

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The impact of employees' perceived corporate social responsibility on employee sustainable performance: Exploring the moderating role of authentic leadership and empathy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of employees' perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on their sustainable performance, with a specific focus on the moderating roles of authentic leadership and empathy. Drawing on social identity theory, this study proposes that employees' identification with their organization, which is fueled by CSR activities, enhances their organizational pride and leads to improved sustainable performance. A survey of 563 employees from CSR-focused companies reveals that when employees perceive their organization as actively engaged in CSR, they are more likely to align their personal values with their organizational values, thereby fostering a sense of pride and improving their sustainable performance. Authentic leadership and high levels of empathy among employees strengthen this relationship and consequently enhance CSR engagement and individual performance. These results contribute to the current understanding of the dynamic interactions among CSR, leadership, and individual behavior and offer practical implications for organizations seeking to leverage CSR for long-term organizational success.

Keywords: CSR; employee sustainable performance; organizational pride; authentic leadership; empathy

1. Introduction

Maintaining exceptional job performance in the workplace is crucial for employees and organizations not only in the short term but also in the long run^[1,2]. However, sustainable performance at the individual level, as reflected in employees' intrinsic value, has received limited research attention^[1]. Employee sustainable performance refers to an individual's ability to consistently maintain high levels of job performance and output over time^[2]. This concept encompasses not only achieving excellent results in the short term but also maintaining stable, long-term performance while continuously improving one's skills and work quality. Therefore, this study posits that exploring and fostering employee sustainable performance is vital not only for individual career development but also for the overall growth and success of organizations^[2,3].

Previous studies have confirmed that external factors can promote employees' sustainable performance.

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For instance, some studies have predominantly focused on sustainable leadership, which indirectly enhances sustainable performance by increasing employees' psychological safety^[4]. Meanwhile, other researchers have highlighted that organizational digital capabilities contribute to higher levels of sustainable performance among employees^[5]. The present study aims to extend the exploration of those mechanisms through which employees' perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) influence their sustainable performance. As the concept of sustainable development gains global prominence, CSR has increasingly become a key indicator of an organization's long-term competitiveness^[6]. CSR encompasses not only external initiatives—such as environmental protection and social welfare—but also its internal impact on employees, which has attracted growing research attention^[7,8]. Employees' perceptions of CSR are also critical in enhancing their job performance, work engagement, and job satisfaction^[8,9]. This study thus raises an important research question: How do employees' perceptions of CSR influence their sustainable performance?

This study draws on social identity theory to explore the underlying mechanisms linking corporate social responsibility (CSR) and employees' sustainable performance. Employees form positive or negative attitudes toward their organization based on its achievements. When employees perceive their organization as actively engaged in CSR, they tend to develop favorable evaluations of it^[10]. One positive cognitive response to CSR is employees' organizational pride^[11], which has been associated with various positive outcomes, such as pro-environmental behavior and enhanced task performance^[12,13]. Accordingly, this study investigates organizational pride as a mediating mechanism between employees' perceptions of CSR and their sustainable performance.

The impact of employees' perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on sustainable performance depends on certain contextual factors. Employees often view leaders as representatives of the organization and may interpret these leaders' actions as reflective of organizational behavior^[14]. Depending on the unique values and concepts of an organization, employees may consider the authenticity of leaders a benchmark for evaluating whether their organization's CSR practices are genuine^[15].

Individual differences can also influence the relationship between CSR and employee outcomes. While previous studies have recognized empathy as a boundary effect on the relationship between CSR and employee outcomes, empirical research in this area remains in its infancy^[12,16]. Employees with high empathy are generally prosocial and exhibit altruistic attitudes in their interactions with others^[17]. Thus, these employees are highly attuned to the welfare of others, including external stakeholders, and tend to respond strongly to perceptions of CSR^[18]. To further expand on this research direction, this study also examines the moderating effect of empathy.

In summary, this study aims to explore the impact of employees' perceptions of CSR on their sustainable performance while further extending the current understanding of the relationship between these perceptions and employees' sustainable performance, considering leadership (authentic leadership) and individual differences (empathy).

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Social identity theory

Social identity theory has been widely applied to explain the mechanisms linking corporate social responsibility (CSR) to employee attitudes^[19]. The core premise of this theory is that individuals strive to maintain or enhance their positive social identity by affiliating with attractive, distinct, and respected social groups, which fulfill their psychological need for positive self-esteem^[20]. This theory suggests that when employees perceive their organization as actively participating in CSR initiatives, they may view such actions

as reflective of the organization's contributions to and concern for society, thereby strengthening their sense of identification and belongingness to the organization^[21]. As a result, employees are more motivated to contribute to their organization and work toward its development^[22]. Authentic leadership and empathy may further strengthen this relationship^[23,16].

2.2. Impact of employees' perceptions of csr on sustainable performance

Employees' perceptions of CSR refer to their cognitive and evaluative judgments regarding their organization's efforts and actions in fulfilling its social responsibilities. These efforts include the organization's commitments and practices in areas such as environmental protection, social welfare, employee well-being, and ethical business operations^[7]. A favorable perception of organizational CSR practices can directly enhance employees' organizational identification, organizational trust, and performance levels^[8] and may even increase their work engagement, thereby positively affecting the organization as a whole^[9]. Therefore, employees' perceptions of CSR are significantly related to positive work-related outcomes.

