[Approfondimento]
When doing the right thing goes wrong! Causes, effects, and dimensions of corporate social responsibility scepticism

Rongtitya Rith*, Riccardo Spinelli†

Abstract

Stakeholder scepticism is becoming more prevalent surrounding organisations' corporate social responsibility (CSR) implementation and communication processes. This study provides a systematic literature review of 73 studies, published from 2007 to 2024, to determine the status quo of the CSR scepticism scholarship by specifically exploring the underlying causes, effects, and salient dimensions of CSR scepticism. The findings illustrate that the process nature of CSR scepticism is multi-dimensional. There are both CSR-related and non-CSR-related causal factors that determine and induce negativities in stakeholders' evaluations and perceptions towards certain CSR actions and communications. Additionally, the content analysis of the literature dataset also depicts the adverse impacts of CSR scepticism and emphasises various implications and measures of CSR scepticism mitigation. This study contributes a conceptual insight into the pervasive issue of scepticism in the CSR context, whilst also informing management, marketing, communication, and public relations professionals about the complexity of CSR scepticism as a barrier to effective CSR implementation and communication processes.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, CSR scepticism, stakeholder scepticism, systematic literature review, content analysis.

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1. Introduction

The proliferation of scholarly corporate social responsibility (CSR) research has largely indicated a consensus that stakeholders are generally more positive towards organisations that engage more attentively in CSR activities. However, scepticism is simultaneously more prevalent surrounding organisational attempts at CSR implementation and communication processes (Kim & Rim, 2024). Those stakeholders have become more sceptical and doubtful about corporate CSR actions and communications (Connors *et al.*, 2017) since they tend to perceive that contemporary business organisations, to a great extent, employ CSR as a marketing tactic to take advantage of and capitalise on consumers' goodwill (Pirsch *et al.*, 2007). As a result, they have become more pessimistic about corporate actions and communications in general, a phenomenon that causes a surging decrease in trust amongst stakeholders.

In the CSR context, scepticism may arise when stakeholders perceive that business organisations engage in and communicate about their CSR actions with ulterior motives for certain benefits. Due to the heightened levels of stakeholder scepticism, it is imperative that businesses strategically discern what CSR activities to implement and disseminate CSR information in an effective manner to satisfy a vast variety of different stakeholders (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Nevertheless, there is an inherent risk of stakeholder scepticism involved in both CSR implementation and communication processes (Kim & Rim, 2024).

In fact, stakeholder scepticism exists on so large of a scale that it imposes a challenging barrier to organisations as they strive to demonstrate their CSR commitment (Bae & Cameron, 2006; Xu & Kochigina, 2021). The crux of the ironic argument is that those stakeholders are sceptical when organisations "do not" implement CSR to fulfil their social and ethical responsibilities; nevertheless, they are still sceptical when organisations "do" implement CSR. This irony presents a conundrum that is contrary to the common notion that CSR is a proposition for business and society to create the so-called "shared value" (Porter & Kramer, 2006).

According to the most recent scoping study of CSR scepticism conducted by Rith (2025), the process nature of CSR scepticism is quite complex (i.e., with both situational and inherent traits), and CSR can yield both buffering and boomerang effects on CSR practitioners. In this regard, understanding the construct of CSR scepticism and its salient features may benefit future research by enhancing a more critical analysis of CSR in relation to not only its perks, but also its challenges, which in this regard, is the pertinent issue of stakeholder scepticism. Therefore, this explorative study aims to depict the salient "causal" and "consequential" factors of CSR scepticism through a systematic review of previous studies that have discussed stakeholders' sceptical sentiments towards CSR. Given that scepticism is a multi-dimensional construct (Grunwald, 2023; Rith, 2025), this systematic literature review also examines dimensions and characteristics of CSR scepticism that are worthy of attention. In addition, this study also characterises CSR scepticism by explicating its dimensions and differentiating it from other negativities associated with stakeholders' evaluations and perceptions. Specifically, this study expands the

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theoretical implications of Rith's (2025) scoping literature review on CSR scepticism and responds to its appeal for a subsequent systematic review that may further explore the key determinants and consequences of CSR-related scepticism. Thus, this present systematic literature review contributes to the said discourse by further constructing a conceptual framework of CSR scepticism to inform about its underlying causes, effects, and dimensions. In this regard, the following research question is posed:

RQ: What are the main causes and consequential effects and mitigation measures of CSR scepticism that have been examined in the extant literature?

2. CSR Scepticism: Conceptualisation and State of the Art

In the CSR context, scepticism originates from the conflicting paradox between the "for-profit" nature of business and the "altruistic" nature of CSR (Rith, 2025). CSR scepticism can be defined as the stakeholders' inclination to question and doubt an organisation's claim of socially responsible actions and efforts (Du et al, 2010; Rim & Kim, 2016). Thus, if stakeholders perceive that a company is using CSR strategically to reap certain organisational benefits, they are more likely to be sceptical of the concerned CSR effort. The crux of the argument is that stakeholders may care less about a company's CSR activities than about its motives (Ellen *et al.*, 2006). According to Becker-Olsen *et al.* (2006), their responses to CSR are a result of not only the actual CSR practice itself, but also their evaluations and perceptions of the CSR practice in association with the said company as a whole.

Previous research has suggested that stakeholders' perceptions and evaluations of a company's motivational factors for its CSR practices are an important condition which determines the effectiveness of CSR (Groza *et al.*, 2011). Stakeholders generally assign one of the two primary types of motives to companies: "self-serving motives", emphasising the potential benefits to the company itself; and "public-serving motives", focusing on the potential benefits to the external society (Forehand & Grier, 2003). When those stakeholders attribute a company's CSR activities to altruistic motives, they positively perceive the company as more sensitive to the well-being of the society, and their attitudes towards the company may be more favourable accordingly, a phenomenon called the "buffering effect" of CSR (Rith, 2025). On the contrary, when stakeholders attribute a corporation's CSR practices to self-serving motives, they may perceive the CSR actions as opportunistic and consequently become sceptical and doubtful about such CSR efforts. This, in turn, may arouse negative attitudes towards the company. This phenomenon can be described as the "boomerang effect" of CSR (Rith, 2025).

