

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mapping theoretical frameworks linking CSR communication to corporate reputation in mainland China: A systematic literature review

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ABSTRACT

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication has become a strategic tool for reputation management. This research presents a systematic literature review of research (2015–2024) between CSR communication and corporate reputation in the Chinese context. We followed PRISMA 2020 guidelines to identify 20 relevant peer-reviewed studies. The review addresses three key questions (1) the state of this research in terms of scope and trends, (2) the theoretical frameworks applied and the influence of Chinese cultural factors, and (3) the main findings on how CSR communication practices impact corporate reputation in China. Across studies, effective CSR communication – characterized by authenticity, transparency, and alignment with cultural values – is generally found to enhance corporate reputation by building stakeholder trust and identification. However, perceived motive hypocrisy or misalignment between talk and action can damage reputation. Notably, Chinese cultural norms and the media environment shape both communication strategies and stakeholder responses. Discuss how classic theories are affirmed or extended in the Chinese context, and provide an integrative framework linking CSR communication to reputation outcomes.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication; corporate reputation; systematic literature review; Chinese context, theoretical framework

1. Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has evolved into a strategic imperative for companies worldwide, valued for its role in enhancing corporate reputation and stakeholder relationships^[1,2]. Corporate reputation is broadly defined as the collective evaluation of a company by its stakeholders over time – an intangible asset that can confer competitive advantage. In an era of heightened public expectations for corporate ethical behavior, effectively communicating CSR initiatives has become crucial for organizations seeking to build and protect their reputations. CSR communication refers to the process by which companies disclose and

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discuss their social and environmental efforts with stakeholders through various channels, aiming to inform, persuade, and engage audiences in the company's CSR narrative. Communicating CSR to stakeholders in a credible and engaging manner is considered a key public relations function that can strengthen stakeholder trust, goodwill, and legitimacy^[3,4,5].

China provides a unique and important context for examining CSR communication and corporate reputation. Over the past decade, CSR has rapidly gained prominence in China, driven by rising stakeholder demands and strong government backing for sustainability and social responsibility initiatives. Chinese cultural value shape both the practice of CSR and the ways it is communicated. For example, Confucian heritage emphasizes social harmony, trustworthiness, and collective welfare, which informs local expectations of responsible corporate behavior. Despite these contextual nuances, much of the early theorizing in CSR communication was rooted in Western settings, potentially limiting its applicability in China. Scholars have noted that CSR research has been dominated by Western paradigms and has insufficiently accounted for country-specific dynamics or culturally embedded meanings of CSR^[6,7]. In response, recent studies have contextualized investigations of CSR communication in non-Western markets^[8]. China's rise as a major economic power, moving from CSR compliance toward stakeholder engagement, warrants dedicated scholarly attention^[9].

In the period 2015–2024, scholars have explored facets ranging from content analyses of CSR disclosures by Chinese firms, including sustainability reports, social media posts to experiments and surveys investigating stakeholder reactions to CSR messages in China. Key topics include how different message strategies affect Chinese audiences, the role of intermediaries, including news media, online influencers in shaping CSR message credibility, and the outcomes of CSR communication in terms of public trust, skepticism, and reputation metrics. However, no comprehensive synthesis has focused specifically on the CSR communication–corporate reputation relationship in China. To address this gap, this paper conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) of studies at this intersection, distilling insights and identifying patterns across the past decade of research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stakeholder theory between CSR communication and corporate reputation

Corporations exist within a network of stakeholders whose perceptions determine the firm's social legitimacy and reputation. Stakeholder theory^[10] states that businesses should attend to the interests of all stakeholders, not just shareholders, for long-term success. Engaging in CSR and communicating about it are means to fulfill stakeholders' social and ethical expectations, thereby securing organizational legitimacy^[11] and building a positive reputation. Corporate reputation has been described as 'the firm's relative success in fulfilling the expectations of multiple stakeholders'^[12]. When a company communicates its CSR initiatives, it sends signals that it is committed to societal values and responsible conduct. Successful alignment between communicated CSR claims and stakeholder expectations can enhance credibility and reputational capital^[13]. In the Chinese context, stakeholder theory is highly pertinent because companies face diverse stakeholder groups, including consumers, employees, government regulators, communities, each with distinct expectations. CSR communication serves as a dialogic tool to negotiate legitimacy with these groups^[14]. An instrumental view of CSR communication sees it as a strategic means to achieve business objectives like enhanced reputation, customer loyalty, or brand differentiation^[4]. On the other hand, a relational view^[15] conceives CSR communication as a two-way process of building relationships and co-creating meaning with stakeholders. This approach emphasizes authenticity, dialogue, and responsiveness. These elements that foster trust and mutual understanding, crucial for a strong reputation. In China, the relational view is