According to social identity theory, when employees observe that their organization is actively engaging in CSR initiatives, they tend to form positive evaluations of the organization and develop a strong sense of organizational identification^[10]. As a result, these employees tend to exhibit attitudes and behaviors that actively support their organization's goals^[24], such as greater focus on their work and a heightened sense of meaning in their roles^[25]. Perceived CSR motivates employees to demonstrate higher levels of work engagement, which drives them to exert greater effort toward the organization's success^[9]. This enhanced engagement likely leads to sustained performance outcomes over time. Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes the following:

H1: Employees' perceptions of CSR positively influence their sustainable performance.

2.3. Impact of employees' perceptions of CSR on organizational pride

Previous studies have shown that an organization's achievements in certain areas—such as leadership, market position, reputation, and work environment—can enhance employees' sense of pride in those organizations^[26]. This sense of pride among employees is further amplified when they receive cues or information highlighting their significance and value within their organization^[16]. In other words, employees experience pride and satisfaction when they are associated with a successful organization^[11].

By actively engaging in various CSR activities, such as environmental initiatives or charitable donations, an organization not only achieves success in the business domain but also earns recognition and respect in the societal realm^[27]. Employees tend to positively evaluate organizations that integrate CSR into their operations because they are eager to connect themselves with these organizations—a connection that is not merely economic but also emotional^[11]. Based on these arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Employees' perceptions of CSR positively influence organizational pride.

2.4. Organizational pride and sustainable performance

Organizational pride is not merely an emotional experience but also a powerful motivator stemming from employees' identification with and resonance with their organization's values^[28]. This emotional drive inspires employees to pursue excellence and achieve outstanding performance in their work. Rather than merely completing their tasks, these employees perceive themselves as contributors to their organization's collective goals and success^[22].

Organizational pride is deeply rooted in employees' strong identification with their organization, which drives them to strive for excellence and persistently work toward the organization's collective goals^[13]. This

intrinsic dedication not only fuels employee performance but also acts as a key driver of organizational sustainability and growth ^[22]. Therefore, organizational pride serves as a powerful motivator that inspires employees not only to pursue excellence but also to sustain their efforts and positive performance when undertaking long-term tasks ^[29]. Based on these arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Organizational pride positively influences employees' sustainable performance.

2.5. Mediating role of organizational pride

This study adopts social identity theory to explain the relationships among employees' perceptions of CSR, organizational pride, and sustainable performance. Organizations engaging in CSR activities often gain a superior reputation and public image compared to their competitors^[27]. As a result, employees tend to hold favorable attitudes toward organizations involved in CSR initiatives and perceive their membership in such organizations as valuable and worthwhile^[24]. This positive sense of belonging enhances their organizational pride, consequently boosting their self-esteem and image ^[21]. Organizational pride also acts as a powerful work motivator that drives employees to pursue excellent performance and work toward their organization's goals, thereby increasing their willingness to work harder ^[13] and improving their sustainable performance. Based on these arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: Organizational pride mediates the relationship between employees' perceptions of CSR and their sustainable performance.

2.6. Moderating role of authentic leadership

Authentic leadership is deeply rooted in strong ethical qualities and moral values. Authentic leaders are characterized by high self-awareness, internalized moral standards, relational transparency, and balanced processing of information^[30]. In light of the increasing prevalence of ethical issues in the business realm, authentic leaders emphasize the importance of honesty, transparency, moral standards, values, objectivity, and self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, all of which foster employees' positive perceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR)^[23].

Moreover, when an organization fosters a highly authentic environment—one that aligns with its stated social responsibility identity—its engagement in CSR is perceived as genuine ^[31]. This perception accurately reflects the organization's values, cultivating a sense of organizational pride among its employees ^[32]. Such pride stems from employees' belief that their organization not only supports CSR initiatives in words but also translates its commitment into tangible actions, demonstrating dedication and alignment with its values. When employees work in such environments, they perceive a shared foundation of values with their organization. This alignment strengthens their organizational identification and enhances their sense of pride in the organization^[33]. Based on these arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H5: Authentic leadership positively moderates the relationship between employees' perceptions of CSR and organizational pride. Specifically, a higher level of perceived authentic leadership corresponds to a stronger positive effect of employees' perceptions of CSR on organizational pride.

If an organization faithfully fulfills its CSR commitments but its leaders behave insincerely, employees may view its CSR practices as being "driven by ulterior motives"^[15]. Authentic leadership promotes values and behaviors that are essential to the identity of the organization and its employees. This type of leadership supports and facilitates fair and equitable social exchanges built on trust, fairness, and loyalty^[30]. Authentic leadership also serves as an authentic signal of an organization's commitment to social responsibility (i.e., perceived CSR)^[23]. Therefore, this study argues that authentic leaders can inspire employees to exert additional

effort in pursuing the organization's goals, thereby enhancing their sustainable performance. Based on these arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H6: Authentic leadership positively moderates the relationship between employees' perceptions of CSR and their sustainable performance. Specifically, a higher level of perceived authentic leadership corresponds to a stronger positive effect of employees' perceptions of CSR on their sustainable performance.

