

THE IMPACT OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ON THE IMAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

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Abstract

This research investigated the influence of CSR initiatives on the organization's image, considering private higher education institutes from the perspectives of stakeholder members, specifically academic staff and students, in Ethiopia. The study utilized a descriptive research design using quantitative methods. Stratified and convenience sampling techniques were utilized to select samples. A total of 410 respondents from the target population were included in the analysis. To evaluate the hypotheses, the study employed structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS 23. The study found that universities embed corporate social responsibility into their strategic frameworks and confirms a positive perception of CSR practices related to economic, employee, social, and environmental aspects. In addition, the findings reveal that CSR targeting employees has a substantial positive impact on the organization's image, followed by the economic and social responsibility dimensions likewise show a significant positive effect on that image. The institutions should focus on engaging in CSR related to employee, economic, and social aspects to improve their image, which is essential for survival and sustainable operations. This research contributes to prior studies by adding knowledge to the literature regarding CSR and the image of higher education. The study recommends that institutions can survive and operate in a competitive environment through strengthening their image when there is a strong emphasis on CSR activities.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, Image, Impact, Higher education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) involves organizational initiatives that enhance societal welfare and safeguard the environment. The concept of CSR has expanded alongside economic development and globalization, encouraging organizations to go beyond legal requirements to meet social and environmental obligations (Marakova et al., 2021). It is a strategy pursued by organizations to ensure their legitimacy to operate within society, as asserted by legitimacy theory (Olateju et al., 2021). CSR intention is to fulfill stakeholder interests such as customers, employees, suppliers, society, and environmental aspect. Legitimacy theory explains the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders, highlighting that organizations and society share a social contract (Economides, 2018). This implies that organizations should strive to establish strong relationships with stakeholders to operate with greater acceptance. CSR, as part of the modern business model, offers benefits not only to society but also to the organizations themselves (Yatsiv et al., 2024).

The CSR framework includes four interconnected elements: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic, which build on each other successively (Carroll, 2016). This suggests that the economic dimension is vital for the success of the subsequent levels of CSR. The intention behind CSR is to fulfill stakeholder interests, such as those of customers, employees, suppliers, and society, while enabling organizations to contribute positively to society and achieve long-term competitiveness. Legitimacy theory emphasizes that organizations gain societal approval by fulfilling a social contract with stakeholders, while stakeholder theory posits that CSR enables

organizations to meet expectations, minimize negative perceptions, and create mutual value (Olateju et al., 2021; Van Wyk and Venter, 2022). Stakeholder theory further asserts that CSR helps to minimize negative perceptions resulting from economic activities, thus benefiting organizations by fulfilling stakeholder interests (Do et al., 2023).

The image of a university plays a critical role in its sustainability. The reason is that the image of higher education institute (HEIs) has a significant effect on loyalty (Leonnard et al., 2015). CSR increasingly serves as a strategic marketing tool to enhance institutional image (Wang, 2017). Universities must engage in activities that enhance their image (Chiguvu and Tadu, 2020). For instance, CSR activities related to environmental sustainability can enhance an institution's ranking (Banner et al., 2022). This is often due to the positive image created among stakeholders.

The establishment of higher education institutions (HEIs) in developing countries is growing (Chen and Frank, 2020), and competition among universities to attract students is intense (Fakhrudin et al., 2024). Private universities in Ethiopia are not exempt from this competitive environment. CSR can provide a strategic advantage by enhancing institutional image (Kumar and Sing, 2022), which is widely recognized as crucial for university success (Alhaza et al., 2021). Hence, it is essential to undertake empirical research to examine the role of CSR in enhancing university image, particularly in Ethiopia. Accordingly, the central research question of this study is to what extent CSR components influence the image of universities in the country. University social responsibility manifests differently across contexts (Leko Simic et al., 2022), making local investigation particularly relevant. Universities often demonstrate their CSR commitment through websites and contribute to societal welfare and economic development through CSR initiatives (Salvioni et al., 2017; Abdel-Hameid and badri, 2019). This highlights the vital role of CSR in addressing social concerns alongside fulfilling core functions of teaching, research, and community service.

The findings of this research will help university management make informed decisions to create a favorable and positive image through CSR practices. Image refers to the aggregate attitude towards an organization (Patlan and Martinez, 2017). This study relies on the perspectives of academic staff and students. For instance, university image depends on accredited programs related to quality, environmental factors, the overall image of the university, and financial stability (Hailat et al., 2021). CSR sub-constructs that affect university image can include economic, employee, social, and environmental aspects. Universities have a fundamental responsibility to build strong relationships with their stakeholders through social responsibility activities (Spodarczyk and Szelagowska-Rudzka, 2019).

Previous studies have focused on the links between CSR, reputation, and financial performance in various countries and settings (Kim et al., 2018; Bianchi et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2020; Chali et al., 2023). The literature also highlights other consequences of CSR. CSR strategies help organizations create a positive image by fulfilling the expectations of customers and other stakeholders (Phan et al., 2021; Kumar and Sing, 2022). However, the specific influence of CSR sub-constructs on image remains unclear. In the competitive environment of private higher education, it is vital for institutions to implement CSR programs that differentiate them from their competitors. Many past studies have not addressed the impact of CSR on image in emerging economies like Ethiopia. This research aims to fill that gap by exploring the private higher education context. As highlighted by previous scholars, if HEIs aim to compete through their image, the first step is to measure the image held by their students (Alves and Rapso, 2010). Further, understanding stakeholder perceptions is crucial for university management and policymaking (Chapleo and Simms, 2010). Therefore, this study takes into account the perspectives of both students and academic staff. By contributing to the literature, this study provides empirical evidence on the influence of CSR sub-constructs on university image within the context of emerging economies. It also sheds light on how CSR, both internal and external, shapes the image of higher education institutions.

