

ECSR Impacts on Employees' Green Innovative Work Behavior

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Environmental corporate social responsibility (ECSR) is often defined as “environmentally friendly initiatives that maximize productivity while concurrently minimizing consumptive use of resources to mitigate impacts upon future generations”.

Keywords: environmental corporate social responsibility (ECSR) ; creative self-efficacy ; environmental commitment ; person-organization (P-O) fit

1. Introduction

Green innovation has emerged as a viable approach for mitigating environmental pressures while maintaining economic competitiveness in environmental stewardship ^{[1][2]}. Initially, the green innovation literature predominantly focused on the organizational level, emphasizing its crucial role in enhancing corporate competitive advantage and ensuring long-term survival ^{[3][4][5]}. However, with the deepening of research, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the indispensable role of employees in corporate green innovation ^[6], recognizing employees' green innovative work behavior (GIWB) as a driving force for corporate green innovation. They integrate green principles into innovative work behavior (IWB), defining employees' GIWB as “employees generating, introducing, and implementing unique environmental ideas or solutions” ^{[7][8][9][10]}. Considering that innovative thinking typically transcends the routine aspects of employees' daily work, IWB is often regarded as an extra-role behavior ^{[11][12][13]}. Extra-role behavior is characterized by discretionary actions that extend beyond formal job descriptions ^[14]. Despite being voluntary and not explicitly outlined in employment contracts, this behavior provides essential resources for organizations, contributing to the smooth functioning of organizations as intricate social systems ^[15]. Perceived as a proactive and voluntary initiative, employees' GIWB benefits organizations and teams by leveraging their creativity to identify potential issues and opportunities ^[16]. Therefore, GIWB can also be categorized as one of the extra-role behaviors, actively contributing to organizations by exercising varying degrees of discretionary power within the environmental context. Given the significance of GIWB, how to promote employees' GIWB is emerging as a focal topic in academia, capturing increasing interest ^{[1][7][8][9][17][18]}.

Several factors have been identified in previous studies that influence employees' GIWB. At the individual level, Li et al. (2019) ^[1] find that employees' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control positively impact their GIWB through green innovation intentions, grounded in the theory of planned behavior (TPB). Additionally, Wang et al. (2021) ^[18] indicate that employees experiencing negative emotions, such as emotional exhaustion, may suppress their GIWB due to dissatisfaction with the current situation. In the organizational context, green leadership ^{[8][9][19]}, green human resource management (HRM) practices ^[7], and organizational support toward the environment ^[16] are positively associated with employees' GIWB, whereas exploitative leadership ^[18] exhibits a negative association with such behavior. Despite the valuable insights gained from these findings, it is recognized that individual attitudes and behaviors are primarily shaped by their immediate work environment ^[20]. Employees tend to carefully scrutinize information in their work environment to determine the most appropriate attitudes and behaviors ^[21]. According to this viewpoint, scholars argue that perceptions of corporate ethical behavior, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, can fundamentally influence employees' moral concerns, consequently shaping the actions they undertake for the well-being of others ^[20]. In comparison to other factors, the execution of CSR transcends the mere ethical and societal commitments of the enterprise; it intricately molds the conduct and perspectives of its workforce. Building on this foundation, recent research has further revealed that when organizations anticipate employees to develop green mindsets and conduct, environmental corporate social responsibility (ECSR) is more likely to achieve this objective compared to the broader framework of CSR initiatives ^{[22][23]}.

2. S-O-R Framework

The S-O-R framework, a prominent theoretical model that originated in environmental psychology, provides insight into how the stimuli shape an individual's internal state within human contexts, subsequently influencing their behaviors, represented as responses [24]. As research progresses, the S-O-R framework has been widely applied in the study of organizational behavior. Within the organizational context, environmental stimuli encompass a range of factors that may induce changes in employees, such as management policies, managerial philosophies, and daily activities [22][25]. Organisms pertain to the internal states of individuals after exposure to these stimuli, encompassing both the internal structures and the dynamic processes that occur between the initial stimulus and the ultimate response [26]. In research, cognitive and affective states are frequently used to represent organisms [27][28][29]. The cognitive state illustrates individuals' conceptual information processing, whereas the affective state conveys their emotions and feelings [30][31]. Responses, representing the ultimate outcomes, encompass both positive behaviors and avoidance behaviors [24].

