ИЗСЛЕДВАНЕ НА ВРЪЗКАТА „КОРПОРАТИВНИ ИНИЦИАТИВИ ЗА УСТОЙЧИВОСТ – МОТИВАЦИЯ, УДОВЛЕТВОРЕНОСТ, АНГАЖИРАНОСТ И ЗАДЪРЖАНЕ НА ПЕРСОНАЛА"

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Резюме: Настоящото изследване е разработено като емпирично проучване, целящо да потвърди или отхвърли съществуването на положителна връзка между прилагането на инициативи за устойчивост на корпоративно ниво и удовлетвореността, мотивацията, ангажираността и задържането на служителите. Изследването се основава на данни, събрани чрез подход на самоселектираща се извадка, като за анализа са използвани методи на описателната статистика. Резултатите показват, че по-голямата част от анкетираните възприемат положително влиянието на корпоративните инициативи за устойчивост върху тяхната удовлетвореност, мотивация, ангажираност и желание да продължат да работят в организацията (задържане). Тези резултати съответстват на предходни изследвания и подчертават значението на корпоративните усилия за устойчивост като инструмент за укрепването на ключови нагласи сред служителите. Въпреки определени ограничения, като самоселектиращата се извадка и субективния характер на данните, изследването предоставя ценна информация за влиянието на инициативите за устойчивост върху служителите в България. Бъдещи изследвания биха могли допълнително да изследват тези връзки, като използват по-представителни извадки и по-усъвършенствани статистически методи.

Ключови думи: устойчивост, мотивация, удовлетвореност, ангажираност, задържане на персонала.

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A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVES AND STAFF MOTIVATION, SATISFACTION, ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

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Abstract: This study is designed as quantitative research aimed at confirming or rejecting the existence of a positive relationship between the implementation of sustainability initiatives at the business organization level and employee satisfaction, motivation, engagement, and retention. The study is based on data collected through a self-selection sampling approach, using descriptive statistical methods for analysis. The findings show that the majority of respondents perceive corporate sustainability initiatives as having a positive impact on their satisfaction (H1), motivation (H2), engagement (H3), and retention (H4). These results align with previous research and

highlight the importance of sustainability efforts in enhancing key employee attitudes. Despite certain limitations, such as the self-selection sampling and the subjective nature of self-reported data, the study provides valuable insights into the impact of sustainability initiatives on employees in Bulgaria. Future research could further explore these relationships using more representative samples and advanced statistical techniques.

Keywords: sustainability, motivation, satisfaction, engagement, retention

JEL: M12, M14

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Introduction

Sustainability, seen as an approach that allows people to meet their needs today without negatively affecting the quality of life of future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), can be considered at different levels - global, regional, national, corporate and even individual. Each of these levels has an important role to play in achieving this difficult but crucial goal. Sustainable development implies efforts to achieve results in three areas - ecology, society and economy. Depending on the specific level, these efforts vary, e.g. introducing so-called green regulations (role of the state), creating so-called sustainable innovations (role of scientists and business), responsible consumption (role of consumers, i.e. people), etc. Sustainability has its price. It is linked to increased regulation, and hence regulatory burdens, to the need for so-called green investments, to rising production costs and hence prices, to certain inconveniences for consumers (e.g. caps attached to plastic bottles). In this regard, it is not surprising that the concept of sustainability has its opponents. The denial of its meaning and/or of the possibility of actually achieving it is understandable, given the fact that the action-outcome relationship is very remote in time. Generations today have to make an effort to achieve something that is deferred in time and very often concerns not them but future generations. There is a motivational gap, the solution of which is important in order to achieve sustainability objectives. A source of such motivation may be the existence of positive effects of an immediate nature resulting from sustainability initiatives. And since business organizations play a major role in the process of transformation towards sustainability, *the aim of this paper is to confirm or reject the existence of a link between corporate sustainability initiatives and the motivation, satisfaction, engagement and retention of their employees*. In this case, corporate sustainability initiatives should be understood as projects, policies or actions of the company aimed at long-term environmental, social and economic development.

1. Literature Review

In recent years, corporate sustainability has been the focus of attention of the scientific community, which has reflected on the number of research papers dedicated to this issue. Figure 1 demonstrates this trend, as in 2022 the word sustainability occurred on average 1.89 times for every 1 million words in the books digitized by Google in that year.