1.1. Statement of the problem

In today's competitive environment, institutions are increasingly aware of the importance of CSR. CSR can play a critical role in maintaining a competitive advantage and improving organizational (Javed et al., 2020). Moreover, CSR is an effective approach to rebuilding customer trust (Lopez-Penabad et al., 2023). HEIs play a vital role in society by acting ethically, working legally, and contributing to economic development while

improving the wellbeing of employees and society (Balzhinimaeva et al., 2018). University social responsibility affects both the institutions and the societies they serve at a global level (Cahya et al., 2019). Universities' involvement in CSR is vital, enhancing affirmative social impact through teaching and service offerings to the community (Campobasso et al., 2022). When universities engage consistently in CSR, customers and society recognize their positive image. Image is a strategic asset, as it can enhance the value of an organization. Image differentiation can serve as a way for private HEIs to stand out in a competitive market (Chiguvi and Tadu, 2020). One of the significant benefits of CSR is its potential influence on organizational success, particularly in relation to its impact on image (Al Mubarak et al., 2019). However, empirical findings on the correlation between CSR and image are inconsistent across various contexts. For example, no correlation has been found between the social aspect of CSR and image (Chen et al., 2021), and some studies suggest that environmental CSR negatively affects image (Sharabati et al., 2023), while others show a direct impact of economic CSR on image (Hafez, 2018). These conflicting findings underscore the need for further research on the matter.

In the Ethiopian context, a descriptive quantitative study by Hurrisa (2023) found an association between CSR and image in foreign companies. However, internal CSR measures were not included in that study. Other domestic scholars have explored CSR issues in Ethiopia, particularly focusing on CSR practices of business organizations, university concerns, and the relationship between CSR and performance (Deyassa, 2016; Cremonini and Adamu, 2020; Chali et al., 2023). Thus, the relationship between CSR and image remains inadequately understood.

Many Ethiopian private universities appear to seek legitimacy through CSR implementation, believing that CSR positively affects their image. Universities' success and sustainability in the competitive education market depend heavily on the social and environmental consequences of their actions (Meseguer- Sanchez et al., 2020). Universities in Ethiopia often demonstrate their commitment to social responsibility through their mission and vision statements. Understanding how CSR initiatives contribute to a positive image is crucial for sustaining and operating in the education sector. Therefore, this study focuses on private universities in Ethiopia to examine the impact of CSR on their image, primarily using structural equation modeling (SEM). This research is crucial for enhancing social responsibility practices in the private education sector and suggesting areas for further study (Pacesila, 2018; Pacesila et al., 2025).

Most past studies have concentrated on reputation outcomes and the significance of other CSR issues, but the image of a university is a key factor in shaping students' perceptions (Alhaza et al., 2021; Haza et al., 2022). Therefore, image is an essential outcome of CSR initiatives. Universities' efforts to enhance their competitiveness in the educational sector directly influence their image. For example, positioning accredited programs effectively helps retain current students and attract new ones. Image is the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions individuals hold toward an organization (Patlan and Martinez, 2017). CSR practices have a substantial positive direct effect on a university's image (Hafez, 2018). However, previous research has focused on broad CSR dimensions, leaving the contributions of specific CSR sub-constructs unclear. At the global level, HEIs face intense competition, which forces them to increase their efforts to maintain a competitive position, directly influencing their image (Alhaza et al., 2021). Understanding how CSR dimensions such as economic, employee, social, and environmental aspect affect a university's image is critical. We conducted the research at three selected universities chosen because they have served in teaching, research, and community service for nearly 25 years in Ethiopia. This selection ensures access to relevant opinions about CSR and its impact on university image. Private university education is a marketable service (Gutierrez-Villar et al., 2021). While previous studies have shown that overall CSR contributes to a good image, this study examines the specific influence of CSR sub-constructs on image and ranks the extent of impact of each CSR form. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

How does the economic aspect CSR influence image in private higher education sector?

What is the influence of employee aspect CSR on image in private higher education sector?

How does social aspect CSR influence image in private higher education sector?

What is the impact of environmental aspect of CSR on image in private higher education sector?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical concepts

Organizations and society recognize that ethical and social behavior plays a vital role in good business practices (Barber and Venkatachalam, 2013). There are various theoretical approaches to CSR, and among these, stakeholder theory offers a framework to understand how institutions prioritize and work toward the well-being of their stakeholders (Lau, 2014). CSR inspires institutions to engage in balanced and consistent social responsibility toward customers, employees, society, the environment, and other stakeholders. Based on this framework, CSR sub-constructs commonly include economic, employee, social, and environmental dimensions. Further, CSR defined as comprising four types of responsibilities: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic (Carroll, 1991).

Researchers widely apply Carroll's pyramid of social responsibility to the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Leko Simic et al., 2022). At the base level of this model, economic responsibility emphasizes meeting customer needs while achieving desired financial performance (Fedotova et al., 2023). Institutions produce positive outcomes when their actions align with and fulfill stakeholder expectations (El-Kassar et al., 2023). Consequently, organizations that fulfill more stakeholder expectations tend to enhance their image. While organizations are committed to CSR efforts to fulfill stakeholder expectations, these efforts can significantly enhance their image. Jones (2005) suggests that the brand benefit stems from the link between the brand and its stakeholders. Legitimacy theory supports this by explaining the existence of a social contract between the organization and its stakeholders (Economides, 2018). The theory asserts that a social contract exists between business and society (Ordonez and Lytras, 2020). According to Olateju et al., (2021), strong CSR performance contributes to institutional legitimacy, reduces risks, and increases returns. These theories highlight the importance of studying CSR's impact on institutional image, encouraging further research on CSR sub-constructs and their effects on stakeholder engagement.

