

Review

Exploring the Relationship Between Firm Internationalization and Corporate Social Responsibility: A Literature Review and Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract: Under global economic integration, firms are active in transnational operations, prompting all sectors to deepen their awareness of the role of enterprises and pay attention to the fulfillment of their social responsibility. Although the existing literature has explored the impact of firm internationalization (FI) on corporate social responsibility (CSR), there is a lack of comprehensive analysis focusing on the interactions between the different dimensions of the two and how they are influenced by the system of the sample's country of origin. Therefore, this study aimed to comprehensively investigate the current developments, trends and hotspots of the relationship between FI and CSR, and at the same time summarize the current major theoretical perspectives and empirical findings in this area. This study utilized the Web of Science database to conduct a bibliometric analysis and a literature review analysis of 331 studies published up to 2024 in order to identify trends and patterns in the relationship between FI and CSR. Specifically, the bibliometric analysis utilized Cite Space 6.4.R1 and VOSviewer 1.6.19 to analyze the collected and screened literature data, clarify the distribution of the core research power, and discover hotspots and trends through keyword analysis, whereas the literature review analysis sorted out the complex relationship between FI and CSR through extensive reading of the literature and an analysis of it from both theoretical perspectives. The empirical results and their aspects are summarized. The findings demonstrate that the research in this field shows an increasing trend year by year, in which American and British universities and research institutes are in the leading position in this field, and Asian emerging economies are also emerging in this field. The current hotspot is still focused on the impact of the degree of internationalization on the fulfillment of social responsibility, but some scholars have begun to carry out interdisciplinary research, focusing on the emerging markets through micro case studies. At the same time, this study also found that there is a complex interaction between FI and CSR; on the one hand, this is due to the fact that scholars use different theoretical perspectives in different practice contexts, and on the other hand, it is because scholars use different research methods and samples, which leads to the heterogeneity of the final empirical results. This study provides a clear guideline for subsequent researchers to quickly grasp the research pattern through the bibliometric analysis, which greatly saves on exploration time and energy in the pre-study period, while the literature review analysis summarizes the framework of the previous studies for readers, and sorts out the complex relationship between FI and CSR clearly. Overall, this study provides ideas for firms to adopt CSR in their internationalization strategies, as well as a basis for relevant sectoral organizations to formulate policies and regulatory measures.



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Keywords: firm internationalization (FI); corporate social responsibility (CSR); multinational corporates (MNCs); bibliometric analysis; literature review

1. Introduction

In the current globalized economic landscape, firm internationalization has emerged as a crucial strategy for many multinational corporations (MNCs) in their pursuit of sustainable development and the expansion of their market share [1]. The rapid advancement of information technology, the gradual reduction of trade barriers, and the ever-increasing integration of global markets have all contributed to a situation where an increasing number of firms have embarked on the journey of internationalization and are actively engaged in business activities in diverse countries and regions [2]. The process of internationalization for firms not only brings a plethora of economic opportunities but also presents firms with a more complex and constantly evolving business environment and a host of formidable challenges [3].

At the same time, the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has gained widespread dissemination and recognition around the world [4]. In today's society, firms are no longer simply regarded as economic entities that solely pursue profit maximization. Instead, they are expected to play a positive role in multiple aspects, including the governance, society, and the environment [5]. In the international arena, the CSR performance of MNCs has received extensive attention from various stakeholders such as governments, consumers, investors, and non-governmental organizations [6]. Good CSR performance can bring numerous benefits to firms. Firstly, it helps to enhance the brand image and reputation of MNCs. In an era where consumers are becoming more conscious of social and environmental issues, they are more likely to support and choose products and services from firms that demonstrate a commitment to CSR [7]. Secondly, it can strengthen the competitiveness of firms. By fulfilling their social responsibilities, MNCs can build stronger relationships with their stakeholders, gain access to more resources and opportunities, and differentiate themselves from their competitors [8,9]. Moreover, it also creates a more favorable business environment for firms and promotes their legitimacy and sustainable development in the global market [10].

In recent years, as the importance of firm internationalization (FI) and corporate social responsibility continues to be highlighted, there has been a growing number of academic studies on the relationship between the two [11–13]. Firstly, the development of research on FI and CSR is dynamic. In the early stage of firm internationalization, research mainly focused on market entry strategies and the economic effects of MNCs, with relatively little consideration of CSR. The few studies on CSR mostly started from the issues of labor rights and environmental protection faced by firms from developed countries when operating in developing countries, and initially explored the basic responsibilities that firms should assume in the international market. For example, some early studies paid attention to the problem of poor labor conditions when MNCs set up factories in developing countries, and began to think about the labor responsibility of firms in the process of internationalization [14]. In recent years, the studies have gone further and started to pay attention to the differential performance of the relationship between FI and CSR in different institutional environments and cultural contexts, while scholars have taken into account more moderating and mediating variables, such as the impacts of the firm's resource capacity, the host country's institutional quality, and cultural distance on the relationship between the two [15–18].

Secondly, the themes of research on FI and CSR show diversity. With the acceleration of economic globalization, the process of firm internationalization has advanced rapidly, and the social and environmental problems faced by MNCs in the international market have become increasingly complex and diverse, so the research has begun to explore the relationship between the two from multiple dimensions, such as the performance of social responsibility under different internationalization strategies, and the correlation between the degree of firm internationalization and the inputs of different aspects of social responsibility [5,19]. For example, Aray et al.'s (2021) findings suggest that internationalization affects different dimensions of CSR to varying degrees, with the greatest impact being on social and community-related practices, and less so on practices related to environmental initiatives [20].

Thirdly, the theories of research on FI and CSR are diversified. Since scholars in this field cover the strategy field, engineering field, sociology field, etc., these studies dissected the relationship between the two from multidisciplinary perspectives such as corporate strategic management, stakeholder theory, institutional theory, etc., which made the study more comprehensive and in-depth [5,21]. For example, studies employing the stakeholder theory examined how enterprises balance the needs of stakeholders in different countries and regions in the process of internationalization in order to better fulfill their social responsibility [22].

Fourth, the results of research on FI and CSR show differentiation. Scholars have adopted different research methods, not only case studies, but also methods such as empirical research, which have emerged to reveal the relationship between the two through a large amount of statistical analysis of data [2,23]. For example, a study collected data from Korean multinational corporations to analyze the impact of their internationalization on corporate sustainability and found that internationalization has both benefits and disadvantages for corporate sustainability [24].

From the existing studies, it is clear that the relationship between firm internationalization and CSR (the FI–CSR relationship) is complex, despite the large amount of research work carried out by scholars. This may be due to the lack of systematic literature review and bibliometric analysis in this area, which makes it difficult to draw comprehensive and conclusive conclusions. Therefore, this paper aimed to help scholars gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between FI and CSR by conducting a systematic review and bibliometric analysis of relevant literature published by scholars from all countries and disciplines in this field. Overall, this study responds to the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the current statuses, hotspots and development trends of research in the field of firm internationalization and CSR?