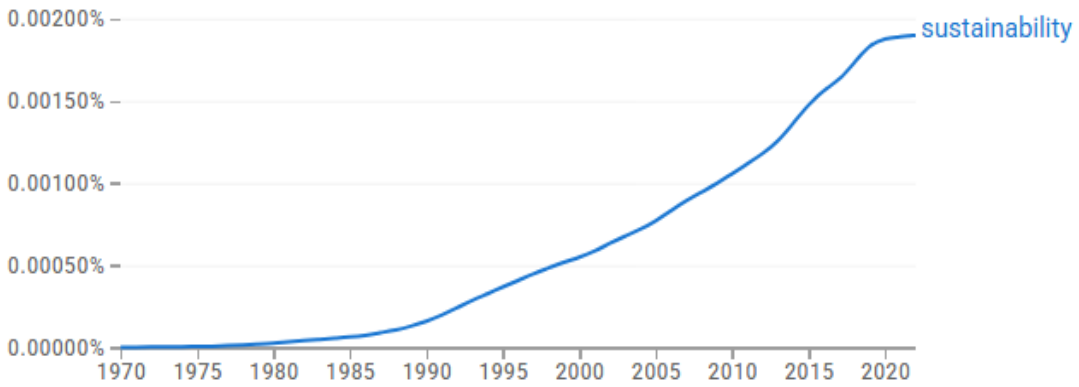

Figure 1. Frequency of use of the word sustainability in the literature
Source: Google Books Ngram Viewer, https://books.google.com/ngrams/

Researchers are exploring sustainability from different angles, with a significant number of them focusing their interest on its impact on business organisations and stakeholders. For example, researchers such as Aggarwal (2013), Amedu (2023), Lee, Rodrigs, Nathan, Rashid, & Al-Mamun (2023) examine the relationship between sustainability reporting and corporate financial performance. However, their results are contradictory. Other authors have demonstrated the relationship between sustainability and consumer loyalty (Moisescu & Gica, 2020), and between sustainability and customer satisfaction (Lin, Nugraha, & Hsu, 2025). There are a number of researchers who are interested in uncovering the impact of corporate sustainability on a key stakeholder group - employees. This is an important issue, as demonstrating such a link would motivate companies to implement sustainability initiatives and thus more readily accept their responsibility for achieving sustainability. At the same time, it would counter the argument that sustainability efforts at the organisational level are economically inappropriate because they impose costs without economic benefits. In this regard, a study by Jeronimo, Lacerda and Henriques (2020) shows that the implementation of sustainable HRM practices leads to an increase in employee motivation. According to the authors, this effect is due to the fact that sustainable HRM practices demonstrate to employees that the organisation perceives them as a long-term investment rather than a cost. As a result, employees feel more connected to the organisation's goals and more valued in their organisational roles. Their thesis is supported and to some extent extended by the research of Ybema, Vuuren and Dam. In it, they conclude that corporate sustainability initiatives lead to increased motivation, but also to increased HR effectiveness, and interestingly, this effect is more pronounced among older employees (Ybema, Vuuren, & Dam, 2017). Shahzad, Jianguo and Junaid (2023) also found a positive relationship between sustainability and employee motivation, which they attribute to a culture of sustainability that encourages open communication, collaboration, and innovation. They also find that implementing sustainability initiatives not only increases motivation, but also employee engagement. This relationship is not unexpected because, according to motivational theories, increased motivation leads to increased engagement and therefore increased HR effectiveness and productivity. It is important to note that sustainability initiatives create so-called intrinsic motivation in employees. This is a form of behaviour 'for its own sake', i.e. for personal satisfaction, without the use of visible external rewards or incentives (Surcheva, 2003). The specific motives leading to an increase in motivation as a result of the implementation of sustainability initiatives have been articulated by Greene, Crumbleholme and Myerson (2014), and are expressed in the formation of a

sense of purpose and belonging. They are in line with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Locke's (1991) theory of motivational goals.

As sustainability initiatives create intrinsic motivation based on employees' personal satisfaction, it can be expected that they will also lead to an increase in employee satisfaction. This is supported by a study by Tschelisnig and Westerlaken (2022), who conclude that sustainability initiatives increase employee motivation and satisfaction. This is supported by other studies, including those by Chakrabarti (2023), Ajitha and Shobita (2021) and Saha, Dey and Papagiannaki (2022). The latter also find that companies that prioritise sustainable practices are characterised by lower turnover rates as a result of higher employee loyalty. This is confirmed by Cachón-Rodríguez, Blanco-González, Prado-Román and Del-Castillo-Feito (2022), who conclude that this positive effect is not direct, but only occurs through social capital.

