



# Can Socially Responsible Foreign Firms Attract Local Talents? \*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Drawing upon signaling and social identity theories, this study explores the effect of engagement in CSR activities by foreign firms on applicants' intention to apply. Furthermore, this study suggests CSR education as a moderator which strengthens the positive effects of the engagement in CSR activities on the intention to apply for potential job seekers.

**Research design, data, and methodology** – One hundred and ninety-one undergraduate students were solicited to participate in this study. Participants were randomly assigned to two scenarios depicting different levels of a given foreign firm's engagement in CSR activities. After reading the given scenario, respondents answered a series of questions on their intention to apply to the foreign organization.

**Result** – The results from hierarchical regression reveal that Korean applicants have a more favorable perception of a foreign firm which performs engagement in positive CSR activities. Moreover, the positive effect of the engagement in CSR activities on the intention to apply has a greater impact for Korean applicants who had CSR education.

**Conclusion** – The result indicates that foreign firms could overcome the liabilities of foreignness and attract local talent effectively, by engaging in CSR activities. Moreover, this study suggests the important role of CSR education, and significantly contributes to the international recruiting literature.

**Keywords:** CSR Activities, CSR Education, Intention to Apply

**JEL Classification Code:** M16, M31.

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## 1. Introduction

The need to attract and retain key local talent has become a critical issue if multinational corporations (MNCs) are to succeed in the world (Hong & Kim, 2017; Hassan & Kodwani, 2018). MNCs compete to hire local employees because attracting local talent signals potential future success in host countries. Furthermore, recruiting and retaining top local talent can be a way for foreign firms to achieve sustainable competitive advantages in host countries, because local employees' know-how, knowledge, experience, and skills are intangible resources necessary to compete with domestic competitors. Despite the high demand for key local talent, foreign firms often suffer from the liability of foreignness (LOF) when recruiting local employees in host countries (Newbury et al., 2006). Specifically, foreign firms often lack embeddedness in terms of local culture, knowledge, and institutions, compared to domestic firms (Zaheer, 1995). For example, Mezias (2002) found that foreign firms in the U.S. do not know enough about US labor practices and legal systems, leading to more labor lawsuits. Likewise, local job seekers are generally less likely to be attracted to foreign firms (Hong & Kim, 2017). Following this line of reasoning, one of the key concerns for foreign firms is how to attract as many qualified local job seekers as possible in order to survive in host countries. Applicant attraction refers to the degree to which future employees regard a company as a good place to work (Bauer & Cable, 2001), and it is closely related to potential employees' actual job choices (Chapman et al., 2005). However, few studies in the recruitment literature have investigated applicant-attraction strategies when it comes to local talent (Newbury et al., 2006; Baum & Kabst, 2013; Held & Bader 2016). Therefore, this study investigates organizational and individual factors affecting local job seekers' attraction to foreign firms.

The popularity and importance of the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has continued to grow in both academic and practical fields over the last two decades (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Organizations are also well aware of its importance to various organizational outcomes, such as performance, corporate image, and organization attractiveness (Lievens, 2016). CSR refers to firms' consideration and fulfillment of responsibilities to stakeholders in various environments in terms of economics, ethics, law, and philanthropy (Carroll, 1991). Because future employees can become stakeholders of the firm, CSR is a predictor that can influence job pursuit intentions (Greening & Turban, 2000; Kim & Park, 2011; Duarte et al., 2014; Hong & Kim, 2017). According to signaling theory, potential applicants use a variety of information as signals when judging an organization (Ryne, 1991). Thus, the CSR practices of organizations can be used as a positive signal for evaluating working conditions, which can enhance job pursuit intentions (Greening & Turban, 2000). Also, social identity theory argues that individuals strive for a positive social identity, so potential job seekers are attracted to socially responsible firms (Turker, 2009). However, there is a lack of studies on how CSR practices by foreign firms affect local job seekers' choices. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of CSR on prospective employees' intentions to apply for a job based on signaling and social identity theories.

