

How does social responsibility impact anxiety, job stress, and employee engagement?

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Abstract

Recent academic literature has highlighted the need to investigate the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on employees' mental health and engagement. This study examined the effects of CSR on anxiety, job stress, and employee engagement, paying special attention to the internal processes through which socially responsible practices may influence employees' emotional and motivational responses. Data collection to conduct the empirical analysis was obtained through an online survey (n = 533) administered to professors of higher education in Spain, a professional group that frequently experiences high workloads and emotional pressure. Statistical analysis was employed using the PLS-SEM technique, which enabled the evaluation of both direct and indirect relationships among the variables. Findings revealed that CSR reduces anxiety and job stress and has a positive impact on employee engagement. Additionally, anxiety and job stress generate lower levels of employee engagement, acting as detrimental psychological states that undermine employees' capacity to remain motivated and committed. This research contributes to the management of social responsibility as a priori element to reduce negative emotional states (anxiety and job stress) and increase employee engagement. Overall, the study offers valuable insights for organisational managers when implementing CSR initiatives that foster healthier work environments, support employee well-being, and ultimately improve organisational performance while generating broader societal benefits.

Keywords: *corporate social responsibility, anxiety, job stress, employee engagement*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: I12, J28, M12, M14, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has experienced significant expansion in recent years as organisations extend beyond financial performance and voluntarily integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and interactions with stakeholders (Blanco-González et al., 2023). According to Stakeholder Theory, CSR involves social responsibility for both the external and internal parties of organisations (Freeman, 2010). Among these stakeholders, employees represent the primary contributors to business performance and organisational sustainability (Velte, 2022). Organisations such as the European Commission and the United Nations have indicated that within the 2030 agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), the initiative to implement CSR measures or policies in organisations requires a priority and comprehensive approach that covers aspects such as mental health, well-being, and employee engagement.

Positive mental health and its impact on all facets of human existence are attracting increasing attention globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) has established positive mental health as the cornerstone of individual and community well-being, defining it as a state that enables individuals to realize their capabilities, manage routine stressors, and function effectively, meaningfully, and participate actively in their

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communities (World Health Organization, 2022). The Global Health Service Monitor (Ipsos, 2022), conducted in 34 countries indicate that mental health constitutes the foremost health concern globally. Two years of five-point increases mean that it now surpasses cancer (ranked third) for the first time as the second biggest cause of concern, at 36% globally (followed by COVID). Among the factors that affect mental health, anxiety is one of the main determinants, increasing by 26% in a single year, with 76 million people affected by anxiety (Santomauro et al., 2021). Anxiety is a mental disorder caused by restlessness, tension, worry, and fear of events or situations that may happen (Kemp et al., 2021). Another major health concern is stress, which ranks fourth among the health problems worldwide at 26% (Ipsos, 2022). According to the State of the Global Workplace 2023 report (Gallup, 2023) reveals unprecedented levels of job stress, with 44% of employees reporting significant work-related stress. Job stress is conceptualised as a physical and emotional response occurring when occupational demands placed on employees exceed perceived coping abilities (Popa et al., 2022). Job stress has become a key factor that can negatively affect employee well-being and performance (DeWitte et al., 2016). Therefore, different authors have called for the inclusion of job stress and anxiety as real factors affecting employee engagement (Blanco-González et al., 2023).

Employee engagement refers to the optimal cognitive and emotional connections between employees and the organisation (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Many authors link employee engagement to a positive and satisfactory mental state related to employment, which is characterised by dedication, a sense of involvement and pride in the work (Albrecht et al., 2021). Employee engagement is essential for organisations because engaged employees experience greater satisfaction, better performance, lower turnover (Book et al., 2019), and better mental health (Anthony-McMann et al., 2017), resulting in better results for the organisation. Since employee engagement has multiple benefits, organisations should discover how their employees' social responsibility actions and mental health problems (anxiety and job stress) influence engagement levels.

Although the literature has explored the effects of CSR on various organisational outcomes, few studies specifically examine the effect of CSR on employees' mental health. Previous studies have suggested that a greater sense of CSR can affect employees' health by reducing their mental fatigue (Farooq et al., 2017; Shao et al., 2017). Additionally, Other studies have indicated that when organisations engage in CSR initiatives, employees often feel that they are working towards something meaningful (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023). This can be highly motivating and may assist in enhancing the balance between work and personal life, which is essential for maintaining good mental health. Moreover, organisations that prioritise responsibility tend to offer additional benefits such as wellness programs, mental health support and paid time off for volunteer work. These initiatives can help reduce stress and promote mental well-being among employees (Aguinis & Glavas, 2017). CSR can improve mental health by alleviating the incidence of depression among employees and amplifying the sense of meaning provided by work (Kim et al., 2023). A Deloitte report highlights that organisations that prioritise the mental health of their employees have achieved a return on investment (ROI) six times greater than those that do not because of their workforce strength (Deloitte, 2019). However, these studies did not evaluate the impact of CSR on the two key variables of employees' mental health: anxiety and job stress. Likewise, previous literature on the relationship between CSR and anxiety has focused on the impact of CSR on external stakeholders, while the importance of internal stakeholders, such as employees, has been somewhat underestimated (Blanco-González et al., 2023; Fatima & Elbanna, 2023). Finally, there is also a dearth of research on the relationship between employee

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engagement and health. Previous studies have demonstrated that employee engagement is an antecedent variable of depression and anxiety symptoms (Innstrand et al., 2012) as well as other factors linked to work stress, such as burnout (Hakanen et al., 2008). Finally, these studies did not analyse whether employee engagement is a consequence (not an antecedent) of these mental states. Therefore, managing employees' anxiety and work stress are key element in achieving greater employee commitment. Therefore, it is necessary to generate an academic framework that demonstrates the impact of social responsibility on variables, such as anxiety, work stress, and employee commitment.

