Does a social purpose matter to new talent? Understanding the importance of corporate social responsibility to university students

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Abstract

The current study explored the perceptions of final year undergraduate and postgraduate students on CSR using Social Identity Theory and Signalling Theory. The lack of research in South Africa examining students' perceptions of CSR and its possible influence on their choice of employer served as the motivation for the investigation. The study was carried out in the South African environment and a qualitative methodology was used to elicit the complex opinions held by these university students about CSR. A sample of 22 final year undergraduate and postgraduate students from diverse academic disciplines participated in this study. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who possessed specific characteristics that fit the study while snowball sampling facilitated easier access to individuals who would be difficult to reach. The thematic analysis revealed several prominent themes. Themes of giving back to society, social accountability, inclusive work environments, diverse CSR priorities and influence of education and awareness emerged as central factors in students' decision-making. While further investigations are needed, the study's findings indicate that a social purpose does in fact appeal to new talent and that students exhibit a higher awareness of external CSR initiatives in comparison to a company's internal CSR initiatives. The findings also indicated the growing importance of CSR as a determinant factor in students' choice of an employer. While generalisation is not possible and further research is required the implications of these findings could assist managers and employers to highlight the importance of employer branding messages that emphasize a commitment to social responsibility, thereby fostering a stronger connection with new talent. Additionally, the awareness gap between students' perceptions of external and internal CSR initiatives underscores an opportunity for organisations to enhance their communication of internal CSR strategies.

Keywords: **Corporate social responsibility (CSR), talent attraction, organisational attractiveness, students' perceptions, Social Identity Theory, Signalling Theory**

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

1.1 Introduction

In this contemporary world, corporations around the world have become aware that to continue being profitable, they should establish long-term relationships with their various internal and external stakeholders including customers, shareholders and investors, suppliers, government agencies and the wider community (Holly, 2019). Given today's world of work, which is characterised by uncertainty and competitiveness, corporate social responsibility (CSR) is gaining heightened societal focus as a sustainable management strategy capable of alleviating the economic, environmental and social impacts that organisations inflict on the environment (Bode et al., 2015). With its increased focus, corporate social responsibility is seen as a strategic tool in generating continued profitability as it has the capacity to integrate the social, economic, and environmental concerns of the community at large (Bode et al., 2015). To that end, sound corporate social responsibility initiatives can become a powerful tool to attract and recruit new talent. This is because the future of organisations lies in their ability to foresee the changes that society today expects and turn them into opportunities for creating value from this process to their stakeholders (Moratis, 2018). Holly (2019) argues that organisations should not only have an economic purpose (making profits) but must also have a social purpose (serving the community in which they operate). At the same time, Holly (2019) describes CSR as an organisation's commitment to having a positive environment and social impact by adhering to sound business practices. Corporate social responsibility is one of the most prominent concepts in literature. According to Rank and Contreras (2021), corporate social responsibility is not just about sponsorship, it encompasses a wide range of activities both internally and outside of the organisation. Scholars contend that the process of choosing the most appropriate initiative(s) for the organisation is crucial as the endeavour can become costly (Shen & Zhang, 2019; Moratis, 2018; Zainee & Puteh, 2020).

Shen and Zhang (2019) suggest that employees play a major role as one of the key stakeholders of CSR as they are ultimately responsible for the enactment of many CSR initiatives of the organisation. Examples of CSR initiatives organisations can do internally include offering subsidised medical aid to employees, providing employees with training and development opportunities, and offering canteen services to employees at a subsidised rate. Typical

examples of external CSR initiatives include "cause-related marketing, corporate philanthropy, and environmental and wildlife protection" to name a few (Hameed et al., 2016, p. 2).

Organisations that are involved in CSR are considered to have an upper hand when compared to other organisations within the same field or industry that are not oriented to CSR (Zainee & Puteh, 2020). According to the aforementioned scholars, the benefits that accrue to businesses that take CSR seriously include attracting strong candidates, increasing employee retention, making the business attractive to investors, and improving overall company reputation. Additionally, Zainee and Puteh (2020) contend that the public is the source of pressure on organisations to participate in CSR initiatives and adopt ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, indicating that the external publics are a crucial stakeholder in ensuring that businesses focus on both philanthropic duties and economic benefits that benefit society.

In essence, engaging in CSR activities is beneficial because it helps organisations to attract and retain quality employees (Collier, 2018; Hameed et al., 2016; Murphy, 2022; Zainee & Puteh, 2020). A company's CSR strategy has become one of the major reasons why people seek employment at certain companies, and it is a way of showing that the company is compassionate towards its employees as well as its stakeholders (Murphy, 2022). It is important to note that participating in CSR initiatives can help the public perceive a company's brand more favourably (Murphy, 2022). This is so that a business may differentiate itself from its rivals and build a stronger platform to draw in more customers and qualified workers (Murphy, 2022; Zainee & Puteh, 2020). Consequently, having a CSR strategy is crucial since it can aid in establishing a positive reputation, which in turn helps the business win the loyalty and trust of both customers and employees (Collier, 2018). Similar to this, client loyalty goes a long way because it is one of the key factors in an organisation's success.

Despite a myriad of prior studies focusing on CSR (Collier, 2018; Murphy, 2022; Zainee & Puteh, 2020), what is not clear is whether a social purpose matters to new talent. By focusing on understanding the perceptions of CSR of new talent, such as university students preparing themselves for the world of work, this study seeks to understand university students' perceptions toward the various social responsibility actions organisations partake in and the role corporate social responsibility plays in the attractiveness of an organisation for them. Therefore, this research aims to explore whether university students' perceptions of CSR may have an influence on their decision to join an organisation occupationally.

1.2 Rationale

According to Career Junction, a jobs portal, South Africa currently faces a widespread shortage of skilled workers in various sectors, particularly in the financial and information technology sectors (Career Junction, 2023). However, universities across the country produce approximately 42 000 graduates every year (Somerville, 2021) which means that upon graduating, students are faced with limited job opportunities. Nonetheless, these graduates survey the market in search for suitable organisations for workplace development. According to Catelino (2021), when university students survey the job market, they look for companies that have a positive reputation and impact on their surroundings because they want to be involved in initiatives that help in making the world a better place. Therefore, they do not want to be associated with or support companies that do not consider their impact on the wider community. Hence, it is important to understand students' perspectives regarding CSR because students may prefer companies with strong CSR initiatives, giving those companies an edge in recruiting the best candidates (Somerville, 2021). Also, many students today have a global perspective and are concerned about issues such as social inequality and climate change, therefore, companies that address these concerns can attract talent that is in tune with the global challenges of the modern business world (Catelino, 2021; Collier, 2018; Murphy, 2022).

The idea of integrating company growth with social perspectives has emerged as the founding principle upon which organisations give back to the society (Adams & de Kock, 2015). Over the past two decades, CSR has emerged as a crucial discussion not only in academic research but in business as well. Although the dimensions of CSR have been a topic under a continuous debate among researchers, organisations around the world are facing increasing pressure to be more socially conscious and active contributors to their local and global communities (Adams & de Kock, 2015).

Despite the fact that there is no shortfall of international research on the various dimensions of CSR, there are relatively little to no studies within the South African context that have considered the value attached to CSR by future talent, particularly university students. For instance, research by Fatoki (2016) explored the role gender played in how students perceive CSR. Koech and Coldwell's (2019) study focused on the perceptions of corporate social performance on university students' purchasing behaviours. These have been the only studies found with a focus on CSR and students, however, no study in the South African literature has explored whether CSR initiatives matter to students, and if so, in what way. Again, there are

few studies within the South African context that look at how CSR can be a strategic tool to manage talent in terms of attracting the right calibre of employees. Often, research on CSR usually addresses the impact of CSR on stakeholders, investors and the recipients of CSR and tends to neglect employees.

To address this knowledge gap, this research aims to investigate the type of corporate social responsibility initiatives that university students understand or value the most as well as initiatives that could draw them to an organisation when they consider their future employers. While it may seem obvious that CSR would influence students' decision-making when it comes to a choice of employer (Adams & de Kock, 2015; Collier, 2018; Fatoki, 2016; Murphy, 2022; Zainee & Puteh, 2020), this may not be the case in the South African context. This is because South Africa faces considerable socioeconomic challenges such as high unemployment and inequality rates (Ncube et al., 2018). As a result, students might put financial security and employment security ahead of CSR considerations in such a situation in order to support their families and meet their immediate requirements. Secondly, the South African job market, particularly in some areas, can be very competitive. Students may therefore prioritize finding any employment that aligns with their skills and career goals thus giving CSR factors less weight when making decisions (Ncube et al., 2018). As a result, this research aims to point out limitations in existing literature, by including a focus on the perspectives of job seekers from a South African context. This is because most studies have been based on evidence from developed countries and specific industries, neglecting contextual factors in developing countries.

The results from this study will contribute greatly to theory in adding to existing knowledge as well as in practice as companies will know exactly the initiatives that will attract young talent. This study aims to show the need for organisations to consider the growing interest of prospective employees in working for organisations that undertake CSR activities. Employing university students in the study allows for the assessment of their perception of CSR in the context of their culture, traditions and national environment, without the influence of workplace pressures that could clash with their intrinsic personal values. Understanding their current perceptions holds importance, as these values might shape their approach to social responsibility when they enter the workforce in the future.

1.3 Outline and structure of the research study

The research study is divided into six chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction and rationale of the study. The second chapter is a review of the literature which includes reviewing the history and evolution of CSR, students' perceptions of CSR and the link between CSR and talent attraction. The chapter further discusses the theoretical foundation that underpins the study. Chapter three discusses the research methodologies adopted in the study. This consists of the research design, sample, sampling technique, data analysis and ethical considerations. In the fourth chapter, the study delves into the research findings which encompass six distinct emerging themes. The fifth chapter discusses and builds on the research findings by answering the research questions. The concluding chapter discusses the study's limitations, implications for future research, recommendations and conclusion of the study.

Chapter 2 Literature review

2.1 Evolution of CSR

Social responsibility has been present since the beginning of humanity and has gradually developed to its current state (Kabir et al., 2015). The concept of CSR has a long history, and it is a concept that can be traced back to social responsibility norms that emerged in the late 19th century when emerging businesses in the United States and Great Britain were concerned about the legal status of their employees' employment (Bowen, 1953; Kabir et al., 2015). The concept emerged as result of the criticisms regarding the employment of women and children in the 1800s. According to Healed (1970) and Marinetto (1990), philanthropy was one of the earliest forms of CSR and it played a significant role in the development of CSR in the early 1900s. In his book, "Social Responsibilities of the Businessman", Bowen (1953) examined the role and responsibilities of businesses in society beyond their primary goal of maximizing profits. Bowen (1953) argued that businesses have a broader social role and should consider the impact of their actions on various stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities and the environment. He further emphasized that businesses exist within a social framework and have obligations to contribute positively to society and that businesses should go beyond legal compliance and voluntarily engage in socially responsible practices that benefit society (Bowen, 1953).

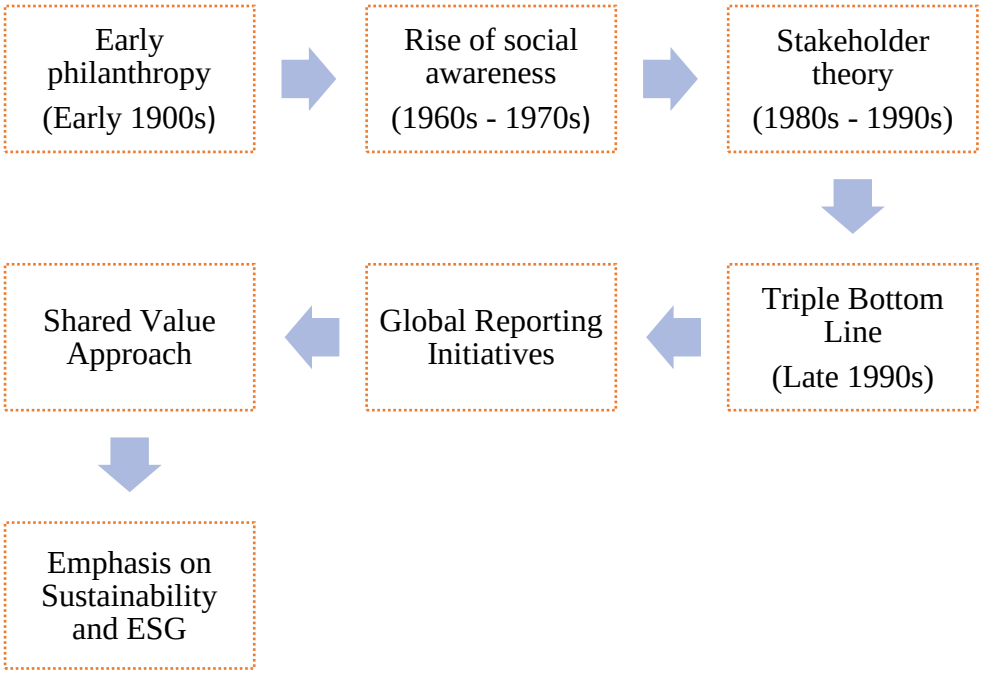
The late 1900s saw the 'rise of social awareness'. This period saw the rise of social movements advocating for civil rights, environmental protection and consumer rights (Loison et al., 2018). This period marked a shift in societal expectations with stakeholders demanding that businesses address social and environmental issues. For instance, the 1960s saw the emergence of environmental activism as a response to concerns about pollution, habitat, destruction and resource depletion. Activist groups such as Greenpeace, founded in 1971, aimed to protect the environment and raise awareness about ecological issues (Loison et al., 2018). The 1980s and 1990s saw the development of stakeholder theory which emphasized that companies ought to consider the interests of all stakeholders, including customers, employees, communities and the environment in their decision-making processes (Munilla & Miles, 2005). This broader perspective stakeholder theory highlighted that businesses have social and ethical responsibilities beyond maximizing shareholder wealth. This called for companies to integrate social and environmental considerations into their operations, taking responsibility for their impacts and engaging with stakeholders in a transparent and ethical manner (Munilla & Miles,

2005). During the late 1990s, the concept 'triple bottom line' gained prominence (Alhaddi, 2015). It expanded the traditional focus on financial performance to include environmental and social aspects. The triple bottom line framework encouraged businesses to consider their environmental and societal impacts alongside their economic goals (Alhaddi, 2015). In the early 2000s, organisations such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) established guidelines for companies to report on their sustainability practices and impacts (Halkos & Nomikos, 2020). The GRI was founded in 1997 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies (CERES), and it was established to address the need for a standardized framework for reporting on sustainability issues. These standardized frameworks provided guidelines that help organisations measure, disclose and manage their CSR activities. The frameworks were established to enable organisations to communicate their sustainability performance while fostering trust and driving positive change in social, environmental and economic dimensions (Thompson, 2023).

In more recent years, the concept of shared value, coined by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer in 2011, gained prominence. This concept suggests that organisations can create economic value while simultaneously addressing environmental and social challenges (Porter & Kramer, 2011). According to Porter and Kramer (2011), shared value is created when a company identifies and addresses social and environmental issues through its core business operations. Rather than treating social and environmental initiatives as separate CSR endeavours, shared value integrates them into the business strategy and value chain. Shared value recognizes that addressing complex social and environmental issues often requires collaboration between companies, governments, and civil society and other stakeholders, leading to win-win outcomes for both business and society (Porter & Kramer, 2011). In today's business world, there is a growing focus on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) and sustainability factors in CSR (Emerick, 2023). Environmental, Social and Governance is a framework that enables stakeholders to gain insights into how an organisation addresses risks and opportunities pertaining to environmental, social and governance aspects (Emerick, 2023). As a result, investors, consumers, and regulators are increasingly considering an organisation's social responsibility, environmental impact and governance practices when making decisions (Emerick, 2023; Kell, 2018). The integration of sustainability and ESG considerations have become vital for long-term business success and resilience as ESG offers a comprehensive perspective, acknowledging that sustainability encompasses more than solely environmental concerns (Kell, 2018).

Corporate social responsibility became more popular during the second half of the 20th century, and it subsequently became dominant in business reporting in the 21st century (Crowther & Aras, 2008). Overall, the evolution of CSR has seen a shift from philanthropy to a more comprehensive approach, integrating social and environmental considerations into core business strategies. The emphasis has moved from solely benefitting communities through charitable giving to addressing systemic issues, promoting stakeholder engagement, and aligning business practices with sustainable development goals (Crowther & Aras, 2008). The above-discussed evolutionary stages of CSR are summarized in the figure below:

Figure 1.1 Evolution of CSR



2.2. Different conceptualisations of CSR and working definition

In this modern world, organisations are moving beyond just serving as producers of goods and services. They are now considering themselves as multifunctional entities as they consider ethical, social, political, and various environmental issues in their business objectives (Kabir et al., 2015). This is because social responsibility issues are becoming significant at the broader level of many countries' economies as it also takes into consideration other issues such as justice and human rights. This is in line with Jones et al.'s (2017) definition that CSR is an organisation's discretionary policies and actions that aim to advance societal well-being

beyond its immediate financial interests and legal obligations. According to the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2000), "corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workplace and their families as well as the community and society at large" (p. 3). Corporate social responsibility is multifaceted and a contested concept with no universal definition. The absence of a universal definition of CSR reflects the complexity and diversity of perspectives, values and contexts within which organisations operate. While there are common principles and guidelines, the interpretation and implementation of CSR can vary widely across industries, regions and stakeholders.

