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On the way to understand responsible business - CSV and ESG concepts from employees' perspective

1. Introduction

In a world undergoing rapid transformation and with growing consumer awareness about the company's value chain, the supply side must swiftly adapt to new trends and expectations emanating from the demand side, which require the enterprise to shift from narrow to broad value creation (van Tulder and van Mil, 2023).

One of the earliest responses to this challenge was the concept of CSR. When implemented with genuine intentions, CSR can significantly enhance brand value (Bhattacharya et al., 2020). Moreover, by demonstrating care for society, a company conveys its commitment to its customers (Nicolau, 2008). However, CSR has also faced criticism for unfair corporate practices such as social washing and greenwashing, which have become firmly entrenched in public perception (Balluchi et al., 2020). The prevalence of these practices has sparked a critical discourse on the authenticity of corporate commitments to social and environmental causes (Pope & Wæraas, 2016). As a result, the business community is leaning toward more proactive

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sustainability efforts, leading to emerging concepts such as CSV and ESG. What is more, while many studies have focused on the consumer perspective (Lee and Shin, 2010; Sharma et al., 2018; Nguyen and Le, 2022), this time, the need was recognized to determine whether sustainable initiatives are important in the value hierarchy of potential employees. This perspective is critical because employees are the cornerstone of any company, making it essential to understand their internal perception of these implemented concepts. Proper understanding and employees' education in implementing sustainable concepts can lead to positive external effects and improved outcomes for investors and consumers.

That is why this article first aims to scrutinize the systemic assumptions underpinning these sustainable management concepts by elucidating the background and definition of the CSR concept. Subsequent sections delve into the definitions of CSV and ESG concepts, elucidating their translation into the corporate context. Furthermore, the second objective is to illustrate how a company's commitment to environmental and social issues is perceived by potential employees, with the age group serving as the primary differentiating factor in awareness and attitudes toward sustainability. This focus is supported by existing literature emphasizing the importance of generational differences in shaping perceptions of CSR (Twenge et al, 2010; Deloitte, 2023). Moreover, the authors will focus on the context of Poland, a Central and Eastern European (CEE) country where awareness of sustainable initiatives is still evolving (Potocki, 2015).

Thus, the first part of the article is based on the critical literature review. In the second part of the study, the authors seek to delineate the research problem using the qualitative research method. Upon introducing the methodology, the authors analyze the research findings, guide the ensuing discussion, and propose avenues for future research. The outcomes of this analysis can serve as a foundational framework for subsequent quantitative research endeavors exploring the influence of ESG and CSV concepts on employees' motivation.

2. Clarification of definitions

This study employs several critical concepts central to understanding corporate responsibility, including Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sustainability, Creating Shared Value (CSV), and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). In order to properly understand the following considerations, the authors decided to clarify the basic definitions of these concepts in this section. These terms, while interrelated, represent distinct frameworks with specific goals and methodologies:

- Sustainability: A broader systemic concept emphasizing the balance between economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social equity. Sustainability goes beyond voluntary actions, integrating long-term strategies to address global challenges such as climate change and resource efficiency (Bradley, 2021).
- CSR: A foundational framework emphasizing voluntary corporate actions aimed at addressing social and environmental challenges while promoting ethical practices and stakeholder engagement (Carroll, 1979). CSR often focuses on initiatives like philanthropy and community outreach.
- CSV: Developed by Porter and Kramer (2011), CSV aligns business strategies with societal needs by generating shared value. Unlike CSR, CSV directly ties corporate success to social progress through initiatives that benefit both the company and its stakeholders.
- ESG: A regulatory-driven framework that emphasizes measurable performance in environmental, social, and governance areas. ESG metrics are increasingly mandated by legal frameworks, such as the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (Directive (EU) 2022/2464), ensuring transparency and accountability in corporate actions.

These distinctions underline that CSR contributes to sustainability, but the two are not synonymous. Sustainability is a strategic umbrella encompassing initiatives like CSV and ESG, which build on CSR principles while addressing emerging challenges and regulatory requirements.

3. Theoretical background

3.1. Insufficiency of CSR in organizations' strategies

CSR describes the long-term creation of stakeholder value by seizing opportunities and managing risks that result from economic, environmental and social development. It colloquially means "doing good" and requires no regulation (Bradley, 2021). CSR has long served as a foundational framework for companies aiming to address social and environmental challenges alongside economic objectives (European Union, 2001; Carroll, 1979). Its core principles revolve around voluntary corporate actions emphasizing ethical practices, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability (Botchway & Bradley, 2023; Modi & Zhao, 2021). CSR is deeply rooted in corporate consciousness (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023), and its development involves actions aimed at increasing the sensitivity of organizations and their members to social and environmental issues. This process can be initiated by managers from the top down or employees from the bottom up, driven by strategic or altruistic motives (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013; Maon et al., 2009). CSR communication is aimed at both internal and external stakeholders and encourages commitment to these initiatives. CSR implementation involves the integration of CSR values into the organizational structure through appropriate policies, procedures, missions and visions that enable the integration of these principles into the company's daily work. Finally, CSR evaluation involves analyzing the achievement of set goals, measuring results and identifying opportunities for further improvement of CSR activities (Maon et al., 2009).

