

CSR for internal social enhancement: exploring employees' perceptions of publicly endorsed art and culture projects

Carlotta Magri, Federico Bertacchini, Pier Luigi Marchini and Isabella Mozzoni

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to bridge a gap in literature by exploring the impact of art and culture projects on primary internal stakeholders (i.e. employees), focusing on the micro-foundations of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis uses a qualitative approach, using a single-case study and semi-structured interviews. The single-case study focuses on art and culture projects developed by companies participating in the public contest promoted by Parma City of Culture 2020. The analysis relies on the information gathered from interviews with the employees who were involved in the projects of seven of the winning companies.

Findings – The results suggest that employees positively assess their participation in CSR activities based on art and culture projects. Specifically, through their direct involvement in the competition employees manage to experience meaningfulness and they attribute intrinsic motives to these types of activities.

Originality/value – This study analyses the effectiveness of a publicly endorsed CSR initiative oriented towards internal social enhancement based on art and culture projects, leveraging the unique case of Parma City of Culture 2020. The findings might be beneficial to both companies and regulators aiming to achieve internal social enhancement. This study contributes to existing literature on the social dimension of CSR by emphasising the key role of art and culture projects in the organisational context and by opening new avenues for future research.

Keywords Corporate social responsibility, Work meaningfulness, Intrinsic motives, Social identity theory, Art and culture projects

Paper type Case study

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is crucial for businesses today, as modern society places increasingly greater emphasis on ethical values and sustainability. In this context, regulatory initiatives can play a crucial role in supporting and encouraging the enhancement of corporate performance in the field of social responsibility (Jackson *et al.*, 2020), as well as in the disclosure of information related to these matters (Ali *et al.*, 2017). Typically, the regulator adopts a coercive approach, using laws and measures to ensure companies adhere to specific standards. However, some initiatives can be framed in a different perspective: this is the case of Parma City of Culture 2020. Since 2015, different Italian cities have been elected “cities of culture” by winning an annual public contest, obtaining funds to support culture-based projects. In the case of Parma, these public funds also had to be used to promote the link between business, culture and art. Therefore, Parma City of Culture 2020 (hereafter Parma, 2020) recruited companies located in Parma that were interested in investing in art and culture (AC) projects, leaving them with the choice of which type of project to develop. The AC projects involved some selected employees, all becoming team members without hierarchical distinctions.

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From the perspective of CSR, the companies involved had the opportunity to develop AC projects that could engage their main internal stakeholders. Indeed, besides having a positive effect on shareholder value (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020) and economic performance (Callan and Thomas, 2009; Saeidi *et al.*, 2015), CSR initiatives can have an important effect on employees' organisational commitment (Glavas and Kelley, 2014) and job satisfaction (Valentine and Fleischman, 2008). Moreover, CSR can lead to increased advantages when oriented towards social enhancement (Farooq *et al.*, 2017) and, in particular, towards internal social enhancement (Jo and Harjoto, 2011).

CSR initiatives based on AC projects, which could involve internal or external stakeholders (Iamandi and Constantin, 2012), have yet to receive sufficient attention from both companies and academics. Following the recommendation of Aguilera *et al.* (2007), who underscored the importance of studying the micro-level effect of CSR initiatives on employee perceptions, our study delves into the investigation of how employees perceive publicly endorsed AC projects that involve their active participation. To do so, we analyse the case study of Parma 2020, focusing on the experiences of the employees who took part in AC projects. Ultimately, our results show that internal stakeholders positively assess AC projects, mainly because they perceive it as internally oriented and feel a sense of satisfaction through the direct enjoyment of individual and collective results.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on CSR and corporate cultural responsibility (CCR) in relation to employees, their attitudes and their "creativity". Sections 3 and 4 outline the methodology and findings of this study and then discuss the findings. Section 5 presents the discussion, and Section 6 includes the conclusions of the study.