2.7. Moderating effect of empathy

Employees with empathy tend to appreciate the CSR activities conducted by their organizations^[18]. Organizational pride is a positive emotion and an expression of pleasure experienced by individuals when they seek to establish a connection with an organization^[32]. When employees believe that their organization excels in certain areas (such as CSR), they experience a stronger sense of organizational pride^[29]. This sense of pride is typically more pronounced among employees with higher levels of empathy, making them more likely to develop a positive view of CSR activities^[16].

Employees with high empathy can also easily align themselves with their organization's values and mission. By supporting and engaging in their organization's CSR activities, these employees feel that they are fulfilling their own values and developing a deeper sense of identification with their organization's goals and mission^[18]. As a result, employees with high empathy tend to view CSR activities more positively and perceive them as meaningful contributions to society, thus strengthening their emotional connection and sense of identity with their organization. This emotional connection and identification ultimately enhance their sense of pride^[12]. Based on these arguments, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H7: Empathy positively moderates the relationship between employees' perceptions of CSR and organizational pride such that a higher level of empathy corresponds to a stronger positive impact of CSR perceptions on organizational pride.

When employees perceive that their organization is socially responsible, they recognize their organization's efforts to contribute to society, thereby fulfilling their psychological need to do good and contribute to society^[16]. When they perceive the positive impact of CSR activities on society and the environment, employees with high empathy see more meaning in their work, thus motivating them to engage actively in their work^[34] and potentially enhancing their sustainable performance. Based on these arguments, this study hypothesizes the following:

H8: Empathy positively moderates the relationship between employees' perceptions of CSR and sustainable performance such that a higher level of empathy corresponds to a stronger positive impact of CSR perceptions on sustainable performance.

The conceptual framework for this study is presented in **Figure 1**.

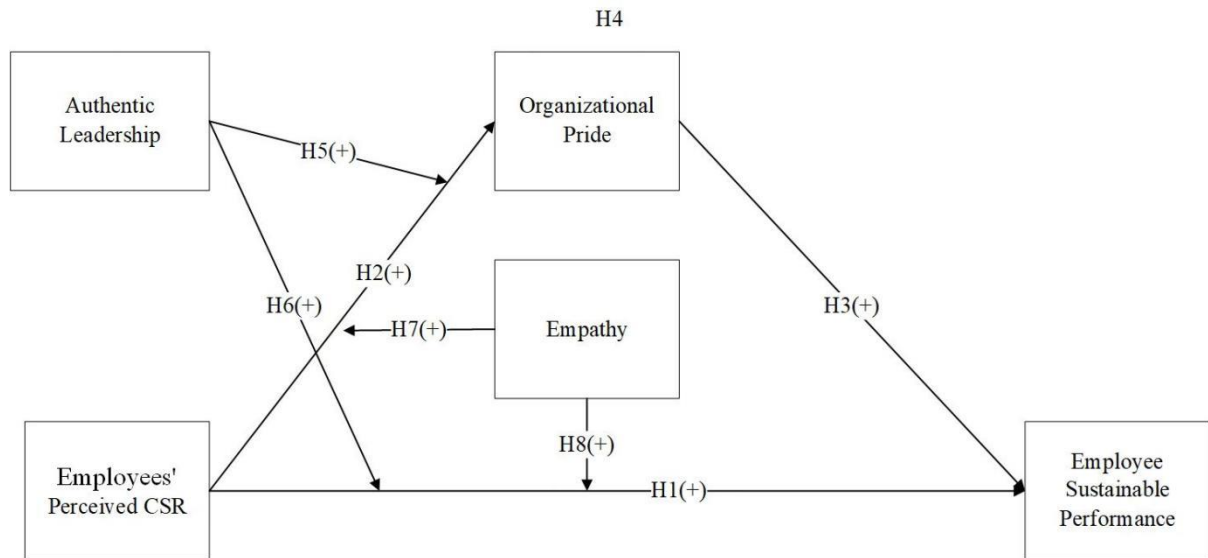


Figure 1. Research framework.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and procedures

Almost every organization participates in CSR activities in various ways^[35]. For instance, some organizations focus on environmental protection in their operations, fairly consider their customers' interests, or emphasize their employees' welfare. CSR can be practiced by organizations of all sizes and is not exclusive to large organizations^[35]. Accordingly, this study focuses on employees of all organizations regardless of size. The respondents surveyed in this study comprise working professionals across various industries.

Purposive sampling was used for the data collection. The target respondents were employees from companies that actively fulfill their corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitments. These companies strive to balance economic benefits with social and environmental responsibilities by reducing environmental impacts (e.g., using clean energy, reducing carbon emissions, optimizing resource utilization, and recycling waste), addressing customer needs and rights (e.g., ensuring product safety, maintaining quality transparency, and promoting fair trade), and prioritizing employee development (e.g., providing fair compensation, maintaining a positive work environment, and offering diverse training programs)^[35]. To identify companies that actively engage in CSR, this study utilized multiple verification methods, including online searches for relevant company information, on-site visits, and direct communication with internal personnel. Companies were selected based on their involvement in CSR practices related to environmental protection, employee welfare, and customer service. Following company selection, employees from these firms were invited to participate in the survey. The study covered a diverse range of economic regions, including developed areas (e.g., Shanghai, Beijing, and Jiangsu), moderately developed areas (e.g., Jiangxi and Anhui), and less developed areas (e.g., Guangxi and Yunnan).