reflected in growing attention to stakeholder engagement in CSR, such as involving community members in CSR projects or responding to employee feedback about CSR programs. Whether using an instrumental or relational approach, extant research agrees that CSR communication quality (typically characterized by clarity, transparency, and interactivity) is positively associated with stakeholders' perceptions of a company's character and thus its reputation^[16].

2.2. Social identity theory and stakeholder identification

Social identity theory^[17] provides another lens for understanding how CSR communication can bolster corporate reputation through stakeholder identification. CSR initiatives offer value-based cues that stakeholders (especially consumers and employees) may use to define or express their own identities^[5]. When a company communicates CSR actions that resonate with stakeholders' personal or social values, stakeholders are more likely to identify with the company seeing it as 'one of us' or as an organization that embodies ideals they care about. This sense of identification breeds loyalty, advocacy, and positive word-of-mouth, which in turn enhance corporate reputation. Employee identification works similarly employees who perceive their employer's CSR communication as reflecting genuine care and societal contribution tend to develop pride and loyalty toward the company, viewing its reputation more favorably and even acting as brand ambassadors, including sharing the company's CSR posts on social media. Kim^[3] found that effective CSR communication increases consumers' CSR knowledge and trust, which in turn elevates corporate reputation perceptions via enhanced consumer-company identification. Similarly, internal communication of CSR has been tied to employees' organizational identification and commitment, key drivers of internal reputation (how employees themselves rate the company).

2.3. Attribution theory, CSR skepticism and corporate hypocrisy

A critical moderating factor in the CSR communication-reputation relationship is stakeholders' attribution of corporate motives. Attribution theory^[18] suggests that people seek to infer why a company engages in CSR and whether its communicated motives are intrinsic (genuine concern) or extrinsic (profit/image-driven). If stakeholders attribute CSR actions to sincere values-driven motives, CSR communication is likely to be believed and rewarded with trust; if perceived as self-serving, stakeholders may respond with skepticism or cynicism^[19]. The concept of corporate hypocrisy captures the damage when there is a perceived discrepancy between a company's CSR messaging and its true intentions or behaviors. Wagner et al.^[20] define corporate hypocrisy as the negative judgments stakeholders direct at a company they believe is not practicing what it preaches in its CSR claims. In China, where consumers are increasingly savvy and hyper-connected in social media (Weibo, WeChat etc.), instances of perceived CSR hypocrisy can quickly erode corporate reputation. A research found that in China, when CSR messages conveyed a *value-driven* motive, consumers reported lower perceptions of hypocrisy, whereas a *performance-driven* motive led to higher perceived hypocrisy and tarnished reputation^[14]. Attribution dynamics underscore the importance of how CSR is communicated – messaging should convey genuine commitment to avoid reputational damage due to skepticism.

2.4. Signaling theory

Another relevant framework is signaling theory^[21], which in the CSR context suggests that companies use CSR disclosures and communication as signals of firm quality and integrity in situations of information asymmetry. Stakeholders cannot directly observe a firm's underlying values or long-term social impact, thus CSR communication serves as a proxy indicator. A credible signal, including third-party certifications, consistent reporting of outcomes can enhance reputation by indicating that the firm meets certain social performance standards^[22]. However, if the signal is cheap or unsubstantiated, stakeholders may discount it.

In China's markets, especially capital markets, CSR reporting is sometimes viewed as a signal to investors of superior management and lower regulatory risk, thereby improving the firm's reputation among the investment community^[23]. Some studies link Chinese firms' CSR disclosures with improved media sentiment or analyst ratings, suggesting that thorough CSR communication sends a strong positive signal about a firm's character, which in turn shapes reputation. Signaling theory thus complements stakeholder and attribution perspectives by emphasizing the technical aspects the clarity, consistency, and verifiability of CSR communications influence how strongly they signal a firm's trustworthiness, which affects reputational judgments.