Despite the widespread occurrence and prevalence of public scepticism towards corporate CSR actions and communications, present studies on the determinants and outcomes of scepticism towards CSR remain scarce and limited (Kim & Rim, 2024). This dearth of research is imperative to address for a number of reasons. First, scepticism is quite an intriguing phenomenon which can manifest within a range of corporate strategies, including firms' CSR communication strategies (Dunn

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& Harness, 2018; Love *et al.*, 2022; Ma & Bentley, 2022), cause-related marketing (Singh *et al.*, 2009; Thomas *et al.*, 2024; Vlachos *et al.*, 2016), or crisis communication (Jung & Lee, 2022; Wei & Kim, 2021). Second, negative consumer responses towards corporate actions are quite damaging and detrimental to business outcomes, such as boycotting (Klein *et al.*, 2004), cynicism (Chon & Kim, 2021; Serrano Archimi *et al.*, 2018; Vveinhardt, 2024), or distrust (Ginder & Byun, 2022; Kim & Rim, 2024). Third, scepticism against CSR is on the rise despite companies' tremendous investment in implementing CSR initiatives and publicising their accomplishments. On another note, there have been reported incidents of corporate scandals and controversies which have worsened both of the issues of corporate transparency (Lee & Comello, 2019) and corporate hypocrisy (Cheah *et al.*, 2023).

Another implication of this study is that the lack of a systematic review of the fragmented CSR scepticism literature can obstruct theory development and advancement, as well as the offering of practical implications for business practitioners and policymakers. Thus, a systematic literature review of the existing empirical work on CSR scepticism is necessary to collate the comprehensive knowledge of the field. In this context, this study synthesises the findings of existing studies and provides a comprehensive framework that integrates evidence-based insights into the causes and effects of CSR scepticism.

Understanding how researchers have explored different aspects of CSR scepticism offers many benefits. In fact, understanding the manifestation of scepticism towards various CSR initiatives can help managers and marketers craft specific CSR strategies and communications that are favourable and effective to attract positive consumer responses. On another note, raising awareness of the consequences of CSR scepticism can also encourage businesses to focus on openness and transparency about their CSR practices. For public policymakers, understanding CSR scepticism may benefit them in a sense that they may be able to draft stronger CSR policies that protect a wide array of stakeholders from misleading CSR actions and communications, whilst also supporting and encouraging both business and society to act responsibly.

In light of these dynamics, the purpose of this study is to examine the underlying causes and effects of CSR scepticism along with its notable characteristics. In line with the previous work of Rith (2025), this review contributes to a nascent CSR research stream which explicates the current workings and linkages between the collective CSR and scepticism topicalities, whilst aiming to inspire a continuous effort in theorising research pertaining to the issue of CSR scepticism in its entirety.

3. Methodology

This study utilises the systematic literature review method to address the afore-mentioned research question. A systematic review can be explained as a research method and process for identifying and critically appraising any relevant research, as well as for collecting and analysing literature data from the said research (Moher

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et al., 2009). The aim of a systematic review is to identify all empirical evidence that fits the pre-determined inclusion criteria to answer a particular research question or hypothesis (Moher *et al.*, 2009). By using explicit and systematic methods when reviewing studies and all other available kinds of empirical evidence, bias can be minimised, thus providing reliable findings from which conclusions can be drawn meaningfully (Moher *et al.*, 2009).

These notions are appropriate for the exploratory and descriptive nature of this study as it emphasises a "specific research problem" (i.e., to explore the underlying determinants, consequences, and dimensions of CSR scepticism). Therefore, the systematic review method is considered pragmatic and suitable for the purpose of the study.

To warrant the academic rigour and quality of the review, it is of utmost importance to formulate a stringent research framework with clear methodological strategies. To ensure transparency and rigor, this literature review follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 checklist and flowchart provided by Page *et al.* (2021). As one approach to qualitative content analysis, an inductive content analysis was employed to analyse the literature dataset of all relevant previous studies, and the process involved collecting and analysing data without pre-conceived categories or theories. This flexibility has allowed the literature data to guide the analysis and to identify any emerging patterns, themes, and concepts that may help address the proposed research question.

Three parameters were set to determine the scale of all potentially relevant studies: (i) publication sources, (ii) keyword identification, and (iii) time span. We opted to utilise Scopus which offers extensive coverage of a large variety of journals to aid our literature search. To further delimit the search, we considered only articles written in English and published until 2024 in peer-reviewed journals with an emphasis on the subject areas of "Business, Management, and Accounting" and "Economics, Econometrics, and Finance". When choosing the keywords, an inclusive approach was adopted to enable semantic variations to be captured. In line with the work of Rith (2025), the generic definition of CSR scepticism in this study considers the concept multi-dimensional and embraces the diverse attributes and characteristics of it, including but not limited to, both situational traits of CSR scepticism (e.g., CSR motives, CSR claims, etc.) and dispositional traits of CSR scepticism (e.g., cynicism, distrust, etc.) (Kim & Rim, 2024; Rim & Kim, 2016; Rith, 2025; Romani *et al.*, 2016).

In the search query, the key terms of "CSR", "corporate social responsibility", "sustain*" were crossed with "scepticism", "skepticism" (the American English equivalent), and cognate terms such as "doubt", "distrust", "mistrust", and "cynicism". This inclusive approach enabled a rigorous search of all potentially relevant studies constituting the dataset. The search query generated an initial sample of 260 articles. First, 9 articles published in 2025 were not considered as the literature search was conducted during the first half of 2025. The titles, abstracts, and keywords of the remaining 251 papers were examined, and 138 articles were excluded as they did not emphasise any issues related to CSR or scepticism topics.