CSR theories (Garriga & Melé, 2004) can be broadly classified into four main categories, each offering a unique perspective on the role and responsibilities of businesses in society. Instrumental theories focus on the corporation as a means to generate wealth, where social activities are undertaken solely to achieve economic objectives. In this view, CSR initiatives are strategic tools to enhance profitability and competitiveness. Political theories, on the other hand, emphasize the influence and power of corporations in society and advocate for the responsible use of this power within the political arena. These theories underline the role of businesses in shaping public policies and addressing societal challenges, while ensuring their actions contribute to the public good. Integrative theories center on the idea that corporations should align their operations with societal needs and demands. According to these theories, the primary purpose of corporate engagement in social activities is to address and satisfy the expectations of various stakeholders, ensuring harmony between business operations and societal interests. Finally, ethical theories highlight the moral obligations of corporations toward society. These theories assert that businesses have a responsibility to act in a fair and just manner, guided by principles of ethics and morality. They emphasize the importance of corporate commitment to societal well-being and the upholding of universal ethical standards in decision-making and practices. Each of these categories provides a distinct framework for understanding and implementing CSR, reflecting the diverse motivations and approaches that businesses can adopt in their interactions with society (Garriga & Melé, 2004). Thus, the CSR is a complex phenomenon that relates to different disciplines.

Already in 1972, Votaw observed that CSR is a multifaceted concept that lacks a singular, universally accepted definition. "The term is a brilliant one; it means something, but not always the same thing, to everybody. To some it conveys the idea of legal responsibility or liability; to others, it means socially responsible behavior in an ethical sense; to still others, the meaning transmitted is that of "responsible for," in a causal mode; many simply equate it with a charitable contribution; some take it to mean socially conscious; many of those who embrace it most fervently see it as a mere synonym for "legitimacy," in the context of "belonging" or being proper or valid; a few see it as a sort of fiduciary duty imposing higher standards of behavior on businessmen than on citizens at large. Even the antonyms, socially "irresponsible" and "non-responsible," are subject to multiple interpretations" (Votaw, 1972).

The concept of CSR goes beyond academic contributions, evolves in parallel with changing societal expectations and requires its discourse to be understood in the socio-political context and associated frameworks (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019; Matten & Moon, 2020; Wehrmeyer et al., 2020). As an essential component of sustainable development, CSR reflects the integration of economic, social and environmental goals into business practices. In line with this development, several dimensions of CSR are distinguished in the literature (Wehrmeyer et al., 2020; Aslaksen et al., 2021). The first dimension, economic responsibility, focuses on compliance with social and political systems rooted in the Friedman Doctrine (Friedman, 1970), which prioritizes profit generation with minimal redistribution to society. The second dimension, social sustainability, broadens this perspective by expecting companies to provide fair working conditions, support social reforms and contribute to social welfare by eliminating inequalities. The third and most advanced dimension, social and environmental sustainability, emphasizes the proactive role of companies in promoting green technologies, implementing environmental regulations and promoting societal well-being more broadly, positioning them as advocates for sustainable transformation. Furthermore, CSR can take two forms: implicit and explicit. Implicit CSR is based on social norms and legal obligations and represents what is naturally expected of companies within their social environment. Explicit CSR, on the other hand, consists of voluntary measures and strategies that companies take to meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Aslaksen et al., 2021).

However, the voluntary nature of CSR has often led to inconsistent application, leaving companies vulnerable to accusations of superficial or unethical practices, such as greenwashing, which erodes stakeholder trust (European Union, 2023; Ginder & Byun, 2022). "The CSR field presents not only a landscape of theories but also a proliferation of approaches, which are controversial, complex and unclear" (Garriga & Melé, 2004). Consequently, CSR's transparency issues remain a significant concern, with Ginder and Byun (2022) stressing the urgent need for honest disclosure regarding human rights, environmental impacts, and sustainability. Efforts to improve CSR accountability in the EU began with adopting the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD) in 2014, requiring large, listed companies to report on CSR-related matters. Despite these regulatory measures, deceptive practices, including greenwashing, social washing, rainbow washing, and diversity washing, continue to undermine the credibility of CSR communications, fostering skepticism among stakeholders (de Jong et al., 2020; Garczarek-Bąk et al., 2024). Moreover, the impact of CSR on financial performance has been limited, often serving more as a tool for public relations than as a driver of measurable business results (Friedman, 1970; Drucker, 1994).

These limitations have spurred the development of more structured and impactful approaches, such as CSV and ESG frameworks. In contemporary corporate strategies, integrating economic and social objectives has become indispensable. Bhattacharyya (2020) asserts that social and environmental responsibility must be fundamental components of corporate strategy alongside economic goals. Similarly, Chalmeta and Palomero (2011) emphasize that embedding sustainability into corporate strategies leads to long-term value creation and equitable value distribution. Corporate strategy, defined as a long-term action plan aligning a company's activities with overarching goals (Jimenez et al., 2021), involves setting priorities that foster growth while addressing economic and social objectives (Lu et al., 2021). By embedding these elements into their strategies, companies can achieve sustainable development and nurture positive stakeholder relationships (Florez-Jimenez et al., 2024).

3.2. Developing CSR – ESG and CSV

As Porter and Kramer (2011) pointed out, voluntary CSR practices are important elements in a business strategy but are not always linked to a business goal. In business administration, CSR contributes to project efficiency and customer satisfaction. However, CSR alone does not guarantee substantial business success or long-term growth (Awale and Rowlinson, 2014). Nevertheless, Porter and Kramer (2011) recognize the shortcomings of CSR and are building a new quality in implementing responsible business thinking.

