






Online Reputation: The Role of CSR Communication through Online Platforms

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Abstract. In an era marked by heightened public awareness of social, environmental, and ethical issues, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) becomes a vital element of strategic corporate communication. Stakeholders nowadays expect companies to communicate such efforts transparently and convincingly. Hence, CSR communication plays an increasingly strategic role in influencing public perceptions and stakeholder evaluations of corporate reputation in digital environment. While existing literature confirms the reputational benefits of CSR engagement, less is known about the specific mechanisms through which online CSR communication translates into favourable stakeholder responses. Specifically, there is a growing need to understand how online CSR communication influence favourable reputation among online community. This paper addresses this gap by synthesizing findings from earlier studies to propose a conceptual model that identifies emotional engagement as mediating factor and corporate credibility as moderator. Drawing on theories from corporate communication, stakeholder engagement, and consumer psychology, the model offers a structured lens for understanding how online CSR content affects online reputation outcomes. The paper concludes with research implications, including suggestions for empirical testing using mixed methods and cross-cultural designs, and it outlines future research opportunities to further unpack the psychological dynamics of CSR communication in the digital era.

Keywords: CSR Communication, Online Reputation, Online Platforms, Social Media.

1 Introduction

Today, the reputation of an organization is not solely depending on the quality of products or services it has to offer but also its contribution to the society and environment. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been a strategy for organizations to align their operations with stakeholders' expectations related to ethical business conduct, sustainability and stakeholders' management. As stakeholders increasingly involve and immerse into digital platforms, the way companies communicate about their CSR initiatives through online platforms is becoming the key to building and shaping electronic reputation (e-reputation) (Jiang et al., 2022; Ma et al., 2021; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021). The evolution of digital platforms has transformed how CSR messages are designed

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and distributed, interpreted and indirectly has changed corporate-stakeholder engagement (Capriotti, 2011; Colleoni, 2013).

Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly explored the relationship between CSR communication and corporate reputation (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Elving, 2013; Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Homer, 2024; Wang, 2024). While many studies confirmed that CSR disclosure can positively influence stakeholders' evaluations, the mechanism through which these effects occur remain underexamined. Inconsistent findings across industries, platforms and cultures suggest that additional explanatory variables may be at play. Some found CSR communication through online channels such as website and social media helps organizations in bridging business actions and public perception. When communicated effectively, CSR initiatives can build trust and confidence, enhance organization's credibility and influence e-reputation (Li et al., 2022; Andini & Arief, 2024). But there are also times when CSR messages may backfire, triggering scepticism and finally put organizations' reputation at risk.

This paper aims to fill this gap by proposing a conceptual framework that identifies mediating and moderating variables – emotional engagement and corporate credibility – that influence the effectiveness of CSR communication in building corporate reputation. Based on existing literatures this article provides insights into best practices for leveraging CSR as a strategic tool for reputation management in digital era.

2 Literature Review

2.1 CSR Communication and The Choice of Channels

The landscape of CSR communication has transformed significantly for the past decade. It is now driven largely by the creation of digital technologies which also changed stakeholder expectations and demands for transparency. Scholars have examined how the choice of CSR communication channels affects the reach, effectiveness and perceived authenticity of CSR content.

Earlier CSR communication mainly relied on traditional, one-way channels such as annual report, corporate website, press release and sustainability reports. These channels, however, remain its role in disseminating CSR information and ensuring regulatory compliance (Bravo et al., 2013; Perez, 2015).

In contrast, the emergence of social media platforms has shifted CSR communication toward real-time, interactive and multimedia-driven formats. It also allows for more emotive storytelling, visual communication and direct stakeholder engagement which influence public perception and enhance trust and transparency (Capriotti et al., 2021; Dhanesh, 2017; Rauf & Saleem, 2023). Social media is now a strategic CSR communication tool. Studies show that platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn are effective for CSR communication through visual storytelling, employee advocacy and influencer partnership (Etter et al., 2019; Fatma et al., 2020).

However, authenticity is crucial because overly self-promotional content can backfire. Different choice of channels reflects different priorities among organizations. For

instance, Facebook and Twitter are more often used to showcase community involvement and environmental efforts while LinkedIn highlights employees' wellbeing and ethical leadership (Kim & Ferguson, 2019; Aiello et al., 2024).

Recent work categorized channels of CSR communication into three; owned, earned and shared. Organizations encourage stakeholders to co-create and share CSR content, turning audiences into advocates (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Colleoni, 2013). This, however, can be both a strength and challenge for brands must monitor and manage their CSR information carefully.

