

## **Corporate Social Responsibility Research in the *Journal of Management Studies*: A Shift from a Business-Centric to a Society-Centric Focus**

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**ABSTRACT** This introduction to the Thematic Collection on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) tracks the evolution of CSR research published in the *Journal of Management Studies* from 2006 until 2021. Alongside the mainstreaming of CSR within management studies, CSR research in JMS has progressed from a *business-centric* to a *society-centric* focus. The business-centric focus centres on the financial implications of CSR on business firms, and advocates CSR to the extent that it leads to improved financial performance or some other competitive advantage for the firm. The society-centric focus asks broader questions about the appropriate role and location of business in society and its political and institutional contexts, and it reflects a wider set of variables of interest beyond firm financial performance. Understanding this evolution is crucial because it helps to elucidate where CSR research is headed and how the role of business in society is conceptualised. Based on these developments, I outline three emergent avenues for future research: the reintegration of governments as important actors shaping CSR, the need to reorient the dependent variables used in CSR research toward tangible social and ecological outcomes, and the importance of CSR research tackling interrelated societal crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis.

**Keywords:** business-centric, corporate social responsibility (CSR), future research, management studies, society-centric

### **INTRODUCTION**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) research has evolved substantially since Bowen's (1953) classic book and Friedman's, 1970 critique. Here, I focus on research published in the *Journal of Management Studies* (JMS) since 2006 when the CSR topic took off; thus, I examine a more contemporary period of CSR research in which scholars increasingly

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considered the 'business case' for CSR, and subsequently broadened that focus to a wider range of societal issues and actors. Research has since addressed CSR through a wide variety of methodological and theoretical lenses, incorporating a broad range of levels of analysis, and drawing on a diverse set of research contexts and paradigmatic approaches. Because of the inherent fragmentation of the CSR literature, following prior work (e.g., Matten and Moon, 2008), I consider CSR as an umbrella term for the debate about the role of business in society and about how the business-society relationship informs the treatment of society's social, ecological, and ethical challenges by businesses.

Beyond the proliferation of CSR as a mainstream topic for management researchers, during this 15-year period we have witnessed a subtle but discernible expansion in the scope of CSR research. Specifically, scholars have broadened their focus from one that is primarily concerned with the business case for CSR to one that asks a broader set of questions, applies more integrative approaches, and considers phenomena that unfold at the intersection of business and other societal actors. With a business-centric focus, scholars frequently ask the following question: 'How and when does CSR improve firm-level outcomes such as performance as reflected in enhanced competitive position, increased reputation, and other financial measures?'. This approach to examine CSR dominated the scholarly agenda during the first part of the 2000s, when some measure of organisational performance was the primary concern (e.g., Brammer and Pavelin, 2006; Husted and Salazar, 2006; McWilliams et al., 2006; Tang et al., 2012; Waldman et al., 2006). Such an approach, however, overshadows the potential social and ecological consequences of CSR.

By contrast, a society-centric focus widens the theoretical and topical lenses, with scholars asking questions such as 'How and when does CSR improve societal-level outcomes such as social and ecological conditions and create welfare for society at large?'. This approach does not necessarily neglect the business implications of CSR; however, research representative of this approach has been concerned with a broader set of questions about the appropriate role and location of business in society and its political and institutional contexts (e.g., Doh and Guay, 2006; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Furthermore, such research is less constricted to a single dependent variable of interest, such as shareholder value.

In this introduction to the Thematic Collection on CSR, I illustrate the expansion of CSR research based on a synthesis of highly influential studies published since 2006 in *JMS*. My intention is not to offer an exhaustive review of the literature that covers the entire variety of CSR research, but rather to bring greater clarity by integrating, synthesising, and providing direction to the highly fragmented scholarly work in this space. I include particularly influential research that has significantly shaped how we think about CSR, and conclude with an outline of emergent avenues of future research.

## **SCOPE OF ANALYSIS**

Even among the numerous studies published on CSR in *JMS*, a few stand out because they have substantially shaped our thinking about CSR and informed subsequent research in crucial ways. To identify these studies, I searched the Web of Science<sup>[1]</sup> for

articles published in *JMS* with the keywords ‘CSR’ or ‘Corporate Social Responsibility’ as ‘topic’, which included titles, keywords, and abstracts. This search yielded 51 articles. Quite clearly, CSR gained momentum in terms of the number of publications in 2006 with the publication of the special issue by McWilliams, Siegel, and Wright on the strategic implications of CSR. CSR research then saw another peak in the number of publications in 2016 when the special issue on ‘Managing for political CSR’ by Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, and Spicer appeared. This special issue coincided with a high number of regular influential publications on CSR in that year (Crane and Glozer, 2016; de Roeck et al., 2016; Marano and Kostova, 2016; Wickert et al., 2016).