Therefore, it is important to note that there are several conceptualizations of what CSR entails. On the one hand, Wang, Xu, and Wang (2020), describe CSR as the context-specific actions an organisation involves itself to achieve competitive advantage through impactful social or environmental initiatives that will benefit the community at large. On the other hand, Mellahi et al. (2016) describe CSR as initiatives that the organisation commits itself to in an attempt to increase its performance regardless of the motive of the CSR initiatives. Notably, Archie Carroll (1979) is one of the researchers found to have a more comprehensive and widely recognised definition of CSR. Carroll (1979) defined CSR as "the social responsibility of organisations encompassing the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary/philanthropic expectations that society has of organisations at a given point in time" (p. 500). Based on Carroll (1979)'s assertion, the economic aspect of CSR is supported by the organisation's responsibility to offer training opportunities while also providing high quality goods and services in order to make profits. This sends a signal that the organisation continuously aims to present opportunities for its employees and that the organisation promotes internal CSR by promoting employees' satisfaction within the organisation. The legal aspect of CSR fosters an organisation to operate within a defined legislative framework (Carroll, 1979). This sends a signal that when the organisation operates legally, it helps to create a good reputation as well as earning employees' commitment. Furthermore, CSR consists of ethical responsibility which looks at the moral rules that the organisation is expected to oblige by (Carroll, 1979; Wang et al., 2020). This ethical responsibility shows that the organisation is trustworthy in its operations as well as when dealing with stakeholders. Notably, this ethical responsibility results in employees responding with more positive behaviours and attitudes within the organisation (Carroll, 1979; Wang et al., 2020). The philanthropic aspect of CSR expects organisations to not only be involved in activities mandated or required by law, but to also engage in activities

that show that the organisation cares about the society in which it operates (Wang et al., 2020). By doing so, this will encourage employees to identify themselves more with the organisation which ultimately shapes their behaviours and attitudes about CSR and the organisation as a whole. In other words, CSR activities shape the way organisations relate with their societies.
Looking more at South African literature, Cronje (1999) described CSR as the behaviour of an organisation toward its various stakeholders, including employees, suppliers, consumers, shareholders, competitors, and the community as a whole. Cronje (1999) further emphasized that being socially responsible meant reconciling the interests of different stakeholders. Codwell (2001) adds that CSR entails management's recognition of the obligation to consider profit, customer satisfaction and societal wellbeing as equally valuable when evaluating the organisation's performance. Slabbert's (1998) definition of CSR emphasizes an intelligent and objective concern for society's welfare. It restricts individual and corporate behaviour from destructive activities, regardless of their immediate profitability and promotes positive contributions to human betterment (Slabbert, 1998).

Notably, there are various alternative expressions of CSR which often include corporate citizenship, business and governance, corporate environmental management, business ethics, sustainability or sustainable development (Visser, 2012). Visser's (2012) findings are also synonymous with Bowen's (1953) findings who discovered that concepts such as business morality, public responsibility and social obligations were synonyms for corporate social responsibility. Considering the various definitions and views mentioned, it can be deduced that CSR is understood as a concept where organisations integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and interactions with various stakeholders.

Due to the economic and social changes across the globe, organisations are being urged to start focusing more on CSR-related issues such as social, economic, environmental and ethical issues in addition to the financial aspects. This is because organisations are responsible for the impact of their operational activities on the wider society. However, the continual dispute about the conceptual underpinning of CSR has resulted in the contested definition of the concept. This is because contextual factors influence CSR practices, causing them to vary at the individual, collective and country levels. This has resulted in the rise of several guidelines such as the AccountAbility (AA) guidelines, the UN Global Compact, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) guidelines, and the ISO Standards in order to give organisation's CSR operations some degree of regulation and credibility (Simpson & Aprim, 2018).

Irrespective of their size and nature of their business, the social responsibility of organisations has spread rapidly all over the world in both the academic and business environment. Hence, the concept of CSR "has been developed in order to equilibrate the interests of both organisations and stakeholders, regardless of their typology" (Modreanu & Andrisan, 2022; p. 263). As a result, many corporations around the globe are now aiming to create their products and services with a purpose by promoting a social mission and being sustainable and environmentally conscious by decreasing their overall negative footprint. From the various definitions of CSR that have been discussed thus far, CSR will be defined as an organisation's voluntary actions to address social, environmental and ethical concerns beyond legal requirements. This definition of CSR is ideal for this study as it aims to explore how university students define and perceive the social, environmental, and ethical initiatives undertaken by organisations in South Africa especially when considering a potential employer.

2.3 Nature and importance of CSR in developing countries vs. developed countries

A comparative look into the differences of CSR practices among developed and developing countries opens an interesting area of research. This is because there is a need to understand the way CSR is shaped by the economic, social and geographical conditions in these developed and developing nations (Sharma, 2019). Corporate social responsibility practices have been mainly realized in developed countries. However, over the past few decades, CSR has been slowly extending through to the developing nations as well.

According to Kabir et al. (2015) CSR literature has primarily been associated with developed countries while there is relatively limited research on CSR in the developing economies, in particular the African continent. This resulted in many CSR studies failing to investigate the contextual factors in developing countries as a result of their unique political, cultural, social and environmental issues (Simpson & Aprim, 2018; Tilt, 2016). According to Tilt (2016), context is crucial in understanding CSR practices and its implications. According to Visser (2008), "CSR debates in Africa have historically been framed in terms of the ethics of colonialism and apartheid and the prevalence of corruption and fraud on the Africa continent" (p. 479). Despite the largely negative sentiment on Africa's development, there has been significant progress on the continent over the past decade. For instance, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso and Uganda have grown at a rate of more than 5% per year since the late 1990s as a result of an increase in the foreign direct investments (FDI). This is due to Africa's new generation of

leadership and partnership efforts, such as the African Union, the East African Community and the New Partnership for Africa's growth (NEPAD), which are taking responsibility for the African continent's growth (Visser, 2008). Despite these efforts, Africa remains a marginal territory on a global scale.

Sharma (2019) found that CSR initiatives in developing countries are carried out through incorporating the country's root traditions. For example, CSR activities in Somalia have been identified to be mainly driven by the country's commitment to cultural and personal values as well as its religious beliefs (Sharma, 2019). Further, Sharma (2019) and Visser (2008) found that this was because CSR activities in developing countries were more suited towards resolving local socioeconomic issues. For instance, organisations in developing countries promote sustainability by providing aid to local or marginalised communities as well as efforts to conserve the environment. Such CSR campaigns are realised through charity drives, financial aid and giveaways (Sharma, 2019). As a result, CSR practices within developing nations are perceived to be less watertight and formal in the way they adhere to a set of benchmarks as opposed to developed nations that practice formal rules of CSR in their aspirations towards achieving global sustainability (Sharma, 2019; Skinner & Mersham, 2008). Although this might be the case, these strategies that companies within developing nations use are found to be beneficial as they provide a simple navigation process of carrying out socially responsible tasks (Tilt, 2016).

Visser (2012) provides an appealing perspective by analysing the nature and importance of CSR in developed nations vs. developing nations. In doing so, Visser (2012), uses Archie Carroll's CSR pyramid to illustrate the nature and importance of CSR particularly in the African context vs. Western countries. Firstly, the role of business organisations in Africa is a contested issue given the continent's history of political corruption, labour exploitation, environmental degradation and social disruption which stretches back more than 100 years due to colonial rule (Visser, 2012). With this in mind, the challenge for CSR in Africa becomes apparent as we are reminded of the depth of societal needs that continue to exist despite decades of relief and development aid. According to Visser (2012), there is a general consensus that the private sector is the better institution in enacting positive contributions towards improving the economic, social and environmental conditions in Africa. Furthermore, developing countries such as South Africa often face unique social, economic and environmental challenges and as a result, South African university students may prioritise CSR initiatives that directly address local issues such as poverty, access to education, healthcare and environmental sustainability.

Referring to Carroll's CSR pyramid, specifically the economic responsibilities, Visser (2012) highlights that the economic contribution of companies in Africa is highly valued by governments and communities. This is because Africa is faced with challenges which mainly include the shortage of foreign direct investment (FDI), high unemployment rates, widespread poverty and crippling external debt. However, economic responsibility in the USA and in continental Europe is defined more broadly where it entails making financial decisions with a dedication to creating positive impact (Iyoha, 1999; Visser, 2012).

The economic contribution of organisations in Africa is seemingly starting to extend beyond profits and including factors such as value added in production, investments in staff development and technology transfer as well as the societal value of their products (Visser, 2012). Anglo American is cited as an example of a company emphasizing economic responsibility in Africa, where its economic contribution is seen to exceed the GDP of many individual African countries (Visser, 2012). Further, Anglo American's economic contribution is emphasized through what it calls economic multipliers which include generating investment and income, creating jobs, establishing local business linkages and supporting technology transfer (Visser, 2012). In South Africa, Anglo American established a fund to promote the entry of black economic empowerment participants joining mining companies. As a result, Anglo American became subjected to regulations aimed at increasing access to economic benefits for previously disadvantaged individuals (Visser, 2012). This resulted in both Anglo American and the South African government entering into a legally binding commitment, namely the Mining Charter. However, Visser (2012) finds that this economic contribution by organisations leads to economic dependence for these African countries. For example, the construction of the Mozal aluminium smelter by BHP Billiton in Mozambique, significantly boosted the country's export earnings and GDP growth (Visser, 2012). However, it also raises questions about the potential consequences of what would happen if organisations were to withdraw from a country and the implications for legal compliance when the government relies heavily on a single company.

In Africa, philanthropic responsibility receives the second top priority as a manifestation of CSR (Visser, 2012). There are several factors that contribute to this emphasis on philanthropy in Africa. Firstly, the socio-economic needs in African societies are substantial, making philanthropy an expected norm and the right thing to do (Tilt, 2016). Organisations recognize that they cannot thrive in failing societies, therefore, philanthropy is seen as a direct approach to enhance the prospects of the communities where businesses operate. Secondly, majority of

the African countries rely heavily on foreign aid, with Sub-Saharan Africa receiving substantial official development assistance (ODA) (Iyoha, 1999; Tilt, 2016; Visser, 2012). In 2002, Sub-Saharan Africa received approximately $150 million in philanthropic funding from American grant makers which therefore sees philanthropy as something that has become ingrained in African culture due to reliance on aid. Visser (2012) notes that philanthropy in Africa is still in its early stages of maturity because most African countries often equate CSR with philanthropy rather than the integrated approaches found in developed nations. Corporate emphasis on philanthropy is observed through organisations such as the Southern African Grantmakers' Association and the Africa's Grantmakers' Affinity Group (Visser, 2012). Again, Anglo American is also highlighted as an example of a company that prioritizes philanthropy in Africa. Their *Report to Society 2003* emphasizes the significant role of its philanthropic programs in developing countries. Notably, the Anglo-American Chairman's Fund, established in 1975, is the organisation's primary vehicle for charitable engagement in Africa (Tilt, 2016; Visser, 2012). For instance, education received the largest proportion of the $10 million distributed in 2003. The organisation's philanthropic contributions also extend to addressing HIV/AIDS with extensive voluntary counselling, testing and antiretroviral therapy for employees.

Legal responsibilities in developing nations have a lower priority compared to developed nations (Visser, 2012). This does not imply that developing countries openly disregard the law, however the pressure for good conduct is significantly reduced. There are several reasons that contribute to this situation. Firstly, many developing countries lack adequate resources and administrative capacity for their legal systems (Tilt, 2016). Secondly, most developing nations lag behind developed nations in terms of incorporating human rights and other CSR-related issues into their legislation (Mwaura, 2004; Tilt, 2016; Visser, 2012). The Nigerian Law Reform Commission is cited as a prominent example which refused to recommend a provision obliging directors to consider the interests of employees on the basis that it could have potential adverse effects on the country's developing economy by deterring foreign investment and ultimately lead to the loss of job creation (Visser, 2012). This approach aligns more with the Western perspective of legislation as interference with private liberty (Visser, 2012).

Visser (2012) further argues that the assumption made by Carroll (1991) that the law is a form of codified ethics driven by changing values may not always true in developing nations, particularly those in Africa. While there has been progress in strengthening human rights and CSR in certain African countries like South Africa and Kenya, the effectiveness of legislation

as a driver for CSR continues to be seriously hampered by these countries' implementation capacity. A survey of top companies in South Africa reveals that only ten percent of these companies view upholding the law and regulations as the main reason they engage in corporate citizenship (Tilt, 2016; Visser, 2012). Furthermore, the weak influence of the law in South Africa as a barrier against unethical behaviour is highlighted by KPMG (2012) survey where respondents identified that the lack of proper punishments, ineffective law enforcement and inefficiencies in the justice system were reasons for the increase in fraud. Orpen (1987) conducted a comparative study on the CSR orientation of South African and American managers. The findings revealed that American managers showed greater openness to CSR policies compared to their South African counterparts. Moreover, American managers believed that their society placed more significance on CSR than the South African managers' society did. Orpen (1987) attributed these differences to the varying cultural values and norms prevalent in South African and American societies.

Developed nations such as those in Europe, hold a higher priority in being ethically responsible (Tilt, 2016). However, developing nations such as those in Africa, ethics seem to have the least influence on CSR. Despite this, Africa has not been unaffected by the global trends toward improved governance (Visser, 2012). For instance, the King Reports on Corporate Governance in South Africa (issued first in 1992 and subsequently in 2002) have been ground-breaking in incorporating CSR issues. The 1992 King Report was the first global governance code to introduce the term 'stakeholders' and stressed the significance of corporate accountability beyond the interests of shareholders. Subsequently, the King Report from 2002 was the first to contain a section on integrated sustainability reporting whereby it covered various policies and practices related to transformation, safety, ethical, health and environmental management. For South African companies, compliance with the code has been voluntary, however, the Johannesburg Securities Exchange (JSE) has made the King II a listing requirement (Visser, 2012). Large companies in South Africa have responded well to the requirements, with a significant percentage of these companies reporting annually on sustainability-related issues and referencing internal codes of ethics. Furthermore, research on JSE-listed companies shows a high level of adoption and future compliance with King II (Visser, 2012).

However, it is important to note that such progress is the exception rather than the rule in Africa as a whole. Even among big South African corporations with basic ethics systems in place, ethics training and senior management accountability for ethics are still inadequate (Visser, 2012). The crucial question is whether corporate governance practices have trickled down to

the majority of companies in Africa. According to Visser (2012), global corruption statistics in Africa suggest that ethics remains the lowest priority in CSR. Notably in Africa, a gap still exists between the ethical stance taken by a small number of companies, typically large multinationals, and the widespread reality of entrenched corruption in many nations (Tilt, 2016; Visser, 2012). The African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption has been launched to address this issue, but there is still a lack of political will with outstanding ratifications needed for it to enter into force (Visser, 2012).

To summarize, this discussion shows that the nature and importance attached to CSR differs among developing and developed nations. By referring to Carroll's CSR pyramid, economic responsibilities in developing nations, especially African countries, take precedence as these countries rely heavily on external funds from their western counterparts. Again, this is because Africa is faced with challenges which mainly include the shortage of foreign direct investment (FDI), high unemployment rates, widespread poverty and crippling external debt.

Figure 1.2 helps to summarize the above discussion in terms of how Carroll's CSR pyramid is valued in developing nations, particularly in Africa.

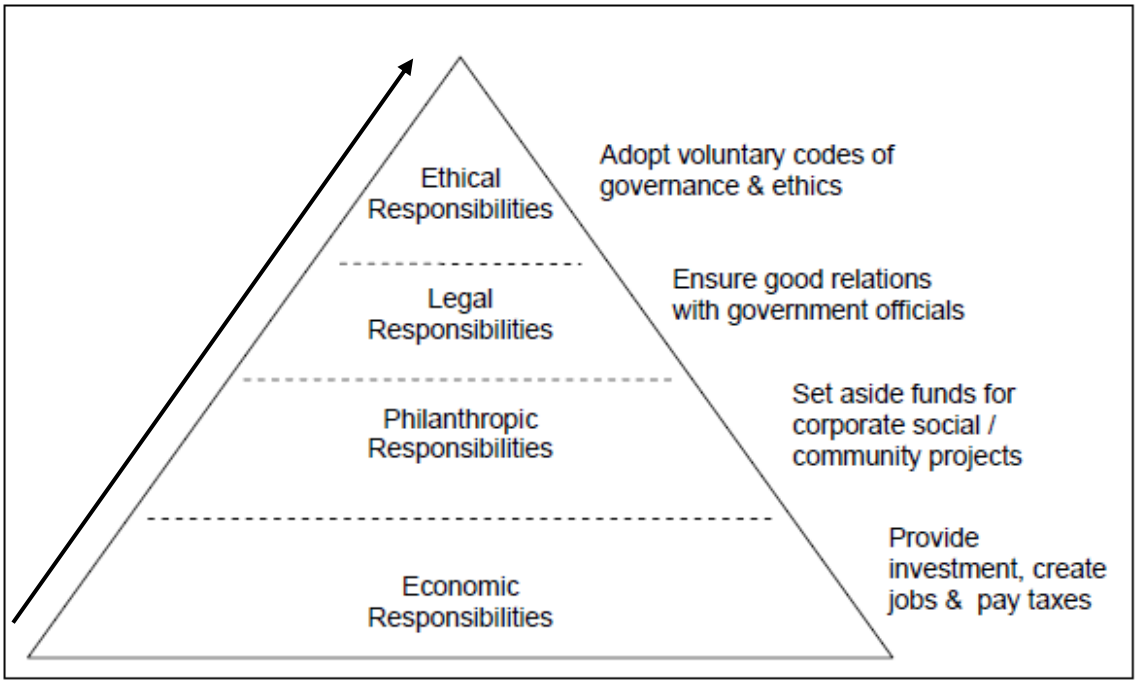


Figure 1.2 CSR Priorities in Africa

2.4. The nature of corporate social responsibility in South Africa

One of the first people to raise the concept of CSR in South Africa was Professor Meyer Feldberg (1972). Feldberg, a professor of Business Administration, delivered a lecture at the University of Cape Town about the relationship between corporate profitability and social responsibility (Kabir et al., 2015). Feldberg (1972) suggested that businesses should be involved in the communities in which they operated and sold their products, and from which they drew employees. During the 1970s, organisations then recognised that poor living conditions of the Black majority in South Africa was affecting the country's economic development (Kabir et al., 2015). This resulted in the establishment of the Urban Foundation in 1976 which is now known as National Business Initiative (established post-apartheid) (Fourie, 2005; Kabir et al., 2015). The establishment of the National Business Initiative was to set up long-term development goals for the improvement of the Black population. According to Fourie (2005), the foundation contributed approximately 1.8 billion rand towards housing projects, the building of many schools and it was also used to train more than 20 000 schoolteachers at the time.

It was in the late 1970s that CSR became a prominent issue in the debates surrounding the question of whether global multinational companies should withdraw their investments from South Africa as a result of the apartheid regime (Fourie, 2005). Rather than disinvesting, many companies argued that they could start incorporating social standards within their business activities (Fourie, 2005; Kabir et al., 2015). These standards became formalized by the Sullivan Principles, which were a set of principles targeted to deal with discrimination in the workplace. The establishment of the Sullivan Principles in the late 1970s, were launched in order to encourage American organisations in South Africa to treat their African and American employees equally (Fourie, 2005). The Sullivan Principles mandated that American businesses with investments in South Africa devote a portion of their revenues to community development. As a result, these organisations started contributing to social causes through the establishment of trust funds (Fourie, 2005). For example, companies such as the Liberty Foundation, Gencor Development Fund, Gold Fields Foundation and Anglo-American among others, established these types of trust funds (Kabir et al., 2015). The significance of these principles was seen in their concern for core business activities.