Given that sustainability initiatives can be divided into three main areas - economic, environmental and social - it is interesting to see whether these positive effects on the motivation, commitment, satisfaction, turnover and loyalty of the organisation's employees are maintained when they are implemented more closely. This question is partially answered by McInerney and Niewiarowski (2022), who examine the impact of sustainability training on employee motivation and commitment. They conclude that sustainability-related employee training has a psychological impact, creating intrinsic motivation in employees, fostering their creative thinking and commitment to the organisation's goals. Purgał-Popiela (2024) adds to their conclusion, finding through her research that training in environmental responsibility and social sustainability not only improves employees' knowledge and skills, but also motivates them to apply them in their daily work, leading to higher productivity. These studies are complemented by the study of Khaled, Walid and Amany (2023), who analysed the impact of so-called Green Human Resource Management (GHRM)[1] practices on employee retention and environmental sustainability and found a strong positive correlation. This implies that sustainability initiatives can have positive effects on the organisation's employees, even if their scope is more limited. This makes them an even more valuable tool for managing key aspects of employee attitudes and behaviours in an organisational setting.

Summarising the studies presented, it can be concluded that, at the organisational level, sustainability initiatives positively influence employees' attitudes and behaviours, with the strength of the effect increasing with age. These initiatives lead to higher levels of employee intrinsic motivation, commitment, satisfaction and loyalty. Increased loyalty, in turn, ensures lower levels of staff turnover.

The transformation of organisational sustainability initiatives into positive HRM-related effects should be mediated by the extent to which individuals appreciate their materiality and significance. Therefore, it is considered important to take the national context into account in this research. In some countries, sustainability issues are taken more seriously and addressing them is an important part of the 'social agenda'. In others, the issue is neglected or even denied, which is also reflected in public attitudes. This would reflect both the strength of the link between sustainability initiatives at the organisational level and employee attitudes and behaviour, and its existence in general. In line with this understanding, the research effort is focused on conducting an empirical study of the research problem in Bulgaria, which as part of the EU observes the strictest regulations regarding sustainability, but at the same time, as one of the poorest member

[1] Green HRM are environmentally oriented human resource management practices that aim to promote sustainable behaviour among employees and integrate environmental principles into personnel management.

states, often opposes European initiatives related to this problem. Especially if they have an economic cost.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The study is designed as quantitative research aimed at confirming or rejecting the existence of a positive relationship between the implementation of sustainability initiatives at the business organisation level and employee satisfaction, motivation, engagement and retention. A structured approach has been applied to ensure logical consistency between formulating research questions, developing hypotheses, collecting data, and verifying the findings.

Based on a literature review, four research questions have been formulated, outlining the key aspects of the studied topic. In response to these questions, four research hypotheses have been generated and subjected to empirical testing. To achieve this, a cross-sectional survey design was employed, allowing for an assessment of the current state of the issue at a given moment.

Assessing satisfaction, motivation, engagement, and retention is difficult to achieve through external characteristics, as these are inherently internal states of the individual. For this reason, the self–assessment method was used in evaluating them, which means that participants assess their own feelings and perceptions, providing a more authentic and accurate representation of their state.

2.2. Research Questions

The confirmation or rejection of the overall research objective implies the formulation of, and therefore the answer to, the following four main research questions:

Research Question 1. Do corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee satisfaction?

Research Question 2. Do corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee motivation?

Research Question 3. Do corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee engagement?

Research Question 4. Do corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee retention?

2.3. Research Hypotheses and Model

Based on the literature review and the defined research questions, the following main hypotheses were derived:

H_1: Corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee satisfaction.

H_2: Corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee motivation.

H_3: Corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee engagement.

H_4: Corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on employee retention.

Visually, the model can be represented as Figure 2.