RQ 2: What are the main theoretical perspectives and empirical findings in the field of firm internationalization and CSR?

In responding to RQ 1, this paper provided a systematic bibliometric analysis that helps to organize information in the area of firm internationalization and CSR, which provides a useful resource for researchers and workers interested in this area. In responding to RQ 2, this paper proceeded to organize and analyze the literature and verify the following hypotheses. Hypothesis 1: there is a complex relationship between firm internationalization and CSR in the academic literature, and such complexity is due to two aspects: (Hypothesis 1a) the different theoretical perspectives in focal studies, and (Hypothesis 1b) the diverse empirical research scenarios in focal studies.

This paper is one of the first papers to make a significant contribution to the existing literature by combining bibliometric analysis with a literature review, with a particular focus on the FI–CSR relationship. First, through bibliometric analysis, this paper applied quantitative data to accurately sort out the development trends in the research in this field

and presented the ups and downs of the research hotspots and the distribution of the core authors and high-impact journals, which provides a clear guideline for the subsequent researchers to grasp the research pattern quickly and greatly saves their exploration time and energy in the preliminary stages of research. Second, in the literature review, this paper systematically integrated and deeply analyzed a large number of complicated related studies and comprehensively summarized the various theoretical perspectives, research methods, sample selection and sources of firm internationalization on the fulfillment of CSR, which provides a more complete research framework for future studies.

The structure of this paper is designed to ensure a thorough exploration of the topic. Section 2 outlines the research methodology employed, providing a clear framework for the study. Section 3 details the bibliometric analysis conducted, which helps to identify the key trends and patterns in the existing research. Section 4 presents the results of the literature review and emphasizes the importance of the study by identifying and addressing key research gaps. Section 5 provides an in-depth discussion of the results, analyzing the implications and limitations of the existing research. Finally, Section 6 provides the conclusions of the study, its contributions, as well as the study's limitations and suggests directions for future research.

2. Research Methods

This study used bibliometric analysis and literature review, aiming to explore the FI–CSR relationship in depth. The bibliometric analysis quantitatively analyzed the research trends in the target area and identified the distribution of research topics, revealing the development trends and hot areas of research on the FI–CSR relationship [25]. The literature review systematically integrated the existing studies, systematically compiled and comprehensively analyzed the related literature on the FI–CSR relationship, formed a comprehensive understanding of the field, and provided suggestions for the further development of the field [26]. The bibliometric analysis and literature review complemented and supported each other in this paper and together serve to explore the relationship. The bibliometric analysis provided quantitative data support for the literature review and helps researchers to quickly understand the research trends, hotspots and tendencies in the field [27]. Through bibliometric analysis, the focus and scope of the literature review were determined, and valuable literature were screened for in-depth analysis [28]. On the basis of the bibliometric analysis, the literature review systematically integrated and deeply analyzed the existing studies to reveal the relationship mechanism. The literature review explained and verified the results of the bibliometric analysis to further deepen the understanding of the field [29]. In conclusion, the combination of bibliometric analysis and literature review provides a more comprehensive and systematic perspective and methodology for the study of the FI–CSR relationship, and provides more valuable research results and suggestions for the academic community [30]. In summary, the research methodology of this paper is shown in Figure 1.

2.1. Bibliometric Analysis Methodology

Bibliometric analysis has been widely used in various aspects of international business management research. Instead of staying in a single perspective throughout the analysis, adopting bibliometric analysis methods, with the support of visualization tools, greatly helps scholars to conduct a rapid and all-around in-depth exploration of a research field and provides guidance and a reference for further research work [31]. Bibliometric analysis provides a macroscopic perspective for the study of FI and CSR. By analyzing the author and institutional cooperation network, keyword co-occurrence, and literature co-citation of

a large number of related studies, we can clearly grasp the current status of the research, the hot trends, and the distribution of the core research power in this field.

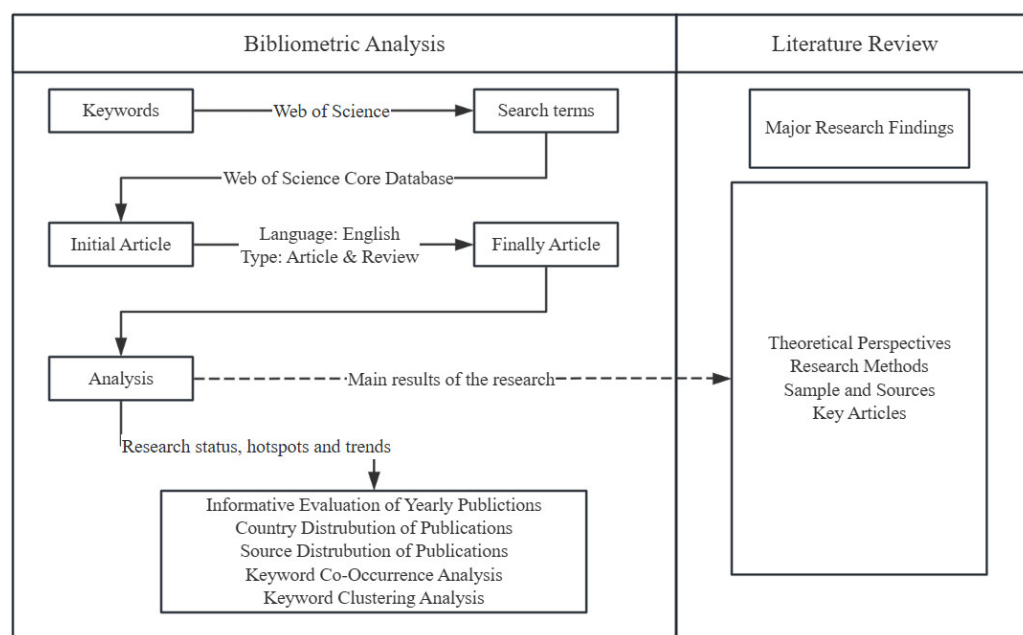


Figure 1. Bibliometric analysis methods and literature review methods.

In order to ensure the authority and comprehensiveness of the research studies, this study chose to use the core journals in the Web of Science, which is the largest and most authoritative academic journal database, as the data source. First of all, considering that “firm internationalization” and “corporate social responsibility” are expressed differently in the literature, in order to make the search results more representative and precise, this study has extensively reviewed the literature related to firm internationalization and corporate social responsibility, and finally determined a pair of search terms. Then, this paper searched the Web of Science core database using these search terms and restricted the language to English. An initial sample of 382 articles spanning 1998–2024 was obtained. Subsequently, after checking and excluding conference papers, editorial materials, corrections, and other documents, 331 valid documents spanning the years 2000–2024 were used as the data source for conducting the bibliometric analysis. Finally, using the export function, the literature was exported in “plain text file” format for further analysis.

