

Strategic Management of Corporate Social Responsibility in International Franchise Networks

Gestión estratégica de la responsabilidad social corporativa
en redes internacionales de franquicias

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This study explores the strategic dynamics of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within international franchise networks, focusing on how governance configurations influence CSR implementation and value creation.

Methodology: Using an integrative analytical framework supported by multi-source data and comparative analysis, the research identifies behavioral patterns and organizational factors shaping CSR strategies in different franchise governance modes, including direct, master, multi-unit, and area development structures.

Results: The analysis shows that centralized governance models demonstrate greater strategic alignment and coherence in CSR practices, whereas decentralized configurations reflect higher variability due to franchisee discretion and local adaptation. Moreover, CSR initiatives have transitioned from a purely economic orientation toward a multidimensional approach that integrates environmental and social commitments.

Conclusions: The findings contribute to the theoretical and managerial understanding of CSR as a strategic component of organizational management, offering practical guidance for aligning social responsibility with corporate competitiveness and sustainable growth in international franchise systems.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), International Franchise Governance, Strategic Management, Organizational Strategy, Sustainability, International Business.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Este estudio examina las dinámicas estratégicas de la Responsabilidad Social Corporativa (RSC) en redes internacionales de franquicias, analizando cómo las configuraciones de gobierno influyen en la implementación de la RSC y en la creación de valor organizacional.

Metodología: A partir de un marco analítico integral respaldado por fuentes múltiples y análisis comparativo, la investigación identifica patrones de comportamiento y factores organizacionales que moldean las estrategias de RSC en distintos modelos de franquicia, incluidos los de tipo directo, maestro, multiunidad y desarrollo de área.

Resultados: El análisis evidencia que los modelos de gobierno centralizados muestran una mayor alineación estratégica y coherencia en las prácticas de RSC, mientras que las estructuras descentralizadas reflejan mayor variabilidad debido a la autonomía del franquiciado y a la adaptación local. Además, las iniciativas de RSC han evolucionado de una orientación meramente económica hacia un enfoque multidimensional que integra compromisos sociales y ambientales.

Conclusiones: Los resultados contribuyen a la comprensión teórica y gerencial de la RSC como componente estratégico de la gestión organizacional, ofreciendo orientaciones prácticas para alinear la responsabilidad social con la competitividad corporativa y el crecimiento sostenible en los sistemas de franquicia internacionales.

Palabras clave: responsabilidad social corporativa (rsc), gobierno de franquicias internacionales, gestión estratégica, estrategia organizacional, sostenibilidad, negocios internacionales.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a defining element of global business strategy in the twenty-first century, evolving from its philanthropic origins to a core expectation for firms across sectors and markets (Carroll, 2021). In today's interconnected economy, organizations are evaluated not only by their financial performance but also by their social, environmental, and ethical conduct, as demanded by a diverse range of stakeholders including consumers, employees, investors, and regulators (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012). This shift is particularly relevant in international business, where multinational enterprises must navigate multiple legal frameworks, cultural contexts, and sustainability standards while pursuing global competitiveness (Kolk, 2016).

The growing prominence of CSR is driven by several converging forces: the global visibility of supply chains, the influence of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the rise of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) standards, and the accelerated public scrutiny enabled by digital platforms (Freeman & McVea, 2001; Oueslati et al., 2023; Lawrence et al., 2024). These dynamics have made CSR not only a reputational imperative but also a strategic instrument for risk management, innovation, and stakeholder engagement.

Within this global context, franchising represents a powerful mechanism for international expansion and local market adaptation (Hollensen, 2020). The model enables firms to combine brand control with local entrepreneurship, fostering agility and scalability. However, it also generates unique managerial challenges for CSR implementation. Franchisors seek coherence in brand values and CSR policies, while franchisees operate under varying degrees of autonomy and face diverse institutional pressures (Mumdzhev & Windsperger, 2011). This governance tension raises questions about how CSR strategies can be effectively coordinated and standardized across decentralized networks.

Despite the growth of both CSR and franchising in international markets, their intersection remains underexplored. Most CSR research in international business focuses on wholly owned subsidiaries or joint ventures, where hierarchical control facilitates top-down diffusion (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012; Kolk, 2016). Fewer studies address franchising, and those that do often limit analysis to specific industries or countries, lacking comparative depth (Jell-Ojobor et al., 2022; Quinn & Alexander, 2002). As a result, little is known about how different franchise governance modes—direct, master, multi-unit, or area development—shape CSR outcomes through distinct configurations of control, incentives, and information flow (Windsperger, 2004; Herz et al., 2015).

This research examines the strategic evolution of CSR practices within international franchise systems and analyzes how governance structures influence their design and consistency. The study aims to advance understanding of CSR as an organizational strategy by identifying the mechanisms that enable effective alignment between global principles and local implementation (Farooq et al., 2020; M. Kim et al., 2020).

Accordingly, two key research questions guide this study:

1. How have CSR practices evolved within international franchise systems over the past fifteen years?
2. How do different international franchise governance modes influence the consistency and strategic integration of CSR?

By addressing these questions, this article contributes to both theory and practice, offering insights for managers seeking to harmonize corporate responsibility, organizational performance, and sustainability within globally dispersed franchise networks (Paul et al., 2021; Paul & Criado, 2020).

To address these questions, the study employs an **integrated analytical design** that combines quantitative mapping with qualitative interpretation (Snyder, 2019; Paul et al., 2021). This approach is particularly effective for examining complex and interdisciplinary fields such as CSR in franchising, as it captures both large-scale behavioral patterns and deeper strategic insights across different business contexts. By interpreting data drawn from a broad body of international research indexed in the Web of Science database, the analysis encompasses multiple sectors, regions, and franchise governance modes—direct, master, multi-unit, and area development. This design allows for a comparative and empirically grounded evaluation of how diverse organizational structures influence the diffusion, standardization, and adaptation of CSR practices across international networks (VOSviewer, n.d.).

