




Review of Corporate Social Responsibility in East Africa: Current State and Future Research Directions

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Abstract. Although Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) research has gained global scholarly attention, its application in developing countries, particularly East Africa, remains limited. This study examined the state of CSR research and practices in East Africa through a systematic literature review using the PRISMA framework, covering the period from 2009 to 2025. A total of 82 high-quality, peer-reviewed journal articles from the Scopus database were analysed. The findings indicate a gradual increase in CSR publications, from 2 to 9 articles per year. CSR research in East African region is heavily dominated by social dimensions (79.3%), with comparatively limited focus to environmental (12.2%) and ethical (8.5%) aspects, indicating a community- and philanthropy-oriented approach to CSR. Qualitative methods were most commonly used, followed by quantitative and mixed methods. Research outputs were fragmented across journals, with no dominant outlet. Theoretical foundations were largely drawn from stakeholder, legitimacy, institutional, and shareholder theories. This study focused on Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. The study concludes by recommending broader research and methodological approaches and the inclusion of additional databases to strengthen CSR knowledge in the region. **Keywords:** Autism Spectrum Disorder, Augmented Reality, Gamification.

Keywords: Environmental, Social, Governance, Developing economies.

1 Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a fundamental element in the framework of sustainable business practices, emphasizing the moral responsibility of businesses to positively influence society and the environment [1]. Over time, CSR has evolved from a primarily philanthropic concept into a structured system that incorporates Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) components. Although ESG originated in the 1970s from the financial sector, focusing on environmental and social concerns among investors [1], the concepts of CSR and ESG are often used interchangeably in academic and practitioner discourse, despite their conceptual differences.

CSR is generally characterized as an internal, voluntary initiative that prioritizes ethical business conduct and community engagement. On the other hand, ESG offers a broader external oriented framework for evaluating a company's sustainability performance across environmental, social, and governance factors [3]. Although their origins, scope, and applications differ, both CSR and ESG share a common objective of promoting sustainable and ethical business practices. As such, organizations worldwide have integrated ESG principles to maintain competitiveness in a rapidly changing business landscape [4].

This paper focus primarily on CSR rather than ESG, particularly in the East African context. While ESG is recognized as a key global metric for corporate sustainability, CSR remains a more suitable and practically applicable framework within developing countries such as Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Most of these countries face resource constraints and distinct socio-economic challenges that often limit the applicability of ESG measures, hence making CSR a more flexible and responsive approach [5].

Although CSR has been extensively examined in developed countries such as North America and Western Europe, scholarly attention to its application in developing economies particularly in East Africa remains comparatively limited. Moreover, research indicates a significant imbalance in the conceptualization of CSR within developing countries, highlighting the need for CSR frameworks that cater specifically to local contexts [6, 7]. Notably, studies have shown that charitable practices are more prevalent in developing economies compared to their advanced counterparts [8, 9].

Existing CSR studies within the African continent have predominantly focused on regions like West and South Africa, leaving a substantial gap in the literature on sub-Saharan regions such as East Africa, particularly Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda [10, 11]. Recent reports indicate that only 5% of CSR research focuses on East Africa, with limited empirical attention on Tanzania and Uganda [12]. Given the shared socio-economic challenges such as poverty, inequality and unemployment together with abundant natural resources and distinctive regulatory environments, these East African countries their present a compelling motivation to investigate CSR practices and their broader implications. Accordingly, this paper undertakes a systematic review and synthesis on CRS literature in East Africa with the objective of mapping existing research trends, methodological and theoretical orientations, publication patterns and local level differences, as well as identifying knowledge gaps, and future research directions in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. This study represents the first rigorous systematic review of CSR scholarly research in East Africa and a response for more detailed analyses of CSR in underrepresented regions [13, 14]. Ultimately, the paper contributes to the CSR research landscape by offering valuable insights for both scholars and practitioners seeking to deepen their understanding of CSR trends and knowledge in East Africa, while also providing a roadmap for future research endeavours.

2 Methodology

This study employed PRISMA framework to guide the systematic review of the literature. PRISMA is widely recognized for its comprehensive and thorough reporting standards, particularly in the conduct of systematic reviews [15].