Author keywords:

AK = (“corporate diversification” OR “internationalization” OR “international diversification” OR “geographic diversification” OR “international expansion” OR “internationalisation” OR “international diversity” OR “international business” OR “international strategy” OR “MNC*” OR “MNE*” OR “MNF*” OR “multinational enterprise*” OR “multinational firm*” OR “multinational corporation*” OR “multinational company*”) AND AK = (“CSR” OR “social responsibility” OR “corporate responsibility” OR “corporate social responsibility” OR “CSP” OR “corporate social performance” OR “ESG” OR “socially responsible behavior” OR “CSR report” OR “corporate social responsibility report” OR “social responsibility report”).

This paper used VOSviewer 1.6.19, Cite Space 6.4.R1, and Excel office 2019 software to construct the research knowledge map of FI and CSR. Specifically, the visualization map generated by VOSviewer 1.6.19 is able to show the structure and hierarchical FI–CSR relationship research in an intuitive way. Through nodes and connecting lines of different colors, sizes and shapes, the importance, relevance and strength of connection between different research topics, studies, authors and institutions can be indicated, enabling re-

searchers to see at a glance the macro-structure and micro-details of the whole research field, and helping to discover potential research patterns and trends. Cite Space 6.4.R1 can cluster keywords according to their co-occurrence relationships, thus clearly presenting which keywords appear more frequently and are closely related to each other in the research in this field, and these high-frequency keywords often represent the hotspots and core issues of the current research. Through the analysis of the keyword co-occurrence network, researchers are able to gain a deeper understanding of the crossover and integration between different research topics, providing ideas for interdisciplinary and comprehensive research. Excel can be used as a complementary tool to list the relevant data and statistical results in detail in the form of graphs or tables, to provide more accurate and specific data support for the graphs and conclusions in the knowledge graph, so that the researcher and the reader can understand the basis and background of the research more comprehensively.

2.2. Literature Review Methodology

Literature review holds significant importance as it can offer researchers the research background and theoretical foundation of a particular field [26]. It plays a crucial role in helping readers gain a comprehensive understanding of the development history of the research field [32]. This includes tracing the important research results, main ideas, and development trends that have emerged in the field from the past to the present. Through this, readers are able to quickly grasp the entire context and sequence of the research topic. Moreover, literature review helps in constructing the theoretical framework of the field. This framework serves as a guiding force for formulating research questions, making informed choices regarding research methods, and conducting in-depth analysis of research results [29].

In the specific field of FI and CSR, by conducting a critical analysis of the existing literature, we were able to draw out the main theoretical perspectives, research methods, and research results. This process enabled us to have a clear understanding of the current state of research in this field. We could identify the key theories that have been applied, the methodological approaches that have been utilized, and the major findings that have emerged. This not only helps us build on the existing knowledge but also allows us to identify gaps and areas for further exploration. By understanding the main theoretical perspectives, we can position our research within the broader academic discourse and contribute to the ongoing conversation. The research methods identified through literature review can guide us in choosing the most appropriate approach for our study, ensuring the reliability and validity of our research. Additionally, the research results provide us with a benchmark against which we can evaluate our own findings and contribute to the accumulation of knowledge.

3. Bibliometric Analysis

In this section, we analyze the current statuses, hotspots, and trends in research on the impact of FI on CSR based on a sample of 331 articles collected from the field.

3.1. Informative Evaluation of Yearly Publications

In this section, this study analyzed research trends on the impact of FI on CSR based on a sample of 331 articles collected from the field. The number of papers published is an important indicator of the trend of a research field, and the year of publication and the number of publications reflect to some extent the general trend and speed of development of the field. Figure 2 presents a graph of the annual number of publications on the topic of FI and CSR published each year between 2000 and 2024. The horizontal axis indicates the year of publication and the vertical axis indicates the total number of articles. It can be seen that

the development of this field can be divided into three phases: (1) before 2008, the budding period, with occasional publication of related literature; (2) 2008–2018, the exploratory period, when the number of articles began to increase steadily; and (3) from 2018 to the present, the developmental period, when the number of articles increased significantly, with a total of 209 articles, which accounted for about 63.14% of the total amount of the literature analyzed in this visualization. During the period from 2023 to 2024, the number of articles published reached its maximum, which is likely to be affected by external factors such as changes in the global economic situation and epidemics, which suggests the social responsibility of MNCs during the process of internationalization should receive more attention from scholars.

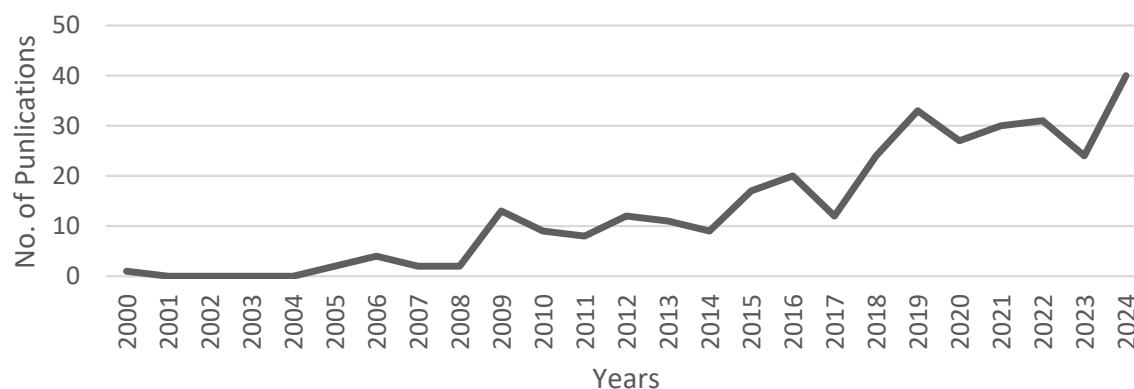


Figure 2. Number of published papers based on the Web of Science.

3.2. Country Distribution of Publications

This study identified the countries that have invested in the research areas of FI and CSR. A total of 63 countries were involved in the 331 documents analyzed in this study, and Figure 3 demonstrates the publishing countries that met the minimum number of documents and minimum number of citations in the national/regional literature of five (the system default values were used) [32]. Ultimately, there were 22 countries that met the requirements of the above thresholds. The United States published the most articles (70), followed by the United Kingdom (69) and China (64) in the second and third places, and these three countries provided the majority of the research with approximately 61.33% of the total literature analyzed in this study. Studies from the United States were cited 3712 times, topping all countries, followed by the United Kingdom (3348) and Canada (2688). These countries are from different geographical areas, which shows that the theme of research on the FI–CSR relationship has received attention from countries all over the world.

3.3. Source Distribution of Publications

Publication source analysis is a valuable method to distinguish the core journals of a research discipline, which is important for scholars to find relevant literature and select appropriate journals. For these 331 documents, a total of 148 published journals were involved, which were visualized with VOSviewer 1.6.19, and the threshold was set to five (the minimum number of journal publications is five), and 14 core journals were filtered out, which are shown in Figure 4 and Table 1 as the core journals' mapping. The size of the nodes in the graph represents the number of journal publications, and the connecting lines indicate that the journals are connected to each other.

Among them, the Journal of Business Ethics published the most articles (44), followed by Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management (12) and Sustainability (11). The Journal of Business Ethics leads all journals with 4380 citations, followed by the Journal of International Business Studies (1403) and the Journal of World Business (799).

