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REVIEW ARTICLE

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A systematic literature review on employee relations with CSR: State of art and future research agenda

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Abstract

Within recent years, the literature on employee–CSR relations has grown significantly. However, the research is fragmented throughout various journals and disciplines, and we still lack a comprehensive literature review on the topic to show what we currently know about the employee relationship with CSR, and what we do not know. In this study, we conduct a systematic literature review on employee relations with CSR, based 331 journal articles. We analyze their methodological and theoretical approaches. Based on their key findings, we build a categorization of dominant research findings and their connections. Building on our review, we show how the research has been dominated by a focus on the organizational implementation of CSR and organizational benefits. Employees have been mainly perceived as implementers of top-down sustainability policies and as mediators towards organizational CSR-related benefits. We also discuss the need for future research on the more active role of employees in CSR relations, especially bottom-up change processes and understanding the role of tensions and complexities.

KEYWORDS
corporate social responsibility, employees, human resource management, literature review, sustainability, sustainable development

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the corporate social responsibility (CSR) literature, employees are often identified as key stakeholders for CSR (Carroll, 1999; Preuss et al., 2009) who are, along with other stakeholders, pushing organizations towards responsible behavior (Aguilera et al., 2007). Since the early works, the role of employees in pushing companies for social and environmental responsibility has been recognized. For example, Henriques and Sadorsky (1999) identified employees among the organizational stakeholders demanding that businesses pursue environmental protection, what has then been supported, for example, by Sharma and Henriques (2005) and Preuss et al. (2009). Employees

take often direct interest in the CSR initiatives and policies of the organization (Rupp et al., 2006). Through their interest, they constantly judge the CSR performance of the organization (Sarina, 2013). More recently, the views of employees as stakeholders in CSR have started to diversify. In addition to their ability to influence CSR policies and practices among other stakeholders, the research has also studied employee engagement in CSR policies, especially its means and benefits (see, e.g., Zhou et al., 2018). Yet, employees have fewer means to adopt or contribute to the CSR policy of an organization (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010). Thus, the role and relationship of employees to CSR is more multifaceted than first believed. They may take roles in not only pushing the organizations and influencing CSR policies, but also implementing and encouraging CSR, experiencing the outcomes of CSR or lack of it, and in evaluating CSR approaches.

Bhavesh Sarna contributed equally to this study.

However, the literature still lacks conceptual clarity on employee–CSR relationship. In this study, we analyze all different research streams to create a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between CSR and employees.

Employees as a group have been studied in the CSR literature for many years, and the studies have dealt with multiple perspectives. The literature has studied employee roles in CSR from managerial, organizational, and individual perspectives. Moreover, the research has been conducted over multiple disciplines, such as organization science, sustainability science, and organizational psychology, as well as from multiple theoretical perspectives such as organizational culture theory, organizational identification theory, and stakeholder theory. However, the research remains fragmented, spread throughout various journals and disciplines, and no comprehensive, systematic reviews of the employee relationship with CSR have been presented.

The prior literature reviews on the employee–CSR relationship have contributed important insights to our understanding. Three reviews have reviewed literature on how sustainable human resource management may increase employee engagement (Boyd & Gessner, 2013; Tariq et al., 2016; Voetglin & Greenwood, 2016), and three employee sustainable or green behaviors by employees (Francoeur et al., 2019; Norton et al., 2015; Ones & Dilchert, 2012). These reviews have contributed important insights into how responsibility-related behavior may be encouraged through HRM activities, and identifying its antecedents. However, no comprehensive review on the employee–CSR relationship has been presented, and the phenomenon has not been reviewed as two-sided: based on the influence of both, managerial and employee perspectives. In this review, we take a wider perspective and review the CSR–employee literature from both management and employee perspectives. We conducted a systematic review based on the search words "employee" and "CSR/sustainability" in the Web of Science. Such comprehensive understanding is important due to the strong role employees have in influencing and being influenced by CSR. This understanding is not only conceptually important but also practically: it helps managers and CSR professionals to analyze diversity of employee roles in relation to sustainability strategies. While organizations constantly make choices between various stakeholder demands (Aguilera et al., 2007), many sustainability-related decisions depend upon employees' understanding of sustainability and CSR issues (Rupp et al., 2006).

Based on our systematic literature review, the main aim of this study is to develop a categorization of the vast available literature and report the research gaps for future studies. Furthermore, we wish to understand what types of methodological and theoretical approaches have been applied in the prior research, as well as to summarize the dominant key findings and understandings pertaining to the employee–CSR relationship.

As a result of our study, we identified three categories that have dominated research on the employee–CSR relationship, as well as subcategories of these larger classifications. We also identified three categories that we term mediating categories, which connect two of the main categories. The findings from most of the analyzed 331 journal articles fall into these categories, and many articles fall into more

than one category. Based on our review, we show how CSR–employee research has been dominated by a focus on the organizational implementation of CSR and organizational benefits. Employees have been mainly perceived as implementers of top-down sustainability policies, and as mediators towards organizational CSR-related benefits. We also discuss the need for future research on the more active role of employees in CSR relations, especially bottom-up change processes and understanding the role of tensions and complexities.