In the context of HEIs, CSR efforts can improve institutional image and attract students (Kucerova et al., 2016). The image of a university comprising the impressions it creates is essential for improving its competitive position (Esen, 2019). University facilities, services, and social activities play key roles in shaping university image (Nguyen et al., 2023). This requires empirical investigation to assess how CSR sub-constructs impact university image in this context.

Private HEIs often use their unique image to create differentiation in competitive environments (Chiguvi and Tadu, 2020). A good image is an intangible resource that supports strategic positioning (Gutierrez-Villar et al., 2022). CSR contributes to competitive advantage by developing intangible assets that are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate (Mohtsham Saeed and Arshad, 2012). In today's environment, organizations consistently seek competitive advantage for effective management (Traverso et al., 2012). CSR offers this advantage when stakeholders recognize both its economic value and significance, requiring institutions to promote CSR strategies (Marakova et al., 2021).

2.2. University image

The image of an organization reflects individuals' perceptions of the environment in relation to the organization's operations (da Costa et al., 2018). There is a growing body of research addressing the factors that shape the image of private universities, where image serves as a key asset for institutions to differentiate their products from those of their competitors. As such, it would be useful for managers to have appropriate measuring techniques for distinct contexts (Gutierrez-Villar et al., 2022). According to these authors, variables such as product features and relative price represent the functional image, while brands that satisfy customers create a positive image representing the affective image. This implies that economic CSR influences the organization's image. This notion extends further, and CSR practices consist of social, economic, and sustainability efforts in the university context (Ayele, 2022).

The primary objective of building a strong image is to form an affirmative attitude toward universities among stakeholders and society, based on the services offered and their core functions. The image of HEIs significantly influences student loyalty (Leonnard et al., 2015). Research shows that a positive image helps institutions differentiate themselves and gain a competitive advantage (Panda et al, 2019). University image

also influences students' enrollment intentions, their decisions to continue studying at the institution, and the retention of talented individuals. Therefore, university managers should view their institution's image as a critical element of their long-term marketing strategy (Schlesinger, 2023).

Due to the increasingly competitive environment in the HEI marketplace, colleges and universities gain significant benefits from successful branding (Hemsley-Brown, 2016). The author also notes that firms and managers eagerly develop distinctive images held by stakeholders to enhance their reputation in this highly competitive global environment. Image is a critical factor in the legitimacy of a university's identity (Amani, 2024). A higher education institution's (HEI) image reflects its credibility, prompting universities to invest in CSR initiatives that demonstrate their commitment to financial performance and sustainability. CSR programs thus play a crucial role in enhancing an institution's image (Pratihari and Uzma, 2019).

3. HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Research indicates that university social responsibility has a positive effect on the quality of life in the community through research and social action (Peric and Delic, 2016). However, studies have not sufficiently explored the relationship between CSR and image in the university setting, which this research aims to address. Phan et al. (2021) suggest that organizations build their image by focusing on customer and stakeholder interests. Organizations enhance their image and achieve a competitive advantage by actively considering stakeholders, including employees, social and environmental concerns, and economic aspect CSR (Kucerova et al., 2016; Al Mubarak et al., 2019; El-Kassar et al., 2023).

3.1. Economic responsibility and image

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a key factor in shaping a company's image and overall success (Maruf and Afeez, 2013). Research shows a strong link between CSR and organizational image (Esen, 2019), which reflects clients' perceptions of an organization (Dapi and Phiri, 2015). CSR positively influences corporate image (Esmailpour and Barjoei, 2016) and can serve as an effective marketing strategy to enhance reputation and increase revenue (Wang, 2017). Evidence also shows a direct and significant effect of CSR on corporate image (Hafez, 2018), including in the hotel sector of Pakistan, where economic CSR notably improves image (Chen et al., 2021).

Despite this, the relationship between economic CSR and image in higher education remains unexplored. University social responsibility correlates with positive perceptions of quality (Latif et al., 2021), including program excellence, fair treatment, better infrastructure, and a supportive working environment are all aspects of economic responsibility. Image is a critical factor for students across various types of universities within the services marketing model (Brown and Mazzarol, 2006), making the study of CSR's impact on HEI image essential. In this context, CSR activities may include fair tuition fees and scholarships (Othman and Othman, 2014), with the economic dimension often taking precedence over other CSR aspects (Junior et al., 2019). Economic responsibility may also involve tailored programs and fostering positive relationships among internal stakeholders (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). Therefore, the study hypothesizes that:

H1: Economic aspect corporate social responsibility has a positive influence on image

3.2. Employee aspect CSR and image

Few past studies have investigated CSR sub-constructs and their impact on image in different settings. Regression analysis of Ala'Eddin et al. (2016) concluded that CSR dimensions, such as vision and workplace culture, positively affect the image of private hospitals. Another study extended CSR dimensions to a different context, suggesting that banks should first achieve a strong internal performance, including governance integrity and a reputation as a good employer (Ruiz and Garcia, 2021). University social responsibility related to employees enhances staff commitment and retention (Ikram et al., 2021), which can subsequently improve the organization's image.

