

## The Effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a Corporate Communication Strategy

Kharisma Citra, Antonius, Jonathan Napitupulu

LSPR Institute of Communication and Business, Indonesia

Email: 24072200024@lspr.edu, 24072200015@lspr.edu, 24072200082@lspr.edu

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### ABSTRACT

*This study investigates the effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a corporate communication strategy by conducting a structured literature review of recent academic sources. The analysis categorizes the literature into key themes such as CSR's impact on corporate image, stakeholder engagement, the role of social media, ethical concerns, and measurement of communication effectiveness. Findings reveal that CSR, when strategically communicated, enhances corporate reputation, builds stakeholder trust, and can lead to improved organizational performance. However, the effectiveness of CSR communication depends on several factors, including message framing, emotional appeal, platform selection, and industry context. Studies also emphasize the growing importance of participatory and dialogic communication approaches, particularly in digital environments, where consumers value authenticity and interaction. Furthermore, the credibility of CSR messaging and alignment between communicated motives and actual corporate actions are critical to avoiding stakeholder skepticism. The review highlights that while CSR communication offers significant strategic benefits, it also poses reputational risks if perceived as inauthentic or excessive. This study contributes to the understanding of CSR as a multidimensional tool in corporate communication and underscores the need for an integrated, stakeholder-focused communication strategy grounded in transparency, relevance, and ethical intent.*

### KEYWORDS



*Brand Reputation, Corporate Communication, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Social Media Strategy, Stakeholder Engagement*

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the boundaries of corporate responsibilities have significantly expanded beyond traditional economic interests. Globally, over 90% of Fortune 500 companies now publish dedicated CSR reports, reflecting the institutionalization of corporate accountability beyond profit maximization (KPMG, 2020). According to the Global Sustainability Study by Nielsen (2015), 66% of global consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable brands, and this figure rises to 73% among millennials, demonstrating that CSR has become a market expectation rather than a discretionary activity. Companies are increasingly expected not only to deliver profits for shareholders but also to demonstrate ethical conduct, social responsiveness, and environmental stewardship (Shafer, 2015). These evolving expectations are rooted in the broader societal shift towards sustainability, transparency, and inclusivity, where *Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* has emerged as both a moral imperative and a strategic business function (Seran et al., 2024). In this landscape, CSR is no longer viewed merely as philanthropy or compliance, but rather as an integral part of corporate identity and brand communication (Leiva et al., 2016).

The strategic communication of CSR has become a focal point of contemporary business practices, as companies strive to build trust, legitimacy, and long-term relationships with various stakeholders (Lim & Greenwood, 2017). However, the modern communication

environment presents unprecedented challenges. In an era characterized by information overload, declining consumer trust, and heightened scrutiny of corporate motives, *CSR* communication faces significant obstacles. Edelman's Trust Barometer (2021) reveals that 61% of consumers believe companies engage in "greenwashing"—the practice of conveying a false impression about environmental practices. Furthermore, media noise and platform fragmentation complicate message delivery, while stakeholder skepticism has intensified following high-profile corporate scandals and perceived disingenuousness in *CSR* claims (Lyon & Montgomery, 2015). *CSR* communication serves as a narrative that allows firms to articulate their social and environmental values, showcase their responsible actions, and engage stakeholders in shared commitments (Adiga, 2024). When executed effectively, *CSR* communication can enhance corporate reputation, influence consumer behavior, foster employee engagement, and even drive financial performance. However, ineffective or inauthentic *CSR* messaging—especially when seen as self-serving or disingenuous—can provoke skepticism, diminish trust, and damage a company's image (Viererbl & Koch, 2022).

Understanding the effectiveness of *CSR* as a corporate communication strategy requires a multifaceted exploration of how *CSR* is framed, delivered, perceived, and responded to across various platforms and stakeholder groups. Scholars and practitioners alike have sought to understand which types of *CSR* messages resonate best, what platforms are most impactful, and how different industries or reputational contexts influence communication outcomes. As Ajayi (2021) reveal, many companies employ both self-serving and society-serving motives in *CSR* communication, with an overwhelming tendency toward controlled, one-way informational strategies. However, the dynamics of stakeholder engagement suggest that dialogic and participatory forms of *CSR* communication may yield stronger relational outcomes.

The rise of digital and social media has further transformed *CSR* communication. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram have become vital arenas for companies to share their *CSR* initiatives, engage in real-time interactions, and amplify their messages to global audiences. Yang (2020) highlight how effective platform selection and alignment between content and stakeholder interests significantly enhance brand equity. Their study finds that companies that tailor *CSR* content to platform-specific features and stakeholder preferences enjoy greater communication impact and stakeholder goodwill. Moreover, digital media enable two-way interactions that allow stakeholders to respond, critique, or support *CSR* efforts, creating both opportunities and risks for corporate communicators (Men et al., 2023).