One of the interesting concepts that emerged was CSV concept which aims to achieve not only social but also economic benefits. The contemporary CSV approach departs from conventional management by considering a broader range of factors (Wójcik, 2016). This approach offers benefits to three key stakeholders: the company, which gains profits from its philanthropic efforts; the beneficiaries of that help; and the customers, who gain a sense of fulfillment from their involvement (Porter & Kramer, 2011). CSV is a process initiated by the company to generate shared benefits for all the actors involved. Companies seeking to implement CSV strategies adopt principles and practices that improve their competitiveness while considering the socio-economic conditions of their respective communities (Crane et al., 2014). This three-pronged strategy introduces a new dimension of value in today's marketplace. One should also consider understanding the value concept when considering the CSV phenomenon. By leaving the perception of value through book value (Freeman et al., 2010), it can be viewed subjectively concerning the opinion of the demand side. The creators of the concept of CSV consider profit in a broader sense - as a reflection of the shared value that enables society to progress and, thus, the company to grow faster (Porter & Kramer, 2011). However, a company's commitment to CSV is voluntary and unencumbered by legal objections.

Another idea was the concept of ESG, which is "managing issues related to environmental protection, society and corporate governance in the enterprise", which should be seen as a framework that guides companies in managing their risk (Bradley, 2021). Economists like Rogall (2010) and van Tulder and Mil (2023), working in sustainable development economics, highlight the critical need to uphold robust economic, environmental, and socio-cultural standards to benefit both current and future generations. The assumptions of the ESG concept underline the need to balance company profits with supporting social and environmental benefits in the long term (Domańska-Szaruga, 2011). Key issues to consider typically include "E": climate change, carbon emissions, pollution, resource efficiency, biodiversity; "S": human rights, labor standards, health and safety, diversity policy, social relations, development of human capital (health and education); "G": corporate governance, corruption, rule of law, institutional strength, transparency" (Inderst & Stewart, 2018). Contrary to CSV, ESG issues have become such an eye-catching topic that their reporting has been legally established through the provisions of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (Directive (EU) 2022/2464 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022).

The following table aims to compare selected attributes of the mentioned CSV and ESG concepts (table 1):

Table 1. CSV and ESG system differences

	CSV	ESG
Value	Economic, society	Environment, society, corporate governance
Orientation	Joint work of the company and society	Joint work of company, society and governing institutions
Type of Action	Related to market development	Under pressure (law), related to market development (evolution)
Profits	Directly related to profit maximization	Direct related to profit maximization
Goal	Long-term perspective, consistent with the company's strengths and its specifications	Long-term perspective, maximizing profitability with maximization of the environmental and social utility
Source of Financing	Scaled with the operation of the company	Diversification of the budget for practices of ESG
Actors Concerned	Employers, employees, customers and the local community	Legislative entities, employer, employees, customers and the local community
Mandatory	no	yes

Source: own elaboration based on (Kramer & Porter, 2011; Kaźmierczak, 2022)

When considering value, CSV should focus most on economic and social value. The economic one is directly related to producing and using resources and reformulating them to create new, unique value. The social one, for its part, is concerned with altruistic and philanthropic aspects of life (Bachnik et al., 2022). The ESG concept places a far greater emphasis on environmental and corporate governance issues. Undeniably, the unifying feature of both concepts is the social issue; both are designed to benefit specific interest groups. In CSV, such assistance often occurs by reframing an existing resource to create new value that benefits all parties involved. Funding and creation are usually the result of dialogue and co-creation of the outcome with the demand side. ESG, like CSV, is oriented towards cooperation with the demand side but implies international institutions' participation by establishing laws requiring compliance with this concept. Turning to the type of action, the creation of shared value cannot occur if the demand side is unwilling to participate in an action initiated by the company. ESG is grounded in regulations (e.g., Directive (EU) 2022/2464, 2022) and established guidelines requiring documentation of pro-environmental and pro-social actions. The imposed regulatory framework does not eliminate the risk of greenwashing within this concept. Still, it significantly mitigates it, as it is shaped and reinforced by regulations such as the Sustainable Finance Disclosures Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2019/2088). In contrast, CSV does not rely on specific indicators, and its reporting is more flexible, allowing companies to choose how to present the outcomes of their initiatives, which, in some cases, may lead to unethical behaviors. This is a pressure that, at the same time, guarantees the company's equal commitment in the long term. CSV and ESG are directly related to profit maximization when considering the profit generation factor. This can be interpreted as a closed cycle. A profit-making company has the resources to generate new social and environmental value. When analyzing both phenomena, it is essential to look at their desirability. CSV assumes long-term and continuous operation but bases its strength on the strengths of the company and its specialization. In the case of ESG, long-term results are also expected, but the main goal is to maximize profitability with the maximization of environmental and social utility. A frequently used criticism of CSR was the funding source for aid (Freeman et al., 2010). In the case of CSV, the funding source is scaled with the company's operation. In ESG, it is a bit more complex, as it involves diversification of the budget for practices of ESG, supported by law (Kaźmierczak, 2022). Both CSV and ESG are concerned with organizations, customers, and the local community. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding employee perceptions of these concepts and possible attitudes toward them.