Successful businesses not only focus on economic success but also operate with the purpose of creating value for clients, employees, society, and promoters (Freeman and Moutchnik, 2013). Al Mubarak et al. (2019) reported that CSR has a significant impact on image, according to Carroll's model, though employee CSR was

not included in the research model. Employee aspect CSR has a positive effect on image among employees in small-medium enterprises setting (Ozcan and Elci, 2020). Employee CSR initiatives include fair treatment and offering training and growth opportunities in the university context (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2021). CSR programs related to employees help build employee trust, which is vital for long-term sustainable performance (Yan et al., 2022). A desired image of HEIs builds through fair employee treatment and growth opportunities (Bialon, 2012). Based on this theoretical foundation, the study hypothesizes:

H2: Employee aspect corporate social responsibility has a positive influence on image

3.3. Social aspect CSR and image

In relation to social issue of CSR, Philanthropic CSR has emphatic positive influence on image (Ahmad et al., 2016). Philanthropic dimension represent supporting programs benefiting society (Singh et al., 2021). Arguably, philanthropic aspect more related with activities towards society through donation such as supporting community project and educational facilities to schools in university context. Differently, literature shows that philanthropic CSR did not affect the image (Chen et al., 2021). These authors conclude that no causal relationship exists between CSR and image. In contrast, other studies show that social responsibility has the highest effect on image (Sharabati et al., 2023). This inconsistency in results motivates further study. Universities provide knowledge to students, support local startups, and encourage entrepreneurship (Eromafuru et al., 2023). They also engage in community development and tend to contribute positively to their local communities (Chen and Vanclay, 2023). These activities may assist universities in creating a positive image. Therefore, this research examines how the social sub construct of CSR influences image in the private higher education context in Ethiopia. Based on this, the study formulates the following hypothesis:

H3: Social aspect of corporate social responsibility has a positive influence on image

3.4. Environmental aspect CSR and image

Environmental friendliness is a key aspect CSR in HEIs (Salvioni et al., 2017). Previous studies have reported conflicting findings on the relationship between CSR components and organizational image. For example, one study found that environmental responsibility, as a specific CSR component, negatively affects image (Sharabati et al., 2023), while another suggested that CSR activities, in general, tend to enhance image (Ahmad et al., 2016). This discrepancy calls for further investigation. Latif et al. (2021) noted specific CSR activities in the context of environmental protection, such as preventing pollution, encouraging staff and students in environmental initiatives. In higher education, environmental responsibility includes activities such as waste minimization, environmental protection activities, recycling, and green practices, as listed by Kucerova (2016), which improve image. Green practices influence organizational image (Fosu et al., 2024). In another research context, literature concluded that environmental CSR is important in creating an attractive image (Alam and Islam, 2021). In the study context, it is suggested that the environmental aspect of CSR increases the ranking of the organization (Bannier et al., 2022), because environmental responsibility activities lead to positive perceptions among stakeholders. In line with the conceptual background, the following hypothesis is developed:

H4: Environmental aspect of corporate social responsibility has a positive influence on image

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study investigated the impact of various CSR sub-constructs on the university's image. We developed a hypothetical conceptual framework and tested it empirically using AMOS 23 (Figure 1). Value creation for stakeholders remains the primary aim of CSR (Van Wyk and Venter, 2022). This research bases its framework on stakeholder theory, focusing on key CSR sub-constructs such as economic, employee, social, and environmental responsibilities (Do et al., 2023). CSR plays a crucial role in creating an attractive image (Virvilaite and Daubaraitė, 2011). Previous studies have established the relationship between CSR and image in different contexts (Hafez, 2018; Al Mubarak et al., 2019). University image is important noted by Alhaza et al., (2021), and argued that image is influential factor on university legitimacy and identity (Amani, 2024). Thus, examining the extent to which CSR sub-constructs influence university image is relevant. Understanding which CSR practices improve a university's image can help inform university strategies. RBV concept supports image

can be intangible resource that can provide competitive advantage to attain organization success (Chiguvi and Tadu, 2020).

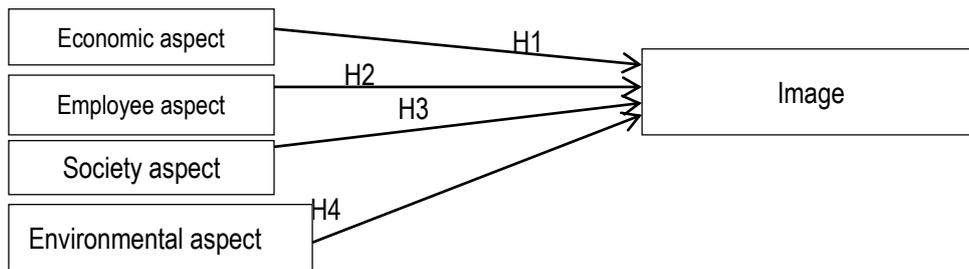


FIGURE 1.1 - HYPOTHESIZED MODEL
Source: Own elaboration from literature

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive research design to investigate the role of CSR sub-constructs in shaping the image of private universities in Ethiopia. A descriptive research design is useful for obtaining detailed information about a phenomenon as it naturally occurs, providing a snapshot of the current situation (Siedlecki, 2020). This research design supports the understanding of CSR's impact on university image. As such, the study follows a descriptive research approach combined with a quantitative methodology. The quantitative approach is suitable for testing theories by examining the relationships between variables (Cresswell, 2009). Quantitative research investigates the links between and among variables, so that quantitative expression of data pattern helps to address research objective offer and evaluate the hypotheses (Adebiyi and Abayomi, 2016). This study was conducted between January 2023 and May 2023 in purposively selected private universities specifically Unity, Saint Mary and Rift Valley universities in Ethiopia engaged in educational activity for almost 25 years. The assumption is better experience of the universities in various forms of CSR activities compared to less experienced universities.