To fill these gaps, we asked the following questions. (a) Can CSR policies help manage employees' levels of work stress and anxiety? and (b) Can anxiety and job stress affect employee engagement? To answer these questions, we propose the following explanatory and predictive objectives: 1) assess the impact of CSR as a variable that can reduce employee anxiety and stress; 2) confirm the positive effect of CSR on employee engagement; and 3) analyse whether higher levels of anxiety and job stress affect employee engagement. These objectives allow us to understand the importance of CSR practices in the positive management of employees' mental well-being, specifically anxiety and stress. Furthermore, we examined whether these factors affected employee engagement.

This study contributes to the CSR field by providing relevant guidance on how to introduce internal social responsibility initiatives aimed at decreasing negative mental health issues such as anxiety and stress. Moreover, it contributes to the field of responsible human resource management because it offers important conclusions on how consideration of employees' mental well-being can increase their engagement levels within their organisation and, therefore, improve corporate and social performance.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: First, we define a theoretical framework including the relevant concepts of mental health and CSR and their relationship with employee engagement. Subsequently, the methodology is detailed, providing a deep explanation of the research approach and the results obtained. Finally, we outline the discussion and suggest theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future propositions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Corporate Social Responsibility and Anxiety

The concept of social responsibility establishes that organisations must respond to society's expectations beyond the economic demands of their shareholders or owners (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). Social responsibility supports stakeholder theory, according to which the organisation must solely respond to the economic interests of the owners but must extend its responsibility to other interest groups that influence the performance of the organisation and therefore, its objectives (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman & Reed, 1983). These conceptualisations have led to different studies identifying social responsibility as a multidimensional concept (Pérez & Del Bosque, 2015). The European Commission describes CSR as the social responsibility of organisations for their effects on society, whereby organisations integrate social and environmental concerns into their business operations and voluntarily interact with their stakeholders (European Commission, 2011). Similarly, different authors have defined responsibility as an organisation's commitment to respond to long-term economic, social, and environmental demands through its practices, policies, and resources (Blanco-González et al., 2021; Currás-Pérez et al., 2018). Limited research has been conducted on the advantages of

CSR for employees in organisational contexts, driven mainly by the desire to explore its impact on financial stakeholders (Homer & Gill, 2022). However, the umbrella of CSR practices is broad, such as charitable activities, community services, wellness practices, and stakeholder programs. Thus, these practices yielded benefits not only for society but also for the organisations that implement them (Naveed Ahmad Zia Ullah & Han, 2023). Organisations are increasingly recognising the need to cultivate and execute CSR initiatives in a professional environment that allows them to improve aspects of their employees' mental health (O'Connor et al., 2024).

Anxiety is conceptualised as a negative psychological state characterised by depression, fear, and anger caused by events or circumstances that generate emotional tension in individuals (Kemp et al., 2021; Winter & Lavis, 2022). This state of emotional tension precipitates an imbalance in physical excitement, tension, and apprehension, thereby impeding them to adapt to future events (Dobson, 1985). According to the Theory of Emotions, emotional states are psychological and behavioural states that emerge through the perception and evaluation of the environment. (Lazarus, 1991). Specifically, they are the attitudinal and behavioural alterations that an individual manifests when evaluating internal and external stimuli. According to this theory, anxiety arises from the evaluation of stimuli that can cause a threat, even if they are not real (Scherer et al., 2001). Additionally, the origin of anxiety may not have an object or intensity of the stimulus, which may not be under objective reality (Spielberger, 1975; Tull et al., 2020). However, the emotional imbalance caused by this threat is significant enough to affect an individual's happiness, self-esteem, and ability to process information from the surrounding environment (Park et al., 2019; Wagner & Morisi, 2019).

Previous studies suggest that satisfaction indicators serve as a crucial metric for understanding the relationship between CSR strategies and employee well-being (Amna Yousaf & Yustantio, 2018). Kim et al. (2018) show that positive perceptions of CSR improve employee well-being, and Wang et al. (2020) state that this perception impacts employees' attitudes and behaviours related to job satisfaction. Similarly, Tamm et al. (2010) find a positive relationship between CSR, job satisfaction, and employee well-being. Other studies highlight the need to meet employees' expectations in terms of recognition, opportunities for personal development, and the reconciliation of work and family life (Zanko & Dawson, 2012). Koutsimani et al. (2019) showed the association of anxiety with issues related to people management in organisations, such as promotions, colleagues, and communication, which is the most important factor in determining burnout. Similarly, Khamisa et al. (2015) confirm an association between burnout and poor physical, mental, and social health outcomes. The implementation of robust CSR policies has a positive impact on reducing employee burnout and anxiety levels (Naveed Ahmad Zia Ullah & Han, 2023). Yan et al. (2021) argued that CSR is a relevant social and contextual support for improving employees' psychological states, reducing their propensity to suffer from work anxiety, and therefore improving their job performance. Despite identifying several research papers covering the topic of CSR and employees' mental health issues there is still a lack of research that pays particular attention to how CSR activities psychologically affect employees' mental health specifically in terms of employee anxiety. Based on these arguments, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1) Higher levels of social responsibility contribute to decreased employee anxiety levels.

2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility and Job Stress

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) indicates that initial scholarly investigations focused on job stress emerged in the 70s. Job Stress is a persistent condition marked by physical and emotional reactions that arise when job demands are mismatched with the capabilities, resources, or needs of a worker (Schwepker & Dimitriou, 2021). Amirkhan (2021) defines stress as a condition that arises when the imposed demands surpass an individual's ability to cope. Burnout has been universally conceptualised to define the emotional and psychological stress experienced within occupational contexts. Job Stress has emerged as a key element in mental health as it is associated with disorders such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and even suicide (Naveed Ahmad Zia Ullah & Han, 2023). The perception of being undervalued within the workplace increases vulnerability to stress and burnout (Yun et al., 2023). The perceived stress level in a specific enterprise can have a negative effect on employee well-being and performance (Popa et al., 2022).