The rest of the review proceeds as follows: first, we first introduce the principles of our systematic review. In the results section, we then introduce the theoretical, methodological, and contextual approaches identified in the articles. We next proceed to the thematic categories identified based on main findings in the reviewed literature. After introducing the dominant categories, we describe the mediating categories and their subcategories. We conclude by discussing the contributions of our review and directions for future research.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Literature review and data collection

To gain insight into the current state of research on the CSR–employee relationship, we applied the methodology of systematic literature review (Danese et al., 2018; Fisch & Block, 2018). The aim of a literature review is a systematic process of identification, evaluation, and interpretation of existing literature based on an explicit and reproducible design (Fink, 1998). We applied a literature review method defined by Wolfswinkel et al. (2013). It enables an inductive style of research and the development of significant models/theories arising from the literature data. Based on Wolfswinkel et al. (2013), we describe six stages of our review in the following (see Figure 1):

In stage 1, we defined our benchmarks. The benchmarks used for the identification of articles were: (i) journal articles from different

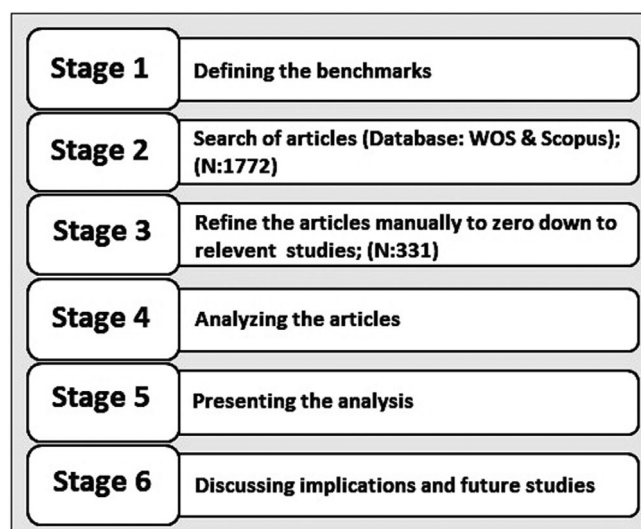| Stage 1 | Defining the benchmarks |
Stage 2	Search of articles (Database: WOS & Scopus); (N:1772)
Stage 3	Refine the articles manually to zero down to relevent studies; (N:331)
Stage 4	Analyzing the articles
Stage 5	Presenting the analysis
Stage 6	Discussing implications and future studies

FIGURE 1 Stages of our review

disciplines, (ii) journal articles that are published in English, and (iii) journal articles that were peer-reviewed.

In *Stage 2*, we conducted our search through Web of Science using the following search words: "corporate social responsibility and employees," "CSR and employees," and "sustainability and employees." The search was conducted in January 2019, bringing the total number of articles to 1638. However, it was noticed that Web of Science was a limited tool for tracking the roots of research on CSR and employees. Therefore, Scopus was used to complement our search for years between 1990 and 2004. Through Scopus, 134 more articles were identified. Thus, the final number of articles was 1772.

In *Stage 3*, we refined the sample of 1772 articles by setting the boundaries for this literature review. We included those articles that were peer-to-peer reviewed full papers, and not an extended abstract and discussed employees as a well-developed theme or objective of the study. We refined the sample of articles by reading the abstract, titles, and keywords of all the articles. We excluded all those papers where employees were considered as one of multiple stakeholders in the study. After this process, our data set consisted of 331 articles. The number of articles started to increase notably from 2009, and especially rapidly since 2015. The selection of articles and their constituent numbers at the different steps of the study are described in Figure 1, and the amount of articles per year in Figure 2. The first article included in our analysis was published already in 1997, although the initial search also produced results dating from 1991. However, the earliest articles were excluded based on our exclusion criteria, as described above.

At this stage, we noticed that some journals had published notably high numbers of studies. The *Journal of Business Ethics* had published the highest number of studies (69), while the second highest number was in *Sustainability* and in *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, with 15 articles in both. However, most of the studies were scattered around different journals, as the majority of journals had published only one to three articles on the topic. The journals with highest numbers of studies are listed in Table 1.

In *Stage 4*, we conducted a selective coding of the articles. We analyzed in each article the following: framing of employee–CSR relation; research areas, theories, and methodologies addressed and key findings. We reviewed the key findings of each study and were thus able to identify patterns of similarities between the studies, and to

TABLE 1 The journals with highest number of studies

Journal	Number of articles
Journal of Business Ethics	Seventy-nine articles
Sustainability	Fifteen articles
Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	Fifteen articles
International Journal of Human Resource Management	Eleven articles
Business Strategy and the Environment	Eight articles
Social Responsibility Journal	Eight articles
Frontiers in Psychology	Six articles
Business and Society	Six articles

start grouping them into categories. In this phase, we identified certain dominant categories, mediating categories based on connections between two of the dominant categories and subcategories for each main and mediating category.

In *Stage 5*, we wrote the descriptions of dominant, mediating, and subcategories (described in chapters 4 and 5, Tables 2 and 3). And finally in *Stage 6*, we focused on discussing the implications of our study and directions for future research. We will next describe the theoretical, methodological, and contextual approaches taken in the reviewed literature. We will then present the key findings of our review in Figure 1, and in the following provide a detailed description of each category.