This research makes two key contributions. First, it offers an integrated perspective on the evolution and implementation of CSR strategies in international franchising, addressing a persistent gap in both the CSR and international management literatures (Jell-Ojobor et al., 2022; Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012). It demonstrates how analytical synthesis can generate actionable insights relevant to both academic inquiry and managerial practice (Paul et al., 2021; Paul & Criado, 2020; Zupic & Čater, 2015). Second, it highlights that the effectiveness of CSR within global franchise systems depends on the governance structure's ability to balance control and flexibility, promote stakeholder engagement and transparent communication, leverage digital monitoring tools, and support franchisees through incentives and continuous learning.

Overall, this study contributes to advancing the theoretical and practical understanding of CSR as a strategic management mechanism in international franchising. It provides guidance for managers, franchisors, and policymakers seeking to align global brand standards with local legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and sustainable value creation. By positioning franchising at the intersection of globalization, governance, and responsible business, the research underscores the strategic potential of this model for embedding CSR into the organizational fabric of cross-border enterprises (Carroll, 2021; Hart & Milstein, 2003; Kolk, 2016; Lawrence et al., 2024; Munro, 2020; Oueslati et al., 2023; Porter & Kramer, 2011; Sharma & Lee, 2012; Tokoro, 2007).

STRATEGIC FOUNDATIONS OF CSR GOVERNANCE IN INTERNATIONAL FRANCHISE SYSTEMS

Franchising is a widely adopted internationalization strategy that enables firms to expand rapidly across borders by partnering with local entrepreneurs. This approach allows companies to enter new markets while minimizing financial risk and benefiting from local knowledge and resources (Hollensen, 2020). Through contractual arrangements, franchisees obtain the right to use the franchisor's brand, operational systems, and intellectual property in exchange for fees and adherence to corporate standards. The model combines centralized coordination with decentralized execution, and its success depends on the capacity to align global brand management with local adaptation and entrepreneurial initiative (Jell-Ojobor et al., 2022; Gorovaia et al., 2023).

Understanding the diversity of international franchise governance modes is key to explaining how control, decision rights, and CSR diffusion interact. Direct franchising encompasses arrangements where franchisors maintain direct contractual ties with franchisees—including single-unit, multi-unit, area development, joint-venture, and wholly owned formats—thus ensuring strong oversight and easier enforcement of brand and CSR standards (Jell-Ojobor & Windsperger, 2004). Indirect franchising, in contrast, delegates authority to a master franchisee who acts as intermediary, assuming local strategic and operational responsibilities and sometimes sub-franchising to others. While this structure accelerates market penetration and leverages local expertise (Alon, 2006; Brookes & Roper, 2011), it also reduces direct control for the franchisor and may produce inconsistencies in CSR implementation, particularly in emerging markets where institutional environments vary widely (Li et al., 2010; Rosado-Serrano, 2019).

The degree of centralization across these governance modes has important implications for strategic initiatives such as CSR. Centralized systems enhance coherence and standardization, while decentralized ones foster responsiveness and innovation but risk fragmentation (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012). Effective franchisors therefore rely on coordination mechanisms—contractual clauses, performance metrics, and continuous training—to sustain strategic consistency and brand integrity across geographies. Governance theory further suggests that the allocation of ownership and decision rights determines not only efficiency but also the firm's ability to

institutionalize policies like CSR (Windsperger & Yurdakul, 2007). Consequently, the balance between control and autonomy shapes the scope, depth, and sustainability outcomes of CSR in international franchise systems.

CSR in franchising must thus be analyzed through both governance and stakeholder perspectives. It now extends far beyond philanthropy to include ethical labor practices, environmental management, community engagement, and responsible sourcing (Carroll, 2021). For franchisors, aligning CSR with strategic brand positioning is crucial, as franchisees embody the company's public presence. However, the autonomy granted to franchisees complicates system-wide implementation; decentralized modes—especially master franchising—often display uneven CSR performance because of local variations in priorities, capabilities, and regulatory contexts (Lawrence et al., 2024).

Stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) underscores that firms must account for the expectations of multiple actors—customers, employees, investors, regulators, and communities—whose interests may diverge across markets (Freeman & McVea, 2001; Raha & Hajdini, 2020). Achieving balance between global CSR goals and local legitimacy requires strategic coordination that considers the governance environment of each host country (Li et al., 2010). In this sense, CSR effectiveness in international franchising depends on how well the governance structure integrates stakeholder concerns into decision-making while maintaining coherence with the network's overall strategic objectives.

Agency theory adds another essential analytical layer by highlighting the inherent conflict of interest between franchisors (principals) and franchisees (agents) (Jepsen et al., 2014). Because franchisees operate independently under the franchisor's brand, they may display limited commitment to CSR if such initiatives are perceived as costly or incompatible with local business priorities. To mitigate this risk, franchisors employ governance mechanisms such as monitoring systems, incentive alignment, and contractual provisions that encourage CSR compliance (Windsperger, 2002).

At the same time, societal expectations have evolved, transforming CSR from an economic option into a strategic necessity. Consumers increasingly favor brands that demonstrate ethical behavior, environmental responsibility, and inclusiveness, pressuring franchises to implement

sustainable supply chains and climate-conscious operations (M. Kim et al., 2020; Peloza & Shang, 2011). Regulators have likewise strengthened oversight, enforcing higher standards on labor and environmental practices (Dahlsrud, 2008). In his seminal work, Dahlsrud (2008) identified five recurring CSR dimensions—environmental, social, economic, stakeholder, and voluntariness—which together provide a multidimensional framework for evaluating corporate responsibility.

- The **environmental dimension** concerns reducing ecological impact and promoting sustainable operations.
- The **social dimension** focuses on fair labor, diversity, and community engagement.
- The **economic dimension** emphasizes transparency and long-term value creation.
- The **stakeholder dimension** recognizes the responsibility toward all affected parties.
- The **voluntariness dimension** highlights proactive actions beyond legal compliance.

