



## Zeitgeist or chameleon? A quantitative analysis of CSR definitions



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 7 February 2016

Received in revised form

3 May 2016

Accepted 25 June 2016

Available online 9 July 2016

#### Keywords:

Corporate social responsibility

Definitions

Social network analysis

Co-word analysis

Review

### ABSTRACT

Despite its increasing relevance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) remains hobbled by problems, variously charged as being chameleon, vacuous or an utterly meaningless concept. One reason is the absence of an agreed upon normative basis underpinning CSR. This is in large part due to the concept lacking a universally accepted definition. This paper explores how the concept of CSR has evolved over time drawing from 110 definitions of the construct. Using co-word analysis of definitions from 1953 to 2014, the study maps how the structure of the definitions has evolved during the field's historical development. The research uncovers the key terms underpinning the phenomenon, the centrality of these terms as well as mapping their interrelationships and evolution. The findings suggest that, despite the profusion and definitional heterogeneity over the six decades of the development of the field, there are six recurrent, enduring dimensions that underpin the CSR concept. These dimensions are economic, social, ethical, stakeholders, sustainability and voluntary. This paper makes several contributions to the academic literature. The systematic, quantitative analysis of definitions brings an objectivity that previous qualitative bibliometric analyses of CSR have lacked. The time period selected is substantially longer than previous analyses and captures the complete historical evolution of the concept. Moreover, the analysis provides the basis for the development of a new, comprehensive, yet concise, definition of CSR that captures all six of the recurring dimensions underpinning the concept.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the 1950s, there has been a “great acceleration” in the human imprint on the natural world (Steffen et al., 2015). There have been dramatic shifts in key earth systems trends, such as emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG), and socio-economic trends, such as urban population growth (Steffen et al., 2015). These changes have helped drive increased attention on global sustainable development.

Commonly defined as “meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987), sustainable development is a broad concept that addresses economic, environmental, and social issues. In recognition of the need to take concrete action on sustainable development, the United Nations recently adopted 17

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, given its broad scope, it is clear that sustainable development cannot be addressed by the public sector alone.

Private sector contributions to sustainable development are essential (SDG Compass, 2015). Many corporations have committed to working towards sustainable development and a number of industry associations, such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), have been established to coordinate action in this regard. As a tangible manifestation of these commitments, many corporations have voluntarily implemented corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. CSR is now viewed by many as the key corporate contribution to sustainable development (Kolk and Van Tulder, 2010). In fact, the world's most widely recognized social responsibility standard explains that “an overarching objective of an organization's social responsibility should be to contribute to sustainable development” (ISO 26000, 2010, p. 9).

CSR has become a modern corporate mantra. A range of internal and external stakeholders now widely encourage firms to behave responsibly in a variety of respects, such as the use of resources,

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treatment of employees, community engagement, and distribution of profits (Asif et al., 2013). CSR is thus attracting increasing attention in both the academic and practitioner literature. For example, based on a review of 40 years of research in strategic management, Cummings and Daellenbach (2009) identified CSR as one of the five key areas of growing interest. It is recognized, however, that the implications of CSR are not limited to strategic considerations. CSR can be approached from a normative perspective, as is often the case in work building on stakeholder theory. CSR can also adopt both short (tactical) and long-term (strategic) orientations (Bansal et al., 2015).

One of the key challenges in applying CSR from both a tactical and strategic perspective is a lack of agreement on how it is defined (Dahlsrud, 2008). Given the great variety of definitions and the fact that they have changed over time, CSR has been described as being a “chameleon concept” (Gond and Moon, 2011). As Gond and Moon (2011, p. 3) explain, while the evolution of CSR usually reflects “sound conceptual developments [...] or changes in managerial practices and visions, they also reveal the zeitgeist that accompany the cycle of consulting and managerial fads and fashions”. The amorphous nature of CSR definitions is problematic for several reasons.

Issues relative to the definition of a phenomenon fundamentally hinder the proper delimitation of what to study (Schulze and Gedajlovic, 2010). Indeed, only when one has a clear definition of a concept, or at least its core underpinnings, can one truly understand its essence. This is needed to provide a basis for meaningful empirical analyses and to build a solid theoretical framework (Pérez et al., 2007). Whitehouse (2003, p. 300) argues that the absence of a consensus around a definition is a major debility of the field, explaining that “the apparent failure by corporate social responsibility to fulfill its potential in remedying the adverse impact of corporate activity is due, in part, to the failure on the part of its advocates to establish a universally accepted definition of the term”. As one illustration of the problem this presents, some have argued that the definitional problems associated with CSR make the efforts to find statistical associations between CSR and profits highly problematic (Burke and Logsdon, 1996). Additionally, the use of different definitions makes it difficult to compare the empirical results from different studies. Measurement problems such as these continue to limit the understanding of the strategic implications of CSR. Moreover, the fact that so many definitions of CSR have been proposed makes even theoretical development of the concept difficult.

The lack of agreement on a definition of CSR suggests the need for further analysis in order to systematically study the elements that form its core. A profusion of definitions is healthy in the early stages of a field's development, but can cause confusion once a field matures (Ahi and Searcy, 2013). The fact that CSR has been widely studied since at least the 1950s (e.g., Bowen, 1953) strongly suggests there is a need to develop a broadly accepted definition of the concept. The current fuzziness of the concept continues to hinder the development and implementation of tactics and strategies to advance CSR goals. Introducing some clarity on the core dimensions of CSR could yield substantial implications for academia, industry, and society.

The purpose of this paper is to conduct a comprehensive, systematic, and quantitative analysis of definitions of CSR spanning the historical evolution of the concept. This purpose is supported by three key research questions:

**RQ1.** : What are the key dimensions in CSR definitions?

**RQ2.** : What are the relationships between the key dimensions in CSR definitions?

**RQ3.** : How have the key dimensions, and their relationships, in CSR definitions evolved over time?

Addressing these questions will provide evidence as to whether the CSR concept is fuzzy, unclear, and contested (e.g., Amaeshi and Adi, 2007; Okoye, 2009) or if there is some as yet unrevealed stability in the core dimensions over time.

The underlying rationale for this study is that definitions have consequences. This has been recognized by a number of authors. For example, Baden and Harwood (2013) highlighted how the terminology used to define CSR is critical in revealing thinking on the phenomenon. A healthy and sustainable future of CSR as both a research and practice domain depends on the establishment of a strong definitional foundation. This paper makes several contributions to research and practice. First, the systematic, quantitative analysis of definitions brings an objectivity that previous qualitative bibliometric analyses of CSR have lacked. Such an analysis provides a stronger basis for identifying the core dimensions of the concept, their relationships, and how they have evolved over time. Second, the time period selected (1953–2014) is substantially longer than previous analyses. This is important because this study is the first to capture the complete historical evolution of CSR definitions. Third, the analysis provides the basis for the development of a new, comprehensive, yet concise, definition of CSR that captures all six of the recurring dimensions underpinning the concept. This definition provides the common basis needed to move research and practice in CSR forward from both a tactical and strategic perspective. The study also provides a basis for future research on studying commonalities and differences in CSR from a cultural perspective. It is important to stress that the purpose of the study was not to provide a literature review. Over the course of CSR's evolution, there have been a number of thoughtful reviews that map the field (see, for example, Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Baden and Harwood, 2013; Carroll and Shabana, 2010; Garriga and Melé, 2004; Gond and Moon, 2011). Rather, this study puts under the microscope the various definitions that have been proposed in the literature by academics, CSR advocates, and business groups over six decades so that they may be unpacked and analysed in a structured way.