3 | THEORETICAL, METHODOLOGICAL, AND CONTEXTUAL APPROACHES

As a part of our analysis process, we reviewed the theoretical and methodological approaches applied in the studies as well as the contexts in which the empirical studies were conducted. Concerning the *methodological approaches*, we noticed that quantitative research has dominated the study of the CSR–employee relationship. The level of preference for this approach is notable—out of the total of 331 reviewed studies, 229 were conducted quantitatively. Qualitative

FIGURE 2 Number of studies on CSR–employee relationship between years 1991 and 2018 [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

TABLE 2 Number of studies in each main category and subcategory

Dominant categories and their subcategories	Number of studies
1. Organizational implementation of CSR	One hundred three studies in total
1.1. The importance of organization–employee fit, congruence, and organizational harmony	Thirty-two studies
1.2. The importance of organizational level policies, practices, and leader behavior	Seventy-one studies
2. Benefits to organizations	One hundred thirty-four studies in total
2.1. Stronger organization–employee relationship	Fifty-five studies
2.2. Positive outcomes to employees' work and non-work life	Forty studies
2.3. Reputation and external image	Fourteen studies
2.4. Positive outcomes to employee and organizational performance	Twenty-five studies
3. Differences in employee CSR perceptions and their explanatory factors	Forty-eight studies in total
3.1. Differences in employees' CSR perceptions and their explanatory factors	Thirty-two studies
3.2. Tensions and complexities in CSR understandings	Sixteen studies

TABLE 3 Number of studies in each mediating category and their subcategories

Mediating categories and their subcategories	Number of studies
1. Interaction between organizational implementation of CSR and employee CSR perceptions	Twenty-four studies in total
1.1. How do organizational practices shape employee CSR perceptions and engagement	Fourteen studies
1.2 The effects of (un)successful CSR to employee perceptions, experience, and employee organization-fit	Ten studies
2. Interaction between benefits to organizations and employee CSR perceptions	Twenty-two studies in total
2.1. Employee CSR perceptions' influence on organizational benefits	Eleven studies
2.2. Further impacts of employee CSR perceptions' influence on organizational benefits	Eleven studies
3. Interaction between organizational implementation of CSR and benefits to organizations	Twenty-four studies in total

methods were applied in 46 studies, and mixed methods research in 11 studies. Seven articles were labeled as literature reviews. We further categorized 38 studies as "other studies." These studies included conceptual and theoretical studies, modeling and mathematical modeling-based studies, as well as studies in which the method was somewhat unclear.

In the quantitative studies, specific causal relationships were explored, and the connections between employee CSR perceptions and outcomes were established (Graves & Sarkis, 2018; Hur et al., 2018). In contrast, the qualitative studies focused more on creating an understanding of the different types of employees, relationships, conflicts, HRM practices, and emotions related to CSR (Järlström et al. 2018; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008). The mixed methods studies combined various different types of understandings.

Concerning the *theoretical approaches*, we noticed that a clear majority of the studies did not apply a specific, well-defined theory. Instead, the theoretical chapters of the studies we constructed based on literature reviews on the key concepts of the study. In those studies, which were clearly connected to certain theoretical discussions, we noticed a fragmentation around multiple theories. For example, stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and social exchange theory were all applied. Despite this fragmentation, we noticed that social identity theory has dominated research on the employee–CSR relationship. It was applied in 45 of the 331 studies we reviewed.

Concerning the contextual approaches, we also reviewed the dominant *national or industry contexts*. The research was scattered around different industries and multiple countries. A focus on multiple industries was the most dominant industry context (46%). This meant that the data collection had targeted organizations operating in different fields of industry. Out of those studies that focused solely on one industry, the highest number (15%) was in the manufacturing industry, followed by the financial sector (12%), the oil, gas, and energy sector (11%), and the hospitality and tourism sector (5%). The rest of the studies (11%) focused on other sectors, such as exports, newspapers and the media, education, the food industry, the packaging industry, construction, and retail. Concerning the contexts, most of the studies were carried out in European countries (65 studies), followed by the United States (32 studies). China (16 studies), South Korea (14 studies), the United Kingdom (12 studies), India (9 studies), Canada (5 studies), and Australia (4) also had multiple studies. However, most of the studies (167 studies) were scattered around different countries.

4 | DOMINANT RESEARCH CATEGORIES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE REVIEWED LITERATURE

In the following section, we will introduce the categories of the dominant research streams providing our understanding of the employee–CSR relationship. We identified three dominant categories of research: (1) the organizational implementation of the research, (2) the benefits of employee CSR engagement, and (3) employee perceptions of CSR and their differences. Each of these categories is divided into subcategories that emerged from the research.

In addition, we identified a significant body of research combining two of the main categories, and named these as mediating categories. The mediating categories are: interaction between organizational implementation of CSR and employee CSR perceptions, interaction between benefits to organizations and employee CSR perceptions, and interaction between the organizational implementation of CSR and benefits to organizations. The main categories and mediating categories are illustrated in Figure 3.

In the following table (Table 2), the number of studies contributing to each category is listed. It is notable that a part of the reviewed studies did not have one clear key finding, but instead two key findings. They thus contributed to more than one category. This explains the fact that the total amount of studies shown in these tables do not match with the amount of studies (331) reviewed in the literature review. In addition, the data set included some studies that did not fall under any of these main categories, and were thus excluded from the analysis. Those studies were single cases with different focuses such as building safe working environment (Hemphill & White III, 2018). As shown in the table, the research showing how employees should be engaged with CSR implementation (94 studies in total) and studies focusing on the benefits of employee engagement with CSR (131 studies in total) have dominated the field of research. Studies dealing with differences in employee perceptions of CSR were also identified, but were not numerous (48 studies in total). The number of findings positioned in mediating categories was notably lower, varying between 21 and 24 studies in total. These are presented in Table 2.