Based on the S-O-R framework, ECSR is defined as an environmental stimulus that elicits positive cognitive and affective states in employees, thereby motivating them to exhibit behaviors beneficial to the organization. Creative self-efficacy, as a cognitive state, compared to other cognitive constructs related to GIWB such as perceived meaningfulness at work [17] and perceived climate for creativity [8], emphasizes more intrinsic motivation and beliefs and is a better predictor for work outcomes in the realm of innovation [32][33]. Furthermore, creative self-efficacy emerges as an essential prerequisite for uncovering novel knowledge [32], establishing a more intimate connection with innovative behavior. Within the realm of environmental literature, Luu (2020) [34] also underscores the critical mediating role of green creative self-efficacy between leadership's green entrepreneurial orientation and employees' green creative behavior. Similarly, environmental commitment, as an affective state, in comparison to other environmentally-related affective constructs such as environmental passion and environmental empathy [22][35], exhibits greater stability and sustainability and can better predict work outcomes in the environmental aspects [35][36]. For example, Song et al. (2023) [37] and Zhu et al. (2022) [19] independently identify environmental commitment as a direct predictor of employees' green creativity and GIWB at the individual level. Meanwhile, Chang and Chen (2013) [38] recognize environmental commitment as a mediator between green organizational identity and corporate green innovation performance at the organizational level.

Green innovation seamlessly integrates innovation and environmental sustainability, with its success depending on these pivotal psychological states of employees [39].

3. Environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (ECSR)

ECSR is often defined as "environmentally friendly initiatives that maximize productivity while concurrently minimizing consumptive use of resources to mitigate impacts upon future generations" [40]. ECSR has garnered considerable attention in academic research. Chang and Huang (2018) identify ECSR as a strategic organizational guideline for achieving the objectives of sustainable development [41]. Wei et al. (2015) [42] contend that ECSR reflects intricate environmental conservation initiatives undertaken by businesses, including resource and energy conservation, pollution reduction, and product recycling. Flammer (2013) [43] argues that ECSR has the potential to yield innovative and competitive resources for businesses. In practical terms, an escalating number of enterprises are directing their CSR endeavors toward addressing environmental issues and promoting green production practices [2]. For instance, the Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP, 2021) reveals that over 90% of the global Fortune 500 companies have explicitly integrated climate change and sustainability considerations into their overarching business strategies. Furthermore, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC, 2022) emphasizes that more than 80% of surveyed companies consider the implementation of environmental protection measures paramount in the context of the global economy. These surveys robustly underscore the paramount importance of ECSR within the broader landscape of global business.

Conventional research has predominantly regarded ECSR as a crucial dimension of CSR [20][44]. However, Baughn et al. (2007) [45] and Rahman and Post (2012) [46] argue that the extent of CSR does not always correspond to an equivalent level of ECSR. García-Piqueres and García-Ramos (2020) [47] also demonstrate that, despite a positive link between CSR and innovation, distinctions emerge concerning the categories of innovation and dimensions of CSR. Consequently, ECSR should be distinguished from economic and social responsibilities [47]. In response to this viewpoint, an increasing number of scholars have initiated independent studies on ECSR from various perspectives. For example, at the organizational level, ECSR demonstrates positive correlations with firm performance [41][42][48], innovativeness [49], stock performance [43], and community environmental well-being [50]. At the individual level, ECSR shows a significant association with employees' organizational identification [51], green performance [52], pro-environmental behavior [53][54][55] [56], environmental citizenship behavior [22], social responsibility behavior [20], and GIWB [17].