## 2. The definitional challenge of CSR

Ambiguity regarding what CSR really means has been recognized for some time. For instance, Zenisek (1979) noted the dearth of both empirical and theoretical support for several definitions and models of CSR. Despite over six decades of research in the area, little progress seems to have been made with respect to arriving at a generally accepted definition, or even what to count as “CSR” (Campbell, 2007). One of the key consequences of this is an “increasing usage” of different definitions and “an ever growing number of publications”, doing the same, with the result being that “the meaning of the term has become increasingly blurred” (Fifka, 2009, p. 212).

The lack of a consensus around what CSR means has therefore resulted in challenges in the development, implementation, and reporting of meaningful socially responsible practices. For example, Nielsen and Thomsen (2007, p. 25) point out that “the lack of a common understanding and terminology in the area of CSR has made it difficult for organizations to develop consistent strategies for reporting on CSR in terms of genres, media, rhetorical strategies, etc.”. This was reflected in a study by Searcy et al. (2016), which highlighted the lack of comparability of indicators disclosed in CSR reports. Carroll (1999, p. 282) comments on the very real practical implications of the lack of consensus around a workable definition of CSR, noting that “... for managers to engage in CSR they needed

to have (a) a basic definition of CSR, (b) an understanding/ enumeration of the issues for which a social responsibility existed (or, in modern terms, stakeholders to whom the firm had a responsibility, relationship or dependency), and (c) a specification of the philosophy of responsiveness to the issues". Some authors attribute a certain arbitrariness with regards to concepts and definitions stemming from a lack of formalism and rigour of sustainability science (Baumgartner, 2011).

There have been some attempts at mapping the thinking in the field, including the exploration of terminology (e.g., Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Baden and Harwood, 2013; Garriga and Melé, 2004). However, these analyses were not based on an in-depth study of the definitions themselves. Other studies, such as Gond and Moon (2011) and Hopkins (2011), have provided definitional overviews, but were not conducted in a systematic, quantitative manner. There are also a multitude of studies in which the authors include a section in their research discussing CSR, often leading to the proposal of their own working definition of the concept. This helps explain, at least in part, the large number of definitions we have today.

One attempt at using definitions as a unit of analysis was that of Dahlsrud (2008). The study focused on an analysis of 37 definitions of CSR covering the period of 1980–2003. Using an emergent coding scheme of the definitions (a type of content analysis), Dahlsrud proceeded to identify five core dimensions. While this study marked an important first step in using definitions as the unit of analysis, Dahlsrud (2008) vastly underestimated the true number of published definitions of CSR. This was, in large part, due to the relatively limited time period covered by the study. As a result, Dahlsrud (2008) missed some of the most important definitions that have shaped the field, and many academically derived definitional constructs were thus not included (Carroll and Shabana, 2010, p. 89). Moreover, the dimensions in Dahlsrud's study were identified using Google citations, with no research attesting to their validity (Carroll and Shabana, 2010). Another relevant analysis was that by De Bakker et al. (2005), though it was not based on definitions of the concept. De Bakker et al. performed a bibliometric analysis of approximately thirty years of research to provide an overview of the intellectual structure of CSR and Corporate Social Performance. Word frequency and co-word analysis were employed to analyze the titles of papers in their database to uncover meaningful structures, including major authors, journals, citation patterns, and epistemological orientations. The study provided support for both progression and "variegation" of the CSR concept. The authors concluded that the field of research has potentially more to offer than it currently does, providing further support for the definitional analysis presented in this paper.

Notwithstanding the significance and contributions of the aforementioned studies' to the development of the field, they have at least two important limitations. First, by choosing a limited period and, therefore, a restricted number of definitions, it becomes difficult to obtain insight into the historical development of the CSR concept. This substantially limits the understanding of CSR's evolution and inhibits the identification of its core dimensions. Second, by engaging in qualitative analysis, definitional overviews (or even a concept's review), remain subjective and the analysis difficult to replicate. The quantitative approach based on bibliometric techniques used in this paper is intended to overcome these limitations. Such an approach limits subjectivity, is replicable, and at the same time enables a more exhaustive analysis of CSR definitions and their evolution, as well as serving as a guide to predict future trends.

Definitions capture the essence of a concept and should provide support for the operationalization of the same. It is relevant to note that the contested nature of CSR is not unique and this is

encountered in other domains as well. However, this is particularly problematic in the field of management (Koontz, 1980). Similar definitional problems are encountered, for instance, in social entrepreneurship (Choi and Majumdar, 2014), family business (Chrisman et al., 2005), and strategic management (Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin, 2012). Lack of definitional clarity has led to a call for a quantitative analysis of one of the essential elements that comprise a discipline's main *raison d'être* – a field's definitions (Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin, 2012, p. 164). Thus, it is essential not only to systematically analyse similarities and dissimilarities between definitions of CSR, but also to identify the strength of the consensus regarding these definitions, uncovering commonalities, if any. A quantitative approach based on bibliometric techniques, specifically content analysis, is both advisable and useful to achieve these goals.

### 3. Method

The approach used in this study involved three key stages (Fig. 1). First, the extant definitions of CSR formulated in the literature were collated, covering the period 1953–2014. This supported the development of a definitional database. The year 1953 was chosen as the starting point due to the publication of Howard Bowen's pioneering book that year, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. Bowen (1953, p. 6) was the first to attempt a definition of the concept, deeming social responsibility as the "... obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society". Second, the collected definitions were pre-processed in order to extract the conceptual elements of CSR based upon key terms and keywords. These conceptual elements formed the basis for further analysis. Finally, the third stage involved subjecting this database of key terms underpinning the different definitions to content analysis, where two types of analyses were combined, co-word and social network analysis.

Each stage is described in further detail below.

#### 3.1. Stage 1- constructing the definitional database

Creating a comprehensive database of CSR definitions is challenging due to a number of reasons, including the long history of the discipline; the wide range of journals in which CSR research is published; the difficulty of extracting explicit definitions within the identified publications; and the fact that a number of definitions

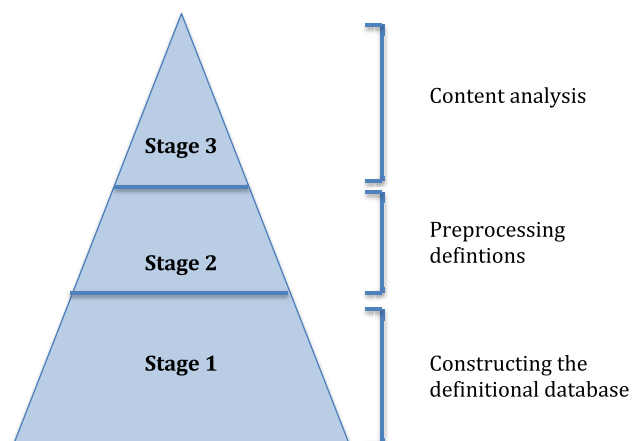


Fig. 1. Uncovering the structure of CSR definitions.

have been developed by non-academic sources. To address these challenges, a multi-pronged approach was employed to identify relevant definitions.

First, a definitional dataset was created based on a search in the scholarly database, Business Source Complete (EBSCO search engine). EBSCO was selected due to its wide coverage of management journals. EBSCO includes, but is not limited to, journals covered by the Thomson Reuters Journal Citation Reports (JCR). It was determined that focusing exclusively on journals listed in the JCR would be too restrictive and could exclude important definitions of CSR. The coverage in other databases, such as ProQuest and Google Scholar, were found to substantially overlap with the journals covered in EBSCO.