4.1 | Organizational implementation of CSR

The first group of studies focuses on an organizational level perspective to the implementation of CSR. These studies stress the importance of the organizational level shared meanings of CSR, and the importance of organizational practices and leader behavior. Employees' role in CSR is perceived as being implementers of organizational level CSR policies. This group of studies perceives CSR within organizations as a top-down managed phenomenon, and focuses on the creation of organizational level commitment to CSR. Instead of focusing on individual level differences, employees are treated as groups of people who should share visions towards CSR. Thus, the studies focus on analyzing questions such as: how are shared meanings and values of CSR created within organizations? How and when do employees implement CSR policies? How is CSR engagement encouraged within organizations?

Two subcategories were identified in this group of studies: the importance of organization employee fit, congruence, and harmony, and the importance of organizational level policies, practices, and leader behavior.

4.1.1 | The importance of organization–employee fit, congruence, and organizational harmony

The findings of these studies highlight the need for organization–employee fit, and congruence in values, harmony, and consistency as a precondition for CSR becoming an organization-wide and accepted phenomenon. Not only does this harmony need to exist between organizational support and employees, but also among different individual employees (Saifulina & Carballo-Penela, 2017), and to this must be added the fit between employees' and leaders' motivations (Shao et al., 2017). A shared approach towards CSR also moderates the effect that personal environmental values have on environmental behavior (Chou, 2014). For example, Brunton et al. (2017) show that CSR initiatives in organizations are essentially influenced by the perceived value congruence between managers and employees. De Roeck and Farooq (2018) add the need for consistency between employees' perceptions of CSR and ethical leadership. Organization-wide CSR approaches are also seen as a prerequisite for changing the behavior of those employees with less interest in CSR issues. For example, Ruepert et al. (2017) show that organization-wide shared CSR approaches may also encourage those employees with relatively weak environmental values to engage in CSR-based behavior.
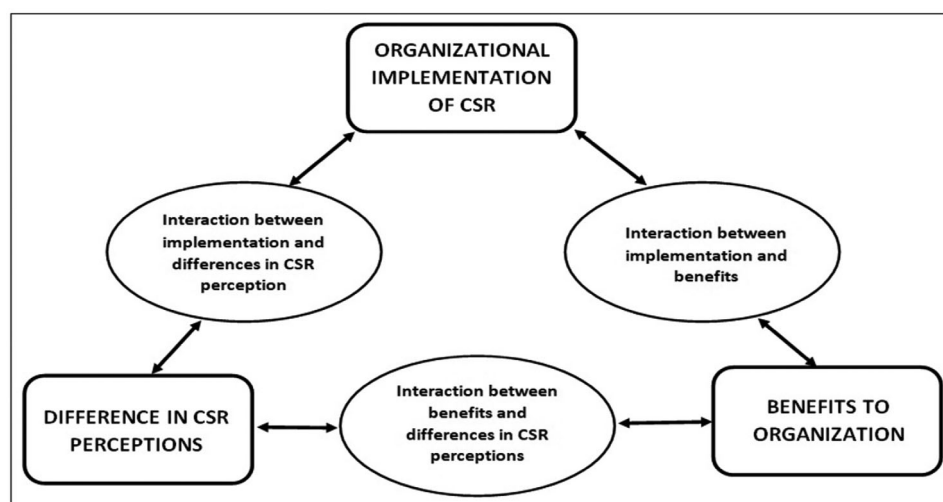

FIGURE 3   Main categories, mediating categories, and their relationships

4.1.2 | The importance of organizational level policies, practices, and leader behavior

The second subcategory developed in a similar way, by focusing on how employees start implementing organizational CSR policies and how those policies become accepted throughout the organization. The results of these studies have especially stressed the importance of communication and green HRM for engaging employees. Additionally, the studies have stressed the relationship between CSR attitudes, the behavior of leaders, and that of employees.

Already Ramus (2002) indicated that clear sustainability policies and supervisory support increase employee willingness to take sustainability initiatives. Concerning communication, Potoski and Callery (2018) studied employees' engagement with CSR and showed that new modes of internal communication can strengthen companies performance and improve employee engagement with CSR policies. On the other hand, Halter and de Arruda (2009) stressed that the negative outcomes related to lack of communication and transparency may lead to irresponsible decisions among employees. According to their conclusions, internal communication within the organization is crucial for complying with CSR policies.

Concerning HRM, the studies have shown the need for changes to provide support for spreading organizational CSR. The concept of a green and sustainable HRM has been introduced. For example, Dumont et al. (2017) show how green HRM affects both employee in-role and extra-role workplace green behavior, but only as mediated through different social and psychological processes.

Furthermore, the studies show how organization-wide acceptance of CSR policies depends on leader support. Supervisors providing examples through responsible leadership is an important mediator for employee CSR behavior (Gao & He, 2017), and leader responsible behavior seems to lead to increasing responsible behavior among employees (Kim, Kim, et al., 2017; Wang, 2018).

Based on the main category of "organizational implementation of CSR" and its two subcategories, the following understanding can be summarized concerning the employee–CSR relationship:

- Employee implementation of CSR policies requires a fit with values and cultures.
- Employee engagement in CSR requires active communication and green HRM.
- Employee engagement with CSR requires leader support.