Introducing responsible and social policies can improve employees' mental well-being (Kim et al., 2023). Employees and society expect organisations to show social responsibility within their human resources management by offering conciliation opportunities, personal development, and recognition and are also expected to support policies to improve employee's mental health (Amna Yousaf & Yustantio, 2018), and are also expected to support policies to improve employee's mental. Therefore, scholars should address this issue by considering the substantial time and resources invested in the implementation of CSR within organisations (Fatima & Elbanna, 2023) and the lack of understanding of the effect of internal CSR on employees' mental well-being outcomes (Macassa et al., 2020). The promotion of fluid and positive relationships in the work environment can be an antecedent to positive psychological conditions for employees (Alfes et al., 2018). Gordon et al. (2017) highlighted the relevance of introducing psychological stress as a real factor in the workplace which affects employee well-being.

Scholars have demonstrated the importance of applying CSR policies to reduce stress at work. For example, Anees et al. (2021) highlight the importance of training employees to manage their stress and improve their well-being in the workplace. (Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) suggested that making efforts to build a positive and trustworthy workplace climate could decrease work-related stress and burnout perceived by employees. According to Celma et al. (2018) applying CSR factors within human resources management could improve employees' well-being by decreasing their stress levels. Schwepker et al. (2021) suggest that the correct application of CSR initiatives could reduce the level of work stress perceived by employees and promote their level of well-being, which has become increasingly relevant in today's working environment (Lin & Liu, 2017). Considering these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2) Higher levels of social responsibility contribute to decreased job stress.

2.3 Corporate Social Responsibility and Engagement

Employee engagement is a psychological process through which employees are identified and aligned with the goals of their jobs and organisations. (Book et al., 2019). It supposes a self-definition link between employees in their relationship with the organisation, through which the objectives and values of the organisation and employees are integrated (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Sen et al., 2015). According to the theory of social identification (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), employee engagement occurs when a member's beliefs about the organisation become self-defined. Employee engagement as a process of maximum connection with the organisation takes place not only as a direct and

objective link between employees' characteristics and those of the organisation, but also supposes a certain criterion of overlap or coincidence between identities as an element of subjective compliance (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). This cognitive mechanism of social comparison is fundamental to employee engagement because it involves strengthening the needs or traits of employees within the organisation while distancing them from those who are not members of the organisation (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2019). In turn, positive employee engagement is a key element in an organisation's performance since it improves motivation and job satisfaction and reduces turnover and conflicts within the organisation (Book et al., 2019; Stoel et al., 2004). Therefore, it is important to enhance employee engagement within an organisation by helping employees achieve their work goals, promoting a positive working environment, and offering training for their professional development (Soni & Mehta, 2020).

Previous studies suggested that social responsibility is an antecedent of employee engagement. Ineson et al. (2013) found that, in employee loyalty, the effect of social benefits prevails over economic benefits. Whelan and Fink (2016) found that sustainability improves employee productivity and reduces turnover and attrition rates. Story et al. (2016) showed that organisations that develop responsible actions are more attractive than those with greater employee retention. Gaudencio et al. (2017) and Del-Castillo-Feito et al. (2022) pointed out that social responsibility activities are important for employees and can lead to behaviours that generate satisfaction and commitment. Lee and Chen (2018) investigate how organisational responsibility initiatives affect job satisfaction and employee retention intentions. Chen et al. (2018) found that environmental management could improve cost savings, customer retention, and employee loyalty. Han and Hyun (2019) found that environmental responsibility actions carried out by an organisation contribute to improving the emotional state and loyalty of employees. Cachón-Rodríguez et al. (2022) discovered that responsible management of human resources contributes to greater social capital by improving trust and identification, which in turn contributes to greater retention and loyalty of employees. Commitment to CSR has a direct effect on workforce climate, translating motivated and engaged employees towards their organisation (Naveed Ahmad Zia Ullah & Han, 2023). Many scholars have studied the impact of CSR on employee behaviour (Raza et al., 2021), showing a positive link with their degree of motivation and commitment (Gond et al., 2017; Jeon et al., 2020) through an increase in a sense of belonging and shared values. Therefore, we establish the following hypothesis:

H3) Higher levels of social responsibility contribute to increased employee engagement.

2.4 Anxiety and Engagement

Different theories relate anxiety to employee engagement. According to the Expectancy Theory, an employee will feel motivated based on expectations about his/her performance and the rewards he/she expects to obtain (Vroom, 1964). Anxiety, as a result of a negative stimulus or threat that may occur, leads employees to avoid certain actions or feel less engaged (Omar et al., 2021). Reactance Theory suggests that when an employee perceives the freedom to perform a specific behaviour as threatened, an emotional state or psychological reactance is aimed at relieving that tension (Brehm & Brehm, 2013). As a negative emotional state, anxiety can make it difficult to recover freedom and work commitment. These theories provide a valid theoretical framework for understanding the impact of anxiety on employee engagement, as anxiety can affect their psychological and social needs.

Previous research has suggested that anxiety can affect work commitment. Khan et al. (2021) suggested that psychological factors associated with employees' mental health affect job insecurity. Han & Hyun (2019) found that actions aimed at improving mental health contribute to improving employees' emotional well-being and loyalty. Hakanen et al. (2008) stated that emotional states such as mental burnout cause greater depersonalisation and reduced personal fulfilment, which can negatively affect organisation and employee engagement. Kim et al. (2020) also revealed that emotional states such as work stress can reduce job satisfaction. Irawanto et al. (2021) and Kemp et al. (2021) suggested that social distancing, isolation, and working from home caused by COVID-19 increased employee anxiety levels and consequently caused a decrease in job satisfaction. Popa et al. (2022) found that poorly controlled mental health states due to the recurrent state of depression lead to subjective distress that negatively affects workplace performance. Additional studies have analysed the connection between negative psychological states, such as anxiety and burnout, and lower employee engagement levels (Pawar, 2015). According to Anthony-McMann et al. (2017), the impact of employees' mental well-being, thus, anxiety levels, on work performance is crucial and affects diverse outcomes such as productivity, engagement, profitability or even absenteeism (Gutiérrez-Broncano et al., 2024). Thus, it is likely that emotional imbalance caused by a state of anxiety can have a negative psychological impact on employees, which, in turn, is reflected in lower work commitment. Therefore, it was determined that:

H4) Higher anxiety levels contribute to decreased employee engagement.