In the search of the academic articles, emphasis was placed on identifying articles that included an explicit definition of CSR. Key search terms entered into EBSCO therefore included “corporate social\*”, “\*social responsibility” and “CSR”. All identified papers were then manually reviewed and screened based on whether or not they offered an original definition of CSR. For the purposes of this study, a “definition” of CSR was defined as “an explanation of the meaning of” CSR or “a statement that describes what” CSR is (adapted from Merriam-Webster, 2016). What constituted a “definition” of CSR therefore required some judgment on the part of the researchers. Those definitions that merely cited a previously published definition of CSR were not included in the study. While there were a number of similar definitions, all variations identified in the search were included in order to capture nuances. Additionally, many scholars employ similar underlying notions in their definitions. The focus on terms directly associated with CSR was due to its widespread diffusion and because of its status as an overarching “umbrella construct” (Garriga and Melé, 2004; Gond and Moon, 2011). Limiting the search specifically to CSR, rather than related terms such as corporate citizenship (Matten and Crane, 2005), helped keep the study focused in an already large and fractured area. Finally, to limit bias in our analysis, we also excluded CSR definitions when they were used in specific contexts (e.g., CSR in the consumer realm, Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001); or when there were multiple but not very distinct definitions used by the same authors.

Second, the definitional dataset was enhanced with definitions extracted from books. Since Bowen's pioneering scholarship in 1953, books have had a tremendous impact in the discipline, influencing both the thinking and practice on CSR. The database was thus expanded beyond peer-reviewed journal articles to include unique definitions from textbooks and chapters therein. Since these do not appear in any hierarchically structured academic database, the inclusion of specific textbooks in this study had much to do with references thereof in the previously identified journal articles, as well as textbooks and handbooks considered classics in the field (e.g., Bowen, 1953; Heald, 1957; Johnson, 1971; Backman, 1975).

Finally, given the importance of CSR as a practical field, and the increasing involvement of non-academics in its promotion, including NGOs, business associations and governments, prominent non-academic definitions of CSR were also included in the database. These definitions were identified through a structured two stage-process. First, the reference lists of the previously identified academic articles and books were searched. Second, a Google search was conducted using the same key words as for the academic article search. A search of non-academic sources is inherently more difficult due to the much larger scope of the Google search engine. However, the reference lists of the previously identified books and articles provided a credible starting point. For instance, definitions proposed by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), a CEO-led organization

focused on organizing the business community globally to create a sustainable future for business, society, and the environment, were included in the database. These definitions are frequently referenced in academic outlets, whether journals or books, but are also high-profile in a more general Google search. Consider that, as of early 2016, WBCSD definitions had over 45,000 citations in Google Scholar. That example notwithstanding, note that the inclusion of the non-academic definitions of CSR is the main reason citations or citation frequency were not used as a part of the inclusion/exclusion criteria for this study.

Overall, the three sources (i.e., peer-reviewed journals, books, and non-academic publications) yielded a total of 110 definitions. The sources of the definitions are summarized in Table 1. A list of the definitions, and the corresponding scholars and sources, is provided in Annex A.

It is recognized that despite the rigour of the process described above that some relevant definitions may have been missed. That is perhaps inevitable given the broad scope and diffusion of CSR. That said, the database analysed in this paper represents the most comprehensive database of CSR definitions in the literature. For example, Dahlsrud's (2008) study encompassed 37 definitions of CSR “gathered through an extensive review of literature, which consisted of both journal articles and web pages” (page 3). Moreover, it is unlikely that any missed definitions would dramatically alter the analysis presented below.

### 3.1.1. Study time frame

Covering the most comprehensive time frame to date, the study focused on the CSR literature published since its inception (1953–2014). The definitional database was segmented into three periods, from: (i) 1953 to 1982, (ii) 1983 to 2002, and (iii) 2003 to 2014. In longitudinal studies employing co-word analysis, the first period examined is generally the longest in order to get a representative amount of published research, while the last period should afford a more accurate indication of future trends (Cobo et al., 2011). The appearance of stakeholder theory in the mainstream management literature and the financial scandals and bursting of the dot-com bubble, respectively, influenced the choice of the cut-off years (i.e., 1983 and 2003). These choices are discussed in greater detail later in the paper.

The decision to include definitions encompassing the entire evolution of CSR is crucial. This permits a truer comprehension of the evolution of key terms underpinning the CSR concept than is currently available in the literature. This provides greater insight into the development of the concept and the emergence of new key terms. Longer periods have the additional advantage of putting into perspective trends that may be less significant when viewed from a long-term lens.

### 3.2. Stage 2: pre-processing of definitions

This stage involved deconstructing the definitions and creating conceptual elements based upon key terms and keywords. Following the extraction of definitions from the bibliographic sources, the retrieved data was subjected to pre-processing consisting of the following steps:

**Table 1**  
Summary of the definitional database.

	Books (and chapters)	Journal articles	Non-Academic	Total
1953–1983	13	10	1	24
1983–2002	8	16	16	40
2003–2014	9	16	21	46
	<b>30</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>110</b>

1. First, words that appeared together but that were not distinct (i.e., those jointly constituting a single concept) were combined. Examples of these terms included “corporate-social-responsibility”, “human-resources”, “broad-social-ends”, “social-relationships”, “social-welfare”, and “financial-wealth”.
2. Second, all duplicate and misspelled items that represented the same idea or concept, but that appeared distinctly, were identified. Examples of these terms included “legal” and “law”.
3. Next, all word groups that would not be taken into account in any subsequent analyses were identified. These included determinants, prepositions, conjunctions or words and groups of words that have no meaning in themselves or that contribute little or nothing to the understanding of the CSR concept.
4. The last step in pre-processing consisted of creating categories of elements representing key terms (and keywords). These categories constituted the unit of analysis. Classifications are composed of categories, which are sets of entities sufficiently similar to each other and sufficiently different from other sets that are separately delimited (Chrisman et al., 1988). Thus, each conceptual element reflected a word family (key terms and keywords) or an umbrella concept. The conceptual elements and key terms are summarized in Table 2. For example, the “economic” category, which encompassed the largest number of words, was composed of key words related to “economic”, such as “gains”, “financial”, “profits”, etc (Table 2). The grouping process led to the identification of a total of sixteen conceptual elements extracted from the definitions over the entire time period.

In determining the conceptual elements, it was necessary to strike a balance between the categories being distinct enough,

without excessive overlap, and yet at the same time enabling the ability to capture nuances across groups and over time. In each of the three periods of analysis (i.e., 1953 to 1982, 1983 to 2002, and 2003 to 2014) the analysis was self-contained. Conceptual elements for each period were developed only based on the definitions from that period. Furthermore, throughout the analysis of each of the three periods, a decision was made to keep elements separate if there were any possible meaningful distinctions. This was to ensure that distinct elements were not unduly subsumed into larger categories too early. This explains why elements such as “voluntary” (i.e., done because the company wants to and not because it is forced) and “discretionary” (i.e., done when necessary) were initially kept separate in Table 2 (both definitions adapted from Merriam-Webster, 2016). Core categories, or dimensions, that cut across the entire time period (i.e., 1953–2014) were not developed until a cross-cutting analysis of the three time periods was conducted. These core dimensions represented a combination of similar conceptual elements.

