in reviewed literature

METHODOLOGY	NUMBER OF PAPERS
Quantitative	30
Qualitative	4
Conceptual paper	3
Mixing of methods	1

As we can see, 30 of the analyzed 38 publications adopted the quantitative approach, 4 studies used qualitative methods, one article employed both quantitative and qualitative, 3 appeared to be conceptual papers.

Industries serving as context

The selected papers examined organizations working in the industries listed in Table 8.

Table 8. Industries serving as context in reviewed literature

IDENTIFIED INDUSTRIES	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
IT	6
Higher Education (students)	5
Hospitality	3
Banking	1
Industrial hub	1
Fashion	1
Higher Education (employees)	1
Oil industry	1
Energy	1
Accounting	1
Mining	1
Tire manufacturing	1

It is clear that 23 articles can be considered industry-specific, meaning that the collection of data was limited to one industry only. The remaining 14 studies either use data from several industries, rather than focus on a specific setting, or introduce another focal point, e.g. concentrating on generational characteristics of Millennials or Generation Z.

Most of the studies explored CSR employer branding in the firms from information technologies sector. The second popular context is higher education, with university

students as respondents. Hospitality sector also was a comparatively frequent context for CSR employer branding inquiries.

Division of articles between databases

In this subchapter, we provide information on the distribution of the analyzed articles between the chosen databases, specifying how many originated from each database.

Table 9. Databases as sources of articles under analysis

DATABASE	NUMBER OF ARTICLES
Emerald Insight	13
MDPI	5
SpringerLink	3
Wiley Online Library	3
Taylor & Francis	3
Sage Journals	2
Elsevier ScienceDirect	1
Cambridge University Press	1
Other databases	6

The leading source of academic articles for analysis is Emerald Insight, with 13 publications relevant to this research. We also selected five articles from MDPI database. SpringerLink, Wiley and Taylor & Francis gave us three papers each. The remaining six articles were taken from other databases or journals' websites.

Discussion

The paper contributes to the study of research agenda in the area of SCR employer branding, as it detects recurring themes, valuable ideas and promising approaches.

Perhaps, the theme most frequently reflected on is corporate social responsibility as a dimension of employer branding. Indu (2016) considers CSR together with work environment, work-life balance and training and development. Azhar et al. (2024) and Tanwar and Prasad (2017) write about five dimensions of employer branding, adding compensation and benefits to the list above. Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) adopted a framework of 10 employer branding dimensions, comprising promotion, education, teamwork, travel opportunities and other elements, together with CSR. Sharma and Prasad (2018) identify 12 employer branding dimensions: CSR is part of this framework, with reputation, internal communication, recruitment, performance

appraisal, senior leadership and some others. There may be differences in terminology, for example, Yameen et al. (2021) perceived CSR as an employer branding trait, rather than dimension. Tanwar and Kumar (2019) and Alzaid and Dukhaykh (2023) suggest that employer branding dimensions be used for creating branding measurement scales.

Researchers also pay considerable attention to the connection between CSR employer branding and employer attractiveness. Klimkiewicz and Oltra (2017) investigates the CSR-based employer attractiveness, understanding CSR as a symbolic attribute of EB, and concludes that individual attitude towards CSR activities heavily impacts employer attractiveness. At the same time, Kumari and Saini (2018) do not see CSR among the key factors of employer attractiveness; in their view, career development opportunities appear to be most important, with the possibility to compensate for poor CSR reputation with good career prospects.

Career development and growth also play a role in CSR employer branding. Gandasari et al. (2024) place the perceived career development in one group with CSR and employer brand when exploring their influence on the candidate's intention to apply. Their results show that EB and career development substantially influenced the intention to apply, while CSR did not have this effect. Since career development is often seen as one of employer branding dimensions together with CSR, it is possible to establish a significant relationship between career enhancement opportunity, CSR and ethics as EB dimensions, and organizational goals (Sharma & Tanwar, 2023) .

Another theme connected with CSR employer branding is corporate reputation. Hosseini et al. (2022) assert that CSR boosts corporate reputation, attractiveness of employer brand, and employee engagement, given the proper planning and commitment to implementation of CSR programs. Özcan and Elçi (2020) found corporate reputation to be a mediator in the relationship between employee-oriented CSR activities and employer brand, with the latter being positively influenced by CSR. Binu Raj (2022) explores the link between CSR, employer brand and corporate reputation, finding that CSR strengthens corporate reputation and is crucial for employer brand and attraction of job seekers. In addition, employer branding appeared to be a mediator between CSR and reputation.

Organizational identification is also linked to the CSR employer branding; it is a propensity of employee to identify with a certain company. Bharadwaj et al. (2022), who regards CSR as a dimension of EB, found that employer branding was positively related to organizational identification, job satisfaction and employee retention. Also, Bharadwaj and Yameen (2021) investigated organizational identification as mediating variable in the relationship between CSR and employee retention from the employer branding perspective, confirming its mediating role; moreover, Bharadwaj (2023) explored the same relationship, adding person-organization fit concept as a confirmed mediator.