3.3. Generations and their attitude toward CSV and ESG

One factor that may influence this perception is the variation stemming from generational differences. Therefore, when analyzing the work environment, it is essential to consider its multigenerational nature, as this can significantly impact the perception of the phenomena under study. Table 2 shows the generations that coexist in daily work tasks. Given the substantial changes in corporate policies and the growing emphasis on incorporating responsible practices, understanding how motivations differ across generations becomes increasingly essential.

Table 2. Classification of generations

Generation	Year of birth	Date of entry into employment	Key values for employees	Expectations of the workplace
Baby Boomers	1946 - 1964	1965 - 1985	Follow rules, social recognition, professionalism	Material success, job stability, appreciation (promotion)
Generation X	1965 - 1979	1985 - 2000	Diligent, committed to career and workplace, copes with teamwork	Separation of work and private life, value freedom, promotions, raises and new positions are motivating
Generation Y	1980 - 1995	2000 - 2013	Highly inquisitive, seeking task clarity, adept at collaborative teamwork, and well-versed in new technologies	They prioritize personal growth, adaptability, employer receptivity, and environmental and social concerns
Generation Z	1996 - 2012	2014 and currently	Unbounded in global connections, multifaceted interests, and innate multitasking ability	Prioritizes diversity and avoids companies that cause harm. Seek quick success, limit work hours, and depend on new technologies

Source: own compilation based on Bradley, 2021; Deloitte, 2023; Dolecińska & Kołodziejczyk, 2016

Baby boomers are the generation of the so-called baby boom period. In Poland, the time of their development was under communism. Due to the historical context, their distrust and suspicion of other people and their desire to fit into a larger collective can be explained. They are faithful workers afraid of losing their jobs (Grzesiak, 2014). For representatives of this generation, it is crucial to follow the rules, social recognition, and material success (Januszkiewicz, 2012). However, the generation is characterized as optimistic and socially competent, and they derive their self-esteem through their motivation (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012).

Furthermore, generation X grew up during a political change, remembering not only the turbulent period of social protests against the government but also the rise of technology. Representatives of this generation are skeptical, have a pessimistic approach to life, value freedom, harmony, and individuality, and strive for complete happiness (Dolecińska & Kołodziejczyk, 2016). At work, generation X exerts themselves on their tasks but, in return, expects a separation of work and private life for a job well done. Hence, there is significant striving for work-life balance. Family and friendship are most important to them (Jamieson et al. l, 2013).

Finally, both Generation Y (Millennials) and Generation Z want to identify with companies that do not have a negative impact on society. As a result, businesses adhering to CSV or ESG standards are more respected and frequently chosen in the job market. This enables companies to attract qualified employees. Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, place significant importance on the non-financial aspects of business operations. Research indicates that they consider companies' ESG performance before making investment decisions, ensuring their choices align with their values. This highlights that Millennials expect their investments not only to generate profits but also to contribute to social good and positively impact society and the environment (Bradley, 2021).

Research on generational differences in attitudes toward social responsibility yields inconsistent results (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021). Studies from the U.S. suggest that pro-environmental values and political orientation are better predictors of environmental concern than age (Gray et al., 2019; Etezady et al., 2020). Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, are more likely to engage in eco-friendly activities and choose sustainable companies (Alonso-Almeida and Llach, 2019; Lee et al., 2020), while Generation Z demonstrates growing expectations for employer accountability, particularly regarding social and environmental practices (Yamane & Kaneko, 2021). Millennials and Generation Z increasingly consider ESG factors when selecting employers, aligning these decisions with personal values and expectations for social good (Bradley, 2021; Yamane & Kaneko, 2021).

While existing research primarily focuses on their implications for customers and communities, their impact on workforce attitudes remains insufficiently studied (Kaźmierczak, 2022).

3.4. The perspective of the employees

Certainly, environmental and social issues are central to sustainable companies. Nevertheless, the critical point is to emphasize that employees make up these companies and, therefore, have a tangible impact on the chosen strategies and performance of the company (Brunton et al., 2017). In the modern landscape, prospective employees possess extensive insights into corporate workings and exhibit a growing concern for the treatment of staff within organizations. This burgeoning awareness has prompted businesses to adopt the concept of employer branding. This strategy can be encapsulated as the fusion of financial and psychological advantages associated with a particular job, all closely linked to the employing company (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

However, according to the Randstad report (2022), fundamental overall criteria in job offers remain consistent, with an attractive salary and benefits being the primary factor, as noted by 62% of respondents. Additionally, 58% emphasized the significance of work-life balance, while other crucial factors included job security (56%), a pleasant work atmosphere (55%), and career progression (49%). Nonetheless, factors associated with sustainable development in businesses are increasingly gaining prominence. Discussions regarding the perception of responsible business as a desirable and appealing workplace have been ongoing for years (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Greening & Turban, 2000). The company willing to share profits and act socially and environmentally responsibly can be seen as a stable and conducive environment for growth. Amidst numerous job opportunities offering similar terms and conditions, presenting oneself as a "responsible business" can be a competitive advantage in attracting top talent (Magbool et al., 2016).

With the increasing emphasis on establishing sustainable workplaces, a pertinent question arises: do employees place importance on adopting sustainable business practices? Moreover, do modern, socially conscious employees expect their employers to address social and environmental concerns actively? Research in this field indicates that companies committed to societal and environmental responsibility are also likely to treat their employees fairly (Ramus & Steger, 2000; Pellegrini et al., 2018).