Building on the above, the creation of the conceptual elements was therefore aligned with the recommendation of Chrisman et al. (1988, p. 417), by creating a broadly inclusive, yet parsimonious classification system. This explains why categories such as “environmental” and “sustainable”, were initially kept separate. In this case, the “environmental” conceptual element included explicit references to the environment, such as “environment(al)”, “environmental-value” etc. (Table 2). “Sustainable” included terms such as “sustainability”, “sustainable-business”, “sustainable-development”, etc. Similarly, while “stakeholders”, “community”, and “employees” are similar concepts, they were not combined to permit the detection of when stakeholders (Freeman, 1984) entered

**Table 2**  
Conceptual elements and their key terms.

Conceptual elements	Key terms
Community	community(ies); citizens; civil; (and- civil society); suppliers, customers; government; competitors; constituent groups; people(s), individual(s).
Economic	economic; own economic interests; profits and profitability; technical interest, performance, financial (goals, wealth, returns); core (responsibility, function, goals); value-chain, utility function; success; direct gains; corporate benefit.
Employees	human resources; staff; employees (and their families); labour, workplace, jobs, workers.
Environmental	environment; environmental (value, protection, dimension); nature, natural; cleaner (environment); ecological.
Discretionary	discretionary (and- business, responsibility, expectations); philanthropy.
Ethical	ethical(ally); moral (correctness, convictions); fairness; openness and transparency; accountability; reputation.
Generations	generation(s); future generations.
Obligations	obligation (and obligations to society); social norms; social order.
Social-objectives	humane; wellbeing; social (development, expectations, interest, justice, objectives, wealth, needs, outcome, welfare); health; well-being; equality; quality of life; education, gender (equality), democracy.
Legal	legal (and- obligations; requirements); law (and –formal law; by-law); contract; regulation; legitimate; licence (to operate).
Stakeholders	stakeholder(s); key and diverse stakeholders.
Stockholders	stockholders; owners (and- owners of capital); investors; share and shareholders.
Strategy	strategy; strategic; business strategy.
Sustainability	sustainable (and- development; business); long-run.
Triple Bottom Line	triple; triple bottom line; three (objectives).
Voluntary	voluntary (and- basis, contributions); (going) beyond; addition (to); exceeding.

the lexicon of CSR scholars in the definitions. Similar reasoning holds for the “triple-bottom-line” category.

These distinctions were intended to capture nuances in how the terminology used in the definitions evolved. However, as will be explained later in the paper, some of these conceptual elements that were initially kept separate were later combined into core dimensions. These combinations were driven by the co-word analysis described below. For example, the elements “voluntary” and “discretionary” were later combined into one core dimension due to the clear conceptual overlap.

### 3.3. Stage 3: content analysis of the definitional database

Content analysis lies at the intersection of the qualitative and quantitative traditions (Duriau et al., 2007), and has been used by social scientists to make generalizations using document category proportions (Hopkins and King, 2010). Content analysis permits groups of words to reveal the underlying themes, with the co-occurrences and co-absences of keywords reflecting the existence of associations between the underlying concepts (Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin, 2012). By opting to use content analysis of definitions of CSR, this study provides a replicable methodology, while at the same time offering sufficient analytical flexibility (Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin, 2012). The sixteen key terms obtained in the pre-processing phase formed the units of analysis in the third stage.

While there are a few techniques to perform content analyses, this study employed co-word analysis (Callon et al., 1983) of the definitions. Co-word analysis explores the co-occurrence of terms in a set of documents. Co-word analysis allows the depiction of the state-of-art research in a scientific area by “delineating and underscoring the relations between various themes, and also the identification of emerging research areas” (Benavides-Velasco et al., 2013, p. 42). If we imagine a term to be a node in a network, then an arc or a line connecting two nodes indicates that these two terms appear together in a document (Bhattacharya, and Basu, 1998; Börner et al., 2003; Ding et al., 2001). Furthermore, a weight can be assigned to each arc, which is a co-occurrence value representing the frequency with which the two terms appear together. This allows us to obtain, and consequently analyse, terms that are more connected to other terms, thus representing *term centrality* in the document (Freeman, 1979). The more frequently a key term appears with other terms, the more “central” it is in the corpus.

Co-word analysis, whether in the area of management or in others, has hitherto been applied in the exploration of centrality of key words appearing in titles, abstracts of texts, keywords or in the entire document itself (e.g., Benavides-Velasco et al., 2013). In our study co-word analysis is employed to detect the centrality of key terms in the definitions themselves. Since definitions represent the essence of a concept or a phenomenon, centrality analysis would permit a systematic examination of the intellectual structure behind the definitions. In this study, co-word analysis is used to create a representation of the CSR structure in a map and to trace changes in the conceptual space (Ding et al., 2001) along the field’s historical development. Co-word analysis to uncover relationships in the intellectual structure of a field, as represented by their definitions, has appeared in only one published work in the field of management, which was in the area of strategy (Ronda-Pupo and Guerras-Martin, 2012).

As previously noted, the units of analysis subject to the centrality tests in this study were the sixteen conceptual elements containing key terms summarized in Table 2. The co-occurrence frequency of two units of analysis (the key-terms from CSR definitions), were extracted and the number of definitions in which the two key terms appeared together were counted. Based on

frequencies of the co-occurrences of these key terms, calculations of similarities that exist between these terms were completed in order to obtain the co-occurrence values and, hence, the centrality of the terms.

In order to normalize relationships between terms, thus giving more importance to those terms with a lower frequency but a higher co-occurrence value, versus those terms with higher frequency and lower co-occurrence value, the Equivalence index proposed by Callon et al. (1983) was used. This index is calculated by:

$$e_{ij} = c_{ij}^2 / c_i c_j \quad (1)$$

In Equation (1),  $c_{ij}$  is the number of definitions in which two units of analysis or key terms  $i$  and  $j$  co-occur and  $c_i$  and  $c_j$  represent the number of definitions in which each one appears. When the terms always appear together, the Equivalence index equals unity, and when they are never associated, it equals zero.

Once the Equivalence index was calculated and the co-occurrence matrix built, social network analysis techniques were utilized to determine the degree of centrality of each key term in the definitions. The networks in this study are non-directional and the *closeness centrality* yields a measure of the importance of key terms. This is defined as the total geodesic distance from a given node to all other nodes (Freeman, 1979) and represents the centrality of each key term in the network (Nooy et al., 2005). The centrality can be considered as a measure of the importance of a theme in the development of the entire research field, and in this case, centrality is viewed as a measure of the importance of a key term in the CSR definition. The greater the number and the strength of a key term’s connections with other terms, the more central it is to the whole network. This process is what ultimately guided the combination of the initial sixteen conceptual elements into the six core dimensions discussed later in the paper.

When the data was processed, the key terms were filtered using a minimum frequency threshold of two appearances. The values obtained for each conceptual element were normalized from 0.00 to 1. This facilitated an analysis of the vector centrality. The normalized values were categorized into three areas: periphery (0.00–0.333), semi-periphery (0.334–0.666), and core of the network (0.667–1). For the computational work, the open source mapping software tool SciMAT (Cobo et al., 2011) was used and integrated with the open source software tool Gephi to measure the closeness centrality and visualize the network.

## 4. Results and discussion

This section presents the key results from the analysis. The results and discussion is structured around the three key time periods noted earlier, namely 1953–1982, 1983–2002, and 2003–2014. In each section, the analysis of the key dimensions, and the relationships between those dimensions, is presented. Comments on the evolution of the dimensions over time are also provided. We then proceed with a global analysis of the results spanning the entire time period (i.e., 1953–2014). Combined, this analysis provides a basis for addressing the three key research questions in this study. It also provides the basis for the development of a new definition of CSR that incorporates its enduring key dimensions.

Figs. 2–4 reveal the network structure of the definition of the CSR concept in each period, displaying both centrality and the relationships between key terms.