2.5 Job Stress and Engagement

Organisations which have developed initiatives to improve employees' well-being have reached higher employee engagement levels (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Individuals with higher levels of psychological well-being are normally more committed to their jobs and perform better (Wright, 2014) because they relate to important individual outcomes such as good mental health (Elrehail et al., 2019). Regarding work climate issues, stress can have a strong negative impact on an individual's well-being and mental health (Kim & Von Dem Knesebeck, 2016; Popa et al., 2022), leading to poorer job performance and low productivity (De Witte & De Cuyper, 2016).

Several studies support the link between stress levels and employee engagement. For example, Kröll & Nüesch (2017) considered that providing stress management training to employees improves their productivity and commitment to their tasks. McMann et al. (2017) found that individuals stressed by the threat of the loss of certain resources for the development of their work activities became disengaged employees. As supported by Saks (2019), the existence of positive workplace relationships impacts the psychological conditions that reduce perceived stress and enhance employee engagement. As Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) analysed in their research, the implementation of policies to mitigate the level of stress and burnout, such as the introduction of training plans or labour conciliation measures will improve employees' commitment level towards their tasks and organisation (Blanco-González et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be understood that work stress is one of the main factors which impact the level of employees' commitment and productivity (Irawanto et al., 2021). As previously stated, a lack of resources or preparation increases the level of perceived job stress, reducing employees' engagement with their company and their efforts to try their best (Anees et al., 2021). Considering these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5) Higher job stress levels contribute to decreased employee engagement.

The model to be tested in the empirical study is presented with the literature review and the proposed hypotheses (Figure 1). The model graphically shows that CSR has a direct and negative effect on anxiety (H1) and job stress (H2) and that CSR has a direct effect on employee engagement (H3). Anxiety (H4) and job stress (H5) have a direct and negative effect on employee engagement.

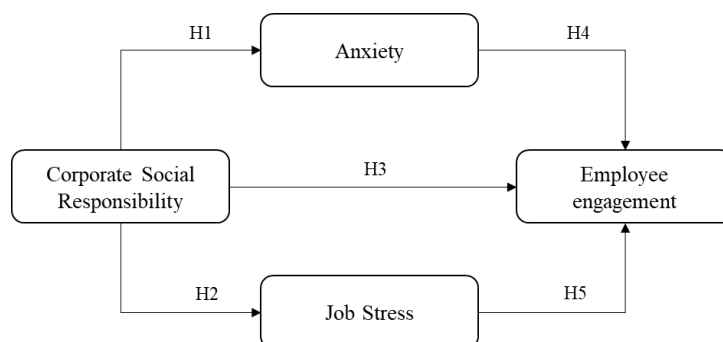


Fig. 1 - Proposed model. Source: own research

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample and data collection

The context of this study was developed for academics working at Spanish public universities for different reasons. The social responsibility of universities consists not only of responsibly developing their teaching and research work, but they also have to identify the needs of the actors, generate knowledge, work to improve the quality of life of people and provide solutions to global problems (Blanco-Gonzalez et al., 2020). Among these problems, various national and international studies (Fundación SM, 2023; Red Educación y Solaridad, 2023), revealed that approximately 40% of teachers suffer from anxiety, depression, and physical and mental exhaustion while carrying out their work, which has caused a loss of employee engagement. In this way, university social responsibility strategies can propose two perspectives: first, they evaluate the effect that university activity has on the development of society through its impact on the mental health of its employees (anxiety and job stress), and second, they evaluate the management of strategies that ensure the development and adaptation of the institution. Furthermore, Spanish public universities operate in a strongly competitive environment, so their long-term survival depends on the adequate management of social and mental health actions that guarantee employee engagement. (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

To collect data, a pre-test was initially launched at a Spanish public university in Madrid to check whether the questions were understood. Subsequently, the final data were collected between September and November 2023 through an online questionnaire distributed by a foundation specialising in higher education; 552 surveys were received, of which 19 were partially completed and eliminated from the data. Control variables related to academic staff, professional category, and region of the university were incorporated into the questionnaire. In addition, IP address control was established to prevent the same user from sending more than one response. Finally, 533 responses were

obtained from higher-education academics. Table 1 shows the information related to the profiles of the samples collected in the first part of the questionnaire.

The evaluation of data using PLS requires a minimum sample size, with the objective of the method being robust and the results valid (Hair & Alamer, 2022). Authors such as Chin & Newsted (1999) suggested using the power method instead of the traditional method in 10 cases (Barclay et al., 1995), due to its low precision. G*Power 3.1.9.6 software was used to obtain the minimum sample size necessary for sufficient test power (Faul et al., 2007), as recommended by Hair et al. (2018). The results required a minimum sample size of 114 cases for a power test of 80% (Cohen, 1988). Our research meets these requirements by obtaining 533 valid cases, which shows that a power test is superior to the minimum required.