2.5. Cultural and media context in China's CSR communication

Many foundational CSR communication studies were developed in Western contexts^[20,5]. In this review is to evaluate the extent to which established theoretical frameworks remain applicable in the Chinese context and to consider whether adaptations or new constructs are warranted. Morsing and Schultz's^[24] classic typology of CSR communication (including strategies *information*, *response*, and *involvement*) provides a useful schema. In the information strategy, companies unilaterally disseminate CSR information to stakeholders, including through reports, press releases, aiming for transparency and awareness. In the response strategy, companies not only inform but also listen and respond to stakeholder feedback, including via surveys, question forums on CSR topics. The involvement strategy goes further by actively involving stakeholders in shaping CSR initiatives or participating in CSR activities, for instance, co-creating projects with NGOs or inviting employees and customers to volunteer events. Each strategy has implications for reputation the information approach can enhance cognitive awareness of the company's CSR (stakeholders know the company is doing CSR), the response approach can improve affective evaluations (stakeholders feel heard and respected), and involvement can foster stronger identification and advocacy (stakeholders become part of the CSR efforts) all contributing to a favorable reputation^[24]. Studies suggest that Chinese firms historically focused on the information strategy, treating CSR reporting as a compliance or public relations task, but are gradually moving toward more interactive approaches in line with global trends. For example, some leading Chinese companies now host stakeholder dialogue sessions as part of CSR reporting or use social media polls to help decide CSR priorities, indicating a shift toward involvement strategies.

In terms of message content and style, research in global and China, identifies several factors affecting stakeholder reception informativeness, tone (factual/objective or emotional; humble or self-promotional), source (the company, CEO, third-party, or media), and frame is CSR presented as core to business strategy or as altruistic philanthropy. Kim and Ferguson^[25] found that stakeholders generally expect CSR communication to be transparent and factual. Chinese audiences, in particular, appreciate concrete details and evidence of impact, given some public wariness of empty slogans. At the same time, Chinese culture traditionally values modesty, but recent studies suggest that Chinese consumers may tolerate a certain degree of self-promotional tone in CSR messaging more than Western consumers do, as long as the claims are credible^[26]. Still, overly boastful messaging can backfire unless reinforced by credible third-party endorsements. In addition, the source of CSR communication matters, messages conveyed via trusted outlets tend to carry more weight in China, whereas social media messages directly from a company might be met with some skepticism unless the company already enjoys trust. However, involvement of high-profile corporate leaders can add authenticity.

As discuss in the literature review of the theoretical CSR communication and Chinese context CSR communication, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1 What are the characteristics and scope of the research on CSR communication and corporate reputation in China from 2015 to 2024?

RQ2 What theoretical frameworks have been used to examine CSR communication's impact on corporate reputation in the Chinese context?

RQ3 What are the key findings of these studies regarding how CSR communication influences corporate reputation in China?

3. Method

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework^[27,28]. Undertaking a review of the related literature assessment is an important part of any discipline^[29]. It helps to map and assess the existing knowledge and gaps on specific issues which will further develop the knowledge base. Systematic literature review (SLR) differs from traditional narrative reviews by adopting a replicable, scientific and transparent producers. It helps to collect all related publications and documents that fit the pre-defined inclusion criteria to answer a specific research question^[30]. The review was designed to identify and synthesize research on the relationship between CSR communication and corporate reputation in China, covering the period 2015 through 2024. Focused on peer-reviewed journal articles to ensure rigor and relevance to scholarly discourse, emphasizing journals in corporate communication, public relations, business ethics, and related fields.