Individuals may differ in how they respond to CSR activities of organizations based on individual values, experiences, and knowledge about CSR (Greening & Turban, 2000; Evan & Davis, 2011; Hassan & Kodwani, 2018). Among these individual differences, CSR education can be one potential moderator that affects job pursuit intention. The knowledge from education about CSR may result in the processing of in-depth information. Thus, individuals who receive CSR education may pay more attention to CSR activities by foreign firms, which may increase job pursuit intention. Based on this reasoning, the second purpose of this study is to investigate the moderating effect of CSR education on job pursuit intention.

This paper makes several considerable contributions to the field of international recruitment. First, this study proposes that CSR practices may serve as an overcoming strategy for foreign firms wanting to attract local job seekers in the host countries. Previous recruitment studies in the literature only address domestic firms' strategies to attract potential job seekers. However, it is necessary for foreign firms to find a strategic way to attract local job seekers to overcome their LOF (Zaheer, 1995). Thus, by suggesting CSR activities as an overcoming strategy for foreign firms when recruiting local job seekers, this study contributes an international recruitment strategy. Second, this paper applies signaling and social identity theories to explain how local job seekers are highly likely to pursue foreign firms that engage in CSR activities. Many scholars in the recruitment literature call for more theories to explain how to attract job applications. Thus, by applying those theories in explaining applicant attraction, this study contributes to the recruitment literature. Third, this study identifies CSR education as knowledge that might help amplify the positive effects of CSR activities on job-pursuit intentions in local job seekers. Since knowledge acquired from education makes information processing more accurate, individuals who receive CSR education may pay more attention to a firm's CSR activities, which can increase intentions to ask for a job. Thus, by suggesting CSR education as a potential moderator, this study examines individual differences in the effects that CSR activities have on job seekers' intentions to apply.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we review the relevant literature that underpins the concepts of CSR and CSR education, and intentions to apply for work. Next, we present the hypotheses and an analysis. Then, we present key findings and explain the results. Finally, we provide the theoretical and empirical implications, along with some limitations to this study.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### 2.1. Literature Review

#### 2.1.1. Intention to Apply

Intention to apply for a job vacancy is defined as a future job applicant's willingness to pursue a job and accept a job offer (Barber & Roehling, 1993). Potential applicants' intention to apply is a very important indicator in the recruitment literature, because it is one of the determinants for a potential applicant's actual job choice (Turban et al., 1998; Van Hoye & Saks, 2011). Attracting as many potential applicants as possible in the first recruitment process can maximize the effectiveness of the selection system. Therefore, it is crucial to attract prospective job seekers in today's war for talent. Among the many predictors, including organizational attributes and job characteristics, previous studies found that potential applicants have shown a greater intention to apply at firms engaging in socially responsible practices (Turban & Greening, 1997). In general, foreign firms are likely to be limited in their knowledge about doing business (compared to domestic firms) in many ways, including attracting local talent. Furthermore, local job seekers might not have as much information about foreign firms compared to domestic firms. Consequently, it will be much harder for foreign firms to attract local talent in host countries. However, engaging in CSR practices can be one strategy for attracting prospective local employees to foreign firms. In this study, we examine the effect of CSR practices by foreign firms on potential local applicants' intention to apply. Moreover, we further investigate the moderating effect of CSR education in the relationship between CSR activities and the intention to apply, as shown in Figure 1.