These dimensions offer a robust analytical basis for examining how distinct governance modes—direct, master, area development, and multi-unit franchising—either enable or constrain CSR implementation across international networks.

Despite governance challenges, franchise systems also offer unique opportunities for scaling CSR initiatives. Through knowledge sharing, collective action, and inter-franchisee collaboration, they can diffuse best practices and leverage economies of scale to strengthen social and environmental impact (Weaven et al., 2014). Centralized training, digital reporting tools, and standardized CSR guidelines help maintain consistency while allowing local innovation. Consequently, franchise systems can evolve from fragmented structures into effective platforms for advancing CSR globally.

Franchising, as a hybrid form of international business, operates through networks combining company-owned and franchisee-owned units where franchisors retain strategic oversight while franchisees manage local operations (Hollensen, 2020; Windsperger & Dant, 2006). This hybrid nature presents governance dilemmas in ensuring system-wide adherence to ethical, social, and environmental benchmarks (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012). Agency theory explains how divergent incentives between principals and agents may result in inconsistent CSR implementation when autonomy is high or monitoring weak (Blair & Lafontaine, 2005; Hill & Jones, 1992). Stakeholder

theory complements this view, stressing that both franchisors and franchisees must address varying stakeholder expectations—customers, employees, regulators, and communities—across diverse contexts (Freeman & McVea, 2001).

Together, these perspectives form the foundation of the study's analytical framework: different governance configurations create varying degrees of control and autonomy, shaping how CSR—understood through its economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Dahlsrud, 2008)—is operationalized across networks. Consequently, governance structures and stakeholder pressures determine both the consistency and evolution of CSR in international franchising, guiding the propositions that structure this research.

METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to analyze the evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices within international franchise systems over the past fifteen years, emphasizing how franchise governance structures and stakeholder expectations influence strategic CSR implementation. Given the interdisciplinary nature of CSR and franchising, this research adopts an **integrative analytical approach** that combines structured data collection with both qualitative interpretation and quantitative mapping (Snyder, 2019; Paul & Criado, 2020). This mixed-method design ensures analytical transparency and reliability while allowing for cross-comparative insights across industries and governance modes.

To achieve this, data were collected from the Web of Science (WoS) database, which provides peer-reviewed research across business, management, environmental science, and social sciences. The analytical framework draws on the SPAR-4-SLR model (Paul et al., 2021) to organize and rationalize the data selection process, ensuring methodological rigor without limiting the scope to a traditional literature review. The process was structured as follows:

- **Data Assembly:** Relevant academic works were identified in WoS using targeted search terms related to franchising, CSR, and sustainability. Boolean operators were applied to maximize relevance and coverage within the 2009–2024 time frame.

- **Data Organization:** Retrieved studies were categorized according to CSR dimensions (economic, social, environmental), franchise governance modes (direct, master, multi-unit, area development), and stakeholder engagement intensity (low, medium, high).
- **Analytical Evaluation:** Each study was reviewed for its theoretical and practical contributions, methodological robustness, and relevance to CSR implementation in franchise systems. This assessment allowed for the identification of dominant themes, governance patterns, and gaps in applied practice.
- **Synthesis and Mapping:** The findings were systematized and visually represented through a bibliometric mapping process using VOSviewer, enabling the identification of conceptual linkages, thematic clusters, and co-occurrence patterns among key CSR concepts.

Through this design, 121 peer-reviewed studies were incorporated into the analytical corpus from an initial dataset of 178 works. The process followed academic best practices in data verification, including query refinement, exportation of metadata (RIS format), and systematic documentation in **Zotero** for traceability and reproducibility.

This methodology enables a comparative interpretation of how different franchise governance structures foster or inhibit CSR integration across global markets. The combined use of quantitative mapping and qualitative synthesis provides a coherent basis for understanding the dynamics through which franchising networks evolve as platforms for responsible and sustainable management.

The analysis of the Web of Science (WoS) research areas revealed the **interdisciplinary scope** of CSR and franchising studies, illustrating how the topic bridges management, sustainability, and social responsibility research. The data show that *Business and Economics* dominates the field, with more than 70 publications emphasizing the relationship between CSR, business strategy, financial outcomes, and franchise performance. This reflects a strong managerial orientation toward understanding CSR as a strategic and performance-driven practice within international franchising.