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This process has consequently reduced the sample size to 113 articles. To further refine the sample, the full texts of the 113 articles were then manually scrutinised against certain inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1).
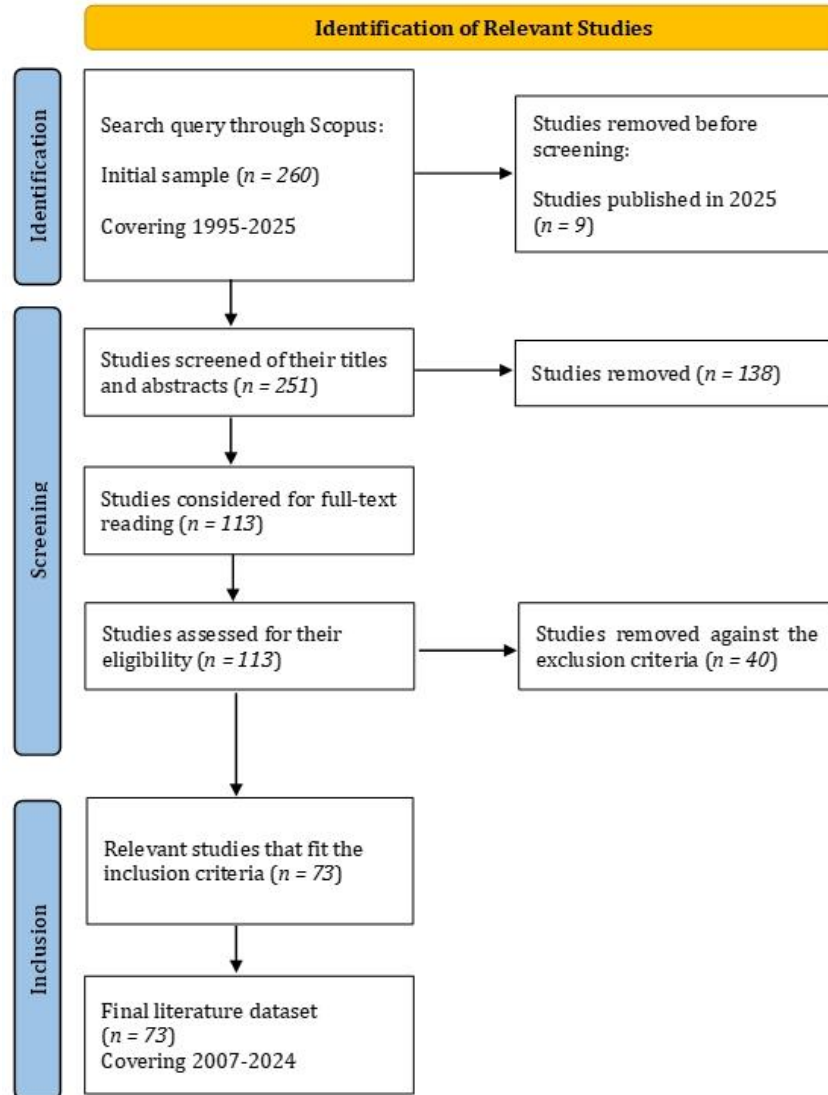
Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criterion (IC)	Exclusion Criterion (EC)
IC1. Specifically examine the issue of CSR scepticism in its entirety; **IC2.** Examine stakeholder and/or consumer scepticism within the context of organisations' CSR activities or initiatives; **IC3.** Examine scepticism in relation to managerial and governance aspects of CSR (e.g., CSR design, implementation, promotion, evaluation, communication, etc.); **IC4.** Examine scepticism against certain CSR-related issues (e.g., greenwashing, CSR authenticity, CSR hypocrisy, etc.); **IC5.** Examine scepticism against certain CSR-based business practices (e.g., cause-related marketing); **IC6.** Examine other adverse behavioural patterns and perceptions of stakeholders towards CSR (e.g., doubt, mistrust, distrust, disbelief, cynicism, etc.).	**EC1.** Lack a substantial focus on either CSR or scepticism-related topics in their research aims, questions, or findings; **EC2.** Examine CSR-related issues irrelevant to the notion of stakeholder scepticism (e.g., stakeholders' engagement, communication, supportive intentions, etc.); **EC3.** Examine scepticism issues outside the context of organisations' CSR activities or initiatives (e.g., scepticism towards corporate leadership, managerial efforts, etc.); **EC4.** Examine organisations' managerial and governance issues (e.g., corporate, reputation, transparency, crisis management, etc.); **EC5.** Examine consumer scepticism against companies' products or services; **EC6.** Examine consumer scepticism against generic marketing strategies or tactics of companies.

Source: Authors' own creation

The final sample comprises 73 articles constituting the literature dataset (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1: Literature Data Search based on the PRISMA Model of Page *et al.* (2021)

Source: Authors' own creation (Adapted from Page et al., 2021)

4. Findings

The findings of this systematic review are illustrated in a two-fold manner, comprising both (i) the descriptive findings of the literature dataset and (ii) the content analysis of the literature dataset.

In addition to charting the dataset's bibliographic features, the qualitative (i.e., inductive) content analysis performed on the 73 studies enabled a further exploration of their research aims, strategic focuses, and findings.

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Our aim was to observe and reconcile emerging themes and important implications which may inform about the process nature of CSR scepticism by unveiling its causal and consequential factors and its various characteristics. Insights into the importance of CSR scepticism mitigation are also presented.

4.1 Descriptive Findings

The bibliographic data of the 73 articles covers the following aspects: authors, publication years, study titles, journal sources, theoretical frames, geographical contexts, and industrial contexts.

As shown in Figure 2, the volume of scientific publications has fluctuated throughout the entire time span (2007-2024), yet the growth in popularity of the research stream has been at a steady pace. Between 2007 and 2018, there have been less than 7 studies published annually, and no publication was recorded in 2011. However, the more recent years of 2022 and 2024 peaked with 10 and 11 studies respectively.

