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# Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): Exploring the Research Trends Through a Bibliometric Approach

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## **Resumen**

El objetivo de esta investigación fue analizar la producción científica sobre responsabilidad social corporativa (RSE). En cuanto a la metodología, se realizó un estudio bibliométrico utilizando la base de datos SCOPUS. Se incluyeron artículos en revistas, conference papers, books y capítulos de libro. Se describió la producción científica según el número de documentos, país, institución de procedencia, área temática, revistas científicas en las que se publicaron, palabras clave, y las redes de colaboración. Respecto a los resultados se incluyeron 22016 artículos. Estados Unidos fue el país más prolífico en producir investigación sobre RSE. La revista con mayor número de publicaciones fue Journal of Business Ethics y de las instituciones con mayor producción científica, la gran mayoría pertenecen al sector educación, liderando la Copenhagen Business School.

Se ofrece una agenda de investigación para el futuro que permita visualizar las tendencias teóricas y prácticas actuales.

**Palabras clave:** responsabilidad social empresarial, análisis bibliométrico.

**JEL:** M14

## **Abstract**

This research aimed to analyze the scientific production of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Regarding the methodology, a bibliometric study was carried out using the SCOPUS database. Articles in journals, congress articles, books, and book chapters are included. Scientific production was described according to the number of documents, country, the institution of origin, thematic area, scientific journals in which they were published, keywords, and collaboration networks. Regarding the results, 22016 articles are included. The United States was the most prolific country in producing research on CSR. The journal with the highest number of publications was the Journal of Business Ethics. The vast majority of the institutions with the most increased scientific production belong to the education sector, leading the Copenhagen Business School.

A research plan for the future focused on carrying out the content analysis of at least the most cited and most recent documents that allow visualizing current theoretical and practical trends.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, bibliometric analysis.

**JEL:** M14

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## **Introduction**

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has experienced an important revival in the last decade of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century. As Georg and Palazzo (2009) mention, the expansion of companies' CSR activities has been driven by the erosion of the division of labor between companies and government and the growing pressure from civil society actors.

The literature on CSR is very diverse, and there is no consensus on its definition. However, a series of main characteristics can be identified in the study approaches; for example, some academics who have analyzed the field of CSR conclude that the economic approach is one of the most significant and influential parts of the current debate on the subject. (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Walsh, 2005; Vogel, 2005; Windsor, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Georg & Palazzo, 2009). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has experienced an important revival in the last decade of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century. CSR refers to the policies and actions of companies that are influenced and implemented by actors at all levels of analysis (institutional, organizational and individual) and in the various contexts of interference in the organization (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). As Georg and Palazzo (2009) mention, the expansion of companies' CSR activities has been driven by the erosion of the division of labor between companies and government and the growing pressure from civil society actors.

The literature on CSR is very diverse, and there is no consensus on its definition. However, a series of main characteristics can be identified in the study approaches; for example, some academics who have analyzed the field of CSR conclude that the economic approach is one of the most significant and influential parts of the current debate on the subject. (Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Garriga & Melé, 2004; Walsh, 2005; Vogel, 2005; Windsor, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Georg & Palazzo, 2009). CSR refers to the policies and actions of companies that are influenced and implemented by actors at all levels of analysis (institutional, organizational and individual) and in the various contexts of interference in the organization (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012).

And as the field of CSR has evolved, scholars have conducted reviews of the literature that address important but specific issues. For example, some researchers focus on CSR conceptualizing, CSR implementation, construct differentiation, confounds, how to measure CSR, and others on measuring the impact of CSR on financial performance or evaluating how CSR is applied. Can create stakeholder value from CSR. Similarly, some authors have focused on specific disciplines such as marketing, organizational behavior, environment, information systems, human resource management, and operations management, among others. On the other hand, the level of analysis has also been different, with some authors focusing on the macro (institutional) or micro (individual) level.

Despite all the publications made to date on CSR, the literature remains fragmented (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012) due to the different conceptual lenses through which the subject is studied.

Consequently, the present study aims to carry out a bibliometric analysis of the evolution in research on CSR as well as to discover critical knowledge gaps and provide clear and specific information on particular lines of action on the subject and suggestions for the direction of future research.

This work is structured as follows: first, the origin and evolution of CSR are briefly described, as well as some conceptualizations. Subsequently, the methodology followed to carry out the study is presented, and finally, the results, conclusions, and limitations of the study are presented.

