

# A Systematic Review of the Impact of Leadership Practices to Overcome Barriers to CSR Adoption in Caribbean SMEs in the Tourism and Hospitality Sector

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## Abstract

This study investigates obstacles to the adoption of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) by Caribbean Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (CSMEs) in the tourism and hospitality sector. It examines the potential for leadership practices to overcome CSR obstacles. CSMEs play a vital role in regional economic sustainability, and this study bridges the literature gap on how leadership influences CSR adoption. A qualitative desk research approach was employed, guided by four theoretical frameworks: (1) Transformational Leadership Theory, (2) Stakeholder Theory, (3) Institutional Theory, and (4) Resource-Based View Theory. These theories examine how CSR adoption is moulded by internal leadership, stakeholder relations, institutional pressures, and resource endowment. By analysing academic literature, industry publications, and Caribbean case studies, the study determined principal leadership styles, CSR barriers and opportunities for improved sustainability performance. Empirical evidence indicates that although financial dissuaders, weak regulations, and inadequate institutional support discourage CSR adoption, effective leadership practices founded on vision, innovation, and stakeholder engagement augment implementation. Transformational leaders devoted to sustainability, who incorporate stakeholder values, emerge as superior in overcoming systemic detriments. A leadership style based on a multi-theoretical framework can enable a standardised and suitable CSR framework. Recommendations include tailored leadership training, policy incentives, regional cooperation, and sharing context-specific CSR models.

## Keywords

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Transformational Leadership, Caribbean SMEs (CSMEs), CSR Barriers, Tourism and Hospitality.

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## 1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a direct response to the degradation of our ecosystems due to excessive commercial activities. As global attention shifts towards the sustainable development agenda (UN's Sustainable Development Goals), CSR plays a central role in making organisations more responsible (Milwood, 2020; Nair & McLeod, 2020). However, many Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), particularly in the Caribbean tourism and hospitality sector, lack the ability to effectively practice CSR (Milwood, 2020). In addition, "in the wake of an increasing process of globalisation" (p. 354), new challenges are introduced to Caribbean SMEs (CSMEs) (Nair & McLeod, 2020). Among the obstacles are effective leadership practices (Zhao et al., 2023). However, research on how leaders promote CSR adoption with CSMEs is lacking, especially in areas where obstacles exist (Pena-Miranda, et al., 2019). This study examined this gap by exploring how leadership can alter the adoption of CSR in this region. For this research, CSMEs refer to micro, small, and medium enterprises in the Caribbean with fewer than one hundred employees.

CSR is important for the tourism and hospitality sector to promote eco-friendly business practices, and has a large environmental, social, and economic impact (Mandanaguli et al., 2022). As CSMEs are considered the backbone of the region's tourism and hospitality sector, effective and consistent CSR is necessary for long-term sustainability (Pena-Miranda et al., 2019; Milwood, 2020). However, many CSMEs struggle to apply CSR to their businesses because of a lack of funding, poor regulatory guidelines, and weak leadership (Spence, 2016). By contrast, larger tourism companies are better equipped with greater access to resources and formal CSR plans, making CSR adoption successful (Pena-Miranda et al., 2019; Milwood, 2020). However, the earnings from larger tourism companies are "repatriated to the parent country" (Spencer & McBean, 2020, p. 264).

Although there is vast literature on CSR adoption, the focus is mainly on larger organisations, thus creating a knowledge gap for CSMEs regarding leadership practices (Zhao et al., 2023). Hence, this study addresses the knowledge gap by exploring how Caribbean SMEs with resource restrictions in the tourism and hospitality sector address the challenges of CSR adoption and identify effective leadership strategies that can support long-term CSR adoption. The insights can guide CSMEs, policymakers, and tourism stakeholders in promoting global sustainability (Changar & Atan, 2021).

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Perspectives on Leadership and CSR Adoption in SMEs

In CSMEs, leadership plays an important role in mitigating barriers to CSR adoption. This literature review on leadership and CSR adoption in SMEs evaluates four theoretical models that explain how leaders influence organisational behaviour, resource management, and stakeholder engagement.

#### 2.1.1. Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT)

As outlined by the originators, Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), transformational leadership (TL) supports the theory that effective leaders should inspire, motivate, and influence their followers through a shared vision. Scholars, including Begum et al. (2020), add that TL should also encourage creativity and stimulate innovation, which are indispensable for organisational change. They argue that “TL may be responsible for innovation” (Begum et al, 2020, p. 2). In CSMEs within the tourism and hospitality sector, CSR adoption is often obstructed by limited funds, short-term gains, and poor CSR literacy. These barriers discourage long-term planning and limit innovation but can be mitigated by leaders who promote ethical cultures and shift stakeholders from a compliance mindset to proactive participation (Camilleri, 2020).

Haque et al. (2021) identify ‘idealised influence’ as a central element of TLT where leaders should act as ethical guides who integrate CSR into business practices. Similarly, Changar and Atan (2021) found that when leaders are guided by ‘inspirational motivation’, they can inspire stakeholders to link CSR benefits to business success and community outcomes. However, in CSMEs, such efforts are often hindered by limited resources and weak CSR frameworks (Chalin-Cheyne, 2021). Furthermore, companies reporting their CSR successes usually raise concerns about unbiased claims (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Purgal-Popiela (2024) also notes that while TLT is successful in larger companies, its effect in SMEs is restricted by structural challenges, calling for contextual considerations when applying TLT.