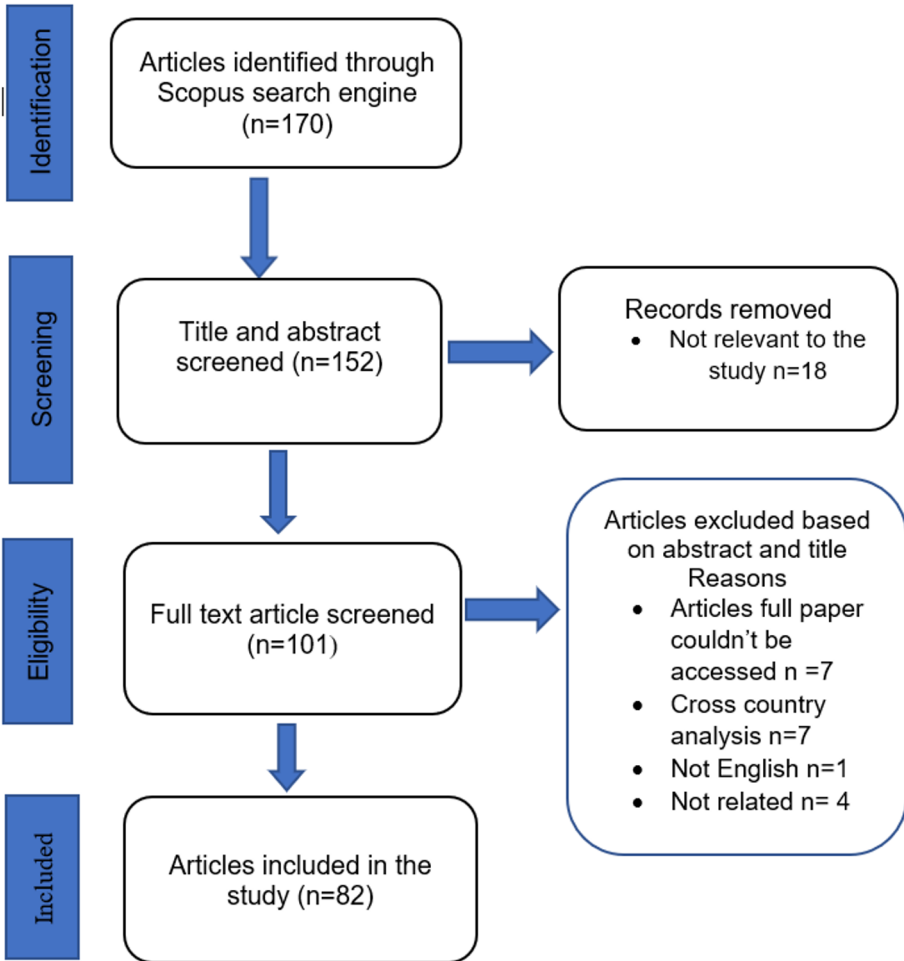


Fig. 1. The journal collection process according to the Prisma flow diagram

Its structured approach provides a standard methodology that contributes to the quality assurance of the revision and replication process. Accordingly, the systematic review clearly delineated the article selection criteria, search strategy, data extraction methods and analytical procedures used to synthesize the findings. A total of 82 articles were coded using predefined coding scheme. These articles were selected from 170 records retrieved from Scopus database (Fig 1). Each article was thoroughly reviewed to capture various aspect of the papers such as theoretical framework, methodologies and geographical scope. The coding covered publication type and year, authorship, citation frequency, institutional affiliation, methodological approaches, country or region of focus, CSR dominant themes and theoretical perspectives. Methodologically, articles were categorized as qualitative or quantitative and further coding by specific methods such as case studies, surveys, focus group, observations and secondary database. Articles were also coded by geographical scope to examine emerging trends of CSR as suggested by [16] and to assess the prevalence of CSR theories in East Africa

3 Results and discussion

This section presents and discusses the key findings derived from the analysis of the reviewed literature. The studies examined were published across a range of scholarly outlets, including peer reviewed journals and book chapters. In total, 82 articles drawn from 62 journals were analysed. Of these, 62 articles (75%) were peer reviewed journal publications, 17 (21%) were book chapters, and 3 (4%) were review articles. On average, each journal counted to 1.3 articles ($SD=1.2$). The review is guided by seven research questions, which are addressed in the subsequent sections and provide the structure and analytical focus of the review.