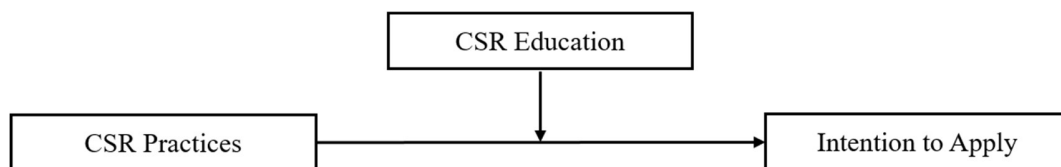


Figure 1: Research Model

### 2.2. Hypotheses Development

#### 2.2.1. Corporate Social Responsibility

The effects of CSR practices have been widely investigated for several decades in both academic and practical fields. Although there is no consensus regarding the definition of CSR, it often refers to an organization's actions, or to their attention to economics, the law, ethics, and philanthropy (Carroll, 1991). The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) officially defines it as "the continuing commitment by a business to contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the community and society at large" (WBCSD, 2013). Because the future workforce can also be an important group to be cared for by companies with CSR practices, job applicants have shown positive attitudes toward companies' CSR activities in the recruitment literature (Greening & Turban, 2000; Kim & Park, 2011; Hong & Kim, 2017).

Signaling (Rynes, 1991) and social identity theories effectively explain in previous studies why job seekers are highly likely to be attracted to companies engaging in CSR practices. In the initial process, job seekers are not able to get complete information on the firms they apply to. Hence, they try to gather whatever information related to the firm they can get for an accurate judgment. The information they use would include campus recruiting activities, organizational characteristics, company reputation, web searches, and CSR activities. Consequently, the information will be used as signals to evaluate the overall quality of the organizations, influencing their intention to apply. Among many cues, CSR activities can serve as an indicator of the overall quality of an organization (Duarte et al., 2014). That

is, potential applicants may judge that socially responsible firms will offer more advanced business standards, agreeable values and norms, and good working conditions, compared to firms without CSR activities. Thus, prospective applicants seem to have more willingness to pursue a job at firms they perceive to be more socially responsible than at companies they consider less socially responsible. Social identity theory further supplements the notion of a positive relationship between CSR activities and recruitment effectiveness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). According to the explanation, people are prone to offer self-descriptions from among various social contexts, and to define themselves under different classifications (Dutton et al., 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Every person has memberships in distinct social categories, such as political affiliation, nationality, or even as a sports fan. Social identity is an individual's social categorization that describes one's self-image (Turker, 2009). An organization can also be a social category that people perceive they belong in. In general, people strive for a positive social identity, and the organization they belong to will help describe their social identity. Thus, people may want to be associated with more socially responsible firms rather than less responsible firms because they believe that belonging to such an organization can enhance their own social identity. Consequently, future employees will have a greater intention to apply to organizations that engage in CSR activities.

The effects of CSR activities on a job seeker's intention to apply will be more dominant with foreign firms, compared to domestic firms. Foreign firms appear to have disadvantages in hiring local employees, compared to domestic firms, because they suffer the liability of foreignness in host countries (Zaheer, 1995; Newburry et al., 2006). Also, potential job seekers can hardly ever get complete information at the initial job choice stage, as mentioned above, and it will be even harder to access information about foreign firms. Under such conditions, foreign companies' engagement in CSR practices may be notable for potential local job seekers, and because of such activities, job seekers will evaluate the overall working conditions of foreign companies positively. Also, because future local employees prefer to have a positive social identity, CSR activities by foreign companies will increase their intention to apply. Based on the above arguments, we suggest:

**Hypothesis 1:** The level of engagement in CSR activities of foreign firms will be positively associated with potential local job seekers' intention to apply.