3.1. Sampling procedure

The literature search was comprehensive and multi-step. First, conducted automated searches across multiple academic databases **Scopus**, **Web of Science**, **EBSCO Business Source Premier**, **ScienceDirect**, **Wiley Online Library**, **SAGE Journals**, **Emerald Insight**, and **SpringerLink**. The search terms were developed based on the research topic and refined through exploratory queries. We used Boolean combinations of keywords such as “corporate social responsibility” OR CSR, AND “communication” OR reporting OR disclosure, AND “corporate reputation” OR image OR legitimacy, AND “China” OR Chinese. An example search string was (CSR OR "corporate social responsibility") AND (communication OR reporting OR disclosure) AND (reputation OR image OR legitimacy) AND (China OR Chinese). Moreover, included terms like “stakeholder trust”, “CSR skepticism”, “Chinese consumers” to capture studies examining mediators or specific contexts. The initial database search (conducted in December 2024) identified relevant to the topic. In addition, manually checked reference lists of key papers and prior reviews to ensure we had not missed any prominent studies, and scanned tables of contents of major communication and business ethics journals for the past decade for CSR-in-China themed articles.

Screening Exported all references into a reference management software and removed duplicates, which reduced the count to 87 records. Next, screened titles and abstracts against predefined inclusion criteria. To be included at this stage, a study had to explicitly address *both* CSR communication (or closely related concepts like CSR message, CSR disclosure, sustainability communication) and corporate reputation (or closely related outcomes such as corporate image, public perception, stakeholder trust as a proxy for reputation) *within a Chinese context*. We interpreted “Chinese context” broadly to include studies focusing on Mainland China, as well as comparative studies where China was one of the focal contexts. We excluded papers that were purely about CSR practices with no communication aspect, purely about CSR's impact on performance without reputational measures, or not related to China. At the same time, we excluded editorials, book reviews, and news articles, focusing on research articles (empirical or theoretical). After title/abstract

screening, 40 records were excluded for not meeting these criteria (common reasons were not about China, not addressing reputation, or not about CSR communication). This left 46 articles for full-text review (eligibility assessment).

Eligibility Obtained full texts for these 46 articles and read each in full to confirm relevance and quality. During full-text review, further assessed whether the study indeed provided insights into the CSR communication–reputation relationship. A few studies were excluded at this stage because upon full reading we found that (a) the focus was tangential; (b) the article was not a research study, including magazine commentary that slipped through initial screening).

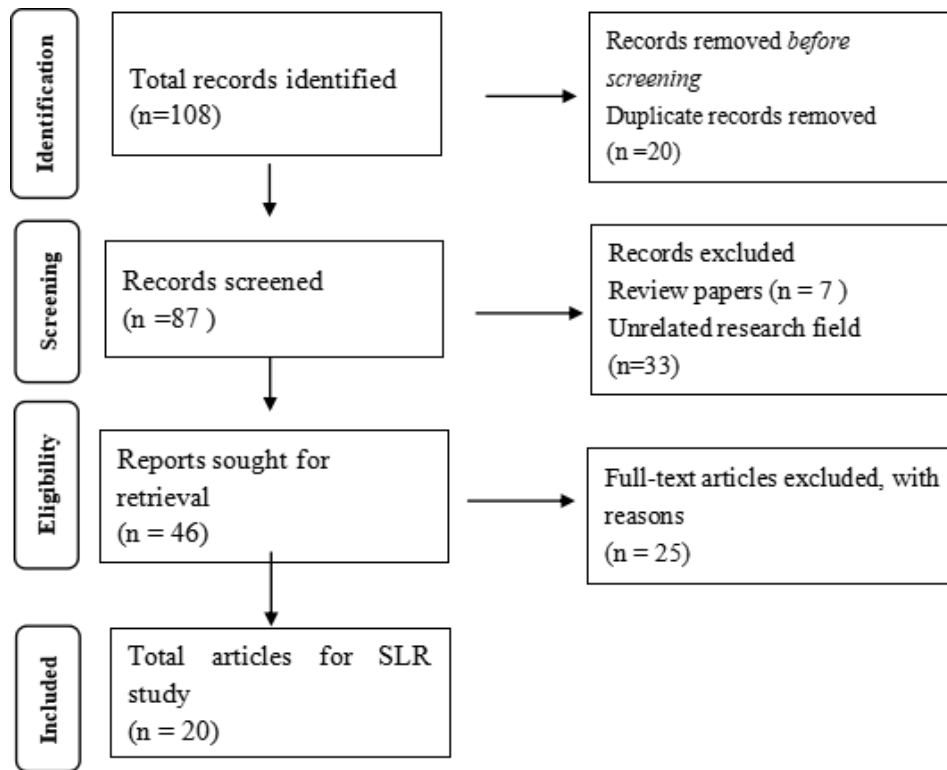


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the study selection process for the systematic review.