3.1 What has been the frequency of publication over the study period in the region?

Figure 2 illustrates the trend of publication on CSR in the region over the study period, revealing an overall gradual increase in publication and scholarly output. This increasing trend reflects growing academic and corporate attention to sustainability, ethical business practices and ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) reporting [17]. Moreover, such interest has been reinforced by regulatory pressures including EU's Non-Financial Reporting Directive of 2014 and other global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The lowest publication output was recorded in 2013 where only 1 article (1%), a decline that can be attributed to the post-2008 global financial crisis, where corporate and

research priorities shifted toward economic recovery [18]. In contrast, the year 2020 marked the highest in terms of number of publications in the region (Figure 2), likely driven by the expansion of ESG investments and mandatory CSR disclosures which intensified further research and scholarly dissemination in the field [19].

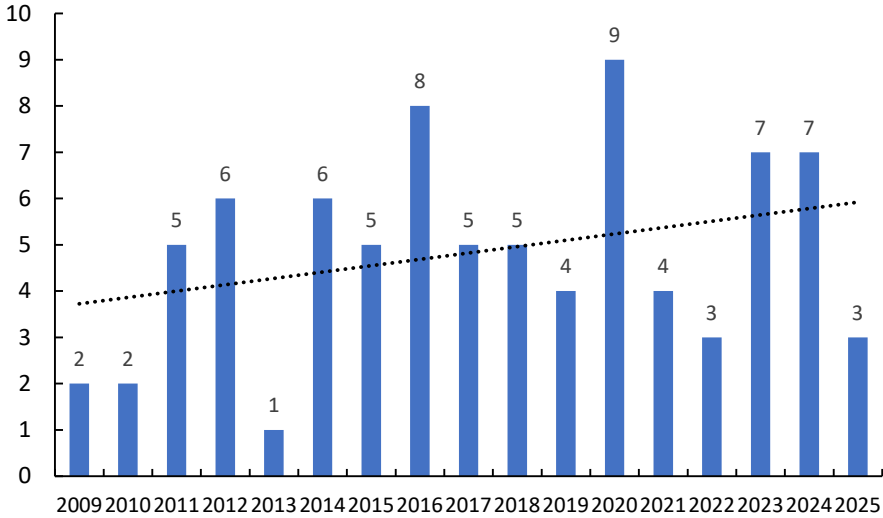


Fig. 2. Trend of frequency of publication over the study period in East Africa

3.2 What has been the focus themes of corporate social responsibility knowledge in the region?

Table 1 presents the distribution of CSR focused articles published between 2009 and 2025 across East Africa countries by themes. The findings indicate a strong dominance of the “social dimension” which accounted for 65 of the 82 articles (79.3%). On the other hand, environmental themes were addressed in 10 out of 82 articles (12.2%) while ethical consideration featured in 7 articles (8.5%).

Table 1: Dominant CSR themes and type of methods used in the study in East Africa

CSR themes	the-	Total (%)	Methodologies		
			Qualitative (%)	Quantitative (%)	Mixed (%)

	82 (100)	51(62.2)	21(25.6)	10(12.2)
Social	65(79.3)			
Environ-	10(12.2)			
ment				
Ethics	7(8.5)			
Methodology data context				
Kenya		17(20.7)	8(9.8)	3(3.7)
Uganda		9(10.9)	5(6.1)	4(4.9)
Tanzania		25(30.5)	8(9.8)	3(3.7)

This pattern aligns with prior studies suggesting that overwhelming dominance of social themes in developing countries reflecting contextual realities, including widespread poverty, environmental challenges and governance constraints [16, 20]. As such, CSR remains the preferred terms in describing the role of business in addressing immediate social needs [21, 22]. Consistent with this perspective, both [23] and [24] argue that in Africa, CSR is frequently community-centric especially in developing economies where CSR is often perceived as charity or social investment rather than sustainability or ethics. Moreover, prior research by [9] noted that African CSR studies often overlook climate change and eco-initiatives in favour of social development.