Of those 51 papers published since the inception of *JMS* in 1963, 48 appeared in or after 2006, and among those, 28 appeared in or after 2016. Taking the number of citations as a proxy for an article’s overall influence in a scholarly conversation, I therefore used 2006 as the starting point for my analysis, and filtered for the most-cited papers since 2006 as well as since 2016. From the 2006–21 collection of the top 10 most-cited papers on CSR, five were part of the 2006 special issue, including its introduction (McWilliams et al., 2006). Likewise, from the 2016–21 collection of top 10 most-cited papers on CSR, five were part of the 2016 special issue, including its introduction (Scherer et al., 2016). These 20 articles mark the primary scope of my analysis (see Tables I and II). For both periods, the introduction to the respective special issue was the most-cited paper. Narrowing the analysis to these 20 papers seemed adequate because the top 10 papers for the 2006–21 period represented approximately 73 per cent of the citations received by all CSR papers in *JMS* (4.817 citations for the top 10 vs. 6.566 for all 48 CSR papers). For the 2016–21 period, they also represented approximately 73 per cent (911 citations for the top 10 vs. 1.248 for all 29 CSR papers).

These publication and citation patterns also underscore the mainstreaming of CSR in the general management literature. For instance, of the 10 most-cited papers on any topic published in *JMS* since 2006, the most-cited paper was the one by McWilliams et al. (2006) with almost 1,300 citations. Of those 10 papers, three concern CSR (Doh and Guay, 2006; McWilliams et al., 2006; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). For the 10 most-cited papers on any topic since 2016, the share of CSR papers doubled (six). Furthermore, the ‘average citations per item’ provided by Web of Science was 65.73 for all *JMS* publications on any topic since 2006. By contrast, the same indicator for CSR was 133.71. This suggests that a CSR paper has, on average, received more than twice as many citations as a regular *JMS* paper. Overall, the number of citations of CSR papers published in *JMS* has increased rapidly since 2006, from just a handful in 2006 to more than 1,000 citations in 2020 alone. Simultaneously, CSR research has evolved from a topic largely constrained to special issues to a topic that appears both in special and regular issues of the journal.

### **EARLIER CSR RESEARCH IN *JMS*: A BUSINESS-CENTRIC FOCUS**

In the mid- and late-1990s, scholars began to explore the extent to which CSR may yield discernible competitive benefits for the firm, which came to be known as ‘strategic CSR’ (Burke and Logsdon, 1996). Building on an expanding body of research (e.g., Orlitzky

Table I. The 10 most-cited CSR papers published in *JMS* since 2006 (until 10 August 2021)

<i>Paper title</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Year of publication</i>	<i># of citations (Web of Science)</i>	<i>Inclusion in 2006 SI</i>	<i>Research focus</i>
1 Corporate social responsibility: Strategic implications	McWilliams, Siegel and Wright	2006	1,272	Yes	Business-centric
2 The New Political Role of Business in a Globalized World: A Review of a New Perspective on CSR and its Implications for the Firm, Governance, and Democracy	Scherer and Palazzo	2011	896	No	Society-centric
3 Corporate social responsibility, public policy, and NGO activism in Europe and the United States: An institutional-stakeholder perspective	Doh and Guay	2006	534	Yes	Society-centric
4 Corporate reputation and social performance: The importance of fit	Brammer and Pavelin	2006	414	No	Business-centric
5 Components of CEO transformational leadership and corporate social responsibility	Waldman, Siegel and Mansour	2006	339	No	Business-centric
6 Corporate social responsibility in management research: Focus, nature, salience and sources of influence	Lockett, Moon and Visser	2006	334	Yes	Business-centric
7 Corporate social responsibility: Three key approaches	Windsor	2006	306	Yes	Business-centric
8 Taking Friedman seriously: Maximizing profits and social performance	Husted and Salazar	2006	280	Yes	Business-centric
9 Managing Legitimacy in Complex and Heterogeneous Environments: Sustainable Development in a Globalized World	Scherer, Palazzo and Seidl	2013	225	No	Society-centric
10 How Corporate Social Responsibility Engagement Strategy Moderates the CSR-Financial Performance Relationship	Tang, Hull, Eirikur and Rothenberg	2012	217	No	Business-centric

Table II. The 10 most-cited CSR papers published in *JMS* since 2016 (until 10 August 2021)

