

The contribution of corporate social responsibility to the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises: A systematic review

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Abstract: This article analyzes how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) impacts small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the challenges they face in its implementation. It also explores the foundations of CSR and its link to sustainability through a systematic review covering publications from 2005 to 2023, which allowed for the identification of areas of influence, integration difficulties, and financial limitations, as well as competitive disadvantages and market positioning. Furthermore, the bibliometric analysis reveals an increase in CSR research, highlighting quantitative methodology as the most applied (54.74%) and surveys as the primary data collection tool (53.68%). In turn, it is evident that CSR significantly contributes to improvements in competitiveness (12.63%), sustainability (50.53%), and corporate image (7.4%). It concludes that implementing CSR in business models promotes sustainable and ethical practices that benefit companies and their relationships with modern consumers, the environment, society, and innovation in management processes, technologies, areas of action, and interaction with stakeholders.

Keywords: *Business performance, Competitiveness, Corporate social responsibility, Innovation, SMEs, Sustainability.*

1. Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face various challenges today, including globalization, the dynamism of economies, and evolving environmental and social demands. Among the most significant challenges are the lack of competitiveness, limited innovation, weak corporate image, and limited performance compared to large organizations, as highlighted by González-Loureiro, et al. [1] in their analysis of the structuring challenges of SMEs. These factors hinder their long-term sustainability, especially in emerging markets, where resources are scarce and there are insufficient support policies, according to Ayyagari, et al. [2]. Moreover, most SMEs lack organizational capabilities to develop sustainable skills that would allow them to remain relevant and create balanced economic, social, and environmental value, as evidenced by Torugsa, et al. [3].

From the perspective of Dangelico and Pujari [4] adopting practices oriented toward sustainability has proven to be a key option for improving business performance, including the ability to retain customers, innovate, and position themselves positively in the market. Despite this, many SMEs still view sustainability and social responsibility as an additional cost rather than strategic opportunities, as pointed out by Jamali, et al. [5]. This results in a lag behind current consumer demands and regulatory frameworks, directly affecting corporate image and competitiveness, as concluded by Porter and Kramer [6]. In this context, the research objective is to determine the impact of corporate social responsibility on the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises based on existing literature resulting from research processes.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept that has evolved significantly. Traditionally, it was defined as a voluntary and philanthropic activity, but over time, it has acquired a strategic

dimension, where organizations integrate CSR as an indispensable element in their business model. Carroll [7] the author of the CSR pyramid model, includes legal, ethical, economic, and philanthropic commitments of companies toward stakeholders, while MacGregor Pelikanova, et al. [8] from a resource-based perspective, highlight that a company may adopt these practices as a tool to maximize its reputation and competitiveness. This perspective is supported by the idea of Porter and Kramer [6] who establish that well-crafted social responsibility can generate a competitive advantage that aligns with the company's own interests.

From an interpretative perspective, Dahlsrud [9] provides a detailed study of CSR definitions, indicating that although different interpretations may be found, all approaches converge on the need to balance organizational objectives with environmental and social values. The relationship between CSR and competitiveness is also identified in the work of Macchion, et al. [10] recognized for their analysis of CSR in various institutional settings, who explain how companies can implement explicit or implicit approaches in their responsible strategies, depending on the organizational and cultural context in which they operate. Additionally, in studying CSR in the African context, Valdez-Juárez, et al. [11] notes that companies in developing countries tend to have a different perspective on CSR, framed around addressing immediate social barriers.

Meanwhile, the concept of corporate sustainability has been essential in the creation of modern businesses, as they seek to ensure that operations are viable both economically and socially and environmentally. Elkington [12] a pioneer in introducing the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), proposes assessing business performance in three dimensions: social, economic, and environmental. This approach has been widely accepted as a model for organizations to achieve long-term sustainability, not only in economic terms but also in their impact on the planet and the population. Similarly, Gimenez, et al. [13] emphasize that corporate sustainability plays a significant role in operational efficiency by minimizing long-term costs through responsible practices.

In their study on sustainability motivations, Bansal and Roth [14] address the relationship between ecology and competitiveness, stating that sustainability reduces the environmental impact of companies while fostering innovation. In the same vein, with an innovative perspective on sustainability, Porter and Kramer [6] argue that organizations adopting sustainable strategies can enhance their competitiveness by reducing waste and optimizing resource use. Saraswati [15] also points out that today's consumers demand high-quality products from companies that are committed to the environment.

Finally, the relationship between CSR and sustainability is crucial to understanding how companies can integrate both concepts into their business strategies. In his critique of "market CSR," Valdez-Juárez, et al. [11] indicates that CSR practices provide a foundation for sustainability initiatives, as both promote shared value for companies and society. In this regard, Scarpellini, et al. [16] conclude that sustainability becomes a long-term strategy for organizations as it encourages the responsible implementation of sustainability in their business model. According to Lockett, et al. [17] for CSR practices to be effective in terms of sustainability, they must align with the company's own interests. The integration of CSR creates new business opportunities and optimizes the financial resources of organizations, as emphasized in the work of Lazonick [18].