Finally, **included** 20 articles met all inclusion criteria and were retained for data extraction and synthesis. These 20 studies constitute the core corpus from which derived the results and insights discussed in subsequent sections. **Table 1** provides a summary of the included studies and their key characteristics (authors, year, research design, theoretical lens, and main findings).

Table 1. Summary of included studies (2015–2024).

| Study (Author(s), Year) | Context and Method | Theoretical Framework | Key Findings on CSR Communication and Reputation |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| Wang & Wu (2015) ^[31] | Experiment – Chinese consumers exposed to CSR message with varying tone (modest vs. self-praising) | (Implied) Attribution/Skepticism Perspective | CSR messages with an overly self-promotional tone generated lower message credibility and did not improve perceived company reputation, especially among consumers high in skepticism. A more factual, modest tone was better received, highlighting the need for sincerity in CSR advertisements. |
| Leung (2017) ^[32] | Case study – Macau (China) casino industry CSR practices (interviews and document analysis) | Legitimacy theory (in controversial sector) | Emphasizing CSR as contributing to social stability and community welfare (aligning with local values) was more effective in enhancing reputation for casinos than framing CSR as purely charitable. CSR communication helped legitimize a controversial industry by aligning with societal norms (harmony, well-being). |

| Study (Author(s), Year) | Context and Method | Theoretical Framework | Key Findings on CSR Communication and Reputation |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Zhou & Ki (2018) ^[33] | Experiment – Chinese consumers; scenarios of routine vs. crisis situation with CSR fit manipulation | Situational crisis and CSR fit framework | High CSR–company fit and longer-term CSR involvement enhanced reputational evaluations, particularly in a crisis scenario. A strong alignment between CSR activities and core business (fit) and sustained commitment over time provided a reputational buffer during crises. |
| Kim (2019) ^[3] | Survey – consumers evaluating CSR communication of a hypothetical company | Stakeholder identification and trust model | Informative CSR communication led to greater consumer CSR knowledge and trust in the company. Increased trust mediated higher corporate reputation perceptions. The study empirically demonstrated a process wherein CSR communication, trust, enhanced reputation, highlighting transparency as key. |
| Ham & Kim (2020) ^[34] | Experiment – Effects of prior CSR communication on crisis perceptions (Korean context, with implications for China) | CSR skepticism (disposition) in crisis communication | Participants with low inherent skepticism were more forgiving in a corporate crisis if the company had a strong history of CSR communication (buffer effect). However, highly skeptical individuals remained critical regardless. Implies a segmented reputational benefit of CSR comm in crises – effective for some stakeholder segments. |
| Zhao et al. (2020) ^[14] | Survey – Chinese consumers across firms; measured perceived CSR motive and hypocrisy | Attribution theory (intrinsic vs extrinsic motives); corporate hypocrisy | Consumers' perceptions of CSR motive sincerity strongly influenced reputation outcomes. CSR seen as value-driven correlated with higher trust and reputation, whereas CSR seen as self-serving led to perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and harm to reputation. Confirms that stakeholders' motive attributions are pivotal in China. |
| Ngai & Singh (2021) ^[35] | Mixed method of CSR content posts by Chinese companies and engagement metrics | Public engagement and authenticity | CSR messages characterized by concrete information and a humble tone (operationalized as “genuineness”) elicited significantly higher public engagement on Weibo. Higher engagement (likes, shares) is interpreted as a proxy for reputational approval. Generic or overly boastful posts saw less engagement. |
| Kim & Ji (2021) ^[36] | Case analysis – Corporate leaders' (Bill Gates vs. Jack Ma) high-profile CSR donations during COVID-19 and public response (China vs. US) | Social attribution across levels (corporate & country reputation) | Chinese stakeholders responded very positively to Jack Ma's philanthropy communications, boosting both Alibaba's corporate reputation and even China's national image, given alignment with cultural expectations of corporate leaders' social role. Highlights multi-level reputational payoffs of authentic CSR communication by leaders in China. |
| Huang et al., (2022) ^[37] | Content analysis – CSR communication strategies Chinese companies in B2B markets | Descriptive (no single theory; refers to Morsing's strategies ^[24]) | Most Chinese companies primarily used one-way information strategies in CSR communication, with limited interactive engagement. Transparency varied widely. While not measuring reputation directly, the study suggests that firms with more substantive disclosures (vs. vague statements) likely enjoy better public credibility. (Referenced for context; does not directly measure reputation.) |
| Cheng et al. (2022) ^[38] | Survey – Employees of Chinese firms during COVID-19; examined CSR perception and turnover intent | Organizational commitment; internal CSR perception (no single theory) | When employees perceived their company's CSR communication as insincere (“just talk”) during the crisis, it increased cynicism and turnover intentions. Conversely, credible internal CSR communication enhanced employees' organizational commitment. Implication genuine CSR communication improves internal reputation and reduces negative behaviors. |
| Jiang et al. (2022) ^[2] | Survey – Chinese employees; linking CSR communication to corporate reputation via employee responses (hypocrisy, engagement) | Attribution & social exchange (hypocrisy and engagement as mediators) | Transparent CSR communication reduced employees' perceptions of corporate hypocrisy and increased their positive engagement (for instance, defending the company online), which in turn boosted overall corporate reputation. Suggests internal stakeholders mediate the CSR comm–reputation link credible CSR messaging builds internal advocates. |
| Su & Zhong (2022) ^[39] | Content analysis – CSR reports of Chinese companies across regions (East vs. West China) | Institutional/stakeholder context (no specific theory) | Identified regional differences in CSR communication, including companies in developed regions communicated more about environment and governance). While not measuring reputation, it highlights that stakeholders in different regions have varied expectations. Tailoring CSR communication to local stakeholder concerns may influence local reputational outcomes. |
| Kim (2022) ^[40] | Survey – Mainland Chinese vs. Hong Kong consumers; | Cross-cultural comparison; | Both Mainland and HK consumers valued transparent CSR communication, but Mainland respondents showed higher initial trust |