<i>Paper title</i>	<i>Authors</i>	<i>Year of publication</i>	<i># of citations (Web of Science)</i>	<i>Inclusion in 2016 SI</i>	<i>Research focus</i>
1 Managing for Political Corporate Social Responsibility: New Challenges and Directions for PCSR 2.0	Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo and Spicer	2016	136	Yes	Society-centric
2 Unpacking the Institutional Complexity in Adoption of CSR Practices in Multinational Enterprises	Marano and Kostova	2016	121	No	Society-centric
3 Researching Corporate Social Responsibility Communication: Themes, Opportunities and Challenges	Crane and Glozer	2016	103	No	Society-centric
4 Taming Wicked Problems: The Role of Framing in the Construction of Corporate Social Responsibility	Reinecke and Ansari	2016	99	Yes	Society-centric
5 Walking and Talking Corporate Social Responsibility: Implications of Firm Size and Organizational Cost	Wickert, Scherer and Spence	2016	95	No	Society-centric
6 The Political Dynamics of Sustainable Coffee: Contested Value Regimes and the Transformation of Sustainability	Levy, Reinecke and Manning	2016	94	Yes	Society-centric
7 Consistency Matters! How and When Does Corporate Social Responsibility Affect Employees' Organizational Identification?	De Roeck, El Akremi and Swaen	2016	90	No	Society-centric
8 Business Statesman or Shareholder Advocate? CEO Responsible Leadership Styles and the Micro-Foundations of Political CSR	Maak, Pless and Voegtlin	2016	64	Yes	Society-centric
9 Strategies of Legitimacy Through Social Media: The Networked Strategy	Castelló, Eter and Nielsen	2016	63	Yes	Society-centric
10 Reducing Complexity by Creating Complexity: A Systems Theory Perspective on How Organizations Respond to Their Environments	Schneider, Wickert and Marti	2017	46	No	Society-centric

et al., 2003; Porter and Kramer, 2006), the 2006 special issue of *JMS* on the strategic implications of CSR by McWilliams et al. further consolidated the business-centric focus in CSR research.

In their introductory essay to the special issue, McWilliams et al. (2006) reviewed key themes in the CSR debate of the time. First and foremost, the empirical question that dominated CSR research was the establishment of a link between social and financial performance. This does not mean that the social and ecological implications of CSR were neglected, but rather that they were secondary to the quest for CSR's financial implications. In fact, building on stakeholder theory (e.g., Dmytriiev et al., 2021; Freeman, 1984), McWilliams et al. (2006, p. 10) emphasised that 'while understanding the relation between firm performance and social performance is of primary importance in the management literature, a more thorough understanding of the CSR phenomenon requires that we take account of other stakeholders as well. These stakeholders include: customers, employees, governments, suppliers, taxpayers, community groups, and underrepresented groups'.

While McWilliams et al. offered an important reflection on the state-of-the-art of the CSR literature and made a key contribution to research that considered the strategic implications of CSR, many of the papers included in that special issue have since also been highly influential. Probably the 'purest' example of a business-centric focus is the study titled 'Taking Friedman seriously: Maximizing profits and social performance' by Husted and Salazar (2006). The authors examined the conditions under which firms can maximise profits and simultaneously enhance social performance, and concluded that both society and firms are better off if CSR is strategic rather than coerced.

Lockett et al. (2006) assessed the status of CSR research in the management literature and concluded that CSR was in a 'continuing state of emergence' and lacked a dominant paradigm. However, their research demonstrated that the then-prevailing quantitative approach was primarily concerned with the link between CSR and financial performance, underscoring the predominance of the business-centric focus. Likewise, Windsor (2006) examined the evolution of three opposing theoretical perspectives on CSR: economic, philosophical, and global corporate citizenship. Windsor emphasised the embryonic state of CSR research, but subjugated himself under the business-centric focus when reflecting on the premise of CSR research: 'Any satisfactory theoretical synthesis must discover some unknown subset of ethical principles also yielding corporate competitive advantage' (Windsor, 2006, p. 93). Notwithstanding a significant concern for moral issues, the strategic implications of CSR for corporations were the primary concern.

Next to those business-centric analyses included in the influential special issue, three other studies were among the 10 most-cited since 2006 and similarly asked how CSR can bring the greatest benefit for a business firm. Waldman et al. (2006) examined the relationship between CEO transformational leadership and CSR, and demonstrated that a critical antecedent of firms to engage in strategic CSR is CEOs' intellectual stimulation. Brammer and Pavelin (2006) offered an analysis of the relationship between CSR, reputation, and performance. Their study explained variations in reputation and social performance based on various contextual factors. It demonstrated the need for fit among the types of CSR in which a firm engages depending on its environment, emphasising the instrumental use of stakeholder concerns by a firm. Lastly, Tang et al. (2012) examined

how CSR engagement strategically moderates the CSR–financial performance relationship. The authors demonstrated that firms benefit more when they adopt a CSR strategy that is consistent, involves related dimensions of CSR, and begins with aspects of CSR that are more internal to the firm.