Figure 2: Publication Years by Number of Studies
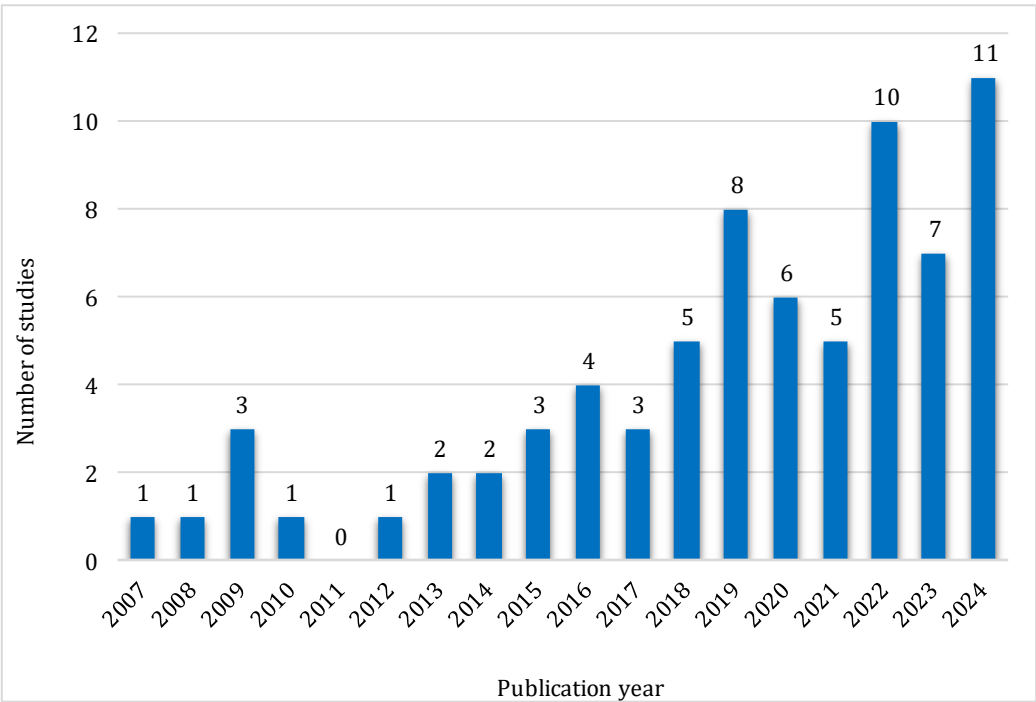
Source: Authors' own creation

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The 73 articles were published across 35 journal outlets. There is a well-spread distribution of different journals, emphasising a wide range of subject areas, including public relations, marketing, management, and communication. As shown in Table 2, certain journal outlets top the chart, including Public Relations Review (n = 6), Journal of Marketing Communications (n = 6), Journal of Business Ethics (n = 5), Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management (n = 5), Journal of Brand Management (n = 4), Journal of Business Research (n = 4), Corporate Reputation Review (n = 3), and Marketing Intelligence and Planning (n = 4). The remaining journals mostly carry three or less papers each.

Table 2: Publication Sources by Journal Outlet

Journal outlet	Number of studies
Public Relations Review & Journal of Marketing Communications	6
Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management & Journal of Business Ethics	5
Journal of Brand Management, Journal of Business Research, & Marketing Intelligence and Planning	4
Corporate Communications & International Journal of Business Communication	3
Journal of Marketing Management, Social Responsibility Journal, & Spanish Journal of Marketing – ESIC	2
Australasian Marketing Journal, Business Ethics, Environment and Responsibility, Business Ethics: A European Review, Business Horizons, Business: Theory and Practice, Current Issues in Tourism, International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, International Journal of Emerging Markets, Journal of Advertising, Journal of Consumer Marketing, Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management, Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, Journal of Financial Services Marketing, Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Insights, Journal of Interactive Advertising, Journal of Promotion Management, Journal of Public Relations Research, Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, Journal of Strategic Marketing, Management Communication Quarterly, Management Decision, & UCJC Business and Society Review	1

Source: Authors' own creation

In addition, this review has identified 30 theories which are explicitly referenced in 46 studies (see Table 3). The remaining 27 studies are not framed around any theoretical approaches. As indicated in Table 4, attribution theory is the most utilised theoretical foundation accounting for 13 studies (n = 13). Legitimacy, framing, signalling, cognitive dissonance, and social identity theories appear in three studies each (n = 3), followed by stakeholder, social learning, expectancy violation, and construal level theories, which carry two studies each (n = 2). Five studies (n = 5) are multi-theoretical in nature and focus on theory building.

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Table 3: Theoretical Approaches of Certain Studies

Theoretical approach	Number of studies
Data not available	27
Attribution	13
Theory building	5
Cognitive dissonance, Framing, Legitimacy, Signalling, & Social identity	3
Construal level, Expectancy violation, Social learning, & Stakeholder	2
Attitude-behaviour-context, Balance, Cognitive avoidance, Cognitive-motivational-relational, Dis-identification, Dual process, Expectancy confirmation, Human values, Information processing, Moral foundation, Narrative, Narrative transportation, Persuasion knowledge, Planned behaviour, Prospect, Reference group, Self-categorisation, Situational theory of problem solving, & Social exchange	1

Source: Authors' own creation

As indicated in Table 4 below, the geographical scope of the literature body stretches across different countries and continental contexts. Majority of the articles emphasise a vast variety of geographical contexts of North America and Europe. Looking closer at North America, USA constitutes the highest coverage accounting for 31 published studies (n = 32). In Europe, the Netherlands contributes four studies (n = 4), followed by the UK (n = 3). France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Greece carry only one study each (n = 1). In Asia, India and Malaysia constitute two studies each (n = 2). One study is from Australia (n = 1). International studies are prevalent in three studies (n = 3), including a cross-continental study (USA and Australia) from Arli *et al.* (2019), a pan-European study from Preuss (2008), and a pan-Asian study from Kim (2022). A high number of studies do not emphasise any geographical contexts (n = 18). Furthermore, the dataset does not have any studies from South American and African contexts.
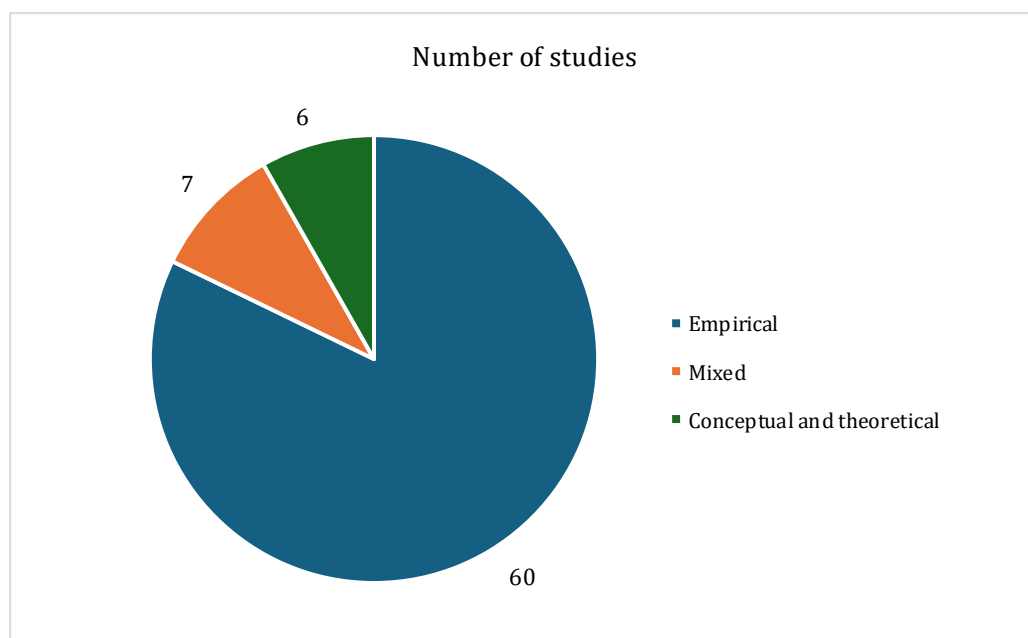
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Table 4: Geographical Scope of the Studies