Table 3 shows the evolution of the conceptual elements (composed of key definitional terms) in terms of their centrality, over the three periods. The table also provides a basis for comparing three different regions according to their degree of

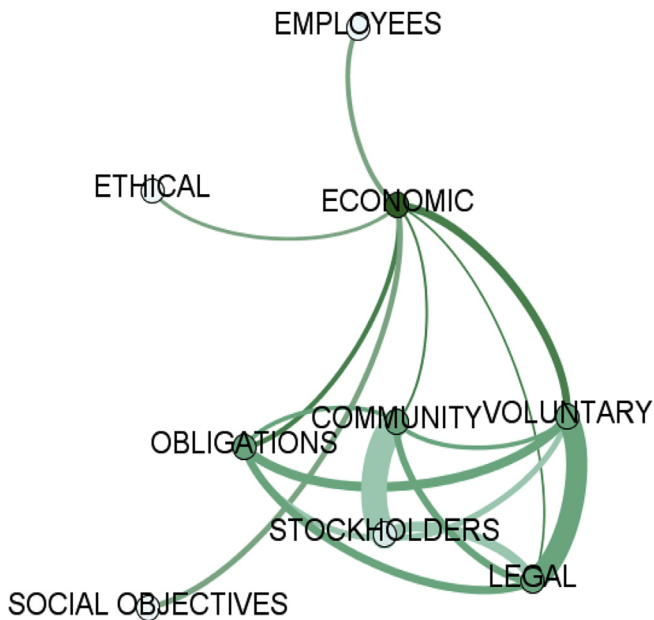


Fig. 2. Network structure of the definitions of the CSR concept during period 1 (1953–1982).

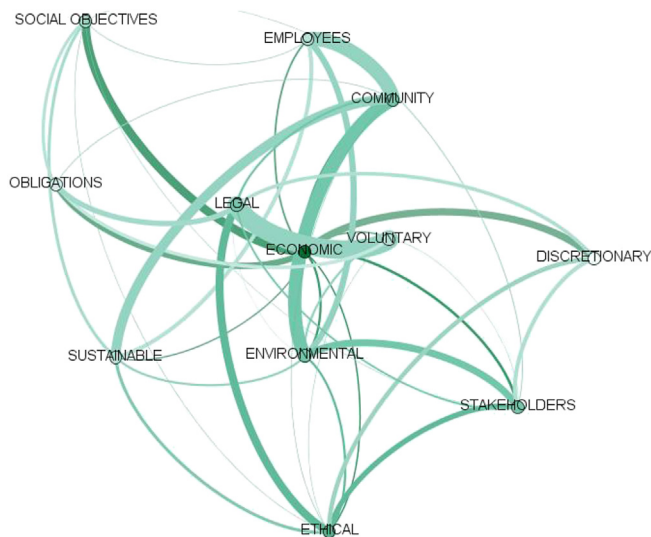


Fig. 3. Network structure of the definitions of the CSR concept during period 2 (1983–2002).

centrality in the network: “periphery”, “semi-periphery”, and “core”.

#### 4.1. First period: 1953–1982

The first period of analysis covers the thirty years starting from the publication of Bowen’s seminal work in 1953. The definitions in this early period tended to revolve around ‘obligations of enterprises to look beyond their core economic goals of profit making’, and to ‘meet social obligations towards their employees and the wider community voluntarily’. Overall, there appears to have been general agreement around the concept of CSR in this early period for the need of corporations to look beyond economic interests (Davis, 1973) and to strive to meet the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations society (Carroll, 1979). The high

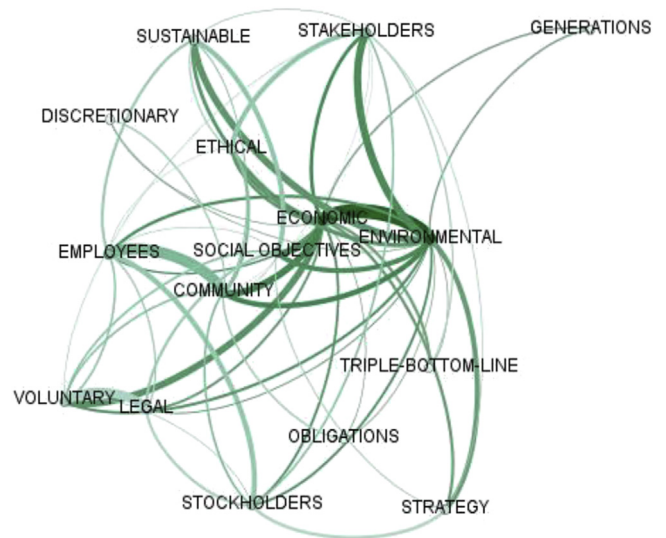


Fig. 4. Network structure of the definitions of the CSR concept during period 3 (2003–2014).

centrality figures of the dimensions “economic” (0.89), “voluntary” (0.73), “legal” (0.73), “obligations” (0.73), and “community” shown in Table 3 mean that from the start, economic as well as legal and social obligations were considered a basis of CSR.

Fig. 2 in the network reveals the centrality positions of the nine conceptual elements in the network during this period. As we can see, “economic” leads with respect to the number of connections with the other conceptual nodes. Hence, the need to address economic obligations was a key thrust of the CSR definitions of the period. From the thickness of the arcs in Fig. 2 for the triad “voluntary”, “obligations”, and “legal” in the network, the idea of CSR of this period was built around the notion that firms have not only economic and legal obligations but also certain social responsibilities that they should meet voluntarily. This view was reflected, for instance, in a definition by Jones (1980, p. 59), who argued that CSR is “the notion that corporations have an *obligation* to constituent groups in society other than stockholders and beyond that prescribed by law and union contract” (emphasis added). The two areas of emphasis in the definition highlight two key concepts. The first is that corporations have an obligation to consider external *stakeholders* (i.e., “groups in society”) other than stockholders. In this definition, therefore, CSR implies a requirement to consider the needs of external stakeholders in decision-making. The second is that CSR also requires that corporations undertake *voluntary* actions to demonstrate their social responsibility. Compliance with the law and signed contracts alone does not constitute CSR. The dual notions of obligations to external stakeholders and to undertake voluntary actions that go beyond legal minimums were reflected in definitions developed by other scholars in later periods of the analysis. For instance, Jamali and Keshishian (2009) understood CSR to be the “principles, processes, practices, and activities adopted by a corporation beyond its pursuit of economic responsibility for its shareholders and beyond compliance with regulations (...).” Another observation is with regards to the strength of the arc connecting “community” with “stockholders”. This connection was directly reflected in some definitions, such as CSR constituting a ‘social obligation to constituent groups in society [community] other than stockholders’ (Davis, 1973).

**Table 3**  
Evolution of the position of the key-terms in the definitions used for CSR.

		Periods		
		1953–1982	1983–2002	2003–2014
Position according to centrality degree	Core (0.67–1)	Economic (0.89) Voluntary (0.73) Legal (0.73) Obligations (0.73) Community (0.73)	Economic (1) Ethical (0.86) Environmental (0.80) Stakeholders (0.79) Legal (0.79) Community (0.79) Soc-objectives (0.73) Employees (0.70) Voluntary (0.69) Sustainable (0.69) Obligations (0.66) Discretionary (0.56)	Economic (1) Environmental (1) Community (0.79) Stakeholders (0.76) Soc-objectives (0.76) Employees (0.71) Voluntary (0.68) Stockholders (0.68) Ethical (0.68)
	Semi-periphery (0.33–0.67)	Stockholders (0.53) Employees (0.5) Ethical (0.5) Soc-objectives (0.5)		Sustainable (0.65) Legal (0.63) Strategy (0.60) Discretionary (0.57) Triple-Bottom Line (0.57) Obligations (0.56) Generations (0.54)
	Periphery (0.00–0.333) 110		(24) <sup>a</sup>	(40) <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Number of definitions included in each period.

#### 4.2. Second period: 1983–2002

The second period, covering the two decades between 1983 and 2002, ushered in 37 new definitions in the CSR literature.