2. Literature review and theoretical background

CSR encompasses a wide range of voluntary initiatives that are usually undertaken by companies to enhance their relations with internal and external stakeholders (Carroll, 1999). Previous literature has extensively studied the corporate characteristics and external conditions that encourage the adoption of CSR practices (Campbell, 2007; Chih *et al.*, 2010; McWilliams and Siegel, 2001), as well as the determinants of CSR disclosures (Boshnak, 2022; Gamerschlag *et al.*, 2011). Several studies have also attempted to assess whether CSR has an impact on financial performance. While some academics have provided evidence of a positive association between CSR and financial performance (Callan and Thomas, 2009; Nollet *et al.*, 2016), others did not reach the same conclusion (Nelling and Webb, 2009), resulting in mixed evidence. Recently, increased attention has also been given to the indirect benefits of CSR for financial performance. For instance, Saeidi *et al.* (2015) reported that CSR might positively impact financial performance if it enhances competitive advantage, reputation and customer satisfaction. Similar results were also observed by Cantele and Zardini (2018).

Although CSR might not have a direct impact on financial performance, it is indirectly beneficial to companies because it generates benefits for their stakeholders. Indeed, studies have demonstrated that CSR increases shareholder value (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020; Samet *et al.*, 2022) and makes companies more attractive to their current and potential employees (Backhaus *et al.*, 2002; Greening and Turban, 2000). According to Carroll's CSR pyramid (Carroll, 1991), all CSR initiatives can be distinguished based on the category of social responsibility they are addressing. At the top of the pyramid is philanthropic responsibility, which is addressed by CSR practices that promote human welfare and well-being and are oriented towards social enhancement. It has been reported that CSR initiatives oriented towards internal social enhancement are more effective in increasing corporate value than CSR initiatives oriented towards external social enhancement (Jo and Harjoto, 2011).

CSR oriented towards social enhancement, either external or internal, positively affects employees' organisational identification as a consequence of increased prestige and respect (Farooq *et al.*, 2017). With reference to the micro-foundations of CSR, several academics have pinpointed the positive impact of CSR oriented towards social enhancement on different work attitudes, such as work engagement (Chaudhary, 2017) and organisational commitment (Glavas and Kelley, 2014; Pimenta *et al.*, 2024; Turker, 2009). In addition, it has been reported that organisational identification is influenced by employees' perceptions of organisational performance and is more strongly influenced by perceptions of corporate social performance than by their perceptions of corporate financial performance (Carmeli *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, Glavas and Piderit (2009) found evidence of a positive association between CSR and employee engagement, where the latter term refers to a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption" that precedes commitment (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004, p. 295). Organisational trust (Farooq *et al.*, 2014; Hansen *et al.*, 2011; Manimegalai and Baral, 2018), organisational identification (Farooq *et al.*, 2014) and work meaningfulness (Glavas and Kelley, 2014) have been reported to mediate the relationship between CSR and employee attitudes.

A recent stream of literature has studied how CSR's impact on employees varies depending on the motives that employees attribute to CSR practices. Indeed, external and internal stakeholders can attribute the motives behind CSR practices to either intrinsic values (ethical orientation), meaning that companies are not perceived as driven by self-interest, or extrinsic values (reputation and financial orientation), meaning that companies are perceived as pursuing CSR activities only to achieve a financial return. Interestingly, Donia *et al.* (2017) provided evidence of a positive association between employees' attribution of intrinsic values to motives for CSR and positive employee attitudes towards their organisations. In addition, it has been reported that when managers are perceived as charismatic leaders, it is more probable that employees will perceive the motives for CSR as stemming from intrinsic values, which will, in turn, result in increased job satisfaction (Vlachos *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, Donia *et al.* (2019) reported that when employees perceive CSR as important, intrinsic (extrinsic) motives for CSR are positively (negatively) associated with the perception of fit in the organisation. However, Story and Neves (2015) provided evidence that greater financial performance is achieved when employees attribute both intrinsic and extrinsic values to CSR motives.