Tab. 1 - Respondents' Profile. Source: own research

Characteristics	Frequency	Percent (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	236	44%
Female	297	56%
<i>Age</i>		
26-35	174	33%
36-45	158	30%
46-55	123	23%
Above 55	78	15%
<i>Are your Academic staff?</i>		
Yes	533	100%
No	-	
<i>What is your professional category?</i>		
Lecturer	233	44%
Senior Lecturer	176	33%
Professor	124	23%
<i>Region of your university</i>		
Com. Marid	127	23%
Com. Valencia	78	14%
Cataluña	73	14%
Andalucía	66	12%
Pais Vasco	54	10%
Galicia	41	8%
Extremadura	34	6%
Castilla Leon	23	4%
Aragon	19	4%
Others	18	3%
Total Sample	533	100%

3.2 Measurement scales

The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) scale utilised in this study is an adaptation of the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards for sustainability reports, as used by Del-Castillo-Feito et al. (2022). This scale has been widely and successfully applied in the literature, demonstrating its reliability and validity. It was meticulously developed by the

authors and has been proven effective in both employee engagement and mental health contexts. The original scale used by Del Castillo-Feito et al. (2022) consists of 14 items. We used the method described by Del-Castillo-Feito et al. (2022). with a reduced version of the items, a total of 9 items. The items of the original scale were simplified because, owing to a pre-test carried out on 50 participants, some items were redundant. This approach is consistent with that of Cachón-Rodríguez et al. (2022) who used a reduced scale of six items.

To measure anxiety, we employed the nine-item scale used by Kemp et al. (2021). Kemp's original scale has been widely adopted in other studies within the consumer sector (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2024). We adapted these items to suit the educational and employment contexts. For instance, "When I buy in this supermarket, I feel anxious" (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2024) and we adapt it to "When I work, I feel anxious".

To assess job stress, we employed the six-item scale used by Irawanto et al. (2021) which originated from the framework developed by Lait & Wallace (2002). Additionally, to evaluate employee engagement in higher education institutions, we applied the three-item measure established by (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2022).

Table 2 presents the measurements of the proposed variables, which were performed using items adapted from previous studies. Likert-type scales (1-5) were used for all items, where 1 indicated strongly disagree and 5 indicated strongly agree.

Tab. 2 - Items used. Source: own research

Construct	Item	Description	Source
Corporate social responsibility	CSR1	My university develops work-life balance plans	Del Castillo-Feito et al. (2022)
	CSR2	My university accepts flexible relationships to adapt to situations of age, gender or disability of its stakeholders	
	CSR3	My university develops initiatives to improve the mental well-being of its stakeholders	
	CSR4	My university supports diversity by gender, age, social stratum or abilities, among its stakeholders	
	CSR5	My university promotes ethical and/or social values in its activities	
	CSR6	My university investigates, informs, and controls the quality of the services offered	
	CSR7	My university carries out studies that analyze the impacts of the university on the local community	
	CSR8	My university supports social programs	
	CSR9	My university develops policies to foster dialogue and information relationships between different stakeholders	

Anxiety	ANX1	When I work, I feel anxious	Kemp et al. (2014, 2021)
	ANX2	When I work, I feel stressed out	
	ANX3	When I work, I feel nervous	
	ANX4	When I work, I feel worried	
	ANX5	When I work, I feel uneasy	
	ANX6	When I work, I feel scared	
	ANX7	When I work, I feel fearful	
	ANX8	When I work, I feel alarmed	
	ANX9	When I work, I feel panicked	
Job Stress	STR1	I am discouraged about my work	Irawanto et al., (2021); Lait & Wallace (2002)
	STR2	I feel that things are out of my control at work	
	STR3	I feel overwhelmed by my work	
	STR4	I feel like giving up on my job	
	STR5	I feel unable to get out from under my work	
	STR6	I feel frustrated with my work	
Engagement	ENG1	I feel that I am part of my university	Cachón-Rodríguez et al. (2019, 2022)
	ENG2	I consider the success of my university as my success	
	ENG3	I feel proud of the positive opinions about my university	

3.3. Statistical analysis PLS-SEM

Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) was used for data processing and hypothesis testing. PLS-SEM is a multivariate analysis method whose main purpose is the prediction of dependent variables through the estimation of *path models* and is mainly designed for confirmatory and explanatory studies (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Henseler, 2018). Data processing using PLS-SEM involves assessing the measurement model (Chin, 1998). Second, structural model analysis must be performed to confirm the proposed relationships. Specifically, we use the software SmartPLS4 V.4.0.8.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Assessment of measurement model

Assessing the measurement model of the estimated constructs, type-A (reflective) is developed through different statistics: a) examining the loadings and the p-value of the items; b) estimating construct reliability; c) evaluating average variance extracted; and d) checking discriminant validity through the Fornell-Larcker criterion and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

4.1.1 Reliability and convergent validity

Examining the loadings of individual items requires a value greater than 0.7. To estimate the constructs' reliability, Cronbach's Alpha (CA), Composite Reliability (CR) and rho_A statistic, values above 0.7 are considered adequate (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). For the average variance, the extracted values were above 0.5, indicating convergent validity

(Chin, 2010). As shown in Table 3, both reliability and convergent validity were within the indicated cutoff values.

Tab. 3 - Reliability and validity. Source: own research

Construct	Item	Loadings	CA	rho_A	CR	AVE
Corporate social responsibility	CSR1	0.710	0.893	0.897	0.914	0.541
	CSR2	0.734				
	CSR3	0.795				
	CSR4	0.762				
	CSR5	0.803				
	CSR6	0.752				
	CSR7	0.724				
	CSR8	0.701				
	CSR9	0.774				
Anxiety	ANX1	0.820	0.948	0.953	0.956	0.707
	ANX2	0.819				
	ANX3	0.865				
	ANX4	0.843				
	ANX5	0.850				
	ANX6	0.844				
	ANX7	0.876				
	ANX8	0.827				
	ANX9	0.822				
Job Stress	STR1	0.774	0.904	0.912	0.925	0.674
	STR2	0.842				
	STR3	0.832				
	STR4	0.789				
	STR5	0.869				
	STR6	0.817				
Engagement	ENG1	0.868	0.878	0.882	0.925	0.803
	ENG2	0.910				
	ENG3	0.910				

4.1.2 Discriminant validity

To evaluate discriminant validity using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, the square AVE roots of each latent variable should be greater than the correlations with the rest of the latent variables of the model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). However, Henseler *et al.* (2016) developed simulation studies to demonstrate that discriminant lack of validity is best detected using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). The HTMT ratio helped more rigorously confirm that all constructs achieved discriminant validity and that none of the confidence intervals contained a value of one, suggesting that all variables were empirically different. To check the discriminant validity HTMT ratio, previous studies have suggested a value less than 0.85 or 0.90 (Cachón-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2022; Kline, 2015). As displayed in Table 4, all constructs meet the discriminant validity based on the HTMT0.85 criterion, so they are different from each other. In addition, all correlations

were smaller than the square root of AVEs, suggesting that none of the constructs presented validity problems according to the Fornell-Larcker criterion.