Geographical context	Number of studies
USA	32
Data not available	18
The Netherlands	4
International studies & UK	3
India & Malaysia	2
Australia, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, South Korea, & Spain	1

Source: Authors' own creation

With regards to the methodological nature of the dataset (see Figure 3), the literature body offers tremendous empirical insights, as evidenced in 60 studies (n = 60), accounting for empirical qualitative and quantitative research output. Seven studies have adopted mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative techniques (n = 7), and six studies are conceptual and theoretical in nature (n = 6).

Figure 3: Methodological Natures of the Studies

Source: Authors' own creation

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In addition, the analysis also unveils certain industrial or organisational settings which have been contextualised in previous studies (see Table 5). Majority of the papers do not specify any organisational or industrial contexts (n = 41). In some cases, those studies are experimental in nature, and they generally exemplify fictional products or services. Notably, the fashion industry (clothing and luxury retails) accounts for eight studies (n = 8). Likewise, the food and beverage industry accounts for seven studies (n = 7). The sectors of media and entertainment and banking and financial services each account for four studies (n = 4), followed by two studies (n = 2) from the tourism and hospitality sector and one study each (n = 1) from the sectors of energy, cosmetics, non-fits, education, gambling, and general retail respectively.

Table 5: Industrial Contexts of the Studies

Industrial context	Number of studies
Data not available	41
Fashion and luxury	8
Food and beverage	7
Banking and financial services & Media and entertainment	4
Tourism and hospitality	2
Aviation, Cosmetics, Education, Energy, Gambling, General retail, & Non-profit	1

Source: Authors' own creation

4.2 Content Analysis

4.2.1 Causes of CSR Scepticism

CSR-related Causes

This perspective represents a notion that emphasises a variety of underlying CSR-related issues which constitute as causal factors of CSR scepticism. This portion of the extant research also examines the "boomerang" effect of CSR on tackling stakeholder scepticism. Specifically, studies falling within this category typically address CSR as a causal determinant perpetrating or inducing public scepticism. In this regard, CSR becomes counter-productive because CSR itself has components that induces negative evaluations and perceptions amongst stakeholders.

Previous studies have demonstrated that stakeholders are generally sceptical about CSR claims since they are under the impression that organisations, in certain situations, employ CSR to be a "window-dressing" or a "green" strategy to take

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advantage of consumers' goodwill (Connors *et al.*, 2017; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017). This perspective is also applicable to when CSR is strategically employed to attenuate a crisis situation (Ham & Kim, 2020). Companies can be perceived negatively although they do good deeds through CSR. This phenomenon can be explained as the "boomerang" effect of CSR which consequently induces scepticism amongst stakeholders.

Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013) and Skarmeas *et al.* (2014) have explained how consumer scepticism towards CSR develops and its influence on important consumer-related outcomes. Their findings revealed that attributions of egoistic and stakeholder-driven motives elicit consumer scepticism towards CSR, whilst value-driven attributions inhibit scepticism. In fact, the consumer behavioural aspect has been examined thoroughly by several notable studies. For example, the work of Kwon and Ahn (2020) studied the effect of green CSR scepticism on consumers' attitude, reactance, and behavioural intention. In line with this perspective, Isa *et al.* (2020) and Thomas *et al.* (2024) also explored the role of CSR scepticism in ethical purchase intention and participation intention respectively. The empirical works of Alhouti *et al.* (2016) and Marschlich and Hurtado (2024) have identified factors which influence the perceived authenticity of CSR initiatives. Likewise, both Samuel *et al.* (2018) and Servaes *et al.* (2023) have further reiterated the importance of addressing the CSR authenticity gap. Their verdicts largely agreed that, in addition to engaging in CSR, a CSR strategy must also consider the extent to which consumers perceive their CSR initiatives as authentic and genuine.

CSR scepticism has been claimed to be related to CSR attributions of the motives behind CSR initiatives (Rim and Kim 2016). A noticeable stream of research discusses how perceived CSR motives influence consumers' scepticism. Scholars have studied the roles of specific CSR motives in CSR scepticism development using terminology such as firm-serving and public-serving (Foreh & Grier, 2003; Mantovani *et al.*, 2017), self-centred and other-centred (Vlachos *et al.*, 2016), economic motives (Lasarov *et al.*, 2021), or extrinsic motives and intrinsic motives (Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Romani *et al.*, 2016). According to Ellen *et al.* (2006), consumer attributions are much more complicated than these binaries and should be categorised into four types: egoistic-driven, strategic-driven, stakeholder-driven, and values driven. These four motives have been examined in several studies in the CSR literature (e.g. Kim & Lee, 2015; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013; Skarmeas *et al.*, 2014). However, these four types of CSR motives have been critiqued as inappropriate for industries with fledgling CSR practices (Lee, 2020). According to the current literature, values-driven attribution can reduce CSR scepticism (Dunn & Harness, 2018; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

However, the findings regarding other consumer attributions and their relationships with scepticism appear to be inconsistent. For example, Kim and Lee's (2015) study shows that motives that are perceived as more self-serving and strategic can lead to higher levels of CSR scepticism, which somewhat contradicts the findings of the works of Skarmeas *et al.* (2014) and Lee (2020). Similarly, inconsistency in the relationship between stakeholder-driven motives and consumer CSR scepticism also exists (Lee, 2020; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

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Therefore, more empirical research is needed to clarify and explore the links between stakeholder and strategic-driven motives and consumer CSR scepticism. The link between perceived motives and scepticism is evident, yet the knowledge of the determinants of perceived motives, at present, appears to be limited.