## **Corporate social responsibility**

### **Origin and evolution**

In the market economy, the traditional idea is that the company's purpose is to fulfill the interests of its owners and that they have decision-making power. Therefore, its responsibility focuses exclusively on satisfying the financial interests of the owners, that is, on just one of the interest groups that make its survival and expansion possible, leaving out the interests of the other groups (workers, customers, suppliers, lenders and the community itself), which are covered by the laws and contracts that link the interest groups with the company (Cea, 2010).

This classic conception of the "unitary" company, that is, conceived for the interests of its property (optics of the shareholders), with responsibility only to the shareholders, has been reformulated. In the words of Cuervo (2003, p.109): "what is privately more beneficial is not necessarily more beneficial socially and vice versa."

Given the change in thinking, "the new conception of the company is linked to the new economic, political and social framework that arises from the socioeconomic development in the main countries of the world after the Second World War. It manifests itself in the deepening of the democratic and social rights of broad layers of the population, in the increase in their capacity for negotiation and criticism of the actions of large companies, in many cases of an international or global dimension" (Cea, 2010, p.16).

The change in the classic paradigm of business behavior entails an important ideological evolution from the concept of a "unitary" company, with responsibility towards the shareholders - shareholders' point of view- to the new idea of a "pluralist" company, with responsibility towards the different interest groups -stakeholder perspective- and before the community. It is summarized in the expression of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Cea, 2010).

It should be noted that the process of changing the paradigm toward CSR has not been easy or quick. Lozano & Soler (2000) stated that in the twenties, the first advances in the construction of CSR were generated as an organizational practice related to the social problems of liberalism of the time, which led to an imbalance in the access of goods and there were significant changes in the distribution of wealth. Given this, the so-called philanthropic practices and volunteering arise, mainly from the bourgeoisie and nobility.

At the end of the fifties and beginning of the sixties, it is when the term social responsibility can be said to appear. It began to be recognized in the United States, where companies, in addition to producing goods and services, had to take responsibility for everything related to their workers and the impact they generated on the environment (Server & Villalonga, 2005).

Later, in the late sixties and early seventies, North American companies had to present a report on their social responsibility, these being considered the first social reports and which were addressed to groups outside the company.

It is in this decade when business behavior in the field of social responsibility begins to be carried out in Europe, copying certain aspects of North American companies, although with slight nuances. For example, while in North America, the corporate reports on social responsibility were aimed at groups outside the company (mainly consumers), in Europe, they were carried out for internal groups, specifically workers, due to the significant influence of union groups in Europe, unlike the United States (Server & Villalonga, 2005).

This stage is summarized in the current called the Social Balance in Europe and social audit for North America (Chevalier, 1976; Abt, 1981).

Similarly, it ceased to be associated with philanthropy and began to be seen as acting in accordance with the awareness of the role of the company in today's society (Landa, 2018).

In addition to the above, there is a boom in interest in corporate social responsibility, with various initiatives appearing to establish a model to be followed by all companies.

It was expected that this change in business thinking would last and spread as a standard practice; however, the 1980s were characterized by the issues of social responsibility taking a back seat since the economic aspect was once again the most important objective. To be pursued by companies, leaving virtually no importance any other outside of it (Server & Villalonga, 2005).

In the 1990s, interest in social responsibility resurfaced, taking up the idea of generating a model that would serve as a source of information and comparison between companies. It is in this decade that the term sustainability begins to be used, including economic, environmental, and social aspects (Cea, 2010).

It is worth mentioning that the new CSR paradigm does not eliminate the classic paradigm of the search for financial objectives for the owners of the company but rather offers a complementary dimension since it includes the benefits of the shareholders (the creation of wealth) and also a set of elements that respond to the objectives of the other interest groups. All this together forms what is now called a company, that is, "a coalition of different groups with sometimes even conflicting interests, which are necessary for the organization to develop its goals of survival and growth, within a scheme of ethical behavior and responsibility towards the community, and with future projection, that is, universal and intergenerational responsibility (sustained development respecting the environment and the conservation of non-renewable resources)" (Cea, 2010, p. 18).