2. Methodology

This work aims to make a significant contribution to the academic literature through a literature review, understood as a method that employs systematic procedures to analyze individual studies and collect data to answer a clear and well-defined question [19]. The methodological approach of Pimenova and Van Der Vorst [20] applied to the social sciences in six key steps, is followed, complemented by the elements included in the Porter and Kramer [6] which are presented below:

Step 1) Formulation of research questions: A main research question is established along with two additional questions related to the same research process, which are, in the corresponding order: How does corporate social responsibility impact the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises?

What research methodologies have been applied in the studies? What instruments have been used in the development of studies?

Step 2) Selection of databases and definition of search equations: The review is carried out using the Scopus bibliographic database. The main terms for the search equation are detailed in Table 1, along with some synonyms or equivalent key terms, including their English translations. This allows for greater precision in the search and expands the scope of the obtained results.

Table 1.

Terms to be used in the search equation in the Scopus database.

Corporate social responsibility	Business sustainability	Small companies
		Small businesses
		Small enterprises
Business social responsibility		Medium businesses
		Medium sized companies
		Medium enterprises

To search, the following equation is employed, detailed below: (corporate social responsibility OR business social responsibility OR corporate social responsibility) AND (business sustainability) AND (small companies OR small businesses OR small enterprises OR medium businesses OR medium-sized companies OR medium enterprises).

Step 3) Establishment of inclusion and exclusion criteria: The following criteria are proposed to decide the inclusion or exclusion of elements: review period, 2005-2023; document types: articles, books, book chapters, conference papers; document language: English or Spanish. Furthermore, one of the inclusion criteria is that the full version of the document must be available.

Step 4) Bibliometric analysis: Given the relevance of bibliometric analysis [21] descriptive statistics are used in this context, which address categories or factors such as journal identification, authors, affiliated institutions, and countries. This allows for the identification of trends in the knowledge production related to the topic of this research.

Step 5) Evaluation of the scientific quality of the publications: To assess the scientific quality of the documents that will be considered in the proposed systematic review, eleven criteria formulated by Preuss and Perschke [22] are applied, which were adapted by Gast, et al. [23] and are presented below:

Table 2.

Quality Criteria according to Petticrew and Roberts, modified by Gast et al.

Category	Quality Criteria
General	Is the research objective clearly stated?
	Does the research method allow for an accurate answer to the stated question?
Selected Sample	Was sufficient data collected to ensure the validity of the conclusions?
	Is the research context (country, participants) clearly specified?
Method	Do the researchers describe the research methods applied?
	Do the authors justify the selected methods?
	Do the researchers consider other variables that could have influenced the results?
Data Analysis	Is the data analysis appropriate and accurate?
	Are the results presented clearly?
	Do the researchers report on the reliability and validity of the study?
Conclusions	Is the research question answered using empirical evidence obtained in the study?

Note: Gast, et al. [23].

To evaluate each quality criterion, a score is assigned based on three parameters: if the criterion is not defined, a score of 0.0 is given; if the criterion is present but not entirely clear, a score of 0.5 is assigned; and if the criterion is presented with full clarity, a score of 1.0 is given [24]. Consequently, the rating scale range goes from 0 to 11, and for a document to be considered in the review, it must obtain a minimum score of 6 in quality [25]. Once all the criteria defined for the systematic review have been applied, they are presented by the Perrini, et al. [26] statement, as illustrated in detail in Figure 1.