4.2 | Benefits to organizations

This main category focuses on the benefits that employee engagement with CSR provides, especially from the perspective of the organization. These studies focus on concepts such as image, reputation, and performance. They especially focus on analyzing how employee CSR engagement may be beneficial for the organization, and also examine, although from a bit more limited view, how CSR engagement may be beneficial to employee work and non-work lives. Thus, these studies focus on analyzing questions such as: How do organizations benefit from involving employees in CSR? How can organizations leverage employees' initiative/voluntarism in CSR? How does employee engagement with CSR provides mutual benefits?

Within this main category, four subcategories were identified: stronger organization–employee relationship, positive outcomes on employees' work and non-work life, reputation and external image, and positive outcomes for employee and organizational performance. Out of these subcategories, only the second (positive outcomes on employees work and non-work life) has an employee level focus. The other subcategories focus on organizational level benefits.

4.2.1 | Stronger organization–employee relationship

The findings in this subcategory focus on showing how CSR strengthens the organization–employee relationship and supports affective organizational commitment as well as organizational identification. These studies have mainly taken quantitative approaches. For example, De Roeck and Maon (2018) showed how CSR can strengthen the employee–organization relationship and also support microlevel outcomes. To stress the emotional aspects of CSR, multiple studies have shown that internal CSR and employee experiences of it also support the affective commitment to the organization (Kim, Rhou, et al., 2017; Mory et al., 2016; Shen & Jiuhua Zhu, 2011) and related organizational citizenship behavior (Kim, Rhou, et al., 2017).

In addition to affective commitment, the research has explored the relationship between employee commitment and the CSR of the employing organization. Asrar-ul-haq et al. (2017) show that CSR highly influences organizational commitment in general. CSR not only enhances the commitment of employees but also their organizational citizenship behavior (Choi & Yu, 2014; Lee & Seo, 2017). The CSR-related employee commitment, and related organizational citizenship behavior, further mediates the organizational performance (Ali et al., 2010; Choi & Yu, 2014).

The research further suggests that CSR, and related increase in organizational (affective) commitment and organizational identification, also influence employee turnover intentions. The decrease in turnover intentions is especially mediated by CSR perceptions, belief in the importance of CSR and CSR awareness (Chaudhary, 2017a), and the trust employees have in their organization (Hansen et al., 2011).

4.2.2 | Positive outcomes to employees' work and non-work life

The findings in this subcategory have highlighted the benefits of employee CSR engagement, focusing on the level of the individual employee. The research has shown benefits for both employees' work and non-work life. The research has linked CSR engagement and the perceptions of employees with higher job satisfaction (Asrar-ul-Haq et al., 2017; Barakat et al., 2016), which is also shaped by the organizational image (Barakat et al., 2016).

Furthermore, these studies have shown that employees' CSR perceptions support their experienced quality of working life (Kim, Rhou,

et al., 2017), as well as employee attitude and behavior at work (Chaudhary, 2017b). The research has also noticed that CSR engagement at work can influence employees' non-work and family lives. For example, Lee et al. (2018) indicate that CSR experienced in work life positively influences employees' overall satisfaction in life.

4.2.3 | Reputation and external image

The findings in this subcategory show that employee CSR engagement provides benefits for organizations' efforts at improving their external image. This type of research has been conducted in different contexts. For example, Raub (2017) connected to corporate philanthropy and showed how it may encourage employees to act to support the external image. Dögl and Holtbrügge (2014) supported this by showing how different types of employee engagements can support the environmental reputation of the employing organization, including its reputation as an employer.

4.2.4 | Positive outcomes to employee and organizational performance

The findings in this subcategory have linked employee CSR engagement with organizational performance, and shown how it supports performance at the organizational level, such as in financial outcomes. On the other hand, the research has also shown how the CSR practices of the organization support employee performance at the individual level, such as in creativity or job satisfaction. Thus, the research has shown an interactive relationship between CSR practices, employee engagement, organizational performance, and employee performance.

First, the research has shown how employee engagement assumes a mediating role in the relationship between CSR practices and organizational performance. While Wolf (2013) states that employee engagement moderates the relationship between firm performance and CSR implementation to some extent, Bučiūnienė and Kazlauskaitė (2012) suggested that there is a clear link between HRM, CSR, and performance outcomes. In this case, the positive relationship required well-developed CSR policies. Faleye and Trahan (2011) showed that those practices significantly outweigh, and thus support the firm's financial outcomes as well. Muthuri et al. (2009) support the perspective of the benefits of employee volunteerism, as it creates opportunities for building new partnerships.

Second, the research has shown how CSR practices support employee performance on an individual level. For example, Sun and Yu (2015) took showed a positive relationship between CSR and employee performance. Glavas and Piderit (2009) and Gharleghi et al. (2018) showed that CSR seems to especially increase creativity among employees. More specifically, Glavas and Piderit (2009) highlight that employees who perceive higher levels of CSR are more eager to engage, and also to involve creatively.

Based on the main category of "benefits to organizations," and its four subcategories, the following understandings can be summarized concerning the employee–CSR relationship:

- CSR strengthens employee organization fit, identification with the firm, and (affective) commitment, what may lead to less turnover intentions.
- Employee CSR perceptions support job satisfaction, and the quality work and non-work life.
- Employee CSR engagement improves an organization's external image and attractiveness as an employer.
- Employee CSR engagement improves organizational performance, and CSR practices improve employee performance.