5.1. Population, sampling and method of data collection

The target population for this study includes permanent academic staff at various levels and students from the aforementioned private universities. Most researchers typically conduct studies using samples drawn from the target population (Banerjee and Chaudhury, 2010). We determined the sample size using the formula suggested by Cochran (1977), considering the total target population. Stratified and convenience sampling ensured adequate representation from each university. The researcher collected 410 completed questionnaires, achieving a 91.5% response rate, which formed the dataset for analysis.

The researcher collected primary data at a single point in time using structured questionnaires. A pilot study with 10% of the sample validated the survey instrument. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to capture responses and identify trends relevant to the research questions. We also sourced secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, books, and other scholarly materials to complement the primary data.

5.2. Measures

The study derived measures for CSR sub-constructs from previous relevant research. For instance, Latif et al. (2021) explored how universities can enhance student loyalty through social responsibility, service quality, customer satisfaction, and trust. Environmental friendliness was adapted from prior studies (Salvioni et al., 2017). Although the questions originated from existing studies, some items constructed with slight modification to fit the specific research context.

The image constructs initially included four items based on previous studies: recommendations of the university to others, a high image, a positive image, and preference over rival institutions. In the final structural model, it comprised three items with factor loadings above 0.5, consistent with prior research (Ahmad et al., 2016; Hafez,

2018) examining CSR's impact on image in other contexts. The researchers adapted the items to fit the study context

All latent constructs measured using a five-point Likert scale items, totaling 30 questions, excluding demographic items. Experts reviewed the questionnaire to ensure content validity and suggested necessary modifications. A pretest survey confirmed that respondents understood the questions and could answer them accurately. After removing items with factor loadings below 0.5, the final analysis included 24 items.

5.3. Data analysis

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the effect of CSR on university image. Specifically, it examined the causal relationships between the CSR dimensions of economic, employee, social, and environmental aspect and university image. The study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to assess the influence of CSR dimensions on private universities' image. SEM is widely used in social science and management research to evaluate theoretical models empirically (Maruf and Afeez, 2013). The analysis conducted using AMOS software, version 23. The study established the analytical model as follows to indicate the causal relationship between CSR components and image.

$$Image = constant + \beta_1 economic\ CSR + \beta_2 employee\ CSR + \beta_3 social\ CSR + \beta_4 environmental\ CSR + \varepsilon$$

Economic aspect CSR denotes initiatives towards economic responsibility

Employee aspect CSR represents CSR initiatives towards employee

Social aspect CSR refers CSR activities towards society

Environmental aspect CSR denotes CSR activities towards environmental aspect

ε represents the error term, accounting for any unobserved variables that may affect the outcome

6. RESULTS

This research analyzed 410 questionnaires collected from private universities to examine how CSR dimensions such as economic, employee, social, and environmental aspect affect institutional image. The model estimation used the maximum likelihood method. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) evaluated the proposed theoretical model using AMOS 23 before conducting SEM analysis. Hypothesis testing followed. The analysis first presents respondent characteristics, then the overall CSR practices, CFA results, and hypothesis testing.

6.1. Profile of respondent description

The respondents' ages ranged from 18 years to 40 years and above. Among the respondents, 182 (45%) were male and 223 (55%) were female. The majority had a master's or PhD qualification, accounting for 211 (90.9%), while 194 (47.8%) held a first degree or diploma. Higher qualifications increase the reliability of responses regarding CSR practices. According to analysis, 195 (48.1%) respondents were from Saint Mary University, 179 (44.2%) from Rift Valley University, and 31 (7.7%) from Unity University. In this study, 217 (53.6%) were students and 188 (46.4%) were academic staff.

6.2. Descriptive statistics result of CSR practice and image

To assess CSR practice, the study employed a Likert scale composed of multiple items averaged to represent each construct, where the computed average score indicates respondents' views (Alkharusi, 2022). The averages generated after transforming the Likert scale data using SPSS 23. A five-point interpretation scale was applied based on the suggestion of Linder and Linder (2024), in which strongly agree corresponds to: 5 to 4.51, agree to 4.5 to 3.51, neutral to 3.5 to 2.51, and strongly disagree to 1.5 to 1. All CSR dimensions had average values above 3.5 (Table 2).

Respondents agreed that universities make significant efforts to fulfill stakeholder interests and influence economic, social, and environmental outcomes. They acknowledged that universities formulate and implement social responsibility strategies in line with stakeholder expectations across all CSR dimensions. Institutions use these practices to strengthen their public image. The findings further indicate that universities consider CSR as

part of a social contract, actively interact with society, and apply these engagements to preserve legitimacy. These results confirm that the public perceives the institutions in a positive manner. Overall, universities appear to practice CSR strategically to enhance their social position, which contributes directly to competitiveness.

6.3. Confirmatory factor analysis

Measurement model

Confirmatory factor analysis evaluated the measurement model for fit, reliability, and convergent validity using standard criteria. A CMIN/DF value of three or less indicates good fit, GFI, AGFI, CFI, IFI, and TLI values should be at least 0.90, RMSEA should not exceed 0.08, and RMR should not surpass 0.05. The initial model failed to meet these criteria because of weak measurement items, as shown by CMIN = 746.080, CMIN/DF = 1.889, GFI = 0.891, AGFI = 0.872, CFI = 0.892, TLI = 0.881, IFI = 0.893, RMSEA = 0.047, and RMR = 0.035 (Figure 2). Table 1 and Figure 3 show that removing items with factor loadings below 0.50 produced a revised model with satisfactory fit. The final model indices CMIN = 427.03, CMIN/DF = 1.765, GFI = 0.919, AGFI = 0.900, CFI = 0.929, IFI = 0.930, TLI = 0.919, RMSEA = 0.044, and RMR = 0.032 confirm that the model accurately represents the observed data.