## **HOW CSR RESEARCH EXPANDED INTO A SOCIETY-CENTRIC FOCUS**

Despite the dominance of the business-centric focus, some early studies have exhibited an expanded scope in which attention to other critical actors in CSR is levelled with concern for the financial implications of CSR. For instance, Doh and Guay (2006) located a firm deeply entrenched in its institutional environment and demonstrated how this relationship affects CSR. The authors offered a synthesis of institutional and stakeholder theory and revealed how differences in the institutional environments of Europe and the USA explain expectations regarding the propensity of firms to engage in CSR, conferring a high degree of agency in shaping CSR to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) vis-à-vis business firms. An important implication of their work was that cross-country comparisons of the likelihood of firms to engage in CSR should consider institutional differences between countries.

The work of Doh and Guay (2006) as well as other highly cited institutional perspectives on CSR published in other journals around that time (e.g., Campbell, 2007; Matten and Moon, 2008) were influential in shaping the ‘relational’ orientation in CSR research. Said orientation was characterised by more attention to institutional and other external factors as determinants of CSR behaviour. Alongside this focus, CSR research experienced a ‘political’ orientation that examined the role of businesses vis-à-vis governments and civil society in addressing global governance gaps under the label of ‘political CSR’ (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Both developments have been paramount in expanding the dominant focus from ‘business-centric’ to ‘society-centric’ where CSR is situated within broader societal interests and concerns. In essence, this evolution signals how priorities have expanded from understanding CSR primarily as a source of (and necessary condition for) competitive advantage to understanding it primarily as the reaction of business firms to increasing societal pressures for greater responsibility. The society-centric focus thus reorients attention to societal stakeholders who exert pressure on firms to which the latter react (e.g., Scherer et al., 2013).

## **The Relational Orientation in CSR Research**

Research that explores ‘relational’ dimensions of CSR has been dominated by an institutional theory perspective. Yet, I label this stream of research relational rather than institutional because several influential studies drawing on alternative theoretical repertoires emerged simultaneously. They shared a view on *other* non-business actors in the CSR arena and how relationships between businesses and these actors inform CSR. Furthermore, the relational perspective shares an acknowledgement of the erosion of business firms’ capability to act strategically regarding CSR, in favour of more influence granted to actors in a company’s social-institutional context, such as NGOs, civil society, governments, and other stakeholders. This implied not viewing CSR above all as the

(pro)active decision of a firm to engage in some sort of social responsibility under the condition that it would contribute to profits; rather, it implied considering CSR to be a necessary reaction of businesses to the expectations of various stakeholders and concomitant institutional pressures.

For instance, Scherer et al. (2013) suggested that CSR is not primarily a (voluntary) quest for competitive advantage, but one that business firms are pressured to pursue to safeguard their legitimacy. To survive, businesses require societal acceptance so that they can maintain their license to operate. Based on this assumption, Scherer et al. (2013) reviewed three strategies that corporations commonly use to respond to legitimacy challenges: adapting to external expectations, manipulating stakeholder perceptions, and engaging in discourse with stakeholders who question the firm's legitimacy.

With a similar focus on the heterogeneous institutional environments with conflicting demands towards businesses, Marano and Kostova (2016) unpacked the institutional complexity surrounding CSR and demonstrated how it affects multinational enterprises' adoption of CSR practices. They situated these firms in complex transnational organisational fields with multiple, diverse, and possibly conflicting institutional forces within which CSR has been globally diffused. The authors identified various factors that explain the salience of different types of institutional pressures related to CSR, and also how CSR is determined by these pressures exerted by various stakeholders that reside outside a business, rather than it being an internal choice.

Schneider et al. (2017) also located businesses as deeply embedded in a web of relationships with their stakeholders, and considered CSR primarily as a response to concomitant expectations. Drawing on social systems theory, the authors zoomed in on how organisations collectively engage with their stakeholders – competitors, suppliers, customers, and civil society organisations – in the development of common CSR standards, and on how such collaborations create additional pressure on firms that are not yet participating. Similar to the institutional theory-based perspectives such as that of Marano and Kostova (2016), CSR was primarily seen as a reaction of businesses to different types of pressure stemming from their external environment.