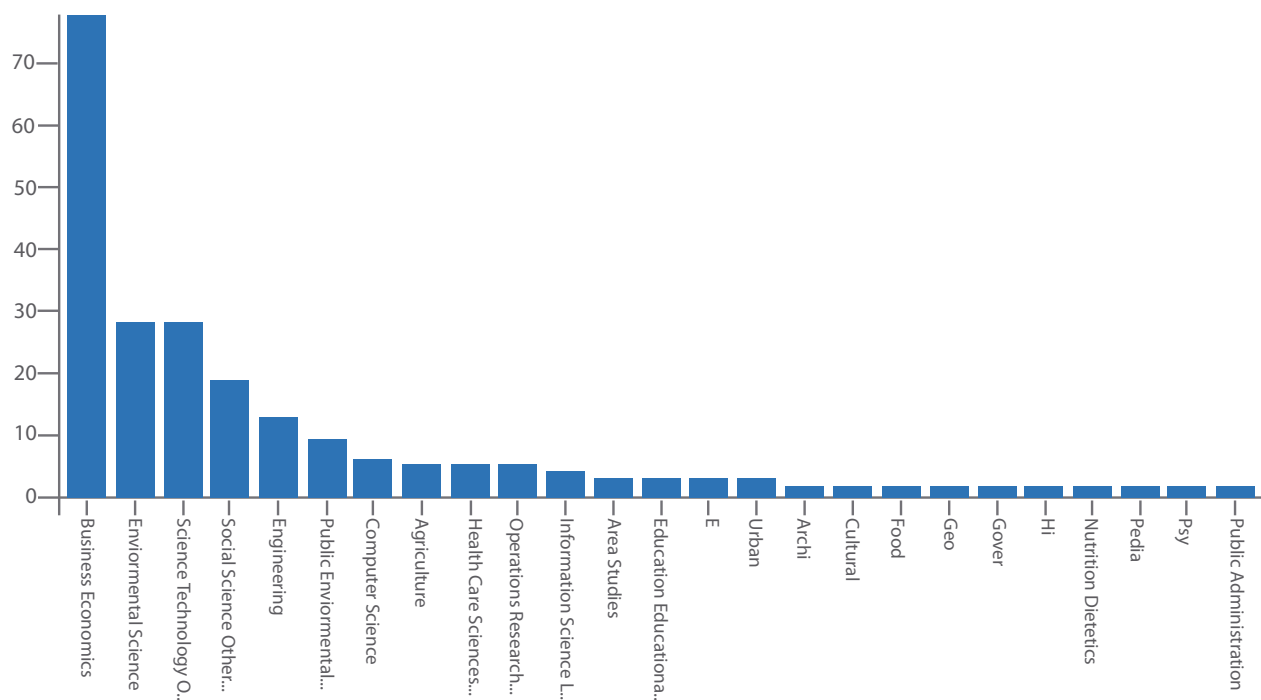


Figure 1. Overview Research Areas in WoS

Source: Clarivate, n.d.

In parallel, *Environmental Sciences* and *Social Sciences* each contributed around 30 publications, underscoring the growing recognition of environmental sustainability, ethical practices, and social impact in franchise management. These findings confirm that CSR in franchising is not limited to economic outcomes but increasingly involves ecological stewardship and community engagement.

The temporal distribution of publications also illustrates the evolution of scholarly attention to the topic. The yearly analysis indicates a consistent upward trend, with notable peaks in 2015 and 2020. The 2015 surge corresponds to heightened global awareness of sustainability following the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, while the 2020 peak reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified public and managerial focus on corporate ethics and social welfare. Overall, the data suggest that CSR in franchising is a dynamic and adaptive research domain, closely aligned with global socio-economic transformations and regulatory developments.

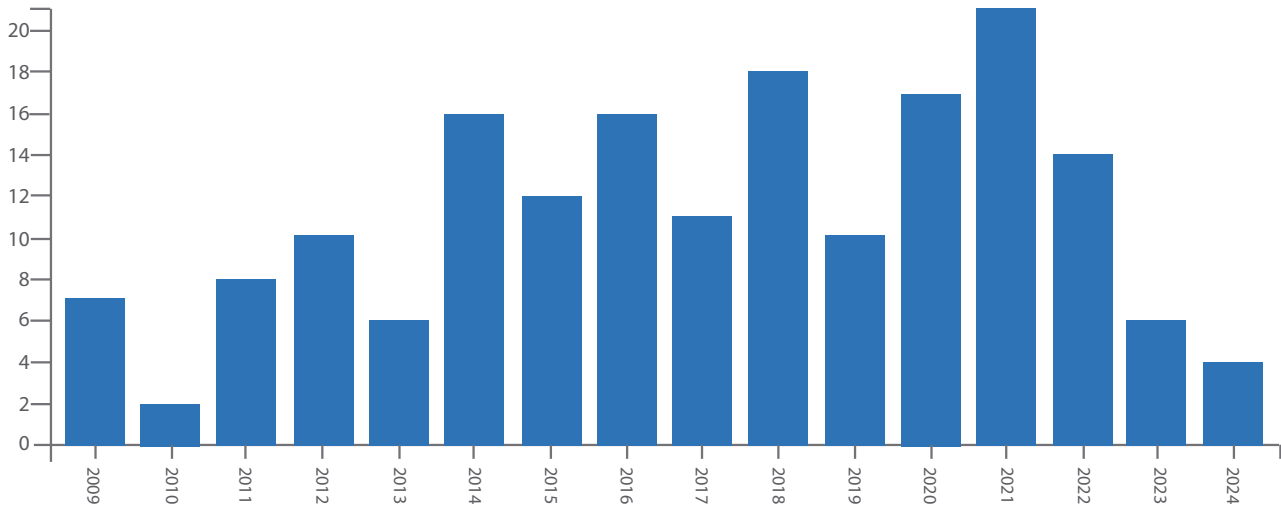


Figure 2. Overview Publication Years in WoS

Source: Clarivate, n.d.

The bibliometric analysis was conducted using **VOSviewer**, a visualization tool that enables the exploration of co-occurrence patterns among key concepts in the research dataset (Jell-Ojobor et al., 2024). This technique provided complementary insights by identifying dominant themes, theoretical linkages, and emerging trends within the field of CSR and franchising.

DATA PREPARATION IN VOSVIEWER

The dataset, exported from the Web of Science (WoS) in RIS format, was imported into VOSviewer for analysis. Prior to visualization, the data were refined to ensure accuracy and conceptual consistency.

- **Standardization of Terms:** All related expressions were harmonized – for example, variations of “franchising” were standardized as *franchise*, and terms associated with corporate responsibility were unified under *CSR*.
- **Threshold Setting:** A minimum occurrence threshold of five was applied to filter out peripheral terms and highlight the most relevant topics, ensuring that the resulting map reflected the dominant research areas in the field.

A co-occurrence analysis was then performed using keywords from titles and abstracts. This process allowed for the visualization of conceptual clusters that reveal the structure of the research landscape.