Table 2 presents construct reliability and convergent validity. Composite reliability values exceeded 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. The composite reliability values exceed 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency. Average variance extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.39 to 0.45 are considered acceptable, given the high composite reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). All items loaded above 0.50 on their respective constructs, confirming convergent validity and a single factor structure (Hair et al., 2008). Cronbach alpha values exceeded 0.60, confirming the reliability and internal consistency of the scales (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). These results establish the measurement model as reliable and valid, providing a solid foundation for testing the hypothesized relationships.

TABLE 1 - FIT INDICES FOR CFA MODEL

Index of fit	χ^2	DF	χ^2/DF	GFI	AGFI	CFI	IFI	TLI	RMSEA	RMR
Score	427.03	242	1.765	.919	.900	.929	.930	.919	.044	.032

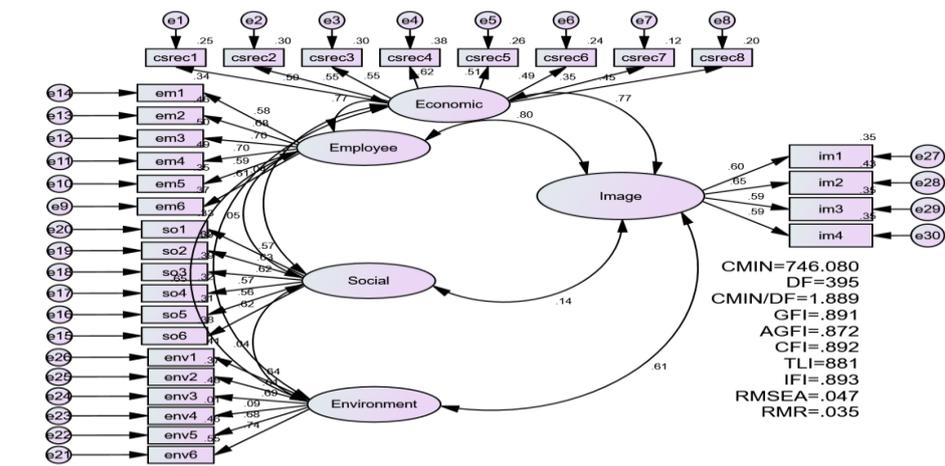


FIGURE 2 – INITIAL MEASUREMENT MODEL

Normality test

As seen in Table 2, in this research descriptive statistics of all uni-variate Skewness and Kurtosis value is within the range of ± 2 that ensures normality distribution of data (Hair et al, 2022).

TABLE 2 - FIVE LATENT CONSTRUCT MEASUREMENT MODEL BASED ON CFA

Construct	Measures	Standardized factor loading	Transformed mean value	Cronbach CR	Skewness	kurtosis
Economic	csrec2	.537	3.96	.705	0.66	-.28
AVE=0.39	csrec3	.595				-.29
						-.55

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	csrec4	.676				-.29	-.66
	csrec5	.500				-.74	.15
Employee	em1	.589	3.80	0.80	0.81	-.48	-.574
	em2	.673				-.46	-.219
AVE=0.42	em3	.701				-.50	-.340
	em4	.697				-.48	-.256
	em5	.598				.020	-.575
	em6	.610				-.584	-.057
Social	so1	.571	3.60	0.76	0.77	-.149	-.42
	so2	.628				-.173	-.533
AVE=0.41	so3	.626				-.19	-.697
	so4	.568				-.14	-.355
	so5	.554				-.16	-.610
	so6	.615				-.07	-.569
Environment	env1	.641	3.60	0.79	0.80	-.141	-.44
	env2	.604				-.267	-.46
AVE=0.45	env3	.695				-.138	-.40
	env5	.680				-.242	-.37
	env6	.742				-.122	-.41
Image	im1	.52	3.90	0.61	0.62	-.242	-.741
AVE=0.40	im2	.61				-.245	-.935
	im4	.52				-.535	-.280

Discriminant validity

The heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT) utilized to evaluate discriminant validity. According to Henseler et al. (2015), HTMT provides a more reliable and unbiased assessment than traditional methods. An HTMT value below 0.85 indicates no discriminant validity concerns, whereas values above 0.9 indicate a problem (Ni et al, 2023). All HTMT values in this research ranged between 0.037 and 0.69 (Table 3), confirming that discriminant validity was achieved.

TABLE 3 - DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY BASED ON HTMT RATIO RESULT

	1	2	3	4
Economic aspect CSR				
Employee aspect CSR	0.69			
Society aspect CSR	0.06	0.05		
Environmental aspect CSR	0.51	0.64	0.037	

6.4. Structural model

After confirming the measurement model, the structural model tested the hypothesized relationships between CSR components and institutional image. Path analysis using AMOS 23 estimated the magnitude and significance of these effects.

Hypothesis testing (Path analysis)

The structural model results are shown in Table 4 and Figure 3. The study evaluated the hypotheses based on the correlation results and the path coefficients presented in Table 4. The study confirms the hypothesized positive relationship between CSR dimensions and university image.

Employee related CSR (H2) exerts the strongest influence on image ($\beta = 0.547, p < 0.001$). This dimension includes training and development, fair treatment and salary, and creating better work environment, showing that investing in employees substantially enhances university's image.