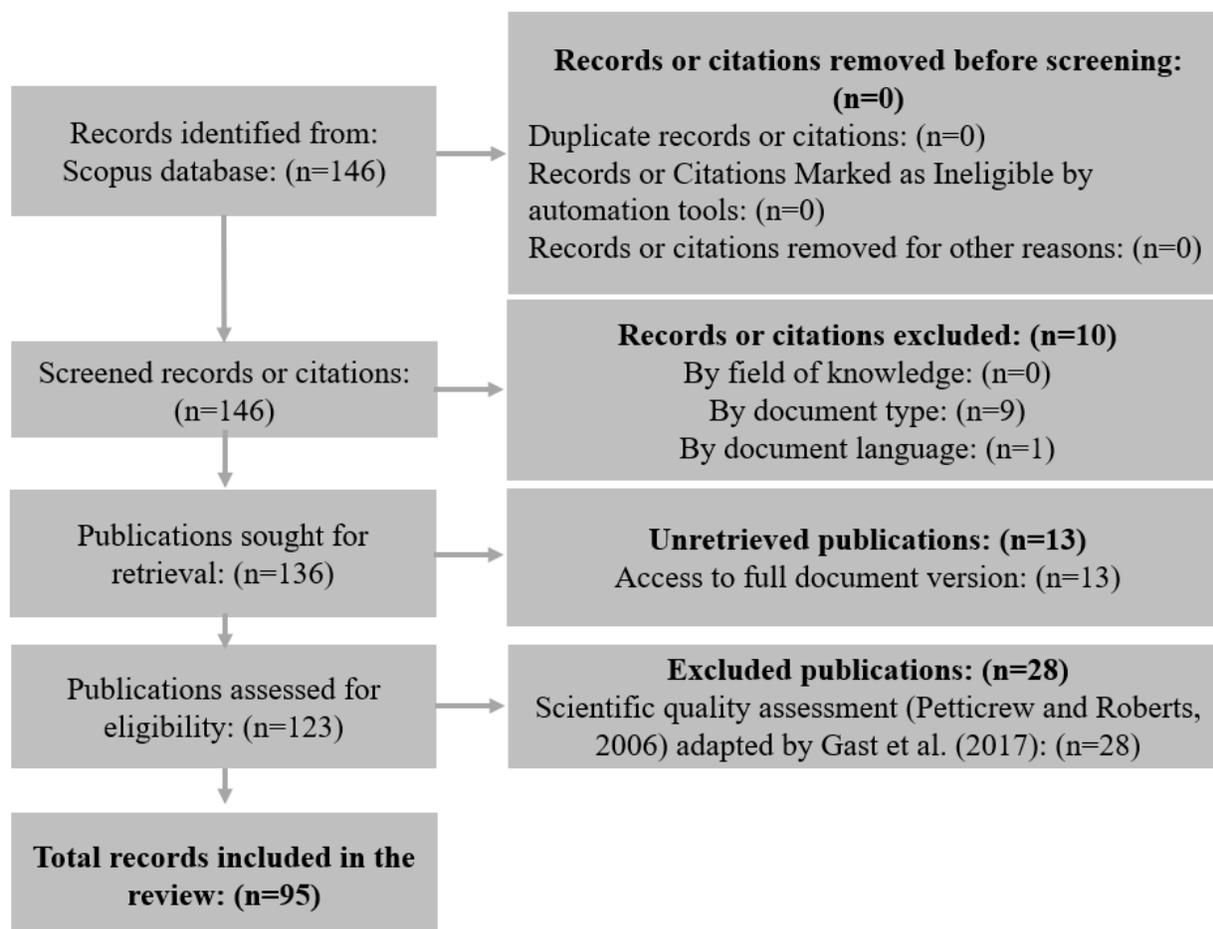


Figure 1.

Schematic representation of the application of the method established in the PRISMA statement.

Source: Yepes-Nuñez, et al. [27]; Gonzalez, et al. [28]; Gast, et al. [23].

Once the selection process has been carried out according to the established parameters, a total of 95 records are obtained for the review from the 137 documents identified in the Scopus bibliographic database. Table 3 presents the list of documents included in the review.

Table 3.

Documents included in the systematic review.

ID	Cited	Year	Cited by	ID	Cited	Year	Cited by	ID	Cited	Year	Cited by
1	Ghobakhloo and Fathi [29]	2020	296	33	Li, et al. [30]	2021	23	65	Srbová, et al. [31]	2023	5
2	Jansson, et al. [32]	2017	271	34	Cantele and Zardini [33]	2020	22	66	Cantele and Zardini [33]	2018	5
3	Chege and Wang [34]	2020	206	35	Werner-Lewandowska and Golinska-Dawson [35]	2021	20	67	Rojas, et al. [24]	2023	5
4	Uhlener, et al. [36]	2012	162	36	Curado and Mota [37]	2021	19	68	Michael and Oluseye [38]	2014	5
5	Scarpellini, et al. [16]	2020	156	37	Wentzel, et al. [39]	2022	19	69	Khorin and Krikunov [40]	2021	4
6	Luken and Stares [41]	2005	101	38	Gurzawska [42]	2021	18	70	Torkkeli and Durst [43]	2022	4
7	Baden, et al. [44]	2012	99	39	Khan, et al. [45]	2023	17	71	Raszkowski and Bartniczka [46]	2023	4
8	Suriyankietkaew, et al. [47]	2016	76	40	Goetz [48]	2010	17	72	García-Santiago [49]	2022	4
9	Baden, et al. [44]	2011	72	41	Genaidy, et al. [50]	2010	16	73	Szegedi, et al. [51]	2023	4
10	Droppert and Bennett [52]	2015	72	42	Corazza [53]	2017	15	74	Preuss and Perschke [22]	2015	4
11	Bevan and Yung [54]	2015	69	43	Le [55]	2023	15	75	Roxas, et al. [56]	2023	3
12	Cantele and Zardini [33]	2020	66	44	MacGregor Pelikanova, et al. [8]	2021	15	76	Yeasmin and Koivurova [57]	2021	3
13	Gupta, et al. [58]	2018	66	45	Del Baldo [59]	2015	15	77	Okřęglicka, et al. [60]	2023	3
14	Tantalo, et al. [61]	2020	66	46	Socoliuc, et al. [62]	2020	14	78	Jarkovská and Jarkovská [63]	2022	3
15	Nigri and Del Baldo [64]	2018	65	47	Kot [65]	2023	13	79	Rahman and Alam [66]	2014	3
16	Suriyankietkaew, et al. [47]	2022	58	48	Dvorský, et al. [67]	2023	11	80	Iannone [68]	2015	3
17	López-Pérez, et al. [69]	2018	58	49	Herrera, et al. [70]	2013	10	81	Shaw [71]	2018	2
18	Fortunati, et al. [72]	2020	57	50	Le, et al. [73]	2022	9	82	Chantamas [74]	2019	2
19	Valdez-Juárez, et al. [11]	2018	53	51	Lee-Wong and More [75]	2016	9	83	Hu and Chen [76]	2023	2
20	Al-Tit, et al. [77]	2019	47	52	Elford and Daub [78]	2019	9	84	Del Baldo [59]	2016	2
21	Lambrechts, et al. [79]	2019	45	53	Williams and Murphy [80]	2023	8	85	James [81]	2018	1
22	Lorincová, et al. [82]	2018	44	54	Teplova, et al. [83]	2022	8	86	Donnan [84]	2020	1
23	Belas, et al. [85]	2021	43	55	Milwood [86]	2020	8	87	Elkington [12]	2020	1
24	Yu and Bell [87]	2007	42	56	Mara [88]	2014	8	88	Zhang, et al. [89]	2023	0
25	Ahmad, et al. [90]	2021	38	57	Toppinen, et al. [91]	2019	7	89	Papageorgiou, et al. [92]	2023	0
26	Pesce, et al. [93]	2018	38	58	Chiloane-Tsoka and Rasivetshela [94]	2014	7	90	Bimson and True [95]	2020	0
27	Fernández and Camacho [96]	2016	34	59	Casalegno, et al. [97]	2014	7	91	Le [55]	2023	0
28	Tantalo, et al. [61]	2012	34	60	Le, et al. [73]	2022	6	92	Turchina, et al. [98]	2023	0
29	López-Pérez, et al. [69]	2017	32	61	Gao, et al. [99]	2021	6	93	Wentzel, et al. [39]	2023	0
30	Lambrechts, et al. [79]	2016	31	62	Macchion, et al. [10]	2023	6	94	Aziz and Darrag [100]	2013	0
31	Ahmad, et al. [101]	2020	27	63	Freze, et al. [102]	2023	6	95	Bansal and Roth [14]	2011	0
32	Das and Rangarajan [103]	2020	26	64	Rojas, et al. [24]	2005	6				