VOSVIEWER CLUSTER ANALYSIS

The network visualization produced by VOSviewer revealed **five major thematic clusters**, each representing a distinct research focus:

- **Red Cluster:** Examines CSR performance and its effects on brand trust, customer loyalty, and stakeholder perceptions.
- **Green Cluster:** Relates to management and strategy, emphasizing *agency theory* and the balance between control and autonomy in franchise systems.
- **Yellow Cluster:** Connects CSR and financial performance, particularly in food service and hospitality franchises.
- **Blue Cluster:** Focuses on innovation, quality, and differentiation, showing how CSR enhances competitive advantage in franchising.
- **Purple Cluster:** Explores the antecedents of CSR adoption, including leadership orientation, corporate values, and regulatory pressures.

Together, these clusters illustrate the **multidimensional nature** of CSR research in franchising—integrating perspectives from management, economics, and sustainability science. The findings demonstrate that CSR in international franchise systems has evolved from a peripheral concern into a strategic management function central to organizational identity and global competitiveness.



Source: VOSviewer, n.d.

The analysis was based on a curated dataset of 121 peer-reviewed studies addressing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices within international franchise systems. Each study was classified according to the main CSR dimensions—economic, social, and environmental—and, when applicable, their intersections (e.g., economic-social, economic-environmental). In addition, the research was mapped across the primary international franchise governance modes: **direct**, **master**, **multi-unit**, **area development**, and **unspecified** cases where no explicit model was identified.

This analytical classification enabled the identification of patterns linking CSR emphasis and franchise governance. Studies unrelated to franchising or CSR were excluded to ensure conceptual precision and relevance. The *unspecified* category included studies that addressed broader issues in franchising or CSR but did not focus on a specific governance structure or CSR dimension (e.g., general franchise regulation or conceptual discussions).

PROPOSITION 1: THE GOVERNANCE MODE OF THE INTERNATIONAL FRANCHISE NETWORK INFLUENCES THE CONSISTENCY AND NATURE OF CSR IMPLEMENTATION

This proposition suggests that franchise governance configurations shape how CSR is implemented and standardized within international systems. The analysis compared the distribution of CSR dimensions—economic, social, and environmental—across distinct governance modes: direct, master, multi-unit, and area development.

FREQUENCY ANALYSIS

To test this proposition, a frequency analysis was conducted to determine how often each CSR dimension appeared within the various franchise structures. Instances where multiple dimensions coexisted (e.g., Economic + Environmental) were recorded as hybrid categories to capture multidimensional CSR patterns. This approach allowed for comparative insights into how governance models influence the emphasis and coherence of CSR initiatives.

The results are summarized in **Table 1**, which reports the frequency of CSR dimensions associated with each franchise mode. The findings show that **direct franchising** exhibited the highest representation of the *economic* and *social* dimensions, reflecting a greater focus on brand-driven accountability and standardized CSR practices. Conversely, **master franchising** demonstrated a broader range of combinations, suggesting more variation and local adaptation in CSR implementation.

Table 1. Frequency Analysis of International Franchise Modes and CSR Dimensions.

Franchise Model / CSR Dimension	Direct	Master	Multi-Unit	Area Development	N/A
Economic	13	3	8	1	5
Economic, Environmental	2	5	1	1	1
Economic, Social	10	0	5	5	2
Environmental	6	1	6	1	0
Environmental, Social	7	0	2	0	2
Environmental, Voluntaries	1	0	0	0	0
Voluntaries	0	1	0	0	0
Social	13	5	6	5	2
N/A	0	0	0	0	1
Total	52	15	28	13	13

Source: own work

CONSISTENCY LEVELS ANALYSIS

To further assess how governance structures influence CSR implementation, a **consistency analysis** was performed to evaluate the uniformity of CSR dimensions across different franchise governance modes. The analysis distinguishes between structured systems that apply CSR systematically (*high consistency*) and those displaying variability across franchise units (*low consistency*).

- **High consistency** indicates that a particular CSR dimension—such as the *economic* or *social* dimension—predominates across franchise units, reflecting a coherent and standardized corporate strategy.
- **Low consistency** reflects significant variation among CSR dimensions, suggesting decentralized governance and greater local discretion in CSR application.

The findings reveal that **direct franchising** exhibited the highest degree of consistency, emphasizing primarily the *economic* and *social* dimensions. This outcome suggests that strong central oversight and decision control foster uniform CSR implementation across franchise outlets. In contrast, **master** and **area development** modes demonstrated lower levels of consistency, characterized by heterogeneous CSR emphases and localized adaptations.

In summary, the results support **Proposition 1 (P1)**, confirming that the governance mode of international franchise networks significantly influences CSR practices.

- **Centralized Modes:** Direct and multi-unit franchising demonstrated high CSR consistency, particularly in economic and social dimensions, benefiting from centralized coordination and tighter managerial control (Windsperger, 2004).
- **Decentralized Modes:** Master and area development franchising exhibited low CSR consistency, as franchisees' autonomy and context-specific priorities led to diverse, locally tailored CSR activities (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012).

These results confirm that centralized governance promotes structured and uniform CSR integration, while decentralized systems favor flexibility and local responsiveness at the cost of coherence across the franchise network.

Table 2. Consistency Levels for Each Franchise Model.

Model	Frequency Highlight	Consistency Level
Direct	Dominated by Economic (13 mentions) and Social (13 mentions) dimensions.	High consistency, as the focus is primarily on a few CSR dimensions (Economic and Social), suggesting a centralized and structured CSR implementation.
	Combined dimensions like Economic, Social (10) and Environmental (6) are also significant.	
	Mixed dimensions like Environmental, Social (7) further highlight a broad approach to CSR but within a limited range of combinations.	
Master	Much lower frequency overall, with Economic (3 mentions) and Social (5 mentions) being the most common dimensions.	Low consistency due to the lower volume of mentions and variation across dimensions, reflecting localized adaptations and a decentralized approach.
	Combinations like Economic, Environmental (2) and standalone Environmental (1) indicate some diversity but limited focus overall.	