Empirical studies have confirmed that transformational leadership can enhance CSR outcomes through collaborations (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). In the Caribbean, Camilleri (2020) noted that the sustainability of businesses was reinforced by TL through stakeholder participation in CSR planning. A case study by Sandals Foundation (2025) in Jamaica demonstrates the receipt of CSR benefits through TL's involvement in extensive educational, environmental conservation, and disaster relief programs offered by Sandals Resorts Group. Similarly, the Eco Lifestyle & Lodge in Barbados has proven that SMEs with scarce resources can enjoy CSR success from TL, with sustainability being part of its core business by supporting local farmers, engaging communities in projects and utilising energy-efficient systems. Although CSR successes exist in CSMEs, research often fails to differentiate

companies with formal CSR planning from those based on leaders' ideas. This makes it challenging to apply the findings of these studies to different regions (Spencer & McBean, 2020).

As noted, Pena-Miranda et al. (2019) observed that TLT overlooks external factors such as regulatory policies, market standards, and stakeholder expectations. Jamali et al. (2017) and Freeman (2020) point to the lack of an institutional framework tailored to SMEs' needs. Therefore, combining TLT with Stakeholder and Institutional Theories offers a comprehensive understanding of CSR adoption. While leadership can foster the adoption of socially responsible practices, evidence suggests that enduring initiatives must be supported by regulatory and institutional structures (Spencer & McBean, 2020). Nair and McLeod (2020) emphasise that SMEs operating in Caribbean tourism often function in a weakly institutionalised and economically challenging environment. The “policy framework” (p. 358) enables businesses to reduce their reliance on leadership, which is vital for CSR adoption (Nair and McLeod, 2020).

### **2.1.2. Stakeholder Theory (ST)**

By extending Freeman's (1984) framework, Harrison et al. (2015) presented Stakeholder theory as both a practical and ethical approach to managing organisations in challenging environments. The theory underlines that businesses must consider a network of constituents such as employees, customers, suppliers, communities, regulators, and shareholders whose concerns should be addressed. This broadened view aligns with CSR's core objectives and integrates social, moral, and environmentally sustainable commitments into business planning. The authors note, “stakeholders that are treated well tend to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviors towards the organization” (Harrison et al., 2015, p. 859). Fobbe and Hilletoft (2021) support this by observing that active stakeholders' involvement fosters trust and support for sustainable business development.

Freeman et al. (2020) argue that balancing stakeholders' interests is important to achieve sustainability. Empirical evidence confirms that companies engaging stakeholders in CSR planning produce more effective outcomes (Freeman & Dmytriyev, 2017; Yuan et al., 2020). When businesses in hospitality and tourism, such as hotels and restaurants listen to the feedback of their customers, employees, residents, and other stakeholders, they gain social acceptance and reputational growth. (Jones et al., 2018). However, because of the challenges of financial and limited organisational resources faced by SMEs, stakeholder engagement is often lacking, resulting in inconsistent CSR activities (Spence, 2016; Jamali et al., 2017).

In CSMEs, tourism has a major impact on the local economies and “Investments in tourism development have far-reaching implications” (Spencer & McBean, 2020, p.261). However, unstable economies present

challenges for companies (Cannonier & Burke, 2019). Stakeholder Theory points to issues like demanding communities and low institutional support due to irregular governance systems, which complicate collaboration among stakeholders (Pena-Miranda et al., 2019). In the absence of these frameworks, some SMEs still manage to get by, such as Jamaica Inn, which embraces Stakeholder Theory by engaging with community and environmental NGOs in turtle conservation, education, and beach clean-up programs (Jamaicainn.com, 2023). This illustrates that collaboration under Stakeholder Theory can enable meaningful CSR.

Despite these efforts, gaps such as the absence of a formal CSR plan persist. Jamaica Inn, for example, operates under rigid leadership-driven policies instead of structured frameworks. These issues are intensified by fierce rivalry within a single strategic framework. Institutional Theory could help structure planned stakeholder interaction. Ethically responsible leadership can be enabled by TLT, while long-term CSR commitment could be strengthened through the Resource-Based View, focusing on internal resource optimisation.

Freudenreich et al. (2020) observed that CSR- Stakeholder Theory literature lacks actionable frameworks for implementation, particularly for resource-constrained CSMEs. This gap, as highlighted by Spencer and McBean (2020) and Madanguli et al. (2022), centers on emerging small enterprises in developing economies, which has remained overlooked by literature focused mainly on large corporations in developed economies. Hence, there is a need for context-tailored market strategies for proactive stakeholder outreach in developing countries.