| Study (Author(s), Year) | Context and Method | Theoretical Framework | Key Findings on CSR Communication and Reputation |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|---|
| | tested model of CSR communication effects on trust and loyalty | process model of CSR communication effects | in companies' CSR messages. Effective CSR comm increased trust and purchase intention in both groups, confirming largely universal processes, with minor differences (Mainland consumers slightly more accepting of self-promotion). Cultural context moderated the magnitude but not direction of effects. |
| Park & Jiang (2023) ^[41] | Experiment & Survey – Chinese social media users; corporate social advocacy (CSA) posts and brand loyalty outcomes | Signaling and identification (CSA as signal of values; consumer identification) | Companies taking a stand on social issues on social media (CSA communication) can enhance brand loyalty and reputation among Chinese Millennials, <i>if</i> stakeholders perceive the stance as authentic. Signaling sincerity and aligning with young stakeholders' values led to greater identification with the brand, hence stronger loyalty/advocacy intentions. |
| Jiang et al. (2022) ^[2] | Experiment – Chinese employees; factual vs. vague internal CSR messaging and effects on trust and identification | Attribution (motives) & social identity (organizational identification) | Informative, factual internal CSR communication led employees to ascribe more intrinsic CSR motives to their firm and to identify more strongly with the organization. Both higher perceived sincerity and identification were associated with improved perceptions of corporate reputation. Provides evidence for motive->identification->reputation chain. |
| Chen, et al. (2023) ^[42] | Experiment – Young Chinese consumers; CSR message endorsed by social media influencer vs. no influencer | Source credibility (influencer endorsement) and leadership framing | When a popular non-profit influencer endorsed a company's CSR initiative, publics perceived the CSR information as more credible and were more likely to have a positive view of the company's character. Third-party or external voices thus boosted the reputational impact of CSR communication, especially for a youth audience attuned to influencer culture. |
| Mak et al. (2023) ^[43] | Conceptual article – Integrative circuit of culture model for CSR discourse (Asian contexts - a multinational corporation based in Singapore) | Cultural discourse model | Proposes that CSR communication in Asia should navigate tensions between global norms and local cultural narratives. While not an empirical study, it underscores that cultural values mediate how CSR messages are produced and consumed, affecting legitimacy and reputation. |
| Dong et al. (2024) ^[44] | Systematic Review – Research on CSR communication in Chinese context (88 articles, bibliometric analysis) | Systematic Literature Review article | Mapped the landscape of CSR comm research in China. Noted an acceleration of publications post-2015, with common topics including CSR reporting practices, digital media CSR communication, and stakeholder reactions. Highlights harmony and stability as unique Chinese CSR themes. Our review builds on this by zeroing in on the reputation outcome in the subset of studies. |
| Rózsa et al. (2024) ^[45] | Systematic Literature Review of Global CSR communication trends in the digital era (emphasis on social media challenges) | Systematic Literature Review article | Identifies evolving challenges such as information overload and skepticism on digital platforms. Stresses that companies need to adapt CSR communication strategies to new media (transparency, rapid engagement) to maintain trust and reputation. Provides broader context that these challenges are relevant in China's social media environment. |
| Stock et al. (2024) ^[1] | Meta-analysis – CSR effects in family firms (includes reputation and trust outcomes) | — (Meta-analytic evidence) | Confirms that strong CSR commitment generally enhances stakeholder trust and positive reputation, even in contexts (like family firms) where unique dynamics exist. Reinforces the foundational idea that “doing good and communicating it well” is beneficial for how stakeholders regard a company. |