##### 4.2.1. New terms

As mentioned earlier, the choice of 1983 as the starting period was influenced by the entrance of stakeholder theory into the mainstream of the management literature in 1984. This period witnessed an emergence of three new terms that gained prominence in the lexicon of CSR: “stakeholders”, “environmental”, and “sustainable” (Table 3). None of these terms were present in the earlier period. Stakeholder theory emerged as a normative, ethically-based organizational theory following Freeman’s landmark book in 1984, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. According to stakeholder theory, “managers bear a fiduciary relationship to stakeholders” (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders are therefore constituent groups having a stake in, or claim on the corporation, including suppliers, customers, employees, and the local community. By keeping “stakeholders” as a distinct conceptual element with key terms explicitly involving “stake\*”, the analysis was able to capture its emergence in the definitions published following Freeman’s book.

In the definitions of CSR during this period, the “environmental” and “sustainable” dimensions also emerged in the core position according to their degree of centrality (Table 3). The two (related) concepts gathered momentum in the CSR discourse following the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or “The Earth Summit”. One of the key outcomes of the conference was the development of an action plan which emphasized environmental, economic, and social action to support sustainable development (UN Agenda 21, 1992). Sustainable development had earlier been popularised in a 1987 report by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). As noted earlier, the report defined sustainable development as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 42). Environmental and sustainability concerns are reflected in a number of definitions from this period. For example, Frederick et al. (1992) defined CSR as the “principle stating that corporations should be accountable for the effects of any of their actions on their

community and environment”, while the WBCSD (2000) defined it as the “commitment of business to contribute to sustainable economic development, working with employees, their families, the local community and society at large to improve the quality of life, in ways that are both good for business and good for development”. In the scholarly community, the *Academy of Management Review* Special Issue on “Ecologically Sustainable Organizations” in 1995 highlighted the green debate in the management agenda. The emphasis on environmental issues in the CSR literature is reflected in Fig. 3, which shows strong connections between the “environmental”, “community”, and “stakeholders” nodes.

##### 4.2.2. Changes in strength

The ethical dimension of CSR gained prominence during this period. There was an increasing use of ethics-related terms in the description of CSR, both by scholars and practitioners. While “ethical” had earlier been in the semi-periphery region (centrality degree of 0.5), in the second period it strengthened with a much higher centrality (0.86), reflecting the wider acceptance and appeal for businesses to “be ethical”. This was in line with Carroll’s (1979) popular four domain pyramidal identification of CSR. Carroll’s widely used definition stated that “The social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary [later changed to philanthropic] expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (Carroll, 1979, p. 500). The importance of the ethical dimension has been noted by many other authors, such as Frederick (2008). This reflects the view that the 1980s were the beginning of the ‘corporate/business ethics’ stage, wherein the focus increased on fostering ethical corporate cultures (c.f. Carroll and Shabana, 2010, p. 88). To that end, Fig. 3 shows the centrality of “ethics” in the CSR debate of the period, with its many strong links to other nodes.

While the conceptual elements “economic”, “legal”, “community”, and “voluntary” maintained their standing in the core of the definitions in the second period, “stockholders” did not. This may be reflective of the growing importance in this period of responding to “stakeholders” as a responsibility of businesses, rather than the previous view of exclusive fiduciary duties towards stockholders. Fig. 3 again shows the central position of the “economic” node, which is linked with all other conceptual elements. The strength of the arcs between “legal”, “voluntary”, and “economic” reflect the



need for social responsibility to be built around “looking beyond economic and legal” aspects of the firm voluntarily.

#### 4.3. Third period: 2003–2014

Towards the end of the second period there were a series of financial crises, particularly in the USA. This same time period also saw the collapse of the dotcom bubble. A number of financial scandals, including those at Enron, helped lead to the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation in the USA, which set financial accountability and social responsibility standards for public companies. Much of the thinking on CSR in this last period was strongly influenced by these financial scandals, with ethical considerations being clearly reflected.

This third period saw a keen interest from governmental and nongovernmental organizations on the role of corporations in society. This group includes NGO representatives, public administrators, and industry associations, among others. These entities had a significant participation in the CSR debate during this period, with almost half (21) of the 44 additional definitions derived from non-academic sources.

Scholars have also identified this period as marking a substantial rise in interest in CSR in high profile academic journals (Kudlak and Low, 2015). As one illustration of this trend, Aguinis and Glavas (2012) found that over 40% of CSR papers have been published since 2005.

##### 4.3.1. Persistence of conceptual elements

Table 3 shows that the conceptual elements “economic”, “environmental”, “stakeholders”, “social-objectives”, “employees”, “voluntary”, and “ethical”, all maintained their core positions (according to their degree of network centrality) in the definitions of the period. The need to voluntarily address social objectives thus remained a core part of CSR definitions, whether they were developed by academics or non-academics. Stakeholder concerns also continued to feature prominently in the definitions.

This period saw the entrenchment of the environmental (and sustainability) dimensions in the CSR definitions. For instance, the CSR Initiative at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government emphasized that CSR “encompasses not only what companies do with their profits, but also how they make them. It goes beyond philanthropy and compliance and addresses how companies manage their economic, social, and environmental impacts as well as their relationships in all key spheres of influence: the workplace, the marketplace, the supply chain, the community and the public policy realm” (CSRI, 2008). Ethical considerations also continue to form a core component of the definitions. Building on the earlier discussion, this may have been influenced by the financial scandals of the time, an observation made by a number of scholars (Crouch, 2006; Verschoor, 2005; Wilson, 2005).

Fig. 4 reveals the centrality of the environmental dimension, which is now connected to all other conceptual elements. The link between “environment” and “economic” is particularly strong. Moreover, the linkage between “stakeholders”, “environmental”, and “economic (including “strategy”)) suggests the entrenchment of the “triple bottom line” concept.

#### 4.4. Global analysis (1953–2014)

Notwithstanding the multiplicity of definitions and diversity of terminology employed, the analysis presented earlier shows that there are a few recurrent, enduring features of CSR over the past six decades. Analysing the networks and the centrality degrees in each of the three periods, and taking into account the overlaps and proximities of some conceptual elements, it is clear that most of the

definitions employed by both academics and practitioners emerged from a few primary conceptual nodes. Recall that in order to capture various nuances in the evolution of key terms in the definitions, some otherwise similar conceptual elements had been deliberately kept distinct in the analysis. Examples included “stakeholders”, “employees”, and “community”, among others.

Taking the entire period into account, the next layer of analysis in this study focused on combining similar concepts to create enduring (integrated) dimensions. This yielded a total of six distinct conceptual genealogies that lie in the core of the definitions for the entire period. Table 4 shows the composition of each of these six integrated dimensions with respect to the key terms. Each integrated dimension is described further below.

##### 4.4.1. Economic

This dimension consists of conceptual elements (and key terms) related to economic responsibility, law abidance, business strategy, and firm ownership (Table 4). Friedman (1970) had argued that the most important contribution that a business can provide to society is performing its natural role of the production of goods and services, with its main responsibility lying in the maximization of shareholder returns. While the various definitions of CSR had pointed to a number of other functions beyond the pursuit of core economic goals, the recognition that business’ primary interest is an economic one holds primacy in the definition (with a centrality of one or close to one in each period). Law abidance must be considered a vital element of CSR as well (Fifka, 2009, p. 317). As Friedman (1970) argued, alignment with the primary economic goals also means abiding by the rules as embodied in law. A key responsibility of a corporation pursuing profit is to do so within the limits set by the law. Economic responsibility cannot, therefore, be separated from the responsibility for legal abidance. Another conceptual element integrated in the economic dimension is the strategic aspect. The strategic call is for businesses to integrate CSR into business activities, with the rationale being that “CSR creates new opportunities for businesses” (Fifka, 2009, p. 315). Finally, ownership of the firm (i.e., the “stockholders”), also forms part of the new, integrated economic dimension.