3.3 What has been the nature of CSR research methods in East Africa?

Table 2 summarises the types of research methods employed in CSR studies in East Africa. The analysis reveals a clear predominance of qualitative studies, with 54 studies adopting qualitative methods, compared to 20 quantitative studies and only 8 studies employing mixed methods. Mixed methods represent the least utilized approach within the reviewed literature. However, the distribution among quantitative and mixed methods studies remains uneven, underscoring the limited methodological diversity in the region.

The strong inclination toward qualitative methodologies particularly case studies approach in CSR research in East Africa is arguably not surprising. These findings are in consistency with Amos (2018) who found an over whelming emphasis on qualitative (81%) compared to quantitative methods (19%) in CSR research.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the number of articles that applied qualitative research methodology is high suggesting that CSR focused on developing countries seem to embrace empirical analysis as emerging stream of research within the body of CSR. This observation is consistent with [8], who characterize CSR research in East Africa as an emerging stream

of research. Given the contextual relevance of CSR practices [25], researchers have widely relied on case study methodologies to generate in-depth insights on the field [20].

In contrast, the review by [26] indicated that quantitative methods dominated CSR research globally, accounting for 80% of empirical studies. Similarly, [16] in their review of international management research published between 1998 and 2007, reported a dominance of quantitative approaches with 75% followed by qualitative studies (51%). Hence, these findings suggest that the analysis of CSR is still embryonic and thus empirical methods have not yet been resolved [27].

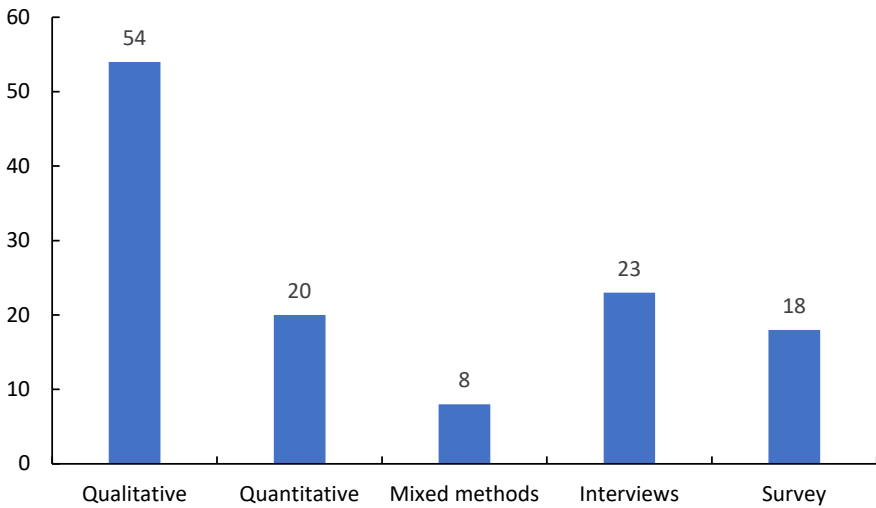


Fig. 3. Type of methods used by different publication over the study period in East Africa

3.4 Which are the most preferred journals for Corporate Social Responsibility articles in East Africa

The influence and dissemination of CSR knowledge in East Africa is assessed by examining journals into which the CSR have been published. Descriptive analysis indicates that journals focusing on CSR, sustainability, ethics and governance accounted for the highest number of publications, with 10 articles (12% of the total sample) published in these outlets (Figure 4). This finding aligns well with [20] who reported a high concentration of CSR publications in sustainability-oriented journals, noting that approximately 75 percent of CSR articles appeared in such journals, often through special issues. This pattern contrasts

with earlier reviews by [16] and [26], which found that international management journals were the most prevalent outlets for CSR research, accounting for approximately 26 percent of published CSR articles. These studies highlighted journals in international business and human resource management as dominant publication venues, reflecting a more management-centric orientation in earlier CSR scholarship.

Within the reviewed sample, the *Journal of Business Ethics*, *The Extractive Industries and Society*, *Social Responsibility Journal* and *Journal of Business Ethics* each published three articles (Figure 4), collectively accounting for nine articles (11 percent). Furthermore, the *Journal of African Business*, *Cogent Business & Management*, *International Journal of Social Economics*, *Management for Professionals* and *Resources Policy* each published two articles (Figure 4), contributing a total of 10 articles (13 percent). Notably, the remaining 53 peer-reviewed journals—representing 64 percent of all publications—each published only one CSR article during the study period. This highly dispersed distribution suggests that CSR research in East Africa is fragmented across a wide range of journals, with no single dominant outlet beyond sustainability-, ethics-, and governance-oriented journals. Such fragmented publication patterns are widely recognized as characteristic of emerging or interdisciplinary research fields, where scholarly work spans multiple disciplines and thematic domains.