Table 1. (Continued)

The 20 included studies span diverse methodologies and cover both external and internal stakeholder perspectives. Most focus on Mainland China specifically, with a few comparative works involving Chinese consumers or companies. Theoretical frameworks, with stakeholder-related theories (legitimacy, identification) and attribution-based perspectives being particularly common.

3.2. Measure

For included study, we extracted pertinent information using a standardized coding sheet. Key data recorded included bibliographic details, study methodology, sample and context, including consumer survey

in China, analysis of Chinese firms' CSR reports, employee-focused study, explicit theoretical framework noted, the main variables or constructs examined, and the primary findings relevant to the CSR communication–reputation link. At the same time, noted any China-specific factors highlighted.

After coding, it conducted a thematic analysis to synthesize findings across studies. Using an inductive approach, looked for recurrent themes or research questions addressed by multiple studies. Five broad thematic areas emerged.

External stakeholder responses to CSR communication focusing on consumers (and general public) and outcomes like trust, skepticism, purchase intentions, and overall corporate image/reputation.

Internal stakeholders and CSR communication focusing on employees and how internal CSR messaging affects employee attitudes and the firm's reputation both internally and externally.

CSR message strategies and credibility factors how aspects of message content, tone, source, and framing influence stakeholder perceptions and credibility of CSR communication.

CSR communication in crises or risk contexts how a history of CSR communication or CSR messaging during a crisis influences reputational damage or recovery.

Contextual influences how Chinese cultural values, regional differences, and media/institutional context shape the CSR communication–reputation dynamic.

The review grouped each study under one or more of these themes based on its primary focus. The synthesis aimed to integrate convergent findings and explain divergent findings. To ensure reliability of our interpretations, two researchers reviewed the coding and thematic grouping. Any ambiguities or discrepancies in interpreting a study's findings were resolved through re-reading and discussion. The study did not compute inter-coder reliability since this is an integrative review, but cross-verified critical data points. Refrained from a formal meta-analysis because of heterogeneity in measures and designs across studies corporate reputation was measured variously, precluding straightforward quantitative aggregation. Instead, synthesis is narrative and integrative, seeking to highlight where findings converge strongly and to contextualize any inconsistencies.

4. Results

A total of 20 studies were reviewed in depth. These studies collectively demonstrate an accelerating interest in CSR communication and its reputational impact in China over the last decade. Over half of the included articles were published from 2015 onward, indicating that research in this area has been burgeoning in recent years. The studies appeared in a range of journals across communication, business ethics, and management disciplines, with notable contributions in journals like *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *International Journal of Business Communication*, *Sustainability*, and others. In terms of research design, about two-thirds of the studies were quantitative, a few were qualitative case studies or content analyses, and a few were literature reviews or conceptual papers, reflecting a healthy mix of approaches. Many studies were anchored in established theories, while some were more exploratory.