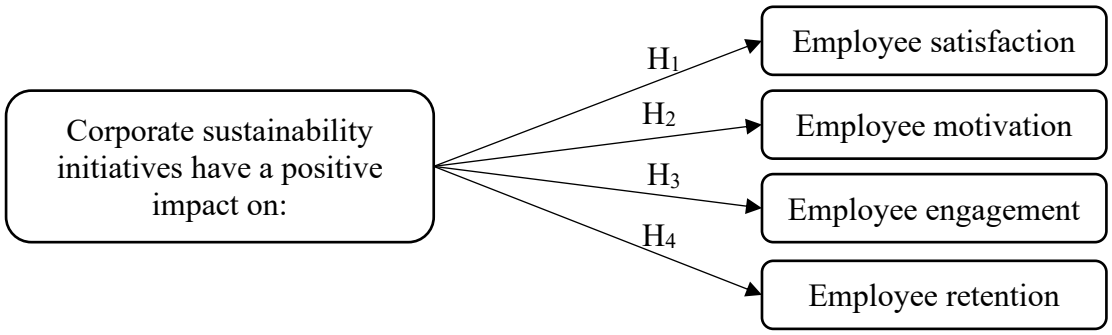

Figure 2. Research model

The model shows that corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive effect on employee satisfaction (H_1), motivation (H_2), engagement (H_3) and retention (H_4).

2.4. Data Collection Methods

The data required to test the adopted research hypotheses were generated through an online survey conducted between February 15 and March 15, 2025. The questionnaire was digitized using Google Forms, and a QR code was generated using QRCode Monkey to facilitate its distribution to potential respondents. The questionnaire contains 12 questions, 6 of which serve to establish the respondent's profile (gender, age, education, position in the organization, presence of children and name of the organization where they work). Two of the questions explored respondents' attitudes towards the concept of sustainable development (approval or disapproval and willingness to make the effort and accept the inconvenience and costs associated with achieving it). Four questions represent respondents' self-assessment of how corporate sustainability initiatives reflect on their satisfaction, motivation, engagement and retention. All questions, except those related to respondents' profiles, are measured on a five-point positive Likert scale: 1 - Strongly Disagree, 2 - Disagree, 3 - Neither Disagree nor Agree, 4 - Agree, and 5 - Strongly Agree. The questionnaire was pilot tested with five respondents who were then interviewed. Based on the feedback received, corrections were made to address weaknesses and errors. The distribution of the questionnaire was done using Facebook - the most popular social network in Bulgaria with 4.4 million users (approximately 66 percent of the population) in 2025. (Penkova, 2025). A link, as well as a QR code, to access the survey has been posted on Facebook pages and groups asking their members to take the survey by completing it. This means that the survey is based on a self-selection sampling approach, where participants choose to respond voluntarily. Filling out the survey form is limited to one time per device using the features provided by Google Forms. After the open period ends, the survey is closed, and the data is exported from Google Forms to Microsoft Excel for analysis.

2.5. Sample

The survey covers 134 people (with 2.93 million employees in Bulgaria in 2024), as already noted the sample is based on a self-selection sampling approach. The profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Profile of Respondents

Characteristics		Frequency	Percentage	Bulgaria*
Gender	• Male	36	26.9 %	48.1%
	• Female	98	73.1 %	51.9%
Age in years	• 23 - 29	8	6.0 %	Not relevant to the study
	• 30 - 39	38	28.6 %	
	• 40 - 49	53	39.9 %	
	• 50 - 59	24	18.0 %	
	• 60 - 67	10	8.6 %	
Presence of children	• Yes	111	82.8 %	No information was found
	• No	23	17.2 %	
Education	• Higher	103	76.9 %	25.5%
	• Secondary	30	22.4 %	47.1%
	• Primary	0	0.0 %	16.4%
	• No education	1	0.7 %	10.9%
Work position	• Manager	35	26.1 %	6.7%
	• Specialist	59	44.0 %	30.9%
	• Worker	31	23.1 %	36.2%
	• Service staff	9	6.7 %	25.4%
	Total:	**134**		

** The data for the gender structure is for 2023, for the educational and work position structure for 2021. Source: National Statistical Institute, https://www.nsi.bg/en*

It is evident from the table that there is a structural discrepancy between the respondents and the population of Bulgaria in terms of gender. Women predominate among the respondents (73.1%), and the population structure in the country is relatively balanced. Structural discrepancies are also observed in terms of educational level and position in the organization, which may affect the accuracy of the estimate.

The mean age of respondents was 44, the minimum 23 and the maximum 67, with a standard deviation of 9.17. One respondent did not correctly state his age. The average age of the surveyed persons is close to the average age of the population in Bulgaria, which according to the National Statistical Institute in 2023 is 45.2 years. It is important to note that in view of the research objective, only employed persons, i.e. those of working age, are included in the scope of the study. Therefore, it is not relevant to look for a correspondence between the age structure of the respondents and the general of the country.