### 2.3. Individual difference in CSR Education

Individuals differ in terms of values, norms, characteristics, and experiences. While CSR activities and organizational cues directly affect a potential local job seekers' intention to apply, individuals' reactions to CSR may differ based on the extent to which they have received CSR education. That is, not all potential job seekers react in the same manner to contextual cues (Evan & Davis, 2011). According to signaling theory, potential applicants often gather whatever information is available to develop their view of an organization in the first stages of the job choice (Greening & Turban, 2000). Potential job seekers are confronted with obscure information signals when judging the overall working conditions of organizations (Ryne, 1991; Gatewood et al., 1993). Specifically, if prospective job seekers are not familiar with the CSR concept, they may not be concerned about CSR activities by firms when judging the overall conditions in an organization. Hence, it is expected that education about CSR may help them interpret information about CSR practices in their job choice decisions (Evan & Davis, 2011). The structure of knowledge is a mental template composed of the things individuals are exposed to, in an information context, to give their lives meaning and form (Walsh, 1995). Therefore, potential job seekers are highly likely to engage in structured information processing when they have basic knowledge about an organization (Zalesny & Ford, 1990). Thereby, CSR education should help them to conduct a more accurate analysis and to make value judgments about the CSR practices by firms. Consequently, it is assumed that future employees who have received some CSR education will be better at recognizing that engaging in CSR is positive for society and employees. Therefore, the CSR practices of firms will be used as a positive signal for judging working conditions, and can enhance job pursuit intention. Evan and Davis (2011) showed that CSR education had significant effects on the job choice decisions from among 141 US university students. Also, Hassan and Kodwani (2018) emphasized the role of CSR education on organizational attractiveness to job seekers. As an extension, job seekers who received some education in CSR will use CSR practices by foreign firms as a positive signal in evaluating overall working conditions. In general, job seekers are less attracted to foreign firms, compared to domestic firms (Newburry et al., 2006). In such conditions, it is highly likely that foreign firms with CSR activities will leave a more positive impression, particularly for those who have received some CSR education.

Based on the above argument, it is expected that a positive effect on job pursuit intention from CSR activities by foreign firms will be stronger for local job seekers who have received CSR education that enhances their familiarity with CSR concepts, compared to those who have not received it.

**Hypothesis 2:** CSR Education will moderate the relationship between the engagement of CSR practices and intention to apply such that, the engagement in CSR activities will have a greater positive influence on the intention to apply for individuals who receive CSR related education than for those who do not receive it.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants and Procedure

Undergraduate students enrolled in upper-level management classes at Korea University were solicited to participate in this study. Participation was voluntary, and responses were kept confidential. One hundred and ninety-one students participated in the study. The average age of participants was 24.2 years (SD = 2.11), and 63.9% (n = 122) were male.

Participants were randomly assigned two scenarios depicting different levels of a given foreign firm’s engagement in CSR activities. One scenario included corporate information on engagement in positive CSR activities, and ninety-five participants were assigned to this scenario. The other scenario conveyed corporate information on engagement in negative CSR activities, and this scenario was allocated to ninety-six participants. Each participant received a packet containing instructions, an individual information survey, and a scenario card. After reading the scenario, respondents were asked to imagine themselves as job seekers preparing to interview with a foreign organization possessing the characteristics depicted in the given scenario. Participants were asked to answer a series of questions on their intention to apply to the foreign organization, and to check manipulation items regarding their recognition of the level of engagement in CSR activities in the given scenario.

**Table 1:** Measurement Model Results

Measurement items	Factor loading	Cronbach’s $\alpha$
<b>Intention to apply</b>		0.953
I would be interested in pursuing a job application with this company.	0.956	
I would work for this company.	0.961	
I would exert a great deal of effort to work for this company.	0.933	
If several companies offer me a job, I would choose this company preferentially.	0.898	

#### 3.2. Measures

This study adapted measure of intention to apply from Greening and Turban (2000) and Evans and Davis (2011). A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was used to assess job-pursuit intention and job-offer-acceptance intention. Overall intention to apply was computed as the mean value of four items ( $\alpha = 0.953$ ). Because CSR and CSR education were categorical variables, dummy codes were created: 0 = engagement in negative CSR activities and 1 = engagement in positive CSR activities; 0 = no CSR education and 1 = CSR education.

Two variables were included as controls: age and gender (Turker, 2009). Age was measured by the natural logarithm of participants’ ages. Dummy codes were created for gender: 0 = female and 1 = male. Construct-level correlation coefficients between these focal variables and descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 2.