Step 6) Category analysis: The categories analyzed are derived from the research questions formulated. The following categories are identified about the posed questions, which emerge from the document review process:

Table 4.
Work categories.

Question	Categories
How does corporate social responsibility impact the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises?	Improves sustainability. Enhances competitiveness. Improves corporate image. Enhances performance. Improvements in innovation processes. Improves productivity. Improves employee motivation. Enhances cooperation. Promotes investment. Improves the alignment of values and governance. Enhances organizational reputation. Improves stakeholder relations. Improves compliance with regulations.
What research methodologies have been applied in the studies?	Qualitative. Quantitative. Mixed.
What instruments have been used in the development of studies?	Survey. Interview. Case Study. Database. Checklist.

3. Results

Following the methodology outlined, the results of the research process are presented below, relating, in order, the bibliometric analysis, followed by the analysis of the determined categories.

3.1. Bibliometric Analysis

The first component addressed is the number of documents per year. Figure 2 shows the trend of publications in the field of knowledge between the period 2005 and 2023.

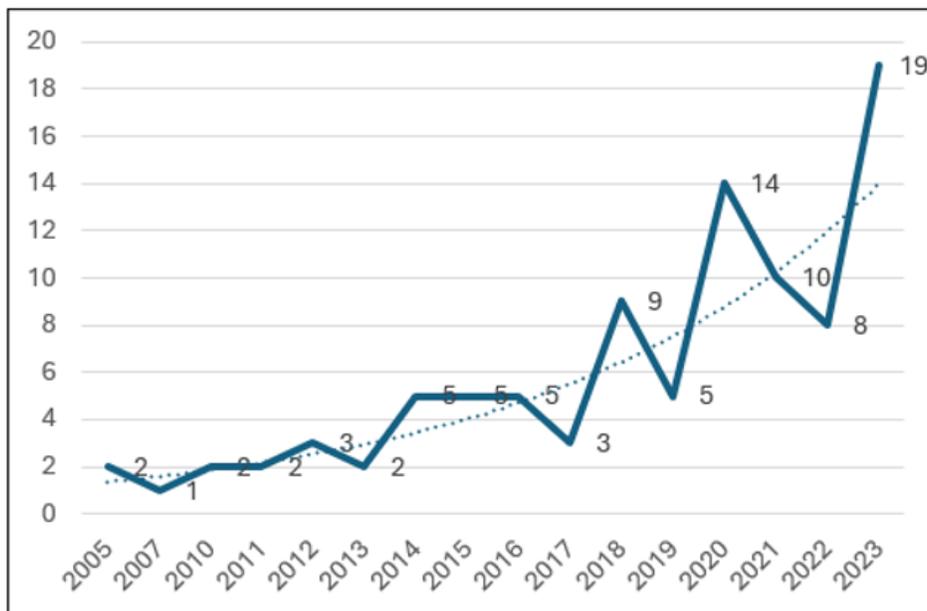


Figure 2.
Number of documents per year.

Based on the data illustrated, the following points stand out: Despite fluctuations per year, the trend line shows an increase in the number of documents published, indicating sustained interest in the field of study. In 2023, with 19 documents published, it marks the highest point in the analyzed period.

Regarding the number of documents per author, a comparison is made between authors, presenting the number of documents published according to the topic and research area, as evidenced in Figure 3.