The 1990s were not only marked by the new political dispensation, but also a stronger trend towards expanded CSR programs (Hamann, 2009). Corporate social responsibility in South Africa has been dominantly interpreted in terms of corporate social investment (CSI) (Hamann, 2009). Other scholars interpreted CSR in South Africa as 'strategic philanthropy' with emphasis on health and education initiatives nationally and in communities in which organisations operated (Bezuidenhout et al., 2007; Fourie, 2005; Kabir et al., 2015). These interpretations originated from initiatives such as the Urban Foundation. Of noteworthy importance, the term CSI is identified as a distinctively South African characteristic/term which denotes community relations or simply corporate social (Fig, 2005; Kabir et al., 2015). As a result, most CSR activities in South Africa are developed and conducted via CSI. Some of the key elements of strategic CSI programs adopted by organisations in South Africa include regular reporting, employee involvement, development of best-practice guidelines, alignment with core business and a dedicated CSI department or trust fund among others (The CSI Handbook, 2006). The reasoning behind the term CSI among South African organisations was that they were going beyond their responsibility of paying tax by investing in their surrounding communities (Fig, 2005). However, there were concerns about the lack of integration with core business strategies and the need for a broader understanding of CSR beyond philanthropy. Furthermore, the concept of corporate citizenship in South Africa emerged as a broader conception of CSR, encompassing business ethics, corporate governance, workplace health and safety, labour practices and environmental standards (Fig, 2005; Hamann, 2009). This perspective emphasized the internalization of social and environmental costs and highlighted the interconnections between different aspects of CSR. Overall, the history and context of CSR in South Africa reflected a complex interplay between philanthropic gestures, political manoeuvres, exploitation of black labour and efforts to address social development (Hamann, 2009). Moreover, the understanding of CSR in South Africa has evolved from a narrow focus on philanthropy to a broader conception of corporate citizenship that encompasses various dimensions of responsible business practices.

2.4.1 Role of CSR in South Africa

The role of corporate social responsibility in South Africa is believed to be shaped by the country's painful and complex history (Hamann, 2009). The country's apartheid history gave rise to some of the first examples of voluntary efforts that helped improve government policy and advance social development (Hamann, 2009). As a result, the legacy of apartheid has had

a considerable impact on the context and concept of CSR. During the apartheid era, Hamann (2009) discovered that mining companies' requirement for relatively inexpensive and inexperienced labour for the extraction of deep low-grade ores, played a significant role in the development of aspects of the apartheid system. This gave rise to racist policies in South Africa which included taxing rural blacks in order to force them into wage labour. This system of providing cheap labour to the mines continued throughout the twentieth century resulting in the continued impoverishment of rural areas (Hamann, 2009). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission which was established post-apartheid in 1994 to investigate human rights abuses during apartheid, came to the conclusion in its final report that apartheid was provided by the mines and not by the Afrikaners (Hamann, 2009). It was at this time that some South African companies began trying to amend some of the worst elements of the apartheid regime by playing an important role in the country's transition to democracy.

The 1970s also gave rise to the popular resentment towards the state's classification of blacks as "informal inhabitants" in urban areas and its lack of investment in informal townships (Hamann, 2009; Skinner & Mersham, 2008). A coalition of businesses, led by Harry Oppenheimer of Anglo American and Anton Rupert of Rembrandt, formed the Urban Foundation to address urban development challenges in an effort to improve the situation in the townships (Hamann, 2009; Skinner & Mersham, 2008). With a membership of over 350 companies and having raised substantial sums of money, the Foundation implemented and supported various urban development and educational projects, mainly in Soweto. The Urban Foundation made efforts that went beyond funding housing and education to engaging in political campaigning against the harsh elements of the apartheid state's policies (Hamann, 2009). Additionally, this gave rise to a number of group initiatives in the private sector that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s such as the Consultative Business Movement which was established with the aim of creating a dialogue across the economic and political boundaries (Hamann, 2009; Skinner & Mersham, 2008). After the 1994 elections, the Urban Foundation and the Consultative Business Movement merged to form the National Business Initiative (NBI) which was established to contribute to initiatives such as teacher training and supporting the criminal justice system (Hamann, 2009; Kabir et al., 2015). Apart from its contributions to the above initiatives, the NBI also played a significant role in promoting CSR in South Africa as the national chapter of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development as well as the country's focal point for the UN Global Compact (Hamann, 2009). As the apartheid era

came to an end, there was a rise in individual company philanthropy initiatives above these group efforts.

Kabir et al., (2015) finds that the role of corporate social responsibility activities in South Africa are mainly dominated by large corporations. These authors also found that the country's troubled past also plays a big role in driving CSR activities in the country. Although South Africa still faces high levels of poverty and inequality even after gaining independence, much has been done by the corporate sector in-conjunction with the government's effort with regard to the public development of the country's economy and social involvement of companies (Fourie, 2005; Kabir et al., 2015).

Since the country's democratic freedom, South Africa has embarked on an ambitious law reform journey (Kabir et al., 2015; Hamann, 2009). Various legislative developments have played a significant role in shaping the country's CSR environment. For instance, the national legislation, premised on the constitution, has been found to play a crucial role in the development of South Africa's CSR agenda (Hamann, 2009). This shows that the South African government is putting in the effort to legislate on social issues than most other African states. A particularly prominent government initiative has been the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) (Hamann, 2009; Skinner & Mersham, 2008). In supporting the historically disadvantaged population groups such as the Blacks, Coloureds and Indians, the South African government introduced the BEE Act in 2003. The BEE Act was the government's strategy for promoting economic transformation and redressing apartheid disparities by presenting socioeconomic chances, as these were scarcely available to them during the apartheid era (Skinner & Mersham, 2008). As a result, CSR programs became formalised through corporate social investment guidelines provided under the BEE Act of 2003. In January of 2004, the BEE Act was firmly placed on the corporate agenda where organisations were obligated to be BEE-compliant if they wished to do any business with the government (Kabir et al., 2015; Skinner & Mersham, 2008).

Furthermore, there are a range of CSR-related regulations that have been put in place by the South African government to encourage corporate sectors to engage in CSR practices. Relevant CSR laws and acts that have been put in place include the Labour Relations Act 66 of 1995; Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998; Promotion of Access to Information Act 2 of 2000; Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993; the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998; the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000, and the National

Environmental Management Act 107 of 1998 (Hamann, 2009; Kabir et al., 2015). In particular, the Skills Development Act in conjunction with the Skills Development Levies Act requires organisations to contribute a percentage of their total earnings to the National Skills Fund, which is controlled by the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) (Skinner & Mersham, 2008). The SETAs compensate organisations for providing legitimate training and skills development programs. Also, the National Environmental Management Act is in place to promote development that is economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable (Hamann, 2009). Additionally, it focuses on environmental justice and equitable access to natural resources, encourages public involvement in environmental decision-making, safeguards whistleblowers, and permits public interest litigation.

While South African organisations are not directly mandated to engage in CSR activities, they face external pressure from diverse groups advocating for social progress and environmental preservation within the corporate sector (Hamann, 2009). These various groups advocating for environmental protection and social development can be regarded as key CSR drivers (Kabir et al., 2015). The first significant key driver of CSR is the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) which basically sets standards in the CSR sector for listed companies (Hamann, 2009; JSE SRI Index, 2014). In 2004, the JSE launched the Socially Responsible Investing (SRI) Index which is used to identify organisations "listed on the JSE that integrate the principles of the triple bottom line and good governance into their business activities" (JSE SRI Index, 2014, p. 2). The listed companies are then expected to reveal in their annual reports their CSR or sustainability information as well as their plans for incorporating the triple bottom line into all aspects of their business operations. The SRI Index is then used to measure firms' policies, management systems, performance, and reporting in relation to the three pillars of the triple bottom line.

Trade Unions are also a significant driver of CSR as they play an important role with regards to labour law, employee benefits, working conditions and job allocations (Hamann, 2009). Another key significant driver of CSR is the government itself. This is because the government plays a crucial role in the economic, social and ecological development of the country through the BEE act (Kabir et al., 2015). Again, the pressure on South African companies to be CSR conscious comes from the political/governmental guidelines to help address the imbalances of the past (Kabir et al., 2015; Ramlall, 2012). In South Africa, civil society organisations have an influential voice regarding environmental protection, human rights, and equal opportunities. For example, AfriForum is a prominent civil society organisation in South Africa adopted to

address issues relating to equal rights, justice and freedom for all (Kabir et al., 2015). The Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) is also another significant factor in the socio-economic development of the country. For instance, "the BBBEE demands of BEE companies to provide opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups in respect of job allocation, access to equity stakes and managerial positions" (Kabir et al., 2015; p. 285).

Most South African companies have predominantly concentrated their social responsibility efforts in domains like social and community development, environmental initiatives, education, healthcare, HIV/AIDS awareness, food security, agriculture, support for small businesses, training and skills development, job creation as well as safety and security (Ramlall, 2012). Apart from the above mentioned CSR drivers, emerging and young professionals such as university students often advocate for social progress and social responsibility due to a combination of local challenges, a desire for positive change, ethical consideration, global awareness and the inspiration they draw from various sources (Kabir et al., 2015). Their advocacy is rooted in a commitment to creating positive change and addressing the complex challenges faced by their societies (Kabir et al., 2015). Therefore, understanding the importance of CSR to these groups is essential for organisations seeking to attract, retain and engage the next generation of talent. Moreover, it helps organisations build sustainable and mutually beneficial relationships with the emerging workforce.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the South African government as well as the corporate sector are taking the issues of redressing the imbalances of the past seriously through their CSR initiatives (Kabir et al., 2015).

2.5 Differences in perceptions of CSR among students in developing countries vs developed countries

In their study, Modreanu and Andrisan (2022) found that Generation Z cohorts (born between 1997 and 2012) are the most passionate supporters of responsible business practices due to their access to worldwide information through the use of the internet. As a result, these Gen Z cohorts are able to comprehend more complex problems due to their early use of technology. The digital environment, especially social media platforms, constitute the main used channels by these Gen Zs. Research also shows that these Gen Zs have a positive attitude towards responsible business practices and that they seem to be more interested in being implicated in

responsible action and to establish a positive change at the social level (Ariker & Toksoy, 2017; Modeanu & Andrisan, 2022).

Galvao et al. (2019) finds that while Gen Zs may not fully understand the concept of CSR, they generally hold a positive attitude towards responsible practices and believe that companies should incorporate social goals. They view CSR as mutually beneficial for organisations and stakeholders (Galvao et al., 2019).

Research also shows that university students' perceptions of CSR can vary between developed and developing countries due to several factors such as cultural, social, economic and educational contexts (Alfirevic et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Modreanu & Andrisan, 2022). For instance, Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al. (2012) finds that students in developed countries tend to have greater exposure to CSR concepts as they are more likely to be exposed to corporate practices and discussions on social responsibility. Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al. (2012) emphasizes that their perceptions of CSR are often influenced by factors such as environmental and social consciousness, education and exposure, consumer behaviour as well as awareness and expectations. With regards to environmental and social consciousness, students in developed countries are found to have a heightened consciousness as they value sustainable practices, ethical sourcing, diversity, inclusivity and transparency in corporate behaviour (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Modreanu & Andrisan, 2022). Secondly, universities in developed countries often integrate CSR-related topics into their curriculum, thereby exposing students to the concepts and encouraging critical thinking about responsible business practices (Modreanu & Andrisan, 2022). Also, these students are found to be conscious consumers who make purchasing decisions based on a company's CSR initiatives. According to Modreanu and Andrisan (2022), they support brands that align with their values and may even be willing to pay a premium for socially responsible products or services. Furthermore, students in developed countries are found to generally have a higher awareness of CSR initiatives and expect businesses to engage in socially responsible practices. They may view CSR as a standard business practice and consider it essential for sustainable development (Modreanu & Andrisan, 2022).

Notably, students in developing countries may have different perceptions of CSR due to distinct socio-economic conditions and cultural influences. Their perceptions are shaped by factors such as socio-economic contexts where poverty, inequality and basic needs are often pressing concerns. Furthermore, cultural values and traditions can influence how CSR is

perceived. As a result, these students may prioritize personal economic development over CSR initiatives (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2012). For example, students in developing nations are found to prioritize community wellbeing and family support as key components of CSR (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2012; Modreanu & Andrisan, 2022). They appreciate companies that contribute directly to local development and address community-specific challenges (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2012). Compared to their counterparts in developed countries, students in developing nations are found to have limited exposure to CSR concepts and initiatives. This is because corporate social responsibility may be less discussed or emphasized in the curriculum (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2012). This can result in lower awareness and understanding of CSR. Alfirevic et al. (2021) found compelling differences between students' perception of those from developed nations versus those from developing nations. Young student populations from developed countries are most likely to not have experienced radical economic downturns and are found to have lived in a growing prosperity environment unlike their counterparts in developing countries (Alfirevic et al., 2021). Growing up with financial support and stable living standards is found to lower these students' general interest in economic success (Alfirevic et al., 2021). Students from developing countries, who are most likely to have experienced radical economic downturns, have their interpretation and importance of economic success affected. Consequently, students from developing countries tend to have a different outlook on life (Alfirevic et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2012). Despite lacking public trust, these young student populations tend to accept the need for public institutions and emphasise economic growth and government intervention. This could be attributed to a general distrust of new institutions developed after socio-economic transitions (Alfirevic et al., 2021). However, Simpson and Aprim's (2018) study showed that prospective job seekers from developing nations were more drawn to employment and economic practices rather than practices focused on community benefits and environmental concerns. Therefore, it might be easy for students in developed countries to find social factors more attractive than personal factors.

In summary, understanding the differences in perceptions of CSR among university students is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it allows organisations to tailor their initiatives to align with local values and address issues that are most relevant to the community. Secondly, it enables organisations to build positive relationships with local communities, foster trust and contribute to sustainable development in a way that respects and responds to the specific needs of each community (Alfirevic et al., 2021). Furthermore, understanding the differences in CSR

perceptions among students adds educational and practical value. It fosters global citizenship, cultural competence, ethical decision-making and the ability to contribute meaningfully to CSR initiatives (Alfirevic et al., 2021). Students, with their fresh perspectives play a vital role in shaping the future of socially responsible business practices.

2.6. Talent management and attraction

2.6.1 Talent Management

Talent management is an integrated system which consists of processes such as recruitment and selection, developing and retaining the right talent at all organisational levels (Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021). The concept of talent management has received great attention both in theory and practice (Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021). The notion of talent management has evolved from the conventional human resource (HR) practices to the management of talent that is relevant to the current evolving business environment (Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020). An essential aspect of talent management is the management of rewards. This is where organisations assess which rewards (whether monetary or non-monetary) hold value for their employees (Rumpel & Medcof, 2006). For instance, organisations can design comprehensive total rewards packages that effectively attract and retain talent (Rumpel & Medcof, 2006). Such comprehensive reward packages are particularly crucial when aiming to attract knowledge workers who are instrumental in an organisation's long-term success and contribute significantly to its intellectual capital (Birt et al., 2004). Also, the competition for skilled individuals is particularly pronounced within the realm of knowledge workers due to the transition of the economy from an industrial-based one to a knowledge-based economy (Schlechter et al., 2014).

According to Schlechter et al. (2014), South Africa faces skills shortages and most corporations in the country are adopting various talent management strategies in order to find the right talent. For most people in South Africa, especially the youth, find it difficult to secure employment. According to Businesstech (2021), the unemployment rate for the youth aged between 15-24 years sits at 46%. Despite this high youth unemployment rate, Statistics South Africa (StatsSA) (2022) also mentions that not all youths are impacted equally because those who have completed some form of tertiary education seem to be at an advantage. Statistics South Africa (2022) further mentions that the unemployment rate for youths with a tertiary qualification is approximately 23% while the unemployment rate for those with only a matric certificate sits at

almost 37%. Inadequate levels of education in the country seem to be costing youths jobs. As a result, when the education system does not produce the skills needed in the labour market, unemployment increases progressively (Businesstech, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2022). Wolfswinkel and Enslin (2020) also mention that various socio-economic factors in South Africa such as a lack of job security, a volatile economy and brain drain due to high levels of emigration of educated South Africans are contributing to organisations' inability to attract and hire the right talent. Although the coronavirus pandemic has resulted in widespread job-cuts around the country, it has, however, intensified the demand for talent in areas that require technological competence and medical skills (Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020).

Despite the Great Resignation wave and the subsequent talent crisis, employees still have the upper hand because companies are desperate for talent (Fast Company, 2022; Viljoen, 2020). According to Termuende (2022), numerous companies are still adhering to the traditional carrot-and-stick approach rather than focusing on building compelling cultures that employees genuinely wish to be part of. Instead of investing in creating a desirable work environment, they rely on offering attractive cash incentives to entice new talent (Termuende, 2022). While this strategy might be effective in attracting talent, it often falls short when it comes to retaining employees in the long term (Termuende, 2022). As a result, Termuende asserts that organisations now need to change their culture and processes to retain Millennials and attract Gen Zs as the ongoing quitting spree of young talent signals dissatisfaction and a lack of meeting employees' needs by employers. Research has shown that companies that forget to improve culture and workplace policies and practices, will see high turnover rates because they hire people who are not a good fit (Termuende, 2022; Viljoen, 2020; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020). This calls for the use of new talent management strategies that can be used to retain and attract the right talent. According to Viljoen (2020), employees often propose innovative solutions to problems. However, organisational culture and systems often act as barriers, hindering them from expressing or implementing their ideas. Therefore, new approaches to company policies and new talent management strategies can be used to prepare for the future of work. For talent management to be effective, real cultural and workplace changes are important for new visions to take hold (Breaugh, 2013; Horwitz, 2013; Termuende, 2022). For instance, most of the research in the field of recruitment focuses on the procedures and actions employed by organizations during the recruitment process, rather than considering the perspectives, values, and self-beliefs of the applicants themselves (Breaugh, 2013). Without a

clear understanding of how potential applicants perceive the organization and what they believe, organizations are unlikely to choose and implement the most effective talent attraction strategies and tactics.