Simultaneously, the content and framing of *CSR* messages are equally critical. Emotional appeals, message credibility, the use of visual elements, and the articulation of company-cause fit all influence stakeholder responses. He (2022) find that emotional congruence—such as using pride appeals for high-power consumers and empathy for low-power consumers—can significantly enhance perceptions of brand authenticity and trust. In a similar vein, Bialkova (2021) demonstrate that dialogue-based communication, especially when it conveys value- and performance-driven motives, is more likely to foster electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), campaign participation, and purchase intention. These findings point to the importance of not only what is communicated but also how and why it is communicated.

Another critical factor shaping *CSR* communication effectiveness is industry context. Companies in controversial industries—such as tobacco, alcohol, oil, or fast fashion—face

heightened scrutiny and must navigate complex reputational risks. According to Song and Wen (2020), stakeholders often respond with greater skepticism to CSR communications from controversial sectors, particularly when messages emphasize corporate interests or use high-fit CSR programs perceived as opportunistic. However, when companies demonstrate commitment, use anecdotal evidence, and express balanced motives, stakeholder reactions tend to be more positive. These nuances emphasize that CSR communication must be context-sensitive and carefully designed to align with stakeholder expectations and industry reputation.

Stakeholder engagement is another foundational pillar in evaluating the effectiveness of CSR as a communication strategy. Participatory CSR models, which involve stakeholders directly in CSR initiatives, have shown promising outcomes in terms of stakeholder empowerment, admiration, and advocacy. Park (2022) find that consumers who perceive a sense of self-efficacy and social worth from participatory CSR programs are more likely to spread positive word-of-mouth and admire the company. Similarly, Yang (2022) introduce the concept of *CSR Communication Productivity* (CCP), which measures the impact of stakeholder involvement and third-party validation on communication outcomes and firm performance. These findings indicate that CSR is most effective when it is co-created with stakeholders rather than merely broadcast to them.

Despite its many advantages, CSR communication also faces several challenges and paradoxes. One of the most notable is the potential backlash from over-communication or perceived disingenuousness. Viererbl (2022) caution that when companies engage in excessive CSR promotion without substantive action, stakeholders may react negatively due to heightened persuasive intent and psychological reactance. This underlines the importance of aligning communication with genuine CSR efforts and avoiding “greenwashing” or superficial messaging that prioritizes image over impact.

From a strategic perspective, CSR is increasingly seen as a tool for corporate planning and value creation. Bowen (2020) argue that CSR, coupled with social media strategies, contributes significantly to strategy formulation by fostering inclusive, ethical, and responsive planning processes. CSR not only reinforces trust but also facilitates relationship-building with key stakeholders, including customers, investors, communities, and regulators. Fatima (2023) further advance this argument by proposing an integrative framework that embeds CSR across organizational systems and levels. They advocate for multi-level, theory-driven research and practices that reflect CSR’s complexity and potential for institutional transformation.

In addition, the credibility of the CSR message source plays an important role in determining its effectiveness. Dalla-Pria (2022) show that while third-party sources do not necessarily enhance message credibility, corporate sources generate more engagement and word-of-mouth. Their findings suggest that the values and motives expressed within the message are more impactful than the source alone. Moreover, Kwon (2021) highlight how the fashion industry leverages visual storytelling to communicate sustainability, emphasizing the growing importance of aesthetics and design in CSR advertising, especially on visual-heavy platforms like Instagram.

Finally, CSR communication proves to be particularly critical in times of crisis, where corporate legitimacy and resilience are tested. Ashraf (2022) argue that strategic CSR communication during crises not only helps mitigate reputational damage but also enhances stakeholder solidarity and competitive positioning. Effective communication in such periods

fosters trust, reinforces corporate values, and demonstrates commitment to long-term societal contributions.

Taken together, the literature reveals a complex, dynamic, and evolving understanding of *CSR* as a corporate communication strategy. The effectiveness of *CSR* communication depends on multiple interrelated factors: message framing, emotional resonance, platform selection, stakeholder engagement, industry context, reputational background, and the congruence between communicated values and actual behavior. Given these complexities and the identified research gaps—particularly the under-exploration of dialogic communication mechanisms and the contextual factors moderating *CSR* effectiveness—this study aims to achieve the following research objectives: (1) to systematically analyze how different *CSR* communication strategies influence stakeholder perceptions and organizational outcomes across various platforms and industries; (2) to identify best practices in *CSR* messaging that enhance authenticity, credibility, and stakeholder engagement; and (3) to propose a framework for integrating stakeholder-centric, transparent, and evidence-based *CSR* communication into corporate strategy. The benefits of this research are threefold: academically, it contributes to closing existing knowledge gaps in *CSR* communication effectiveness; practically, it offers actionable insights for corporate communicators seeking to optimize *CSR* strategies; and socially, it promotes more authentic and impactful corporate contributions to sustainable development.