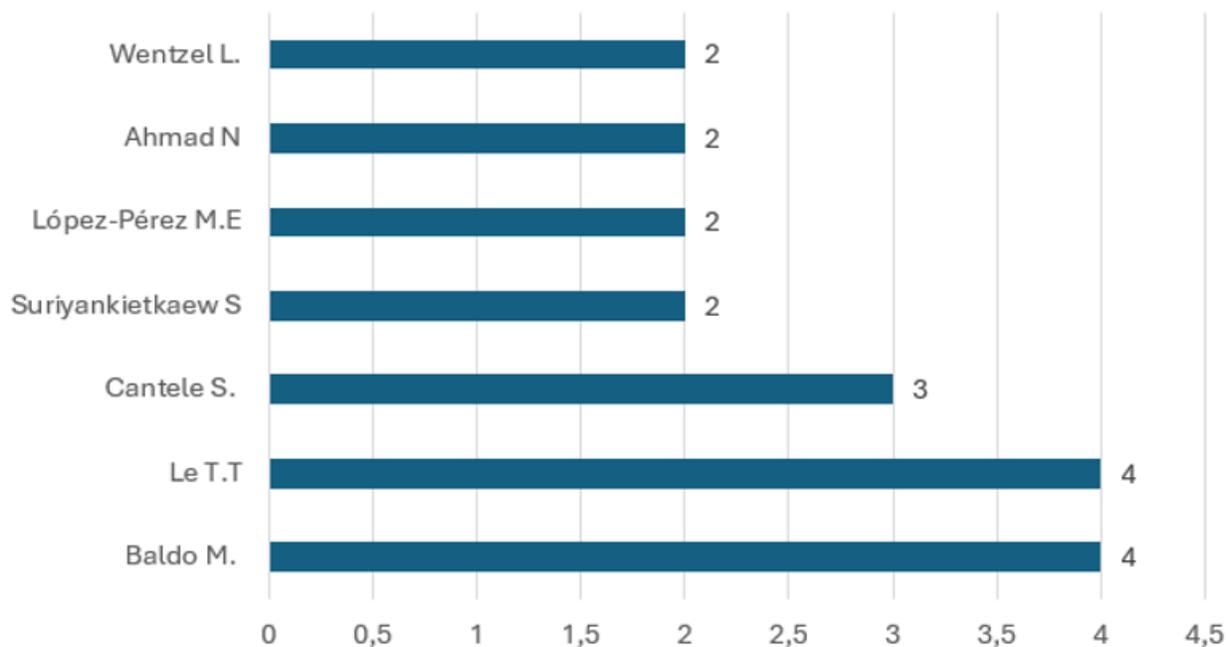


Figure 3.
Number of Documents per Author.

As can be seen in Figure 3, the authors with the highest number of publications are Bansal and Roth [14]. Other authors with more than one publication include Cantele and Zardini [33] (each with two). These results show that there is no clear consolidation of an author in the field of knowledge.

Regarding the number of documents per funder, Figure 4 allows for identifying the contribution landscape and establishing the level of financial investment in research projects.

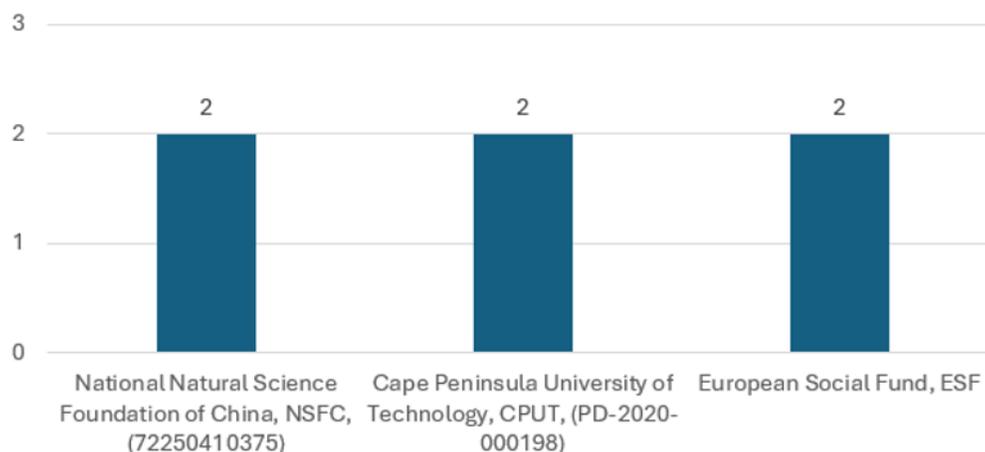


Figure 4.
Number of Documents per Funder.

Based on the total number of documents analyzed, Figure 4 indicates the funding entities or organizations with more than one published document: The National Natural Science Foundation of China, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and the European Social Fund. Regarding the number of documents per affiliation, Figure 5 presents the results according to the methodology established in the systematic review.