Given these considerations, exploring potential employees' motivation to work in a company recognized as a sustainable business is imperative. Assuming that the global trend of responsible business is relevant to Polish employees, a qualitative study was conducted to assess the relevance of postulates related to CSR, CSV, and ESG concepts to Polish employees. The CSR, CSV, and ESG discussions raise questions about employees' knowledge and understanding of these concepts.

4. Methods

The Focus Group Interview (FGI) method was selected due to the exploratory nature of this study, which seeks to understand employees' awareness and perceptions of CSR, CSV, and ESG concepts. FGI is particularly well-suited for generating in-depth qualitative data, as it facilitates open-ended discussions and the sharing of diverse perspectives in a group setting. This approach enables a deeper exploration of generational differences and the contextual factors influencing attitudes toward sustainable business practices.

By capturing dynamic interactions among participants, FGI enriches the understanding of how employees perceive corporate responsibility initiatives and the factors shaping their preferences. Additionally, the insights gathered provide a foundation for future quantitative studies to validate and expand upon the findings.

The study explored how employees perceive companies' commitment to environmental and social issues. To achieve this goal, the following research questions were developed:

- RQ1: What first comes to mind when you hear "Responsible Business"?
- RQ2: What is your attitude toward companies claiming to be sensitive to environmental and social issues in terms of trust?
- RQ3: Have you encountered situations where a company perceived as "responsible" actually engaged in unethical practices?
- RQ4: What do you know about CSR, CSV, or ESG concepts? Can you discuss how these programs can be translated into everyday life?
- RQ5: If you had the choice of employers, would you be inclined to choose a company that practices sustainable methods? Please arrange the factors that can influence your choice of employer (1-most important, 11-least important): Salary, Work-life balance, Location, Impact on the natural environment, Impact on society, Hybrid - on-site work, Employee benefits, Equality policies, Corporate governance, Opportunities for growth Industry.

The Focus Group Interviews (FGI) study, conducted via MS Teams, involved 24 participants (N=24) divided into four groups (Rószkiewicz et al., 2021). Participants were white-collar workers from both large corporations and small family businesses, ensuring diverse perspectives on CSV and ESG practices. To illustrate how a company's commitment to environmental and social issues is perceived by potential employees, with age groups serving as the primary differentiating factor in awareness and attitudes toward sustainability, the authors divided participants into two age groups: Baby Boomers and Generation X vs. Generations Y and Z. This division also accounted for varying levels of professional experience. The focus on generational differences is supported by existing literature, which emphasizes their importance in shaping perceptions of CSR (Twenge et al., 2010; Deloitte, 2023). Recruitment was conducted through social media (e.g., thematic groups on Facebook related to responsible business) and professional networks, with a pre-screening questionnaire (Mehahad & Bounar, 2020) assessing eligibility based on employment, education, work experience, age, and satisfaction with remuneration. Participants declared familiarity with responsible business principles and assessed their financial situation as good. Detailed information about the study's purpose, anonymity, and video recording were provided, and participation was voluntary and free of charge. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the Poznań University of Economics and Business (Resolution 10/2023). This exploratory research aims to assess Polish employees' recognition of CSV and ESG elements and their significance in employer strategies. Bhattacherjee (2012) explains that exploratory research investigates emerging topics to determine phenomena and generate preliminary ideas. The age group division accounted for differences in professional experience, supporting the study's goal of building a comprehensive knowledge base (Sławecki, 2018). The study utilized the FGI to address the "what" and "why" questions. Given the qualitative nature of the approach, the sample was purposive and consisted of a smaller group (N = 24). This method allowed for more liberal and subjective interpretations (Olejnik, 2021).

- I Group - individuals aged 18-35 years (6 participants)
- II Group - individuals aged 18-35 years (6 participants)
- III Group - individuals over 35 years old (6 participants)
- IV Group - individuals over 35 years old (6 participants)

The detailed division is shown in the table 3.

Table 3. The FGIs participants (May - June 2023)

Respondent	Group No	Age (years)	Average age	Sex
1	1	23	24	Male
2	1	24		Male
3	1	26		Female
4	1	24		Female
5	1	24		Female
6	1	23		Male

7	2	32	27	Male
8	2	26		Female
9	2	22		Female
10	2	25		Female
11	2	30		Female
12	2	29		Male
13	3	45	49	Male
14	3	50		Male
15	3	55		Female
16	3	51		Female
17	3	52		Male
18	3	42		Female
19	4	52	54	Female
20	4	45		Male
21	4	56		Female
22	4	55		Male
23	4	54		Female
24	4	59		Male

Source: own elaboration

5. The results of the research

The study's theme revolved around responsible business practices. Given the various definitions of this phenomenon, the most common associations were linked to the key areas of interest within this domain, namely "ecology", "society", and "employees", rather than "economy." Another notable aspect is its characterization as "non-financial" instead of purely numerical or financially driven. This suggests that responsible business is perceived as being oriented towards maximizing socio-environmental benefits rather than solely focusing on a company's profit.