Crane and Glozer (2016) reviewed the CSR communication literature and echoed the previous assumption that firms are embedded in a web of relationships with stakeholders who influence why and how they should engage in CSR, and that this in turn affects the need to communicate with these stakeholders. The authors demonstrated that how firms communicate with their stakeholders shapes the design, implementation, and success of CSR activities. The authors sought to overcome the fragmentation of the CSR communication literature and offer a new conceptual framework for such research.

The link between CSR communication and its internal organisational implementation was also emphasised by Wickert et al. (2016), who examined when firms are 'walking the talk' of CSR. They viewed CSR as a response to institutional pressures that urge firms to match communication about CSR with corresponding internal practices. Given recurring accusations that particularly large firms fail to live up to their CSR commitments, Wickert et al. (2016) argued that CSR research suffers from a lack of understanding of the differences between 'CSR talk' (i.e., impression management and symbolic practices) and 'CSR walk' (i.e., substantive implementation of CSR policies, structures, and

procedures), as well as limited knowledge about the influence of firm size on these different patterns. Based on the organisational cost of engaging in CSR, the authors explained the large-firm implementation gap, where large firms communicate CSR symbolically but do less to implement it into their core structures and procedures; this is in contrast to the small-firm communication gap, where small firms less actively communicate while placing greater emphasis on CSR implementation. A critical implication of this work was that it also called for more attention to small and medium-sized enterprises in CSR research.

De Roeck et al. (2016) examined CSR in relation to organisational identification of a company's employees. Their research demonstrated that how CSR is perceived by employees interacts with organisational identification and is mediated by a company's external prestige and internal pride. De Roeck et al. (2016) argued that while CSR has become a mainstream practice for businesses, too many companies continue to create CSR initiatives that have ambiguous impacts on the wellbeing of key stakeholders, such as employees. The framework they developed can assist managers in better understanding how their CSR engagement can positively affect employees.

### **The Political Orientation in CSR Research**

The political orientation is best exemplified by the highly cited publication by Scherer and Palazzo (2011) in *JMS*, titled 'The New Political Role of Business in a Globalized World: A Review of a New Perspective on CSR and its Implications for the Firm, Governance, and Democracy'. The authors challenged the then-dominant assumption in management and economics that business firms focus on profits, while governments provide public goods such as health care, clean water, and human rights. In that view, business firms are economic actors, whereas governments are political actors. However, under the conditions of globalisation, business firms turn into political actors, and the previously upheld division of labour between governments and the private sector erodes. Scherer and Palazzo (2011) indicated that many business firms have begun to assume social and political responsibilities beyond legal requirements and in doing so fill gaps in global governance, such as the private self-regulation by businesses of labour norms in global supply chains. This new mode of operating politically marks a crucial shift away from the political involvement of businesses in a more traditional sense, which mainly concerns businesses interacting with governmental decision-makers, for instance through lobbying, to influence political outcomes (den Hond et al., 2014).<sup>[2]</sup>

Therefore, the involvement of business firms in matters of public concern induced researchers to examine the conditions under which business decision making could become democratised and gain the necessary legitimacy through multistakeholder involvement, deliberations, and collective decision making. As Scherer and Palazzo (2011) summarised, the aim of political CSR is to aid the formulation of the conditions of legitimate political will-formation and rule enforcement in contexts where government authorities are absent, corrupt, or repressive, and where private regulation might be the only viable alternative.

The 2016 special issue on 'Managing political CSR' edited by Scherer, Rasche, Palazzo, and Spicer further consolidated the political orientation in CSR research, as five of the

10 most-cited CSR papers published in *JMS* since 2016 are from this issue. The second most-cited paper was by Reinecke and Ansari (2016), who examined collective responses for solving a critical governance problem, namely the mining of conflict minerals in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This work exemplified that whether CSR benefits businesses financially is not at the centre of attention. Instead, the solution to a societal issue is the key research problem. Reinecke and Ansari (2016) tracked the shift in thinking of companies about conflict minerals as an insoluble issue occurring at a distance to an issue they are socially connected to and should assume responsibility for. Crucially, these reframing strategies involved changes in legislation about conflict minerals, and hence, turned attention to the role of governments that had previously been underemphasised in political CSR research.

Levy et al. (2016) similarly located businesses in a web of stakeholder relationships and zoomed in on NGO–industry interactions around the political dynamics of sustainable coffee. Their research demonstrated that constructing legitimacy around important CSR issues can help to establish new business models underlying entire industries – which in this case was fairly traded coffee. This change in international standards linked to the trade of coffee was greatly driven by activist groups – rather than strategic considerations of coffee companies – who contributed to expanding fairly traded coffee from a niche to a mainstream product accommodated by firms such as Nestlé and Starbucks. The research of Levy et al. (2016) was vital in demonstrating how industry–NGO interactions can enable new international regulations and even entirely new business models.

