

Understanding Social Responsibility in Portuguese Companies: Characteristics, Innovations, and Stakeholder Perspectives

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Abstract: Social responsibility has emerged as a crucial topic in the corporate landscape, recognised by market perception as a valuable asset for gaining a competitive advantage. This voluntary initiative by companies is driven by social and ethical engagement, leading management to seek shared values and positive interactions with stakeholders. This study aims to identify the characteristics of companies adopting social practices and evaluate innovative social responsibility practices in Portuguese companies. Furthermore, it explores the understanding of social responsibility among companies and stakeholders, examines motivations behind employing these practices, analyses the benefits of their inclusion, and identifies the main challenges hindering their implementation. Data were collected through questionnaires administered via the Google Forms platform. The findings reveal that most respondents consider social responsibility relevant to the company's growth and development, placing emphasis on human capital as a vital organizational asset. Motivations primarily revolve around worker welfare and satisfaction. Key benefits include proactive positioning, strategic integration, and decision-making incorporating social concerns. Major obstacles include the absence of direct profitability, resistance from older employees, limited resources and time for action and innovation, lack of participation, employee mistrust, and inert mindsets. The article concludes by discussing limitations and suggesting avenues for future research.

Keywords: Social Responsibility, Corporative Social Responsibility, Corporate Social Innovation, Stakeholders, Innovation, Leadership.

1. Introduction

Social responsibility is assuming an increasingly significant role in both public and private contexts (Wenqi et al., 2022). Its growing prominence can be attributed to its presence as a cultural phenomenon (Marchi, 2022) and within the business domain (Chandler, 2022), as socially responsible practices become more prevalent (Liang & Renneboog, 2017; Yan et al., 2019). Companies are voluntarily adhering to legislation aimed at training and qualifying individuals, promoting gender equality, enhancing workplace quality of life and mental health (Singh & Misra, 2022), and addressing issues related to social inclusion, health and safety, volunteering, and various psychosocial matters within organisations (Gangadharan, 2006; Osieranski et al., 2023).

Evaluating the social dimension involves examining the global impact, such as dignified and participatory work relationships, elimination of child labour, employability, human rights, gender equality, and combating discriminatory practices (Rixom et al., 2023; Tejedo-Romero & Araujo, 2022). Similar expectations extend to partners, including suppliers (Księżak, 2016; Shang et al., 2014).

Envisioning a socially responsible organisation entails viewing the company as a dynamic organism, constantly evolving in relation to people, the environment, and stakeholders, and offering innovative solutions that positively impact its reputation in the marketplace (Banerjee, 2008; Kotler & Maon, 2016; McWilliams et al., 2006).

Europe, particularly the United Kingdom, stands out as a leader in social responsibility, contributing to the development of values, norms, and perceptions that align more closely with the theme (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Matten et al., 2005; Voltan, 2017). In the past two decades, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly linked to the creation of shared value (CSV) and the emergence of hybrid organisations.

This paper aims to investigate the characteristics of companies that adopt social practices and evaluate the innovative social responsibility practices implemented by Portuguese companies. Additionally, it explores the perceptions of social responsibility among both companies and stakeholders, examines the motivations behind implementing these practices, analyses the benefits derived from their inclusion, and identifies the primary challenges faced in their implementation. Quantitative research of descriptive nature was used, and a questionnaire was conducted at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA), in Portugal. After the introduction, Section 2 deals with the concepts of Corporate Social Responsibility and Corporate Social Innovation. Section 3 presents the Methodology, and Section 4, the results, and conclusions, as well as directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a well-established and integral concept in contemporary research within the field of Business and Society, closely tied to business ethics (De Bakker et al., 2005; Singh & Misra, 2022). The academic roots of CSR can be traced back to the 1950s, particularly with the influential work of Bowen (1953), which introduced the notion of social responsibilities that extend beyond market boundaries and emphasise values beyond mere profit. Subsequent publications, including those by Carrol (1999), Swanson (1999), Windsor (2006), and the theoretical framework developed by Garriga and Melé (2004), have provided comprehensive and supported reviews of CSR. Furthermore, works by Maignan and Ralston (2002) and Matten and Moon (2004) have explored cultural perceptions and the significance of CSR. The concept of Organisational Social Performance (DSO) has also been expanded upon (Swanson, 1999; Wood, 1991), while Corporate Citizenship has been included (Matten & Crane, 2005).

Corporate social responsibility entails a company's dedication to sustainable economic development by enhancing the quality of life for employees, their families, the local community, and society as a whole (Watts, 2000). This concept has evolved as individuals have become more aware of their social rights and responsibilities and have grown less tolerant of unethical practices (Latapí Agudelo et al., 2019). Consequently, companies are increasingly embracing socially responsible practices, not solely as a pragmatic response to the environment, but also as a reflection of shifting societal values (Matten & Moon, 2020; Wang, 2016).