Tab. 4 - Discriminant validity. Source: own research

Construct	Anxiety	Corporate social responsibility	Engagement	Job Stress
Anxiety	0.841	0.202	0.351	0.715
Corporate social responsibility	-0.191	0.736	0.627	0.247
Engagement	-0.324	0.560	0.896	0.317
Job Stress	0.654	-0.231	-0.288	0.821

Note: Values above the diagonal elements are HTMT0.85 values. The diagonal elements are the square roots of the AVEs. Values below the diagonal elements represent correlations between the constructs.

4.2 Assessment of the structural model

Once the reliability and validity of the measurement instrument were evaluated, the validity of the structural model was also evaluated. To do so, we examine a) collinearity through the invariance inflation factor (structural VIF), b) the size and significance of the *path* coefficients, c) the R^2 coefficient of determination, d) effect size f^2 , and e) the Q^2 coefficient (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

With multicollinearity, the cut-off value of the structural VIF most conservative is 3.3 or less (Hair et al., 2019). Table 5 shows that the correlations of the constructs are adequate to the range of scores indicated, so there are no collinearity problems.

Tab. 5 - VIF results. Source: own research

Construct	Anxiety	Engagement	Job Stress
Anxiety	N/A	1.753	N/A
Corporate social responsibility	1.000	1.059	1.000
Job Stress	N/A	1.784	N/A

N/A= Not applicable

Using bootstrapping to assess the significance of coefficients path through a re-sampling of 5,000 subsamples as recommended by Hair et al. (2019), Figure 2 shows that corporate social responsibility is negative and significantly influences anxiety (H1; $\beta=-0.191$; $p<0.01$) and job stress (H2; $\beta=-0.231$; $p<0.001$). The direct effect of corporate social responsibility on engagement revealed a positive and significant influence (H3; $\beta=0.512$; $p<0.001$). The direct effect of anxiety negatively influences engagement (H4; $\beta=-0.200$; $p<0.01$). Finally, the results also show a negative effect of job stress on employee engagement (H5; $\beta=-0.329$; $p<0.001$).

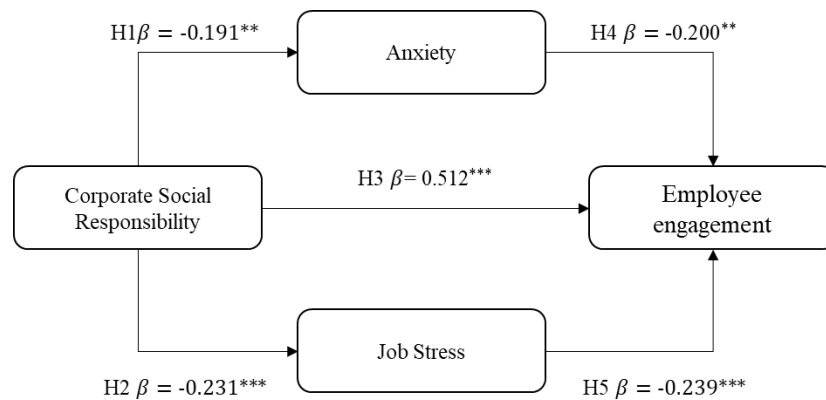


Fig. 2 - Proposed model. Hypothesis Testing. Source: own research

Researchers have proposed reporting confidence intervals and t-values. Confidence intervals have the advantage of being completely non-parametric and are not based on any type of distribution (Henseler et al., 2009). Table 6 does not include a zero value for any confidence interval of the path coefficients; therefore, the proposed hypotheses are accepted.

Tab. 6 - Hypothesis testing. Source: own research

Hypothesis	Standardize d beta	t-value (Bootstra)	Confidence Intervals		f ²
			5.0%	95%	
H1: Corporate social responsibility → Anxiety	-0.191**	2.992	-0.303	-0.092	0.038
H2: Corporate social responsibility → Job Stress	-0.231***	3.489	-0.344	-0.126	0.056
H3: Corporate social responsibility → Employee Engagement	0.512***	9.896	0.428	0.597	0.389
H4: Anxiety → Employee Engagement	-0.200**	2.738	-0.321	-0.081	0.036
H5: Stress → Employee Engagement	-0.239***	3.609	-0.355	-0.130	0.058

R²: 0.037 (anxiety), 0.053 (stress), 0.363 (engagement).

* p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001 (based on t (4,999), one-tailed test)

Once it was verified that there were no collinearity problems and that the path coefficients were significant, the determination coefficient R² was examined as a measure of predictive power. The R² coefficient represents the variance explained by the predictor variables of the endogenous construct. In social sciences, values between 0 and 0.10 are considered weak, 0.11 to 0.30 modest, 0.30 to 0.50 moderate, and >0.50 substantial (Hair & Alamer, 2022). As shown in Table 6, anxiety and stress had weak values, while engagement had strong explanatory power owing to its predictors. Furthermore, the coefficient f² evaluates the effect of an exogenous variable on explaining an endogenous variable in terms of R². The guidelines for assessing f² values higher than 0.02, 0.15 and 0.35 depict small, medium, and large f² effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). Table 6 shows that

the effect of CSR on anxiety and stress is small whilst the impact on engagement was significant, with anxiety and job stress exhibiting small effects on engagement.