During the questionnaire collection phase, data were primarily gathered through the Wenjuanxing online survey platform, allowing respondents to complete the questionnaire electronically. To enhance data reliability and minimize potential biases from single-source collection, the study employed multiple distribution channels. First, contact was made with CSR-compliant companies, and the research purpose was explained to their human resources departments via email or telephone. A research introduction and a sample questionnaire were provided to ensure transparency and encourage participation. Second, surveys were distributed during university-industry collaboration meetings, where representatives of CSR-oriented companies were engaged.

Surveys were handed out before the meetings and collected afterward, with additional requests for company representatives to share the survey within their corporate networks. Third, face-to-face distribution was conducted at business parks and recruitment events, where direct interaction with employees helped clarify the study's purpose, and respondents were invited to complete the survey via a QR code. Using multiple distribution methods increased sample diversity and representativeness, reducing potential biases associated with a single collection channel. Moreover, the survey was conducted anonymously to alleviate respondents' concerns about potential consequences, thereby encouraging honest and accurate responses. Additionally, before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed that their personal information would be kept confidential, further enhancing trust and willingness to participate.

3.2. Measures

This study primarily explores how employees' perceptions of CSR affect their sustainable performance. Therefore, the adopted scales focus on these employees' cognitive perspective.

The Employee Sustainable Performance Scale comprises 10 items^[1] measured on a 5-point Likert scale. These items measure the extent to which employees can maintain a stable work performance over time in the future, which reflects their self-expected level of achievement. Before measurement, the following prefix was added to the questions highlight the respondents' self-reflection and future expectations: "In my future career, I will be able to..."^[1].

The Employee Perception of CSR Scale comprises 15 items^[7] that measure the extent to which employees perceive their organization's efforts or activities to support the environment, its employees, and its customers^[7]. This scale originally includes four dimensions, of which the "government" dimension was excluded from this study given that employees typically engage with the core functions of their organization while government-related affairs are generally handled by management^[36]. This study only used items from three dimensions, namely, environment, employees, and customers^[7], without making any clear distinctions among them.

The Organizational Pride Scale comprises 7 items^[28] that measure the extent to which employees experience positive emotions about their organization's achievements based on their sense of being part of this organization^[28].

The Authentic Leadership Scale comprises 14 items^[30] that primarily measure employees' perceptions of whether their leaders are authentic, honest, candid, and consistent with their displayed self^[30].

The Empathy Scale comprises 10 items^[37] that measure the emotional tendency of individuals to understand and share the feelings of others^[37].

Following previous research on CSR perceptions and employee attitudes and behaviors in Chinese organizations, this study selected gender, age, educational level, organization type (private, state owned, or public), job position, and income level as control variables to control for their potential influences^[38].

4. Data analysis

Professional data analysis software (SPSS and AMOS) was initially employed to conduct a descriptive statistical analysis of the valid sample data and to assess their reliability and validity. Linear regression analysis and bootstrap methods were subsequently employed to further explore and validate the relationships among the variables.

4.1. Characteristics of respondents

The questionnaire was distributed via Wenjuanxing, targeting organizations that exhibit CSR characteristics. This survey was conducted from August 1 to August 21, 2024, yielding 1,048 responses. After excluding responses from individuals aged below 18 years, senior executives, respondents from government agencies, schools, and other public institutions, and respondents who were unemployed, had less than 1 year of tenure, or provided inconsistent or repetitive answers, a total of 563 valid questionnaires were retained, resulting in a valid response rate of 53.7%. Most of the respondents were male (58.4%), aged 30–39 years (60.6%), held bachelor's degrees (79.4%), and were working as general employees (85.8%). A significant proportion of these respondents came from private organizations (93.3%) due to the scope of the questionnaire distribution. The majority of the respondents had been employed for 5 to 10 years (67.5%). These figures suggest that the respondents have relatively high levels of education, which is typically associated with better cognitive and comprehension abilities, thereby enhancing the accuracy and reliability of the questionnaire data. Meanwhile, the predominance of general employees ensures that the sample closely reflects real workplace conditions.

Table 1. Demographic analysis.

| Control Variable | Options | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 329 | 58.4% |
| | Female | 234 | 41.6% |
| Age | 18-29 | 163 | 29.0% |
| | 30 – 39 | 341 | 60.6% |
| | 40 – 49 | 50 | 8.9% |
| | 50 years old or above | 9 | 1.6% |
| | | | |
| Education Level | Below Associate Degree | 0 | 0% |
| | Associate Degree | 32 | 5.7% |
| | Bachelor's Degree | 447 | 79.4% |
| | Master's Degree and Above | 84 | 14.9% |
| Position | General Employee | 483 | 85.8% |
| | Junior Management | 54 | 9.6% |
| | Middle Management | 26 | 4.6% |
| Enterprise Type | Private Enterprise | 525 | 93.3% |
| | State-Owned Enterprise | 38 | 6.7% |
| Tenure | 1–5 years | 145 | 25.8% |
| | 5–10 years | 380 | 67.5% |
| | More than 10 years | 38 | 6.7% |