The European Commission has played a prominent role in advocating for social responsibility, urging Member States and other countries to engage in discussions and initiatives related to this theme. Examples of these efforts include the publication of the Green Paper "Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility" in 2001, the establishment of the High-Level Group on Social Responsibility in 2002, the formation of the European Alliance on CSR in 2006, and the presentation of a Compendium on National Public Policies in 2004 and 2007, among other initiatives. Additionally, international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), International Labour Organisation (IOL), and European Union (EU) have also been actively promoting corporate social responsibility.

In Portugal, there is a growing inclination among companies to embrace social responsibility as a core component of their corporate identities. This trend is evident in the increasing number of awards that acknowledge exemplary internal social responsibility practices. Such progress is encouraging, and merits enhanced visibility and recognition (Gonçalves et al., 2020). While the adoption of Portuguese and international standards for corporate social responsibility is not mandatory, their implementation can bring added value to organisations. Certification in these standards can lead to increased recognition and competitive advantage, particularly when dealing with multinational clients. Notable international standards in this realm include ISO 26000:2011, which provides guidelines for social responsibility, the SA 8000:2008 standard which mandates certification, and the AA 1000:2008 standard, which offers advisory and consultative guidelines for corporate responsibility (as outlined in Table 1).

Table 1: International and Portuguese Standards for Corporate Social Responsibility (own elaboration)

Standard	Type	Subject
ISO 26000:2011	Certifiable International Standard	Social Responsibility Guideline
SA 8000:2008	Consultative International Standard	Standard on Social Responsibility
AA 1000:2008	National Consultative Standard	Corporate Responsibility (accounting, auditing, social and ethical reporting)
NP 4460 –1:2007	National Consultative Standard	Ethics in Organisations
NP 4460 –2:2010	National Consultative Standard	Ethics in Organisations
NP 4469 –2:2008	National Consultative Standard	Social Responsibility Management System

Standard	Type	Subject
NP 4469 –2:2010	National Consultative Standard	Social Responsibility Management System
NP 4522:2013	National Consultative Standard	Family Responsible Organisations
AGENDA 2030	Action Plan - Voluntary Membership	Sustainable Development

The progression of organisational innovation gives rise to a dedicated unit or department focused on novel practices and ideas, which contributes to the emergence of a sustainable strategy field. Within the corporate context, this innovative system is referred to as Corporate Social Innovation (CSI). CSI goes beyond solely pursuing outcomes for shareholders, as it also generates social advancements, including enhanced employee motivation and improved organisational adaptation and interaction (Dionisio & de Vargas, 2020). These transformations extend beyond corporate identity and strategies aimed at gaining a competitive advantage (Du et al., 2011; Herrera, 2015).

When companies embrace both Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Corporate Social Innovation (CSI), they achieve improved market performance and enhance their corporate reputation, which is a highly discussed and sought-after objective in today's business landscape. Corporate reputation encompasses a set of principles ascribed to an organisation, reflecting its past actions and its potential for future endeavors. These principles encompass financial stability, product and service quality, commitment and performance of top management, transparency, ethics, and market competitiveness (Maaloul et al., 2023).

To foster innovative organisations, it is essential to undertake actions that can generate greater benefits for the innovation process. These actions include fostering a shared vision, having leadership that possesses a strong inclination towards innovation, establishing an appropriate organisational structure, identifying key individuals who can support training and development efforts, and cultivating a workforce that is dedicated to embracing new approaches. Additionally, effective teamwork plays a crucial role in facilitating the innovation process (Allal-Chérif et al., 2023).

Socially responsible companies adopt good practices to generate greater competitive strength in problem-solving, optimising results, and having a clear perception of the constant changes and innovations within their organisation. They recognise that learning and fostering good relationships contribute to the results and strategies of the organisation, creating space for policies that promote quality of life at work, beyond allowing workers to perform their jobs but also generating positive results in their lives (Carayannis et al., 2015).

However, CSR consciousness involves raising the mindset of an organisation and its members concerning these concerns. The approach may be top-down or bottom-up for strategic or altruistic reasons (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023), including a commitment to CSR by adding it to statement documents (Drempetic et al., 2020) and communicating goals to both internal and external stakeholders while accounting them for their actions (Marques-Mendes & Santos, 2016),

3. Methodology

This study aims to identify the key characteristics of companies that have already adopted social practices and evaluate the main innovative practices of Social Responsibility (SR) in Portuguese companies. Additionally, the specific objectives of this study are to: i) analyse the understanding of these companies and their stakeholders regarding SR, ii) identify the main motivations for companies to engage in socially oriented practices, iii) analyse the primary benefits associated with the inclusion of these practices, and iv) identify the main challenges in implementing these practices.