2.6.2 Talent attraction

The concept of talent is commonly described as possessing unique and crucial skill sets and being a good fit with the company brand, characterised by a strong alignment between their personal purpose, vision, values and behaviour and that of the company (Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020). In the context of recruitment, talent attraction refers to the process of identifying and attracting people who have the skills and abilities necessary to fill vacant positions within an organisation (Afirevic et al., 2021; Magbool et al., 2016; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020). It is also a process of proactively filling job openings as quickly as possible in order to meet the organisations' objectives (Afirevic et al., 2021). Talent attraction is a critical component of talent acquisition, which involves sourcing, identifying, and recruiting top talents who possess the skills, knowledge and experience that align with the organisation's needs and goals (Magbool et al., 2016; Wolfswinkel & Enslin, 2020). The presence of talent has a direct and positive impact on an organisation's performance and overall success, offering a sustainable competitive advantage in a global market where competitors quickly emulate and enhance products and services (Keller & Meaney, 2017; Oosthuizen & Nienaber, 2010). According to Yu et al. (2017), an organisation's competitive advantage is closely linked to its talent, which is considered a unique feature of an organisation. Such talent becomes valuable human resources for organisations because they provide and serve as the competitive advantage for the organisation's survival. Given the demand for organisations to adopt responsible behaviour due to the increasing pressure from the public, organisations themselves are realising that these social practices are an efficient way of attracting graduates (Barrena-Martinez et al., 2015). Wolfswinkel (2019) emphasizes the significance of employer branding, consistent branding, internal branding, corporate branding, and coherent branding in the context of 'war for talent', a term coined to describe the competitive struggle among organisations to acquire and retain skilled employees. A comprehensive strategy for attracting applicants encompasses various aspects and can shed light on the positive psychological advantages that candidates gain by affiliating themselves with a specific organization (Barrena-Martinez et al., 2015; Keller & Meaney, 2017; Magbool et al., 2016). This aspect holds significance not just for applicants but

also for organizations, as both parties stand to benefit from the psychological bond formed between them.

In South Africa, the talent war is intensified due to the socio-economic factors such as high unemployment rates and a deficient education system, resulting in a talent paradox (Wolfswinkel, 2019). However, South African companies are turning to brand building to aid in attracting talent within this challenging socio-economic backdrop (Wolfswinkel, 2019).

2.6.3 Talent attraction and Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility initiatives challenge organisations to become innovative and make use of effective tools to attract talent as people are a vital human resource responsible for any organisation's success (Wang et al., 2020). Besides attracting new talent, organisations are adopting CSR initiatives as a necessary condition to improve their competitiveness against other firms. Consequently, Barrena-Martinez et al. (2015), argues that talent attraction has become an important concern that affects companies from small and medium enterprises to large and multinational companies.

Previously, there has been research conducted to assess the impact of CSR on job seekers' behaviour and attitudes (Wang, Xu & Wang, 2020). Such research involved integrating organisational psychology and corporate social responsibility by implementing a research framework. In addition, this previous research has served as an important point of reference to be able to understand job seekers' perceptions of CSR.

A growing number of researchers have found CSR to be a strategic tool in attracting a qualified workforce (Afirevic et al., 2021; Barrena-Martinez et al., 2015). For instance, "the future of companies lies in their ability to anticipate the changes that society currently demands and turn them into opportunities for creating value from this process to their stakeholders" (Barrena-Martinez et al., 2015, p 410). Scholars such as Martinez et al., (2015) and Bhattacharya et al. (2008) also assert that social responsibility initiatives aim to engage innovative and efficient methods in the 'war for talent', recognizing the critical role of individuals in a business's success. Barrena-Martinez et al. (2015) concurs that organisations that are involved in CSR activities become attractive to prospective employees. For example, Afirevic et al. (2021) argues that Millennials are driven by actions, which implies that CSR initiatives influence their CSR related behaviour. Thus, CSR is considered to be one of the key influencers in attracting new talent.

Among literature advocating for CSR involvement, one of the arguments in favour of CSR is its positive impact on prospective employees (Garriga & Mele, 2004). In recent times, attracting top talent has emerged as a crucial factor for enhancing firm competitiveness. Employing CSR strategies has been suggested as an effective approach to achieve this goal. Notably, Turban and Greening's study in 1997 investigated the influence of corporate social performance (CSP) on the appeal of organisations to potential student employees. Their research revealed a positive connection between corporate social performance and organisational attractiveness. In a subsequent study, Albinger and Freeman (2000) examined organisations' corporate social performance and its relationship with employer attractiveness. Their findings indicated that CSP played a significant role when individuals had a high likelihood of securing a job. However, in situations where individuals had limited options, CSP showed no impact on organisational attractiveness (Albinger & Freeman, 2000). These findings underscore the importance of CSR as a means to attract talent and enhance the appeal of organisations among prospective employees.

Notably, CSR initiatives are found to be closely linked to talent attraction for several reasons. For instance, talented individuals often seek employment with organisations that align with their personal values (values alignment). Therefore, CSR initiatives such as environmental sustainability efforts, ethical business practices and community engagement programs, signal an organisation's commitment to social and environmental responsibility (Schlechter et al., 2014). This will resonate with candidates who prioritise these values, making the organisation more attractive to them. Secondly, CSR initiatives can improve an organisation's reputation and standing in the eyes of potential employees (Schlechter et al., 2014). Therefore, organisations that are known for their positive impact and responsible practices are more likely to be perceived as desirable employers. These signals help attract talent by appealing to candidates who want to work for socially conscious organisations.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

Various theories within the CSR field have been used to try and explain job seekers' perceived reactions to CSR (Cook et al., 2013; Phillips, 1997). Wang, Xu, and Wang (2020) argue that explanations offered by these theories have contributed to the conclusion that job seekers' perceptions do have an impact on their behaviours and attitudes towards organisations' involvement in CSR. This research draws on social identity theory and signalling theory to

explore how CSR affects job seekers perceptions and perspectives on a potential employer. Social identity theory indicates that individuals categorize themselves into social groups that facilitate common social interactions and address a variety of self-motivations (Banks et al., 2015). Signalling theory, on the other hand, suggests that a company's social policies can serve as signals of working conditions, organisational values, and norms (Connelly et al., 2011). Signalling theory is used to help better understand the applicant attraction process.

2.7.1 Social identity theory

This research employs the perspective of social identity theory from psychology and organisational psychology literature (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Numerous scholars have highlighted the significance of applying social identity theory to recruitment processes (Archer, 2008; Balmer, 2001; Cornelissen et al., 2007; Tajfel, 1982; Turban & Greening, 1997). Social identity theory (SIT) looks at how people define and see themselves in terms of group membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Banks et al., 2015). Ashforth and Mael (1989) were among the first to use SIT in the context of a person's identification with an organization. According to SIT, people frequently group themselves and other people into social groups based on shared qualities and characteristics such as ethnicity, gender, nationality or organisational affiliation (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). These social identities have an impact on people's behaviour, attitudes, and decisions as well as how they view CSR and what makes them want to work for a company. According to social identity theory, individuals derive some of their self-worth from their membership in specific groups (Tajfel, 1982). Belonging to a particular organization can influence an individual's self-concept, making affiliation with an attractive employer desirable for potential employees. Once people categorise themselves as members of a specific group, they tend to identity with that group and adopt its norms, values, and behaviours as part of their own self-identity.

Ersoy and Aksehirli (2015) utilized social identity theory to comprehend the connection between a company's CSR initiatives and potential employees' attraction to an organisation. They found that individuals tend to choose activities that align with their identities and support institutions representing those identities. For example, in their study, Martins and Parsons (2007) discovered that women who held strong beliefs about discrimination displayed a strong positive association between organisational attractiveness and gender composition, whereas women with weak discrimination beliefs demonstrated a substantial negative relationship.

According to social identity theory, job seekers' perceptions of a potential employer's reputation is connected to their understanding of their own identity (Albinger & Freeman, 2000). According to Lin et al. (2012), the essential idea is that job seekers evaluate the worth of a potential employer by considering how well the potential employer can satisfy their identification goals, i.e., self-continuity and self-esteem. To do so, job seekers first assess how well their personal identities align with the potential employer's present identity. Subsequently, these potential employees then evaluate the degree to which their ideal employer matches their ideal organisational identity, or their view of what their ideal employer should be (Brickson, 2013; Lin et al., 2012). In doing so, they assess the organisation's suitability as a potential employer, which would raise their self-esteem and their total subjective emotional assessment of themselves (Brickson, 2013).

Social classification, as described by Ashforth and Mael (1989) involves people categorizing themselves and others into various social groups. This process serves two purposes: it helps individuals mentally organise their social environment and it allows them to define themselves within that environment. Individuals may identify with social categories to boost their self-esteem, and through this social identification and comparison, they become associated with the successes and status of the group (Lin et al., 2012). Consequently, organizations with a positive reputation are perceived as more attractive options among potential employees.

2.7.2 Signalling theory

Signalling theory is a concept that explains how individuals and organisations communicate information about their characteristics or qualities to others (Schlechter et al., 2014). Signalling theory is extensively applied to solve the prevalent information asymmetry of the social and economic spheres (Connelly et al., 2011; Schlechter et al., 2014). Therefore, information asymmetries are high when it comes to CSR given its contested and multifaceted nature. As a result, organisations often need to adopt organisation-specific interpretations of the concept to acquire meaning (Moratis, 2018). Such meaning can be derived from CSR initiatives that are demanded by new talent (Connelly et al., 2011; Moratis, 2018).

Wang, Xu and Wang (2020) state that signalling theory is when "individuals interpret an organisation's observable actions as signals of unobtrusively observable firm characteristics, thereby forming impressions about a firm's motives" (p. 473). As a result, these individuals will consistently try to observe signals such as the organisation's CSR actions in order to

identify whether the organisation is making a social and/or environmental impact (Wang, Xu & Wang, 2020).

In the context of attracting talent, signalling theory suggests that organisations can use certain signals to convey their attractiveness as an employer, thus attracting high quality candidates and in turn, this shape job seekers' perceptions of organisations. However, various scholars argue that potential employees possess limited information about a company's values and characteristics (Backhaus et al., 2002; Behrend et al., 2009; Spence, 1973). For this reason, information about a company is found to serve as 'signals' regarding the company's work environment and intentions, which leads individuals to assess the company's actions or intentions based on various cues and attributes (Connelly et al., 2011). According to Turban and Greening (1997), information about a company's social policies and programs can signal its prevailing working conditions and organisational values and norms. Furthermore, Judge and Bretz (1992) suggest that an organisation's concern for the environment and society, may impact potential employees' perceptions of its values. Therefore, signalling theory proposes that job seekers might view a company's social responsibility as an indication of its respectability, care, trustworthiness and concern not only for the environment but also for its employees (Turban & Greening, 1997).

According to Zerbini (2017), signalling theory has the ability to make some contributions to the field of CSR. Firstly, signalling theory provides the rationale for investing in CSR initiatives because the theory is mainly concerned with the relationship between an organisation and its stakeholders (Zerbini, 2017). Secondly, the theory contributes to the theoretical aspect of CSR by pointing out relevant information that is essential to the development of CSR actions (Zerbini, 2017). One of the key assumptions of signalling theory is that it views CSR activities as great strategic tools that can enhance the performance of the organisation as well as the perceptions of the general public (Connelly et al., 2011). Signalling theory argues that CSR actions have the capacity to build relational assets to the organisation such as reputation and competitive advantage (Brown et al., 2020). For instance, CSR initiatives can help organisations build a strong reputation as an employer of choice. Such positive reputation will act as a signal that the organisation is committed to ethical practices (Brown et al., 2020).

In essence, signalling theory explains how employers strategically use signals to attract job seekers who align with their organisational values, culture and attributes (Brown et al., 2020;

Schlechter et al., 2014). Job seekers then interpret these signals to make informed decisions about their choice of an employer. Furthermore, signalling theory maintains that an organisation's engagement in CSR can also be viewed by prospective employees as representing the kind of working environment that exists within the organisation, thereby informing prospective employees' organisational choice (Brown et al., 2020). Such actions play a crucial role in attracting talent. Figure 1.3 below provides a detailed link of how signalling theory can be utilized to attract talent.

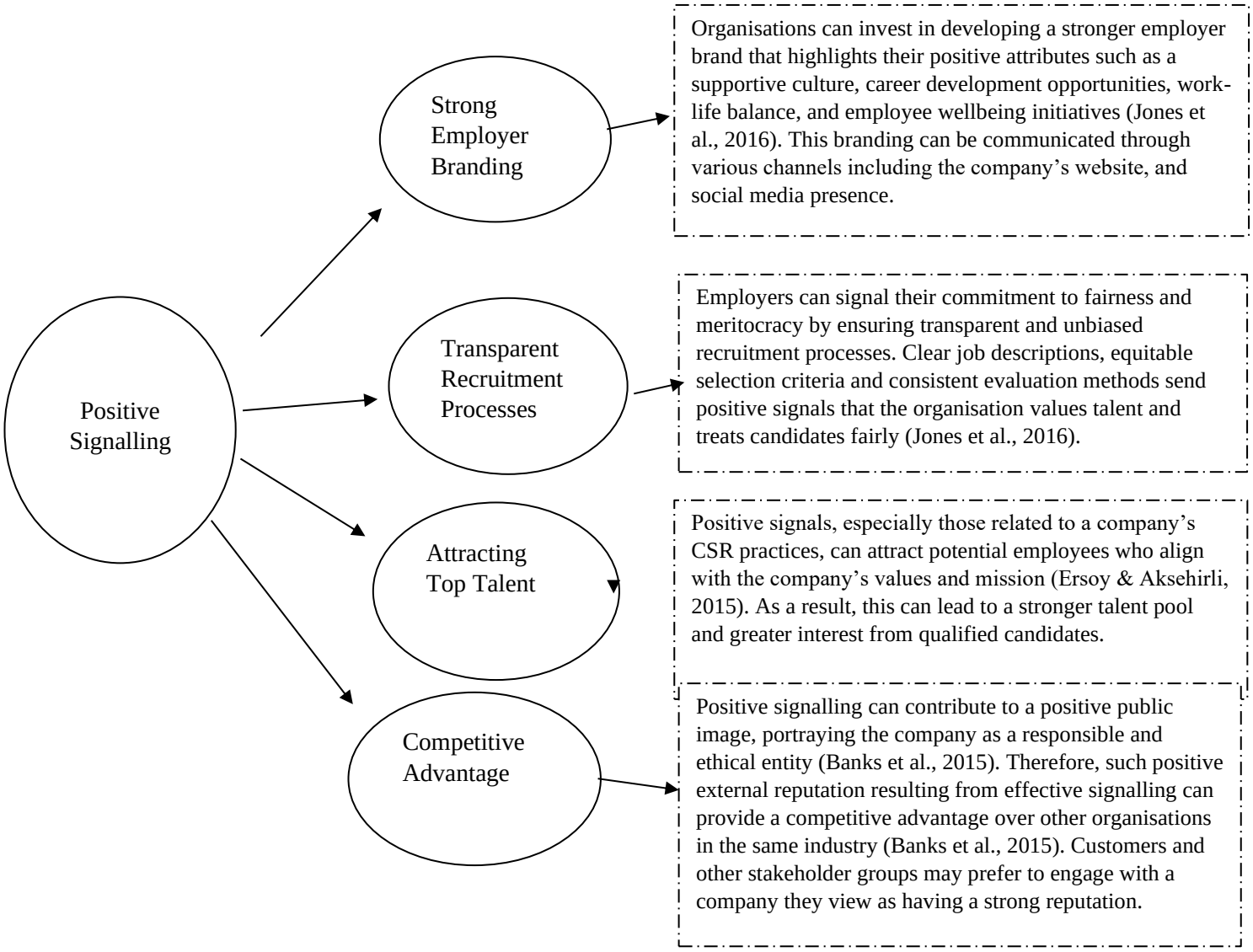


Figure 1.3 Signalling theory and talent attraction within organisations, along with its connection to CSR

To reiterate the importance of the above discussion, signalling theory suggests that organisations can attract talent by sending positive signals that highlight their desirable

attributes. Corporate social responsibility initiatives serve as powerful signals, demonstrating an organisation's commitment to values, ethical practices, and a positive societal impact (Connelly et al., 2011). By aligning their CSR efforts with talent attraction strategies, organisations can enhance their reputation, improve their company brand and most importantly, attract high-quality candidates who value these attributes.

2.8. Research Aims

This research aimed to determine the role CSR plays in influencing university students' choice of the preferred prospective employer.

2.9. Research Questions

There are a few research questions that this research proposes to answer. The research questions are as follows:

- How do university students conceptualize and understand CSR?
- How do university students perceive internal and external CSR initiatives?
- What level of importance do university students assign to CSR for organisations when considering a potential employer?
- Are there any socially responsible behaviours that make an organisation attractive to university students?

The following chapter delves into the methodological framework used in the study.

Chapter 3 Research Methodology

In this chapter, we will delve into the methodological framework used. This chapter details the research design, sample, sampling strategy and analysis approach utilised in the study. Moreover, it will elaborate on the data collection procedure and the thematic analysis approach employed, which involves systematically identifying patterns and themes within the data. Through this analytical process, the aim is to derive meaningful and contextually relevant findings that resonate with the experiences of the participants. Furthermore, we will elucidate the ethical principles governing the study and detail the measures taken to ensure the wellbeing and privacy of the participants. Finally, the researcher's positionality will be discussed as well as the steps taken to mitigate potential bias and ensure objectivity throughout the study.

3.1 Research Design

The current study made use of a qualitative cross-sectional and exploratory research design while using the naturalistic inquiry approach. A qualitative research design is described as a methodology used to understand how individuals make meaning of a phenomenon by finding answers for the questions under study (Patton, 2002). The cross-sectional aspect of the design involves collecting data from a sample of participants at a single point in time (Bhandari, 2020; Thomas, 2022). This approach enables the researcher to collect data from different individuals at a specific moment and gain insights into how various factors are associated with the phenomenon under study. The exploratory nature of the design means that the study is more open-ended and seeks to explore a research topic that may not have been extensively studied (Ponelis, 2015). However, a naturalistic inquiry facilitates a deep comprehension of a phenomenon in its natural context, emphasising the complexity and richness of real-life experiences (Armstrong, 2012). The naturalistic inquiry respects the diversity of human experience and holds that it is impossible to compile information in a straightforward, objectivist manner since people perceive and interact with the world according to their own uniquely formed realities (Bowen, 2008). Furthermore, it is used to explore and describe a phenomenon without imposing preconceived hypotheses as well as to answer research questions that focus on the experiences, behaviours and meanings of participants in their natural context (Bowen, 2008; Ho & Limpaecher, 2022). Overall, naturalistic inquiry is valuable in social science research as it offers a deeper understanding of human behaviour. This inquiry allows for the use of various techniques, including focus group sessions, online open-ended questionnaires as well as one-on-one interviews while applying structured or

unstructured processes (Armstrong, 2012; Bowens, 2008). The strategy was appropriate because the study aimed to gather participants' perceptions and opinions about the phenomenon under investigation.