Overall, the absence of a clearly dominant journal underscores both the interdisciplinary nature of CSR research in East Africa and the evolving status of the field. While this diversity enhances intellectual breadth, it also points to the need for stronger consolidation of CSR scholarship within dedicated or regionally focused academic outlets.



Fig. 4. Distribution of number of articles among the reviewed journals in East Africa

Moreover, study reveals the studied articles and books i.e., 82 had a total of 1397 citations. Among the studied articles, two articles were the most cited during the study period. These were An Institutional Analysis of Corporate Social Responsibility in Kenya [9] and Virtual moralities: The mainstreaming of Fairtrade in Kenyan tea fields [28] which together constituted almost 10% of all the citations. Other articles with next relative abundance in citations were Corporate social responsibility reporting in the mining sector of Tanzania: (Lack of) government regulatory controls and NGO activism (6%) [29] and A Global Mining Corporation and Local Communities in the Lake Victoria Zone: The Case of Barrick Gold Multinational in Tanzania (5.2%), [30]. Five articles had citations of one each while six had citations of 2 and 14 had no citations at all during the study period.

3.5 What kind of theories were used in the CSR studies?

Furthermore, analysis of theoretical framework revealed that major theories employed in this study were social contrast, legitimacy, shareholders, stakeholders and institutional theories. Among these, stakeholders’ theory was used in 18 articles equivalent to 22%,

shareholders 17 articles (20.7%), legitimacy 17 articles (20.7%), institution 15 articles (18%), social contract 9 articles (10.9%) and other theories 61 articles (74%) (Figure 5). These findings are in agreement with [20] who found that convention group of theories were most used in the study while other theories were less employed.

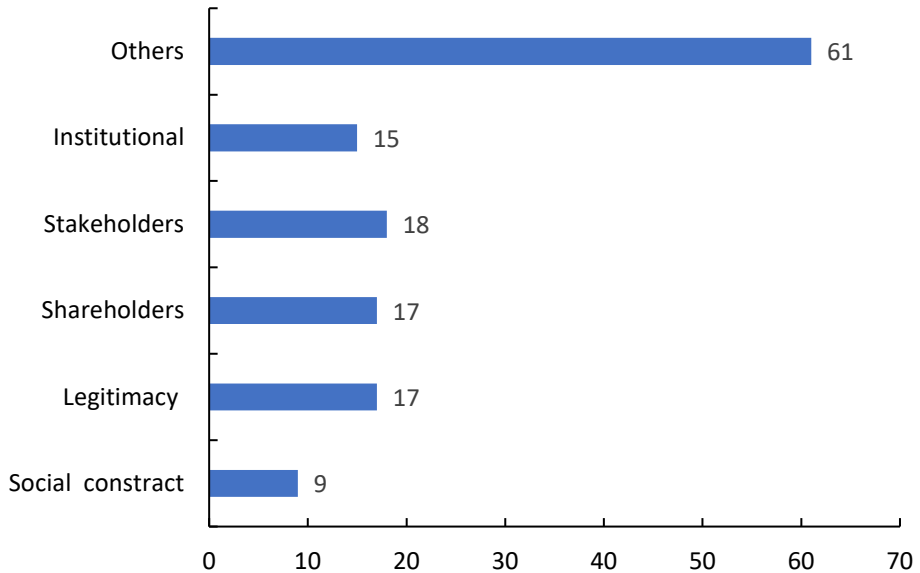


Fig. 5. Theories utilized by the reviewed CSR articles in East Africa

This study employed theoretical frameworks in supporting the findings and conclusions. Following the selected 82 articles, the study articles were grouped into those which used single theory, two theories, three to four theories, articles that used CSR model only and those used both model and theory. Table 2 indicate that over the studied period (2009-2025) CSR research focused on East Africa countries has drawn predominantly on single theory (25 articles), two theories (23) and three to four theories (19) to support the analysis of the finding and conclusions.