## METHOD

This study utilized a literature review methodology to comprehensively analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (*CSR*) as a corporate communication strategy. The process involved systematically gathering literature from reputable academic databases and publications, with a primary focus on sources from the last decade that directly examined the relationship between *CSR* and communication strategies. Key selection criteria ensured the inclusion of credible and relevant materials, such as peer-reviewed journal articles and authoritative reports, which explored themes like the impact of *CSR* on brand image and its role in stakeholder engagement.

Following the collection phase, the analysis proceeded by categorizing the literature into specific thematic areas, including *CSR*'s influence on corporate image, its use in stakeholder relationship-building, and the role of digital media in its dissemination. The findings from these thematic groups were then synthesized to identify common insights and contrasting perspectives on *CSR*'s strategic communication value. To maintain analytical rigor, the methodological quality of each source was critically assessed, prioritizing studies with robust evidence and valid data while treating those with weaker methodologies with caution.

This structured analytical process, however, was not without its limitations. A primary constraint was the study's complete reliance on existing published literature, which may have contained inherent author biases. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of the analysis introduced a degree of subjectivity, and the vast, diverse body of *CSR*-related literature presented a challenge in maintaining a tightly focused and entirely objective research scope.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved beyond its philanthropic roots to become a strategic imperative for companies seeking to maintain legitimacy, build reputation, and engage stakeholders in meaningful ways. As societal expectations rise and communication channels diversify—particularly with the proliferation of digital and social media—CSR communication plays a pivotal role in shaping how stakeholders perceive and interact with corporations. This paper explores how CSR functions as a corporate communication strategy, drawing on recent empirical studies to examine the mechanisms through which CSR communication enhances corporate reputation, stakeholder engagement, and overall business performance.

### CSR Communication and Corporate Reputation

One of the primary objectives of CSR communication is to bolster corporate reputation. Ajayi (2021) investigated how companies communicate their CSR motives and found that most organizations employ a mix of self-serving and society-serving motives in their messaging. Notably, their study revealed that the “informing” strategy dominates CSR communication, with firms favoring controlled channels such as press releases, websites, and annual reports. However, this one-way approach may limit stakeholder engagement and diminish the perceived authenticity of CSR efforts.

Similarly, Verk (2021) analyzed the discursive evolution of CSR communication over time, highlighting the fragmentation of the field into multiple frames such as “reporting,” “business case,” and “stakeholder engagement.” Their findings underscore the dynamic and contested nature of CSR discourse, suggesting that companies must navigate an increasingly complex landscape to maintain credibility and relevance.

Yang and Stohl (2020) also noted a disconnect between actual CSR performance and stakeholder perceptions. Their study revealed that traditional measures of CSR do not always align with stakeholder reputation metrics, emphasizing the need for a multidimensional and stakeholder-oriented approach to CSR communication.

### Social Media as a CSR Communication Tool

The rise of social media has dramatically altered how companies communicate CSR initiatives. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn allow companies to disseminate information rapidly and interactively. Yang (2020) examined how platform selection influences the effectiveness of CSR messaging and found that companies linking relevant CSR content to the appropriate platform and stakeholder group experienced stronger brand equity. Their research also points to untapped opportunities in optimizing content-platform fit for better engagement outcomes.

Troise (2021) supported these findings, emphasizing the strategic use of digital channels for CSR communication and stakeholder engagement. Their study of Italian businesses showed that companies actively use Facebook, YouTube, and LinkedIn to communicate their CSR efforts, while platforms like Instagram and Twitter are used to raise CSR awareness. This diversification allows businesses to reach different audiences with tailored messages, increasing the potential for positive engagement.



Moreover, ElAlfy (2020) found that companies frequently align their CSR messaging with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to increase legitimacy. Their analysis of over 24,000 SDG-related tweets by S&P 500 companies revealed that firms often emphasize areas aligned with their core business operations, signaling a strategic integration of sustainability and communication.

### **Emotional Appeals and Message Framing**

Effective CSR communication is not only about the channels but also about the content and tone of messages. He (2022) explored the psychological effects of emotional appeals in CSR messaging on social media. They found that pride-based messages resonate more with individuals with a high sense of power, whereas empathy-based appeals work better for those with lower perceived power. These emotional congruence effects are mediated by perceptions of brand authenticity and trustworthiness, indicating the importance of aligning message tone with audience psychology.

Bialkova (2021) further investigated how CSR message framing—monologue vs. dialogue—and cause proximity impact consumer behavior. They concluded that dialogue-style communication significantly boosts purchase intentions and eWOM (electronic word of mouth), particularly when value- and performance-driven motives are conveyed. These findings highlight that interactive, transparent, and value-aligned communication strategies are more likely to elicit favorable stakeholder responses.