These publications cover disciplines such as management, environmental science, ecology and engineering technology, which indicates the interdisciplinary nature of the topic of research on the FI–CSR relationship.

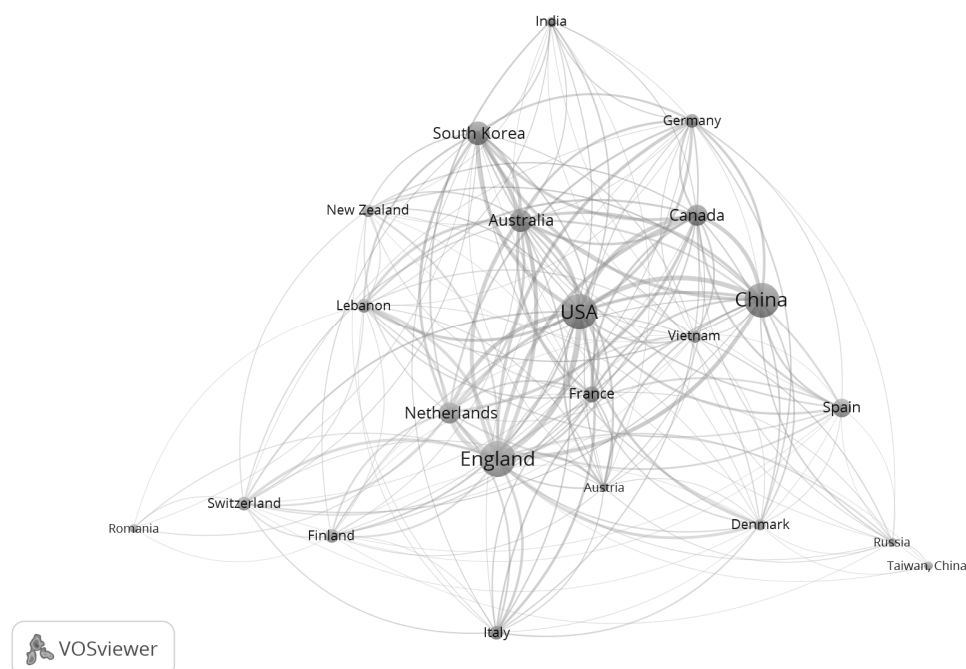


Figure 3. Countries' contribution to research on FI and CSR.

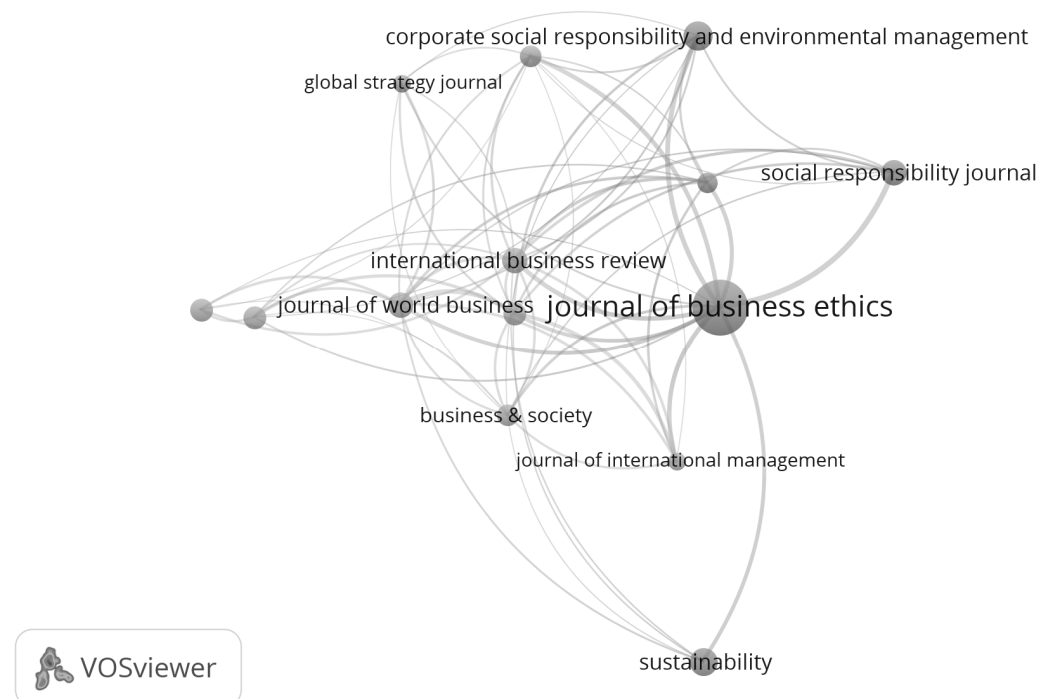


Figure 4. Sources' contribution to research on FI and CSR.

Table 1. Summary of sources.

Categories	Source	Documents	Citations	Total Link Strength
IB	International Business Review	9	613	3887
IB	Journal of World Business	9	799	3800
IB	Journal of International Business Studies	8	1403	3793

Table 1. Cont.

Categories	Source	Documents	Citations	Total Link Strength
IB	Journal of Business Research	7	295	3030
IB	Management International Review	6	191	2602
IB	Global Strategy Journal	5	113	2294
IB	Journal of International Management	5	131	2161
IB	Strategic Management Journal	4	608	1674
CSR	Journal of Business Ethics	44	4380	8665
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management	12	450	3767
CSR	Sustainability	11	34	2467
CSR	Business & Society	7	328	2762
CSR	Business Ethics Quarterly	4	454	1074
CSR	Business Strategy and The Environment	3	74	327
CSR	Sustainable Development	3	4	64

3.4. Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis

In the keyword co-occurrence mapping, the larger the node, the more often the keyword appears, and the thicker the connecting line between the nodes, the higher the correlation between the two keywords. According to the visualization information, the high-frequency keywords of the research on the FI–CSR relationship were collated and obtained. As can be seen from Figure 5, the keyword knowledge graph of FI and CSR research has 419 nodes, 2568 connecting lines, and the network density is 0.0293. From the frequency point of view, the nodes of the keyword co-occurrence graph are obvious and differentiated prominently, and the co-occurring relationship between the keywords is clear. Among them, the keywords of CSR, performance, multinational corporations, management, business and strategy have the largest number of nodes, which is the main direction of research in the field of FI and CSR in the past 20 years. Besides, the nodes of keywords such as governance, financial performance, ethics, and impact are also more obvious, indicating that in recent years, academics have carried out a more specific extension and in-depth discussion on the fulfillment of social responsibility during the process of firm internationalization from the perspective of results.