### 2.1.3. Transformational Leadership Theory (TLT)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory, as defined by Barney et al. (2021), suggests that companies can gain a long-term competitive advantage by utilising valuable, rare, and inimitable internal resources. The RBV offers “opportunities to expand the strategic resources concept” (Barney et al., 2021, p. 1677). Notably, CSR involvement often depends on the availability of a company’s internal resources and their usage. In the Caribbean tourism and hospitality SMEs, the RBV theory shows that limited financial capital, skilled workers, and official CSR plans prevent long-term CSR adoption (Alvarez Jaramillo et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, Manzoor et al. (2019) argue that effective leadership combined with a clearly defined CSR vision can alleviate some resource constraints. However, the challenges of CSME require combining various disciplines beyond what the RBV offers. Kaur and Kumar (2024) contend that self-sufficient internal resources do not guarantee robust strategic impact; institutional support and multi-stakeholder collaboration are also necessary for meaningful CSR outcomes. This is supported by Freeman and Dmytriye (2017), who recommended combining RBV with Stakeholder Theory for a

more balanced approach to CSR; particularly “in the world of limited resources” (p. 13). (Madanaguli et al., 2022) further suggests that Institutional Theory would enhance the credibility of SMEs’ CSR activities and their ability to engage with rigid regulatory frameworks.

The Jamaica Inn case illustrates the interplay of vision-driven leadership (TLT), stakeholder collaboration (ST), institutional backing (IT), and resource management (RBV). While progress is evident through community programs, the absence of a formal CSR strategy, scarce funding, and a narrow internal resource framework hinder sustainable CSR adoption. Although RBV offers useful concepts for linking internal resources to CSR, its influence remains limited without integration with other theories. As such, resolving internal limitations alongside external expectations requires a more comprehensive framework tailored to the specific needs of CSMEs. Systematically embedding CSR into operations depends not only on resource management but also on leadership, institutional backing, and stakeholder engagement.

#### **2.1.4. Institutional Theory (IT)**

As framed by Balzano et al. (2024), Institutional Theory (IT) explains how organisation reacts and adapts to external socio-governmental pressure, “influencing their financial performance and their contributions to sustainable development” (p. 1). These are important concerning the implementation of CSR policies in Caribbean tourism and hospitality industries. Hence, SMEs often operate under such models to meet compliance requirements, licensing standards, and secure resource access. These compliance boundaries include legal environmental agreements, customer demands, and international tourism standards (Camilleri, 2020).

Sandals Resorts Group, Eco Lifestyle & Lodge, and Jamaica Inn are examples that show how SMEs actively participate in global sustainability initiatives and community needs. These businesses have addressed stakeholders and legal demands through eco-certifications (Green Globe), environmental education programs, and sustainable supply chain partnerships (Sandals Foundation, 2025). Notably, these cases provide evidence of business processes in integrating IT into its operations. It further highlights the importance of TLT in navigating external pressures, supported by ST in fostering meaningful engagement.

Nevertheless, the adoption of CSR remains inconsistent across the Caribbean because of the multiple challenges outlined (Pena-Miranda et al., 2019; Milwood, 2020). Balzano et al. (2024) point out that IT alone does not fully explain how businesses respond to such pressures and often ignores the importance of leadership. Overall, a “holistic framework for sustainable operations planning” (Lovicsek, 2020, p.4) is needed to offer a thorough understanding of the dynamics of CSR adoption in CSMEs. This framework

has created a gap in research to investigate how such a combination can facilitate CSR adoption in CSMEs.

### 2.1.5. Gaps in Literature

The literature on CSR adoption tends to focus primarily on larger organisations in more developed countries, leaving a gap in understanding how SMEs operate within resource restrictions. This unexplored area in understanding how the tourism and hospitality sector in CSMEs manages challenges remains critical (Spencer & McBean, 2020). Given the unique financial and operational challenges these businesses face, along with weak institutional support, there is a clear need for a tailored framework for SMEs.

Leadership has been widely recognised as a catalyst for CSR innovation (Manzoor et al., 2019), yet little research has been done on how CSMEs utilise it. Specifically, while transformational leadership can inspire CSR commitment, its impact is often limited by financial and human resources constraints (Haque et al., 2021). Purgal-Popiela (2024) adds that without clear CSR guidelines, it's difficult to adopt CSR practices, reinforcing that leadership alone is insufficient for CSR adoption. Therefore, stakeholder involvement and external support should be considered.

A notable key area in the literature is that it often relies on a single viewpoint, such as Stakeholder or Institutional Theory, without looking at multiple perspectives. This approach limits a thorough understanding of how SMEs adopt CSR. Similarly, Freeman et al. (2020) and Kaur and Kumar (2024) outline the importance of combining Stakeholder engagement with internal resource capacities, underscoring the need for a hybrid, theoretically grounded model tailored to CSMEs.

Methodologically, a significant portion of studies mainly utilise qualitative approaches like interviews and case studies. Although these methods provide valuable insights into the context-specific CSR adoption situation, they are difficult to apply widely and lack cross-validation. The literature also lacks sufficient use of a mixed methods approach, which could offer a more balanced insight into CSR practices. Additionally, there is a lack of studies that compare different regions, including CSMEs. Hence, making a general conclusion about applying successful strategies from one region to another is challenging.

Lastly, empirical investigation into Stakeholder collaboration is limited. While engagement with governments, NGOs, and communities has shown improvement in CSR outcomes (Freudenreich et al., 2020), there is still a lack of knowledge on how CSMEs build and sustain networks (Zou et al., 2021). Addressing these gaps is crucial to developing an integrated CSR framework designed for CSMEs in the tourism and hospitality sector (Loviscek, 2020).