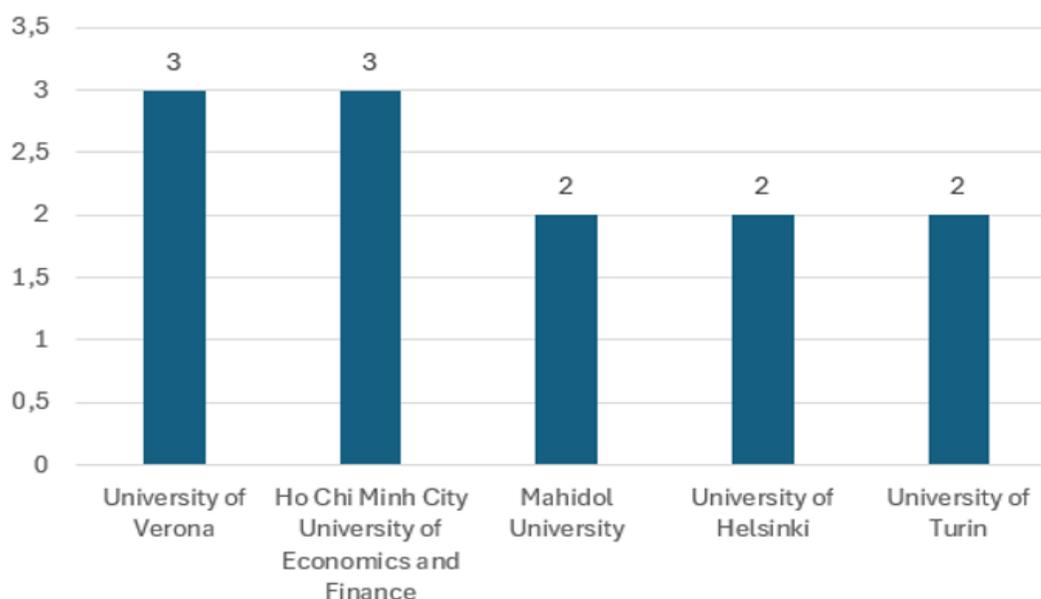


Figure 5.
Number of Documents per Affiliation.

According to the obtained data, the institutions with more than 2 published documents are: University of Verona and Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance with 3 documents; Mahidol University, University of Helsinki, and University of Turin with 2 documents, as shown in Figure 5.

Regarding the number of documents per country, it is possible to visualize and understand the number of documents published in relation to the country. Figure 6 presents the results obtained.

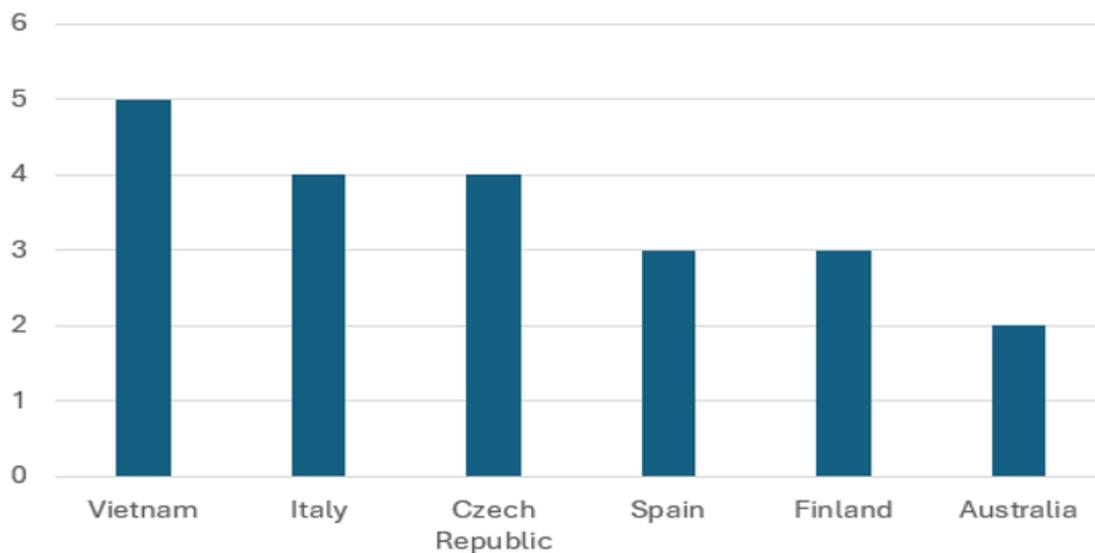


Figure 6.
Number of Documents per Country.

Based on the total number of documents analyzed and organized by countries with more than 2 publications, it was found that Vietnam is the country with the highest number of published documents, with a total of 5. Additionally, Italy and the Czech Republic, each with 4 documents, rank as the second countries. In third place are Spain and Finland, with 3 documents produced, respectively. Finally, Australia ranks 4th among the countries with the highest scientific production, with a total of 2 publications.

Regarding the number of documents per document type, Figure 7 presents the document types used by authors in the scientific community for the publication of their research in the study area.