#### 3.3. Manipulation Check

To verify whether the manipulation was successful, participants were asked to assess the foreign company’s engagement in CSR activities after reading their scenario. Participants’ perceptions of the foreign company regarding engagement in CSR activities were measured using multiple items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 =

strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Six items were used to measure the participants' recognition for the level of engagement in CSR activities ( $\alpha = 0.981$ ) (Turban & Greening, 1997; Hong & Kim, 2017).

A series was created for ANOVA to assess whether the level of engagement in CSR activities was successfully manipulated. Participants who read scenarios for engagement in positive CSR activities perceived such engagement more favorably than participants who read scenarios for engagement in negative CSR activities ( $M_{negative\ CSR\ activities} = 1.46$ ,  $M_{positive\ CSR\ activities} = 4.06$ ;  $F(1, 189) = 896.20$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This significant result shows that manipulation of the level of engagement in CSR activities was successful.

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	3.182	0.086	1.000				
2. Gender	0.640	0.482	0.407	1.000			
3. CSR	0.503	0.501	0.016	0.080	1.000		
4. CSR education	0.424	0.496	-0.006	-0.060	-0.057	1.000	
5. Intention to apply	2.283	1.092	-0.027	0.040	0.710	-0.040	1.000

#### 4. Results

To confirm the proposed hypotheses, this study conducted hierarchical regression that included age and gender as control variables, CSR as an independent variable, CSR education as a moderator, and interaction between CSR and CSR education. Table 3 shows that CSR had a significantly positive effect on intention to apply ( $\beta = 1.546$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This result reveals that Korean applicants have a more favorable perception of a foreign firm that engages in positive CSR activities. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Hypothesis 2 was supported, predicting a positive interactive effect from CSR and CSR education on intention to apply, because the CSR x CSR education interaction was a significant predictor of intention to apply ( $\beta = 0.456$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\Delta R^2 = 0.008$ ). This result indicates that the positive effect from the level of engagement in CSR activities on intention to apply had a greater impact for Korean applicants who had CSR education.

**Table 3:** Results of Hierarchical Regression

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	4.320 (3.188)	3.062 (2.252)	3.062 (2.258)	2.692 (2.248)
Age	-0.668 (0.139)	-0.489 (0.717)	-0.489 (0.719)	-0.364 (0.716)
Gender	0.139 (0.181)	-0.003 (0.128)	-0.003 (0.129)	-0.038 (0.129)
CSR		1.548 (0.112)	1.548*** (0.113)	1.546*** (0.112)
CSR education			0.000 (0.114)	0.011 (0.113)
CSR x CSR education				0.456* (0.228)
Adjusted $R^2$	-0.007	0.498	0.496	0.504
$F$ value	0.368	63.906***	47.673***	39.551***

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Managerial and Academic Implications

To achieve and maintain competitive advantage in the global market, firms may need to manage human resources effectively. In particular, the need to attract and retain local talent could be a key strategic factor for foreign firms competing with local firms. However, because of LOF (Newburry et al., 2006; Zaheer, 1995), it is common for foreign companies to struggle with recruiting local talent. Therefore, this study empirically examined CSR activities and CSR education, which may help foreign firms to overcome the disadvantages in recruiting local job seekers. By investigating such factors, this study contributes significantly to the international recruiting literature. First, drawing upon signaling (Ryne, 1991) and social identity theories (Turker, 2009), we explain how CSR activities and CSR education have positive effects when recruiting local candidates. Specifically, individuals evaluate firms with whatever information is available, and in such conditions, CSR activities by foreign firms can send positive signals. Also, individuals prefer firms that engage in CSR activities because they believe those organizations represent their social identity. This responds to recent calls for more theories explaining how individuals are attracted to firms (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005).