The quantitative data presented show that the research sample does not meet the requirements for representativeness in terms of employees in Bulgaria and therefore cannot be considered representative for this group. However, the sample provides valuable information on trends and attitudes among respondents, allowing valid conclusions to be drawn about certain aspects of the topic under study.

2.6. Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis from the survey was conducted using Microsoft Excel. The preliminary processing included checking for anomalies and outliers, removing duplicates, handling missing data, as well as categorizing and encoding variables. Descriptive statistics were used to test the adopted hypotheses, including mean values, minimum and maximum values, proportions, standard deviation, and other indicators.

The results are presented through figures and tables for better clarity. Higher level statistical techniques such as correlation, regression or analysis of variance (ANOVA) were not used in testing the hypotheses due to the lack of objective data to evaluate corporate sustainability initiatives. Such an assessment is very difficult to make as the respondents are from a large number of different business organisations. It would be possible if respondents were from a more limited number of businesses and their managers provided the necessary information, or if it was publicly available, for example in the form of a corporate sustainability report. However, this is not the case in this particular instance, so the testing of the hypotheses is based on self-assessment by respondents and the use of descriptive statistics.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The participation of the respondents in the survey was voluntary and completely anonymous. The questions are formulated in a way that does not allow the identification of respondents. The data are used for academic purposes only and will not be made available to third parties. The information obtained is presented in aggregate form only, without reference to specific business organisations. The data collected is stored exclusively on local media and is not accessible online. For maximum security, the data is protected by encryption.

2.8. Research Limitations

The empirical study was conducted under certain limitations. First, the sample was formed using the self-selection sampling approach, which may lead to self-selection bias if certain groups of respondents are more likely to participate than others. Second, the sample does not meet the requirements for representativeness in terms of its size and structure. Third, the results are based on self-assessments by respondents, which are subjective and may be influenced by personal perceptions and cognitive biases. Finally, the inability to quantitatively assess corporate sustainability initiatives limited the use of more advanced statistical methods for hypothesis testing.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into respondents' perceptions and attitudes, contributing to a better understanding of the issue among employed individuals in Bulgaria. The data obtained can serve as a basis for more in-depth analyses and for the formulation of hypotheses to be tested in future, larger and more representative studies.

3. Results and Discussion

The summary results of the survey, presented in the form of Table 2, demonstrate that based on mean scores, sustainability initiatives at the organizational level led to a notable increase in employee satisfaction (mean score of 4.19 out of a maximum score of 5.0) and motivation (mean score of 4.10). Also, positive, but slightly weaker, was the impact of sustainability initiatives on engagement (mean score 3.98), and employee retention, measured as reduced likelihood of leaving the organisation (mean score 3.61).

Table 2
Employee perceptions of sustainability initiatives and work outcomes

Questions	$\bar{X}$	S	Percentage of response (%)				
			1	2	3	4	5
			Negative		*Neutral*	*Positive*	
The implementation of sustainability initiatives by my employer would increase my job satisfaction.	4.19	1.0	3.7	2.2	15.7	28.4	50.0
The implementation of sustainability initiatives by my employer would enhance my work motivation.	4.10	1.1	3.7	6.0	17.9	21.6	50.7
The implementation of sustainability initiatives by my employer would enhance my work engagement.	3.98	1.1	5.2	6.0	17.9	27.6	43.3
The implementation of sustainability initiatives by my employer would reduce my likelihood of leaving the organization.	3.61	1.4	13.4	8.2	17.2	26.1	35.1

* Where X is the mean score, and S is the standard deviation.

Analysing the results from another perspective, it can be concluded that corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on the satisfaction, motivation, engagement and retention of the majority of the individuals surveyed. For 78.4% of the individuals surveyed, corporate sustainability initiatives have a positive impact on their satisfaction. Almost as high was the percentage of respondents (72.3%) for whom sustainability initiatives led to an increase in their work motivation. Increasing engagement and retention to the organization is also positively influenced by corporate sustainability initiatives for a high proportion of employees, 70.9% and 61.2% respectively.