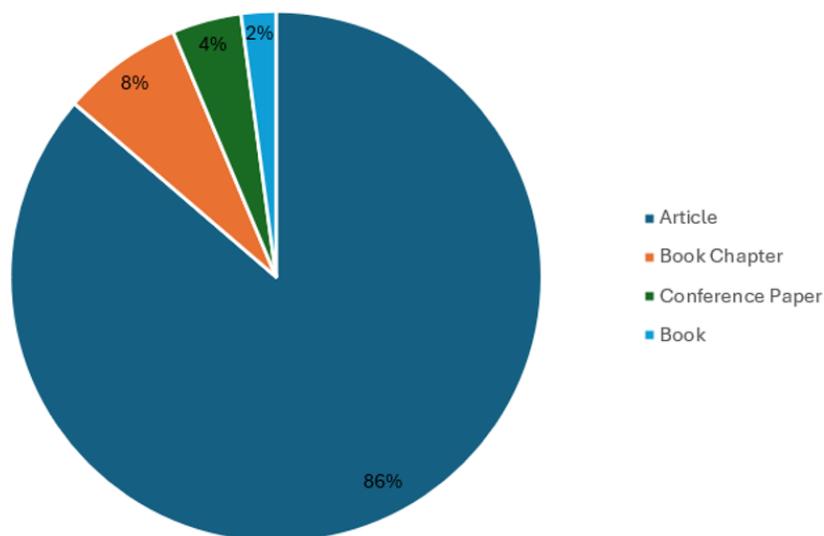


Figure 7.
Number of Documents per Document Type.

It is identified that 86% of the total documents were published as "articles," followed by "Book Chapter" with 8%. On the other hand, "Conference Paper" and "Book" are the least used, accounting for 4% and 2%, respectively, according to Figure 7.

Regarding the co-occurrence analysis of keywords, this helps identify patterns and trends between the most frequently used terms or term groups (clusters) in the field of study. It also provides a visual understanding and facilitates the identification of words that frequently appear in the documents analyzed in this research, as seen in Figure 8.

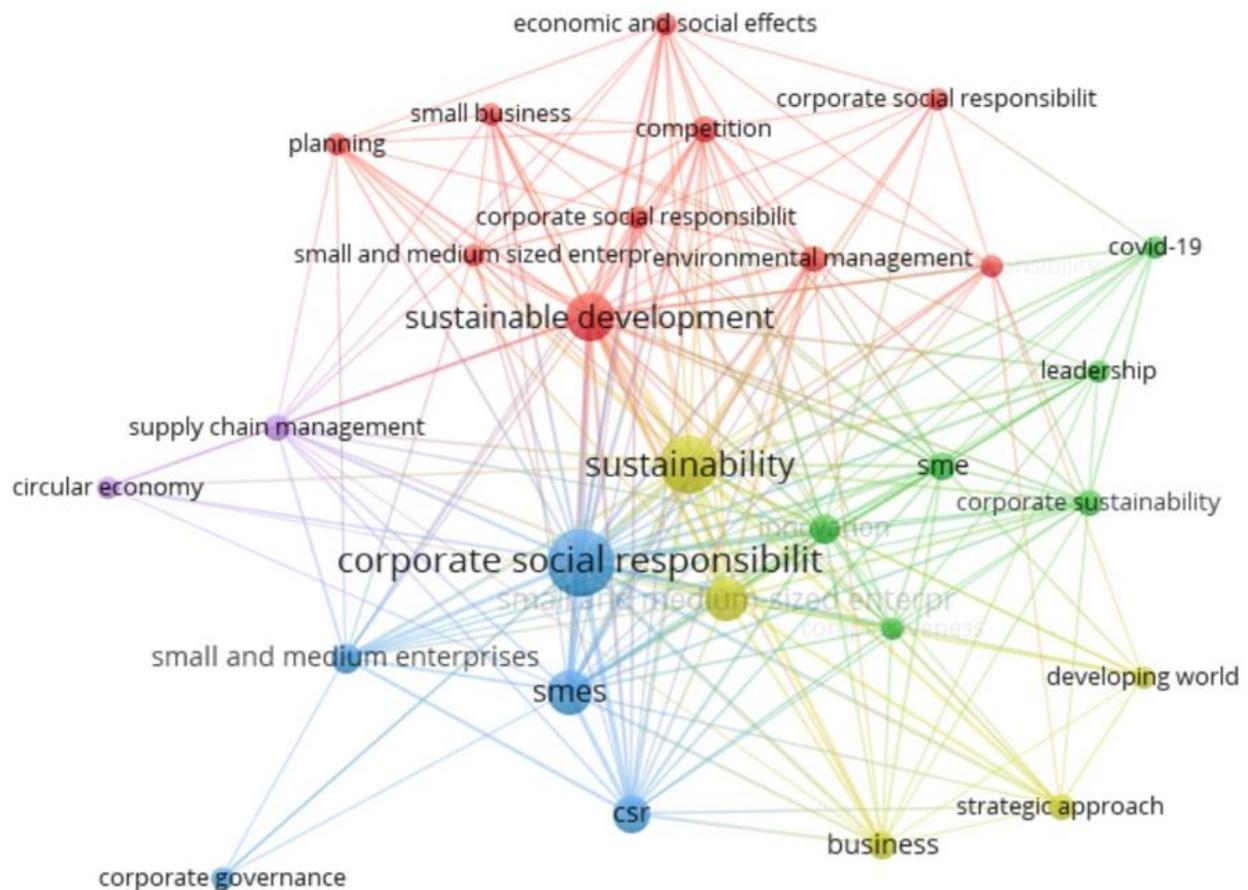


Figure 8.
Co-occurrence Analysis by Keywords.