THE IMPACT OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY ON IMAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

Economic aspect CSR (H1) also positively and significantly affects image ($\beta = 0.331, p < 0.05$). Its dimension covers accredited programs, tuition fee management, and better facilities, indicating that responsible economic aspect practices contribute meaningfully to the university's image.

Social aspect CSR (H3) exerts a smaller but significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.115, p < 0.05$). Its sub-dimensions, community service, community development, and supporting local schools, highlight the importance of social engagement in shaping the university's image.

Environmental aspect CSR (H4) shows a positive relationship with image ($\beta = 0.111, p > 0.05$), although the effect does not reach statistical significance. This dimension includes engagement in green programs on campus and in surrounding university areas, encouragement of staff and student participation in environmental initiatives, efficient resource utilization, and appropriate waste management, indicating a positive but relatively weaker influence on image.

Overall, the study confirms H1, H2, H3, and H4, with the strength of influence depending on from employee, economic, social, to environmental aspect CSR.

TABLE 4 -STRUCTURAL MODEL RESULT

	Path in the model	Unstandardize d Estimate	Standardize d Estimate	SE	CR	p	Remark
H1	Image <--- Economic	.41	.331	.138	2.943	.003	Accepted
H2	Image <--- Employee	.51	.547	.118	4.330	***	Accepted
H3	Image <--- Social	.11	.115	.055	1.98	.048	Accepted
H4	Image <--- Environment	.09	.111	.068	1.299	.194	Accepted

Squared multiple correlation (R²)

As illustrated in Figure 3, the R squared value for the image construct is 81 percent. This indicates that the four CSR dimensions, economic, employee, social, and environmental, explain the image construct. The remaining 19 percent reflects the influence of factors not included in this study. Figure 3 and Table 4 also present the CFA results, including standardized regression weights and fit indices, which illustrate the relationship between CSR variables and image.

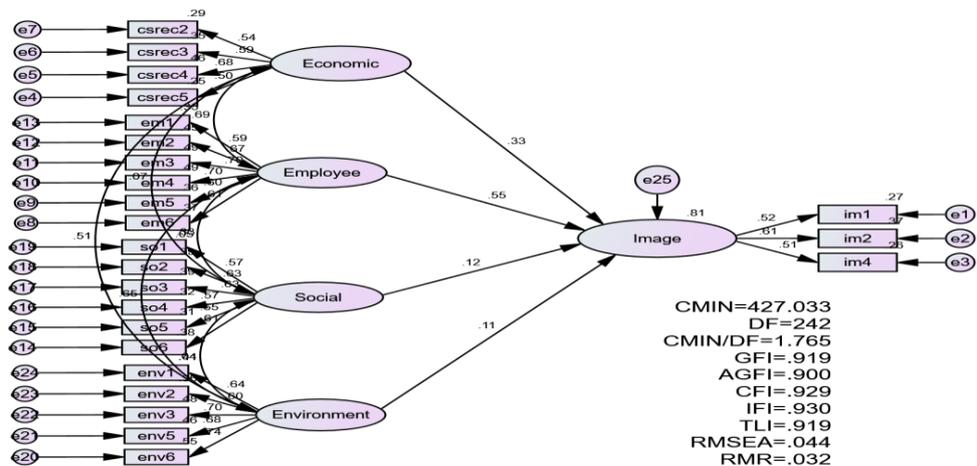


FIGURE 3 - STRUCTURAL MODEL BASED ON SEM.

The unstandardized coefficients show the expected change in image resulting from a one-unit increase in each predictor while keeping the others constant (Table 4). The regression model for predicting image from CSR dimensions expressed as follows:

$$\text{Image} = .35 + .41 (\text{economic CSR}) + .51 (\text{employee CSR}) + .11 (\text{social CSR}) + .09 (\text{environmental CSR}) + .04$$

This equation highlights the relative impact of each CSR dimension on image. Employee CSR exerts the strongest influence, followed by economic, social, and environmental CSR. The high R^2 value of 0.81 indicates that the four CSR dimensions collectively explain a large share of the variance in image. In conclusion, the regression analysis demonstrates that employee, economic, and social CSR significantly influence image, whereas environmental CSR has an insignificant influence.

7. DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated the impact of CSR dimensions on the image of private higher education institutions (HEIs) in an emerging economy. Universities adopt various approaches to enhance the significance of CSR practices (Rahman et al., 2019). The findings offer valuable insights into how CSR sub-constructs influence institutional image. The results confirm that institutions are actively engaged in CSR practices across the economic, employee, social, and environmental dimensions, with the overall mean score for these four CSR dimensions consistently above average. These findings suggest that institutions are committed to pursuing CSR initiatives that align with stakeholder interests while developing and implementing strategies aimed at improving their public image. Additionally, institutions recognize that their social responsibility activities contribute to building a positive public image, which, in turn, attracts more customers. The image of HEIs plays a crucial role in enhancing stakeholder loyalty (Leonnard et al., 2015), and effective CSR practices enable institutions to maintain growth (Anute and Ingale, 2019). Ultimately, CSR initiatives help institutions gain a competitive advantage through an established and positive image (Kumar and Sing, 2022).

7.1. The effect of CSR sub constructs on image

The research confirms the validity of the hypotheses developed in the conceptual model, showing that CSR dimensions related to economic, employee, social, and environmental aspects positively influence the image of universities. These findings align with prior research (Al Mubarak et al., 2019), where CSR programs focusing on employee, economic, and social responsibility create a positive institutional image, which serves as a long-term competitive advantage. A positive image helps institutions distinguish themselves in a competitive higher education market (Panda et al., 2019).