Critics of qualitative research design raise several concerns. It is important to note that these critiques do not necessarily invalidate the value of qualitative research, but rather highlight areas that researchers should be aware of and address in their methodology and reporting (Bowen, 2008). For example, qualitative research is often criticised for its potential subjectivity and researcher bias (Naresh, 2021). Critics argue that the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis may lead to the researcher's personal biases influencing data interpretation and analysis (Busetto et al., 2020; Naresh, 2021; Patton, 2002). Another criticism of qualitative research is its limited generalisability of findings (Borman et al., 1986; Busetto et al., 2020). Critics argue that the small, non-random samples and context specific nature of qualitative studies make it challenging to apply findings to broader populations or contexts (Denzin et al., 2011; Borman et al., 1986; Busetto et al., 2020). Also, concerns are often raised about the transparency and rigour of qualitative research. This is because there is a lack of standardised procedures and the interpretive nature of qualitative research can make it difficult for others to assess the trustworthiness of the research findings (Borman et al., 1986; Naresh, 2021).

3.2 Sample

The sample consisted of students from the University of the Witwatersrand. The sample was inclusive of students from different faculties and departments. The researcher only considered students who were studying on a full-time basis and those who had never been formally employed. A total of 22 university students volunteered to participate in the study. Further characteristics of the demographic sample are provided in *Table 1* below. However, 70% of the sample comprised of postgraduate students with 30% accounting for final year undergraduate students. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 29 years of age. The majority of the participants identified as Indian, comprising 41% of the total sample. There was also a significant representation from Black, White and Coloured participants, accounting for 36%, 18% and 5% respectively. Also, 73% accounted for female participants while 27% accounted for male participants.

Furthermore, data saturation was reached at 22 because at this point, there were no new codes, information or themes that could be extracted from the data. The data collected from the 22

participants was enough to draw the necessary conclusions and any further data collection would not have produced any value-added insights (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

The study sample was not restricted to students studying specific degrees or within certain faculties but was inclusive to any final year undergraduate or postgraduate student from the University of the Witwatersrand. This process helped to ensure that many areas of knowledge would be included in the study so that the object of analysis could be explained from different learning contexts. It is important to note that final year undergraduate students and postgraduate students who had been formerly employed were excluded from participating in this study. This was because the study aimed to obtain students' honest opinions and perceptions as to whether they value CSR initiatives when considering potential employers. Also, part-time students were excluded from participation because the researcher wanted to ensure that the sample group would be homogeneous in certain aspects, such as educational status. Excluding part-time students helped to create a more homogeneous sample that was relevant to the research study. Further, the research study's focus was not applicable to part-time students because the study was centred on experiences specific to full-time students.

Table 1 *Demographic sample description*

Participant	Age	Race	Gender	Faculty	School	Level of education
1	24	White	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
2	25	White	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
3	28	White	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
4	29	Black	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate

5	23	Black	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
6	25	Black	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
7	25	Black	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
8	25	Black	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
9	22	Indian	Male	Commerce, Law and Management	Economics and Finance	Undergraduate
10	22	Black	Male	Commerce, Law and Management	Law	Undergraduate
11	21	Indian	Male	Commerce, Law and Management	Economics and Finance	Undergraduate
12	25	Coloured	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
13	25	White	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
14	24	Indian	Male	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate
15	25	Indian	Male	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate

16	25	Indian	Female	Science	Molecular and Cell Biology	Postgraduate
17	25	Black	Male	Commerce, Law and Management	Wits School of Governance	Undergraduate
18	25	Black	Female	Commerce, Law and Management	Wits School of Governance	Undergraduate
19	24	Indian	Female	Commerce, Law and Management	Law	Undergraduate
20	23	Indian	Female	Humanities	Literature, Language and Media	Undergraduate
21	23	Indian	Female	Commerce, Law and Management	Business Sciences	Undergraduate
22	24	Indian	Female	Humanities	Human and Community Development	Postgraduate

3.3 Sampling Strategy

The study made use of the purposive sampling method in selecting participants. The purposive sampling method relies on the researcher's judgement when identifying and selecting participants who can provide the best information to achieve the study's objectives (Ames et al., 2019). This sampling method works by focusing on particular characteristics of a population and for this research, participants had to be in their final year of study or in their postgraduate studies, studying full time at the university and without any prior professional work experience. Also, purposive sampling allows researchers to strategically gather data from individuals who can provide the most relevant and insightful information, enhancing the depth and richness of the study's findings (Etikan et al., 2016; Suri, 2011). However, Ames et al. (2019) argues that it is important to acknowledge the potential bias in the selection process and to clearly document the rationale for participant inclusion.

In addition, the snowball sampling method was also utilised because the participants who were identified using the purposive sampling method recruited other participants from their acquaintances. In essence, snowball sampling is a method whereby existing participants provide referrals to recruit future subjects/participants required for the research study (Crossman, 2020; Nikolopoulou, 2022). Since snowball sampling capitalises on existing social networks within the target population, referrals from existing participants can help establish trust and rapport with new participants, enhancing the quality of data collected (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Nonetheless, researchers using snowball sampling should carefully document their recruitment, including information about the referral chains and participants' relationships (Crossman, 2020).

3.4 Data collection method

This study adopted the in-depth interview method in collecting data, particularly making use of semi-structured interviews (Gill et al., 2008). The interview guide (see Appendix D) was developed and pre-tested on students from the study population. The students who participated in the pilot study phase did not participate in the actual interviews. According to Hassan et al. (2006), piloting a study is a very crucial step prior to conducting a full-scale research project. Thus, conducting pilot studies assists in identifying design issues and evaluating feasibility, practicality, resources, and time (Hassan et al., 2006). By conducting the pilot study first, the researcher was able to ensure that the respondents understood the terminology used in the questionnaire and that the questionnaire could be completed in an appropriate time frame. Thus, the researcher was able to improve the understanding of the interview questions as the pilot study showed that there was some misunderstanding in the information given to participants in the pilot study.

As mentioned before, semi-structured interviews were used because they left room to probe and allowed participants to give as much detail as they could (Gill et al., 2008). The content of the semi-structured individual interviews was determined by the theoretical framework utilized within the study.

To operationalise the research questions, a couple of statements were posed to the participants such as – '*What do you understand by the term Corporate Social Responsibility; what role do you think companies should play in society and the environment;* and *what specific elements make an organisation attractive to you*'. Participants' individual thoughts and reflections were then recorded separately during their individual interviews. The interviews were audio

recorded by means of an electronic handheld voice recorder with the participants' consent. Thereafter, the interviews were transcribed word-for-word, known as verbatim transcripts by the researcher. Most importantly, participants were not restricted in any way in giving their thoughts and opinions about the phenomenon under investigation as this allowed them to fully explain and give in-depth information that would be valuable to the study.

3.5 Procedure

After the development of interview guide (Appendix D) and receiving the necessary authorisation from the Human Research Ethics Committee at University of Witwatersrand, the researcher sought to look for potential participants. Through the use of the participant information sheet (see Appendix B), the identified potential participants were made aware of what the research was about including the title of the research and why their participation would be valuable. By doing so, the researcher was able to give the potential participants an overview of the research study and its aims. From those who volunteered to partake in the study, the researcher then formally sought written consent (refer to Appendix C) to proceed with the research. The consent forms were sent out to the participants a day prior to the interview to give them time to read the form. Upon receiving written consent, the researcher explained the study's goals again. Participants were informed that they did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any given point.

The interviews lasted approximately between 10 to 30 minutes, and they were audio-recorded. As soon as each interview was recorded, the researcher transcribed it in preparation for thematic analysis.

3.6 Data analysis

The thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data. A thematic analysis involves systematically organising and interpreting qualitative data to uncover meaningful patterns of information (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Thorne, 2000). This analysis process consisted of organising the interview transcripts so that the researcher could make sense of the participant's responses. Furthermore, the data was broken down into smaller segments in order to generate codes. Codes are short descriptions that capture the essence of a particular concept or aspect of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; (Lochmiller, 2021). Thereafter, similar codes were grouped together to identify potential themes which were then reviewed and refined to ensure that they

accurately capture the essence of the data to align with the research objectives. By identifying and analysing themes, thematic analysis provides a holistic understanding of the research topic, capturing both commonalities and variations within the data (Thorne, 2000).

In essence, thematic analysis focuses on participants' own words and expressions, allowing their voices and viewpoints to be directly represented in the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), thematic analysis assumes that participants' perceptions are valuable enough to warrant examination, synthesis and in-depth description. Although thematic analysis has inherent limitations including subjectivity and potential bias, its strengths lie in its adaptability, holistic understanding and potential for theory development (Lochmiller, 2021).

3.7 Trustworthiness in data

The current study ensured its credibility by employing consistent observation of the interview transcripts to single out only those elements relevant to the study. Also, transferability in the current study was ensured by the researcher through the reporting and quoting of the exact words of the participants that evidenced the generated themes.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Following ethical approval from the University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix A), individual, in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Through the use of the participant information sheet (see Appendix B), participants were made aware that their participation in the study would be voluntary and that they could withdraw from the research at any point in time. By using coded data to protect their identities, participants were also given the assurance that the information they provided would be kept safe and that only broad themes would be reported. Although anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the in-person data collection, the researcher made sure that confidentiality would be upheld by assigning participants numbers during the reporting of the results to protect their identity (for example, using 'Participant 1'). Participants were also told that the recordings would be kept secure on a password-protected laptop, with access restricted to the researcher and the supervisor. Furthermore, consent forms were sent out to the participants a day prior to give them time to read the form as well as for them to decide whether they would like to take part in the study. The interviews were conducted on the university premises.

Additionally, there were no identifiable risks that the participants could have experienced as a result of participating in the research. Nonetheless, participants were informed that they could visit the Counselling and Careers Development Unit at the university if any psychological problems materialised.

3.9 Researcher Reflexivity

Femi-Ajao (2018) posits that reporting on reflexivity in qualitative research is important for transparency and rigor. Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of their own biases, assumptions and potential influences on the research process and findings (Femi-Ajao, 2018; Dodgson, 2019). Reflexivity is regarded as being crucial because the researcher is the main 'instrument' for data gathering and interpretation. According to experts, reflection can help researchers become more aware of both the things that enable them to see and the things that might prevent them from seeing (Dodgson, 2019; Russell & Kelly, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Mruck & Breuer, 2003). This requires giving considerable thought to both the phenomenon being studied and the ways in which the researcher's own ideas and actions may influence the investigation. Therefore, being reflexive involves researchers acknowledging their role in the research process and actively striving to minimize their subjective involvement (Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Sanjari et al., 2014). To achieve this, researchers engage in a process of exploring and documenting their pre-existing ideas, personal characteristics and philosophical perspectives before initiating the qualitative study (Mruck & Breuer, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Sanjari et al., 2014).

The researcher's role was introduced as an individual interested in exploring students' perceptions of corporate social responsibility and whether they took it into consideration when deciding on a potential employer. Since the researcher was also a student at the university, this helped elicit a sense of trust with the participants. The process of engaging with participants in this study was characterised by a diversity of interactions, of which some were influenced by pre-existing connections as the researcher shared a classroom environment with a subset of the participants included in the study. The researcher's familiarity with these participants could have influenced their willingness to participate, the level of comfort during data collection and the candidness of their responses. This necessitated careful consideration of the potential impact of these pre-existing relationships on the research. The researcher recognised the significance of these relationships and took proactive steps to ensure transparency and mitigate

potential biases as participants were informed about the researcher's dual role as a researcher and peer, emphasizing the importance of open and candid responses. Additionally, the researcher maintained a professional demeanour and established clear boundaries during the data collection, ensuring that interactions were consistent with these participants. Thereafter, these participants were encouraged to refer friends whom they believed shared similar experiences and met the research criteria. This process aimed to ensure a diverse and relevant sample by leveraging participants' existing networks. To ensure transparency in the snowball sampling process, participants were informed about their role in referring others. Also, several steps were taken to mitigate potential biases and guarantee the validity of the study. For instance, the researcher emphasized during the informed consent process that participation was entirely voluntary, and there would be no consequences for declining or withdrawing from the study. Participants were assured that their academic standing would not be affected by their decisions or responses to the study. Secondly, during the data collection, the researcher maintained a neutral and non-directive stance, treating all participants equally and avoiding any preferential treatment. The data collection process was carried out systematically and consistently across all participants, regardless of prior pre-existing relationships. Interviews were conducted in a standardized manner to ensure that data was collected uniformly.

In summary, this reflexivity report underscores the researcher's commitment to transparency, ethical conduct, and rigorous research practices. The researcher hoped that by candidly addressing these issues, the research findings would be enriched and reflect the diverse perspectives of the study participants accurately.

The following chapter provides an overview of the study's findings and emergent themes.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, we present the themes that emerged during the data analysis process using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis model. The data analysis revealed six broad themes and quotes from participants will be used to illustrate the emergent themes derived from the data. In the following chapter, a discussion and conclusion will be presented.

4.1. Descriptive statistics for individual interviewees

Seventy per cent of the participants were female. Participants fell between the age groups of 20-29. Also, 70% of the participants were postgraduate students while undergraduate students accounted for 30%. From a race perspective, Indian participants accounted for 41% of the sample while Black, White and Coloured participants accounted for 36%, 18% and 5% respectively.

The use of individual interviews served to provide the analytical and interpretive depth of the students' perceptions on corporate social responsibility. The interviews provided research participants with the opportunity to reflect on the meaning the phenomenon under study has for them individually. Following a structured application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, a total of six emergent themes were generated regarding students' perceptions of corporate social responsibility and whether a social purpose mattered to them. To also provide context, the selected verbatim quotes are embedded in the findings.

4.1.1 Theme 1: The duty to give back and benefit society

Respondents' perceptions of CSR seemed to generally align with the study's chosen definition of CSR which described CSR as an organisation's commitment to concerns of environmentally friendly activities, the public and the overall society. This study sought to ascertain the level of CSR awareness among the student sample and the results showed that the majority (95%) of the students were familiar with CSR whereas the remaining percentage of the students reported having little to no knowledge of CSR. To explore their understanding of the concept, students were asked to define and describe what CSR meant to them. When students were asked how they conceptualise CSR, they all shared the same idea that it was a concept that meant organisations giving back to the society and taking care of the environment in which they operated. For instance, participant 20 commented:

> *'…my understanding of the term is that corporations have to give back to the society in the form of either charity or looking after the environment. It is also some sort of*

upliftment of a community around them…and sectors where the government lacks such as in health care, human empowerment and also global warming'.

Other participants also mentioned that CSR was an activity that went beyond just meeting organisational goals and objectives. This was elaborated by participants 12 and 14 who commented their ideas below respectively:

> *'I think corporate social responsibility is basically companies trying their best to be beneficial to the wider environment, I think not just fulfilling their own organisational goals, but also making sure that what they are doing is something that is beneficial for everyone…making sure that the wider society is also benefiting from what they are doing'*. [Participant 12]

> *'I think [CSR] is a term where organisations need to have an outlook broader than themselves and look at how they could better the community and environment around where they are working in. This is because companies generate profit off of the community and environment that they are operating in, so I see it as a term where it allows organisations to reconstitute the proportion of that profit back into the community'*. [Participant 14]

There were also participants who mentioned that they understood very little about the concept of CSR. However, their generalisations were still in line with other respondents who did have some knowledge on CSR. For instance, participant 13 commented:

> *'…I am not the most familiar with CSR, but corporate social responsibility to me is just the responsibility that companies have to the environment that they are situated in'* [Participant 13]

Another participant also mentioned:

> *'I could be very wrong, but from what I understand, it is that organisations have a responsibility to give back in a way that is meaningfully contributing to society and that can benefit for all in whatever their outputs are'* [Participant 3].

For other respondents, CSR meant building facilities such as libraries for students in less fortunate communities. Some reported that it should be made 'mandatory' for organisations to contribute to improving conditions within the environments in which they operate. These

students based their expectations on the fact that organisations make use of resources from the natural environment of which when those resources are being transformed into goods or products, such organisational processes of transforming the resources can be detrimental to the environment [for example, releasing high levels of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere]. Among the participants, there was a general belief that there can be a win-win situation when companies take care of their surrounding communities. Participants believed that by doing so, organisations would be able to invest and attract the right talent from the communities they invest in, suggesting that students are attracted to organisations' explicit CSR activities, mostly the social and environmental dimensions of CSR.

4.1.2 Theme 2: Expectations of social accountability and environmental stewardship

Another important emerging theme was in relation to how students perceived the role of organisations in society and the environment. Participants shared similar sentiments as they mentioned that organisations need to be conscious of their actions on the society and the environment, ensuring that their activities do not have detrimental effects. The respondents also expressed that companies need to have a conscious outlook to what they could be potentially doing to the environment and society and take measures to contribute positively to its preservation and betterment. For instance, participant 20 mentioned that:

> *'…companies have a responsibility, a huge one because they owe it to the employees to set a good example and to make life more sustainable for them, and that is by being socially responsible and setting the pace for being more conscious about carbon footprint. Corporations are usually the ones that are the reason why there is a hole in the ozone layer because they benefit a lot from the quick, fast paced destruction of nature.*

Participant 1 also added on by stating:

> *'So I think companies should be indebted to the society as a whole because they function within that. Companies are not isolated entities, so I think that companies should have structures and plans in place to always give back.'*.

Participant 5 also commented by saying:

'Well, I believe that companies have a huge role to play in society and the environment, particularly with aspects to social responsibility and environmental responsibility. So here we are talking about things like sustainable development and that the practices that we do should not be harmful to the society or the environment, but rather should be beneficial to those societies and environments'.

Given the current economic crisis in South Africa characterised by on-going blackouts and rising unemployment rates, some participants argued that it is not sufficient for the government to tackle these issues alone. The respondents believe that organisations should also play a role in addressing these issues instead of solely leaving it to the government. Participant 9 commented:

'...as you can see, global warming has become a thing. So organisations can turn to alternative sources of energy instead of just relying on coal power because our coal power supply in this country is not very reliable'.

Another interesting viewpoint was given by a participant 19 who mentioned that:

'...there are a lot of things that we do [individuals and organisations] that do not have the greatest impact on the environment, however, looking at how far science is progressing, such tools in science can be used to protect the environment' [Participant 19].

Since organisations form part of the social and physical environment, they also exert considerable influence over the choices people make and the resources they have to aid them in those choices. As a result, some participants reported that organisations in South Africa ought to be mindful of human rights when employing people and putting their products and services out there as the environment is the source of resources that the organisation needs. Participant 21 emphasised that:

'...if you are a chocolate company and use child labour, that is a violation. But since I like chocolate, I should not feel bad buying the chocolate. So, I think that companies really need to re-evaluate themselves because they put a lot of responsibility on the consumer to be ethical when the companies are just unethical themselves. I do wish companies would be more responsible where they take a step back and realise that

they are the ones damaging the environment and the ones who are causing global warming'.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Inclusive work environments that foster growth and development

The participants reported varying and similar elements that made organisations attractive to them to join occupationally. This theme centres around students seeking employers with a flexible and healthy work culture. It also highlights students' preference for employers that prioritize diversity and inclusion in their workplace as well as companies that provide ample opportunities for growth in terms of career progression and personal development.