Model	Frequency Highlight	Consistency Level
Multi-Unit	Strong presence of Economic (8 mentions), Social (6 mentions), and Environmental (6 mentions) dimensions.	High consistency, as the focus is spread across Economic, Social, and Environmental dimensions in a balanced way. This reflects a structured yet somewhat adaptable approach.
	Combination dimensions like Economic, Environmental (5) are well-represented, showing diversity but within a recurring pattern.	
Area Development	Limited mentions overall, with sporadic focus on Economic (1 mention), Social (2 mentions), and combinations like Environmental + Social (2 mentions).	Low consistency due to limited data and sporadic mentions across dimensions, indicating a decentralized and less structured approach.
N/A	Dominated by Economic (5 mentions) and Social (2 mentions).	Low consistency, as the focus remains primarily on Economic and Social dimensions, despite the broader non-franchise-specific context.
	Few mixed dimensions like Economic, Environmental (1).	

Source: own work

4.2 PROPOSITION 2: CSR PRACTICES HAVE EVOLVED OVER THE LAST 15 YEARS, DRIVEN BY INCREASING STAKEHOLDER EXPECTATIONS

Proposition 2 suggests that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices within international franchise systems have evolved significantly over the past fifteen years, shaped by rising stakeholder demands and global sustainability agendas. This evolution reflects a strategic shift from CSR as an economic responsibility toward a multidimensional framework integrating social and environmental priorities.

TRACKING CSR DIMENSIONS OVER TIME

To capture this evolution, the analysis compared the relative prominence of the *economic*, *social*, and *environmental* CSR dimensions across four time periods: **2009–2013**, **2014–2018**, **2019–2023**, and **2024**. This longitudinal comparison highlights how stakeholder expectations and regulatory pressures have progressively influenced the focus and scope of CSR initiatives in franchising.

The results (summarized in **Table 3**) show a clear progression toward greater emphasis on *social* and *environmental* dimensions, alongside a gradual decline in the dominance of purely *economic* objectives.

- **2009–2013:** CSR discourse in franchising was primarily driven by *economic* and *social* considerations, with limited attention to environmental performance.
- **2014–2018:** Environmental concerns gained visibility as sustainability became a core strategic issue, resulting in more integrated CSR frameworks that linked profitability with ethical and ecological outcomes.
- **2019–2023:** A notable transformation occurred during this period, with *social* and *environmental* dimensions overtaking economic priorities. This reflects a growing alignment between CSR implementation in franchising and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, as well as heightened stakeholder scrutiny.

Overall, the temporal analysis supports **Proposition 2 (P2)**, demonstrating that CSR within franchise systems has evolved from compliance-oriented practices toward proactive, stakeholder-driven strategies that embed social and environmental values into global franchise governance.

Table 3. Track of CSR Dimension over time.

Time Interval / CSR Dimension	2009 - 2013	2014 - 2018	2019 - 2023	2024
Economic	6	11	11	2
Economic, Environmental	0	2	4	0
Economic, Social	3	13	9	2
Environmental	1	4	7	1
Environmental, Social	2	5	4	0
Environmental, Voluntaries	0	0	1	0
Voluntaries	0	1	0	0
Social	7	9	14	1
N/A	0	0	1	0
Total	19	45	51	6

Source: own work

TRACKING STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT LEVELS OVER TIME

The analysis also examined the evolution of stakeholder engagement in CSR practices within international franchise systems across four time intervals (**2009–2024**). Engagement levels were classified as *low*, *medium*, or *high*, reflecting the degree to which stakeholders participated in shaping and implementing CSR initiatives.

The results, summarized in **Table 4**, reveal a steady and significant rise in stakeholder engagement over time, emphasizing its growing role in strategic CSR governance.

- **2009–2013:** Both *high* and *medium* engagement levels were already visible, with ten recorded instances of high engagement, indicating that franchise systems had begun to recognize the strategic importance of stakeholder inclusion in CSR activities (Freeman & McVea, 2001).
- **2014–2018:** High engagement references increased sharply to twenty-three, highlighting a shift toward more participatory and feedback-driven CSR models, where stakeholder expectations started influencing corporate decision-making.
- **2019–2023:** During this period, *medium* engagement became dominant, with twenty-seven mentions, reflecting the institutionalization of structured CSR processes aimed at balancing diverse stakeholder interests with organizational performance objectives (Arian et al., 2023).
- Overall, the results show that stakeholder engagement has evolved from ad hoc consultation to an integral component of CSR governance. This trend supports **Proposition 2 (P2)**, reinforcing the notion that CSR evolution in franchising is not only temporal but also relational—driven by the deepening and formalization of stakeholder involvement in strategic decision-making.

Table 4. Track Stakeholder Engagement Level Over Time.

Time Interval / Engagement level	2009 - 2013	2014 - 2018	2019 - 2023	2024
Low	1	3	2	0
Medium	8	18	27	2
High	10	23	22	4
N/A	0	1	0	0
Total	19	45	51	6

Source: own work

The results provide strong support for Proposition 2 (H2), demonstrating that CSR practices in international franchising have evolved substantially over the past fifteen years in response to growing stakeholder expectations.

CSR Evolution: The findings indicate a clear transition from a primarily economic orientation toward a multidimensional framework encompassing social and environmental dimensions. This evolution underscores the increasing integration of sustainability within CSR practices and the influence of stakeholder demands on strategic decision-making (Oueslati et al., 2023).

Stakeholder Engagement: The progressive rise in medium and high levels of stakeholder participation reflects the expanding influence of customers, regulators, and local communities in shaping franchise CSR strategies (Peloza & Shang, 2011).

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

This study investigates how Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved within international franchising networks over the last fifteen years and examines how different governance modes and stakeholder pressures influence the consistency and nature of CSR implementation. Drawing on **stakeholder theory** (Freeman & McVea, 2001; Parmar et al., 2010), **agency theory** (Hill & Jones, 1992), and **Dahlsrud's multidimensional CSR framework** (Dahlsrud, 2008), the research integrates bibliometric mapping and analytical interpretation to identify patterns, challenges, and emerging directions in the CSR–franchising nexus (Jell-Ojobor et al., 2024; Paul et al., 2021). This approach provides a robust, data-driven understanding of how governance and stakeholder dynamics shape CSR implementation across international franchise systems.