4.2. Common method bias

Given that a questionnaire survey was employed in this study, the possibility of common method bias (CMB) cannot be ruled out^[39]. Although several measures were taken during the questionnaire design and survey process, such as ensuring anonymity, using clear and straightforward wording, and avoiding sensitive or private topics, further validation was still necessary to confirm the extent of bias in the collected data. Accordingly, Harman's single-factor test was conducted to assess the potential presence of CMB in the data^[39]. Results showed that the first principal component explained 30.556% of the variance, which was below the 40% threshold, thereby suggesting that CMB did not pose a serious concern in this study^[39].

Table 2. Common method bias test.

| Component | Initial Eigenvalues | | | Extracted Loadings Squared Sum | | |
|-----------|---------------------|------------|--------------|--------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| | Total | Variance % | Cumulative % | Total | Variance % | Cumulative % |
| 1 | 17.111 | 30.556 | 30.556 | 17.111 | 30.556 | 30.556 |
| 2 | 7.462 | 13.324 | 43.880 | 7.462 | 13.324 | 43.880 |
| 3 | 3.565 | 6.366 | 50.246 | 3.565 | 6.366 | 50.246 |
| 4 | 2.915 | 5.205 | 55.452 | 2.915 | 5.205 | 55.452 |
| 5 | 2.520 | 4.499 | 59.951 | 2.520 | 4.499 | 59.951 |

4.3. Reliability analysis

The reliability analysis results indicate that the Cronbach's α values for all variables exceed 0.7, thereby suggesting that the questionnaire exhibits good overall data reliability and high internal consistency^[40].

Table 3. Reliability analysis results.

| Variable | Cronbach's α Value |
|----------|---------------------------|
| CSR | 0.948 |
| OP | 0.907 |
| SP | 0.924 |
| AL | 0.938 |
| E | 0.932 |

Note: CSR denotes employees' perceived CSR, OP denotes organizational pride, SP denotes employees' sustainable performance, AL denotes authentic leadership, and E denotes empathy.

4.4. Model fit

As shown in **Table 4**, the model fit indices meet the required criteria: $\chi^2/df = 1.358$ (less than 3), RMSEA = 0.025 (less than 0.08), and SRMR = 0.039 (less than 0.05). Meanwhile, the other indices, such as GFI and AGFI, are all above 0.8. These results confirm a satisfactory model fit and a high level of consistency between the theoretical model and the collected data. Further assessments of convergent validity and discriminant validity can thus be conducted^[41].

Table 4. Model fit indices for all variables.

| Composite Indicator | χ^2 | df | χ^2/df | RMSEA | SRMR | GFI | AGFI | IFI | CFI |
|----------------------|----------|------|-------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Evaluation Indicator | | | <3 | <0.08 | <0.05 | >0.8 | >0.8 | >0.8 | >0.8 |
| Model Results | 2001.452 | 1474 | 1.358 | 0.025 | 0.039 | 0.890 | 0.551 | 0.974 | 0.974 |

4.5. Convergent validity analysis

Results of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) reveal that the average variance extracted (AVE) values for employees' perceived CSR (AVE = 0.56, CR = 0.95), organizational pride (AVE = 0.59, CR = 0.91), employees' sustainable performance (AVE = 0.55, CR = 0.92), authentic leadership (AVE = 0.52, CR = 0.94), and empathy (AVE = 0.58, CR = 0.93) are all greater than 0.5, while the composite reliability (CR) values exceed 0.7. Therefore, these variables have a satisfactory convergent validity ^[41].

Table 5. Convergent validity analysis.

| Variable | Item | Standardized Factor Loading | CR | AVE |
|------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------|-------|-------|
| CSR | 1 | 0.633 | 0.950 | 0.562 |
| | 2 | 0.751 | | |
| | 3 | 0.752 | | |
| | 4 | 0.795 | | |
| | 5 | 0.632 | | |
| | 6 | 0.642 | | |
| | 7 | 0.753 | | |
| | 8 | 0.894 | | |
| | 9 | 0.609 | | |
| | 10 | 0.917 | | |
| | 11 | 0.649 | | |
| | 12 | 0.752 | | |
| | 13 | 0.821 | | |
| | 14 | 0.746 | | |
| | 15 | 0.808 | | |
| Organizational Pride | 1 | 0.736 | 0.909 | 0.590 |
| | 2 | 0.869 | | |
| | 3 | 0.670 | | |
| | 4 | 0.702 | | |
| | 5 | 0.912 | | |
| | 6 | 0.707 | | |
| | 7 | 0.750 | | |
| Employees' Sustainable Performance | 1 | 0.789 | 0.924 | 0.550 |
| | 2 | 0.797 | | |
| | 3 | 0.673 | | |
| | 4 | 0.780 | | |
| | 5 | 0.751 | | |
| | 6 | 0.633 | | |
| | 7 | 0.674 | | |
| | 8 | 0.775 | | |
| | 9 | 0.693 | | |
| | 10 | 0.826 | | |