Considering the topic of art and culture initiatives within the business context, one of the main contributions was provided by Cejudo and Rodríguez-Gutiérrez (2016). The authors developed a framework for analysing corporate performance in the area of culture and fine arts. To this end, their research considered a specific area of CSR called CCR. The model proposed in their paper allows companies to be ranked based on the quality of their CCR while also taking into consideration size and industry aspects. Kohl (2007) studied the level of CCR of nine Austrian enterprises, highlighting the complementary behaviour of these enterprises towards the country with regard to the dissemination of cultural initiatives. Similarly, Iamandi and Constantin (2012) developed an index to account for corporate involvement in artistic and cultural projects. The authors underlined the importance of developing these types of initiatives to meet society's expectations of corporate social engagement. Indeed, organisations sometimes play a crucial role in supporting cultural and artistic activities (Bulut and Bulut Yumrukaya, 2009).

Another stream of research has focused on the topic of employee creativity. Abdelmotaleb *et al.* (2018) underlined the positive impact that being perceived as a socially responsible company has on employee creativity. In addition, Chaudhary and Akhouri (2018) found that employees' intrinsic perceptions of CSR (i.e. internally oriented instead of market oriented) are positively associated with work engagement and creativity. The authors also called for

future research on employees' attributions of CSR as a strategic factor in obtaining real benefits from investments in CSR.

Beyond their role as CSR initiatives, arts-based organisational practices intended as powerful mechanisms for achieving sustainable development, fostering value creation and enhancing business performance, are also gaining recent attention in the academic context (Schiuma, 2011). Carlucci and Schiuma (2018) assert that "arts-based initiatives" might play a pivotal role in today's economic environment, that requires novel solutions to address emerging and demanding challenges. Empirical results support the role of art-based initiatives in generating economic and social value in cultural institutions, such as museums (Azmat *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that artistic interventions strategically employed with the aim of solving organisational problems by encouraging employees to work differently from the ordinary, can be highly effective (Berthoin Antal *et al.*, 2018).

Despite the extensive literature on CSR and the increasing interest in more specific topics related to employees' perceptions, attitudes and creativity, there remains limited knowledge on CSR initiatives based on art and culture projects. Berthoin Antal *et al.* (2018) studied employees' perceptions of their direct involvement in art initiatives; however, these initiatives were specifically aimed at supporting organisational processes and they were not employed for non-opportunistic CSR goals. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have analysed the effects of such projects on employees from a CSR perspective. We aim to bridge this gap by focusing on a particular type of art and cultural project – a publicly endorsed one. This could provide additional practical implications from a business perspective for policymakers and public authorities in general.

Previous research on CSR and work attitudes use social identity theory (SIT) to explain the impact of CSR on employees (Chaudhary, 2017; Farooq *et al.*, 2017; Turker, 2009). According to SIT each individual defines themselves in terms of the category to which they feel they belong; thus, a positive perception of social identity improves the self-perception of the individual (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). SIT asserts that belonging to different social categories dictates individuals' self-perception by defining their attributes, thoughts, emotions and conduct (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). Key determinants of identification include the distinctiveness of a group's values and practices compared to similar groups, as well as its status relative to others (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Hewstone and Jaspars, 1984) highlighted that individuals actively pursue a positive social identity to foster psychological distinctiveness within their own group or to differentiate themselves from other groups. In the organisational context, employees distinguish themselves from other workers through their identification with their employer. Therefore, the more positive consideration they have for their organisation, the more favourable their self-description becomes (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). SIT has been used to explain why higher corporate social performance attracts a quality workforce (Backhaus *et al.*, 2002; Greening and Turban, 2000), as job applicants recognise that they will enhance their self-image by working for socially responsive firms. We intend to study employees' perceptions regarding their participation in AC projects through the lens of SIT. Indeed, we assume that a positive perception of this CSR initiative will contribute to achieving effective internal social enhancement; conversely, negative perceptions will not lead to the desired result.

Taking all these elements into consideration, and especially considering the limited research on AC projects, the research question (RQ) that guided our work is:

RQ. How do employees perceive CSR initiatives based on publicly endorsed AC projects?

3. Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative approach and presents a single-case study focusing on the initiative promoted by Parma 2020. The case study approach is the most important methodology used in qualitative research in social studies (Rubino *et al.*, 2017; Yin, 2003,

p. 13) defined the case study research strategy as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”. Thus, this methodology is appropriate for studying complex real-life issues that require the investigation of contextual variables (Berry and Otley, 2004; Yin, 2003, 2018). It is also suitable for issues that are current and for which multiple sources of information, including documentary sources, direct observation and interviews, are available (Chiucchi, 2012; Grandori, 1996). Case studies are useful for analysing innovative situations and projects because they focus on concrete cases and allow the theoretical dimension to be enriched by the analysis of reality, addressing one of the most discussed issues in business management literature: the gap between theory and practice (Chiucchi, 2014; Hopwood, 1983; Ryan *et al.*, 2002).

A single embedded case study (Yin, 2013) is used here. An explorative approach is taken (Scapens, 2004) with the goal of getting insights on a topic that is still under-investigated. In particular, this paper aims to explore how employees perceive AC projects from a CSR perspective. In this case, 15 small and medium-sized enterprises joined the contest promoted by Parma 2020, but only eight companies were selected as winners and received money to finance their AC projects. The projects addressed society as a whole, as many of them produced physical or digital products available to the local community and involved the participation of employees at different levels. Seven of the eight winners were involved in the analysis, representing 117 employees. The projects promoted by the winning companies are outlined in Table 1. We conducted one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with 17 employees, until we reached data saturation (Fusch and Ness, 2015; Guest *et al.*, 2006). Selecting which employees to interview was done by sending each employee an email requesting their willingness to take part in an interview related to the project in which they were involved. 81 of the 117 employees gave us their consent to be interviewed. At least one employee per company was interviewed. Detailed information on the interviewees’ years of service is provided in Table 2. The interviews lasted, on average, 45 min and were conducted online. All interviews were recorded with the respondents’ consent. Appendix 1 contains the interview protocol used.

Table 1 Description of CCPs per company

<i>Company</i>	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Piece of art</i>
1	Construction	Cell-phone video
2	Food manufacturing	Clay works
3	Pharmaceuticals manufacturing	Art installations
4	Food manufacturing	Short film based on stop-motion animation technique
5	Non-metallic mineral product manufacturing	Clay works
6	Machine for packaging manufacturing	Art installations
7	Machine for packaging manufacturing	Mural puzzle

Source: Authors’ own creation

Table 2 Number of interviewees per years of service

<i>Years of service</i>	<i>No. of interviewees</i>
0–5 years	4
5–10 years	6
10–20 years	3
20–30 years	2
Above 30 years	2
Total	17

Source: Authors’ own creation

The information collected through the interviews underwent thematic analysis. This analysis method is widespread in qualitative research (e.g. [Iazzi et al., 2022](#); [Onu and Oats, 2018](#); [Yamak et al., 2019](#)). We followed the six-step approach proposed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). During the first phase, two authors listened to the recording of the interviews, which were then transcribed *verbatim*. During the second step, the same authors worked separately to develop an initial coding of the information. After the initial coding phase, all the authors worked together to identify recurring codes. At the end of this revision, 35 codes were selected (see [Appendix 2](#)). The third and fourth steps were devoted to identifying and revising the common themes present among the codes. Finally, during the last steps of the analysis, we named the themes and wrote descriptions of them. At the end of the thematic analysis, two themes were identified.

4. Results

The analysis of the interviews made it possible to identify two main themes:

1. the perception of intrinsic motives behind CSR initiatives based on AC projects; and
2. experienced meaningfulness through the involvement in AC projects.

The analysis is structured in two sections, each of which includes the most relevant quotations from the interviewees to clarify how and why the two themes emerged. It is important to underline that the findings that will be presented within this section are representative of the opinion of the respondents only and do not consider the perception of employees who did not participate in such initiatives.