A number of participants reported that companies that offered hybrid working environments were attractive to them. Further, the respondents also noted that finding a good organisation that offers a balance between their professional and personal life, was attractive to them. As participant 15 put it:

> '*So definitely a hybrid working environment. Not only does it allow you a more flexible schedule, but it also reduces like carbon emissions because you are not traveling to work every day'.*

Some participants mentioned that they prefer organisations that cultivate a work environment that respects and values individual differences, where it ensures that all employees feel included and empowered to contribute their unique perspectives. These participants also noted that given South Africa's troubled past, organisations that considered previously disadvantaged groups (such as women) in their recruitment processes were also attractive to them. For instance, participant 19 commented that:

> *'...In terms of hiring…there should be a balance in racial identity and gender…because I would not want to walk into a company where women are not given the opportunity to accelerate'.*

Participant 5 added on by saying that:

> *'So, for me, it would be the presence of relevant diversity opportunities for growth and development'.*

Some respondents reported that organisations that offer growth opportunities and those that took innovation seriously were attractive. Innovation was an attractive element to various participants because it meant that such companies like to stay up-to-date with the current global trends and that such organisations are always looking to do things differently in order to stand out in such a competitive business environment. In particular, participant 22 described how innovation was an important element that made an organisation attractive:

> *'I can say that three times, innovation, innovation, innovation- that is the main reason. And then obviously growth within the organisation because I see myself as a loyal person (employee) not a jumper'*.

Other comments comprised:

> *'I look at whether the [company is]in touch with what is happening around the world and the environment and if they adapt to change (flexibility) or if they are hellbent on sticking to a specific way of doing things. Also, innovation and creativity'*. [Participant 6]

Other participants reported that organisations that had ample opportunities for growth and that gave back to society in some ways were attractive to them. For example, Participant 3 added on by saying:

> *'…I like a people-oriented organisation. I would like to be in a company where I am valued and there's lots of growth opportunities. But I would also want to be part of an organisation that does something to give back, whether it be funding charities or bringing awareness'*.

Other comments comprised:

> *'A healthy work culture with room for growth. So, a place that really makes a difference not only in helping me achieve my goals, but also to make the company reach really great objectives'*. [Participant 1].

In essence, organisations that put effort in creating a supportive and enriching workplace that nurtures employees' wellbeing, career progression as well as diversity and inclusion were found to be attractive by the participants.

4.1.4 Theme 4: Attraction to reputation, values and ethical leadership

Subsequently, this theme reflects the factors that the participants consider when evaluating potential employers. The theme focuses on how job seekers consider a company's reputation, the work environment it offers, and its impact on the broader society and environment.

Efforts to secure employment among the youth in South Africa is a popular topic given the country's skills shortages and high unemployment rates. Such factors would suggest that a significant number of young people are competing for a limited number of job opportunities. Because when asked what they considered before deciding to join a company occupationally, one participant in particular had this to say:

> *'The current economic crisis prevents me from looking at the bigger picture in terms of what I would consider before deciding to apply because it is so competitive in the world of work. I just want to land an internship and it doesn't matter where it is'.* [Participant 3]

This shows the sad reality of what students have to go through as the current economic crisis in South Africa does not necessarily allow them to choose. However, Yu (2013) argues that skills shortages and employment opportunities can vary significantly across industries and regions. According to Yu (2013), the skills shortages in the country could be a result of a mismatch between the skills demanded by employers and the skills possessed by the youth.

However, some participants who had a more positive economic outlook, reported that they considered various aspects such as the company's brand, reputation, values and the impact the organisation has on the bigger environment. In addition, participant 19 emphasised that companies that had a social impact were ideal. The participant further described that when considering joining an organisation occupationally, they look at:

> *'What are their stance on corporate social responsibility and how do they give back and the big impact that they have on the environment. I also like looking at the*

socioeconomics, in terms of who they are employing, their overall mission, what they are trying to achieve and what is their aim?'.

Other participants pointed out saying:

> *'The type of company that I have in mind would definitely be a company that is ethical and seems to have good integrity, like that's a big thing to me and a nice company culture. I consider…companies that do contribute to society that do like different charity drives'*. [Participant 13]

> *'I look at their brand image first and see what type of organisation it is…what their values are [by checking] their website; their vision and see how they are interacting within their community. And then that's probably where I would make a decision to apply to that organisation'*. [Participant 14]

> *'Values of a company…that's very important to me. I always want to ensure that some of my values are at least aligned with the company's values. Regardless of how much I am being paid, I would not choose to go to a [work]place where the environment is just so toxic because it's obviously bad for my overall well-being'*. [Participant 6]

Other participants mentioned that before considering a company to apply to, they would conduct some research as this would help them get a full overview of the company. This was elaborated by two participants:

> *'I like to do a bit of research by looking at the company's website. I also like to look at any reviews I can find online to see what other individuals rate the company as to work for. I know a couple of reviewing platforms that allow you to rate the work life balance, satisfaction, so I look at that. I also like to look at the reputation of the company, for instance have there been any scandals within the organisation and did they recover from it?'*. [Participant 2]

> *'…the first thing I do actually is google the company's values. I want to know the kind of company I will be getting myself into and what they stand for. I also read employee*

reviews on Indeed to understand the culture, because that is very important to me'. [Participant 22]

Company culture was another aspect that many participants considered. A good corporate culture was discovered to be one of the factors that university students would consider when choosing a company based on its set of common beliefs, practices and objectives. Company culture determines whether you will be a good culture fit within a company or not, as described by participant 12:

> *'I think one of the main things is organisational culture. I think that is something that people forget about a lot because the culture basically determines how you will fit in. So, I think just basically making sure that it's going to be a healthy environment to work in, making sure it's going to provide you with the growth that you need'*.

Participants 15 also shared the similar viewpoints:

> '*So firstly, I look at their company culture and see what is important to them. So, I would definitely go for a company that looks after its employees, because I believe if your employees are healthy and happy, then they are going to perform optimally'*.

In most cases, the aspects that most participants reported they took into consideration before deciding to apply to an organisation, were similar. From the participants' responses, it shows that before deciding to apply or join an organisation occupationally, they take into consideration aspects that would make them stay with that company for the long run. This theme shows that a social purpose does matter to new talent because rather than just caring about what organisations have to offer them, the students showed that they care about what organisations are doing on a larger scale. Most of these participants further mentioned that it would be more meaningful and fulfilling to have a job that allows them to make a difference in somebody else's life.

4.1.5 Theme 5: CSR appeal - Prioritising Personal Impact

In exploring whether a social purpose mattered to new talent, the researcher also explored whether students found internal or external CSR initiatives appealing. This theme highlights that students prioritise different CSR issues based on their personal experiences, values and societal concerns. While some may be more concerned about environmental sustainability, others may prioritise issues related to social justice and/or community development.

From their knowledge of what internal and external CSR entailed, a few students reported that they found internal CSR appealing. These students reported that they wanted to make a difference by helping people in the workplace. For instance, participant 13 went on to say:

> *'...I want to make a difference by helping people in the workplace. I think if people are happy at work, then they are happier in general'*.

Participant 6 also emphasised by saying:

> *'...enhancing employee wellness, as it ultimately enhances productivity in the workplace, [and] make it easier for employees to reach organisational goals and actually enjoy their job'.*

However, from the data analysis process, it was evident that most students found external CSR initiatives more appealing. This is because from the participants' responses, the researcher deduced that participants associated the concept of CSR with what organisations ought to do for the society and environment at large. For instance, participant 14 mentioned that:

> *'I would like working at an organisation that has a high external focus, in terms of the community. I would look more towards education and skills development policies for the community members. I believe that by focusing on these types of initiatives, companies could unlock the door to a lot of talent that would otherwise be ignored'*.

Other participants mentioned that:

> *'I think in this country the emphasis on education is really important to me. I think that the kind of inequality we see in the education system is really quite devastating.*

So, grades 1 to 7 are really important in developing those basic foundational skills that every human being really does need in order to grow and develop appropriately and that's why I like to see companies that really help in that sort of realm'. [Participant 2]

'I think the most important [initiatives] is looking after the people around you, I mean especially in South Africa, there is a lot of poverty and unemployment and uneducated people as well. So just helping the people that don't have access to the things we take for granted, even if it's just one or two people out there that you give a chance to study further or just make an impact on their wellbeing. I find that very important'. [Participant 15]

While discussing the types of initiatives they found appealing, some participants would even go as far as to list the CSR projects they find appealing as well as the companies they knew that were already participating in such initiatives. Such justifications showed how much value and understanding these participants placed on CSR. For example, participant 6 had this to say:

'Helping communities is attractive to me. I know Revlon, as a make-up brand… they go to underprivileged communities to just assist students in preparing for their matric dance. For instance, the top ten students from class will get a make-up artist and gift bags while helping them prepare for matric dance. So, I like that a lot'.

Another participant also explained how they found external CSR appealing, citing a clothing company as an example:

'...Cotton On is a company that I do know has quite an interesting sort of project…where they are providing schools to children in disadvantaged communities.' [Participant 2]

Only these few participants were able to elaborate on the specific CSR initiatives they were interested in, citing a few companies in their explanations as well. On the other hand, the data from the interviews showed other concerns that the participants had with regards to corporate social responsibility. For example, some participants were sceptical in the sense that perhaps companies could be using CSR as a greenwashing strategy or to seem as if they give back but

actually do not. These participants reported that they felt that most of the companies they knew were not as ethical as they seemed. For example, when participant 13 was asked to give examples of companies she knew that were actively involved in CSR initiatives, she said:

> *'…I know Woolworths for example tries to seem that way, but I think they actually do not really contribute that largely. And also, KFC, they have a drive where you give extra money to feed hungry children. They apparently donate it somewhere, but I mean, they never say where exactly it's going. They just say you are giving to children and I'm like, which children? So, I can't think of a company that I genuinely believe is actually doing these initiatives wholeheartedly'.*

Participant 3 also shared the same sentiments and mentioned that:

> *'I have been made aware of greenwashing and that it is kind of a front where [CSR] is not done for the right purposes, but it is just a front to make it look like they are being responsible or environmentally friendly'.*

Although this research does not aim to cover how companies use CSR as a greenwashing strategy, the researcher felt that it was important to point out that, from the perspective of developing countries, Generation Z cohorts, are actually more knowledgeable than they appear to be.

In summary, the theme highlighted that most of the students found external CSR practices more appealing. For example, CSR initiatives that prioritise environmental sustainability, social impact, ethical practices, education and transparency were appealing to participants who seek to align their values with potential employers.

4.1.6 Theme 6: Influence of education and awareness of CSR

The interviews showed that participants had an idea of what CSR is from a general point of view but were not very knowledgeable about the concept. As a result, this theme highlights participants' desire to be more exposed to CSR concepts. Some participants had expressed their lack of awareness of the concept and highlighted that if CSR education had been integrated across their curricula, they would have had a deeper understanding of CSR and what it entails

on a much broader scale. Most participants wished for CSR to be integrated into their curricula with participant 3 mentioning:

> *'I would love to learn more to get an idea around it [CSR] because right now I do feel a little naïve to think maybe it's something that only companies should take into consideration. So, incorporating it into the curriculum is a big yes from me'*.

Participant 19 also shared the same sentiments by stating that:

> *'I think universities should try and do some CSR courses and it is something that should be taught and be spread throughout the university across all faculties.'*

Other comments comprised:

> '*I think schools should create awareness of it [CSR]. I mean, often, people don't necessarily participate in things that they are not aware of. So, once you make a person aware of this concept, particularly younger individuals because they are the future of the organisation, they will then go forward with this whole concept and do what they can to implement it. So, I definitely think it's something that should be taught from the earliest stages of your career so that by the time you are done, it's pretty much ingrained into you'.* [Participant 16]

Also, most participants were in favour of integrating CSR into their educational programs because some had mentioned that it was their first time hearing about the concept of CSR during the interviews with the researcher. One participant in particular stated that:

> *'I think if we can drive and push for the importance of it, that is a start because from all my education, all my five years, I only learnt about [CSR] this year'*. [Participant 12]

Other participants felt that more should be done by universities to make students more aware of the importance of CSR. These participants suggested that universities should consider hosting webinars and workshops on campus just to educate students on CSR. As participant 22 put it:

'I feel it is highlighted only in certain degrees. I think it should be integrated as a crash course or have webinars and workshops on campus just to educate people on it'.

Participant 23 also stated:

'*I think it's something were for every university student, it's mandatory for you while you are registered at the university to be involved in something [CSR] related*'.

Participant 23 further suggested that creating awareness of CSR issues should start from the primary level going through to high school and university. The participant added on by mentioning that such efforts would help with raising awareness about the importance of being socially responsible in children from a young age.

What will follow is a discussion on the findings of the study.

Chapter 5 Discussion

The current study aimed to explore whether a social purpose matters to new talent, specifically university students. The study aimed to examine whether the value that university students give to socially responsible practices can influence their decision to join an organisation occupationally. To do so, the following research questions were explored:

- How do university students conceptualise and understand CSR?
- How do university students perceive internal and external CSR?
- What level of importance do university students assign to CSR for organisations when considering potential employers?
- Are there any socially responsible behaviours that make an organisation attractive to university students?

Six themes emerged from the thematic analysis that can aid in addressing these research questions. The six themes include:

- The duty to give back and benefit society
- Expectations of social accountability and environmental stewardship
- A dynamic, supportive and inclusive work environment fostering growth and development
- Attraction to reputation, values and ethical leadership
- Diverse CSR priorities
- Influence of education and awareness of CSR

Each theme is meticulously examined through the lens of relevant literature, allowing us to build a cohesive narrative that enriches the understanding of whether a social purpose matters to new talent.

5.1 University students' conceptualisation and understanding of CSR

The findings revealed that the respondents possessed some general knowledge regarding the concept of CSR. While most students reported being familiar with the concept of CSR, some students indicated low confidence in their understanding of CSR, but the results indicated that they knew more than what they thought. For those students who indicated low confidence in their understanding of CSR, the results showed that their technical conceptualisation might not have been entirely accurate, but their practical understanding was. For instance, participant 3 mentioned *'I could be very wrong, but from what I understand, it is that organisations have a*

responsibility to give back in a way that is meaningfully contributing to society and that can benefit for all in whatever their outputs are'. Participant 13 also mentioned *'...I am not the most familiar with CSR, but corporate social responsibility to me is just the responsibility that companies have to the environment that they are situated in'*.

These findings are in line with Albinger and Freeman's (2000) findings, who discovered that younger generations show reflection and doubt about social norms, however, they also demonstrate strong ethical preferences on a personal level. Their study further suggested that young people have developed individual consciousness of environmental and social CSR but have not fully integrated it into a holistic view (Albinger & Freeman, 2000). In addition, Galvao et al. (2019) found that while Gen Zs may not fully understand the concept of CSR, they generally hold a positive attitude towards responsible practices and believe that companies should incorporate social goals. Therefore, they may view CSR as mutually beneficial for organisations and stakeholders (Galvao et al., 2019).

Further, the emergent themes showed that the respondents generally understood CSR as organisations' duty to give back to society as well as engaging in environmentally friendly activities. Some participants understood corporate social responsibility as organisations trying their best to be beneficial to the wider environment and not just fulfilling their own organisational goals while others understood it as looking after the environment, uplifting the community and sectors where the government lacks. This is in line with Burcea and Marinescu's (2011) findings which discovered that in some developing nations where the provision of government's services and resources are limited, students may view CSR as a way for businesses to fill the gaps in social welfare provision. As a result, these students may perceive organisations as having greater responsibility to address societal issues.

Contrary to Burcea and Marinescu's (2011) findings, Ugwuozor (2020) reported that students from less developed countries often lack familiarity with the concept of CSR, despite its potential to shape their sense of equity and social justice, particularly within work environments, whether as future employees or business managers. However, in the context of this study, South African university students indicated familiarity with the concept of CSR. Perhaps this can be attributed to the point that although South Africa may be a developing country, it is among the most industrialised, technologically advanced and diversified economies on the African continent (Okafor, 2022). As a result, CSR has gained prominence in the country due to various factors including the country's history of social and economic

disparities, the influence of global CSR trends and the efforts of both businesses and civil society organisations to promote responsible business practices (Okafor, 2022). Ugwuozor (2020) further argued that in regions like Africa, where students directly observe the complexities and difficulties businesses face in developing nations, their sensitivity to CSR tends to be limited. The author adds that many students in sub-Saharan African nations, primarily pursue education as a means of escaping poverty, aiming for improved prosperity and long-term sustainability (Ugwuozor, 2020). Consequently, newly graduated job seekers tend to prioritise secure positions within civil services or high-paying private sectors, making their CSR orientation contingent upon the CSR practices of their employers (Ugwuozor, 2020).

However, the findings from this study do not support Ugwuozor's (2020) findings as the participants in this study showed a good level of knowledge and orientation towards CSR. While South African university students may prioritise securing employment in an economy where economic disparities persist, the findings indicate that these students significantly value companies that demonstrate a commitment to ethical business practices and social responsibility as they believe that organisations' CSR strategies can be instrumental in addressing the country's broader economic issues. These students believed that by aligning CSR efforts with the specific needs and aspirations of South African communities, organisations can make meaningful contributions to economic development and social progress in the country (Galvao et al., 2019). A number of CSR initiatives involve creating employment opportunities, particularly in sectors relevant to the company's expertise. For example, a company can strategically decide to partake in CSR programs that focus on skills development and training to enhance the employability of local residents (Galvao et al., 2019). Therefore, when organisations invest in training and upskilling the local workforce, it does not only benefit individuals but also strengthens the overall labour market. Furthermore, CSR projects involving infrastructure development can address critical needs in South Africa such as improving access to clean water, healthcare facilities and upgrading educational institutions (Ntoutoume, 2023). While often seen as an environmental issue, sustainable practices can have economic benefits. For example, South Africa faces environmental challenges such as water scarcity and energy inefficiency. Therefore, adopting sustainable CSR practices can reduce operational costs for organisations and contribute to the nation's environmental sustainability, indirectly benefiting the economy (Ntoutoume, 2023).