| Variable | Item | Standardized Factor Loading | CR | AVE |
|----------------------|------|-----------------------------|-------|-------|
| Authentic Leadership | 1 | 0.678 | 0.938 | 0.521 |
| | 2 | 0.807 | | |
| | 3 | 0.740 | | |
| | 4 | 0.725 | | |
| | 5 | 0.801 | | |
| | 6 | 0.732 | | |
| | 7 | 0.738 | | |
| | 8 | 0.688 | | |
| | 9 | 0.616 | | |
| | 10 | 0.759 | | |
| | 11 | 0.680 | | |
| | 12 | 0.707 | | |
| | 13 | 0.725 | | |
| | 14 | 0.687 | | |
| Empathy | 1 | 0.798 | 0.933 | 0.582 |
| | 2 | 0.844 | | |
| | 3 | 0.655 | | |
| | 4 | 0.769 | | |
| | 5 | 0.763 | | |
| | 6 | 0.781 | | |
| | 7 | 0.771 | | |
| | 8 | 0.771 | | |
| | 9 | 0.690 | | |
| | 10 | 0.770 | | |

Table 5. (Continued)

4.6. Discriminant validity and descriptive statistics

Discriminant validity was then assessed by comparing the square roots of AVE with the correlation coefficients between variables. As shown in **Table 6**, the square roots of AVE for each variable are greater than the correlation coefficients between that variable and any other variable, thereby suggesting that despite the correlations between these variables, they remain statistically independent. In other words, each variable represents its own construct and does not represent another variable, thereby confirming good discriminant validity^[41]. See **Table 6** for the detailed results.

The means and standard deviations of each variable were then examined. Results in **Table 6** indicate that the respondents rated CSR, authentic leadership, and empathy at relatively high levels. Meanwhile, the Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships among the variables under investigation, thus supporting the feasibility of conducting further regression analyses.

Table 6. Means, standard deviations, correlations, and discriminant validity.

| Variable | M | SD | CSR | OP | SP | AL | E |
|----------|-------|-------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------|
| CSR | 2.998 | 1.163 | 0.749 | | | | |
| OP | 2.840 | 1.097 | 0.485*** | 0.768 | | | |
| SP | 2.847 | 1.038 | 0.366*** | 0.475*** | 0.742 | | |
| AL | 3.228 | 0.932 | 0.255*** | 0.371*** | 0.497*** | 0.722 | |
| E | 3.360 | 1.081 | 0.159*** | 0.352*** | 0.495*** | 0.519*** | 0.763 |

Note1: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Note2: *M* denotes the mean, *SD* denotes the standard deviation, *CSR* denotes employees' perceived CSR, *OP* denotes organizational pride, *SP* denotes employees' sustainable performance, *AL* denotes authentic leadership, and *E* denotes empathy.

4.7. Hypothesis testing

The relationships among variables, including the direct, mediating, and moderating effects, were examined through a regression analysis and by using the bootstrapping method to answer the research questions and validate the proposed hypotheses.

4.7.1. Verification of direct effect hypotheses

As shown in **Table 7**, in Model 2, the regression coefficient of employees' perceived CSR on employees' sustainable performance is 0.364 ($p < 0.001$), thereby indicating that the former has a positive impact on the latter, which supports H1.

In Model 9, the regression coefficient of employees' perceived CSR on organizational pride is 0.484 ($p < 0.001$), which suggests that the former has a positive impact on the latter, thus supporting H2.

In Model 7, the regression coefficient of organizational pride on employees' sustainable performance is 0.473 ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that the former has a positive impact on the latter, thereby supporting H3.

4.7.2. Verification of moderating effect hypotheses

A hierarchical linear regression was performed to test the moderating effects. After decentralizing the independent and moderating variables, the interaction terms between the independent and moderating variables were computed and included in the regression analysis to verify the presence of moderating effects^[42]. The results of the moderation analysis are presented in **Table 7**. First, in Model 11, the interaction term between authentic leadership and employees' perceived CSR has a regression coefficient of 0.216*** on organizational pride, which is positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, thereby suggesting that higher levels of authentic leadership strengthen the positive effect of employees' perceived CSR on organizational pride, which supports H5.

Second, in Model 5, the interaction term between authentic leadership and employees' perceived CSR has a regression coefficient of 0.267*** on employees' sustainable performance ($p < 0.001$), thereby suggesting that authentic leadership enhances the positive influence of employees' perceived CSR on their sustainable performance, which supports H6.

Third, in Model 13, the interaction term between empathy and employees' perceived CSR has a regression coefficient of 0.210*** on organizational pride ($p < 0.001$), which implies that higher levels of empathy amplify the positive effect of employees' perceived CSR on organizational pride, thus supporting H7.

Finally, in Model 6, the interaction term between empathy and employees' perceived CSR has a regression coefficient of 0.292*** on employees' sustainable performance ($p < 0.001$), which indicates that empathy

strengthens the positive impact of employees' perceived CSR on their sustainable performance, thereby supporting H8.