## Conceptualization of CSR

Although different denominations are used today, such as corporate social responsibility, sustainable company development, sustainable company or business sustainability, citizen company, corporate governance, and corporate citizenship, it is above all, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that is the most generalized denomination (Freeman et al, 2010). It is evident that not all these names are equivalent, but it is not appropriate in this study to analyze this issue in detail. We are going to use the denomination RSC, which is the most used in practice, but clarifying, as Sethi (1975) already mentioned when he started the movement, that the term has been used in so many contexts that it can even mean the opposite things for different people. Depending on the position they are in (whether they are business owners, employees, social activists, government, academics, etc.). This can cause some confusion regarding what CSR is, its application, impacts, and consequences (Barroso, 2008).

From the foregoing, it is then understood that CSR may have a margin of ambiguity in its definitions. Some of the most representatives are presented below, beginning with a responsible company and later with CSR.

“The term responsible company in today's society focuses its attention on meeting the real needs of stakeholders through the voluntary integration, among others, of their social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their relationships with the different interlocutors. The responsible company knows that it must ensure the care of its market and that both the generation of economic capital and the creation of social and environmental value are as important for its long-term permanence.” (Garrigues, 2005, pp. 11 - 12).

Lizcano (2002) defines it as "assuming the social essence of business organizations as a group of people who interact within the framework of society, both from the point of view of their own elemental composition and from the perspective of an integral member of a system social" (cited in Server & Villalonga, 2005, p. 15).

In the words of Pérez Bueno (2010, p. 275): "The company ceases to be a single decision-making area, linked to ownership or management, to become a multifocal center, in which interest groups reveal themselves as counterparts and set themselves up as co-participants. The so-called Corporate Social Responsibility will be a favorable environment for the expansion of social organizations, which will stimulate new forms of relationship and intervention, whose real scope will depend on the approach given to this emerging space".

Hopkins (2004, p.1) argues that:

“CSR aims to maintain ethical behavior or responsible treatment with the different interest groups that come together in the company. Ethical or responsible treatment towards its interest

groups means acting with them in a manner considered acceptable in civilized countries. Social includes economic responsibility. There are internal interest groups within the company and external or outside the company. The natural environment should also be considered a stakeholder. The goal of corporate social responsibility in its broadest sense is to create the highest standards of living while preserving the company's profitability for people inside and outside the company. Therefore, CSR means ethical behavior of the company towards its different components or interest groups”.

From an institutional perspective, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) (2000, p. 8) defines CSR as: “The continuous commitment of the company to act ethically, to contribute to economic development, contributing to the improvement of the quality of life of its employees and families, as well as the local community and society in its broader sense.”

For its part, the Ecology and Development Foundation (2004), pointing instead to the operational aspects linked to this notion, points out that "(business) organizations exercise their social responsibility when they pay attention to the expectations of their different interest groups. (shareholders, investors, employees, partners, customers, suppliers, local communities, environment). The adoption of social responsibility criteria in business management is a process that involves three activities: 1) the formalization of management policies and systems in the economic, environmental, and social spheres; 2) transparency of information on the results achieved in each area; 3) the external scrutiny of the results" (Cea, 2010, p. 23).

The European Union Green Book. Promoting a European framework for corporate social responsibility (2001: paragraph 20) points out that most definitions of corporate CSR understand this concept as "the voluntary integration, by companies, of social concerns and in its commercial operations and in its relations with its interlocutors."

## **Methodology**

A bibliometric search was carried out based on an adaptation to the methodological design proposed by Pineda (2015), which is made up of 3 phases; establish the search equation and its result, develop the bibliometric exercise, obtaining, as a result, the bibliometric analysis for data collection and finally the last phase seeks to consolidate information for its dissemination and the summary of the data and establishment of the main findings of the search (Martelo et al., 2022).

This article uncovers the evolution of CSR articles over the years (1972 - 2022) by analyzing the trend and development of publications (including the number of publications, total citations, publications by subject area and source title, distribution of publications by country, most productive authors on the subject and co-occurrence of keywords).

The development of a bibliometric analysis implies the measurement of the literature from several aspects (Castillo-Muñoz et al., 2017). Among these, the quality and quantity of publications are

analyzed and measured, with the application of statistical and mathematical methods, to identify trends related to scientific advances and developments (Van, 2005).

In the bibliometric analysis, three types of indicators can be used: the one that indicates the quantity (it is related to the measurement of the productivity of publications in terms of numbers), the one related to the quality (it measures the impact of the publications in relation to citations received and finally) and the structure indicator (measures the relationship between publications) (Cadavid-Higuera et al., 2012). In the analysis of this research, the three indicators are used in order to obtain a global vision of the scientific production of CSR. In this sense, as an informative source, the data obtained by a search equation in the SCOPUS database were selected.