The study revealed that the percentage of papers that draw on single theory and those which combine two or more theories have fluctuated over time (2009-2025). The study also revealed that over the study period there has been a lesser emphasis of adopting CSR models to support CSR findings and conclusion as the articles that used CSR model only are 9 (11%) and articles that employed both model and theory are 6 (7%). This may not be surprising given the context specific relevance [21, 22].

Table 2: Theoretical framework employed by the study articles in East Africa

Year of publication	Single Theory	Two Theories	Three to four Theories	CSR model only	Both model and theory	Total
2009	1(4)	0	1 (5.3)	1(11.1)	0	3 (3.7)
2010	2(8)	0	0	0	0	2 (2.4)
2011	2(8)	2(8.7)	1(5.3)	1(11.1)	0	6 (7.3)
2012	3(12)	2(8.7)	0	0	2(33.3)	7 (8.5)
2013	0	1(4.3)	0	0	0	1 (1.2)
2014	1(4)	1(4.3)	3(15.8)	1(11.1)	0	6(7.3)
2015	2(8)	1(4.3)	1(5.3)	0	0	4(4.9)
2016	2(8)	0	4 (21.1)	2(22.2)	0	8 (9.8)
2017	2(8)	0	1(5.3)	0	1(16.7)	4 (4.9)
2018	1(4)	2(8.7)	1(5.3)	1(11.1)	1(16.7)	6(7.3)
2019	1(4)	2(8.7)	1(5.3)	0	0	4 (4.9)
2020	1(4)	5(21.7)	1(5.3)	2(22.2)	0	9(11.0)
2021	2(8)	0	1(5.3)	0	0	3(3.7)
2022	1(4)	0	2(10.5)	0	0	3(3.7)

202	1(4)	3(13.0)	0	1(11.1)	0	5
3)					(6.1)
202	2(8)	3(13.0)	2	0	1	8(9.8)
4)		(10.5)		(16.7)	
202	1(4)	1(4.3)	0	0	1(16.7)	3(3.7)
5						
To-	25(100)	23(100)	19(100)	9(100)	6(100)	82(100)
tal						

Numbers in the brackets indicate percentages (%)

3.6 Are there country differences in terms of publications?

Of the 82 articles reviewed, 35 equivalent to 43% of all articles were focused on Tanzania indicating a strong academic and practical interest in CSR within the country. This could be attributed to Tanzania's growing extractive industries (i.e., mining, oil and gas), which often face scrutiny over social and environmental responsibilities [31].

In addition, Tanzania's regulatory framework and policy environment may have contributed to this research concentration. In this study, Kenya accounted for 28 articles, representing 34% of the reviewed publications (Figure 6). This reflects its position as East Africa's largest economy and a regional hub for multinational corporations actively engaged in CSR.

Similarly, Uganda had a total of 18 articles equivalent to 22% of all published articles (Figure 6) suggesting a growing but comparatively less developed body of CSR research. This suggests more limited academic focus despite the presence of active CSR initiatives, particularly within the agriculture and telecommunications sectors [32]. One article which is 1% of all published articles focused on the three countries (Figure 6) underscoring a significant gap in comparative CSR research within East Africa. Cross-country studies remain limited despite their potential to generate valuable insights into regional patterns, regulatory divergences, and shared socio-economic and institutional challenges [9]. Expanding comparative research would therefore represent an important avenue for strengthening both regional understanding and theoretical development of CSR in East Africa.