Castelló et al. (2016) explored the legitimation strategies of companies and thus also turned their attention to the societal acceptance of business activities rather than their strategic value. Given the rise of social media instruments such as Twitter at the time of the analysis, the authors demonstrated how digital technologies are used to engage with stakeholders as well as how this impacts the ways in which businesses can build legitimacy for their actions. Crucially, their research indicated how the studied company changed from a one-way communication *to* stakeholders to a more discursive and conversation-oriented mode of communication *with* stakeholders.

Finally, Maak et al. (2016) examined the relationship between responsible leadership and political CSR. Their research explored the leadership traits of those who are more likely to engage in the type of CSR that is reflected in the society-centric focus in contrast to pursuing narrower financial objectives. They demonstrated that responsible leaders who focus on social welfare can process higher degrees of cognitive and social complexity paired with a business governance system oriented at stakeholder concerns and lower power distance.

In conclusion, both the relational and political views contributed to the evolution of the society-centric focus in CSR research, which prevails in present-day scholarship. To recall, an important change that expanded the business-centric focus to the society-centric focus was that the former attributed a relatively high degree of agency to business firms to act strategically vis-à-vis their stakeholders. This agency, however, became more distributed among stakeholders in the society-centric focus, with the pendulum swinging towards viewing CSR as a reaction rather than action of business firms to stakeholder expectations and institutional pressures. Next, I take the society-centric focus further and outline three central avenues for future research, which CSR scholars have just begun to examine.

## **MOVING SOCIETY-CENTRIC CSR ANALYSIS FORWARD: IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While methodological, analytical, and theoretical pluralism is likely to continue, as it should in order to grasp the rich and dynamic nature of CSR, some critical trends are visible in how scholars approach CSR and how this may further expand the society-centric focus. These trends are intensifying due to current developments, including the climate and COVID-19 crises, and continue to locate business firms *in* society rather than *next to* it. Based on this, I sketch three emergent research avenues in this section: the revival of governments as key actors in shaping CSR, the need to reorient the dependent variables in CSR to tangible social and ecological outcomes, and the importance of CSR research in tackling interrelated societal crises. My aim is not to offer an exhaustive list of what needs to be done in future research, but rather to provide inspiration for scholars who intend to craft research geared towards making an impact—not only on the scholarly conversation and theory but also on practice and society at large (Wickert et al., 2021).

### **The Revival of Governments in CSR**

The revival of governments in CSR research challenges the assumption that business firms vis-à-vis governments are voluntarily able to provide public goods and close governance gaps, as suggested by research on political CSR. This coincides with a return of the state in the CSR arena and a proliferation of legislation driven by national, regional (e.g., the European Union), and transnational governing bodies (e.g., the United Nations, OECD, and G20 initiatives). Governments have never been absent in CSR. However, while earlier research called attention to the potential benefits of ‘soft’ law, such as industry self-regulation and voluntary agreements, there is an increasing recognition that these initiatives have been insufficient for solving the world’s most pressing social and ecological challenges (e.g., Kourula et al., 2019; Maher et al., 2021; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2021).

Even proponents of political CSR admit that ‘the debate on PCSR might have been too sceptical with regards to governmental regulation both on a national and international level and too much focused on soft-law initiatives and the significance of private authority’ (Scherer et al., 2016, p. 283). Prior work might thus have been somewhat naïve about the capacity and willingness of business firms to engage in forms of soft law that level the typically much more stringent hard law. In fact, there are increasing attempts by governments to reclaim control over the activities of businesses in relation to CSR that used to be ‘outsourced’ to private regulation, both nationally and globally. For instance, Reinecke and Ansari (2016, p. 323) suggested that ‘political CSR is not simply about a shift from “government” to “governance” or from “hard regulation” to “soft regulation”’, but involves ‘both public and private actors with a shifting rather than a shrinking role of the government’.

Next to the US regulation on conflict minerals that Reinecke and Ansari (2016) studied, there are ongoing attempts by governments worldwide to legislate global supply chains in relation to human rights, modern forms of slavery, and child labour, such as the German ‘*Lieferkettengesetz*’ (supply chain law), the French ‘*Loi de Vigilance*’ (vigilance law), and the ‘Modern Slavery Act’ of the UK. Likewise, the new European Union Directive on non-financial disclosure mandates large firms to report on how they deal with critical

social and environmental issues. Whether this return of hard law is, however, more effective at solving what soft law left unresolved remains an important empirical question.