The data obtained were articles in which, in their abstract, title, or keywords, they contained the words "Corporate Social responsibility."

Information obtained from the Scopus database included: the number of publications per year, active countries, active journals, active institutions, and citation information. The same data was exported to Excel software for tabulation or mapping. Similarly, for the visualization of some data analysis, the VOSviewer program was used for cartographic purposes (Van & Waltman, 2021). Mapping was carried out for the keywords, for the countries, and to visualize the collaboration between authors.

**Table 1. Procedures of getting the dataset in Scopus for review of the CSR literature.**

| <b>Topic, Scope y Eligibility</b>   |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Topic</b>                        | Corporate social responsibility  |
| <b>Scope y Coverage</b>             | <b>Database:</b> Scopus<br><b>Search Field:</b> Article Title, abstract, keyword<br><b>Time Frame:</b> 1972 - 2022<br><b>Language:</b> All the languages in which there were publications on the topic<br><b>Source Type:</b> Journal, Conference Proceedings, Books <b>Document Type:</b> Article, Conference Paper, Book Chapters, Books |
| <b>Keywords y Search String</b>     | TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "corporate social responsibility" )  |
| <b>Screening and included</b>       |  |
| <b>Date Extracted</b>               | 06 august 2022   |
| <b>Record Identified y Screened</b> | n = 22016  |



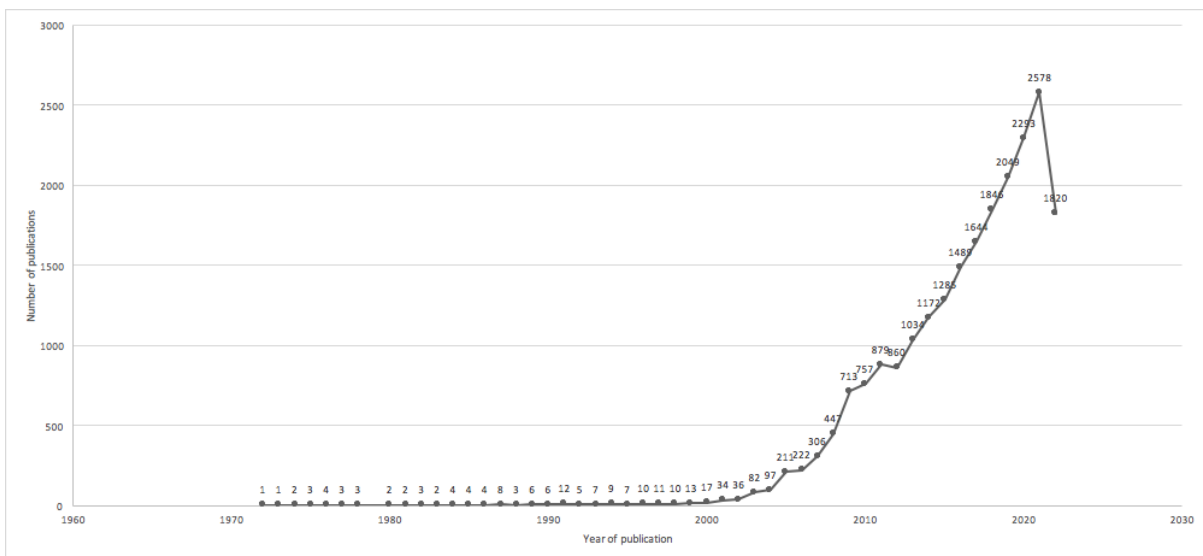
## RESULTS

**Trends and performance analysis.** In relation to the distribution of publications per year (1972-2022), the number of articles on CSR has increased significantly since 2005. The results show that there is a positive and growing trend of publications on CSR (See figure 1).

On the other hand, regarding the type of published document, of the 22,016 documents analyzed, 83.08% (18,290) are articles, 7.84% (1,726) are book chapters, and 7.01% are conference papers, and 2.07% (456) are books.

Regarding the language in which they are written, 96.90% (n=21334) are in English, followed by 1.76% (n=389) in Spanish, and the remaining percentage is divided into more than thirty different languages.