Pro-environmental behavior, environmental citizenship behavior, social responsibility behavior, and GIWB are all voluntary and non-coercive discretionary actions exhibited by employees within an organization. Pro-environmental behavior and environmental citizenship behavior encompass a range of positive and spontaneous actions aimed at organizational and societal well-being, such as recycling, taking the stairs, double-sided printing, and more [53][54]. Social responsibility behavior, including green and societal behavior, signifies employees fulfilling their responsibilities in an environmentally friendly manner and actively supporting the well-being of the broader community beyond the workplace [20]. Nevertheless, GIWB seeks to incorporate environmental and innovative concepts into the design, production, and processing of products to alleviate environmental burdens and achieve goals of ecological sustainability [18]. Compared to other employees' behaviors, GIWB represents a variety of innovative and unconventional environmentally friendly activities, carrying both risks and values; it is often a critical driving force for enhancing a company's competitive advantage [16]. Thus, amidst numerous employee work outcomes, GIWB is gradually capturing the interest of scholars.

4. ECSR and Employees' Green Innovative Work Behavior (GIWB) in the Chinese Manufacturing Sector

Developing countries need to focus on and implement ECSR due to institutional limitations and a lack of environmental awareness [54]. As a representative example, China has gained renown in recent years for the rapid development of its manufacturing sector. However, this growth not only propels the nation's economic prosperity but also triggers a series of adverse environmental impacts, emerging as a significant factor constraining the sustainable development of the Chinese manufacturing industry [22]. In response to this challenge, the Chinese government has embarked on an initiative to encourage corporate adherence to ECSR, emphasizing the adoption of clean production practices as a strategic approach to achieving a harmonious balance between economic advancement and environmental conservation. Simultaneously, the government has formulated the "Made in China 2025" strategic policy, with the objective of advancing the manufacturing industry through the incorporation of green innovation. Within the Chinese manufacturing sector, there is a shared consensus among government entities and entrepreneurs regarding the imperative to invest in the development of green factories [16].

Employees play an indispensable role in corporate green innovation strategy [6]. Their commitment to green innovation not only represents a crucial dimension of environmental governance but also serves as a catalyst for enhancing the efficacy of corporate green innovation initiatives. Existing literature suggests that ECSR functions as a primary motivator, propelling employees to manifest GIWB [17]. In turn, the contributions made by employees in the realm of sustainable development contribute to the ongoing evolution of ECSR. Therefore, in the context of the Chinese manufacturing industry, conducting a thorough investigation into the relationship between ECSR and employees' GIWB holds significant theoretical and practical importance for promoting corporate green transformation and environmental protection.

5. ECSR, Creative Self-Efficacy, and Employees' GIWB

Creative self-efficacy, defined as "belief in one's ability to generate creative results," is a prerequisite for creative productivity and the generation of "new knowledge" [32]. Bandura (1997) [57] and Gist and Mitchell (1992) [58] have highlighted that individuals' efficacy perceptions are shaped by their judgments of various task-related and interpersonal environmental factors. Interpersonal environmental factors include the presence of role models and feedback (resources), while task environmental factors involve potential distractions (e.g., noise) and the physical setting. Assessing these resources and constraints at various levels enables individuals to enhance their creative self-efficacy [58].

Initially, employees develop self-efficacy by interpreting cues related to their tasks [58]. ECSR initiatives typically go beyond supporting environmental conservation by encouraging and assisting employees in innovative endeavors [59]. When employees perceive that ECSR provides the necessary resources for generating creative ideas, it leads them to allocate more time to identify problems and solutions. Furthermore, with the backing of the organization, they can confidently and adeptly navigate challenges, even in the face of potential failures and uncertainties [60]. These abilities are essential prerequisites for cultivating creative self-efficacy.

Additionally, the implementation of ECSR may influence and reshape interpersonal dynamics within the workplace by fostering interaction and information sharing among employees [61], which can aid employees in tackling challenging and novel tasks while reducing adverse physiological responses [62]. Simultaneously, employees benefit from the shared insights of their colleagues, which bolsters their confidence in generating and carrying out creative solutions in the workplace [63].

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