4.1 *The perception of intrinsic motives behind CSR initiatives based on AC projects*

One of the themes that emerged clearly from the analysis of the interview transcripts is the positive feelings of employees in relation to the AC projects in which they were involved: they spontaneously acknowledged the benefits derived from these projects. During the interviews, many employees spontaneously proposed improvements to the projects, implicitly indicating their hope for the project's continuation. Furthermore, they recommended involving more colleagues and individuals from different companies in the projects, thereby fostering collaboration between companies. Some interviewees suggested engaging different artists in the future to enhance various types of soft skills:

I enjoyed participating in the initiative; I shared my experience with other colleagues who were not involved, and they are hoping to participate in the next projects. I believe this could be a good opportunity for everyone, from the worker to the director. (Interviewee no. 4)

Overall, the activities not only provided fertile ground for the expression of individual creativity but also fostered a sense of belonging and pride in the company. This feeling of belonging was fuelled by opportunities for collaboration and idea sharing within the creative context of the AC projects. The sense of being part of a broader initiative aimed at contributing positively to the corporate community created a more inclusive and supportive corporate culture. Employees emphasised how the company has transcended its traditional role as an employer, transforming into a place where each individual contribution blends harmoniously to create a more meaningful collective impact:

The cooperation and mutual support among managers and employees during the project, the fact that we were all on the same level, created a feeling of positive harmony that I expect will be brought into future corporate business projects as well. (Interviewee no. 1)

Therefore, the first theme that emerged from the interviews is that employees enjoyed participating in the AC projects, they exchanged their positive feedback with colleagues and offered suggestions for future, similar activities. Through positive assessments of their

participation in AC projects, employees directly experienced the social enhancement these projects aimed to achieve. Thus, employees were aware of the primary goal of AC projects – internal social enhancement – and did not express any complaints regarding possible opportunistic and non-genuine strategies employed by their companies in implementing these projects. According to the description of intrinsic motives provided by [Donia et al. \(2017\)](#), we can conclude that employees did not perceive the AC projects as beneficial solely for the company in terms of external image and financial performance.

4.2 Experienced meaningfulness through the involvement in AC projects

The interviewees also delved deeply into the specific benefits they obtained from participating in the projects. By analysing the transcripts, we have identified four main benefits that the employees recurrently perceived during their involvement in the AC projects, which, in accordance with the work of [Morin \(2008\)](#), are attributable to work meaningfulness: *learning and development opportunities, autonomy, positive relationships, recognition*.

The development of personal competences (*learning and development opportunities*) and the freedom to decide how to realise the piece of art, or a part of it, (*autonomy*) are related to the personal growth of the participants:

It has increased my soft skills, especially with reference to internal communication and time management. Indeed, we did not have much time to dedicate to the project, but we were able to finish it and accomplish ordinary working tasks at the same time. Additionally, I improved my communication with my boss after understanding that her temperament has nothing to do with my personality and results. (Interviewee no. 2)

I believe we had the chance to enhance our transversal skills in a pleasant and satisfying way, something completely different from the traditional classroom-type courses on problem solving and public speaking I attended before. (Interviewee no. 7)

Thus, from the interviewees' point of view, the companies involved in AC projects managed to promote the growth of their employees' skills and to create better working conditions. The quotations from the interview transcripts demonstrate that the employees perceived that they improved their competences through the participation in the AC projects, as well as that they could take advantage of a better workplace. During the interviews, it became evident that both existing and newly formed relationships among colleagues (*positive relationships*) were also fostered thanks to the participation in the AC projects.

The project has improved relationships between colleagues, as we managed to collaborate without being affected by work-related conflicts. (Interviewee no. 4)

It has been fun to participate in choosing the project without any fear of consequences. For the first time, I feel like I am an active part of the company and I enjoy working with my colleagues. (Interviewee no. 8)

Thanks to the project I have had the chance to meet colleagues from other departments, with whom I now regularly take my breaks. (Interviewee no. 15)

The benefits perceived by the employees are the results of the distinctive characteristics of the AC projects. Indeed, these CSR initiatives gave the possibility to the employees to work in a team with different people, regardless of their age and position, and also to be engaged in a full creation process, starting from the development of an idea and ending with the creation of a piece of art. The active participation of employees is one of the strengths of the AC projects, since the participative feature of CSR is reported to be important for its effectiveness ([Maclagan, 1999](#)). Indeed, the participation of employees contributes to the effective implementation of CSR ([Rodrigo and Arenas, 2008](#)). This involvement positively influences their work attitudes by enhancing the meaningfulness of

their work (Supanti and Butcher, 2019). In addition, it has been noted that one of the factors affecting employee involvement is their perception of CSR (Hejjas *et al.*, 2019).

