
Guest editorial: Corporate social responsibility and COVID-19 global crisis: managerial and financial perspectives in developed and emerging countries

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and its implications on businesses has attracted a lot of attention from both scholars and practitioners (Pisani *et al.*, 2017). CSR can be defined as a combination of strategies, practices and principles that firms follow to strengthen and create relationships towards stakeholders and the environment (e.g. Carroll, 1979; Waddock, 2004; Nejati *et al.*, 2014). Due to the increase of issues tied with environmental and ethical aspects, CSR has become a key element for business strategies (Kim *et al.*, 2018) and operations (Zheng *et al.*, 2015). Although the objectives seem clear, the principles that regulate CSR are more fragmented (Surroca and Tribó, 2008) and the continuous changes in the competitive context in which the companies operate have impacted on CSR practices (e.g. Battisti *et al.*, 2022).

Moreover, management behavior plays a crucial role in developing CSR strategies. Managers can implement “real” or “symbolic” CSR actions (Kim *et al.*, 2012). Through the implementation of “real” strategies, management contributes to the development of a corporate culture focused on principles related to sustainability and ethics, with the use of resources and investments at the expense of other projects. Whereas in “symbolic” CSR, managers show to investors a positive corporate image, but they do not provide real investments, thus leading to a misalignment of interests between managers and owners. These implications made our understanding on the impact of CSR strategies on businesses more difficult. Hence, with the development of new theoretical constructs and new models, it is necessary to better understand the dynamics and critical factors of the relationship between CSR and company performance as well as the context in which they operate (Lin *et al.*, 2019; Surroca *et al.*, 2010). In developed countries, CSR has become an important element for firms, as CSR strategies enhance their competitiveness and corporate reputation (e.g. Becker-Olsen *et al.*, 2006; Aguilera *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, of particular interest – in terms of context influences – are also countries considered as fastest-developing, such as BRICS, CIVETS, Next Eleven, and MINT, in which different cultural and social aspects can influence CSR strategies in different ways compared to developed countries (e.g. Aguinis and Glavas, 2019; Sardana *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic is having critical impacts and implications for organizations and management. The specific features of the COVID-19 event are unique and the impact of this unpredictable exogenous event requires a rethinking of strategies for the firms in developed and emerging market economies. In this context, CSR strategies must be re-thought and strengthened, leading to new business models and new type of investments for the companies. The effects related on COVID-19 can be more important than any other global crisis in living history and its impacts on financial and managerial practices could be significant and continuous for many years (Carroll, 2021).



Accordingly, this special issue aimed to attract rigorous research studies from scholars all over the world, contributing to enrich theoretical and practical knowledge about CSR, helping scholars – as well as executives of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), emerging market SMEs, multinationals enterprise (MNEs) and emerging market MNEs (EM-MNEs) – to navigate through, overcome and learn from the COVID-19 global crisis. The selected contributions assisted develop and enhance stakeholder theory, institutional theory and resource-based perspectives in the context of international crises. In particular, the papers considered in the special issue addressed a real-world CSR question before, during and/or after COVID-19 crisis, with particular regards on financial and managerial perspectives.

The next section presents the synopsis of the contributions included in this special issue.

2. Synopsis of the special issue contributions

This special issue comprises eleven articles from different fields, with novel informative content and implications for scholars and managers around the world.

The paper by Le *et al.* “*Role of perceived corporate social responsibility in the nexus of perceived cause-related marketing and repurchase intention in emerging markets*” presents a model that includes direct and indirect relations between perceived cause-related marketing (perceived-CRM), brand-image (BIMA), customer satisfaction (CSAT), repurchase-intention (CRIN) and moderation effects of perceived-CSR on perceived-CRM-BIMA and perceived-CRM-CSAT relations. The authors provide evidence to the increasingly important roles of perceived-CRM and perceived-CSR in creating win–win relationships with customers, also helping companies enhance their intangible assets and competitive advantages in Vietnam.

Mohammed *et al.*, in their paper “*CSR practices and creativity during COVID-19 pandemic in the emerging market: investigating the mediating effect of affective commitment*”, explore how CSR dimensions – ethical, economical, legal and philanthropic – foster employee creativity during the pandemic context in Saudi Arabia. The authors show that the ethical and philanthropic dimensions present both direct and indirect effects on the creativity behavior of workers and the affective commitment mediates the link between the ethical, legal and philanthropic CSR dimensions and creativity behavior.