4.3 | Differences in employee CSR perceptions and their explanatory factors

This group of studies focuses on a more individual level perspective to the implementation of CSR, by identifying differences in employees' perceptions of CSR and exploring their explanatory factors. However, a clear microlevel perspective is still missing, as the studies target employees as groups regarding their perceptions of CSR, for example by creating employee typologies based on their CSR approaches. The research has also identified multifaceted meanings, practices, and conceptualizations of CSR among employees, and shown how these may cause tensions and complexities for the implementation of CSR. However, this notion has not been explored further. Thus, the studies focus on analyzing questions such as: how do employees perceive CSR? How do employee perceptions differ? What explains the differences in employees' CSR perceptions?

Two dominant subcategories were identified within this main category: differences in employee CSR perceptions and their explanatory factors, and tensions and complexities in the understanding of CSR.

4.3.1 | Differences in employees' CSR perceptions and their explanatory factors

The studies within this subcategory have shown that employees' CSR perceptions differ, and have explored the explanatory factors for those differences. The findings of these studies have identified both demographic factors, for example relating to employees' education and life situations, as well as differences drawn from organizational level factors. Concerning demographic factors, for example, Lu et al. (2017) and Rosati et al. (2018) suggest that age, gender, level of education, site of living, level of incomes, and marital status influence employee CSR behavior. Vitell and Hidalgo (2006) added that CSR perceptions also depend on the country of residence. Farooq et al. (2014) support the perspective that organizational level differences can better explain differences in CSR perceptions—they show how employee experiences of CSR activities explain their perceptions of CSR. Kim, Kim, et al. (2017) add that employee perceptions are also shaped by colleagues' green behavior. Inevitably, employee perceptions are also influenced by their personal environmental beliefs, values, and attitudes. For example, Chou (2014) and Huber and Hirsch (2017) suggest that they are an important moderating factor for employee environmental behavior.

The researches have also created typologies based on the differences in CSR perceptions and approaches among employees. For example, Du et al. (2015) identified categories of idealists, enthusiasts, and indifferents depending on their demand for organizational CSR. Rodrigo and Arenas (2008) further categorized employees based on their attitudes towards CSR program implementation. Onkila (2015) categorized employee perspectives on employing an organization's CSR based on their emotional arguments and responses.

4.3.2 | Tensions and complexities in the understanding of CSR

Within this subcategory, the research showed that employees' different understandings of CSR, even within an organization, may include tensions and complexities. Puncheva-Michelotti et al. (2018) relate these tensions to stakeholder role and the varying identities of individuals, while Edwards and Kudret (2017) stress that there are also complexities in employee responses to CSR practices. Onkila (2017) specified that employees' understandings of whether the organizations should, or should not, take responsibility for its environmental impacts is particularly tension-filled, and depends on micro-contextual aspects. Seivwright and Unsworth (2016) identified two contrasting cohorts of employees, divided according to their CSR engagement and how CSR contributes to the meaningfulness of their work. This research perspective also moves towards a more microlevel understanding of the employee–CSR relationship. For example, Rupp et al. (2013) show how the effects of individuals' CSR perceptions are more complicated than previously noticed, and further understanding would require a microlevel approach.

Based on the main category of "differences in employee CSR perceptions and their explanatory factors," and its two subcategories, the following understanding can be summarized concerning the employee–CSR relationship:

- Employee perceptions on CSR differ depending on demographic and organizational factors.
- Employees assign multiple meanings to CSR that often incorporate complexities and tensions.

5 | MEDIATING RESEARCH CATEGORIES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE REVIEWED LITERATURE

5.1 | Interaction between organizational implementation of CSR and employee CSR perceptions

Concerning mediating categories—meaning studies that connect the main streams of research, as we explained in Section 4—we found several studies in which the connections between the organizational implementation of CSR and employee CSR perceptions are established and explored. We identified two dominant categories of

those studies: how organizational practices shape employee CSR perceptions, and engagement and the effects of (un)successful CSR on employee perceptions, experience, and employee–organization fit.

5.1.1 | How do organizational practices shape employee CSR perceptions and engagement

The studies within this subcategory focus on explaining the meaning and importance of organizational-level CSR practices, such as different kinds of CSR initiatives, influencing how employees perceived CSR, and their tendency to engage in CSR activities within the organization. For example, Opoku-Dakwa et al. (2018) studied how CSR initiatives may promote employee engagement with CSR, depending on how well the initiatives fit with the employees' personal CSR expectations and Spanjol et al. (2015) added that employees perceive CSR more positively when there is a fit between an employee's personal concern for the environment and organizational concern for the environment.

5.1.2 | The effects of (un)successful CSR on employee perceptions, experience, and employee–organization fit

This subcategory consists of studies in which the effects of successful (or unsuccessful) CSR are related to the development in employee perceptions, experiences, and employee–organization fit. For example, El Akremi et al. (2018) showed how higher level CSR positively influences organizational pride, job satisfaction, organizational identification, affective commitment, and perceived organizational support. Allen et al. (2017) added that the perceived CSR performance of the employing organizations, as well as organizational identification, influence affective organizational commitment, and Afsar et al. (2018) showed how perceived CSR influences, through organizational identification, also employee behavior.