4.7.3. Verification of mediating effect hypothesis

The mediating effect analysis examines the role of a mediator in the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. In this study, the bootstrapping method was employed for the mediating effect analysis ^[43]. Results show that the indirect effect of employees' perceived CSR on organizational pride and employees' sustainable performance is 0.168, with a Boot standard error of 0.023 and a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.124 to 0.214, excluding 0. The direct effect is 0.159, with a Boot standard error of 0.039 and a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.082 to 0.238, also excluding 0. The total effect is 0.327 with a Boot standard error of 0.035 and a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.260 to 0.396, excluding 0. These results indicate that organizational pride partially mediates the relationship between employees' perceived CSR and their sustainable performance, thus supporting H4.

Table 8. Mediating effect analysis.

| Variable | | Effect | BootSE | BootLLCI | BootULCI | <i>p</i> |
|----------------|-----------------|--------|--------|----------|----------|----------|
| CSR, OP, SP | Indirect Effect | 0.168 | 0.023 | 0.124 | 0.214 | .000 |
| | Direct effect | 0.159 | 0.039 | 0.082 | 0.238 | .000 |
| | Total effect | 0.327 | 0.035 | 0.260 | 0.396 | .000 |

Note: CSR denotes employees' perceived corporate social responsibility, OP denotes organizational pride, and SP denotes employees' sustainable performance.

Table 7. Hypothesis testing results.

| Variable | Employees' Sustainable Performance | | | | | | | Organizational Pride | | | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | M1 | M2 | M3 | M4 | M5 | M6 | M7 | M8 | M9 | M10 | M11 | M12 | M13 |
| Gender | 0.002 | 0.008 | 0.020 | 0.031 | 0.006 | 0.025 | 0.008 | -0.012 | -0.005 | 0.003 | 0.012 | -0.006 | 0.007 |
| Age | -0.003 | -0.003 | -.026 | -0.025 | -0.015 | -0.024 | -0.002 | -0.003 | -0.003 | -0.017 | -0.016 | -0.010 | -0.017 |
| Tenure | -0.055 | -0.034 | -.006 | -0.014 | 0.001 | 0.011 | -0.036 | -0.040 | -0.012 | 0.005 | -0.001 | 0.010 | 0.017 |
| CSR | | 0.364*** | 0.255*** | 0.260*** | 0.295*** | 0.301*** | | | 0.484*** | 0.417*** | 0.421*** | 0.441*** | 0.445*** |
| Organizational Pride | | | | | | | 0.473*** | | | | | | |
| Authentic Leadership | | | .433*** | 0.370*** | | | | | | 0.266*** | .216*** | | |
| Empathy | | | | | 0.448*** | 0.421*** | | | | | | .283*** | 0.263*** |
| CSR × Authentic Leadership | | | | .267*** | | | | | | | .210*** | | |
| CSR × Empathy | | | | | | 0.292*** | | | | | | | 0.210*** |
| R ² | 0.003 | 0.135 | 0.310 | 0.377 | 0.330 | 0.414 | 0.227 | 0.002 | 0.236 | 0.301 | 0.343 | 0.313 | 0.356 |
| Adj. R ² | 0.000 | 0.129 | 0.304 | 0.370 | 0.324 | 0.408 | 0.221 | 0.000 | 0.230 | 0.295 | 0.336 | 0.307 | 0.349 |
| F | 0.576 | 21.855*** | 49.989*** | 56.031*** | 54.829*** | 65.459*** | 40.910*** | 0.326 | 42.985*** | 48.004*** | 48.341*** | 50.753*** | 51.321*** |

Note1: The coefficients presented above are standardized β coefficients.

Note 2: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The above results confirm the validity of all proposed hypotheses. This section discusses the findings and proposes some relevant recommendations.

5.1. Conclusion

The above results demonstrate that employees' perceived CSR directly influences their sustainable performance, with organizational pride, authentic leadership, and empathy serving as mediators and moderators. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamic interactions among employees' perceived CSR, leadership, personal traits, and behavior and offer practical insights for organizations seeking to leverage CSR for long-term organizational success. The results are discussed in detail as follows.

First, the results confirm that employees' positive perception of CSR directly enhances their sustainable performance at work, thereby supporting H1. Specifically, employees' perception of CSR directly influences their sustainable performance, which aligns with the findings of Silva et al. (2023)^[8]. A stronger perception of CSR fosters higher employee performance levels. When an organization actively fulfills its CSR obligations, employees perceive such an organization as a reliable and trustworthy environment, thus fostering their commitment to its organizational goals. This commitment translates into increased effort and contribution to the organization's success^[9].

Second, organizational pride, as an emotional manifestation of employees' identification with and recognition of organizational values^[44], acts as a bridge between CSR perception and employees' sustainable behavior. The above results support H2, H3, and H4. When employees perceive that their organization actively engages in socially responsible activities, they tend to develop a strong sense of belonging and pride in this organization^[26]. This positive emotional connection further translates into concrete actions that promote organizational sustainability^[45].

Third, empathy and authentic leadership play crucial roles in strengthening the aforementioned relationship. High levels of empathy enhance employees' recognition and acceptance of CSR, which facilitates their development of organizational pride and achievement of sustainable performance, thereby supporting H7 and H8. Consistent with previous research, empathy promotes employees' perception of CSR and fosters behaviors that benefit the organization^[16]. Meanwhile, authentic leadership, which is characterized by high self-awareness and transparency, serves as a positive role model^[30] that further reinforces employees' understanding and internalization of CSR values^[23]. This process fosters organizational pride and promotes employees' sustainable performance, thus supporting H5 and H6.