Figure 8 provides several clusters of words related to sustainability, sustainable development, and corporate social responsibility, indicating their relevance in the studied field and primarily classifying them as follows:

- **Red Cluster:** This group includes terms like "sustainable development," "corporate social responsibility," "environmental management," and "economic and social effects," highlighting the importance of addressing environmental issues and corporate sustainability.
- **Green Cluster:** Focuses on corporate sustainability in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and their relevance in emerging economies. It includes "SME," "corporate sustainability," and "developing world."
- **Blue Cluster:** Groups terms like "corporate social responsibility," "SMEs," and "CSR" (corporate social responsibility abbreviation), suggesting how SMEs adopt responsible practices to contribute to sustainable development.
- **Yellow Cluster:** Terms like "sustainability" and "business" form the core of this cluster, with connections to strategic concepts such as "strategic approach." It focuses on how companies can integrate sustainability into their planning for long-term growth.
- **Purple Cluster:** The grouped terms suggest a focus on the circular economy and supply chain optimization as part of available practices.

3.2. Analysis of Categories According to Findings

Categorizing the findings obtained in the review allows for a more organized analysis, facilitating the identification, comparison, and presentation of the gathered data. Below, the results are presented according to the research questions posed.

Regarding the research methodology implemented, Table 5 breaks down the number of documents published according to the methodology used, namely: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed.

Table 5.
Research Methodology.

Methodology	Number of documents	ID
Qualitative	52	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39, 42, 43, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 54, 60, 61, 63, 65, 67, 68, 69, 70, 74, 75, 77, 78, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89, 92, 93
Quantitative	34	9, 15, 16, 18, 21, 24, 25, 28, 34, 36, 38, 41, 44, 51, 52, 53, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 62, 64, 66, 72, 73, 76, 79, 80, 82, 87, 91, 94, 95
Mixed	9	10, 11, 14, 40, 45, 71, 81, 84, 90

As can be identified, the most implemented methodology is quantitative, with a total of 52 documents (54.74%). Regarding the qualitative methodology, 34 documents were developed under this approach (35.79%). Finally, 9.47% of the total documents applied a mixed methodology.

Regarding the data collection instruments used in the research analyzed in this review, it can be established that the survey is predominant, being used in 53.68% of the documents, followed by the interview, which was applied in 27.37% of the documents. The case study was implemented in 16.84%, and finally, the checklist and database were each present in 1.05% of the analyzed documents.

Regarding the impact of CSR on the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises, thirteen key items are identified, which are presented below:

- Improves sustainability.
- Enhances competitiveness.
- Improves the company's image.
- Enhances performance.
- Improves innovation processes.
- Improves efficiency.
- Increases employee motivation.
- Improves cooperation.
- Encourages investment.
- Enhances the integration of values and governance.
- Improves the organization's reputation.
- Strengthens relationships with stakeholders.
- Improves compliance with regulations.

In general, it is evident that CSR implemented in small and medium-sized enterprises positively contributes to the creation of strategies that lead to sustainable development and the application of ethical practices that benefit employees, clients, managers, the environment, and the community as a whole. Furthermore, it allows companies to stand out in the market by reinforcing key aspects of their performance and competitiveness while also increasing productivity and efficient resource management.

4. Discussion

The study conducted highlights several challenges currently faced by SMEs in integrating sustainable strategies that effectively align with corporate social responsibility (CSR). Although some

organizations emphasize the value of CSR as a practice that positively impacts corporate image, market positioning, and competitiveness, most lack the necessary knowledge and both economic and institutional support to make significant changes, as pointed out by Jamali, et al. [5].

On the other hand, the documentation used for this research corroborates that CSR and sustainability are directly related and influence the company's perception by consumers, as well as its organizational performance. Despite this, organizations primarily focus on immediate profitability and stability, leaving strategies such as innovation and sustainable corporate image in the background, which could be implemented through CSR. Likewise, the findings of this study suggest that the limited integration of competitiveness, innovation, and sustainability hinders SMEs from achieving a strong market position, which becomes a factor that prevents their long-term sustainability.

Regarding the strengthening effect of CSR implementation in SMEs, 50.53% of the documents reviewed confirm that CSR directly impacts the sustainability of the company, particularly in modern enterprises, reinforcing the assertions of authors such as Elkington [12] and Scarpellini, et al. [16].

5. Conclusions

Regarding the research objective posed, it can be concluded that, based on the existing literature and the research methodology employed, corporate social responsibility (CSR) significantly impacts the sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The documents reviewed indicate that CSR enhances the sustainability of SMEs, increases their competitiveness, and improves corporate image. Therefore, it can be inferred that adopting responsible practices allows organizations to generate social, environmental, and economic value, as well as strengthen their market position. Moreover, CSR contributes to improving organizational performance and innovation processes, further corroborating that CSR enhances the sustainability of these business units.

In summary, integrating corporate social responsibility into small and medium-sized enterprises improves their long-term sustainability and strengthens their ties with society and the environment, as well as boosting their performance, image, and innovation. Thus, it is suggested to promote training and public policies that facilitate its implementation in business models as strategies that align with the companies' interests.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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