The analysis of the interviews shed light on employees' feelings too. The employees also acknowledged the benefits they gained from the projects from an emotional perspective. Indeed, the possibility of cherishing the results of the AC projects and the feeling of pride after being selected as winners have emerged as positive elements:

Winning the contest has been a big source of pride. We all shared in the satisfaction together while enjoying the results of our work. (Interviewee no. 9)

It was great to share the video we made with my team with other colleagues and my family. We enjoyed watching it. (Interviewee no. 7)

We worked on the development of the idea and also on the realisation of the art installation. So, I had the opportunity to follow its development from the beginning to the end. I liked this very much. (Interviewee no. 1)

The employees felt fulfilled and a sense of pride during and after the participation in the AC projects. Indeed, these projects were based on the creation of pieces of art (e.g. short films, art installations and clay works) that could be in digital or physical form and that were made available to external users and all employees, regardless of their contribution to the project. The employees positively assessed the tangible nature of the results of the AC projects because they managed to identify themselves and their efforts with the piece of art and to directly enjoy the individual and collective results. In addition, the results of the AC projects and the names of the participants were published on corporate websites, thus the employees' pride for externally showing their results and their victory has contributed to increasing the feeling of satisfaction.

With the aim to effectively communicate the CSR practices to their stakeholders (Du *et al.*, 2017; Pomeroy and Dolnicar, 2009), companies often rely on voluntary non-financial disclosures (Fernandez-Feijoo *et al.*, 2014) or on ratings and certifications given by external agencies (Parguel *et al.*, 2011). In this case, the pieces of art were themselves a means of communication, as the employees were immediately aware of the initiative's benefits thanks to the sense of fulfilment generated by the artistic performances.

Some additional quotations that highlight the emotional involvement of the employees are reported below.

I have primarily appreciated the fact that the project was not an end in itself, but it led to a tangible and observable result. (Interviewee no. 2)

I was motivated by the fact that we were competing against other companies. I wanted to show something impressive to external people. (Interviewee no. 15)

I took a picture of the mural puzzle that I now use as a screensaver. (Interviewee no. 9)

Employees developed an emotional attachment to the result of the AC project in which they were involved. The tangible nature of the AC project made it appreciable by individuals inside and outside the organisation, as well as by the participants themselves, contributing to create a sense of fulfilment. The satisfaction from the appreciable result and the pride of winning the public competition made the participants' effort recognisable (*recognition*).

Thus, based on the determinants of work meaningfulness promoted by Morin (2008), we can conclude that, in general, employees perceived the AC projects beneficial in terms of increased work meaningfulness. The concept of meaningfulness, that captures the feelings of satisfaction, pride and fulfilment, is something more than an improvement, as was the case of transversal competences and working relations. While the improvement can be

directly exploited by both employees and employers, the meaningfulness is personally and emotionally experienced by employees only.

5. Discussion

CSR aims at increasing the engagement of external stakeholders – namely, clients, suppliers, shareholders and the community as whole – and internal stakeholders (i.e. employees). With reference to CSR oriented towards internal social enhancement, previous literature highlights the importance of employees' perceptions. Indeed, internal social enhancement can be achieved only when internal stakeholders perceive CSR to be oriented towards the common good and not oriented towards reputation and profit enhancement (Donia *et al.*, 2017). Thus, when CSR is non-opportunistically oriented towards internal social enhancement, the employer company must make its employees aware of it (Du *et al.*, 2010; Pomeroy and Dolnicar, 2009). A CSR strategy oriented towards internal social enhancement is effective when it is positively perceived by employees, and, as a result, it positively affects employees' attitudes (Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2018; Donia *et al.*, 2017, 2019; Vlachos *et al.*, 2013).