Second, this study suggests that engagement in CSR activities might help foreign firms to attract local talent. In the recruiting context, potential job seekers are attracted to a socially approved firm they expect to enjoy working for. As shown in the results, potential applicants are more attracted to a foreign firm that engages in positive CSR activities, because they perceive the given firm as a more attractive place to work. The result suggests that foreign firms could engage more actively in CSR activities to overcome LOF. As a crucial signal, CSR activities could provide foreign companies with the opportunity to build reliability and trust, which can increase their attractiveness. Providing information on the organization's attributes, and communicating its engagement in CSR activities might help to increase the applicant pool and recruitment effectiveness. Thus, including information about CSR activities in recruitment messages could be a relevant approach for foreign firms.

Finally, this study considered the moderating role of individuals' differences in CSR education. The results indicate that the influence of the engagement in CSR activities by foreign firms on potential applicants' intention to apply was more pronounced for individuals who had received CSR education. This result is consistent with Evans and Davis (2011), who found that CSR education is associated with perceived corporate citizenship, and such perceived corporate citizenship has a greater influence on job applicant attraction in individuals who received CSR education than for those who did not. When individuals have the experience of receiving education related to CSR, they are more likely to interpret new information about a foreign firm based on accumulated knowledge from educational contents. Since CSR education leads to systematic information processing of CSR-related information, the effect of information about the level of engagement in CSR activities might be greater on behavior intentions such as potential job seekers' intention to apply to a firm.

### 5.2. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, this study conducted a scenario-based experimental design, and participants were asked to imagine themselves as applicants preparing for a job interview with a given foreign company. While this study suggests that engagement in CSR activities by foreign firms overcomes LOF and attracts local talent, the scenarios were set solely with foreign firms. In order to provide more substantial evidence, a future study could include an additional scenario based on a hypothetical situation for a domestic firm, comparing the different effects from engagement in CSR activities between a foreign firm and a domestic firm. Furthermore, potential employees could expect different levels of engagement in CSR activities from a foreign firm compared with a domestic firm. According to Newburry et al. (2006), even foreign-headquartered companies that offer better benefits than domestic firms (e.g., higher wages, or health and retirement benefits) may have difficulty overcoming LOF, and are less attractive to local applicants. Further study could be conducted to examine the different levels of engagement in CSR activities between a foreign firm and a domestic firm.

Second, the scenario in this experimental study included sufficient information on CSR activities based on Carroll's (1979) study, which consisted of four domains: economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities. However, to examine the exact role of engagement in CSR activities when attracting local talent, it would be worthwhile classifying CSR activities into internal CSR and external CSR, and comparing different effects between them from the engagement in CSR activities. CSR activities can be internal or external, depending on the target stakeholders (Kim et al., 2010). Internal CSR activities can be related to benefits for stakeholders like the owners themselves or

employees, customers, and suppliers. On the other hand, external CSR activities are socially responsible practices related to external stakeholders, including governments, special interest groups, competitors, environmentalists, and the media. Even though all stakeholders are important enough to be taken into consideration, it will be beneficial to provide strategic ways to effectively attract local talent by examining the relative importance to potential applicants of internal CSR activities compared to external CSR activities.

Lastly, for measuring CSR education as a moderator, participants were asked whether they had ever taken any education related to CSR, and dummy codes were created: 0 = no CSR education and 1 = CSR education. Because CSR education might provide specific knowledge and information, and could help potential applicants with a more systematic processing of CSR-related information, this study expected that the engagement in positive CSR activities would have a greater influence on the intention to apply for a job in applicants who have experience in CSR education than in applicants who have not received any education related to CSR. However, this approach could not control the quality or quantity of CSR exposure. To determine the role of CSR education more precisely, future studies could conduct a manipulated setting: an experimental group that receives CSR education related to CSR activities contained in a given scenario, and a control group that received no CSR education. In a similar approach, future studies could measure the amount of CSR education, or the time it was received. Applicants who had more CSR education or received it more recently could be more attracted to a foreign firm that actively engages in CSR activities.

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