Non-CSR-related Causes

This literature strand explicates a notion that scepticism is relatively "inherent" amongst stakeholders. Studies falling within this scope typically revolve around the fact that scepticism is an outcome resulting from a variety of issues that are not directly related to CSR but are more associated with various generic factors in relation to organisations or their associated CSR practitioners.

The extant literature has provided an insightful implication that stakeholder scepticism towards organisational altruism of CSR generally stems from the conflicting paradox between the profit-maximising nature and priority of business organisations and the altruistic nature of CSR (Rith, 2025). The empirical work of Kim and Rim (2024) posited that scepticism can be more inherent in nature amongst individuals who are considered as cynics. For-profit business organisations are perceived to be seeking profit maximisation as their main priority for survival. This naturally leads people to doubt the ulterior motives of any corporate CSR practice and perceive them as less altruistic. Kim (2022) has also stated that CSR scepticism is rising, and it is intricately connected to the issue of capitalism and the capitalistic nature of business. The matter is more intense in the contexts of stigmatised industries which operate in controversial business settings (Austin & Gaither, 2019; Choi *et al.*, 2024). Prior research has shown that public scepticism is more inherent towards controversial corporations, and scepticism is an antecedent of any CSR practice which may instead heighten the issue of corporate hypocrisy (Arli *et al.*, 2019).

On a different note, several studies have adopted a more psychological approach in understanding consumer behaviour with regards to CSR scepticism. Newman and Trump (2019), for instance, have emphasised a particular characteristic of an ideal CSR spokesperson which is the gender aspect of the concerned CSR messenger. The paper from Ramasamy *et al.* (2020) has examined the effect of human values on consumer CSR perceptions towards cosmetic companies' CSR practices. Consumer scepticism was found to have a moderating effect on the relationship between human values of openness to change, self-transcendence, and conservation towards their CSR perceptions. Their results allow decision makers to better understand the influence of consumers' value system on their CSR perceptions whilst elucidating the boundary conditions posed by scepticism, amplifying the need for organisations to engage in authentic and sincere CSR practices. Magee (2022) took a different approach and studied the role of consumers' worldview beliefs in allaying scepticism towards CSR advertising. Another empirical study from Moscato and Hopp (2019) was conducted to examine certain psychological aspects of sceptics or

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cynics, involving the role of personality characteristics in consumer scepticism of CSR activities.

The consensus is that various scholars have established the link between consumer attributions and CSR scepticism. The factors that influence consumers' perceived CSR motives can be interpreted as indirect drivers of CSR scepticism. Some scholars have studied distinctive factors that affect CSR attributions. For example, within CSR scepticism research, Yoon *et al.* (2006) show that the perceived sincerity of CSR motives varies depending on a combination of factors, including benefit salience, the source of consumers' knowledge of CSR programmes and the CSR contribution–CSR advertising ratio. The timing of the CSR initiative (reactive vs proactive) has also been demonstrated to influence unfavourable CSR attributions, which can lead to CSR scepticism (Lee, 2020). Arli *et al.* (2019) add that perceived corporate hypocrisy harms perceived CSR. Consumers' involvement, or stakeholder participation (Beldad *et al.*, 2020), also affects consumers' motive perceptions.

In the field of CSR scepticism, notable attention has been paid to communication-related factors in investigating the sources of perceived CSR motives or the indirect antecedents of consumer scepticism. Nevertheless, few studies have explored the sources of consumer attributions.

4.2.2 Effects of CSR Scepticism

One research stream illuminates the effects of different levels of scepticism and their associated consequences. More sceptical stakeholders appear prone to ascribing a negative attribution to CSR practices (Foreh & Grier, 2003). They also react less favourably to CSR actions and communications (Joireman *et al.*, 2018; Yu, 2020). In contrast, stakeholders with lower levels of scepticism tend to attribute positive motives (Ratnakaran & Edward, 2019) and respond to CSR initiatives and communications more favourably (Albayrak *et al.*, 2013; Manuel *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, when scepticism is low, consumers' willingness to purchase increases (Mendini *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, prior studies have also suggested that scepticism towards CSR is closely related to scepticism towards conspicuous forms of CSR communication (Kim & Rim, 2024) which may include CSR claims with regards to environmental sustainability (Cheah *et al.*, 2023; Chin & Kim, 2021; de Vires *et al.*, 2015), CSR messages (Dunn & Harness, 2019; Steltenpool & Verhoeven, 2012), or CSR advertising (García de los Salmones & Pérez Ruiz, 2018). A few studies have also addressed consumer scepticism associated with cause-related marketing (Kim & Lee, 2009; Singh *et al.*, 2009; Vlachos *et al.*, 2016; Webb & Mohr, 1998).

Research on public attributions of companies' CSR motives has been pushing the forefront of CSR literature (Romani *et al.*, 2016). Previous studies on CSR motives have empirically demonstrated the negative effects of public scepticism towards a wide range of CSR manifestations. When publics question a firm's sincerity of engaging in CSR, they tend to discredit CSR actions and messages and pose a negative evaluation of the concerned CSR practice (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013).

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How publics perceive a firm's motivations for engaging in CSR initiatives is crucial, as their perception and evaluation may alter the effectiveness of corporate CSR activities (Ellen *et al.*, 2006).

Although CSR communication enhances the visibility of a company's CSR effort, the more the company communicates, the more likely negative consumer reactions such as scepticism may also occur (Lim & Lee, 2023; Love *et al.*, 2022). The work of Kang and Atkinson (2021) stressed on pro-environmental CSR messages in the hotel industry and examined the effects of message objectivity and consumers' CSR-oriented and advertising-oriented responses. Their findings demonstrated that objective and outcome-focused messages are more effective in reducing consumers' scepticism and leading consumers to perceive CSR as more public-serving. However, the findings of Wei and Kim (2021) indicated that stating a public-serving motive or launching a CSR initiative incongruent with a crisis in progress can heighten CSR scepticism. This perspective is in line with the earlier empirical works from Kim and Lee (2015) and Zhang and Borden (2017) which emphasised the importance of managing public perceptions towards CSR implementation and communication taking place amidst a crisis.