Based on the mediating category of "interaction between organizational implementation of CSR and employee CSR perceptions" and its two subcategories, the following understanding can be summarized concerning the employee–CSR relationship:

- Depending on contextual factors, successful organizational CSR initiatives increase employee engagement and produce positive CSR perceptions among employees.
- Perceived levels of (un)successful CSR can support positive/negative perceptions of CSR among employees, as well as employee–organization fit.

5.2 | Interaction between benefits to organizations and employee CSR perceptions

The second mediating category connects the benefits of employee CSR engagement with differing employee CSR perceptions. We

identified two dominant categories within those studies: the influence of employee CSR perceptions on organizational level benefits, and the impacts of that relationship on benefits and perceptions.

5.2.1 | The influence of employee CSR perceptions on organizational benefits

The studies in this subcategory have shown how the positive CSR perceptions of employees provide support to the organizational level benefits of employee CSR engagement. For example, Rupp et al. (2018) showed that employees who perceive higher CSR-specific autonomy also had stronger work engagement. This was supported by Ditlev-Simonsen (2015), who noticed that CSR perceptions predict affective commitment to the firm, but this is influenced by perceived organizational support. Im et al. (2017) continued by indicating that the CSR participation of employees positively influences their job satisfaction, organizational identification, and organizational commitment. McNamara et al. (2017) further showed how both externally and internally focused CSR supports employees' affective commitment.

5.2.2 | Further impacts of the influence of employee CSR perceptions on organizational benefits

While a significant body of research has shown how employee CSR perceptions connect with organizational benefits, another stream of research has deepened this discussion to further analyze the impacts of this relationship. For example, Shin et al. (2016) extend the relationship between perceived CSR and organizational identification to positive impacts on employees' job performance. De Roeck and Delobbe (2012) supported this view by showing that perceived CSR positively relates to organizational identification, and then also moderates the relationship to organizational trust. Raub and Blunschi (2014) took a wider view, and suggested that CSR perceptions relate to job satisfaction, personal initiative, and perceived task significance. On the other hand, the relationship also decreases emotional exhaustion, and thus the danger of negative responses.

Based on the mediating category of "interaction between benefits to organizations and employee CSR perceptions" and its two subcategories, the following understanding can be summarized concerning the employee–CSR relationship:

- Positive CSR perceptions among employees support organizational commitment.
- Positive CSR perceptions, and the related organizational commitment, further explain positive employee performance at work and trust in the employing organization.

5.3 | Interaction between the organizational implementation of CSR and benefits to organizations

Within this mediating category, the studies focused on the relationship between the organizational level implementation of CSR and

benefits to organizations. These studies were especially related to the question of how the fit between employees' CSR approaches and organizational CSR approaches positively influence, for example, organizational commitment and environmental performance. No clear subcategories were identified within this mediating category.

The research positioned under this category focused particularly on discussing how CSR-related employee–organization fit also provides organizational level benefits. For example, Kang et al. (2018) found that the fit between employee approaches and organizational CSR positively influences commitment. Haski-Leventhal et al. (2017) also showed that a congruence connecting employees and employers can be a foundation for a successful CSR model that results in positive organizational outcomes. The congruence of CSR and environmental-related programs also positively associates with job satisfaction, but this requires a cooperation with other management practices (Delmas & Pekovic, 2018), and possibly the implementation of multiple policies within the organization (Valentine and Fleischman, 2008). John et al. (2017) showed that CSR supports employees' organizational identification, increases their pride in the employer, and finally leads to a willingness to make an impact through work.

Based the mediating category of "interaction between the organizational implementation of CSR and benefits to organizations," the following understanding can be generalized concerning the employee–CSR relationship:

- CSR-related employee–organization fit also provides organizational level benefits.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 | The state of the art in employee–CSR research

The aim of this literature review was to systematically review the CSR research that focuses on employees and to identify how the CSR–employee relationship has been studied and what the dominant key findings are. In the review, we identified three main categories of research that have dominated the field of CSR–employee research: (1) the organizational implementation of the research, (2) the benefits of employee–CSR engagement, and (3) employee perceptions of CSR and their differences. Thus, the review shows that CSR–employee research has been dominated by focuses on the organizational implementation of CSR and organizational benefits. In those studies, employees are mainly perceived as implementers of top-down sustainability policies and as mediators towards organizational CSR-related benefits, and the focus has been placed on the question of how employees can contribute to CSR within their employing organizations. In addition, the review showed that differences in employee perceptions have been recognized, and that their explanatory factors, as well as tensions in employees' CSR understandings, have been identified, but not explored further.

Our review illustrates the complex and interactive relationships prior research has identified concerning CSR–employee relations. We

identified a significant number of studies positioned within mediating categories that combined two of the main categories. This means that, for example, the possible organizational benefits of employee engagement with CSR depend on how CSR has been organizationally implemented, and that organizational implementation of CSR shapes employee–CSR perceptions. This shows how difficult CSR–employee relationships are to analyze, and then also to manage.

Our review provides a conceptual understanding of the relationship between employees and CSR. This is important due to the strong role employees play in influencing and implementing CSR policies. It clarifies conceptual linkages between different perspectives, and shows how they may influence each other. Such conceptual understanding offers managers and CSR professionals tools for in-depth analysis on how employees can be better engaged in CSR, how it may be beneficial for the organization and how the diversity of employees could be in CSR management practices. Based on the understanding created in our study, arguments for inclusion of employees in CSR management and planning can be constructed.