The credibility of channels matters as much as the content. Stakeholders evaluate CSR authenticity based on how well the channel fits the message type. For example, a sustainability report is expected to include detailed environmental data while an Instagram post is expected to show real human stories (Perez, 2015; Kim & Ferguson, 2019; De Bernardi et al., 2024). Thus, when digital platforms are heavily used to communicate with the publics, it is important for organizations to understand stakeholders' expectations of type of content shared throughout different platforms including CSR-related information.

2.2 Emotional Engagement

The link between CSR communication and emotional engagement has gained attention among scholars since organizations' intention is not only keeping the publics informed but to also to connect with stakeholders on affective level. Earlier studies suggest that CSR communication is most effective when it resonates emotionally with audiences and going beyond factual reporting to evoke empathy, pride, gratitude or even more elevation (Du et al., 2010; Kim & Ferguson, 2018).

There were also early studies that largely focused on informational approaches; clarity, transparency and credibility of CSR disclosures (e.g.: Morsing & Schultz, 2006). However, recent direction leans toward examining how CSR messages can generate emotional responses and leads to stronger identification with organization (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Romenti, Murtaellu & Valentini, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2021). Emotionally charged CSR messages such as story-telling or human-centered narratives is found to be more persuasive than purely rational appeals (Men & Tsai, 2015).

The concept of emotional engagement in CSR communication is often based from psychological and communication theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and appraisal theory. It highlights how emotional cues influence cognitive processing and the formation of attitude (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). Scholars also asserted that stakeholders are more likely to develop positive attitudes such as trust, loyalty and sense of shared values with organization when they emotionally engaged with CSR messages (Bergman, Bergman, & Berger, 2017; Rauf & Saleem, 2023; Ki & Kim, 2024).

The existence of digital and social media platforms has extensively changed the dynamics of emotional engagement in CSR. Online platforms allow interactive, dialogues and facilitate real-time emotional expressions through what is commonly seen today; likes, comments, shares, and user-generated content (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Korschun, 2015; Wang et al., 2023). Studies also shows that CSR messages with emotional tone

– particularly those emphasizing care, community impact or moral responsibility – tend to receive higher engagement metrics and more favorable responses from the publics (Zhao, Yin & Song, 2021; Zhang, Sun & Yin, 2024).

Despite these insights, the emotional dimension of CSR communication remains understudied. Existing studies commonly treat emotional engagement as a result of CSR communication rather than exploring its role as a mediating or moderating mechanism CSR – reputation or CSR – trust relationships. There is limited integration of emotional engagement into broader strategic CSR communication framework. Hence, there is a room for further conceptual development and this paper propose future studies to look at mediating effect of emotional engagement in the relationship between CSR communication and e-reputation.

2.3 Corporate Credibility

Speaking of the effectiveness of CSR communication, its one basic element is corporate credibility. Corporate credibility, defined as the degree to which stakeholders perceive an organization as trustworthy, reliable and competent (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001). How companies communicate their CSR efforts significantly influenced by whether these efforts are perceived as genuine and thus enhance its corporate credibility (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010; Kim & Lee, 2012).

Scholars emphasized on the instrumental function of CSR in building credibility, specifically in time of crisis or in highly scrutinized industries (Yoon, Gurhan-Canli & Schwarz, 2006). CSR communications act as a reputation buffer where it mitigates skepticism when stakeholders unsure of corporate intentions. However, this effect is highly contingent on perceived sincerity and alignment between CSR claims and corporate behaviours (Foreh & Grier, 2003).

The credibility of the source – the organization itself – play a vital role. Source credibility determine consume judgment of how believable a communication is and in turn can have strong impact of attitudes toward company (Choi & Rifon, 2002). It is important to select source of information before sharing CSR information on social media (Dalla-Pria & Rodriguez-de-Dios, 2022). To build trust and credibility, organizations must move from one-way, self-promotional CSR messages toward stakeholder-inclusive, dialogic communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2003). Stakeholders tend to evaluate CSR communication as more credible when it reflects good values that organizations hold on to (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore & Hill, 2006).

Theoretical underpinnings often branched from attribution theory and legitimacy theory. The former suggests that stakeholders hypothesized about organizations' motives behind CSR and those perceived motives influence corporate credibility (Ellen, Webb & Mohr, 2006). The latter posits that CSR communication assists organizations secure approval from society provided if business actions and CSR messages are aligned (Suchman, 1995).