The abundance of research pertaining to scepticism vis-à-vis CSR communication implies that companies face a major challenge in successfully and authentically communicating their good deeds, especially if their contributions are closely related to their core business activities (van Rekom *et al.*, 2014). Overall, companies are becoming more involved in a wide array of CSR activities, and they often publicise their good deeds to demonstrate their CSR effort, yet Elving (2013) proposed that organisations ought to be careful when communicating about their CSR commitment to stakeholders.

4.2.3 CSR Scepticism Mitigation

Studies that fall within this scope typically emphasise the impacts of CSR scepticism on organisational or outcome variables, as well as the presence of external variables and their mediating or moderating roles in mitigating CSR scepticism.

The empirical evidence captured in the dataset largely indicates that CSR scholars have been striving to identify factors influencing scepticism towards organisational altruism and stakeholders' perceptions towards CSR motives and manifestations (Teah *et al.*, 2022). When the attribution of ulterior motives is triggered, publics are more likely to evaluate organisations and their CSR practices in a negative manner (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). Amidst public scepticism against CSR actions and communications, organisations ought to attenuate the scepticism towards their altruism and pursue to build a quality brand-consumer relationship (Shankar & Yadav, 2020). Specifically, the study of Park (2022) has investigated the mediating role of scepticism in determining how corporate social advocacy (CSA) can help build quality relationships with publics. In this regard, corporations can signal their sincerity by engaging in CSA practices and taking a

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more definitive stance on major societal issues (Park, 2022). This approach can also be enhanced with the utilisation of social media as a channel of corporate communication or along with the presence of influential and popular social media figures (Cheng *et al.*, 2024; Zhang & Zhang, 2024) as well as the interaction effect of effective system-generated information to convey CSR information to publics (Lee *et al.*, 2019).

Other scholars have proposed various CSR-related measures to help alleviate CSR scepticism. Hall *et al.* (2023) have built a conceptual model which demonstrates the effects of CSR story-telling and suggested that organisations can leverage the storytelling process to convey their CSR actions. On top of that, the empirical study of Jung and Lee (2022) emphasised the importance of maintaining a continuous and consistent CSR communication effort in achieving favourable perceived CSR attributes from stakeholders.

Within the CSR communication context, Dunn and Harness (2018) adopted a mixed method approach in their study to explain how social media communication can shape CSR attributions and influence consumers' scepticism towards CSR. Similarly, Joireman *et al.* (2018) have explored whether company advertisements promoting a firm's good actions generate more positive responses when the advertisements contain concrete CSR-based claims or images. The work of Pomering and Johnson (2009a) emphasised the pros of corporate image advertising and its central role as a communication tool to help inform the public about organisations' CSR effort. Their other work (Pomering & Johnson, 2009b), on the other hand, critically discussed the cons associated with corporate image advertising, whilst also proposing two message variables, namely social topic information and social impact claim specificity. They suggested that these message variables are possibly effective in inhibiting the development of consumer scepticism and building a positive reputation.

The issue of CSR scepticism has been quite sensational, and many companies have to strategically discern what CSR actions to undertake and how to deliver CSR-related information to their stakeholders. Previous research has provided empirical insights into the role of corporate strategies which aim to mitigate public scepticism. Moreno and Kang (2020) conducted a study to examine the role of consumer evaluations of a company's CSR communication, from both content and delivery perspectives, in shaping consumers' CSR scepticism. The delivery of CSR information can be more important than the content itself in inducing scepticism. The findings also indicated that the fit between a company's core values and the CSR activities they communicate can play a significant role in alleviating scepticism (Mavi *et al.*, 2024), whilst the fit between consumers' personal values and CSR activities does not have significant effects on scepticism. The influence of CSR fit and reputation is quite crucial, especially if the company is a stigmatised business entity which is commonly perceived as controversial and problematic (Austin & Gaither, 2019).

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5. Discussion

Although the concerned previous research has provided ample evidence of the emerging public scepticism towards CSR, there has been little attention devoted to examining CSR scepticism in its own entirety. This is partially because of the complexity of theorising and conceptualising the concept due to the intricate nature and diverse sources of scepticism (Kim & Rim, 2024) as well as its overlapping characteristics with other related concepts such as distrust, doubt, or cynicism (Rim & Kim, 2016; Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). The void of consensus in CSR scepticism conceptualisation is quite apparent, and the extant literature indicates that CSR scepticism has been operationalised in various manners and contextualised across different disciplines (Rith, 2025).

In this systematic literature review, stakeholder scepticism against CSR can be so pervasive that CSR actions may instead become a double-edged sword for business organisations when it is not perceived positively by stakeholders. Despite the fact that scepticism towards CSR can obstruct the success of CSR design, implementation, and communication, this study indicates that CSR scepticism, in its own entirety, has not been well conceptualised and contextualised in the extant literature. Nevertheless, previous research has so far offered tremendous empirical evidence to examine consumer scepticism within only specific CSR-related areas such as environmental claims (Cheah *et al.*, 2023; de Vries *et al.*, 2015; Stadlthanner *et al.*, 2022), cause-related marketing (CRM) (Kim & Lee, 2009; Singh *et al.*, 2009; Thomas *et al.*, 2024; Vlachos *et al.*, 2016; Webb & Mohr, 1998), CSR advertising and messages (García de los Salmones & Pérez Ruiz, 2018; Kang & Atkinson, 2021; Pomering & Johnson, 2009a; 2009b; Zhang & Hanks, 2017), CSR reputation (Bögel, 2019; Ennenbach & Barkela, 2024; Ginder & Byun, 2022; Lessa & Coelho, 2024), corporate hypocrisy (Arli *et al.*, 2019), corporate transparency (Lee & Comello, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2023), perceived CSR motives (Chon & Kim, 2021; Teah *et al.*, 2022), stakeholders' perceptions (Kim & Lee, 2015; Matilla *et al.*, 2010), and consumers' behavioural intentions (Isa *et al.*, 2020; Kwon & Ahn, 2020). The topicalities of CSR and scepticism have been contextualised and examined in either a more direct or an indirect manner in relation to each other. In relation to their valuable empirical insights, those studies have notably examined scepticism against CSR as a "single dimension" with regards to specific CSR-related issues. It is also noteworthy that there remains a dearth of research elaborating on the underlying antecedents and outcomes of CSR scepticism.