### 3. Materials and Method

#### 3.1. Method

A systematic review method using desk review data, was used in this study to conduct the investigation of the impact of leadership practices to address the obstacles to CSR adoption in CSMEs, within the tourism and hospitality sector. According to [Siddaway et al. \(2019\)](#), a systematic review “bring[s] together, synthesize, and critique[s] one or more literatures to provide an overall impression of the extent, nature, and quality of evidence in relation to a particular research question” (p. 749). Also, systematic reviews often use PRISMA guidelines to enhance transparency by considering studies that do not meet predetermined criteria ([Page et al., 2021](#)). According to [Gough et al. \(2017\)](#), this approach depends on a well-defined search strategy with clear inclusion and exclusion rules.

Therefore, the systematic review approach is especially fitting for this study, as it allows for the comprehensive evaluation of literature concerning the leadership styles pertaining to CSR in relation to SMEs. Additionally, this approach strengthens the conclusions drawn by the research by confirming that these conclusions were based on extensive and reputable research which makes it possible to identify patterns as well as knowledge gaps and best practices. This approach, while it “serve many critical roles” (p. 1), is more comprehensive than single case studies or small-scale surveys ([Page et al., 2021](#)). As a result of the systematic synthesis of past research, the study can formulate evidence-based suggestions ([Gough et al., 2017](#)).

#### 3.2. Search Strategy

For the purpose of the study, a relevance-based keyword selection system was employed, as the search strategy “by checking that the search at least yields the studies that are known to be relevant” ([Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 759](#)) resulting in ‘transformational leadership’, ‘leadership roles in CSR adoption’, ‘leadership practices in SMEs’, ‘leadership in the Caribbean tourism and hospitality industry’, ‘corporate social responsibility in SMEs’, ‘Caribbean SMEs’, ‘barriers to CSR in SMEs’, ‘gaps in CSR adoption in Caribbean SMEs’, ‘tourism and hospitality SMEs’, ‘challenges in CSR adoption in tourism SMEs’, ‘sustainable practices in the tourism and hospitality sector’, and ‘sustainability in SMEs’.

The use of these keywords and phrases helped to locate the relevant research from databases, including Emerald Insight, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and SAGE journals. These databases are highly ranked as reliable repositories of published peer-reviewed articles critical to systematic review. Likewise, these sources were carefully selected in order to conduct a thorough search of the most suitable available articles relevant to the topic, to produce the best results.

### 3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were outlined to select the data for this research:

***Inclusion:***

1. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals, government publications and industry reports between 2015 to 2025 to acquire updated and relevant data on the topic.
2. Studies sourced from reputable academic databases to support the credibility of the research.
3. Studies published that are relevant to the topic, addressing leadership practices, CSR adoption, and SMEs.
4. Studies that focus on barriers to CSR adoption within SMEs.
5. Studies focusing on SMEs within the Caribbean region, examining CSR adoption specifically in the tourism and hospitality industries.
6. Studies highlighting the effectiveness of transformational leadership practices to overcome CSR barriers.
7. Studies published in the English language to ensure the correct interpretation of data.
8. Studies should utilise the systematic review method to ensure thorough analysis and insightful outcomes.

***Exclusion:***

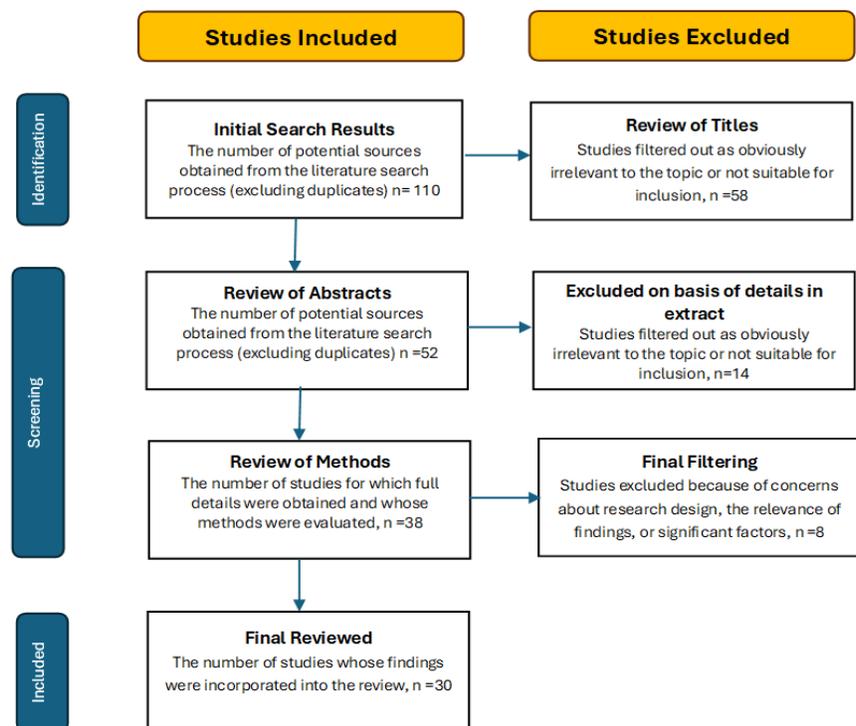
1. Studies with no focus on CSR, leadership practices or Caribbean SMEs in the tourism and hospitality industry.
2. Studies that focus on CSR adoption within large corporations and SMEs outside of the Caribbean region.
3. Studies from blogs, Wikipedia, news articles and non-peer-reviewed articles that are prone to bias.
4. Studies published beyond the ten years timeframe.
5. Studies published in languages other than English.
6. Studies with weak evidence and clear methodology.