Recent advances in PLS-SEM have introduced the PLSpredict procedure into SmartPLS4, enabling evaluation of the predictive nature of our model by following an out-of-sample procedure (Shmueli et al., 2019). To develop this procedure, the first step is to determine a) the number of folds or k subsets of data of identical size and b) the number of repetitions. Regarding the number of folds (a), a subset of data with a minimum size of $N=30$ is recommended to obtain minimum statistical power. Shmueli et al. (2019) suggested dividing the sample into 10 subgroups (i.e. $k = 10$) to maintain PLSpredict result precision when meeting the minimum size recommendation ($N = 30$). Given our sample size of 533 data points, we established $k=10$, ensuring 30 cases per section. These folds were part of a cross-validation process that was repeated k times, and each fold was used once as a test sample. Regarding repetitions (b), 10 repetitions ($r=10$) were implemented as suggested (Shmueli et al., 2019).

The second step involved calculating the prediction index Q^2 for all the indicators of the main dependent variable. In the proposed model, employee engagement served as the final dependent variable. When the values of Q^2 are positive, the third step involves evaluating whether the prediction errors are skewed for all indicators (Cepeda-Carrión et al., 2023). For skewness measures exceeding one, the root mean square error (RMSE) should be used; if it is less than one, the mean absolute error (MAE) should be used. The final predictive assessment examines whether the prediction error of PLS-SEM is lower than that of the linear regression (LM). If the prediction error of PLS-SEM is lower than that of LM for all indicators, the model has a high predictive character; if the prediction error is lower for most indicators, the model has a medium predictive character; if the prediction error is in a minority of indicators, the model has low predictive power; and if the prediction error is not lower for any of the indicators, the model lacks predictive power (Hair & Alamer, 2022; Shmueli et al., 2019). As can be seen in Table 7, all employee engagement indicators show positive Q^2 values and all prediction errors for each engagement indicator (RMSE must be considered) are lower for PLS than for LM (PLS-LM RMSE column data). Therefore, the model demonstrated high predictive power.

Tab.7 - Predictive results. Source: own research

	Q²	Skewness	PLS-SEM_RMSE	PLS-SEM_MAE	LM_RMSE	LM_MAE	PLS-LM_RMSE
ENG1	0.198	-0.439	1.06	0.836	1.068	0.851	-0.008
ENG2	0.252	-0.429	1.164	0.944	1.173	0.922	-0.009
ENG3	0.281	-0.292	1.121	0.905	1.145	0.909	-0.002

Note: RMSE considered

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Theoretical discussion

Corporations have recognised the importance of knowing and responding to social demands on CSR matters to improve their relationships with their stakeholders, particularly, with their employees. This internal stakeholder group relevance is critical since they are present in every daily activity and linked with the organisation's performance (Blanco-Gonzalez et al., 2020). Moreover, considering the difficulty of attracting and retaining talent, this approach should be a priority for human resources

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managers to build internal engagement (Cachón-Rodríguez et al., 2022). Having high employee engagement levels is a critical factor for an organisation's success and performance, as they correlate with increased job satisfaction whilst reducing turnover and internal issues or conflicts diminish (Book et al., 2019).

Mental health and well-being have emerged as critical topics for society that necessitate attention within CSR initiatives. Individuals with better psychological well-being and mental health are normally more engaged in their jobs and show better performance (Salas-Vallina et al., 2021). Consequently, organisations developing CSR initiatives to mitigate mental health issues, such as job stress and anxiety, will have more engaged employees (Anees et al., 2021; Gutiérrez-Broncano et al., 2024).

Based on these arguments, the main objectives of this research were to analyse the impact of applying social responsibility initiatives on improving the mental health of employees and comprehend the impact of CSR initiatives, as well as reduced job stress and anxiety, on the level of employee engagement. The first objective was to identify the exploratory nature of the proposed model. An additional objective was to test the predictive capacity of the previously mentioned model.

The results of the structural model highlight the following: All five proposed hypotheses were confirmed through this study. First, hypothesis (H1) testing the impact of developing social CSR initiatives on reducing anxiety, was confirmed. These results are in line with previous research, such as Yousaf et al. (2016), Kim et al. (2017), Tamm et al. (2010), and Wang et al. (2020), who agree on the importance of social responsibility in improving employees' well-being and reducing their anxiety levels. The results of additional research papers were also confirmed through our study, such as the work developed by Khamisa et al. (2015) and Cachón-Rodríguez et al., (2025), whose research highlighted how the lack of social policies within a corporation increases negative mental health outcomes for employees.

The second hypothesis (H2) analyses the effect of applying CSR policies on reducing job stress. This relationship was also accepted, showing that a significant negative relationship existed between both variables. This conclusion was confirmed through the research developed by Galbreath (2006) and Collier & Esteban (2007), who demonstrated the importance of developing social responsibility policies to improve employees' mental stability. Also, the results achieved by Celma (2018) and Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) were confirmed in this research since both groups of academics also supported the link between applying social initiatives within human resources management to decrease their perceived job stress level.

Stakeholder and social identity theories were confirmed through the approval of both hypotheses, measuring the link between CSR initiatives and improvement in mental health variables (H1: anxiety; H2: job stress). Through stakeholder theory, organisations understand the need to respond to diverse stakeholders, such as employees, and improve their situation, while in the case of social identity theory, an employee's self-concept appears to be affected by how their organisation considers them, reducing their levels of anxiety or stress.

Regarding the third hypothesis (H3), which measures the relationship between CSR policies and employee engagement, the results confirm a positive and significant link between the two constructs. Our research aligns with previous research that measures the importance of CSR initiatives in enhancing the level of employee engagement. This includes scholarly work by Whelan & Fink (2016) which focused on the importance of

sustainability in reducing turnover, Gaudencio et al. (2017), Stojanović et al. (2020) and Lee & Chen (2018) which showed how the implementation of CSR activities was relevant for employee commitment. Cachón-Rodríguez et al. (2022) demonstrated how responsible human resources management enhances employee identification and subsequent employee engagement. Del-Castillo-Feito et al. (2022) demonstrated the importance of applying CSR in human resources management to receive employees' support and commitment. Moreover, the Theory of Social Identification was confirmed, highlighting that employee commitment is achieved through the connection between individual beliefs and organisational values.