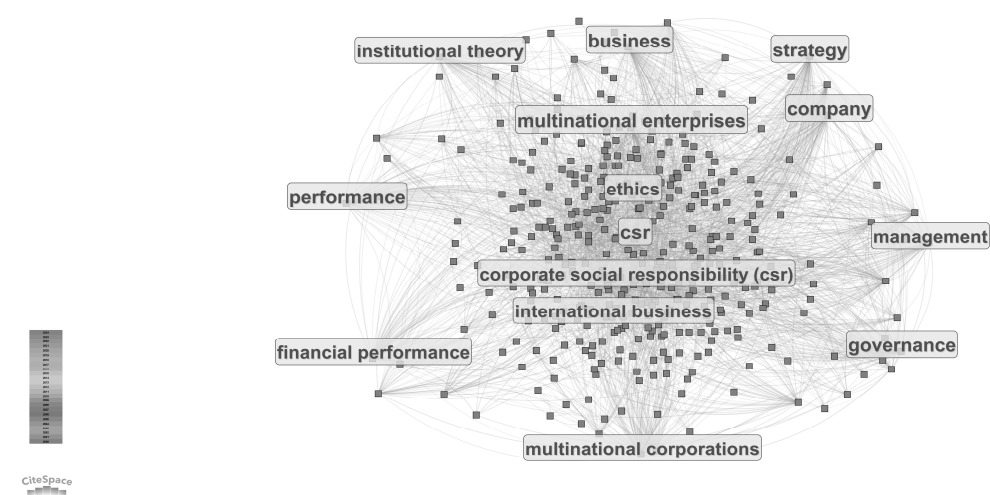


Figure 5. Keyword co-occurrence analysis of FI and CSR.

High-frequency keywords can represent the existing research direction to a certain extent, and centrality means the influence of keywords in the field. Generally, when the centrality of a keyword is greater than or equal to 0.1, this means that the keyword is a key

node in this research field. As can be seen in Figure 4, in terms of centrality, corporate social responsibility (CSR), international business, performance, and multinational corporations are the key nodes in the study of the FI-CSR relationship. This shows that the fulfillment of CSR by MNCs in the stage of internationalization is still a research hotspot.

3.5. Keyword Clustering Analysis

Keyword clustering mapping can provide a thematic perspective of a specific research field, show the thematic connection between various research hotspots in the field, and help researchers accurately grasp the research status and development of the field. In the keyword clustering map, the cluster number is negatively correlated with the cluster size, i.e., the smaller the number, the more keywords are included in the cluster. In the clustering atlas, the clustering module value and the average contour value of clusters are two indicators for judging the effectiveness of clustering, and it is generally believed that the clustering structure is significant when the Q value is >0.3 and the clustering is efficient and convincing when the S value is >0.7 . The clustering atlas in Figure 6 shows a Q value = 0.3703 (>0.3) and S value = 0.7107 (>0.7), which indicates that the clustering structure of this clustering atlas is significant, the clustering is efficient and convincing, and the division of the clustering module is reasonable, and therefore, it can be analyzed in more depth. In total, the keyword clustering map forms the main clustering labels in the research field of FI and CSR, which are #0 Stakeholder engagement, #1 Institutional theory, #2 Corporate social responsibility, #3 Corporate governance, #4 Business and peace, #5 International diversification, #6 Human rights, #7 Corporate and social responsibility, #8 Social responsibility, and #9 Business ethics. This indicates that in recent years, the research on FI and CSR has been mainly centered on these 10 clusters.

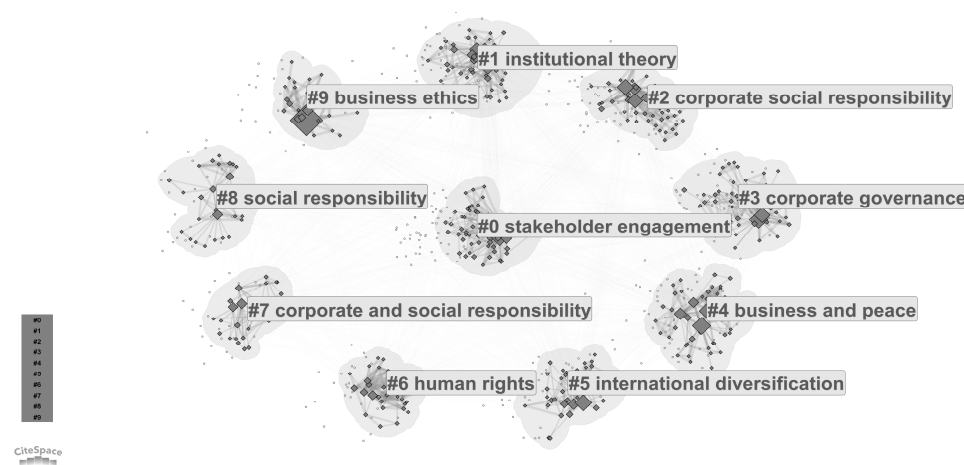


Figure 6. Keyword clustering analysis of FI and CSR.

4. Literature Review and Analysis

Literature review is a method of systematically elaborating, evaluating and examining the existing research results on the basis of collecting, organizing and analyzing the literature in a specific field. This study analyzed the main theoretical perspectives, research methods, samples and sources, and key articles in the field of the relationship between firm internationalization and CSR by using a literature review method so as to derive the main research results in this field.

4.1. Theoretical Perspectives in FI-CSR

Scholars have explored the motivation of social responsibility of MNCs from different theoretical perspectives, such as stakeholder theory, institutional theory and a resource-

based view, which has provided a solid theoretical foundation for the research on FI and CSR [33,34]. Stakeholder theory holds that the decisions and practices of a firm are influenced by its stakeholders, and that a firm has to focus on the demands of its stakeholders, which include shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, communities, the environment, and so on. In the process of firm internationalization, MNCs face multiple stakeholders from different countries and regions, and in order to ensure that these stakeholders can support the firms' decisions and behaviors, MNCs must actively satisfy the diversified requirements of stakeholders, and based on this, the scope and requirements of the CSR will be expanded accordingly [6,8]. Mzembe et al. [35] emphasized through a single case study that external stakeholder pressures (government, industry and customers) motivate Malawian mining industry firms to adopt specific environmental programs and policies in the host country. Park et al. [36] investigated the CSR practices of Korean MNCs through a questionnaire survey, and the results of the study showed that both primary stakeholders (e.g., consumers, internal managers, employees, and business partners) and secondary stakeholders (e.g., the government, the media, the local community, and NGOs) have a positive impact on the CSR practices of MNCs.

Institutional theory emphasizes that the institutional environment in which a firm operates has a significant impact on its survival and growth, and that a firm needs to gain local legitimacy. In the context of internationalization, there are differences in the institutional environments of different countries and regions, and MNCs need to obtain local legitimacy through various ways and means in order to facilitate their long-term development in the global market, while CSR behaviors of MNCs can help them to obtain legitimacy [10,37]. Marano et al. [21] showed that emerging market MNCs from less institutionally developed countries are likely to face liability of origin during internationalization, and that CSR reporting is an effective strategy for overcoming such liability and legitimacy barriers because it communicates alignment with global meta-norms and expectations to host countries and global stakeholders. Miska et al. [38] conducted a comparative analysis of 29 MNCs in China, and their study showed that the greater the participation of MNCs in global CSR organizations, the greater the degree of their CSR integration and legitimacy in the host country.