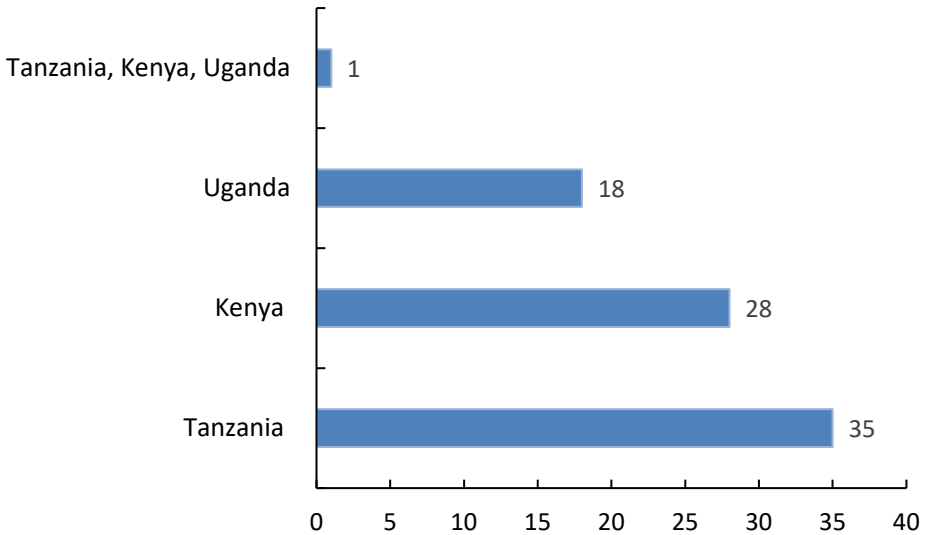


Fig. 6. Distribution of articles found in the review among countries in East Africa

4 Conclusion, Implications and Future Research Directions

This study set out to systematically evaluation CSR research in East Africa by examining the current scholarly state and highlight future research directions for advancing CSR theory and practice in the region. Guided by the PRIMA framework, the study covered a period of 14-year period (2009 – 2025), which is adequate to capture key themes, methodological trends and research gaps, while also allowing for informed projections about the future trajectory of CSR research. The study used rigorous procedures involving critical analysis and structured methodology and therefore obtained findings are reliable.

Overall, there has been a gradual increase in CSR reporting during the study period due to growing academic and corporate awareness. In addition, international requirements for sustainability, ethical business practices and ESG reporting driven by regulatory frameworks like international initiatives such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have also contributed to the rise.

The thematic analysis revealed a strong dominance of the social theme while environmental and ethical themes received significantly less attention. This aligns well with existing literature suggesting that CSR in developing economies like East Africa is largely community-centric, emphasizing philanthropy and social development over environmental sustainability or ethical governance [23]. It appears that qualitative studies predominate in CSR research than studies using quantitative and mixed-methods in East Africa. This suggests that CSR research in East Africa remains emergent and

context-driven, prioritizing nuanced understanding of local socio-economic realities over standardized measurement and generalization.

The analysis further shows that no a single journal dominated CSR publications in the region during the study period. This dispersion suggests that CSR research in East Africa may be highly fragmented, a characteristic commonly observed in emerging or interdisciplinary fields. The institutional, stakeholder and legitimacy theories were the most frequently employed, confirming their centrality in CSR studies.

Geographically, Tanzania accounted for the largest share of CSR publications, representing approximately 43% of the reviewed studies. This dominance demonstrates a strong academic and practical interest as well as supporting policies on CSR, contrary to Kenya and Uganda. This pattern of CSR research may point to variations in cultural, economic and institutional contexts across the East Africa region.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations. The present study is solely based on Scopus database meaning that some CSR articles that are not included in the database might have been left out. Moreover, the search in the database was limited to articles written in English meaning that articles in other languages might have not been captured. Nevertheless, it is widely known that Scopus is one of the largest and comprehensive databases with over 100 million scientific records implying that its use (in this study) has explored almost all available literature on CSR in the region. Any omissions are therefore unlikely to have significantly altered the overall findings.

This study is one of the few in the region to undertake systematic review of CSR knowledge involving 14 years datasets and 3 East African countries. Empirical evidence shows clearly the underrepresentation of CSR research in East Africa as opposed to other African countries such as West and Southern Africa. As such, this study provides a useful guidance for future CSR research focused on East Africa. Looking ahead, future research should build on the methodological and thematic insights generated by this study to further advance CSR scholarship in East Africa. In particular, it is also recommended that future research expands the employed methodology for example by using more than one database to capture emerging issues and enrich the generated knowledge base. The scarcity of mixed-methods studies further indicates missed opportunities to triangulate qualitative depth with quantitative rigor, a gap noted in broader CSR literature. Thus, future empirical studies should consider utilizing mixed-methods approach to enhance our understanding of CSR in the region while remaining grounded in local realities

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