The results of the fourth hypothesis (H4), which measured the relationship between high anxiety levels and engagement, confirmed the existence of a negative and significant link, which means that the higher the anxiety level of employees, the less engaged they will be in their organisation. Based on these conclusions, previous research papers and several other theories were confirmed. Hypothesis 4 is aligned with the work developed by academics such as Han & Hyun (2019), who focused on studying how improving mental health issues impacted employee loyalty; Hakanen et al. (2008), who analysed how mental burnout reduced employees' fulfilment and thus reduced their level of commitment; and Irawanto et al. (2021) and Kemp et al. (2021), who analysed how employees' anxiety level during the Covid-19 pandemic decreased job satisfaction and involvement.

The validation of hypothesis (H4) provided empirical support for the two theories' additional framework. First, expectancy theory is confirmed because it shows the link between employees' negative perceptions or threats about the future and a decrease in their engagement or connection with the organisation (Omar et al., 2021). Reactance Theory is also supported by our results since it considers that any perceived threat to an employee's freedom to behave in a certain manner results in a negative psychological reaction (Brehm & Brehm, 2013), which arises as a barrier to becoming involved and committed to their work.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis (H5) testing the relationship between high job stress levels and engagement was also confirmed as a negative and significant link was identified, showing that the higher the perceived stress level, the less engaged the employees were. This confirmation was also supported by other academics in the field such as De Witte & De Cuyper (2016) and Anees et al. (2021) whose work showed that high stress levels could influence job performance, satisfaction and commitment; Anthony-McMann et al. (2017) considered that employees who felt stressed in their jobs became disengaged employees; Kim & Von Dem Knesebeck (2016) considered the existence of a positive workplace climate critical in the aim of reducing perceived stress and increase employees' commitment levels; or Popa et al. (2022) whose work considered that introducing initiatives to mitigate burnout and job stress had a clear impact on employee engagement levels.

Through this accepted hypothesis (H5), social exchange theory received additional validation as the findings demonstrate that organisational commitment to employees' mental well-being facilitates a reciprocal exchange that enhances engagement levels.

5.2 Practical Implications

The results of this study have the following practical and managerial implications. Organisations need to develop CSR initiatives focused on employees since these types of

policies increase their level of engagement with their enterprises which translates into improved performance.

Corporations need to not only develop generic CSR policies but also focus on designing specific social initiatives that improve employees' well-being and mental health. According to our results, the development of social policies can reduce employees' anxiety and job stress levels, which will increase their degree of commitment to the organisation.

Several CSR initiatives could be useful for improving employee mental well-being. For example, employees value the inclusion of conciliation policies and social programmes to create more flexible schedules and a balanced life between work and time with family or friends. These policies could have a direct impact on reducing job stress and anxiety. Moreover, it is critical to promote dialogue and positive relationships across internal stakeholders because the quality of the workplace climate can affect employees' mental well-being and belongingness inside an organisation. Additionally, the type of leadership applied by managers could influence the psychological state of employees. Therefore, it is important to enhance ethical behaviours within the organisation to reduce the level of anxiety and stress.

Furthermore, internal communication can be a relevant tool for improving employees' mental states in corporations. Managers should consider the information to communicate with their internal stakeholders and offer the necessary tools and training to help them feel prepared to develop their required tasks. Corporate managers must continue developing and monitoring the outcomes of these activities.

Through a better psychological state, employees become more committed and work-driven which improves their outcomes. Thus, managers must monitor their employees' mental health through the development of satisfaction or work climate surveys, to identify and reduce (if necessary) their levels of anxiety and stress, since, as proven by our research results, a decrease in these two negative mental states will increase employee engagement and the degree of involvement within their organisation.

6. Conclusion, limitations and futures lines

Contemporary academic literature emphasises the need to investigate the impact of CSR on employees' mental health and engagement. These findings indicate that CSR initiatives significantly reduce anxiety and job stress while enhancing employee engagement. Additionally, they align with those of previous studies, validating the stakeholder and social identity theories. Specifically, the research demonstrates that CSR initiatives improve employees' mental well-being and commitment, highlighting the importance of targeted social policies. Furthermore, higher anxiety levels were found to negatively impact engagement, emphasising the need for organisations to address mental health issues to foster a more committed workforce. This study highlights the importance of managing social responsibility to mitigate negative emotional states and enhance employee engagement, thereby providing valuable insights for organisational managers to improve their performance and benefit society. In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of developing CSR initiatives that focus on enhancing employee engagement and performance. Specific social initiatives can reduce anxiety and job stress, thereby improving employee well-being and commitment. Effective CSR policies include flexible schedules, conciliation programs, and the promotion of a positive workplace climate. Ethical leadership and clear internal communication are crucial for reducing anxiety and stress, leading to increased employee engagement and productivity.
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Managers should continuously monitor and address employees' mental health to foster a committed and productive workforce.

Several limitations of this study warrant consideration, along with future research directions, the following aspects should be considered. First, the sample comprised academic staff from Spanish Universities; therefore, future researchers could expand the analysis by introducing additional internal stakeholders and comparing results. Moreover, external stakeholders could be added to the sample, and a multigroup comparison could be developed to identify whether internal and external perceptions differ.

Moreover, this study has focused on the higher education sector in Spain; thus, future academics could improve their knowledge on the topic of CSR and mental health by applying a similar analysis to other sectors to develop a multigroup analysis to compare the achieved results. Additionally, the introduction of individuals from other countries could also improve knowledge in the mental health field by analysing whether there are any relevant differences when considering different cultures.

An additional limitation pertains to the singular consideration of CSR as a determining factor for reducing anxiety and stress levels. Future researchers could broaden their scope and introduce additional variables, such as relational marketing constructs, to expand the understanding and knowledge of internal activities that could improve employees' mental health and well-being.

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