The results indicate that employee-oriented CSR exerts the strongest positive and significant influence on the organization's image, followed sequentially by economic and then social responsibility initiatives, both of which produce significant positive effects. The findings of this study contrast with the prior work of Sharabati (2023), who argued that social responsibility has the greatest impact on image, followed by ethical and economic factors.

Employee-related CSR activities play a significant role in shaping the institution's image. Providing fair salaries, opportunities for training and growth, and ensuring a healthy work environment all contribute to building a positive image. These findings confirm the results of studies by Ala'Eddin et al. (2016) as well as Ozcan and Elci (2020), showed that employee-oriented CSR initiatives positively influence organizational image.

Further, the results of this study align with those of Al Mubarek et al. (2019) and Chen et al. (2021), which showed that the economic dimension of CSR positively and significantly influences organizational image. The current study found that when institutions engage in economic CSR, particularly by offering accredited programs, reasonable tuition fees, and improved facilities, these practices help strengthen their positive image.

The study also supports the findings of Ahmad et al. (2016) and Sharabati et al. (2023), showing that social CSR practices have a positive and significant influence on image. Universities' socially responsible actions, such as engaging in community service, supporting local schools, and participating in community development projects, significantly boost their image. These actions are crucial for enhancing the institution's image. CSR remains a key factor in maintaining the viability and competitiveness of universities (El-Kassar et al., 2023). However, this finding contradicts the study by Chen et al. (2021), who found that philanthropic activities had no effect on image.

Regarding environmental CSR, the results of this study contradict the findings of Sharabati et al. (2023), who reported that environmental responsibility has a negative impact on institutional image. However, this research partially supports the findings of Alam and Islam, 2021 (2021), who suggested that environmental CSR

contributes positively to building a strong image. The study reveals that while environmental responsibility initiatives have a positive but insignificant influence on image, the activities in this area are still relatively minor and insufficient, to significantly affect the university's image. It is likely that universities engage less in environmental CSR because their operations do not have a substantial negative impact on the environment. However, the results imply that universities should increase their environmental initiatives, as they can potentially enhance institutional image and improve organizational rankings (Pratihari and Uzma, 2019).

This study explains its findings using the Resource-Based View (RBV). From this perspective, university image constitutes an intangible resource that institutions strengthen or weaken through their engagement in CSR practices. Institutions with a strong CSR-focused image can build stronger relationships with stakeholders, creating a bridge between the university and society based on mutual understanding (Singh and Misra, 2022). This, in turn, helps universities differentiate themselves from competitors, giving them a competitive advantage in a crowded educational market. The image of the institution influences the selection process of prospective students. CSR is an integral component of organizational success, and the image created through CSR can strengthen a university's competitive position in the market (Maruf and Afeez, 2013). Thus, CSR is a strategic tool for enhancing the image of institutions in the higher education context.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the descriptive and structural equation modeling analysis, several key conclusions and recommendations can be drawn. First, the research confirms that the existing CSR activities in private universities, concerning employee, economic, social, and environmental dimensions, are positive and help to achieve their CSR objectives.

The findings validate that the CSR sub-constructs related to employee, economic, and social responsibilities have a positive and significant impact on institutional image, in that order. CSR practices that focus on meeting the initiatives towards employees, economic, and society have a tangible influence on stakeholder perceptions. As a result, university administrations should prioritize these factors to gain a competitive advantage over other institutions. In contrast, environmental CSR activities were found to have an insignificant impact on image, suggesting that universities should enhance their CSR initiatives in this area.

To enhance public acceptance and build a positive image, universities should integrate CSR programs into their strategies, strengthening the legitimacy of their operations and their identity, particularly by focusing on employee-related CSR practices followed by economic and social aspect of CSR. The stronger the university's image, the more it influences the community to spread positive experiences about the institution, leading to better university selection decisions based on a strong image.

8.1. Contribution and implication

Previous studies have emphasized the direct relationship between CSR and reputation, as well as financial performance. This research is among the few that focus on the impact of CSR on the image within the higher education context of an emerging economy. In particular, there has been limited empirical research on the link between CSR sub-constructs (economic, employee, social, and environmental) and image. The findings of this study have important implications for top management when considering CSR strategies to improve the institutional image in HEIs.

The results should help practitioners and managers related to marketing and CSR administration to better understand how CSR initiatives strategically contribute to the creation of image and lead to organizational success. University image has a positive and significant influence on performance (Sunardi, 2019). A key takeaway for institutional management is that universities should pay attention to CSR activities and implement them with a focus on stakeholder expectations, particularly regarding employee, economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Jones (2005) recommends that brand benefits are derived from the connection between a brand and its stakeholders. Image is one of the intangible resources that enhance the competitiveness of HEIs (Maduro et al., 2018). CSR programs, when driven by institutions, positively influence image. Institutions should focus on CSR to survive and compete in the higher education sector. Clients prefer organizations committed to implementing CSR practices (Kumer et al., 2025).

Overall, institutions are encouraged to consider the factors discussed in this research and perform consistent CSR practices for the welfare of stakeholders to strengthen their university image.

8.2. Limitations and further research

While this study offers important insights, there are some limitations:

The research focused exclusively on private universities in Ethiopia. Future research should consider expanding this scope to include universities in other emerging economies to generalize the findings.

The study only included academic staff and students, excluding the perspectives of other key stakeholders such as administrators, alumni, and community members. Future research should include these groups to provide a more holistic view of CSR's impact.

This study used a quantitative approach. Future studies could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative techniques like in-depth interviews or focus groups to gain deeper insights into CSR practices and their impact on university image.

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