In summary, organizational pride mediates the effect of employees' perceived CSR on their sustainable performance, while authentic leadership and empathy moderate this process. These findings explain why leadership styles and individual differences shape the impact of CSR on employee performance and offer strategic insights for organizational leaders.

5.2. Theoretical implications

The above results also confirm that employees' perception of organizational engagement in CSR plays a crucial role in shaping their sustainable performance. Leadership and individual differences are equally significant in this process.

The theoretical contributions of this study can be summarized as follows. First, previous studies have primarily explored the effects of leadership styles^[4] and corporate digital capabilities^[5] on employees' sustainable performance. However, unlike previous research, the present study also takes into account the role

of CSR. Specifically, this study delves deeply into the mechanisms through which CSR contributes to employees' sustainable performance and elucidates how CSR affects such performance through organizational pride, thereby enriching the theoretical understanding of the relationship between CSR and employee behavior. This study also provides a theoretical framework based on social identity theory to explain how employees perceive CSR and to highlight the critical role of organizational pride in shaping employee behavior.

Second, this study considers the influence of leadership behavior and individual factors in this process. Employees often perceive leaders as representatives of an organization, which suggests that leadership behavior significantly impacts employees' attitudes and behaviors toward CSR^[14]. Results confirm that authentic leadership strengthens employees' CSR perception and ultimately fosters their positive attitudes and behaviors.

Third, this study addresses the gaps in previous research by examining the role of empathy at the micro-level in shaping employees' CSR perception^[16]. Previous studies have examined how empathy moderates the indirect effect of perceived CSR on employee innovation behavior through organizational pride^[16]. However, the current study diverges from previous research in its theoretical approach and subject focus. Specifically, this study reaffirms how high levels of empathy positively shape employees' responses to perceived CSR. Accordingly, this study advances previous research by further exploring the external factors that affect employees' CSR perception and sustainable performance, thus improving the present understanding of CSR's internal mechanisms within organizations.

5.3. Practical implications

The findings of this study indicate that organizations should prioritize the design and implementation of their CSR initiatives given that employees' CSR perception significantly enhances their sustainable performance. From a managerial perspective, this study offers the following key insights.

First, managers should enhance the transparency and inclusiveness of their CSR activities to strengthen their employees' recognition of CSR and to foster their long-term commitment and sustainable behavior^[45]. Organizations should reinforce CSR initiatives, such as environmental protection efforts, community service programs, and employee welfare projects, to make their employees perceive their positive social values. Enhancing employees' sense of identification with the organization can also encourage them to exhibit positive behaviors in the workplace, including better job performance and greater long-term commitment, which are critical to organizational development. Managers should also cultivate a positive corporate culture and promote values that reinforce employees' organizational identity and pride. Regularly communicating CSR achievements and encouraging employee participation in CSR initiatives can further enhance these employees' sense of belonging and motivation.

Second, the importance of authentic leadership and empathy as moderators indicates that leaders' behavior and emotional intelligence significantly influence employees' sustainable performance. Organizations should therefore cultivate managers with authentic leadership characteristics. These authentic leaders not only inspire employees' trust and loyalty through high ethical standards and transparency but also effectively reinforce their identification with CSR, thereby fostering positive behaviors and promoting organizational sustainability.

Third, organizations should enhance employees' empathy through training and mentoring programs. Developing empathy can help employees better understand their organization's CSR goals and internalize these objectives as their own motivational drivers. Employees with high levels of empathy not only contribute to an organization's CSR initiatives more effectively but also exhibit greater enthusiasm and responsibility in their daily work.

5.4. Limitations and future research directions

While this study provides valuable theoretical and practical insights into the impact of employees' perceived CSR on their sustainable performance, certain limitations need to be noted. Future research can further expand and refine the findings in the following areas.

First, this study relies heavily on questionnaire data, which may introduce self-report bias (e.g., the social desirability of employees may influence their responses) that can influence the results. Moreover, these quantitative self-assessment data may not fully capture the complexity of employees' emotional and cognitive responses to CSR. Future research may adopt mixed methods, specifically by combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of employees' perceptions and emotional reactions toward CSR.

Second, this study employs a cross-sectional research design that only captures the relationships among variables at a single point in time, thus introducing challenges in predicting future changes. Future research may adopt a longitudinal design to track changes over time and establish causal relationships. They may also examine how employees' organizational identification and pride influence their long-term performance.

Finally, while this study examines the moderating roles of authentic leadership and empathy, these mechanisms are likely multifaceted and complex. Future research could explore additional factors, such as employees' personal values and cultural backgrounds, to further understand how they shape the impact of CSR on employee behavior.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, RH and CC; methodology, RH and CC; software, RH.; validation, RH and CC; formal analysis, RH; investigation, RH; resources, RH; data curation, RH; writing—original draft preparation, RH; writing—review and editing, RH and CC; supervision, CC ; project administration, RH and CY; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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