To achieve these objectives, a questionnaire-based approach was employed. The questionnaires were distributed using the Google Forms platform and collected data from both companies and stakeholders. The questionnaire was developed based on a review of the existing literature and consisted of items designed to explore the understanding of social responsibility, motivations for adoption, and perceived benefits and challenges associated with implementing social responsibility practices. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections: sociodemographic data, company profile, and social responsibility. The socio-demographic data section included questions about the age, gender, and position of the respondents within their respective

companies. The company profile section collected information on the number of employees, the source of social capital, the sector of activity, and any certifications already obtained. The main focus of the study, social responsibility, was assessed using a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions utilised a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 - "Strongly disagree" to 5 - "Strongly agree". These questions aimed to understand how companies perceive the concept of social responsibility and their positioning in relation to it and society.

Data were collected by administering the questionnaires to students enrolled in the first and second years of the master's degree program in Integrated Quality, Environment, and Safety Management Systems (SIGQAS) at the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA). All 47 students included in the study were already employed by companies actively engaged in socially responsible activities, as evidenced by their sustainability reports and CSR disclosures. The data collection period took place in May and June 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Socio demographic

Considering gender, respondents were mainly female (76.8%), as can be seen in Figure 1.

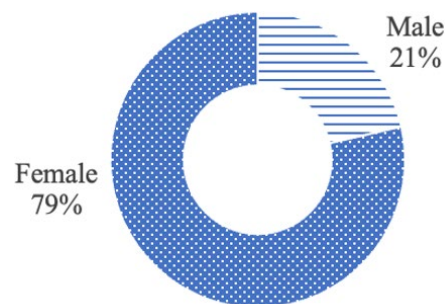


Figure 1: Gender of the respondents

In what concerns age, the range belonging to 28 - 37 years old represents 28.6%, followed by 23 - 27 years range, with 14.7%. The respondents are engineers and directors of the Department of Quality and Safety in the companies they are working on. They all are qualified and are taking a master's degree in areas where these thematic are studied and emphasized.

4.2 Company profile

The companies are all from the North of Portugal. They are the majority of Small and Medium Enterprises (SME), representing 83% of the sample. 50% of the companies belong to the manufacturing industry, 43% to extractive industries, and the other respondents are from agriculture, hunting, and fishing, representing 7%.

Most of the companies have no certification in Social Responsibility (64%), 28% have the SA 8000 international certification and 7% have the ISO 26000 certification (figure 2).



Figure 2: Certifications obtained in Social Responsibility

In what concerns the origin of the Capital, 50 % of the companies are Portuguese, 7% are foreign and 43% are mostly Portuguese, as can be seen in figure 3.

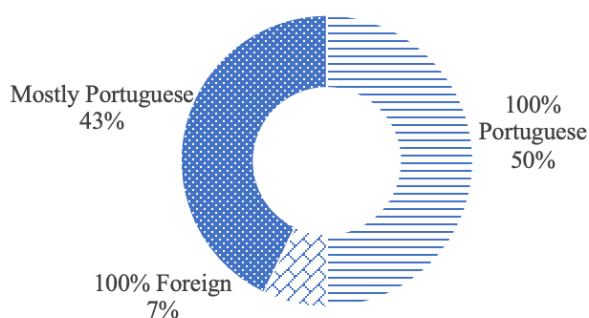


Figure 3: Origin of Capital

4.3 Social Responsibility

The study aimed to gain insights into the perspectives of the respondents (master's students) regarding the topic of Social Responsibility (SR). Most participants viewed SR as significant and vital for the growth and development of companies. However, one participant expressed the opinion that although the theme is increasingly important, companies are not adequately prepared for it.

To explore the understanding of SR among companies, a series of predetermined questions aligned with the literature review was administered. The summarised responses are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: How Social Responsibility is applied/understood

35.7%	Respect for human, environmental and ethical rights
21.4%	Strategy leading to profit and shareholder satisfaction
21.4%	Strategy whose objective is to give greater social emphasis to the company
14.3%	Business practice that contemplates respect for society and the community in which it is inserted
7.1%	Commitment tending to develop the quality of life and the environment

Furthermore, an effort was made to determine the extent to which respondents identified with specific questions that had been formulated. The summarised results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: How the company positions itself in relation to Social Responsibility

42.9%	Through Social, Corporate and Environmental Responsibility, company positions itself as a proactive actor, integrating these concerns into the strategy and decision-making process
28.6%	Through Social Responsibility, company communicates its standards of behaviour to stakeholders who in turn influence its values, culture, integrity, strategy and operation
21.4%	Through Social Responsibility, company engages in public policies that are conducive to promoting an inclusive and responsible green economy in its sector of activity
7.1%	Through Social Responsibility, the company generates a new business model that aims to reconcile profit with social inclusion and impacts

In terms of the presence of a Code of Conduct within the companies, most respondents (78.6%) indicated that their respective companies have such a code. However, only 35.7% of the companies prepare a Social Responsibility Report.