FINDINGS

The analysis of 121 peer-reviewed studies enables a comparative mapping of trends and persistent gaps in CSR implementation across diverse governance modes and sectors. By combining bibliometric visualization with thematic interpretation (Clarivate, n.d.; VOSviewer, n.d.), this investigation not only identifies the growing relevance of CSR in international franchising but also clarifies the mechanisms through which governance and stakeholder structures shape organizational outcomes.

IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL FRANCHISE GOVERNANCE MODES ON CSR

A central finding concerns the impact of governance configuration on CSR consistency and depth. **Direct franchising**, where the franchisor retains significant operational authority, is associated with high uniformity in CSR implementation (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012). These systems often employ centralized training, contractual CSR clauses, periodic audits, and shared digital reporting frameworks. For instance, Kim and Choi (2022) describe a global restaurant chain that leveraged its direct model to deploy a unified ethics program and sustainability metrics across all markets. Table 2 further demonstrates that direct franchising achieves superior performance across economic, social, and environmental dimensions of CSR.

Conversely, **master franchising** and **area development** models—characterized by greater autonomy at the local level—display higher variability in CSR outcomes. Local operators in these decentralized structures adapt policies to cultural and institutional contexts, which supports responsiveness and innovation but may undermine standardization (Mumdžiev & Windsperger, 2011). This autonomy, while beneficial for market adaptation, can lead to inconsistency in social or environmental initiatives, especially when incentives and resources are misaligned (Rosado-Serrano, 2019). Empirical evidence from French franchise systems shows that decentralized modes encounter greater difficulty maintaining stakeholder engagement and coherent CSR communication during periods of social or regulatory scrutiny (Oueslati et al., 2023).

The **multi-unit franchising** model demonstrates a middle ground, balancing standardization with flexibility. As Meiseberg and Ehrmann (2012) highlight, this model often fosters better alignment between corporate directives and local adaptation when complemented by mentorship, peer learning, and modular CSR toolkits.

TRANSFORMATION OF CSR IN INTERNATIONAL FRANCHISING

In the early 2000s, most franchise systems regarded CSR as a peripheral activity—primarily compliance or reputation management rather than a strategic pillar (Carroll, 2021). CSR actions were typically philanthropic or symbolic, such as community donations or basic environmental adherence (Quinn & Alexander, 2002). Over time, however, global sustainability movements, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and rising consumer activism have repositioned CSR at the core of strategic management (Kolk, 2016; Oueslati et al., 2023).

Franchise organizations are now expected not only to comply with legal standards but to demonstrate proactive leadership in sustainability, labor conditions, and stakeholder engagement. The bibliometric mapping (see Figures 1 and 3) confirms a substantial growth in scholarly attention to CSR in franchising since 2010, aligning with the broader shift toward responsible business models. This evolution reflects the repositioning of CSR from a peripheral, reputational concern to a **strategic driver of competitiveness, legitimacy, and organizational learning** (Lawrence et al., 2024; Perrigot, 2018; Dahlsrud, 2008).

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND CSR CONSISTENCY

A further theme emerging from the analysis is the growing centrality of stakeholder engagement in shaping CSR effectiveness. Earlier CSR programs tended to follow a top-down orientation, but evidence now points to a clear transition toward participatory and dialogic approaches. Franchise networks that institutionalize high stakeholder engagement—integrating input from franchisees, employees, customers, and NGOs—display stronger CSR performance and greater resilience to external shocks (Freeman & McVea, 2001; Oueslati et al., 2023).

Table 4 illustrates how mature brands in the service and retail sectors have embedded mechanisms such as community roundtables, employee surveys, and public reporting, generating measurable improvements in trust and corporate reputation (Perrigot, 2018). Stakeholder engagement proves particularly critical in emerging markets, where institutional gaps or weak regulation often leave CSR implementation largely to franchisee discretion. Farooq et al. (2020) observe that in such contexts, *economic* CSR dimensions typically dominate, while *social* and *environmental* components gain traction only when franchisors provide targeted incentives or capability-building programs.

EXPANSION OF CSR DIMENSIONS

The evidence shows a consistent broadening of CSR scope and ambition in international franchising. Franchise organizations now regularly report on sustainable procurement, diversity and inclusion, carbon-footprint reduction, and ethical supply-chain management (Carroll, 2021; Dahlsrud, 2008). Studies by M. S. Kim (2018) and Lawrence et al. (2024) highlight how firms in hospitality and services employ digital platforms and integrated reporting to strengthen compliance

and communication across global units. Lee et al. (2014) emphasize the potential of cloud-based analytics for benchmarking performance and promoting continuous organizational learning.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This investigation contributes to the international franchising literature by clarifying how hybrid governance structures simultaneously generate distinctive challenges and opportunities for CSR design and diffusion.

First, the findings show that CSR effectiveness depends on a governance model that **balances control and flexibility** through active stakeholder engagement, transparent communication, digital monitoring tools, franchisee incentives, and continuous learning mechanisms. Integrating these elements enables franchise systems to manage risk, ensure compliance, and transform CSR into a competitive advantage that advances both business and societal objectives (Carroll, 2021; Kolk, 2016).

Second, the results reinforce **stakeholder theory**, demonstrating that franchise networks operate within complex, multilayered stakeholder environments. Franchisees, employees, communities, consumers, and regulators all influence which CSR dimensions are prioritized, often with divergent expectations (Freeman & McVea, 2001; Parmar et al., 2010). This pluralism is especially pronounced in international settings where cultural, legal, and social norms differ. The evidence confirms that social and environmental concerns are typically more salient in developed markets, whereas economic imperatives—job creation, local investment—dominate in emerging economies where franchisees have fewer resources (Farooq et al., 2020; Kolk, 2016). Consequently, effective CSR in franchising cannot rely on uniform global templates but must remain context-sensitive and adaptive.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The analysis yields actionable recommendations for franchisors, franchisees, managers, and regulators across governance configurations.