Other significant terms associated with responsible business include "transparency," "honesty," and "trust." These associations underscore the importance of the ability to verify a company's actions. It becomes crucial to assess their credibility through appropriate reports, documents, metrics, opinions, and certifications. Achieving this necessitates adhering to legal requirements, "regulations", and "tax" obligations, which, in turn, demonstrates responsibility.

These associations lead to the conclusion that responsible business carries both positive connotations, such as "high quality," "optimization," and "value creation," which are linked to the value creation process, and negative connotations, such as "marketing" or "trend." The latter often refers to temporary greenwashing practices or issues related to the company's promotional or PR efforts, emphasizing the importance of trust mentioned earlier.

Additionally, responsible business is closely associated with concepts like "taking care" and "teamwork," which require soft skills and empathy. Finally, the study revealed that a responsible business profile is characterized by a higher level of advancement ("high quality," "value creation") and a focus on efficiency ("zero waste," "optimization") (figure 1).

Figure 1. Word cloud to keyword: responsible business

Source: own elaboration, mentimeter.com

Based on these associations, it is evident that sustainable business practices are perceived as encompassing non-financial aspects, trustworthiness, efficiency, and occasionally, actions that may be misleading (table 4).

Table 4. The associations related to the term "responsible business"

Subject	Connotation
The area of interest	• ecology • society • employees • environment • economy
Financial/ Non-financial focus	• non-financial focus
Ability of verification	• transparency • honesty • trust • regulations • taxes
Soft skills	• taking care • teamwork
Level of advancement	• high quality • optimization • zero waste • value creation
Markedness	Positive • high-quality • optimization • value creation • responsibility • sustainability • CSR Negative • marketing • trend • CSR

Source: own elaboration based on results in mentimeter.com

Another important and unclear issue is *the attitude of employees toward companies claiming to be sensitive to environmental and social issues as far as trust is concerned*. Respondents underline that the trust created by companies becomes a crucial factor for closer relationships with employees or consumers. The group of workers under 35 does not always trust companies with responsible practices. It notes that some actions are carried out for PR, marketing, or cost minimization. On the other hand, the younger respondents trust the companies where they work or know the company culture first-hand, i.e., from the knowledge of relatives and friends who work there. The group of workers over 35 also does not always trust the companies they work for to conduct their business responsibly. Verifying their actions through relevant reports, documents, key figures, opinions, or certificates is essential. In addition, survey participants trust companies whose continuity and effectiveness of sustainable actions they can confirm. One-time actions are not sufficient validation for them, as both the younger and older groups know that companies want to gloss over their prosocial or pro-environmental actions in front of customers to gain their advantages.

Unfair practices perceived in the marketplace were also the topic of discussion, as well as whether respondents *encountered situations where a company perceived as "responsible" actually engaged in unethical practices.* The older groups of respondents refer to this problem from the employee's point of view. Mutual respect is essential (respecting each other's contract). Deviations such as unfair pay, non-compliance with contracted working hours, or violations of environmental regulations are unethical practices by seemingly "responsible" companies. Younger groups of workers provide more specific examples, naming companies or citing specific media scandals that have tarnished the reputations of companies commonly viewed as responsible. In addition to scandalous working conditions and environmental pollution, respondents also cited examples of pseudo-foundations that cause harm under the guise of helping while misappropriating funds from community collections.

Another critical point was learning whether terms such as CSR, CSV, or ESG are familiar to the questioned persons. The findings about the comprehension and acknowledgment of the concepts are delineated in table 5.

Table 5. Recognition of CSR, CSV and ESG concepts

	Under 35 years of age	Over 35 years of age
CSR	Good knowledge	Basic knowledge
CSV	Basic knowledge	Poor knowledge
ESG	Poor knowledge	Lack of knowledge

NOTE: Levels of knowledge (from highest to lowest): good knowledge (high awareness, know the term of the concept, know the examples of the concept, know the philosophy of the concept), basic knowledge (moderate awareness, know the term of the concept, know the examples of the concept), poor knowledge (low awareness, know the term of the concept), lack of knowledge (no awareness, do not know the concept).

Source: own elaboration based on research

By far, the most prevalent concept was CSR. The younger cohort of workers showed some familiarity with specific CSV initiatives but needed help to identify the differentiating factors. Even after the explanation of the acronym, reception diverged. On the one hand, respondents expressed satisfaction with the company's efforts to create shared value with customers. On the other hand, it was also perceived as a marketing strategy, as evidenced by one respondent's assertion that "*fundraising is outsourced to third parties, rather than being undertaken by the company itself*." Even after the acronym was explained, the concept of ESG remained relatively opaque. Only one person employed by a company could correctly identify that ESG refers to reporting that summarizes a company's responsible activities in all areas. This was briefly summarized as "*an annual overview of the responsible actions undertaken by the company*."

The next question was to identify *what motivations drive economically active people when choosing where to work and if sustainable practices are important for them in this decision*. Table 6 shows the ranking of factors relevant to potential employees. The gradation of factors varies according to the answers given by the age groups. The overall classification (Total = without age breakdown) shows that the organization's activities for the environment and society are far from the respondents' hierarchy of values.