**Figure 1. Total publications by year**

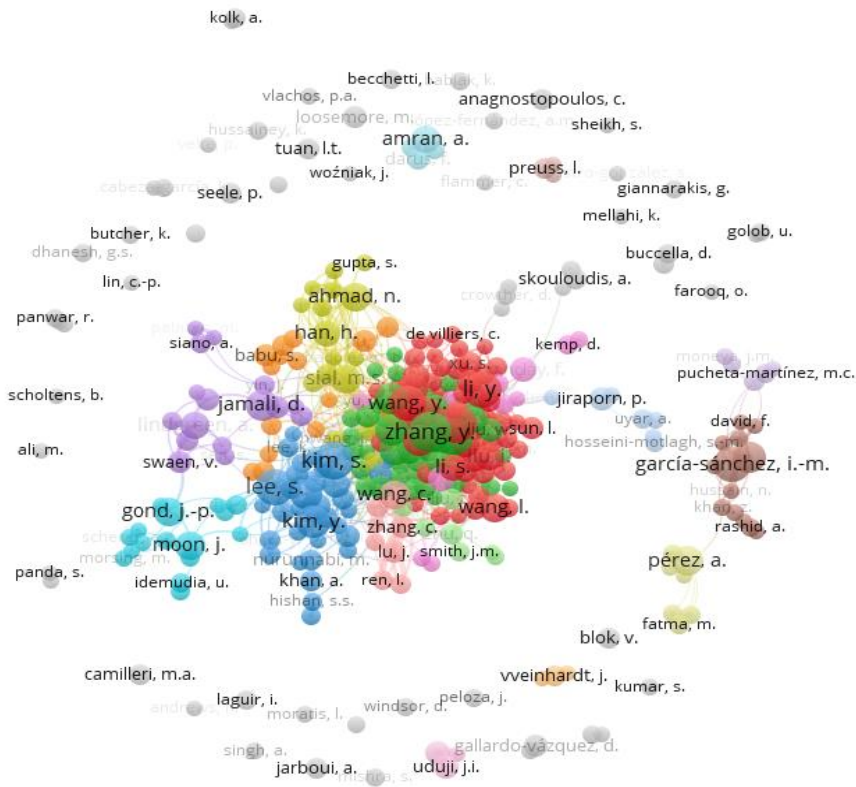


Regarding the authors, Table 2 shows the ten most productive, the percentage with respect to the total number of publications, affiliation, and country of affiliation. The Spaniard García-Sánchez occupies the first place (n=60), followed by the Lebanese Jamali (n=49), and in third place is another Spaniard, Martínez-Ferrer (n=38). A total of 31,319 different authors were identified, which were reduced to 328 by indicating as selection criteria for the mapping that they had at least ten published documents and at least one citation. The results are shown in figure 2. A total of 64 clusters were formed, and different groups are observed that show the joint and collaborative work of authors of different nationalities and affiliated institutions.

**Table 2. Top - 10 most active authors by Affiliations and Country**

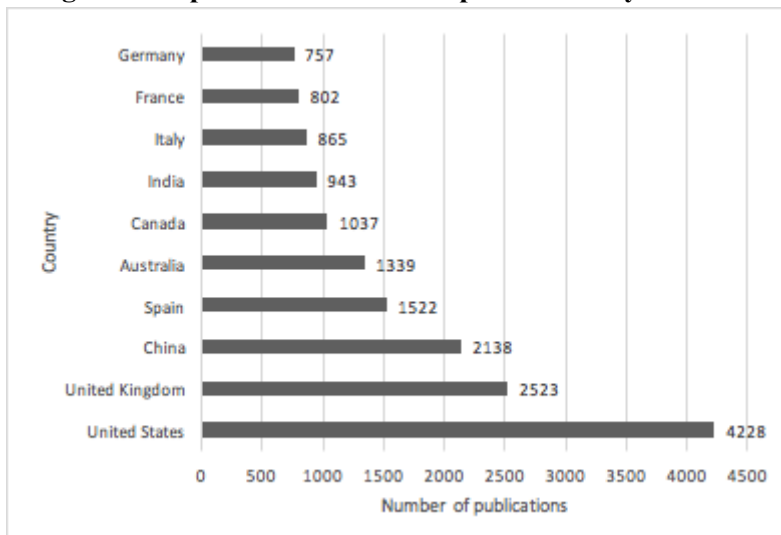
| Num. | Author Name          | Documents | % of total documents | Affiliation                      | Country        |
|------|----------------------|-----------|----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------|
| 1    | García-Sánchez, I.M. | 60        | 2.29                 | Universidad de Salamanca         | Spain          |
| 2    | Jamali, D.           | 49        | 1.87                 | American University of Beirut    | Lebanon        |
| 3    | Martínez-Ferrero, J. | 38        | 1.45                 | Universidad de Salamanca         | Spain          |
| 4    | Moon, J.             | 37        | 1.41                 | Copenhagen Business School       | Denmark        |
| 4    | Pérez, A.            | 37        | 1.41                 | Universidad de Cantabria         | Spain          |
| 5    | Lindgreen, A.        | 35        | 1.34                 | Copenhagen Business School       | Denmark        |
| 6    | Gond, J.P.           | 34        | 1.30                 | University of London             | United Kingdom |
| 7    | Amran, A.            | 33        | 1.26                 | Graduate School of Business      | Malaysia       |
| 7    | Lee, S.              | 33        | 1.26                 | Pennsylvania State University    | United States  |
| 8    | Sial, M.S.           | 32        | 1.22                 | COMSATS University Islamabad     | Pakistan       |
| 9    | Han, H.              | 27        | 1.03                 | Sejong University                | South Korea    |
| 10   | Husted, B.W.         | 26        | 0.99                 | Tecnologico de Monterrey         | Mexico         |
| 10   | Kolk, A.             | 26        | 0.99                 | Universiteit van Amsterdam       | Netherlands    |
| 10   | Swaen, V.            | 26        | 0.99                 | Université Catholique de Louvain | Belgium        |
| 10   | Vanclay, F.          | 26        | 0.99                 | Rijksuniversiteit Groningen      | Netherlands    |