Furthermore, person-organization fit turned out to be yet another prominent research direction regarding CSR employer branding. Tanwar and Kumar (2019) provided insights on how person-organization fit can help transfer employer brand

dimensions into employer of choice status; Klimkiewicz and Oltra (2017) employed person-organization fit concept to find out how individuals are influenced by CSR-based employer branding.

Klimkiewicz and Oltra's research also concerns the social identity theory. We review its role in CSR employer branding studies together with another construct – signaling theory. The role of social identity is accentuated in the study by Okolocha (2020), who posited that employees seek and enhance social identity by identifying with their organization if it has positive employer brand and enacts employee-focused CSR. The paper by Bharadwaj and Yameen (2021) highlights the same idea, explaining the relationship, first, between social identity and the influence of CSR on employee outcomes and, second, between employer branding effects and employees' identification with organization. The signaling theory was first developed to explain the interaction between companies and employees in the job market. (Ikhide et al., 2021) maintains that employer branding strategy based on CSR can be used by organizations to signal positive corporate image; Szegedi et al. (2023) proposes CSR employer branding process model based on various internal CSR signals; Alshathry et al. (2017) points out that CSR sends signals to the labor market about organizational values and norms, positively influencing attraction and retention outcomes.

The paper by Alshathry et al. is one of three conceptual articles we selected for the review. Alshathry et al. (2017) presented a conceptual framework for employer brand equity (EBE), regarding CSR as an antecedent to EBE and highlighting CSR influence on two EBE elements – familiarity and associations with employer brand. Ahmed et al. (2022) seeks to develop a conceptual framework of employer branding and talent retention, claiming that employer's reputation is explained by employer's image, excellence in market competition and perceived CSR. Caputo et al. (2023) focus on measurement of employer branding and reputation, confirming that CSR positively influences reputation and hence EB.

A promising research direction is the role of gender in CSR employer branding communication. According to Andruszkiewicz et al. (2024), women are much more likely to choose employers who implement CSR measures in targeting local community, environment and employees. Also, Tanwar and Prasad (2016) maintain that the effects of CSR on job satisfaction are significantly stronger for women than for men.

In the course of our research we came across some rare approaches to CSR employer branding. Thus, Buzzao and Rizzi (2024) compared the effects of CSR and two other attributes of EB – employer originality and resilience – on job applicants with different educational backgrounds. They argue that background and social identity determine the effectiveness of CSR and may contribute to workers' originality and resilience. Azimi et al. (2023) introduce the concept of employer brand personality appeal in hospitality industry, meaning the perceived amount of appeal and attraction of employer brand, which is achieved by its humane characteristics. The study measures its impact on turnover intention and employee satisfaction alongside CSR, finding that both tend to impact employees' behavior.

Conclusion

In this paper we provide a thorough review of the literature on CSR employer branding and its impact on employee attraction and retention. Through a meticulous selection process, we analyzed 38 studies published from 2014 onwards. The findings reveal that CSR initiatives are increasingly recognized as a critical dimension of employer branding. Organizations that actively engage in CSR not only enhance their reputation but also cultivate a positive organizational identity that resonates with potential and current employees. This alignment of CSR practices and employer branding strategies is essential for attracting top talent, particularly among younger generations who prioritize ethical considerations in their employment choices.

Our analysis helped identify the recurring themes and concepts in the literature on CSR employer branding, including employer attractiveness, career development, organizational identification, corporate reputation, person-organization fit and others. These themes underscore the multifaceted nature of CSR employer branding, highlighting the ability of effective CSR strategies to foster a sense of belonging and commitment among employees. The reviewed studies mostly use quantitative methods of research, which suggests a robust measurement of the impact of CSR on employer branding. Still, there remains a need for more qualitative insights to capture the nuanced experiences of employees.

The variety of industries represented in the literature, namely IT, higher education, hospitality and others, indicates a growing recognition of CSR's role in diverse settings. We suggest that future studies should concern other organizational context that are no less important for society, such as manufacturing, healthcare or logistics, thus filling a significant gap in research.

Looking ahead, we also recommend that future research concentrates on the mechanisms through which CSR influences employee perceptions and behaviors. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of CSR initiatives on employee retention and attraction. Exploring the role of leadership in promoting CSR within organizations could further illuminate the dynamics of employer branding. Also, gender-based differences in perception of CSR initiatives could be a worthy object of research, allowing to better understand the dynamics of CSR impact within the employer branding strategies. It may be useful to investigate the variation in CSR and employer branding perception depending on the professional stratification, e.g. the differences in perception of CSR initiatives by white-collar and blue-collar employees.

Integration of CSR into employer branding strategies is not merely a trend but a strategic imperative for organizations aiming to thrive in a competitive labor market. By prioritizing CSR, companies can enhance their attractiveness as employers, foster employee loyalty and drive organizational success. As the global job market continues to evolve, the interplay between CSR and employer branding will remain a critical area for scholarly inquiry and practical application.

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