Additionally, Luthar and Karri (2005) found that age and students' academic levels were strongly correlated with ethical values. This implies that older students, both in terms of age and academic standing, tend to possess a heightened awareness of corporate social responsibility. Also, Alonso-Almeida et al. (2015) found that students in higher academic levels demonstrate greater ethical awareness and a disposition toward CSR compared to those recently enrolled. Contrary to these findings, this study's findings indicated that there was no difference in how undergraduate students and postgraduate students understood and conceptualised CSR while also taking into consideration their age. According to Teixeira et al. (2018) and Ugwuozor (2020), older students might not always be wiser given that age may not be a reliable indicator of their CSR knowledge and understanding as there are instances where older students might find themselves at lower academic tiers. Therefore, age might not consistently and comprehensively mirror students' CSR orientation (Ugwuozor, 2020). In addition, the findings of this study show that demographic variables such as gender and academic level, did not have an influence on students' CSR orientation, knowledge and understanding.

5.2 Students' perceptions of internal and external CSR

Social identity theory helps explain how university students categorise, compare and identify with organisations based on their internal and external CSR initiatives. The theory sheds light on why students may perceive certain companies as more socially responsible and appealing as potential employers, depending on the emphasis these companies place on CSR, both internally and externally (Ersoy & Aksehirli, 2015). Furthermore, the emergent themes indicated that the majority of the participants perceived external CSR as more appealing when choosing a potential employer. The participants mentioned that they considered organisations that have a high external focus in terms of what they could be doing for their surrounding communities and societies. For instance, participant 14 mentioned:

'I would like to work at an organisation that has a high external focus, in terms of the community. I would look more towards education and skills development policies for the community members. I believe that by focusing on these types of initiatives, companies could unlock the door to a lot of talent that would otherwise be ignored'.

The data analysis indicated that students tend to appreciate CSR initiatives that have a visible and tangible impact on their communities as well as projects that create job opportunities, improve infrastructure or enhance education and skill development (Burcea & Marinescu,

2011). According to social identity theory, when students encounter organisations with prominent external CSR initiatives, they may categorise these organisations as socially responsible companies (Presley et al., 2018). This categorisation is based on the visible actions these companies take, such as contributing to charitable causes or engaging in environmental conservation efforts (Presley et al., 2018). Also, students who identify with socially responsible values may experience social identity enhancement when they associate with companies known for their external CSR initiatives (Presley et al., 2018). They may feel a stronger connection to these organisations, perceiving them as extensions of their own identity (Ersoy & Aksehirli, 2015; Presley et al., 2018).

Findings from Alfirevic et al. (2021) indicate that external CSR initiatives contribute to a positive reputation for the company. According to signalling theory, job seekers interpret these CSR efforts as indications of the organisation's values and authentic care for the environment and society (Matten & Moon, 2008). As a result, job seekers will form more favourable opinions about the organisation itself. At the same time, students placed greater emphasis on external CSR because given the current economic crisis in South Africa (characterised by ongoing blackouts and high unemployment rates), they felt it was not sufficient for the government to tackle these issues alone. As a result, these students emphasised that organisations ought to play a role in addressing these issues, for instance, by using alternative sources of energy and creating employment opportunities for the youth. This is because the provision of social services, which have been historically supported and funded by the government, is under severe strain (Simpson & Aprim, 2018). In this scenario, the social responsibility efforts of the private sector, leveraging their efficient and effective use of private resources, prove valuable in filling the gap left by the insufficient social services provided by the government (Simpson & Aprim, 2018). Furthermore, Kabir et al. (2015) mentions that the contribution of organisations, regulatory bodies and government is crucial to a greater extent in addressing these socio-economic problems. This coming together of various organisations and regulatory bodies is important because according to the CSI Handbook (2008), the government alone cannot address the socio-economic challenges by itself, rather, such an initiative should include ordinary people, the private sector and non-governmental organisations making their contributions as well.

Participants who found external CSR more appealing expressed that organisations that are conscious of their actions on society and the environment were attractive places to work for. They argued that organisations that have a conscious outlook and take appropriate measures to

contribute positively to the preservation and betterment of the society and environment were attractive. Alfirevic et al. (2021) states that when individuals perceive organisations to genuinely care about societal issues and concerns that align with their own perspectives, they regard the company as more trustworthy and esteemed. Consequently, this perception makes them view the organisation as a preferred choice of employer. From the study's findings, it can be concluded that students value CSR efforts that make a tangible difference in society. They appreciate companies that engage in community development projects, support charitable causes and actively participate in social initiatives. As a result, this shows that students are more likely to apply to organisations that demonstrate a commitment to improving the lives of others, be it through funding educational programs or assisting vulnerable populations. The data showed that participants placed greater importance on external CSR because they would like to be involved with and support companies that help ease the current economic and social challenges that prevent them from securing stable and decent job opportunities.

Only two participants explicitly reported that they found internal CSR appealing. For these participants, internal CSR meant helping employees within the organisation thrive through the use of employee wellness programs. The participants further stated that the use of employee wellness programs would not only help enhance productivity, but have the potential to create a healthier, happier and more engaged workforce. Social identity theory posits that students who prioritise ethical workplace practices may enhance their social identity when aligning with companies emphasizing internal CSR (Presley et al., 2018). As a result, they assess how organisations treat their employees, the fairness of their workplace practices, and the overall ethical culture. As participant 2 put it:

'I like to do a bit of research by looking at the company's website. I also like to look at any reviews I can find online to see what other individuals rate the company as to work for. I know a couple of reviewing platforms that allow you to rate the work life balance, satisfaction, so I look at that. I also like to look at the reputation of the company, for instance have there been any scandals within the organisation and did they recover from it?'.

Participant 15 also mentioned:
'*So firstly, I look at their company culture and see what is important to them. So, I would definitely go for a company that looks after its employees, because I believe if your employees are healthy and happy, then they are going to perform optimally'*.

The above findings are also supported by Martinez et al.'s (2015) research which discovered that students valued elements such as diversity and inclusion; a good company culture; a flexible working environment; company brand and reputation; opportunities for growth and development as well as companies that adhere to ethical codes. Simpson and Aprim (2018) found similar factors that influenced prospective employees' decision to work within a particular company and these factors included working conditions, value congruence between the individual and the organisation, level of person-organisation fit as well as the nature of employee benefits that the organisation would offer. Furthermore, Simpson and Aprim (2018) discovered a more inclusive list of organisational attributes and factors that attract talent such as job security, managerial quality and relationships, fringe benefits, involvement in decision making, working conditions, pay, responsibility given, marketability, authority and the possibility of long-term career prospects (Simpson & Aprim, 2018). Thus, organisations that excel in these areas may stand out as preferred choices for students seeking an ethical and inclusive work environment. In essence, these students may see these organisations as reflective of their values and identity as individuals who value fair treatment, inclusivity and ethical conduct in the workplace (Presley et al., 2018).

However, it is important to note that the findings from this research indicate that most of the participants were not aware of what constitutes internal CSR. Anand and Singh (2021) describe internal CSR practices as the actions and initiatives taken by organisations that provide insights into how they might treat their employees and what the experience of being an employee within that organisation would entail. These practices focus on creating a positive and supportive work environment and fosters a strong sense of employee satisfaction and fulfilment (Anand & Singh, 2021; Story et al., 2021). Consequently, when the participants were asked to explain characteristics and attributes that make a potential employer attractive to them, they unknowingly cited things related to internal CSR such as having a flexible work culture; good organisational values and culture; diversity and inclusion; as well as having relevant opportunities for growth and development. This shows that many students may not have had direct exposure to internal CSR practices, as this aspect is often less visible than external CSR initiatives (Galvao et al., 2019). Galvao et al. (2019) further argue that students may have narrow definitions of CSR, primarily associating it with external initiatives like charity donations. Therefore, this limited perspective may hinder their understanding of the broader concept nature of CSR.

5.3 The level of importance university students assigns to CSR when considering potential employers

University students, as the future workforce, place significant importance on CSR practices when considering potential employers. Participants in this study reported that companies that have a social impact were ideal and that they would want to work for organisations that aim to make a difference within society and the environment. They reported that when considering joining an organisation occupationally, they look at the potential employer's stance on social responsibility, basically how they give back and the impact they have on the environment. For example, a few participants mentioned:

'The type of company that I have in mind would definitely be a company that is ethical and seems to have good integrity, like that's a big thing to me, and a nice company culture. I consider companies that do contribute to society, that do like different charity drives'. [Participant 13]

'Values of a company…that's very important to me. I always want to ensure that some of my values are at least aligned with the company's values. Regardless of how much I am being paid, I would not choose to go to a [work]place where the environment is just so toxic because it's obviously bad for my overall well-being'. [Participant 6]

In doing so, some mentioned that they would start by checking the company's website in order to see and get an idea of how the company interacts with its surrounding communities.
'I look at their brand image first and see what type of organisation it is…what their values are [by checking] their website; their vision and see how they are interacting within their community. And then that's probably where I would make a decision to apply to that organisation'. [Participant 14]

Ásványi (2010) proposes that students' perception and evaluation of CSR can be positively affected if they have been exposed to general information about CSR through various media channels like newspapers, radio, television, or the internet. Communication strategies such as annual reports, corporate websites, packaging and production process information, and publicity play a significant role in helping students gain knowledge about CSR practices.

Moreover, the findings in this study are supported by Martinez et al. (2015), who found that organisations that incorporate an ethical and responsible business practice, were an attractive

place to work for according to prospective employees. Bharadwaj and Yameen (2020) also asserted that organisations with a higher focus on CSR have been found to attract more employees compared to organisations with lower corporate social performance. Theoretically, the link between CSR and employer attractiveness can be explained using signalling theory. Signalling theory posits that when people receive information about organisations, they interpret it as signals reflecting the organisation's working conditions, profile, and what it would be like to be part of the organisation (Martinez et al., 2015). This means that there is ample information available about organisations that can influence people's opinions and overall perceptions of a potential employer. The core focus of signalling theory lies in intentionally communicating positive information to signal favourable organisational attributes, including CSR. For instance, a company may use CSR to signal its concern for employees, leading potential applicants to view it as an attractive workplace.

As the participants in this study placed great importance on CSR initiatives when choosing an employer, similarly, Ersoy and Aksehirli's (2015) study found that students understand CSR as a reflection of an organisation's long-term vision and sustainability and that organisations that prioritise CSR are more likely to have a stable and enduring presence in the business world. Students are therefore, drawn to these employers as they envision their own career paths within a stable and growth-oriented environment. By associating themselves with such employers, students align their future trajectories with organisations that are more likely to sustain their presence over time (Ersoy & Aksehirli, 2015). This alignment reinforces their sense of purpose and personal continuity as suggested by social identity theory (Magbool et al., 2016). When students find employers that prioritize CSR, they may feel a sense of shared social identity with these organisations where they also see themselves as part of a community that values social responsibility. This shared social identity reinforces the importance of CSR when students consider potential employers because they seek alignment not just with a job, but with an organisation that mirrors their values and social identity.

From a signalling theory perspective, organisations that prioritise CSR are signalling their dedication to responsible business practices, which often translate into long-term success (Balmer, 2001; Greening & Turban, 2000). Therefore, students interpret these signals as the company's ability to conduct its business operations in a sustainable manner. Furthermore, Catelino (2021) argued that university students today are growing up in an era marked by heightened awareness of social and environmental issues and as result, the exposure to global

challenges such as climate change, social inequality and ethical dilemmas, have led students to develop a strong ethical consciousness. As a result, these students seek out employers that align with their values and demonstrate a commitment to addressing these concerns through CSR initiatives. Theoretically, this can also be linked to social identity theory because the theory proposes that individuals seek positive distinctiveness by associating themselves with groups that have favourable images (Archer, 2008; Turban & Greening, 1997) and students are no exception as they want to align themselves with employers who have a positive reputation and brand image. Archer (2008) finds that students naturally want to identify with organisations that have a positive reputation because it reflects positively on their own social identity as individuals who prioritize success, integrity and ethical behaviour. Choosing an employer with a positive reputation aligns with their values, making them feel more connected to the company and the values it represents. Therefore, by choosing employers that reflect their values, these students are essentially engaging in a form of self-enhancement, bolstering their own perceived status through their affiliation with a reputable and morally conscious employer (Galvao et al., 2019; Magbool et al., 2016). The organisation's CSR efforts act as a symbolic representation of their shared social identity, contributing to a stronger attraction to those employers.

It is important to note that the respondents did not only assign high levels of importance to CSR for organisations alone, but strongly felt that their educational institutions needed to play a significant role. The emergent themes indicated that students who reported having little knowledge regarding CSR wished it were something that was incorporated in their curriculum. For example, participant 3 mentioned:

'I would love to learn more to get an idea around it [CSR] because right now I do feel a little naïve to think maybe it's something that only companies should take into consideration. So, incorporating it into the curriculum is a big yes from me'.

Participant 12 also emphasised that:
'I think if we can drive and push for the importance of it, that is a start because from all my education, all my five years, I only learnt about [CSR] this year'.

As a result, these students advocated for CSR education to be something that should start off at primary-school level, so that learners grow up knowing the importance of social responsibility. In their study, Alfirevic et al. (2021) identified that there was a gap between students' existing knowledge on CSR and their wished-for level of knowledge of CSR. It is believed that students' perceptions of CSR are influenced by their experiential lessons from

academic learning and teaching and not from the professional socialization approaches (Alfirevic et al., 2021). By incorporating CSR into the curriculum, universities can foster a sense of identification with the values of social responsibility among students, faculty and staff. This can lead to a stronger sense of community and shared identity among members of the university. Social identity theory emphasises the desire for individuals to enhance their self-identity by identifying with groups that share their values and beliefs (Ersoy & Aksehirli, 2015). Therefore, teaching CSR allows students to align with the values of ethical business practices and social responsibility.

Furthermore, the idea of integrating CSR into students' curricula is supported by Martinez et al. (2015) who found that the incorporation of CSR contents into students' subjects results in a greater understanding of CSR among students. This is because, according to Barber and Venkatachalam (2013), the attitudes of students being trained at universities today will determine the future of CSR in organisations. At the same time, various studies have shown that an appropriate education in CSR provides the necessary skills and knowledge in students to address the ethical, social, and environmental impacts of business activities (Anand & Singh, 2021; Dahan & Senol, 2012; Martinez et al., 2015). This educational background also enables students to make informed decisions and prioritize among the optimal companies to work for, while considering their social, ethical, and environmental commitments and practices (Barber & Venkatachalam, 2013; Martinez et al., 2015). At the same time, CSR education in universities plays a crucial role in preparing the future generation of corporate leaders and instilling them with a socially conscious mindset (Barber & Venkatachalam, 2013; Persons, 2012). Social identity theory underscores the importance of individuals aligning themselves with groups that share their values and beliefs (Simpson & Aprim, 2018). Students, as future workers, are increasingly drawn to organisations that align with their values, including ethical business practices. As a result, CSR education helps students identify with organisations that prioritise CSR, reinforcing their commitment to these shared values (Simpson & Aprim, 2018). Because university graduates are expected to have ethical competencies, employers wish to recruit graduates who can successfully transfer and apply their university acquired skills and knowledge into the workplace (Rodriguez-Gomez, 2022; Schimperna et al., 2022).

Also, Schimperna et al. (2022) highlighted that the integration of CSR teaching and learning in university curricula consisted of several benefits. For instance, it fosters a positive attitude toward social responsibility, enhances ethical decision making for the benefit of society and positively impacts business performance (Schimperna et al., 2022). Secondly, since

universities are granted legitimacy by multiple stakeholders based on their ethical, moral and functional impact on society, they go beyond knowledge production and dissemination to contributing to economic, social, sustainable, legal and cultural development as well as promoting social justice. To improve CSR knowledge and dissemination, Schimperna et al. (2022) suggests that universities, especially in developing nations, should make several changes such as expanding tuition, diversifying funding sources, organisational restructuring and establishing collaborations with the public and private sectors. Simpson and Aprim (2018) reported that it is necessary for the academic curriculum of university students to be restructured or modified to encourage students' understanding and appreciation of CSR.

Finally, the integration of CSR into student learning is necessary because the study showed that participants were incognizant of the fact that aspects such as diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as corporate labour policies form part of internal CSR. They were unaware that organisations put in place these internal CSR practices to give back to employees, acknowledge their contribution and reward their efforts. Simpson and Aprim's (2018) study suggest the need for educational institutions to actively foster students' CSR orientations and personal values through CSR education as this will empower students to engage in the systematic processing of CSR-related information. While signalling theory posits that there is often information asymmetries between employers and job seekers in the labour market, teaching CSR in universities bridges this information gap by providing students with a comprehensive understanding of CSR concepts, practices and their importance in business (Schimperna et al., 2022). This knowledge empowers students to make informed decisions when seeking employment. Also, learning about CSR and understanding its importance enhances students' self-identity as socially responsible individuals (Paruzel et al., 2020). This identity influences their career choices and makes them more inclined to seek employment with organisations that reflect this identity.

In essence, signalling theory and social identity theory provide explanations for why teaching CSR in universities is crucial for students as they prepare to enter the workforce. It empowers them with knowledge, signals their commitment to CSR values, aligns with their personal identity, fosters a sense of community and prepares them for careers that make a positive impact on society and the environment (Albinger & Freeman, 2000; Anand & Singh, 2021; Barber & Venkatachalam, 2013; Ersoy & Aksehirli, 2015; Martinez et al., 2015).

5.4 Behaviours that make an organisation attractive to university students

The study found that students prioritise the environmental and social dimensions of CSR. This suggests that personal values and concerns drive their engagement with CSR rather than conforming to socialisation influences. According to the participants, socially responsible behaviours that make organisations appealing included specifically those that have a focus towards education and skills development for communities and societies. They believed that when companies invest in their communities through education and skills development initiatives, they would be able to assist the government in addressing the inequalities in the education system. As South Africa continues to grapple with high levels of income inequalities and widespread poverty, many young people living in impoverished communities face limited access to quality education and other basic services (Jones et al., 2016). For some participants, these socially responsible behaviours meant building facilities such as libraries for students in less fortunate communities. This is because schools in disadvantaged communities often lack resources, qualified teachers and proper infrastructure, leading to lower quality education which ultimately hinders youth's ability to secure better job opportunities (Jones et al., 2016). For this reason, the participants showed that they were very much aware of the disparities in the quality of schooling and access to educational resources between urban and rural areas in the country. Therefore, they believed that when companies are involved and assist in addressing these inequalities, then more of their youth counterparts would have better access to employment opportunities.

Also, among the participants, there was a general belief that there can be a win-win situation when companies take care of their surrounding communities. Participants believed that by doing so, organisations would be able to invest and attract the right talent from the communities they invest in, suggesting that students are attracted to organisations' explicit CSR activities. Greening and Turban's (2000) study revealed that factors such as the environment, community relations and diversity exerted a substantial influence on employers' attractiveness. In theory, this connection can be understood using signalling theory. For instance, when a company engages in CSR practices, it signals commitment to societal and environmental care (Greening & Turban, 2000). As a result, individuals may perceive this signal as an indication that the organisation possesses socially valued attributes, such as a genuine commitment to environmental issues.