Table 4 provides a summary of the main motivations expressed by the respondents for implementing Social Responsibility actions, with the well-being and satisfaction of employees emerging as one of the primary drivers.

Table 4: Motivations for actions of Social Responsibility

28.6%	The welfare and satisfaction of workers, as they are the company's greatest asset
21.4%	The challenges of globalisation
14.3%	The positive market image

14.3%%	Increased competitiveness
7.1%	Transparency in social activities
7.1%	Defence of the environment and human rights of the business quality benchmark
7.1%	Access to financial support

When respondents were asked about the prioritisation of specific issues in their company's Social Responsibility practices, such as older workers, individuals with disabilities or disadvantages in the job market, women, and the inclusion of ethnic minorities, their summarised responses are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Privileged practice in the company

14.3%	Women
7.1%	People with limitations and disadvantages in the market
7.1%	Inclusion of people from ethnic minorities
71.4%	None of the previous situations

Regarding the inquiry about the primary challenges associated with implementing Social Responsibility practices, the responses varied. Except for two respondents who did not provide an opinion, all others expressed their views. The collected answers have been categorised and are presented in Table 5.

Table 6: Collected answers in what concerns main entropies

Does not generate direct profit
Decrease in the number of wastes
Awareness of the importance by top management
Pleasing everyone
Lack of sensitivity on the part of the company's older employees
Organizational culture that devalues the implementation of sr actions
Time
Lack of participation
Distrust on the part of employees
Resources
Inactive mentality

Regarding the inquiry about how respondents perceive the relationship between the long-term success of the company and the practice of Social Responsibility, 42.9% of the participants stated that it is fundamental. This was followed by 28.6% who considered it important, while 14.3% regarded it as weak, 7.1% believed it to be non-existent, and another 7.1% viewed it as neutral.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to identify the main characteristics of companies adopting social practices as well as to evaluate the main innovative Social Responsibilities (SR) practices in Portuguese companies. It also intends to analyse the understanding that these companies and stakeholders have of Social Responsibility, to identify the main motivations of these companies to employ these practices aimed at society, to analyse the main benefits with the inclusion of these practices and to identify the main entropies for the application of these practices.

The companies questioned are all from the North region, are all small and medium sises (SME), with national capital or majority national capital, and most of them are not certified in SR, and when they do, the certification chosen is the SA 8000. The main innovative SR practices in Portuguese companies are related to the Code of Conduct, women, people with limitations and disadvantages in the market, as well as the inclusion of people from ethnic minorities. However, the low percentage of companies preparing SR reports suggests a potential gap in transparent reporting. When analysing the understanding that these companies and stakeholders have

of Social Responsibility, most of them understand it as relevant, essential for the growth and development of the company, and sustained in human capital as one of the most important assets of the organisation. When identifying the main motivations of these companies to employ these practices aimed at society, the welfare and satisfaction of its workers, since they are the company's greatest differential, seems to be the principal factor. Analysing the main benefits of the inclusion of these practices, companies position themselves as proactive actors, integrating these concerns into the strategy and decision-making process. Finally, the main obstacles to the application of these practices are the indirect profit, lack of sensitivity on the part of the company's older employees who are not always collaborative, time for actions and innovations, lack of participation, mistrust on the part of employees, resources, and inactive mentality/mindset. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of SR in organizational strategies and decision-making. They provide valuable insights for companies seeking to enhance their SR practices, address challenges, and align their actions with societal expectations.

The main limitations of this study are related to the fact that it is a convenience sample, of small size, associated with a specific geographical area. For future studies, it would be interesting to replicate it in a larger number of companies, possibly in different countries and with different sizes. A complementary qualitative approach would certainly bring a greater richness to the results found. Another suggestion is more linked to the relationship between leadership and Corporate Social Responsibility, as the inclusion of all stakeholders (internal and external) should be a priority to promote some social good. In this sense, leadership seems to be mandatory not only to gather the demands of shareholders but also to consider and balance the expectations of all stakeholders to accomplish the best interests in the long term.

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