The paper “*Corporate social responsibility in post COVID-19 period: critical modeling and analysis using DEMATEL method*” by Chatterjee *et al.* presents an analytical model showing cause–effect aspects of the critical success factors of CSR and find seven factors (i.e. “actively focus on healthcare related CSR programs; focus on special CSR programs like hygiene awareness programs for all; actively engage with whom, national and local governments; more involvement of local community; focus on motivating employees working in CSR teams; establish COVID-19 CSR protocol; mandatory use of protective equipment, such as gloves and masks”) which companies need to better emphasize in order to execute well CSR activities in the post-pandemic period in India context.

The paper by Gromis di Trana *et al.* “*Stakeholder engagement, flexible proactiveness and democratic durability as CSR strategic postures to overcome periods of crisis*” presents a model of integrated thinking (IT) stages of development and CSR strategic postures that have evolved before and during the pandemic scenario. Specifically, in an Italian context of analysis, the authors identify three main CSR strategic postures: stakeholder engagement, flexible proactiveness and democratic durability.

Basile *et al.*, in the paper “*Innovation and corporate social responsibility during the Covid-19 in Ardakan (Iran)*”, test empirically whether there is a bidirectional relationship between CSR practices and innovation. Based on the Iranian context, the authors highlight that it is essential to consider the direct and indirect relationships between CSR, innovation and corporate social performance to highpoint the social and economic stakeholder(ing) role.

The paper titled “2008’s mistrust vs 2020’s panic: can ESG hold your institutional investors?” by Giakoumelou *et al.* shows that in a context plagued by a lack of trust (2008) or panic due to high uncertainty and lack of past experience (2020), investment managers adapt their frameworks to account for ESG extra-financial information. Based on US and European listed firms, their findings reveal that ESG weighs in investment decisions during economic downturn and poor returns. The authors show that “the nature of this positive relationship is not static but dynamic contingent on overall risk materiality considerations”.

The paper by Khan and Rammal “*The role of trade unions in promoting CSR in Bangladesh’s ready-made garments sector: the post-pandemic scenario*” explores the efficiency of trade unions in Bangladesh in preserving and stimulating the rights of the employee, and being their voice in guaranteeing safe working conditions as part of the companies’ CSR activities. The authors underline that in a context characterized by uncertainty, it is now more important than ever for the unions to work in a harmonious link with the management to safeguard the rights of the employees through CSR activities.

Stella *et al.*, in the paper “*Shedding light on the impact of financial literacy for corporate social responsibility during the COVID-19 crisis: managerial and financial perspectives*”, investigate if and how the level of financial literacy affected stakeholders’ sensitivity to CSR issues during the COVID-19 scenario, as well as recognizing if financial literacy is a relevant variable to account for in the post-pandemic era. Referring to the Italian context, the authors show that (1) the greater the level of financial literacy and financial happiness, the higher people’s sensitivity to CSR, (2) demographic and socioeconomic features have a significant role in explaining respondents’ sensitivity to CSR; (3) being infected by virus affected people’s sensitivity to different dimensions of social responsibility.

The paper by Jain *et al.* “*Stimulating CSR learning collaboration by the mentor universities with digital tools and technologies – an empirical study during the COVID-19 pandemic*” shows that the IT infrastructure support, virtual collaborative tools and future-oriented technologies have a significant impact on the CSR learning outcomes of undergraduate students under the mentorship program in India. In particular, the CSR initiatives assumed by the mentor universities improved learning among the mentee institutions also during the pandemic period.

Iazzi *et al.*, in their paper “*Were we prepared to face a pandemic? Exploring companies’ CSR disclosure on social media before COVID-19 outbreak*”, highlight that the success of stakeholder engagement in CSR communication is affected by both controversial sector membership and the features of the posts. The authors reveal how the European companies have focused on social traits in firms’ communication, showing readiness for the challenges of COVID-19.

Finally, the contribution by Nirino *et al.* “*Can sustainable practices protect investors during financial market instability? A multi-sector analysis during the COVID-19 pandemic*” reveals, through an analysis of European listed companies, the presence of a negative (weak) or null relationship among sustainable practices and stock returns, failing to offer evidence that these practices are able to defend shareholders value during the crises.

3. Concluding remarks

Each article of the special issue generates significant insight for scholars and managers from managerial or financial perspective, by digging in depth about CSR in relation to COVID-19 global crisis in developed or emerging markets, highlighting interesting theoretical and managerial implications. The guest editors of this special issue hope that the contributions selected will contribute to enrich the debate on CSR, inspiring readers and motivate scholars to conduct future studies on this topic.

Finally, we would like to thank the Editor-in-Chief of the Journal, Prof. Brandon Randolph-Seng, for the great opportunity to host this special issue in this historical and renowned journal, and the anonymous reviewers for their time and for offering constructive and deep feedback during the review process.

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