Based on the presented results, it can be concluded that ***the descriptive results support all four research hypotheses. This suggests that corporate sustainability initiatives are perceived to have a positive impact on employee satisfaction (H_1), motivation (H_2), engagement (H_3), and retention (H_4).*** The obtained findings align with previous scientific studies on the topic, reinforcing the conclusions drawn by other researchers. For better clarity, the research model is illustrated in Figure 3.

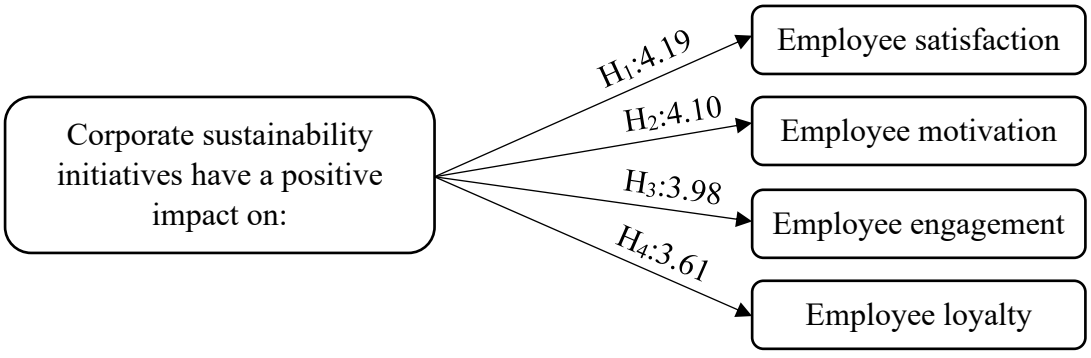

Figure 3. Results of model and hypotheses

After confirming the existence of a positive relationship between corporate sustainability initiatives, from a practical standpoint, it is essential to analyse the factors that may strengthen or weaken this relationship. Firstly, the intensity of the positive effects largely depends on the individual's perception of the significance of sustainable development as a societal issue. In Bulgaria, where there is still a significant division regarding the perception of this problem, corporate sustainability initiatives cannot universally exert a positive influence on the attitudes and performance of all employees in the organization.

Another critical aspect is the way and extent to which employees are involved in sustainability initiatives. The most effective initiatives are those in which employees actively participate, rather than merely observing decisions made "from the top" and imposed for implementation within the organizational hierarchy. Employee engagement in the process is key to enhancing their motivation and commitment to the initiatives.

Furthermore, the organization must demonstrate genuine commitment to sustainability, rather than merely complying with newly introduced regulations. As already noted, the practice of "greenwashing" may be effective for external stakeholders, but it is not applicable to internal ones, particularly employees, who can easily recognize the lack of authenticity in the company's commitment. An example of this is the practice in some Bulgarian municipalities that have separate bins for waste collection, yet all waste is mixed during transportation. This practice is demotivating and leads people to stop separating their waste. Similar behaviour would be observed in business organizations that simulate sustainability for PR effects.

A negative effect may also arise if sustainability initiatives create additional burdens for employees without clear benefits or recognition. This includes situations where these initiatives are not integrated into the corporate culture and values, reducing their effectiveness and the possibility of long-term positive impact on employees.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that to enhance the positive impact of corporate sustainability initiatives on human resources within the organization, it is necessary to implement a targeted approach. This includes providing employees with a deeper understanding of the significance of sustainability, and actively engaging them not only in the implementation processes but also in the goal-setting processes related to sustainability initiatives. In addition, the organisation must integrate sustainability issues into its mission, strategy and corporate culture so that it demonstrates a real long-term commitment to sustainability. This applies in particular to the HR department, which should engage employees in achieving sustainability objectives (Gechbaia, Goletini, Abashidze, & Nasaraia, 2024).

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that corporate sustainability initiatives are positively associated with employee satisfaction, motivation, engagement, and retention. By providing descriptive support for all four research hypotheses, the study contributes to the growing body of evidence on the link between sustainability efforts and key employee attitudes.

Despite certain limitations, such as the self-selection sampling approach and the subjective nature of self-reported data, the results provide valuable insights into how sustainability initiatives impact employees in the Bulgarian labour market. These findings align with previous research and highlight the importance of corporate commitment to sustainability as a driver of positive workplace outcomes.

Future studies could further explore these relationships using more representative samples and advanced statistical methods to enhance the robustness of the conclusions. Additionally, a longitudinal approach could help assess the long-term effects of sustainability initiatives on employee attitudes and behaviours.

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