In this study, we analyse employees' perceptions of a novel CSR initiative: AC projects promoted within the framework of Parma 2020, involving the creation of tangible pieces of art. AC projects are sometimes used by companies to address specific organisational issues (Berthoin Antal *et al.*, 2018) but there is no previous research in academic literature that focuses on how employees perceive these kinds of CSR initiatives when they are primarily non-opportunistically oriented towards internal social enhancement. Thanks to the case study of Parma 2020, we have been able to investigate an emerging topic that is still under-researched, and to identify two recurring themes in relation to employees' perceptions of AC projects. Employees positively assessed their participation in AC projects; they perceived these CSR initiatives as ethically and genuinely oriented towards the enhancement of the social dimension of their company, and they experienced clear and evident benefits that are associated to work meaningfulness (Morin, 2008). Our findings underscore how employees perceive the AC project as CSR initiatives oriented towards them. This aspect holds significant importance considering that CSR initiatives towards employees have a greater impact on work attitudes if compared with CSR towards the community or the environment (Farooq *et al.*, 2014).

SIT can serve as a valuable framework for interpreting the findings of our study. As employees appraise AC projects positively, acknowledging them particularly as endeavours genuinely aimed at enhancing the social dimension of the company, their evaluation extends to a positive assessment of their own participation in the project and their overall perception of the company. Thus, the company might benefit from employees' perceptions as well. Indeed, the perception of intrinsic motives has been positively associated with increased employee engagement (Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2018; Lu *et al.*, 2020). Perceived work meaningfulness has been associated with organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Glavas and Kelley, 2014) and work engagement (Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2019; Kahn, 1990) highlights that meaningfulness is one of the psychological conditions that drives work engagement and it refers to the sense of worthwhileness and usefulness. Meaningfulness is defined in terms of the amount of significance that people attribute to a certain activity with which they are engaged (Barrick *et al.*, 2013; Rosso *et al.*, 2010).

Work meaningfulness is also a factor that employees consider when assessing the opportunistic nature of CSR (Donia *et al.*, 2019), which implies that experienced meaningfulness contributes to attributing intrinsic motives to AC projects. Simultaneously, the association between positively perceived CSR and work engagement is reportedly mediated by the work meaningfulness experienced (Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2019). Therefore, work meaningfulness might have a direct and indirect positive impact on employees' attitudes.

6. Conclusions

There is evidence of increased performance when CSR practices oriented towards social internal enhancement are positively perceived by internal stakeholders (Mishra and Suar, 2010). However, companies willing to develop an effective CSR strategy oriented towards internal social enhancement for the first time could face difficulties. Indeed, companies can choose to adopt different practices, such as promoting action against sexual harassment, providing assistance to low-paid workers (Hao *et al.*, 2018) or offering employee support programmes that provide “emotional, financial and instrumental assistance beyond the scope of standard pay, benefit, recognition and training and development programs” (Grant *et al.*, 2008, p. 898).

The findings of this work lead to the conclusion that AC projects are an effective CSR practice oriented towards internal social enhancement. Indeed, employees attribute intrinsic motives to AC projects and they experience meaningfulness by directly enjoying the pieces of art to which they have contributed. Thus, the results of this study can be useful for companies that want to be socially responsible. Moreover, we can conclude that these types of initiatives bring together two worlds that often stand quite apart from each other: the business world and the sphere of art and culture.

AC projects can, in fact, be used as effective CSR initiatives both for companies that embrace CSR activities for the first time and by companies which are more mature and experienced in the field of social responsibility. Indeed, these projects allow for simple and direct employee engagement that is not based on the company’s ability to know how to properly communicate its CSR initiatives but relies on the positive perceptions elicited by creative activities. Such activities lead to the formation of positive feelings that can foster, on the one hand, the perception of intrinsic motives towards the initiative and, on the other, the meaningfulness of the work performed.

Moreover, the results of our study may also have implications for public authorities. Indeed, authorities can enhance their social contexts by promoting contests based on AC projects, such as the one promoted by Parma 2020. These types of initiatives help bring the business world closer to artistic and cultural themes. This can be significant for companies that are not traditionally associated with the artistic and cultural sphere, as it enables them to develop innovative CSR projects. Similarly, it holds importance for companies already engaged in the artistic sector, as such initiatives could directly and indirectly involve them. The involvement of local public entities could encourage the spread of AC initiatives more widely throughout the territory, reaching even smaller business entities. Moreover, the attribution of intrinsic motives to AC projects might have been influenced by the employees’ awareness of the public endorsement of the initiative. Indeed, the employees might have perceived that their companies did not need to employ CSR initiatives for opportunistic reasons, such as enhancing their image, because the AC project was not initially promoted by them. Accordingly, González and Martínez (2004) have highlighted the importance of public initiatives in fostering CSR among companies. Thus, based on our findings, we hypothesise that without the support of a public authority endorsing the implementation of AC projects, companies could face challenges in making them be perceived as internally oriented.