##### 4.4.2. Social

Bowen’s (1953) seminal book sparked the discussion on the role that businesses can or should play in society. Many scholars have since subscribed to the broad responsibilities corporations could assume beyond their principal responsibility as economic units of society. The core of the CSR argument therefore lies in this “social” dimension, predicated upon the idea that “the corporation has not only economic and legal obligations but also certain responsibilities to society which extend beyond these obligations” (McGuire, 1963, p. 144). The call for social responsibility implies that businesses should not only accept and bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions, but also align their economic responsibilities with certain “obligations” (a central measure in the analysis presented in this paper) towards the betterment of society. As Table 4 shows, these could include working towards quality of life and gender equality, among others.

##### 4.4.3. Ethical

What constitutes the ethical dimension of CSR remains debatable. For instance, Schwartz and Carroll (2003, p. 506) hold that many philanthropic activities could fall under the ethical domain. Ethical perspectives also embody a framework where a “moral reflection by managers and investors is instrumentally necessary in business, normatively commanded, and socially desirable” (Windsor, 2006, p. 96). The ethical conception holds that the narrow economic view is both

**Table 4**  
Core dimensions and key terms related to the dimensions.

Core dimensions	Key terms
Economic	economic interests; profits and profitability; financial goals, wealth and returns; core (responsibility, function, goals); legal abidance; business strategy; stockholders, owners, investors and shareholders.
Ethical	ethical; moral; fairness; openness and transparency; accountability; reputation.
Social	social wellbeing; interest; justice; social needs; health; well-being; equality; quality of life; gender equality; obligations to society; social norms.
Stakeholders	stakeholders; employees and their families; local community; suppliers, customers; government; competitors; constituent groups.
Sustainability	environmental value and protection, ecological; sustainable; long run; triple bottom line; future generations.
Discretionary	voluntary; (going) beyond and in addition (to); discretionary; philanthropy.

insufficient and myopic and further implies fairness, openness, transparency, accountability, and preserving reputation in all of the firm's dealings (Table 4). Reputation, for example, was included as a part of this core dimension given the enormous potential impact of ethics on a corporation's reputation. The collapse of companies such as Enron and Arthur Anderson are just two of the many examples of this issue. While economic responsibilities are 'required', these ethical responsibilities have come to be considered 'expected' (Carroll and Shabana, 2010).

#### 4.4.4. Stakeholders

In contrast to the economic or shareholder approach, which emphasized the primacy of fiduciary responsibility towards shareholders, the stakeholder dimension of CSR broadens the internal and external actors to whom a corporation has obligations. These are individuals or constituent groups who may affect or be affected by the firm (Freeman, 1984; Clarkson, 1995). Over the sixty-year period of the analysis in this study, the different CSR definitions explicitly identified a number of beneficiaries of CSR. These included citizens, the local community, employees (and their families), competitors, suppliers, and customers. These diverse actors are now integrated in the "stakeholder" dimension. The importance of this dimension is underlined given that "stakeholder theory" is often considered as a CSR variant and a descriptor of the field.

#### 4.4.5. Voluntary

A contribution of CSR activities can be assessed along the dimension of voluntarism, representing "the scope of discretionary decision-making by the firm and the absence of externally imposed compliance requirements" (Burke and Logsdon, 1996, p. 498). In the analysis in this paper, the voluntary dimension has remained in the core position (according to its network centrality) during each of the three periods investigated. One of the central features of CSR is therefore the need to go beyond the minimum requirements specified by law. Mere compliance with legal requirements or agreed-upon contractual terms is not sufficient for CSR. Integrating the related discretionary and philanthropy components yields the voluntary dimension at the core of CSR definitions shown in Table 4. This is similar to Carroll's original (1979) conceptual

definition, where he had termed "discretionary" as pursuing voluntary social roles and philanthropic activities. In his review of CSR, Fifka (2009, p. 317) argued that "without a voluntary component, the concept of CSR becomes obsolete". This echoes the views of many other scholars, including Mosley et al. (1996, p. 141) who defines CSR as "managements' obligation to set policies, make decisions and follow courses of action beyond the requirements of the law that are desirable in terms of the values and objectives of society". While economic and legal obligations can be regarded as its foundation, a voluntary or discretionary component makes CSR especially effective (Fifka, 2009).

#### 4.4.6. Sustainability

As discussed in the temporal analysis presented earlier, the "environmental" conceptual element emerged as a central node of the CSR debate, particularly from the second period on. Over time, this evolved into the broader issue of sustainability. Combining the "sustainable", "triple bottom line", and (future) "generation", yields one core dimension of CSR, "sustainability" (Table 4). Some scholars have warned of the dangers of environmentalism engendering "greenwashing" in the CSR debate (Adler et al., 2007; Prasad and Mills, 2010). However, our study of the definitions reveals a clear concern among scholars for the need for economic performance to be balanced with social and environmental performance. In the closely associated, and sometimes converging, field of corporate citizenship, consideration for the environment has also been found to predominate (Garriga and Melé, 2004). We opted for the designation of the dimension as "sustainability", for the broader implication it has, including not only environmental concerns, but also with regards to the welfare of future generations (Table 4). The need for a long-term perspective is therefore implicit in this dimension. Also note that this dimension also implies the need for an integrated view of economic, social, and environmental issues. These are typically viewed as the three key pillars of sustainability.

Economic issues were kept separate from the sustainability dimension because they were consistently rated the most central issue in the analysis. Social issues were kept separate since the word "social" explicitly appears in the term CSR. As noted above, this is the very core of the CSR concept. The combined social dimension also rated highly in terms of network centrality.

#### 4.5. Reflection on key findings

The results and discussion provide the basis for drawing a number of conclusions. The first key conclusion is that, despite the multiplicity of definitions, it is clear that the achievement of “economic” goals has endured as a core element in the definitions of CSR over time. This reveals a clear consensus among scholars that the first act of “doing good” is “doing economic good”. Expanding economic growth and focusing on shareholder value provide a needed foundation for CSR. While CSR undoubtedly requires firms to look beyond the achievement of core financial goals, assuming economic responsibility constitutes a basic requirement for a business.

Another key conclusion is that while the CSR literature seems fragmented and its diversity suggests the possibility of the existence of “parallel and sometimes confusing universes” (Waddock, 2004, p. 5), there is a certain congruence that belies this heterogeneity. Much of the field's fragmentation is derived from its interdisciplinary nature (Garriga and Melé, 2004) and different levels of analysis (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012), including cultural differences (e.g., Waldman et al., 2006). Firm-level challenges to correspond to CSR expectations may also contribute to this challenge. The proliferation of definitions has risen precisely because no single definition fulfills the criteria applied across a range of disciplines, scholarly thought, individual firm needs, and societal expectations. Yet, despite the existence of a large number of definitions, the analysis in this paper reveals that there is an essential core in the definitions that has remained remarkably consistent and stable over time, assuming a central position in the network of the CSR concept.

The analysis above showed that the common characteristics behind the CSR concept are *economic, social, ethical, stakeholders, sustainability, and voluntary*. Thus, while CSR may be a “chameleon” (Gond and Moon, 2011) with the intensity of its colours changing depending on the context, the colours themselves have remained essentially the same. Scholars and practitioners alike can use these six dimensions, while drawing upon national, cultural, and local traditions to tailor tactics and strategies to address CSR as necessary. That said, scholars and practitioners should be cautioned that CSR remains a concept with predominant Anglo Saxon origins and frameworks (Blowfield and Frynas, 2005). The same CSR approaches may not be directly transferable to other contexts (Williams and Aguilera, 2008). With that caution in mind, these six dimensions, and their associated underlying key concepts, can help guide future scholarship towards an instrumental linguistic praxis that is meaningful to managers in their day-to-day pursuits of organizational goals and objectives (Amaeshi and Adi, 2007), as well as in developing long term “strategic orientations” (Bansal et al., 2015).