Recent evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed governments back into the CSR arena even further. Crane and Matten (2021, p. 283), for instance, argued that ‘COVID-19 has re-centred governments as the key actors in tackling grand challenges rather than being seen as increasingly ineffective in this space, as they are often portrayed in the CSR literature’. These developments also call for future research to challenge another important assumption underlying political CSR scholarship, namely the existence of a ‘postnational constellation’ in which nation states play a less pronounced role in the governance of global issues. As evidence of resurging government authority at national levels suggests, this assumption might be weaker than previously thought, as already acknowledged by Scherer et al. (2016). Research should scrutinise the consequences of this rise of government authority, and consider for instance how national CSR agendas impact transnational CSR initiatives such as the United Nations Global Compact and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Furthermore, crucial research questions surface regarding the transformation of once emerging markets into globally dominant economic superpowers that increasingly influence how we think about CSR. Future interpretations of CSR will most likely be neither decisively ‘Anglo-Saxon’ nor ‘Continental European’ (see e.g., Matten and Moon, 2008). Given the economic and political influence of China and other emerging economies, future research needs to investigate how businesses in these contexts approach matters of social and ecological responsibility, where national governments have an even more decisive – sometimes authoritarian – role (e.g., Li and Lu, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Different regulatory environments might be in harmony or clash, and relatively little remains known about how a ‘Chinese’ understanding of CSR, for instance, accords with a ‘Continental European’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ one, let alone understandings of CSR from the Global South. These questions are critical not only for globally operating companies that aim to introduce their home-country understanding of CSR in foreign markets, but also for NGOs that require a reference point for what socially responsible behaviour entails when they exert pressure on business firms to act accordingly.

### **Reorienting the Dependent Variables in CSR**

The expansion from a business-centric to a society-centric focus has crucial implications for future research investigating cause–effect relationships that involve CSR, and also for studies linking different types of CSR strategies and practices to actual improvements in certain social and environmental conditions. This specifically concerns quantitatively oriented research, which in the past has been dominated by the key dependent variable of interest of financial performance or a derivative, such as profitability or shareholder value. Thus, future CSR research interested in the ‘outcomes’ of CSR should leave firm-level analysis behind and turn its attention to other dependent variables that more explicitly consider the social and ecological impact of CSR.

The problem is that while the literature offers much information about how CSR can impact financial performance, surprisingly little is known about whether and how CSR creates outcomes that profit beneficiaries other than shareholders (Barnett et al., 2020);

such beneficiaries include workers and their health and well-being, smallholder farmers and their working conditions in global supply chains, and the natural environment and its resilience, sustainability, and biodiversity (de Bakker et al., 2020; Whiteman et al., 2013). This is because the focus has typically been on *outputs* (e.g., commitments made to CSR; the production of CSR reports; data collected on CSR indicators; the existence of CSR policies/programmes and dollars spent on them; and membership in various CSR initiatives). However, outputs are not necessarily indicative of the *outcomes* for different beneficiaries, nor of whether some aggregate social or ecological conditions have actually been improved. In fact, companies often produce excellent CSR outputs without producing significant CSR outcomes, and in doing so, they disguise their true impact on society (Wickert and Risi, 2019).

Further, outcomes are often long-term, nonlinear (i.e., drawing a straight line of sight from outputs to outcomes is challenging), and often cannot be counted. Therefore, the ambiguous impact that CSR, as currently practiced by many businesses, has on concrete social and environmental conditions requires a shift in our understanding of CSR from ‘a (never ending) journey’ to one that better captures its concrete societal outcomes and effects (Wickert and Risi, 2019, p. 73). However, the challenge for researchers and practitioners remains to replace the predominant business case logic of CSR with an ecological case (or social and ethical case) for business (Ergene et al., 2020) that is tightly anchored to the world’s planetary boundaries (Whiteman et al., 2013); for instance, the achievement of the 17 SDGs.

While research has already suggested some alternative measures of CSR outputs, such as ‘net zero’ emissions or different forms of ecological ‘footprint’ (e.g., carbon, water, and waste), our understanding of how these measures – specifically in their *absolute* (e.g., total emissions caused by a firm or industry) rather than *relative* (e.g., emissions per dollar spent or earned) manifestation – are linked to business activity is only in its nascent stage. We still know very little about how these measures can be achieved most effectively, what the associated trade-offs are, how they are interrelated, and whether and how they result from particular CSR practices and procedures. In summary, we need to know more about how to effectively capture the impact of CSR beyond financial performance, as well as how different social and ecological outcomes are linked to what businesses do in the name of CSR.