Table 6. Gradation of factors relevant to respondents during employment

	Total	Under 35 years of age	Over 35 years of age
1	Salary	Salary	Work-life balance
2	Opportunity for development	Opportunity for development	Opportunity for development
3	Work-life balance	Work-life balance	Salary
4	Location	Hybrid-stationary work	Location
5	Hybrid-stationary work	Employee benefits	Corporate governance
6	Corporate governance	Industry sector	Hybrid-stationary work
7	Industry sector	Social impact	Equality policy
8	Employee benefits	Location	Industry sector
9	Social impact	Corporate governance	Environmental impact
10	Equality policy	Environmental impact	Social impact
11	Environmental impact	Equality policy	Employee benefits

NOTE: "Total" refers to the aggregate number of responses provided by participants across all focus groups.

Source: own elaboration based on research

Given the intergenerational differences, the authors decided, in addition to carrying out a pooled analysis (based on the weighted average of the points awarded), to carry out an in-depth study by age group. The differences between economically active people under and over 35 indicate a different hierarchy of values. For older employees, the most important thing is to maintain a work-life balance. Despite already achieving professional specialization, this group still highly values the opportunity for development, somewhat less importantly. However, salary is still significant to them. Due to their desire for independence and life stability, the younger age group points to salary as the most critical factor (Sánchez-Hernández et al., 2019). The opportunity for development comes second. The next most important factor is work-life balance. There is no doubt that social impact was more often reported as important by younger workers. Still, environmental impact was ranked as one of the least important factors in choosing an employer by both groups. Overall (for both groups), social impact was ranked only two places higher than environmental impact, with neither group ranking it in the top five. Unfortunately, this proves that Polish society, aware of its salary situation, cannot set aside hedonistic motives, which for individuals have long focused on seeking pleasure and avoiding pain (Steers et al., 2004). Only greater financial freedom and a sense of security could induce Polish employees to change the value system of factors required by an employer. The example of Germany can serve as an example of the consistency of CSR practices, and the pressure of the CSR business environment reflects the characteristics of developed countries with well-established institutions. Among other things, it promotes strong employee engagement (Kowalczyk & Kucharska, 2020).

6. Discussion of results

The supply side, often accused of unfair practices in favor of better sales figures, was confronted in the 21st century with the need to manage resources more responsibly. Stakeholders, having access to extensive knowledge and being able to scrutinize companies' actions in an easy and accessible way, started to put pressure on companies to not only limit their activities that are harmful to society and the environment but also to participate in creating a better future for all (Iglesias et al., 2020). That is why companies have started applying CSR, CSV, or ESG concepts to their daily practice.

The creators of the new course (CSV), hoping to underpin the overdone CSR retrospective, propose to create shared value through one of the three main ways companies can create SV opportunities: by redesigning products and markets, by redefining productivity in the value chain, or by developing local clusters (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Furthermore, the concept of CSV assumes that the achievement of economics and SV represents benefits relative to costs. It is about providing value to buyers while meeting important economic and social needs in the communities where the company operates, and this applies to all participants in the value chain (Grzegorczyk, 2021). Unfortunately, due to the low popularity of the concept of CSV, companies using this strategy do not manage to fit their activities into this stream. There is a tendency to assign all responsible corporate activities to the better-known CSR concept (Lemańczyk, 2023).

The perception of ESG risk management priorities by companies is becoming more common, but mainly for investors and executives. In response to the question *"Why do you consider ESG issues in your company?"* in a questionnaire prepared by CFA in 2015, the most commonly cited reason was that this concept helps manage investment risk (63%). Respondents ranked customer and investor demand for such actions as the second reason. Other reasons included ESG, which signifies qualitative management, a fiduciary duty to help identify investment opportunities, and the positive influence of the company's reputation. The statement that regulations require it received the fewest votes (Hayat & Orsagh, 2015).

Distinct disparities exist between older generations, like baby boomers and Generation X, and younger ones, particularly Generations Y and Z. Baby boomers are notably committed to their careers, often dedicating extensive hours at work, motivated by financial rewards, as documented by Dolecińska and Kołodziejczyk (2016). In contrast, Generation X values interpersonal loyalty, teamwork, and work-life balance.

The research confirms that employee awareness of ESG and CSV concepts is generally low, while CSR is more widely recognized. These terms are better understood by employees of corporations or international companies where such topics are gaining popularity. Awareness also varies by age group. Focus group participants, including those from small Polish companies and global corporations operating in Poland, struggled to link their companies' responsible business activities to specific strategies. They did not associate these actions with any defined approach. Younger generations (Y and Z) appeared to be more familiar with these topics, as shown by their shared examples and practices.

7. Limitations and future research

This qualitative study was carried out on an age-diverse group of respondents. Due to the research topic, active employees were invited to the focus groups. By pre-elimination, the authors wanted to get as up-to-date a picture as possible of employees' feelings on workplace choice. According to Rabiee (2004), qualitative analysis aims to interpret a situation rather than pursue the truth as emphasized in quantitative research. This method can offer valuable insights into attitudes, convictions, and viewpoints, and might prioritize consumers over professionals, considering consumers as experts. However, the most serious objection to the focus group interview is a relative lack of consistency in make-up and content. (McLafferty, 2004). The authors are aware that the focus of the research is intended to help diagnose a problem regarding a sustainable business issue, which means that the findings are not statistically validated.