The resource-based view suggests that differences in performance among firms are influenced by firm-specific resources and capabilities, and that a firm needs to possess unique resources in order to gain a competitive advantage. Internationalized firms face more complex market environments and competitive pressures, which prompts MNCs to integrate global resources and realize the synergistic effect of resources to create greater value, while social responsibility can bring about a good reputation, brand image and social recognition for MNCs, which are important factors for MNCs to obtain resources, expand markets and attract partners in the international market [39,40]. Bouquet et al. [41] showed that highly internationalized MNCs are more likely to develop more sustainability practices because of a sharper market orientation and a greater ability to innovate in response to environmental changes and stakeholder requirements. Strike et al. [3] showed that in the process of internationalization, MNCs use CSR to gain a good reputation in order to maintain a continuous operation in the host country.

It can be seen through the analysis that when scholars study the impact of firm internationalization on social responsibility in the context of emerging economies, they are more inclined to use the institutional perspective to explore the extent to which the relationship between the two is affected by institutional distance; when the object of the study is multinational corporations in developed countries, scholars are more likely to use the resource-based view to explain that in the process of internationalization, MNCs can use social responsibility to gain a competitive advantage. When focusing on the impact of

the breadth of firm internationalization on social responsibility, scholars need to use the stakeholder theory, because when MNCs operate in multiple countries, they need to satisfy the demands of different stakeholders in order to gain legitimacy. In general, different theoretical perspectives are applicable to different scenarios, and therefore, there are a large number of research perspectives in this field.

4.2. Research Methods in FI–CSR

The current research field has already studied the characteristics of internationalization in some depth, and they have focused on and explored two typical dimensions of internationalization: depth and breadth. Specifically, depth of internationalization is a representative dimension that has been used in internationalization research, which describes the depth of a firm's approach to the process of overseas expansion [42,43]. In previous studies, depth of internationalization has been expressed as the percentage of overseas assets, the percentage of overseas sales revenue, and the percentage of overseas employees in the firm [44].

Breadth of internationalization is another important dimension of internationalization, which to some extent reflects the degree of geographic distribution of internationalization in a firm's overseas operations [45]. Breadth of internationalization generally refers to the specific number of countries or regions in which the firm operates and invests, as well as the spatial concentration of the firm's overseas activities. Compared with the depth of internationalization, the breadth of internationalization better reflects the spatial heterogeneity and diversification characteristics of overseas expansion. Williamson et al. [46] found that firm internationalization is positively related to the environmental dimension of CSR when measured by the Foreign Sales to Total Sales (FSTS) ratio, but negatively related to the environmental dimension of CSR when measured by the Foreign Assets to Total Assets (FATA) ratio. Cheung et al. [47] showed that the depth of internationalization (Foreign Sales to Total Sales) has a greater impact on CSR than the breadth of internationalization (Number of Sales Regions).

CSR, as a specific non-market strategy, has gradually attracted extensive attention from scholars in the field of international business in recent years. With the promotion of overseas market expansion and strategic layout, corporates are facing different institutional pressures in the areas of environment, society and governance, which make corporates and academics begin to focus on the practice of CSR. CSR provides an important non-market advantage for multinational enterprises to “go global” to achieve overseas market expansion, and it provides important strategic value for the acquisition of internationalization resources [13,48]. The environmental concerns of firms in the process of internationalization encompass proactive actions of firms in the environment, such as energy-saving and emission-reduction measures [49], green innovation [50,51], waste pollution and management [52].

Social issues refers to the social behavior of firms, such as community communication [20], philanthropy [53], and employee welfare and health [2]. Governance issues include corporate transparency [54], board diversity [55], and shareholder rights [5]. Ma et al. [56] found that MNCs reduced the quality of environmental CSR disclosure as international diversification increased institutional complexity, but they increased the quality of their employee CSR disclosure due to their different institutional influences.

4.3. Sample and Sources in FI–CSR

The current study used samples of firms from different countries and industries as well as primary and secondary data to explore the FI–CSR relationship. First, it covered different countries, including both developed and developing countries. For example, there

are MNCs from developed countries such as the United States and Europe [20,23], as well as emerging MNCs from developing countries such as Asia and Africa [57,58]. The political, economic, cultural and legal environments of different countries vary considerably, which allowed this study to examine the FI–CSR relationship in different institutional contexts [59]. For example, Sambharya et al. [2] examined the relationship between international diversification and non-market strategies (human rights and employee orientation disclosures) in global companies from 31 countries/regions, and the results of the study found that the outcomes of international diversification and non-market strategies varied by region (Europe, the Anglo-Saxon cluster, as well as Asia and emerging markets).

Second, it covered different industries, including manufacturing, services and many other fields [60–62]. There are significant differences in internationalization patterns and social responsibility focus among firms in different industries [63]. Manufacturing firms may focus more on supply chain sustainability and labor rights, while service firms may focus on customer satisfaction and employee training. A cross-industry study can reveal the impact of different industry characteristics on the FI–CSR relationship.

Finally, the data sources are diversified, including primary and secondary data [64–67]. From different data perspectives, scholars verify the extent to which MNCs practice CSR in the process of internationalization.

4.4. Key Articles in FI–CSR

To demonstrate that the implementation of CSR by MNCs in the process of internationalization has been favored by scholars from various countries and industries, Table 2 lists the key articles in the field of FI and CSR. This study identified ten important studies through the search process. These studies are summarized in Table 2, detailing the independent variables related to firm internationalization, the dependent variables related to CSR, the theoretical perspective used in the article, as well as the context.

From Table 2, it can be found that when scholars discuss the FI–CSR relationship, they mainly start from the stakeholder perspective and institutional perspective, such as Brammer et al. [68] and Sambharya et al. [2]. Some scholars have also explored the relationship between CSR and internationalization from the resource-based view [3,47] and pollution paradise (haven) theory [69]. In addition, scholars exploring the FI–CSR relationship have found that the depth and breadth of firms' internationalization have different impacts on CSR. Ma et al. [19] found that the depth of internationalization is positively correlated with CSR scores, but the breadth of internationalization has no impact on CSR scores. Certainly, there are also findings that firm internationalization has different impacts on different dimensions of CSR. Attig et al.'s [5] findings show that although firm internationalization is positively related to CSR ratings, internationalization has a significant positive impact on the community, diversity, and environment dimensions, while it has a significant negative impact on the human rights dimension. Aray et al.'s [20] study also found that that internationalization has a high impact on all dimensions of CSR reporting, with the greatest impact on social and community-related practices. These findings suggest that different measurements can have inconsistent empirical effects on the relationship between FI and CSR.

Finally, the extent to which MNCs fulfill their CSR in the process of internationalization is influenced by the country in which they are located. A study by Brammer et al. [68] found that the dispersion of activities is associated with improvements in community performance, as long as operations do not expand into Eastern Europe, and with improvements in environmental performance, as long as operations expand into Western Europe rather than Eastern Europe. Sambharya et al. [2] selected a multi-country sample for empirical

analysis and found that international diversification has curvilinear relationships with CSR disclosures on human rights and employees.