### **The Importance of CSR Research for Tackling Interrelated Societal Crises**

While hardly any aspect of life has not been affected by COVID-19, the pandemic has also created new challenges in how we research the role of business in society and what companies do in terms of CSR. Scholars (e.g., Crane and Matten, 2021) have demonstrated that COVID-19 has posed multiple challenges to CSR. These challenges include the following: (1) the reconsideration of previously marginalised but systemically relevant stakeholders such as health care and retail/service workers; (2) the role of business as a source of societal risk and as an actor that is increasingly exposed to new risks and thus needs to determine how to address them, such as considering whether to retain or lay off employees and to serve customers with essential services; (3) the responsibility to safeguard global supply chains, for instance, for medical products and vaccines; and (4)

the political economy of CSR, regarding which Crane and Matten (2021, p. 283) called for research that explores ‘how different systems of capitalism across the globe have prepared for and dealt with the challenges of the pandemic, and what role for business responsibility is allocated in these systems to address social demands and the needs of wider society’.

Moreover, the pandemic has underscored the interdependency of multiple crises, many of which are still ongoing or have even been accelerated due to COVID-19. They include the climate crisis, the displacement crisis, the economic crisis, and the crisis of critical consciousness (e.g., the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements; Wickert et al., 2021). While it is no surprise that these crises are interrelated, an urgent need exists for future research to investigate the actual mechanisms and driving forces that either contribute to their further intertwining or allow their disentanglement, as well as the role of business in mitigating or accelerating one crisis at the expense of another. For example, responses to COVID-19 might have both positive (e.g., less air travel) and negative (e.g., more medical waste) repercussions on how firms deal with other crises, such as the climate crisis, as part of their broader CSR strategies. In the long term, these repercussions are also likely to land on the CSR agendas of businesses and governments and might lead to important shifts in priorities, to name just a few of the critical issues that future research should address.

Some scholars have begun to think about how to tackle the interrelatedness of multiple crises. Bansal et al. (2021), for instance, suggested that management research should adopt a systems perspective that emphasises the recursive, dynamic, and cross-scale nature of social, ecological, and economic systems. Such views would substantially expand the scope of issues that are currently subsumed under CSR, and shift attention even more to those ‘big questions’, such as the role of individual business decisions in tackling societal grand challenges like global inequality and its relation to climate change (see Gümüşay et al., 2021). Researchers should investigate contexts in which actors – managers, employees, workers, and civil society participants – are simultaneously confronted with multiple crises, and examine what this means for how business firms and their stakeholders negotiate the scope of CSR.

## **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

My analysis suggests that CSR research has expanded from focusing on shareholder value maximisation to serving more stakeholders and society at large (see also Dmytriiev et al., 2021). This evolution is progressing along several important avenues for future research. Although I have sketched some illustrative research questions, it is also crucial to maintain the ontological as well as epistemological openness that has characterised previous CSR research. We must continue to acknowledge the value, interrelatedness, and complementarity of different approaches to conducting research. To capture the full complexity of CSR, we must appreciate the full methodological (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative approaches) as well as theoretical (e.g., variance- vs. process-based; inductive vs. deductive theorising) repertoire. Such openness and reflexivity about the methods and theories we use is vital because the inherently dynamic character of CSR makes it a

phenomenon that will never be ‘fully explored’, if only we can find that missing moderator or mediator to solve the puzzle.

After all, we need to make CSR research a scholarly enterprise that is about the big questions that are worth asking. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century and in light of the vast challenges we face, this does not mean asking how CSR can benefit business, but rather how business can benefit society through CSR. Companies must take greater care of the negative social and environmental impacts that they generate through their business conduct, and then mitigate these negative externalities while amplifying the positive ones. Whether the business-centric focus was overly obsessed with the positive externalities is open to discussion. Also open to discussion is whether the society-centric focus might similarly have been overly obsessed with the negative externalities, at the expense of the innovativeness and creativity that certainly characterise much business activity. We are yet to find satisfactory answers to the question of what the role of business firms vis-à-vis the world’s most pressing societal grand challenges is and should be. I hope that this introduction to the Thematic Collection on CSR inspires scholars to engage in research that makes a difference.

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## NOTES

- [1] The search took place in August 2021.
- [2] The work of den Hond et al. (2014) is an important contribution to the CSR debate as it received the *JMS* Best Paper Award in 2015. However, this paper was not among the 10 most-cited publications since 2006.

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