**Figure 2. Network visualization of most active authors and their cooperation.**

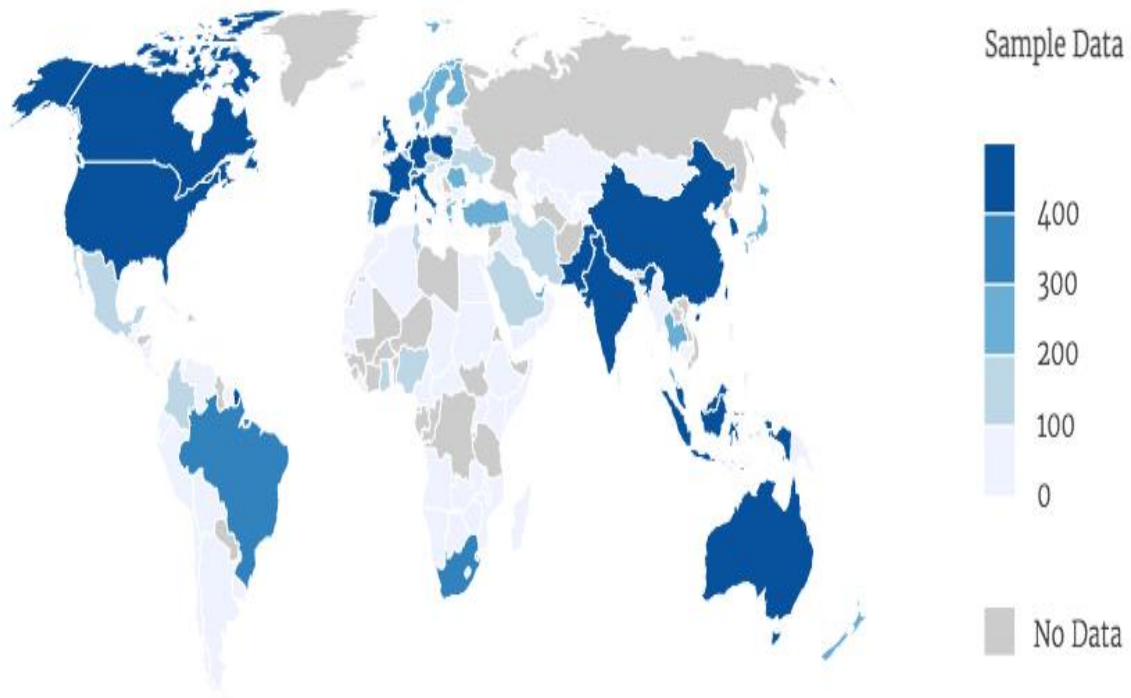


In relation to the country of the author, the distribution of the publications is variable according to the continents and countries. 150 different countries were identified, of which 29.33% (n=44) are European, 28.67% (n=43) are Asian, 22% (n=33) belong to Africa, 17.33% (n=26) belongs to America and 2.67% (n=4) are from Oceania. The countries with the highest number of documents published by author affiliation are the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Spain, Australia, Canada, India, Italy, France, and Germany (See Figure 3 and Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Top - 10 Distribution of publication by countries**



**Figure 4. Distribution of publication by countries**



Similarly, when analyzing the institutions with the highest productivity index on the subject of CSR, it was found that Copenhagen Business School (n=172), York University (n=143) and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (n=124) lead the first places. Table 4 presents the Top 15 of the most productive institutions on the subject.