### 3.4. Data Collection

The strict timespan of three months has limited this study to secondary data sources, making primary data collection infeasible. The secondary data collected comprised qualitative datasets and contained findings from published articles found in online journals from reputable databases. The PRISMA Chart in Figure 1 below illustrates the data collection process and outlines the final number of articles which were evaluated for the findings of this study.

**Figure 1**

*PRISMA Chart illustrating the Data Collection Process*



### 3.5. Data Analysis

The findings for this study were analysed using a thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), a thematic analysis is a research method used to identify patterns, evaluate, and key themes, and highlight the main ideas within qualitative datasets. This identification process, when done thoroughly, produces successful findings. Equally, the main themes from the reviewed articles were captured and their findings interpreted to ensure they aligned with the study’s aim and objectives.

Further, a dataset was created from which data were systematically extracted, compared, and contrasted to identify recurring themes. Miles et al. (2019) refer to this process as a matrix method. As a result, the findings

produced several similarities and patterns which were carefully examined and organised in such a way so as to reflect the research topic and objectives.

Although it can be noted that thematic analysis can be flexible, it is not without limitations. One such limitation is the potential for biased results, since findings may be interpreted according to the researcher's perspective. However, [Nowell et al. \(2017\)](#) suggest that to alleviate this limitation, the researcher should ensure transparency and consistency throughout the process by creating steps that will identify and organise themes as well as comparing the findings across multiple data sources using different scholars. While time-consuming, this approach helped to reduce personal bias.

### **3.6. Ethical Issues**

Since this study was conducted using secondary data from peer-reviewed articles published in reputable databases, there were no ethical issues that required addressing. However, it is important to note that the acknowledgement of sources utilised in this study was addressed by appropriate referencing and in-text citations.

## 4. Results

Table 1: Presentation of Findings

Theme	Findings	Data Source
1. Barriers to CSR Adoption in Caribbean SMEs	<p>Across the reviewed literature, financial constraints were observed as one of the frequently reported barriers. These include limited access to capital, short-term financial planning, high operational costs, inconsistent revenue streams, a lack of CSR-specific financial incentives and limited economies of scale. <sup>1,2,3</sup></p> <p>Short-term budgeting was noted in various articles as a barrier to long-term CSR planning. <sup>4, 5</sup></p> <p>Another reported barrier to CSR adoption in SMEs is weak regulatory frameworks. This includes a lack of mandatory CSR guidelines, inadequate monitoring and policy enforcement, limited tax breaks, policy fragmentation across agencies, a lack of SMEs-specific policy frameworks and weak alignment with international standards. <sup>2,3,4,5,6</sup></p> <p>Limited CSR awareness and training, stakeholder engagement, and resistance to change have also emerged as critical barriers to CSR adoption. <sup>1,3,4,5</sup></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cannonier and Burke (2019)</li> <li>2. Milwood (2020)</li> <li>3. Spencer and McBean (2020)</li> <li>4. Jamali and Karam (2018)</li> <li>5. Pena-Miranda et al. (2019)</li> <li>6. Camilleri (2020)</li> </ol>
2. Leadership Strategies for CSR Adoption and Overcoming Barriers	<p>The literature review shows that leadership has emerged as a major enabler of CSR adoption. Various studies have highlighted the role of transformational and ethical leadership in shaping CSR vision by building trust and fostering a sustainable business culture.</p> <p>Specifically, leadership styles that promote employee engagement and organisational commitment were connected to higher CSR adoption. <sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ahsan, (2023)</li> <li>2. Begum et al., (2020)</li> <li>3. Changar &amp; Atan (2021)</li> <li>4. Aguinis and Glavas (2019)</li> <li>5. Saha et al., (2020)</li> </ol>
	<p>Studies specific to the Caribbean noted that leadership in this region often operates within fragmented policy and economic systems that are not unified. This requires leaders to be culturally sensitive and responsive to local perspectives. <sup>6,7,8</sup></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Begum (2020)</li> <li>7. Camilleri (2020)</li> <li>8. Spencer and McBean (2020)</li> <li>9. Cannonier and Burke (2019)</li> <li>10. Miska &amp; Mendenhall (2018)</li> </ol>