### **Communicating in Controversial vs. Non-Controversial Industries**

CSR communication strategies must also be adapted to industry context. Song and Wen (2020) compared CSR videos from companies in controversial and noncontroversial industries and observed that stakeholders responded more skeptically to messages using a company-dominant tone or highlighting high-fit CSR programs. Conversely, messages that emphasized commitment, shared anecdotes, and balanced motives were received more positively. This suggests that in industries with low trust or high scrutiny, authenticity and stakeholder-centric storytelling are crucial for effective CSR communication.

Song (2020) also found that corporate reputation plays a critical role in moderating the effects of CSR messages, especially in controversial industries. In such sectors, maintaining a strong corporate reputation can mitigate stakeholder skepticism and enhance the overall effectiveness of CSR communication, even more so than employing sophisticated messaging tactics.

### **Stakeholder Engagement and Participatory CSR**

Stakeholder involvement is a vital dimension of effective CSR communication. Park (2022) demonstrated that participatory CSR initiatives—where consumers are directly engaged in CSR activities—lead to higher levels of perceived social worth and self-efficacy. These, in turn, increase admiration for the company and intentions to spread positive word-of-mouth. Such participatory approaches enhance stakeholder empowerment and foster stronger emotional ties between the company and its audiences.

Yang (2022) introduced the concept of CSR Communication Productivity (CCP) to measure the impact of external stakeholder involvement on firm performance. Their analysis

of Facebook content from the top 100 global brands revealed that stakeholder involvement enhances both CCP and overall firm performance (measured by Tobin's Q). Third-party CSR evaluations further amplified this effect, underscoring the importance of credibility in CSR messaging.

### **Balancing Communication Intensity and Activity Extent**

While visibility is essential, excessive CSR communication can backfire. Viererbl (2022) found that intensive CSR messaging, if not backed by substantial CSR activity, can lead to stakeholder skepticism due to perceived persuasive intent. Their experiments showed that when companies over-communicate minor CSR efforts, it can reduce perceptions of social responsibility due to psychological reactance. Conversely, when extensive CSR efforts are communicated proportionately, stakeholder perceptions improve.

This paradox suggests that transparency must be balanced with authenticity. Companies should avoid "greenwashing" or superficial messaging and instead focus on aligning CSR narratives with verifiable actions. This is especially important in the age of digital media, where stakeholders can quickly access and share contradictory evidence.

### **Strategic Integration of CSR in Corporate Planning**

CSR is not merely a communication function but a strategic business tool. Bowen (2020) argue that CSR and social media strategies should be integrated into the strategic planning process. Their findings indicate that CSR can reinforce trust and act as a relational mechanism in inter-organizational partnerships. Social media, with its bidirectional nature, serves as both an enabler and amplifier of CSR initiatives, providing real-time feedback that can inform strategic decision-making.

Fatima (2023) echoed this sentiment in their comprehensive review of CSR implementation literature. They propose a multidimensional framework that situates CSR within organizational systems, processes, and cultures. Their model emphasizes the importance of internal alignment, stakeholder collaboration, and continuous evaluation for the successful implementation and communication of CSR strategies.

### **The Role of Corporate Source, Credibility, and Word-of-Mouth**

Source credibility remains a critical factor in CSR message reception. Dalla-Pria (2022) found that while the source of a CSR message (corporate vs. third party) does not significantly affect credibility, corporate sources generate more WOM. Moreover, values-driven messages positively impact corporate reputation and stakeholder engagement, even if message framing (e.g., gain vs. loss) has limited influence. These findings suggest that authenticity and values alignment outweigh source neutrality in driving effective CSR communication.

Kwon (2021) investigated CSR advertising in the fashion industry and found that brands use visual strategies to convey environmental sustainability messages. The focus on "greenness" and visual storytelling demonstrates that the format and aesthetics of CSR messaging can significantly influence consumer perceptions, especially in image-centric industries.

### **CSR Communication During Crisis**

Effective CSR communication is even more critical during times of crisis. Ashraf (2022) emphasized that CSR initiatives during crises not only help address stakeholder concerns but also contribute to competitive advantage when communicated effectively. Transparent communication fosters trust and reinforces organizational resilience, demonstrating that CSR is a valuable tool in corporate crisis management strategies.

## CONCLUSION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become a vital element of corporate communication strategy, influencing stakeholder perception, engagement, and support. Its effectiveness relies not only on the CSR initiatives themselves but also on strategic, credible, and authentic communication. Key factors enhancing CSR communication outcomes include the use of social media, emotional appeals, participatory methods, and active stakeholder involvement. However, companies must avoid appearing opportunistic or superficial, as this can undermine trust. Future research should explore deeper mechanisms of stakeholder dialogue and co-creation in CSR communication to better understand how authentic engagement can be sustained across diverse industries and digital platforms.

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