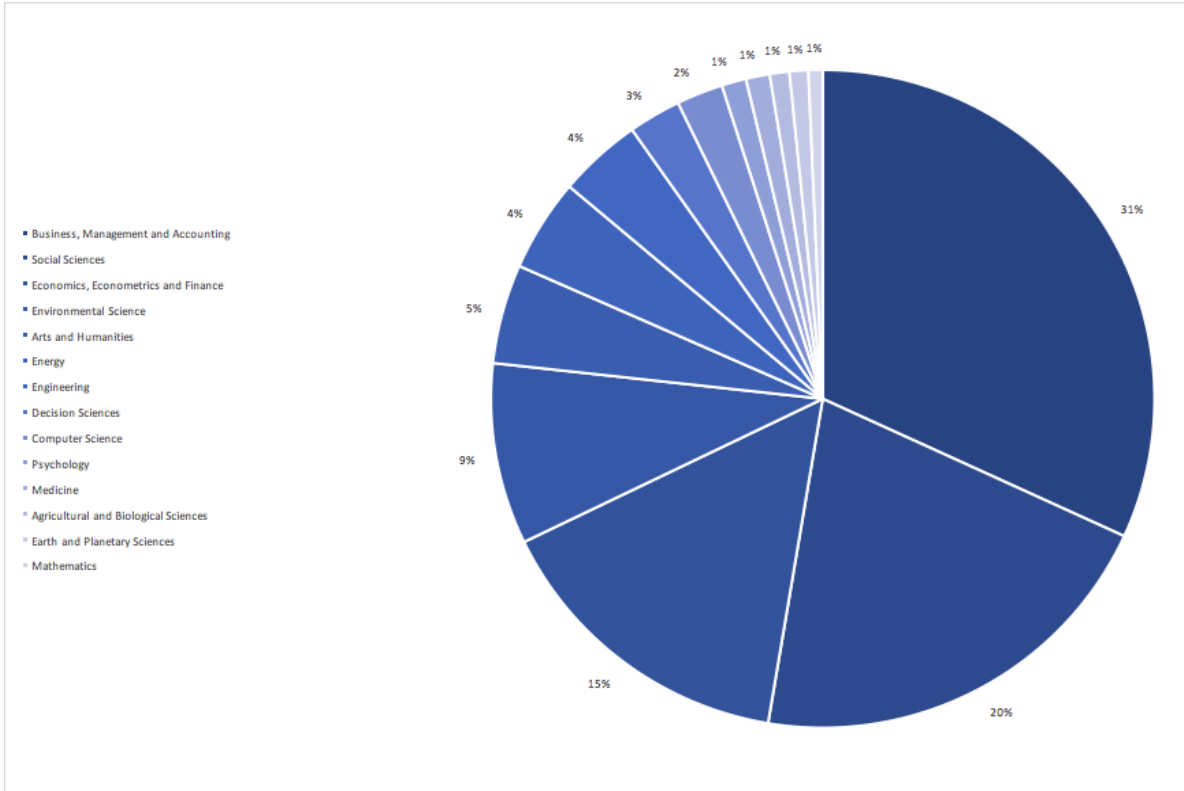
**Table 4. Top 15 Top - 10 most active Affiliations by Country**

| Num. | Affiliation                      | Country       | Total publications |
|------|----------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|
| 1    | Copenhagen Business School       | Denmark       | 172                |
| 2    | York University                  | Canada        | 143                |
| 3    | Hong Kong Polytechnic University | Hong Kong     | 124                |
| 4    | Universidad de Salamanca         | Spain         | 120                |
| 5    | Pennsylvania State University    | United States | 106                |