Furthermore, several empirical studies have investigated the relationship between an organisation's CSR practices and its ability to attract applicants (Backhaus et al. 2002; Kim & Park 2011; Turban & Greening 1997). Previous research based on signalling theory and social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) suggests that a company's socially responsible practices send a positive signal to potential employees (Turban & Greening, 1997). These studies have provided evidence that show how a socially responsible organisation influences the attractiveness of a company to prospective employees in various applicant pools such as undergraduate students (Albinger & Freeman 2000; Backhaus et al. 2002; Greening & Turban 2000; Jones et al. 2016). According to Turban (2001), since applicants often have limited information about what it would be like to work for a company during the early stages of recruitment, they interpret available information about the organisation as 'signals' about the work environment. Signals related to the organisation's prestige, specific values and social orientation, significantly influence organisational attractiveness. This impact is evident through three areas of signalling: the job seekers' anticipated pride in identifying with a reputable company, perceived value fit between the organisation and the applicant, and the anticipated positive treatment inferred from the organisation's community involvement and pro-environmental practices (Jones et al., 2016). Additionally, Sohn et al. (2015) found that corporate social responsibility profiles of organisations affect how appealing they are to job seekers. These researchers further discovered that the majority of talent gathers data on corporate social performance during the pre-decision stage of the evaluation process before making the choice to apply (Sohn et al., 2015). Another study by Duarte et al. (2014) also demonstrated that participants' perceptions of an organisation and their intent to seek for a job there are positively impacted by the level of socially responsible practices the organisation engages in.

Research has shown that initial job decisions are often influenced by the image or reputation of the employer, and job seekers' perceptions of a company's reputation are closely related to the information available about that organization (Gatewood et al., 1993; Breaugh, 2013; Gaidhani et al., 2019). For example, research conducted by the Future Work Institute and the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) indicated that adopting responsible business practices contributes to the ability to attract and retain a diverse and highly capable workforce. Furthermore, in 2010, the Global Reporting Initiative commissioned a survey in collaboration with KPMG and the findings indicated that job seekers are increasingly using sustainability reports as a crucial factor in determining whether they want to join a specific

company (Global Reporting Initiative, 2010). Furthermore, the Global Reporting Initiative (2010) found that sustainability reports from developed countries primarily focused on conveying information pertaining to sustainable production and emissions in supply chain while sustainability reports from developing nations emphasised topics related to educational initiatives and human rights. De Run et al. (2010) proposed that when forming opinions about an organization, potential employees are often constrained by the limited availability of accurate and comprehensive information. As a result, job seekers tend to rely on prevailing characteristics of the organization to make their decisions. This decision-making process aligns with the principles of the signalling theory, wherein individuals draw inferences about an organization's purpose or performance based on the cues it presents. For instance, an organization boasting ISO 14001 certification might signal to potential applicants its commitment to environmental advocacy (De Run et al., 2010). As a result, it is presumed that an organization's adoption of sustainable business practices will send positive signals to prospective employees, thus enhancing the overall appeal of the organization.

Scholars such as Turban and Greening (1997), Matten and Moon (2008), and Smith et al., (2004), discovered that organisation attractiveness was generally seen as the factor that had a big influence on the choice of one employer over another one. In other words, organisation attraction can thus be seen as job seekers' positive view of an organisation and as a positive place to work. Simpson and Aprim (2018) discovered that organisation attraction was an implicit force that moves prospective job seekers to decide to work for one organisation over another based on the organisation's explicit activities. This is because external responsible practices positively stimulate organisational attractiveness through the reputation of the organisation. This study's findings are in support of the findings above as the students indicated that they were explicitly attracted to an organisation's external CSR initiatives. This shows that positive signalling of organisation's CSR initiatives creates a favourable image which portrays the organisation as socially responsible and committed to ethical practices. As a result, positive signalling of CSR initiatives not only influences the types of initiatives students value, but also has the potential to spark their interest in joining the company. This creates a sense of alignment, purpose, and shared values that can make the organisation a highly attractive option for students seeking meaningful and fulfilling career opportunities.

What follows is the concluding chapter which provides a comprehensive view of what the study has achieved and its implications.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to determine the role CSR plays in influencing new talent's choice of a future employer. A qualitative study was conducted, and data was gathered from a tertiary institution targeting students who had not been formally employed before. Employing students in the study allowed for the assessment of their perceptions of CSR in the context of their traditions, culture, and national environment without the influence of workplace pressures that could clash with their intrinsic personal values. Furthermore, this study provided a comprehensive view of how these students conceptualise CSR, how they perceive internal and external CSR, the level of importance they assign to CSR for organisations when choosing a potential employer and whether socially responsible behaviours make organisations attractive.

A CSR strategy and its execution is indeed one of the reasons why people seek employment at certain companies as it is a way of showing that the company is compassionate towards its employees and stakeholders. The qualitative approach adopted in this study provided in-depth information that managers and organisations can use in attracting talent. This study explored students' perceptions of CSR and the influence that CSR practices of organisations have on students' decision to join a company occupationally. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a favourable and significant association between an organisation's social purpose and the value that university students place on CSR when they choose a company to work for. As a result, corporate social responsibility is indeed one of the talent management strategies that organisations in South Africa can adopt to attract and retain top talent. The important conclusion in this study is that managers and employers need to understand the impact their social responsibility practices have in attracting valuable talent. This study has shown that university graduates show a high level of awareness toward corporate social responsibility, therefore, managers and employers must be quick to respond to the CSR factors that are central in attracting them to the workplace. Indeed, there is a need for a in-depth study on CSR in order to investigate the nature, integration and coverage of CSR related topics in higher education institutions' curriculum to provide the basis for CSR studies.

6.1 Implications of the study

This study shows that a social purpose does matter to new talent, a topic that has not received wide attention in the existing literature. This research has important practical implications. For instance, the results in this research show that good CSR practices do not only help organisations gain a good reputation, but also affect the attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions

of prospective employees. For organisations to capitalise on their CSR initiatives, they need to ensure that their stakeholders are able to recognize and assess the quality of their CSR initiatives.

At the same time, analysing the various elements, perceptions and expectations of university students could be very useful for firms, especially for human resource managers in their crucial role of developing competitive practices aimed at attracting and retaining a qualified workforce. A talented workforce can provide organisations an important advantage of differentiation, which can have a positive impact on the company's financial performance (Viljoen, 2020). Therefore, to attract such a talented workforce, organisations can signal their CSR practices in response to stakeholder demands in order to differentiate themselves from competitors, thus providing them with a greater advantage in the marketplace (Mobarak, 2021).

According to Martinez et al. (2015), incorporating a socially responsible approach in the human resource management (HRM) can be advantageous in terms of organisational performance through variables such as employee commitment, a stronger sense of belonging among employees, and a reduction in turnover and levels of absenteeism as the findings of this study highlight that students seek organisations where they can establish a sense of belonging. Such aspects can positively motivate current employees and help in attracting future candidates. Furthermore, the study suggests that universities across the country partner with industry HR practitioners to update and improve degree curricula that speaks to industry needs. By doing so, the employability of the new talent and their integration into the industry would be seamless and effortless.

Also, organisations can maximize the positive impact of their CSR initiatives by developing initiatives that not only focus on the external recipients but on what internal employees would appreciate (Mobarak, 2021). Thus, developing such an understanding, will assist organisations and CSR managers in implementing various initiatives within their organisations. These efforts aim not only to encourage participation in CSR but also recognize and appreciate the positive impact of a CSR experience extending into the workplace (Mobarak, 2021). Moreover, a well-designed CSR strategy can increase an organisation's reputation which ultimately leads to an attractive place to work for current and prospective employees (Holly, 2019). Another important managerial implication is that CSR is a powerful tool that can be used by organisations to differentiate themselves from competitors in attracting and retaining top talent.

Therefore, it is important for organisations and HR managers to know what students think because this study provided evidence that where students see a problem, they simultaneously provide a solution. Knowing the opinions and feedback of university students regarding the implementation of CSR initiatives could present organisations and human resource managers with a competitive advantage in the course of attracting and motivating this valuable human capital effectively.

The results also showed that very few students know exactly the CSR initiatives organisations engage in. Rather, they have an idea of what certain organisations do. According to signalling theory, organisations' CSR practices send different signals to the market and the organisations receive feedback from the market (Mobarak, 2021; Moratis, 2018). These market forces are very influential in driving sustainability practices (Mobarak, 2021). Therefore, within the communication process, sustainability reporting diminishes information disparities and empowers organisations to gain a competitive edge, ultimately maximizing their value (Mobarak, 2021). As part of their strategies, organisations can use a variety of media as signals (such as engaging in strategic stakeholder dialogue, sponsoring worthy causes or publishing sustainability reports) to reveal their CSR practices. Moreover, organisations can partner up with various universities so that they are able to publicize their initiatives to university students while also attracting prospective employees. This would be in the organisation's favour because by attracting the right talent from recent graduates, they will be able to recruit the right people who will be a good culture fit for the organisation.

6.2 Limitations of the study

This study had several limitations that must be noted. Firstly, the unit of analysis in the study was limited to participants from a single population at the Witwatersrand university, therefore, it is not possible to make assumptions that students from other universities would have the same perceptions. Given that qualitative research makes use of a small sample size, assumptions cannot be made that all students from the University of Witwatersrand perceive CSR favourably when looking for employment. Secondly, the study only considered students who were studying on a full-time basis at the university and those who had never been formally employed. Part-time students and students who had been formally employed were excluded from this study. Including both full-time and part-time students would have substantially broadened the scope of the study, potentially exceeding the manageable limits of the research timeframe and resources. Focusing exclusively on full-time students allowed the researcher to

conduct a more comprehensive and focused qualitative analysis. It is important to note this exclusion was not based on any discriminatory intentions. Rather, it was made in the interest of research clarity, feasibility and alignment with the study's objectives. Another limitation to note is the gender distribution within our participant pool, which consisted of 27% males and 73% females. This gender imbalance reflects the nature of the study's recruitment process, which was based on availability and willingness to participate. As a result, it may not capture the unique perspectives and experiences of individuals who identify outside the binary gender framework. Additionally, a noteworthy limitation pertains to potential researcher bias which involved the segmentation of the participants into different groups, primarily final year undergraduate and postgraduate students. This categorization was necessitated by the research objectives and the need to explore differences in perceptions within these groups. However, the researcher acknowledges that this categorization may have the unintended effect of oversimplifying the intricate nature of the participants' perceptions and experiences, thereby potentially overlooking the nuances that go beyond these categories.

6.3 Contributions

The study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Both social identity theory and signalling theory offer insights into why university students consider professional growth, skill enhancement and long-term career prospects when evaluating potential employers based on their CSR orientation. These theories highlight the role of shared values, social identity, and signals in shaping students' perceptions of organisations' commitment to employee development and long-term sustainability. Also, signalling theory has rarely been applied to analyse corporate social responsibility and talent management in the context of an emerging economy such as South Africa. Furthermore, this research established links between social identity theory, signalling theory and CSR, thereby contributing to the growing body of literature on organisational attractiveness. Moreover, the findings from this research can be used to assist South African organisations in determining the appropriate CSR communication frameworks in order to enhance their ability to attract the most suitable candidates effectively. A review of existing literature from several databases such as Emerald, SA Publications, ProQuest and EBSCOHOST, suggest that there are little to no studies in the South African literature that have used these theories together to investigate the role of CSR in influencing new talent's choice of future employers.

Practically, this study can contribute to managers' decision-making processes with respect to talent attraction and talent management strategies as CSR can be used as a strategic tool to attract new talent. Thus, the study provides feasible results that human resources (HR) managers or employers in South Africa can use to retain and attract the talent. The study contributes by adding insights into what new talent or prospective employees look at when seeking employment from organisations, which managers can leverage on in designing winning strategies that attract new talent. The study found that by tailoring CSR practices according to market demands, organisations are able to attract valuable talent which simultaneously enhances an organisation's competitive advantage especially in this 'war for talent' era.

University students were chosen as the target segment for this study due to their influence as consumers and their future roles as social leaders and managers in society. Their attitudes can provide insights into their future behaviour. Also, by understanding the process that leads to prospective applicants submitting their applications for job vacancies, organisations can refine their recruitment strategies and improve their ability to attract top talent. Furthermore, this research concludes by stating that there is a growing perception among university students that shareholder value and sustainable business success cannot be attained solely by maximizing short-term profits. Instead, it can be attained through collaborative and accountable behaviour. Therefore, organisations are encouraged to partner their operations in a way that enhances economic growth, increases competitiveness, ensures environmental protection and promotes corporate social responsibility.

6.4 Recommendations for future research

Some recommendations for future research emerged from the limitations encountered by the researcher throughout the course of study. Firstly, it is recommended that similar research should be carried out at other public universities in South Africa to be able to facilitate a more holistic understanding of South African university students' perceptions of CSR. Replicating these kinds of studies in different contexts (e.g., different universities across the country) may help tackle the talent crisis in South Africa. In addition, future studies can also focus on exploring the perceptions of students studying within both private and public tertiary institutions as this can provide more significant outcomes toward understanding whether students across the country value ethical business practices when considering potential employers. Thus, such findings can widen the judgement on the importance of CSR for

organisations. Future studies can also be carried out to discover if students within private tertiary institutions have different perceptions to students within public tertiary institutions.

Given that this study solely focused on students without formal work experience, future studies along this path can include students studying both on a full-time basis and those on a part-time basis. Perhaps more insight can be gained from part-time students (i.e., students with work experience) as they will be able to provide insights based on their involvement within an organisation. Furthermore, this study primarily reflects the short-term perspectives of university students who were registered during a specific academic period. As a result, future research can undertake longitudinal studies that look at the research findings across time as well as a quantitative approach to study the phenomenon on a broader scale.

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Appendix A: Ethics Clearance

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ETHICS COMMITTEE CONSTITUTED UNDER THE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE:	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: MAORG/22/06**
PROJECT TITLE:	Does a social purpose matter? Understanding the importance of corporate social responsibility to university students.
INVESTIGATOR	Humbani Natasha (1808395)
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT OF INVESTIGATOR	SHCD/Psychology
DATE CONSIDERED	13 July 2022
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved unconditionally
RISK LEVEL	Minimal Risk
EXPIRY DATE	31 December 2024

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE 11 August 2022 **CHAIRPERSON**

_____

(Prof. Karen Milner)

cc: Dr Sifiso Mlilo (Supervisor)

_____

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

_____ **12 / 08 / 2022**

Signature **Date**

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

Good day,

My name is Natasha Humbani. I am a Masters student in Organisational Psychology at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. My supervisor is Dr. Sifiso Mlilo. I am conducting a research study about students' perceptions on corporate social responsibility (CSR) to investigate whether these perceptions have an influence on the type of organisations students would want to apply to upon completion of their studies at the university. The study title is *Does a social purpose matter to new talent? Understanding the importance of corporate social responsibility to university students.*

I am inviting you to take part in answering my survey. If you decide to take part, your participation in this research study will last about 30 minutes. The survey will take place online and you will be given five days to complete it.

With your permission, I would like to keep the completed audio-recorded interviews. This data will be stored on a secure password protected laptop. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

During the research activity, I will need to ask for some personal information about you including your age, the degree you are currently enrolled for and how you identify yourself (either male, female or other).

The completed surveys will be strictly confidential and anonymous. When I share the results of the study, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you. With your permission, other researchers may use the data collected from this research study, but your name and any personal information will not be used or passed on.

If you decide to take part in the research study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You do not have to take part. You can stop being in the study at any time. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. You will not get any direct benefits if you choose to join the research study. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you decide not to join. Taking part in the research study will not cost you anything. You will not be paid for being in this research study.

This research study will be written up as a research report. The report will be available on the university library website. If you would like to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you.

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research study, feel free to contact me or my supervisor on the details listed below.

Yours sincerely,

Natasha Humbani

Researcher:
Natasha Humbani
Email: 1808395@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor:
Dr. Sifiso Mlilo
Email: Sifiso.mlilo@gmail.com

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
PSYCHOLOGY

Research Title: *Does a social purpose matter to new talent? Understanding the importance of corporate social responsibility to university students*

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve. I agree to the following:

(Please circle the relevant options below).

I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in her research report	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be audio recorded	YES	NO
I agree that the information that will be provide may be used anonymously by other researchers following this study	YES	NO

…… (signature)

…… (name of participant)

…… (date)

Appendix D: Interview Guide

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG | SCHOOL OF HUMAN AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PSYCHOLOGY

Good day,

My name is Natasha Humbani, a Masters student at the university and I would like to thank you for taking your time to participate in my qualitative research study. The survey is based on finding out about your perceptions of corporate social responsibility and if these perceptions have some sort of influence on the organisations you would wish to work for. Basically, my aim is to find out if corporate social responsibility activities organisations engage in matters to you as a prospective employee.

Just to reassure you, there are no right or wrong answers, therefore, I would like to request that you give your honest responses.

To reiterate some of the main ethical considerations as per your signed consent form, please note:

- You can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any questions without any consequences
- All information you provide for this study will be treated confidentially
- The data will be used for research purposes and that the results may be published
- The data may be used for future research where the same rules of confidentiality will apply
- Last but not least, the interview will be audio-recorded as per your signed consent form

Biographical data

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your gender identity? _____
3. What is your racial identity? _____

Opening questions

a) Tell me a little bit about yourself. For example, where are you from, what are you currently studying?
b) What made you decide to pursue the degree you are currently enrolled for?

Semi-Structured questions

1. What role do you think companies should play in society and the environment?
2. Do you believe that the concept of 'corporate social responsibility' matters? Why?
3. Are there any companies that are involved in looking after the environment or those that play a positive role in society that you know of? Please specify them.
4. Based on the companies mentioned above, can you give examples of specific initiatives that stood out?
5. What type of work or job would you enjoy doing? Why?
6. Before deciding on where to apply, what are some of the things that you take into consideration?
7. What specific elements make organisations attractive to you?
8. What type of CSR initiatives do you consider to be important to you? Please provide examples of the initiatives.
9. Would the opportunity to participate in CSR be attractive to you?
10. Given the opportunity to become a leader of an organisation, how important would contributing positively to the society and the environment mean to you?
11. Based on your above explanation, please provide examples of corporate social responsibility you will be interested in implementing.

Conclusion

I would like to thank you once again for participating in my research. If you have any further questions, please direct them to my email address listed below. Thank you!

Researcher:

Natasha Humbani

Email: 1808395@students.wits.ac.za