Table 2. Key articles: analysis summary.

Study	Author	Year	Journal	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Theoretical Perspective	Context
[68]	Brammer et al.	2006	Journal of Business Research	Breadth of FI	CSP (EIRS)	Institutional Perspective Stakeholder Perspective	UK
[3]	Strike et al.	2006	Journal of International Business Studies	Breadth of FI Depth of FI	CSR (KLD)	Resource-Based View	US
[1]	Kang, J.	2013	Strategic Management Journal	Depth of FI	CSP (KLD)	Stakeholder Theory	US
[47]	Cheung et al.	2015	Journal of Business Ethics	Breadth of FI Depth of FI	CSR (SNAI)	Institutional Perspective Resource-Based View	China
[5]	Attig et al.	2016	Journal of Business Ethics	Breadth of FI Depth of FI	CSR (MSCI ESG STATS) CSR Score (official websites and their CSR or sustainable development reports)	Stakeholder Theory Resource-Based View	US
[19]	Ma et al.	2016	Management Decision	Breadth of FI Depth of FI	CSR (MSCI ESG STATS) CSR Score (official websites and their CSR or sustainable development reports)	Institutional Perspective Stakeholder Perspective	China
[70]	Kim et al.	2019	Management Decision	Breadth of FI	CSP (KEIJ index)	Stakeholder Theory Internationalization Theory	Korea
[2]	Sambharya et al.	2021	Global Strategy Journal	Breadth of FI Depth of FI	CSR (annual report)	Institutional Perspective Stakeholder Perspective Stakeholder Perspective	Multi-country
[69]	Zhang et al.	2021	Emerging Markets Review	Breadth of FI Depth of FI	CSP (hexun.com)	Pollution Paradise Theory	China
[20]	Aray et al.	2021	International Business Review	Depth of FI	CSR (annual report)	Legitimacy Theory	Russia

5. Discussion

5.1. Major Findings

Based on a comprehensive bibliometric analysis and an in-depth literature review of a substantial number of 331 papers, this study was designed with the specific aim of conducting a detailed analysis of the current statuses, emerging trends, and the latest research advances in the development of firm internationalization and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

In terms of bibliometric analysis, the amount of literature in the field of firm internationalization and CSR has been subjected to the development of globalization, which began to increase steadily in 2008, with 2018 being the explosive period, and the publication rate of articles on this topic then began increasing steadily every year, highlighting its strong development and research fervor. Among them, most of the highly cited articles are concentrated in the top journals related to international business and CSR, such as *International Business Review*; *Journal of World Business*; *Journal of International Business Studies*; *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Business Strategy and the Environment*; and *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*. The importance of these journals in leading research in the field is emphasized. Although the current cooperation network

among scholars is still immature and mainly concentrated in the United States, the United Kingdom and China, which account for about 60% of the published papers, after more than two decades of development, popular topics such as stakeholder engagement, corporate governance, business and peace, business ethics, etc. have emerged.

In terms of literature review, this study found that scholars mostly analyze the relationship between firm internationalization and CSR from the perspectives of stakeholder theory, institutional theory and resource-based views. When further analyzing the relationship, most scholars explore the impact of firm internationalization on CSR in terms of the depth and breadth of internationalization. Meanwhile, although scholars also explore the impact of internationalization on CSR in other dimensions, such as human rights, community, employees, etc., most studies analyze the relationship in terms of the environmental, social and governance dimensions of CSR. These different measurement methods may lead to inconsistency between the empirical results of firm internationalization and CSR, and through the analysis of the samples and data sources chosen in the literature, this paper found that such inconsistent results may also be affected by the background of the countries and industries in which the multinational corporations are located, which provides an important reference for subsequent research on the optimization of the methodology and the consideration of the context.

Figure 7 summarizes the framework diagram of the FI–CSR relationship, explaining the complexity of the relationship from two major aspects: the theoretical perspective and empirical methods, and thus verifying the validity of hypotheses 1a and 1b. From the theoretical perspective, current scholars mainly explore the internal logic between firm internationalization and CSR from the resource perspective, capability perspective, institutional perspective, stakeholder perspective and corporate governance perspective [71–74]. Each perspective is subdivided into specific theories, such as the resource-based view and resource dependence theory under the resource perspective.

Most of the studies under the theoretical perspectives agree that due to the liability of foreignness and the country of origin effect, multinational corporations can actively fulfill their CSR when internationalizing, that is, there is a positive relationship between FI–CSR [20,37,69]. For example, Bouquet et al. drew on a stakeholder perspective and suggested that highly internationalized MNCs are more likely to develop more sustainable development practices because they have a clearer market position and greater capacity to innovate in response to environmental changes and stakeholder demands [75]. But Zhu et al. argued from the theoretical perspectives that, in order to satisfy the political legitimacy of the institutional complexity, legitimacy pressures, and dispersion of resources faced by the firms in the process of internationalization, firms would make trade-offs, leading to a decline in the quality of CSR reporting [76]. Also from a resource perspective, one scholar argued that because of the different competitive challenges and resource constraints encountered by multinational corporations in the process of internationalization, the legitimacy pressures faced by firms vary, and therefore the level of firm commitment to social responsibility varies, leading to a U-shaped change in FI–CSR [15]. This verifies hypothesis 1a, that is, the differences in the theoretical perspectives of research lead to changes in the relationship between FI and CSR.

In terms of empirical methods, the current research results on this topic show variability, and the source of this variability includes both the measurement of key variables and sample selection. In terms of measurement, firm internationalization includes depth of FI and breadth of FI, while corporate social responsibility can be broadly divided into environment-related issues, social issues and governance-related issues, and scholars may obtain different results when they use different measurement methods to explore. For example, Williamson et al. found that firm internationalization is positively related to the

environmental dimension of CSR when internationalization is measured by the ratio of foreign sales to total sales (FSTS), but negatively related to the environmental dimension of CSR when internationalization is measured by the ratio of foreign assets to total assets (FATA) [46]. Cheung et al. showed that depth of internationalization (ratio of foreign sales to total sales) has a greater impact on CSR than breadth of internationalization (number of sales regions) [47]. Ma et al. found that international diversification increases institutional complexity and that multinational corporations lower the quality of environmental disclosure for CSR, but MNCs increase the quality of employee disclosure for CSR due to the influence of different institutions [56]. The sample can be broadly categorized into developed and developing countries according to the countries in which MNCs are located, and into manufacturing and service industries according to the industries in which the firms are located, and the institutions of different countries and industry norms may have different impacts on the fulfillment of various types of social responsibilities during the process of internationalization of the firms. For example, Sambharya et al. examined the relationship between international diversification and non-market strategies (human rights and employee-oriented disclosure) in multinational corporations from 31 countries/regions, and found that the results of international diversification and non-market strategies varied by region (Europe, Anglo-Saxon cluster, and Asia and emerging markets) [2]. Significant differences were found in the focus of firms in different industries in fulfilling their social responsibility in the internationalization process [63]. This verifies hypothesis 1b, that is, the differences in the empirical scenarios of research will lead to changes in the relationship between FI and CSR. It is for this reason that scholars have adopted different theoretical perspectives and measurement methods to explore different scenarios, thus leading to the complexity of the relationship between firm internationalization and CSR.