Digital and social media platforms come as new challenges and opportunities to organizations. While it offers transparency and wider reach, they also make stakeholders scrutiny and potential backlash against inauthentic CSR inevitable to organizations (Illia et al., 2003). Previous studies show that interactive CSR communication such as

inviting feedback and ideas from stakeholders in co-creation enhance credibility because it demonstrates responsiveness and accountability (Colleoni, 2013; Capriotti et al., 2021). Corporate credibility plays a role in consumer response toward company efforts (Bialkova & Te Paske, 2020).

Nevertheless, many existing literatures remains fragmented. There is a limited integration of communication style, channel choice, message framing and stakeholder expectations into a cohesive comprehension of how corporate credibility influence CSR communication. Furthermore, few conceptual frameworks holistically capture the dynamic of CSR communication-corporate credibility relationship over time. This article suggests future scholars to examine the role of corporate credibility as moderator in linking CSR communication and e-reputation.

2.4 CSR Communication and Reputation

A growing body of literature has discovered how CSR communication influence e-reputation. Earlier studies generally support the notion that effective CSR communication contributes positively to e-reputation. CSR content which consistent with organization's values and actions build trust, enhance legitimacy and also influence positive evaluations among stakeholders on digital platforms (Du et al., 2010; Colleoni, 2013; Kim & Ferguson, 2019). These studies stand for communicated CSR activities signals organization's social and ethical values which in turn develop confidence and favorable perceptions among stakeholders online.

However, literature also point out notable variations in the effectiveness of CSR communication. It is found that communication style, platform and stakeholder engagement strategy can be the factors of effective CSR communication. Digital CSR messages are more impactful when delivered through dialogic and interactive formats instead of one-way announcement. Companies that practice two-way communication and use Twitter as platform were more likely to see improvements in e-reputation than those who used broadcasting (Etter, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2020). Framing of CSR content – whether informative, promotional or emotional – significantly affect stakeholder responses and online engagement metrics which are closely linked to e-reputation (Okazaki et al., 2020). These suggest that the outcomes of CSR communication can be influenced by the strategic use of tone, platform and message format.

There is no consensus on the impact of CSR communication on e-reputation. Some studies have identified conditions under which CSR communication either have no effect or can negatively affect company's e-reputation. For example, Yoon et al. (2006) found that stakeholders might react skeptically to CSR messages due to pre-existing reputational damage, evaluating CSR efforts as hypocritical or opportunistic. Credibility becomes important as digital spaces allow rapid information circulation and subject to high scrutiny (Fieseler et al., 2010; Pasi & Vivaini, 2020). Thus, lack of consistency and transparency may become the reason why CSR communication harms e-reputation. These results challenge the assumption that CSR communication is beneficial and emphasize the importance of prior good reputation.

Importantly, one of the major limitations in understanding the correlation between CSR communication and e-reputation is the lack of attention given to emotional engagement. While emotional content tends to be prominently effective for it leads to higher likes, shares and comments, most earlier studies of CSR communication focused on information accuracy and alignment with stakeholders' expectations (Men & Tsai, 2015; Bergman et al., 2017; Cao & Cao, 2025). Few studies have examined how emotions elicited by CSR stories contribute to building and strengthening e-reputation. The lapse leaves a significant gap in understanding the psychological processes that influence stakeholders' support in this digital era.

A related but similarly underdeveloped area is the role of corporate credibility in the CSR – e-reputation relationship. Some studies recognized credibility as a moderating factor (Newell & Goldsmith, 2001, Aljarah et al., 2020; Widyaningsih et al., 2024) but it is rarely examined thoroughly. The investigation on how message source, tone and historical consistency influence stakeholders' perceptions is still limited. Looking at how digital audiences openly and skeptically responded to organizations' CSR messages, corporate credibility should be treated as fundamental precondition for effective CSR communication.

In conclusion, earlier studies have made significant progress in documenting the connection between CSR communication and e-reputation. Yet, earlier findings are not uniformly aligned. There is a general agreement on the positive influence of CSR communication but it is also important to look at significant variants based on context, message strategy and public's perception. Moreover, emotional engagement and corporate credibility is found to be insufficiently studied in the past despite their relevance in digital CSR narratives. These gaps outline golden chances for future empirical work to refine and expand the existing understanding of how CSR communication can shape positive perceptions in digital environment.