	<p>Many SME leaders struggle to balance short-term financial pressures with long-term CSR objectives. This challenge is also linked with resistance from stakeholders' buy-in and the lack of effective systems to measure the benefits of CSR efforts. <sup>9,10</sup></p>	
	<p>To overcome these challenges, researchers advocate for leaders to practice inclusive leadership by collaborating with stakeholders and having honest and open communication. <sup>13,14</sup></p> <p>Another strategy for strengthening leadership and overcoming challenges is through training and skill development for leaders. This ensures the company's plans and actions are aligned with its social responsibility. <sup>15,16</sup></p> <p>It is also noted that leveraging strong community ties and local cultural values can empower leaders to develop low-cost CSR solutions in partnership with communities and governments. <sup>11,12</sup></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>11. Freeman et al. (2020)</li> <li>12. Zou et al. (2021)</li> <li>13. Barney et al. (2021)</li> <li>14. Mu et al. (2024)</li> <li>15. Gough et al. (2017)</li> </ol>
3. CSR Influence on SMEs in Tourism and Hospitality Industry	<p>Several studies reported that implementing CSR initiatives such as environmental conservation and community involvement, can yield significant benefits in the tourism and hospitality sector in SMEs. Companies can benefit from enhanced brand reputation and trust building with stakeholders.</p> <p>CSR engagement also attracts customer loyalty from eco-conscious consumers seeking responsible tourism experiences.</p> <p>Reports have shown that SMEs that adopted sustainability practices such as waste management and energy conservation have experienced improved financial performance, cost efficiency and competitive advantage. <sup>1,4,5,6.</sup></p> <p>CSR was found to enhance employee morale and retention when companies involved staff in CSR planning and executions. <sup>2,3</sup></p> <p>These reported benefits often depend on consistent stakeholder engagement and an effective implementation approach which many CSMEs still lack. <sup>6</sup></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Camilleri (2017)</li> <li>2. Freeman and Dmytriyeu (2017)</li> <li>3. Jones et al. (2016)</li> <li>4. Dodds and Joppe (2017)</li> <li>5. Shin and Hong (2020)</li> <li>6. Milwood (2020)</li> </ol>
4. Best Practices and Recommendations for CSR Improvement	<p>It is found that effective CSR adoption requires visionary leadership, structured CSR frameworks and government incentives tailored to SME capabilities. <sup>1,2,3</sup></p>	<p>Bertrand &amp; Hamilton, (2024)</p> <p>Bielawska, (2022)</p> <p>Carroll &amp; Brown, (2022)</p> <p>Camilleri (2020)</p>

Multiple studies have recommended that SME leaders be involved in formal CSR training, education, and leadership development to improve their awareness and business practices. <sup>4,5,6,7</sup>

Studies noted the need for an integrated strategy that combines stakeholder collaboration with NGOs, communities, and institutional support which is imperative for shared learning and exchange of resources. <sup>8,9,10,11</sup>

Clear, reliable guidelines and stable policy are also suggested to support long-term CSR planning. <sup>12,13</sup>

Using a blend of methods that match stakeholder needs with the business resources is also proposed for balancing CSR practices with realistic business strategies. <sup>12,14,15</sup>

Kaur and Kumar (2024)  
Madanaguli et al. (2022)  
Pena-Miranda et al. (2019)  
Bustillo-Castillejo et al., (2023)  
Cannonier and Burke (2019)  
Font & Lynes, (2018)  
Freeman et al. (2020)  
Jamali et al. (2017)  
Spencer and McBean (2020)  
Elkington (2018)  
Zou et al. (2021)

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## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Barriers to CSR Adoption in Caribbean SMEs

Caribbean SMEs operate in environments where CSR is recognised in a theoretical sense, as measured by Institutional Theory, but enforcement frameworks are absent. As observed by [Jamali and Karam \(2018\)](#) and [Spence and McBean \(2020\)](#), many countries lack formal CSR legislation or even non-binding frameworks, resulting in optional CSR adoption. [Milwood \(2020\)](#) demonstrates that this slack enforcement leads to a lack of accountability. Specifically, [Spencer and McBean \(2020\)](#) noted that small tourism enterprises in Jamaica face bureaucratic delays in the processing of environmental permits, where “enforcement being relaxed in some instances” (p. 265). This illustrates the dominant yet ambiguous regulatory slack prevalent within the system. Furthermore, scholars observed that the absence of tailored CSR strategies for SMEs sustains regulatory gaps and micro-constraints of enforcement. It is cited that 68% of CSMEs claimed ignorance of CSR requirements and institutional incentives ([Pena-Miranda et al., 2019](#)). Similarly, [Camilleri \(2020\)](#) pointed out that local CSR expectations are not aligned with global tourism standards, disadvantaging CSMEs competing for environmentally conscious clientele.

According to the RBV theory, which posits that financial constraints greatly undermine CSR adoption, competitive advantage stems from efficiently utilised internal resources ([Barney et al., 2021](#)). Many SMEs face challenges obtaining financing or capital, alongside the CSR frameworks needed to sustain focused initiatives ([Cannonier & Burke, 2019](#); [Milwood, 2020](#)). Given the seasonal and unpredictable nature of tourism income, these businesses rely on rigid multi-year financial planning dominated by short-term thinking ([Jamali & Karam, 2018](#); [Spencer & McBean, 2020](#)). Furthermore, [Pena-Miranda et al. \(2019\)](#) state that SMEs are hardest hit financially by imported energy costs, water usage, and operational expenditures, especially in Barbados and Jamaica, where energy imports contribute to 20% – 30% of operational costs relative to the global average ([Camilleri, 2020](#)). Moreover, governments that do not provide CSR tax incentives or grants often make sustainable investments impractical ([Camilleri, 2020](#); [Spencer & McBean, 2020](#)). Therefore, without economies of scale, smaller firms incur higher costs than larger firms with dedicated CSR teams and outsourced operations.