CENTRALIZED MODES: STANDARDIZATION AND BRAND INTEGRITY

In highly centralized systems, franchisors should leverage their authority to establish contractual CSR obligations, deliver network-wide training, conduct regular audits, and implement comprehensive reporting frameworks (Meiseberg & Ehrmann, 2012; Mumdzhev & Windsperger, 2011). These mechanisms enhance brand coherence and mitigate reputational risk—an aspect particularly relevant in food and hospitality industries where global standards must be reliably enacted at the local level (M. Kim et al., 2020; Le Bot et al., 2022). For instance, a direct franchising model in the hospitality sector successfully introduced global employee training on labor ethics and environmental standards, improving satisfaction while reducing compliance costs (M. S. Kim, 2018).

DECENTRALIZED MODES: FLEXIBILITY, LOCAL ADAPTATION, AND INNOVATION

In decentralized formats such as master or area-development franchising, success depends on **flexible frameworks** that promote knowledge exchange and localized innovation. Collaborative platforms, peer-learning initiatives, and regional CSR task forces have proven effective in supporting consistent yet adaptable practices (Jell-Ojobor et al., 2022). Franchise systems that implemented such participatory structures—particularly those documented by Weaven et al. (2014) and Oueslati et al. (2023)—demonstrated superior capacity to tailor CSR to local stakeholder needs and to sustain operations during periods of disruption.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

Continuous stakeholder dialogue remains indispensable for credible CSR governance (Raha et al., 2025). High-performing franchise networks maintain ongoing interaction with franchisees, employees, customers, community groups, and NGOs to ensure that CSR programs stay contextually relevant (Freeman & McVea, 2001; Raha & Hajdini, 2023). Transparent and participatory reporting—through community forums, employee feedback mechanisms, and public disclosures—fosters trust, enhances customer retention, and strengthens organizational legitimacy (Perrigot et al., 2015).

DIGITALIZATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Digital transformation is redefining how CSR is conceived and implemented within international franchising. Digital platforms and cloud-based analytics now enable real-time monitoring, benchmarking, and dissemination of CSR guidelines across global networks (Lee et al., 2015;

Oueslati et al., 2023). Franchisors that invest in these tools can detect weaknesses, compare performance across units, and initiate corrective actions early.

Equally important, the digital documentation of both successful and unsuccessful CSR initiatives fosters **organizational learning**. By capturing lessons from experience, franchises can continuously adapt to changing stakeholder expectations and improve their long-term sustainability performance (Le Bot et al., 2022; Kolk, 2016).

EMBEDDING CSR IN CORE BUSINESS

CSR must be integrated into the **core value proposition** of franchise systems rather than treated as a peripheral obligation. Embedding sustainability criteria into franchisee selection, performance evaluation, and incentive systems leads to more authentic and enduring CSR outcomes (Carroll, 2021; Porter & Kramer, 2011). In emerging or lower-capacity markets, additional support—through training, resources, or financial incentives—may be essential to bridge the gap between policy intent and local execution (Farooq et al., 2020).

5.4 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on peer-reviewed sources indexed in the **Web of Science (WoS)**, which, while ensuring quality and reliability, may exclude insights from industry reports, practitioner case studies, or grassroots CSR innovations, particularly in developing economies (Clarivate, n.d.; Quinn & Alexander, 2002). This may result in an incomplete picture of emerging, informal, or non-traditional CSR practices that operate outside established academic discourse.

Second, existing research remains **sectorally and geographically concentrated**, focusing mainly on food service, hospitality, and retail industries in North America and Western Europe. Consequently, findings may have limited generalizability to other sectors such as healthcare, education, or technology, and to rapidly growing regions like Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, where franchising operates under different institutional logics (Farooq et al., 2020; Kolk, 2016).

Third, the predominance of **cross-sectional studies** restricts understanding of the dynamic evolution of CSR over time. Longitudinal data are essential to capture how CSR practices adapt to crises—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—or to regulatory and technological shifts that reshape stakeholder expectations (Lawrence et al., 2024).

Finally, much of the literature privileges the **franchisor's perspective**, leaving underexplored the experiences of franchisees, employees, and local communities (Raha & Hajdini, 2023; Oueslati et al., 2023). Given that franchising is inherently a networked and multi-actor structure, neglecting these voices risks overlooking bottom-up CSR innovation, intra-network tensions, and local mechanisms of adaptation.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research should advance understanding of CSR in international franchising along several lines:

Cross-Cultural and Cross-Sectoral Analysis: Comparative investigations are needed to examine how differing institutional, cultural, and regulatory contexts shape CSR implementation and outcomes. Expanding inquiry to underrepresented regions—particularly Africa, Latin America, and Asia-Pacific—would capture a more comprehensive picture of global CSR evolution (Kolk, 2016; Farooq et al., 2020).

Longitudinal Perspectives: Multi-year and longitudinal studies should explore the trajectories of CSR development within franchise networks, assessing how strategies respond to crises, stakeholder activism, and technological disruptions.

Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence: Future work should assess how digital technologies, big data, and AI-driven analytics can enhance CSR monitoring, benchmarking, and impact assessment. These innovations hold potential for greater transparency, stakeholder inclusion, and real-time compliance management.

Institutional Context and Legitimacy: Further inquiry should address how legal frameworks, civil society, media, and market norms influence CSR diffusion and legitimacy. This line of research is particularly relevant in transitional economies, where institutional volatility creates both challenges and opportunities for responsible franchising (Oueslati et al., 2023).

DISCLOSURES

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work, the author(s) used ChatGPT (OpenAI) in order to improve clarity, structure, and academic language. After using this tool, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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