5.2. Contributions

This study makes three significant contributions to the research on the relationship between firm internationalization and corporate social responsibility (CSR). First, it meticulously revealed the theoretical framework for studying the relationship between the two from the perspectives of stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and resource-based views [75,77,78]. By doing so, it provides a comprehensive and systematic foundation for understanding the complex interactions between firm internationalization and CSR [5]. This not only enriches the theoretical toolkit available to researchers but also guides the direction of in-depth exploration, opening up new avenues for future research and enabling a more profound understanding of the underlying mechanisms at play.

Second, it thoughtfully proposed a specific measurement method for firm internationalization and CSR. This is a crucial step as it helps to quantify and analyze the relationship more accurately [19]. Moreover, it highlights the potential inconsistency of empirical results that may be caused by this measurement method [1]. This awareness prompts a call for further research to address these inconsistencies and promotes the improvement of the measurement method. By doing so, it enhances the reliability and validity of research in this field, facilitating more accurate and meaningful conclusions [3].

Third, it emphatically emphasized the influence of country and industry backgrounds on the relationship between firm internationalization and CSR. This recognition is essential as it acknowledges the contextual nature of business operations and the importance of considering external factors [2,35]. By providing theoretical references for corporate strategy development, it enables MNCs to make more informed decisions when formulating internationalization and CSR strategies. This helps them to better navigate the complex global business environment and balance economic goals with social responsibilities, ultimately contributing to sustainable business development.

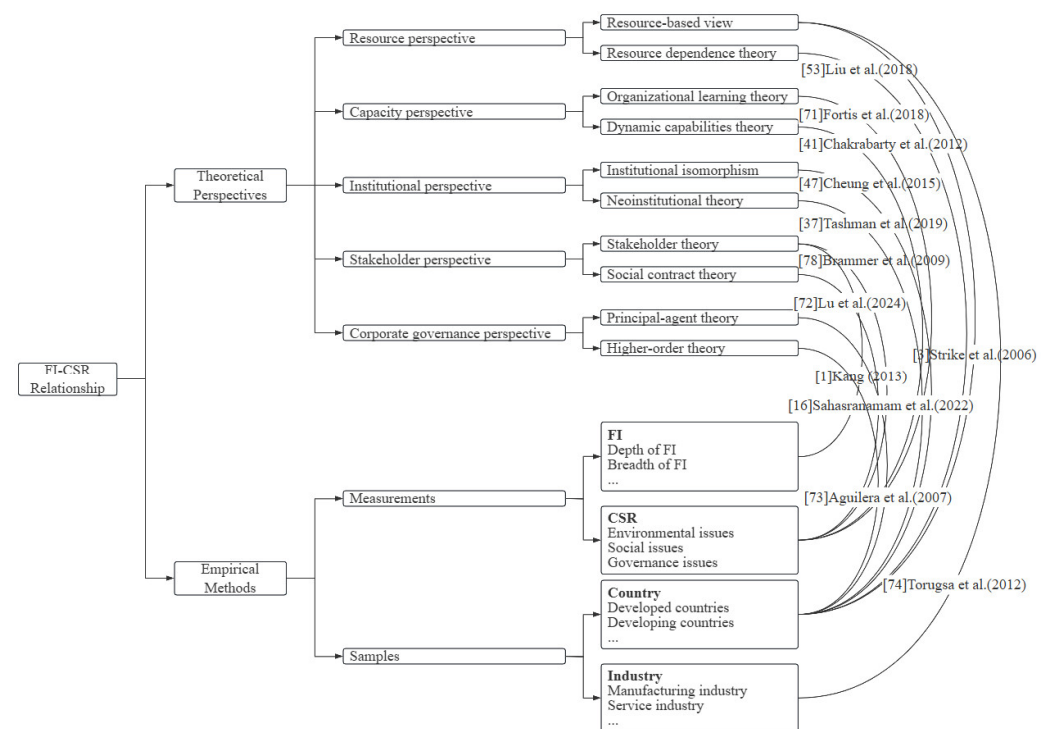


Figure 7. Major findings of FI and CSR.

5.3. Limitations and Future Directions

This study used literature review and bibliometric analysis to investigate the relationship between firm internationalization and corporate social responsibility (CSR). However, there are two limitations in this paper, which future scholars should continue to explore. First, the methodology of this study is limited. Although the bibliometric analysis can provide a certain macro perspective, it may not be able to dig deeper into the specific mechanism and internal logic of the relationship between firm internationalization and CSR. The subjectivity of a literature review can hardly be avoided completely, and there may be a bias in the interpretation of certain studies or the omission of important points. Future scholars can combine qualitative and quantitative research methods, such as case studies, interviews, and empirical studies, to explore in depth the specific processes and influencing factors of the relationship between firm internationalization and CSR. Besides, there are incompleteness of the data in this study. This study relied on the literature within the core dataset in the Web of Science database, which may lead to the possibility of not covering all the relevant studies in the field of enterprise internationalization and CSR, meaning some important results were not included in the analysis. In the future, scholars can expand the data sources to include different types of databases and research resources to ensure a more comprehensive study of the relationship between enterprise internationalization and CSR.

6. Conclusions

By employing a comprehensive literature review and a sophisticated bibliometric analysis, we were able to thoroughly reveal the intricate relationship between firm internationalization and corporate social responsibility (CSR). On the one hand, the extensive literature review meticulously examined how the different dimensions of firm internationalization, namely the depth and breadth of internationalization, exert an influence on the engagement of multinational corporations (MNCs) in CSR activities across the environmental, social, and governance dimensions. This examination was conducted from three main theoretical perspectives, namely the stakeholder perspective, the institutional perspective,

and the resource-based view. Moreover, the literature review also astutely points out that this relationship is significantly affected by diverse country contexts and industry contexts. Different countries have their own unique political, economic, cultural, and social environments, which can shape the way MNCs approach CSR in their international operations. Similarly, different industries have distinct characteristics and requirements, which can also impact the relationship between corporate internationalization and CSR. On the other hand, the bibliometric analysis serves as a powerful tool to identify the key themes, influential authors, and emerging trends in the field of business internationalization and CSR. Through the analysis of a large number of academic papers and research works, we can determine which topics are currently at the forefront of research, who are the leading scholars in this field, and what new directions are emerging. The findings of our research strongly suggest that multinational corporations actively engage in CSR activities during the process of internationalization. As MNCs expand their operations across different countries and regions, they recognize the importance of fulfilling their social responsibilities, not only to enhance their reputation and brand image but also to meet the expectations of various stakeholders and adapt to the local regulatory and social environments. In short, this paper concludes that it is very important for firms to fulfill their CSR in the process of internationalization and that MNCs should actively practice it.

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