This present systematic review specifically explicates the concept of scepticism in the context of CSR and examines the process nature of CSR scepticism. By doing so, this study conceptually examines CSR scepticism as a multi-dimensional construct along with its determinants and outcomes (i.e., causes and effects). In addition, this study offers a refined conceptualisation of CSR scepticism as the stakeholders' inclination to doubt, suspect, distrust, or disbelieve an organisation's CSR manifestations (i.e., implementation and communication) of any CSR-related practices. Based on this conceptualisation, this study is grounded in an extensive review of the extant literature aiming to elaborate on the multi-dimensional process

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nature of CSR scepticism. Our analysis of the concerned literature body also unveils important components constituting the CSR scepticism construct along with a variety of its underlying causes and effects and mitigation measures.

The concept of CSR prominently appears on the corporate agenda in the modern business world. Such tremendous interest has stimulated an abundant volume of research on the importance of CSR in general and the extent to which business organisations can "do well by doing good". Whilst corporate CSR strategies have been demonstrated to stimulate favourable firm performances (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006), scepticism can seriously distract the success of such a strategy (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). In this regard, it is imperative to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of how organisations can ameliorate and attenuate the negative impacts of scepticism.

Whilst the extant research has provided valuable insights into how the negative effects of CSR scepticism can be addressed, the focus has been mostly on discrete instances in which the major cause of the scepticism is directly attributable to a specific organisation itself (Torelli *et al.*, 2012; Wagner *et al.*, 2009). For instance, when an organisation functions in a manner which is inconsistent with its professed CSR claims, one can then reasonably perceive the stakeholder scepticism as a result based on that specific organisation's behaviour. However, this type of corporate hypocrisy is amongst many possible factors that contribute to a surge of scepticism in which stakeholders can become more inherently sceptical of all types of CSR claims (Connors *et al.*, 2017). Thus, understanding scepticism towards CSR has become increasingly important because of its negative consequences.

In addition, the extant literature coverage on the topic of CSR scepticism is still sheer, and scholars have examined CSR scepticism using different constructs from different fields such as advertising, marketing, public relations, to name a few. Despite its multi-disciplinary nature, this systematic literature review posits that CSR scepticism is unique, and the concept should be differentiated from other types of consumer scepticism, which has been examined in previous research (e.g., consumers' distrust, doubt, reactance, or cynicism). Specifically, unlike scepticism towards other targets like product advertising or marketing, CSR scepticism is closely related to stakeholders' attributions to a business organisation's CSR motives (Rim & Kim, 2016). In this regard, the effectiveness of CSR programmes is influenced by how those individuals perceive and evaluate CSR practices. For instance, a low consistency between expectations and information leads to customers' unfavourable evaluations of CSR which, as a result, can intensify their negative behavioural intentions (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). To increase the positive impacts of CSR practices on stakeholders' behaviour, business organisations must consider their stakeholders' scepticism and address the issue accordingly (Goh & Balaji, 2016).

6. Conclusion

This systematic literature review depicts the status quo of the extant scholarly research pertaining to CSR scepticism. As implied earlier, the relevance and growing

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importance of this research topic is quite apparent as there has been a surging interest in examining the topic of CSR scepticism from both academics and practitioners from multi-disciplinary fields. The extant literature has, by no means, reached its full maturity, but our consolidation of the current research output has unveiled important causes and effects of CSR scepticism as a multi-dimensional construct. As scepticism is a complex concept, which originates from a wide array of research streams (e.g., marketing, public relations, communication, management, consumer behaviour, etc.), our consolidation of the valuable and insightful implications and contributions from previous studies has enhanced a more comprehensive understanding of the CSR scepticism construct and its process nature as a whole.

Additionally, this literature review offers more conceptual insights into the issue of scepticism to inform CSR managers about the necessity of mitigating scepticism which poses as an alarming managerial concern and a barrier to effective CSR implementation and communication. This study may also contribute insightful theoretical and practical implications to the fields of marketing communication and public relations in a number of ways. This study posits that scholarly studies on the determinants and effects of CSR scepticism are still lacking, and more empirical research is needed. This dearth of research is a pressing issue for a few reasons. Firstly, scepticism constitutes one of the most intriguing phenomena that manifest under a wide range of circumstances (McGrath, 2011). Secondly, there exists in today's business world a reactive environment of stakeholders where there is a sharp rise in quick negative responses to corporate actions, such as boycott (Klein *et al.*, 2004), outrage (Lindenmeier *et al.*, 2012), suspicion and distrust (Ferguson *et al.*, 2011), and perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (Wagner *et al.*, 2009). Thirdly, consumer scepticism towards business has been on the rise in general (Jung & Lee, 2022; Moreno & Kang, 2020). Despite firms' heavy investment in disclosing and publicising their good deeds (Porter & Kramer, 2006), there are numerous reports of irresponsible corporate behaviours and scandals (Lange & Washburn, 2012). To enhance and maximise the public support and legitimation of CSR implementation and communication, researchers and practitioners need to comprehend the process nature of CSR scepticism, thereby to effectively manage the said public scepticism. Considering these dynamics, this study reiterates the relevance of the scepticism concept in the context of CSR and aims to contribute more important perspectives to both realms of academia and practice with regards to the intricate process nature of the scepticism and its distinctive causes and effects.

It is equally important to note that this systematic literature review has certain limitations to be disclosed. First, this review purposefully targeted only peer-reviewed journal articles to maximise academic rigour and quality. In this regard, we may have neglected the grey literature which may also offer insightful perspectives to further address the research question. Second, we only utilised Scopus to extract and compile previous studies; therefore, we may have missed some other relevant works on other platforms or databases. Another limitation is that only studies in English were considered. As the concept of CSR has been known to differ and vary across different social, economic, and cultural settings, it is

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possible that we may have neglected other valuable studies published in foreign languages. Future research may consider more types of scholarly publications and utilise other databases (e.g., Web of Science or EBSCOhost) to accumulate more studies for future systematic reviews or meta-analyses that emphasise other pressing research problems. Additionally, future research may also incorporate research works published in foreign languages to help diversify or enrich the current knowledge.

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