With this research paper we contribute to existing literature since we study an under-researched topic, that is CSR based on AC projects, following the research direction proposed by Aguilera *et al.* (2007) on micro-level CSR. In particular, we adopt a qualitative approach to study employees’ meaningfulness (Aguinis and Glavas, 2019). This study contributes to the existing stream of literature that focuses on the link between CSR and work engagement as mediated by work meaningfulness (Brieger *et al.*, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2017).

Our research is limited by the fact that the companies involved in the contest promoted by Parma 2020 were in the same geographical area. In addition, it was not possible to make comparisons between this CSR initiative and other types of initiative, since the AC projects

were the first attempt at achieving internal social enhancement for some of the companies involved in our study. Considering this interesting but under-researched topic, future research could analyse the impact of AC projects in different institutional contexts or contexts other than a public competition such as the one promoted by Parma 2020. Moreover, additional studies could compare AC projects to other types of CSR initiative (e.g. Galton and Page, 2015) and also to AC projects that are not publicly endorsed. While the positive effect of being a socially responsible company on employees' creativity has already been demonstrated (Abdelmotaleb *et al.*, 2018; Chaudhary and Akhouri, 2018), future research should investigate whether this effect might be stronger or different in the case of AC projects. Finally, bringing forward the explorative nature of this research, which focuses for the first time on the topic of AC projects based on CSR, future studies could adopt a quantitative approach to further explore the impact of these particular projects on employees.

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Appendix 1. Interview protocol

Opening (Introductions, brief overview of the purpose of the interview, permission to record the interview).

Opening questions

1. How long have you been working for your company?
2. Please describe your role and main duties in the company.

AC projects questions

3. Please describe how your company presented the AC project in which you participated.
4. What were your expectations in relation to that activity?
5. Please describe how the project was carried out. How was the activity organised?
6. Please outline how you interacted with your colleagues during the activity.
7. Please describe any critical issues you experienced during the activity.
8. How was the workday after the activity? Did you and your colleagues talk about the project you did?

Previous experience question

9. Have you done similar activities before? If yes, please describe them.

Appendix 2

Table A1 List of the themes and codes based on the thematic analysis

<i>Theme 1</i> The perception of intrinsic motives behind CSR initiatives based on AC projects		<i>Theme 2</i> Experienced meaningfulness through the involvement in AC projects	
1	Authenticity in CSR commitment	1	Creative fulfilment
2	Organisational cohesion and support	2	Valued contribution appreciation
3	Positive organisational culture	3	Autonomy in the realisation of the project
4	Emotional resonance with company ethics	4	Sense of accomplishment
5	Societal impact recognition	5	Skill enhancement through creativity
6	Ethical transparency appreciation	6	Emotional satisfaction with the result
7	Employee well-being emphasis	7	Improvement of personal relationships
8	Employee enthusiasm in sharing the activity	8	Soft skills improvement
9	Opportunity for all levels	9	Meaningful project involvement
10	Cross-functional collaboration	10	Cultural/artistic enrichment
11	Collaborative learning	11	Rewarding work perception
12	Long-term impact on corporate culture	12	Personal growth opportunity recognition
13	Perceived personal benefits	13	Sense of fulfilment in enjoying the tangible result of the project
14	Proactive and enthusiastic participation	14	Ability building
15	Enjoyment of collaborative creative endeavours	15	Creative thinking enhancement
16	Purpose-driven engagement	16	Diverse learning experiences
		17	Excitement for participating in a competition
		18	Team collaboration and solidarity
		19	New type of communication among colleagues

Source: Authors' own creation

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