Stakeholder Theory concentrates on communities, customers, and public organisations ([Freeman et al., 2020](#)). However, studies by [Cannonier and Burke \(2019\)](#) and [Pena-Miranda et al. \(2019\)](#) show that many SMEs lack the ability or knowledge to strategically engage with stakeholders at the CSR level. Additionally, most focus are on short-term ‘fire-fighting’ activities and therefore, cannot cultivate sustainable relationships ([Pena-Miranda et al., 2019](#)). This weakens the institutional and social structures necessary for

integrating CSR adoption. According to Font and Lynes (2018), “opportunistic” CSR emerges from unsystematic stakeholder engagement, where stakeholders become the targets instead of partners, diminishing trust. Spencer and McBean (2020) further explain that unidirectional SME leadership due to low CSR knowledge obstructs trust-building, creative change, and strategic CSR development. Furthermore, CSR implementation in CSMEs is constrained by both internal and external factors. These problems cannot be resolved using one theory alone. To promote CSR adoption among regional SMEs, an integrated approach that addresses institutional, resource, and stakeholder gaps is essential.

#### **4.2. Leadership Strategies for CSR Adoption and Overcoming Barriers**

Within the resource-constrained CSMEs, leadership emerges as a key enabler for CSR adoption. Financial and institutional barriers which often hinder CSR adoption, can be mitigated with proactive leadership that cultivates trust, articulates a clear vision, and nurtures a culture of sustainability (Begum et al., 2020; Changar & Atan, 2021; Ahsan, 2023). However, leadership alone cannot fully resolve systemic and resource-related challenges.

The perspectives to gauge how leaders motivate teams toward CSR initiatives are seen through TLT. Moreover, leaders offering ‘idealised influence’, motivation, and individual consideration were linked to stronger employee engagement and company buy-in (Saha et al., 2020). Such actions of TLT are highly beneficial, especially in CSR-emerging SMEs that lack formal guidelines. While TLT cannot fully address unstable markets or inconsistent policies, it effectively influences internal stakeholders.

Furthermore, Camilleri (2020) and Spencer and McBean (2020) noted the importance of having leaders who are adaptive to the Caribbean region. The author stresses that such leaders should be able to overcome community demands, cultural nuances, and weak governance frameworks. Such leadership bridges CSR goals and limited resources. As Miska and Mendenhall (2018) state, leadership resilience provides strategic foresight for stakeholder commitment. In this regard, Stakeholder Theory (ST) complements TLT by emphasising leadership’s role in building trust-based relationships. Likewise, engaging communities, NGOs, and government can establish co-ownership of CSR activities (Freeman et al., 2020; Zou et al., 2021). As pointed out by Zou et al. (2021), “the government should also take some meaningful initiatives to support CSR practices of SME sector” (p. 9). However, most stakeholder involvement remains reactive, limiting long-term CSR adoption.

For CSMEs to improve their CSR capabilities, leadership training is required. Mu et al. (2024) and Barney et al. (2021) highlight that training should align CSR activities with business objectives while adapting to market trends and policy shifts. Gough et al. (2017) further suggest leveraging

community partnerships and cultural practices to develop trust in small economies. Although TLT and ST offer valuable insights, effective leadership in CSMEs goes beyond vision-setting. Leaders should guide CSR strategies, strengthen stakeholder partnerships and respond to ongoing CSR challenges.

#### 4.3. CSR Influence on SMEs in Tourism and Hospitality Sector

SMEs in the Caribbean's tourism and hospitality sectors can cite several CSR-related benefits, including operational effectiveness, employee engagement, enhanced brand image, and overall efficiency. These benefits depend on how deeply rooted CSR is in the daily business culture, leadership continuity, and the level of stakeholder participation.

Supported by Stakeholder Theory, scholars argue that SMEs' reputation and relationships with stakeholders can be improved through genuine CSR practices and strategic initiatives. Similarly, [Freeman and Dmytriiev \(2017\)](#) and [Camilleri \(2017\)](#) note that community relations, environmental care, and socially responsible branding strengthen the company's identity. Moreover, SMEs that participated in community-cleaning, conservation activities, and transparent business practices have gained patronage and enhanced reputational standing. This is important in tourism-dependent economies where community perceptions and social license impact sustainability. However, balancing the perceived benefits reveals controversy. [Dmytriiev and Freeman \(2017\)](#) caution that actively involved stakeholders may grow sceptical without any visible efforts made. Furthermore, finding a market for CSR within the Caribbean can limit competitive advantage from pursuing these sustainability measures ([Dodds & Joppe, 2017](#)). Without a clear strategy, CSR risks becoming a mere symbol ([Font & Lynes, 2018](#)).

Following the TLT framework, CSR activities are perceived to stem from a leader's cohesive vision and values that mobilise the workforce towards collective action. There is enough empirical evidence to suggest that sustainable leadership is positively correlated with a strong CSR culture, higher morale, and reduced turnover ([Jones et al., 2016](#); [Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2017](#)). [Spencer and McBean \(2020\)](#) argue that CSR initiatives in many CSMEs often depend on individual leaders rather than systemic structures, which weakens its resilience to change.

[Shin and Hong \(2020\)](#) and [Camilleri \(2017\)](#) show that CSR strategies like energy and waste management have led to improved financial performance. Similarly, RBV supports this, asserting that firms can achieve competitive advantages through internal resources. Sustainability practices have also been described by [Dodds and Joppe \(2017\)](#) as cost-saving and differentiation strategies among eco-conscious consumers. Nevertheless, [Milwood \(2020\)](#) and [Pena-Miranda et al. \(2019\)](#) report that many SMEs lack policies, education, and financial infrastructure to sustain long-term CSR initiatives. [Camilleri \(2020\)](#) adds that international certification schemes, like Green

Globe, may disadvantage smaller firms, which lack the administrative capacity, thus supporting the need for tailored CSR frameworks in small island economies.