In the future, the findings from this qualitative research should be validated through studies conducted on a more prominent and more representative population. Furthermore, beginning in 2025, all large companies will be legally obligated to report their non-financial practices, which could play a pivotal role in raising awareness of the ESG concept among employees in these organizations. This increased awareness may spark interest and encourage employees to familiarize themselves with ESG principles. Conversely, an opposite effect could also emerge: companies, recognizing the growing interest of younger employees in ESG, might be more motivated to implement its provisions. Investigating this dynamic in future research would be valuable. Additionally, examining how industry or company type influences employee perceptions of CSR, CSV, and ESG is important, particularly in scenarios involving economic trade-offs such as wage security versus sustainability commitments. Expanding the scope of research beyond age as the primary variable and exploring its interaction with other influential factors—such as income, education, and industry—would provide a more multidimensional understanding of these perceptions. Our research results consistently indicate that salary remains a significant factor in work motivation across both age groups. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to discuss in future research how profit is perceived within the context of CSV and ESG. This exploration could enrich our understanding of how financial and sustainability goals intersect with employees' and organizations' priorities.

8. Conclusion

The contribution of this article lies in its exploration of how corporate responsibility initiatives can attract and retain talent, particularly in the context of Poland. In this Central and Eastern European (CEE) country, awareness of sustainable initiatives is still evolving. This contributes to enhancing organizational competitiveness while also driving positive societal impact.

The study shows that employee awareness of ESG and CSV concepts differs greatly, while CSR is much more widely recognized. It identifies barriers such as various forms of laundering, superficial initiatives and a lack of transparency in reporting that undermine trust in companies' sustainability claims. By comparing generational attitudes, the study provides valuable insights into how Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials (Y) and Generation Z prioritize sustainability issues in their career decisions. The results show that younger employees (Generations Y and Z) are more open to social and environmental initiatives. However, both younger and older employees rate financial factors, job stability, and work-life balance as being higher than sustainability concerns. The study also highlights the practical implications for employer branding and emphasizes the importance of authentic and transparent implementation of ESG and CSV strategies to attract and retain talent. In addition, the qualitative findings provide a solid foundation for future quantitative research, mainly to understand how generational differences influence employees' motivation and commitment to responsible business practices. In light of these issues, the study provides practical guidance for companies on which elements of their strategy need to be better promoted (education in sustainable practices) and how to develop employer branding communication.

Regardless of whether one is analyzing consumer attitudes or those of employees, both groups strive to maximize satisfaction; the difference lies in the subject matter. For consumers, the focus is undoubtedly on consuming a product, whereas for employees, finding the best combination of factors influencing job satisfaction is crucial. Qualitative research conducted among a diverse age group has shown that despite the awareness of the need to engage in responsible business activities, the most significant factors determining the attractiveness of a job offer are still salary, opportunities for development, and work-life balance.

Furthermore, for potential employees, it does not matter what the company's sustainable strategy is called; as long as the overall concept of sustainable business is fulfilled, the employer gains credibility in the eyes of the public. Participants in the study often perceive the existence of a reciprocity principle, seeking analogies between a company's pro-social and pro-environmental actions and fair treatment of employees. If a company is fair to external stakeholders, it should treat its internal stakeholders justly and well.

The presented research findings and knowledge about generational differences lead to the conclusion that understanding employees' awareness of CSR, ESG, or CSV and their attractiveness as employers can only be considered with considering their specific generation. When targeting younger individuals, it can be assumed that values such as personal development, a balance between professional and personal life, and hybrid work arrangements (aside from salary, which is always a priority) should be among the factors proposed as attractive qualities of an employer. Employers must expect representatives of this generation to dedicate themselves to work to a different extent than individuals from Generation X. On the other hand, older generations do not perceive salary issues as a top priority, especially since individuals over 35 often have established their professional positions, albeit sometimes at the cost of work-life balance. Hence, they seek equilibrium. It is essential to recognize how interdisciplinary the issue of CSV has become, where knowledge from sociology and psychology significantly supports decisions in human resource management.

The future development and popularization of the concept of sustainable business in Poland, regardless of whether it is CSR, CSV, or ESG, depends on several factors. One of them is the transparency of the supply side. Another factor is the awareness of managers and individuals who have the opportunity to instill the need for employee participation in sustainable practices. Yet another issue is the approximation of Polish average wages to Western European standards. This last factor is particularly crucial because, as rightly pointed out by the respondents, no one in their right mind, with a family to support and wanting to "live decently," would sacrifice their hedonistic benefits for altruistic and lofty ideals.

Abstract

The main aim of this article is to explore how employees are aware of and perceive companies' commitment to environmental and social issues through the concepts of Creating Shared Value (CSV) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). The authors begin with a critical review of the theoretical background of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Then, they highlight and compare a shift towards the more profit-oriented CSV and ESG concepts. Additionally, the authors examine generational attitudes toward corporate sustainability, focusing primarily on employees' perspectives. The second part of the article presents empirical findings based on qualitative research using focus group interviews. This section clarifies the extent to which employees understand sustainable development. Surprisingly, despite investors' heightened interest in CSV and ESG, employees need to become more familiar with these concepts, being more acquainted with CSR. Moreover, while the literature emphasizes the importance of environmental and social concerns to employees, the results reveal a general skepticism toward businesses claiming social responsibility, particularly when such claims lack concrete evidence. The study also finds that employees prioritize financial factors over sustainable development when making job decisions. This work contributes to the research on sustainable development in the context of human resources.

Keywords: *CSR, ESG, CSV, Employee awareness.*

JEL Classification: M14, L20, M54.

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