|    |  |                |     |
|----|--|----------------|-----|
| 5  | Bucharest University of Economic Studies | Rumania        | 106 |
| 6  | Universitat de València                  | Spain          | 103 |
| 7  | Universiti Sains Malaysia                | Malaysia       | 98  |
| 8  | Nottingham University Business School    | United Kingdom | 96  |
| 9  | Rijksuniversiteit Groningen              | Netherlands    | 87  |
| 9  | Deakin University                        | Australia      | 87  |
| 10 | The University of Queensland             | Australia      | 86  |
| 11 | University of South Australia            | Australia      | 84  |
| 12 | Wageningen University yamp; Research     | Netherlands    | 80  |
| 12 | Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam           | Netherlands    | 80  |
| 13 | Universiti Utara Malaysia                | Malaysia       | 79  |
| 13 | RMIT University                          | Australia      | 79  |
| 14 | Griffith University                      | Australia      | 77  |
| 15 | University of Oxford                     | United Kingdom | 76  |

**Subject area.** In order to evaluate the influence of different journals in CSR studies, the number of publications by subject area and source title was also calculated. As Fig. 5 shows, the CSR field has been studied from the perspective of the top fourteen research areas namely "business, management and accounting", "social sciences", "economics, econometrics and finance", "environmental sciences", "arts and humanities", "energy", "engineering", "decision sciences", "computer sciences", "psychology", "medicine", "agricultural and biological science", "earth and planetary sciences" and "mathematics". These results demonstrate that CSR research is an interdisciplinary subject that the research can also be studied from other perspectives, including "psychology," "medicine," and "arts and humanities." Table 4 shows the top ten journals that cover the highest number of articles on CSR.

**Figure 5. Published documents by subject area**



**Table 4. Number of published documents by source title**

| Number | Source Title   | CiteScore 2021 <sup>a</sup> | SJR 2021 <sup>b</sup> | SNIP 2021 <sup>c</sup> | Documents published |
|--------|--|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| 1      | Journal Of Business Ethics                                   | 10.8                        | 4.38                  | 2.863                  | 1213                |
| 2      | Sustainability Switzerland                                   | 5                           | 0.664                 | 1.31                   | 1098                |
| 3      | Corporate Social Responsibility And Environmental Management | 11.5                        | 1.945                 | 2.044                  | 617                 |
| 4      | Social Responsibility Journal                                | 4.5                         | 0.632                 | 1.09                   | 513                 |
| 5      | Journal Of Cleaner Production                                | 15.8                        | 1.921                 | 2.444                  | 320                 |
| 6      | Journal Of Business Research                                 | 11.2                        | 2.316                 | 3.089                  | 207                 |
| 7      | Business Strategy And The Environment                        | 11.9                        | 2.241                 | 2.289                  | 204                 |
| 8      | Business And Society   | 11.6                        | 2.717                 | 2.974                  | 181                 |
| 9      | Corporate Communications                                     | 3                           | 0.7                   | 0.982                  | 119                 |



Although, over time, it has had different names, it has kept its main objective of seeing the company as a holistic entity where there are other elements just as essential as the economic one, which set the tone for its performance and survival. Likewise, the definition given to it has been different according to the authors, times, and contexts in which it has tried to be implemented.

This bibliometric review work comes at a time when interest in CSR is rapidly accelerating, organizations are increasingly involved and committed to this fundamental aspect for their growth and validity in the market. Researchers have an interesting opportunity in this field of knowledge. One of the goals was to make what we already know about CSR more accessible to a broader audience of scholars by synthesizing and integrating the vast and heterogeneous literature on the topic. The second objective pursued was to identify critical areas of opportunity for research that would allow us to improve our knowledge in CSR, and we needed a starting point. Therefore, based on the knowledge gaps identified, we offer a research agenda for the future, focused on performing the content analysis of at least the most cited and most recent documents that allows us to visualize current theoretical and practical trends, models that have been applied for its measurement and application, indicators, new legislation, and others.

As this research study focused exclusively on the bibliometric analysis of the publications obtained, future studies on CSR may incorporate additional types of analysis, such as a systematic literature review (SLR), historical analysis, meta-analysis, and structured analysis. Notwithstanding, this article lends insights to researchers on the trend and performance of research in the field of CSR, in terms of the most popular research themes and disciplines. This paper hopes to contribute as a point of reference on the extant and emergent topics and methodology decisions for future studies.

The present limitations are the basic ones of any bibliometric study: first of all, the fact that articles from a single database were analyzed; secondly, there are authors who present differences in the way they are cited and therefore may appear as if they were different people, skewing the count and mapping of authors. Similarly, the bibliographic review is limited to a specific date and an established methodology, so it is not possible to analyze the entire set of articles on a topic.

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