The analysis also suggests that while CSR has frequently been used as a synonym for environmental management or business ethics, it is not that alone. CSR is not, as suggested by McWilliams et al. (2006), “tantamount to corporate philanthropy, and considered strictly as relating to environmental policy”. Environmental responsibility, for instance, is increasingly a necessary, but is clearly not a sufficient, condition of CSR. That said, the prominence of environmental issues, and the broader concept of sustainability, is rising in CSR. This was underlined in the analysis showing the strong linkages of the “environmental” dimension with “economic” and “stakeholders” (including community), particularly during the last time period studied.

Finally, although the analysis shows that the six dimensions of CSR recurred over the entire period studied, it is important to underline that different authors have placed greater emphasis on different dimensions. In the absence of a universally-accepted

definition of CSR, this is likely to continue. Thus, it is likely that the field of CSR will continue to be characterized by a multiplicity of approaches. Research on CSR is likely to remain fragmented in terms of theoretical foundations, methodological approaches, and recommendations actions for moving its agenda forward. Nonetheless, it is also critical to underline that the combination of the initial sixteen conceptual elements into the final six core dimensions of CSR was not arbitrary. The combinations were based on a systematic, structured, and objective co-word analysis. The analysis highlights that there has been a convergence of CSR constituent conceptual elements over time.

In an effort to provide a stable foundation for research on CSR, the next sub-section proposes a new definition of the concept that encompasses the key dimensions identified in this study.

#### 4.6. A new definition of CSR

The six core dimensions identified earlier in the analysis provide a basis for the development of an empirically supported definition of CSR. These six dimensions, which address the full historical development of the field, are sufficiently embracing to enable contextualization, while simultaneously providing a needed definitional reference point. Building on the six core dimensions, the following definition of CSR is proposed:

CSR implies that firms must foremost assume their core *economic* responsibility and *voluntarily* go beyond legal minimums so that they are *ethical* in all of their activities and that they take into account the impact of their actions on *stakeholders in society*, while simultaneously contributing to *global sustainability*.

This definition emerging from our analysis reveals the ethical component as being a distinct concern in the CSR debate, which was not explicitly extracted in the much reduced definitional database of Dahlsrud (2008). In Dahlsrud's study, ethics was subsumed in the voluntariness dimension. Our analysis shows that this was a critical oversight. The ethical concern finds resonance among a number of leading CSR thinkers. For instance, it features prominently in Carroll's (1979) CSR pyramid. It is therefore essential that ethical considerations are explicitly included in definitions of CSR going forward. CSR explicitly requires that firms behave in an open, fair, and moral way.

Another distinction is the explicit emphasis on sustainability. We argue that this reflects the continued extension of environmental issues into that realm, underlines the need for a long-term perspective in decision-making, and implies that the interrelationships between key decision-making variables be considered. This is essential given that CSR is often viewed as the key corporate contribution to global sustainable development.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper presented a quantitative analysis of 110 definitions of CSR. The definitions were drawn from the time period encompassing 1953–2014, which spans the historical evolution of the concept. Three key research questions were addressed. First, the key dimensions of CSR were identified from three distinct time periods. Moreover, the dimensions were evaluated based on their centrality to the concept. Second, the strength of the relationships between the key dimensions were analysed. This provided further insight into the dimensions that were deemed core to the CSR concept. Third, the evolution of the dimensions and their relationships were also analysed. This provided insight into the dimensions that endured over time. Answering each of the key research questions provided a basis for the development of an

original definition of CSR that possesses strong empirical grounding.

### 5.1. Key contributions

The paper makes several clear contributions to the literature. First, the systematic, quantitative analysis of definitions brings an objectivity that previous qualitative bibliometric analyses of CSR have lacked. This provides a strong foundation to identify the core dimensions of CSR and formulate models that measure the strength of the relationships between them. Second, the time period selected is substantially longer than previous analyses and captures the complete historical evolution of the concept. This ensures that all key dimensions of CSR were captured. Third, the analysis provides the basis for the development of a new, comprehensive, yet concise, definition of CSR that captures all six of the recurring dimensions underpinning the concept. As argued earlier, definitions matter. CSR has been characterized by a multitude of definitions that have led to confusion about what, exactly, the concept entails. The definition developed in this paper is empirically grounded and reflective of the rich history of CSR. It provides a strong basis for advancing the CSR agenda from both a tactical and strategic perspective.

### 5.2. Limitations

Notwithstanding the contributions outlined above, this study has several limitations. One limitation, framed by the objective of the study, is that using only definitions does not permit capturing the many nuances in a debate around a concept. Each of the six core dimensions of CSR identified in this research are themselves the subject of ongoing research and debate. Shifting understanding of the core dimensions could influence the definition of CSR. Another limitation of the study is that related research did not appear in the search unless it included “corporate social\*”, “\*social responsibility”, or “CSR” as the theme, or were referred to by another article that was captured under that search criteria. Thus, there could have been CSR-related studies that did not use explicitly to these terms, yet may have held definitions of the same. It is therefore possible that some published definitions were missed. However, it is unlikely that any additional definitions would have altered the analysis presented above. In any case, this study drew on a far larger sample of CSR definitions than previous bibliometric analyses.

### 5.3. Directions for future research

Going forward, future scholarship in the area will likely bring greater refinement of the forms in which organizations could be socially responsible. One clue in that respect is the new terms that are being introduced in CSR definitions. This movement may help bring greater clarity in the understanding and operationalization of the concept at both tactical and strategic levels of an organization. One potential driver of future convergence of CSR initiatives is through industry association programs. Industry associations, such as the WBCSD, are increasingly creating structured CSR programs and expectations. These may help enable their members to meet their short- and long-term CSR goals and objectives. One potential area of future research could therefore focus on how international, national, regional, sectorial-based, and issue-based industry associations promote CSR amongst their membership. This could include studying the participation of association members in CSR policy debates and networks, and how such participation drives greater institutionalization of CSR.

The methodology employed in this study may also provide insight into potential avenues of future research. Using quantitative analysis of definitions (and discourse) is an objective, systematic

and replicable methodology that has considerable potential in the fields of sustainability, environmental management, and business ethics, among others. Thus, one direction of future research could be to perform a similar quantitative analysis of definitions to uncover commonalities and differences between CSR and other related (and, in some cases, competing) concepts such as corporate social performance, business ethics, and corporate citizenship. Another possible avenue of future work could distinguish between how the two broad constituents, i.e., academic and non-academic advocates of CSR, understand the concept, and how this understanding has evolved over time.

Since CSR is somewhat context-dependent, a valuable exercise would be to analyse the differences in perspectives on CSR between developed and developing countries, based upon the discourse emerging from these two settings. Using the six dimensions that have emerged from the analysis in this paper, one could study the relative relevance of each of these dimensions (and the underlying sub-dimensions), in different institutional contexts. This could also help predict how the CSR construct is expected to change, an issue that has assumed particular relevance given the recent institutionalization of CSR in developing countries, such as India.

### Acknowledgement

The authors gratefully acknowledge the comments and suggestions made on an earlier version of this manuscript by three anonymous reviewers. We also acknowledge, and are grateful to Remedios Hernández-Linares for her help with the software and analysis.

The first author also acknowledges financial support received from the Portuguese Science Foundation- Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia and FEDER/COMPETE (grant PEst-C/EGE/UI4007/2013).

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.06.157>.

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