The prior research has been able to show how multiple factors eventually influence CSR–employee relationships. However, the research still seems theoretically fragmented, and largely produced by qualitative methodologies. As pointed out before, from a theoretical perspective the reviewed studied were rather limited. While the majority of the studies applied no clear theory, in those studies applying specific theories, social identity theory was clearly dominant. We believe that such lack of clear theories relates to diverse role of employees in relation to CSR. We do not believe that this phenomenon should be studied through only limited amount of theories in the future either. Instead, we believe that a more in-depth understanding can be gained by more extensively applying theories of individual and organizational behavior, agency, psychology, social networking, and structure. From the perspective of methodology, there was more rigor; the studies applied both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, as well as mixed method and conceptual research. However, the research was dominated by quantitative approaches. Moreover, no experimental approaches were identified. Such focus on quantitative research has allowed repetitive and comparative findings by focusing on extensive research approaches and data sets. However, more focus on qualitative and experimental research would help us to find more in-depth approaches, as well as understanding nuances and individual and contextual approaches, to this multifaceted relationship between employees and CSR. Thus, there is room for broadening both the theoretical and methodological approaches in employee–CSR research, in order to gain a deeper understanding of this complex relationship.

Our review thus contributes to the CSR–employee literature by providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of the art of that research, identifying the dominant themes in research as well as the complex, interactive relationships between those dominant categories. However, the review naturally carries some limitations. First, the search was limited to a specific databases, and different databases could have yielded different results. Second, the search was focused only on the specific search words "employees" and "corporate social responsibility/sustainability/CSR," and applying such search words as

"greening organizations" and "organizations & sustainable changes," for example, might also have yielded different search results. Furthermore, we decided to focus only on journal articles, while several interesting book chapters have also been published on the topic.

6.2 | Future research directions

Based on the contributions of the study, there are multiple gaps that should be covered by future research on the CSR–employee relationship. Based on the current literature review, four concerns emerge about the previous studies, and these provide suggestions for future streams of research. These relate to bottom-up change processes started by employees, employees as targets of responsibility, deepening perspectives on the tensions and complexities in employees' understanding of CSR, and expanding the theoretical rigor, methods, and contexts of future studies. Many of these suggestion for future research deal with adding microlevel CSR research (Jones et al., 2017), and thus approaching employee–CSR research more as an individual-level phenomenon.

First, the prior findings show a lack of understanding about how employees can initiate and drive sustainability changes within organizations. The reviewed research was dominated by top-down management approaches, and employees are mainly seen as implementers of organization-level policies. This deals with activity and agency, and especially with the bottom-up actions of employees. Future research should especially focus on questions such as: how and in which situations are bottom-up actions by employees enabled? What are the challenges in the bottom-up CSR actions of employees? What influences the employees' ability to act on such initiatives? What stories and narratives are related to successful bottom-up CSR action within organizations? These research questions would be especially fruitful for in-depth case studies, based on which an understanding of the phases and influences of such complex bottom-up processes could be created; the studies could also apply theories such as issue life-cycle theory (see, e.g., Zyglidopoulos, 2003) and human agency theory (Bandura, 1989).

Second, somewhat surprisingly the reviewed literature focused on treating employees as implementers of responsibility, and showing differences in their perceptions, but only dealt with the role of employees as targets of responsibility in a very limited way. Although employees are one of the key stakeholder groups, to whom the company is seen as being responsible (see, e.g., Peloza & Shang, 2011), the views of employees as targets of responsibility was not given the appropriate amount of interest. Studies on the social dimensions of CSR should largely focus on employee well-being and justice. However, they were only marginally addressed in the reviewed research. We suggest that future research should apply theories of business ethics, and both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, to map employee experiences of their employing firms' CSR, especially relating to questions such as equality in the work-place, well-being, and social justice. This would involve research questions such as: how are employee experiences as targets of responsibility influenced by

CSR initiatives? What are employees' expectations for CSR initiatives, from the point of view of their workplace well-being and equality?

Third, the reviewed research has identified that there exists tensions and complexities in employee understandings of CSR. While they were identified as naturally existing, they were not explored further. We need more understanding of individual-level differences related to CSR initiatives, and how such differences (e.g., different backgrounds, different individual value priorities) influence employee willingness to participate in CSR, or to initiate changes. This would require both in-depth case studies, experimental studies, and quantitative studies, and would involve research questions such as: how and when do such tensions and complexities in CSR understanding develop? How do they influence organizational CSR processes? What are the outcomes of such tensional understandings, and do they provide obstacles for change? How does one deal with such complexities and tensions? How can one promote CSR despite the existence of such complexities and tensions? Although we are currently gaining more and more understanding of CSR as a tensional and paradoxical phenomenon (Hahn et al., 2018), this understanding does not yet appear in the CSR–employee literature. In certain situations, such differences in understandings may also trigger new changes, as they may raise new perspectives that have not been previously thought of within the organization. Thus, we would encourage a move in the literature from "shared meanings" to "discovering a multiplicity of meanings" for CSR.

Finally, as noted previously in this article, we call for more theoretical, methodological, and contextual rigor in future research. Research has been dominated by certain methods and one specific theory. Otherwise, approaches have been rather fragmented. We also call more appreciation for the contexts of multiple meanings. Future research should also focus more on contextual influence, and analyze how stakeholder willingness to participate in CSR initiatives is influenced by different contextual factors, such as external pressures, different legal requirements, and differences in managerial support.

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