Ultimately, CSR adoption offers improved performance and relationships with stakeholders for tourism SMEs, but its outcome depends on the implementation details. Therefore, the benefits of CSR can only emerge when it is integrated into business functions with proactive leadership, clear organisational structures, internal resources, and active stakeholder participation. Without these, CSR risks remaining superficial and unsustainable.

#### **4.4. Best Practices and Recommendations for CSR Improvement**

As illustrated in the findings, promoting CSR within CSMEs requires shifting from periodic, unstructured initiatives to systematic, strategically planned actions supported by strong leadership, institutional frameworks, and stakeholder backing. This CSR analysis draws from TLT, Stakeholder Theory (ST), Institutional Theory (IT), and Resource-Based View (RBV), which offer guiding principles, effective only when SMEs' inherent constraints are mitigated.

To embed CSR within SME culture, vision-oriented and ethical leaders should hold authoritative position (Carroll & Brown, 2022; Bertrand & Hamilton, 2024). Leadership influences perceptions among employees and stakeholders. Literature highlights that a lack of training, strategic planning, or insufficient resource allocation hinders CSR outcomes (Pena-Miranda et al., 2019; Spencer & McBean, 2020). For example, Spencer and McBean (2020) described several Jamaican SMEs with strong leadership but weak CSR performance due to ambiguous operational norms. Thus, regionally, chambers or associations are encouraged to provide targeted CSR training for SME leaders to enhance strategic sustainability outcomes (Pena-Miranda et al., 2019; Camilleri, 2020; Bielawska 2022; Kaur & Kumar, 2024).

Engaging primary stakeholders is another significant pillar towards successful CSR adoption. Font and Lynes (2018) and Cannonier and Burke (2019) emphasise that collaborations with NGOs, local communities, and government actors furnish SMEs with trust, local expertise and resource synergy. The authors emphasise that purposeful interaction is essential; otherwise, fragmented efforts will yield superficial results. Networked stakeholders are especially critical in small island economies like Jamaica and Barbados, where SMEs struggle to sustain CSR programs (Bustillo-Castillejo et al., 2023; Freeman et al., 2020). Additionally, Stakeholder Theory stresses that genuine engagement with multiple interests is fundamental for lasting impact.

Another best practice is to reinforce governance systems and align policies. Jamali et al. (2017) noted from an IT perspective, institutional legitimacy

pressures are critical for CSR adoption. Caribbean governance systems remain fragmented (Spencer & McBean, 2020). As a result, SMEs often find CSR grants inaccessible due to bureaucratic and unclear frameworks. Pena-Miranda et al. (2019) reported that over 60% of CSMEs were unaware of available government CSR support, revealing poor information dissemination. To rectify this, scholars recommended tailored policies, direct financing, simplified tax compliance, and fewer compliance restrictions to stimulate CSR activity.

Researchers recommend using hybrid models to fuse internal assets with external demands (Zou et al., 2021). Likewise, the RBV suggest a firm must defend against external pressures while simultaneously capturing value from its unique resources (Barney et al., 2021). Furthermore, Elkington's (2018) Triple Bottom Line emphasises the balance of profitability, social responsibility and environmental stewardship, particularly for SMEs. However, scholars warn that without careful execution, hybrid variations risk becoming diluted or misaligned with core SME focal areas (Font & Lynes, 2018). Developing an integrated strategy, visionary leadership with capacity building, along with stakeholder engagement and rigorous regulatory frameworks, is essential (Font & Lynes, 2018; Bielawska, 2022).

## 5. Conclusion

The study shows how leadership influence CSR adoption in the tourism and hospitality sector within CSMEs. Transformational leadership is identified as a key enabler of CSR, especially when leaders value sustainability and establish stakeholder involvement. However, it is observed that most CSMEs depend heavily on leaders' traits rather than following a structured plan, resulting in inconsistent CSR practices. Additionally, limited funding, weak governance, and inactive stakeholder engagement remain major barriers, compounded by inconsistent regulatory guidelines that disrupt long-term CSR adoption.

The study adopts an integrated framework of four key models: Transformational Leadership, Stakeholder Theory, Institutional Theory, and Resource-Based View. Each theory offered valuable insights into leadership behaviour, stakeholder collaboration, regulatory influence, and internal capacity. However, since no single theory could fully address the complexity confronting CSMEs, an integrated approach which provides a more comprehensive understanding of CSR practice was employed. It further shows that while leadership catalyzes CSR, its long-term impact relies on complementary institutional support, accessible resources, and active stakeholder partnerships. It is highlighted that customising a hybrid CSR framework to suit the tourism and hospitality sector within CSMEs is vital. Leadership alone cannot enforce CSR initiatives, as structural support, grants and incentives, and inclusive stakeholder involvement are required.

Additionally, the study contributes to the literature by proposing a multi-theory framework to address the gap in the region, and offers practical guidance to SME owners, policymakers, and other agencies aiming to promote sustainable eco-tourism and hospitality in the region.

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### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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