Hence, based on the review of existing literature, this paper proposes a conceptual framework as below:

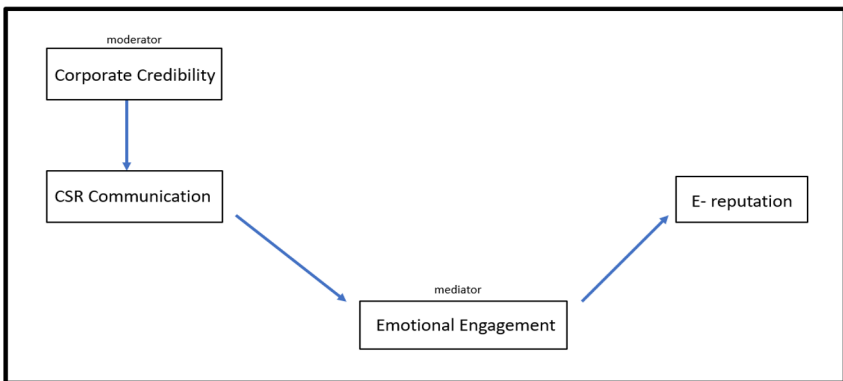


Fig 1. Proposed conceptual framework

3 Methodology

Many earlier studies confirmed direct relationship between CSR communication and reputation, but the underlying mediators and moderators are underexplored or inconsistently modelled. This paper suggested promising mediating and moderating factors supported by past research; emotional engagement and corporate credibility. CSR content framed emotionally creates strong public support (Janssen et al.,2020; Minton et al., 2020) while corporate credibility is found to significantly affect message reception (Pomeroy & Johnson, 2009; Colleoni, 2013; Hosain et al.,2022).

Considering the nature of the proposed conceptual framework, a quantitative method is the most suitable to analyze and measure the relationship between those variables. Furthermore, the advantage of quantitative study is that it allows measurement of perception, reactions and attitudes of a sample through a set of structured questions. For an accurate estimate of the relationship between variables, a descriptive study usually needs a sample of hundreds or thousands of subjects. However, future studies may also employ mixed method to examine the relationship between CSR communication and e-reputation with the presence of mediating and moderating variable; emotional engagement and corporate credibility.

By combining quantitative data and qualitative insights, future studies may better understand the underlying drives, perceptions and contextual factors that influence the findings. For instance, survey data could be complemented by in-depth interviews or focus groups to explore participants' experiences in greater depth. Thus, it enriches the interpretation of statistical findings and offering a more nuanced perspective.

Future researcher should also consider cross-cultural studies to examine the effect of cultural differences has on CSR communication outcomes. Cultural values, norms and social structures can significantly affect individuals' attitudes, behaviours, perceptions. Thus, it may lead to different outcomes across different cultural contexts. Cross-cultural comparisons can highlight both universal and culture-bound aspects which is valuable in globalized world. By incorporating samples from diverse cultural background, future studies may provide a holistic understanding and suggest practical implications that are sensitive to cultural differences.

For quantitative study, this paper suggested the below to measure the variables studied. The instrument will consist of close-ended questions using a 5-point Likert Scale.

Table 1. Table captions should be placed above the tables.

Construct	Source	No of items	Sample Item
CSR Communication	Du et al. (2010); Kim & Lee (2012)	4–6	“I am aware of CSR activities shared by airlines online.”
Emotional Engagement	Janssen et al. (2015); Minton et al. (2020)	4–5	“CSR messages from airlines make me feel proud or hopeful.”

Corporate Credibility	Pomering & Johnson (2009); Ohanian (1990)	4–6	“The airline seems trustworthy and competent.”
Corporate Reputation	Fombrun et al. (2000); Ponzi et al. (2011)	5–7	“The airline is highly regarded and respected.”

4 Conclusion

This conceptual paper has focused on the influence of CSR communication on stakeholders. Effective communication is essential to ensure that CSR efforts undertaken by organizations generate meaningful impact on stakeholders and society at large. As Moreno and Kang (2020) assert, stakeholders’ awareness and understanding of CSR initiatives largely depend on both the content and the manner in which these initiatives are communicated. Consequently, public’s understanding towards what and why it has been done would have impact on their perceptions and attitudes. Given the substantial investments organizations made in CSR activities, communication should not be treated as a secondary concern—it is a critical component in realizing the intended outcomes of CSR efforts.

Ultimately, the positive perceptions and attitudes that stakeholders develop toward organizations significantly influence their behaviours and actions. Their support for products, services, and other aspects of the business is essential for ensuring organizational survival and long-term sustainability within a competitive industry landscape. Therefore, understanding the mechanisms through which CSR communication influences e-reputation—particularly with the inclusion of mediating and moderating variables—can offer valuable insights for organizations. Such understanding can help them not only to design more strategic and authentic CSR initiatives but also to communicate these efforts more effectively to their audiences.

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