Substantively, the findings can be grouped into five thematic areas as identified earlier. **Table 2** below synthesizes key findings under each theme, along with example studies supporting those insights. Following the table, it provided a narrative explanation for each theme, illustrating how the studies collectively answer RQs.

Table 2. Thematic synthesis of findings on CSR communication and corporate reputation in China.

| Theme | Key Findings | Related Studies |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Consumer Responses and Trust(External Stakeholders) | <p>– Positive impact on trust Transparent, substantive CSR communication generally increases consumer trust and positive attitudes, which enhance corporate reputation.– Authenticity is critical Consumers are highly sensitive to perceived authenticity; CSR messages seen as self-serving (exaggerated or unsubstantiated) trigger skepticism and can undermine reputation gains.– Brand equity benefits When consumers trust the motives behind a company’s CSR (i.e., see them as genuine), it can translate into higher brand credibility, loyalty, and supportive behaviors (buying, advocating), strengthening reputation.– Educational role Historically low awareness of CSR in China (e.g., mid-2010s) meant many consumers only knew of a firm’s CSR if it was actively communicated. Effective CSR communication helps educate stakeholders and build goodwill, whereas silence can be misinterpreted as lack of CSR, indirectly harming reputation.</p> | <p>Kim^[3] – CSR communication boosts consumer trust and perceived reputation; Tian et al.^[46] – noted low baseline CSR awareness in China, need for more stakeholder engagement. Wang & Wu^[31] – self-promotional CSR tone reduced credibility among skeptical consumers.</p> |
| 2. Employee Engagement and Internal Reputation(Internal Stakeholders) | <p>– Employee identification Communicating CSR to employees (through internal channels and involving them in CSR activities) strengthens employees’ identification and pride in the company, which can spill over to a better external reputation (employees act as advocates).– Internal authenticity When employees perceive CSR communication as genuine and matched by company actions, their organizational commitment rises, improving internal reputation and likely external reputation (via positive word-of-mouth).– Cynicism risk If there’s a gap between CSR claims and actual practice, including firm boasts about CSR but mistreats staff), employees become cynical, which harms both internal morale and external image (through negative word-of-mouth or higher turnover that tarnishes company attractiveness).</p> | <p>Jiang et al.^[2] – factual internal CSR messaging, employees see sincere motives, higher org. identification , improved reputation; Cheng et al.^[38] – perceived “CSR hypocrisy” internally (CSR talk not matched by action) , employee distrust and turnover intent.</p> |
| 3. Message Strategies and Source Credibility(Content, Tone, and Delivery) | <p>– Factual content wins CSR messages that provide concrete, specific information (data on outcomes, detailed examples) yield greater stakeholder credibility and reputational benefit than vague or generic statements. Chinese stakeholders appreciate data-driven, factual reporting as a sign of honesty.– Tone matters A humble or neutral tone tends to be more effective with a generally skeptical public. Chinese audiences tolerate a modest level of self-praise in CSR communication more than some Western audiences, but blatant boasting is often counterproductive unless validated externally. Maintaining a sincere, non-defensive tone is key, especially when addressing issues.– Source and channel CSR messages conveyed by trusted sources (respected news media, key opinion leaders) amplify positive reputational impact. Corporate-owned media (official Weibo, WeChat) can be effective for reaching audiences, but trust is higher when a third party (like an NGO or influencer) endorses the CSR effort. In China, having state media or popular influencers report on a company’s CSR can significantly boost credibility. CEO personal communication of CSR can humanize the message and add trust (if the leader is well-regarded), but it also ties the reputation to the leader’s persona (a risk if the leader is controversial).– Cultural framing Aligning CSR messages with Chinese cultural values and national priorities increases impact. For example, framing an environmental program as contributing to the nation’s “ecological civilization” or invoking the value of harmony resonates well. In contrast, using frames that feel foreign or overly corporate (purely compliance-driven language) may be less compelling.</p> | <p>Kim & Ferguson^[25] – publics expect CSR communication to be rich in facts and transparency; Kim & Ji^[26] – Chinese consumers are somewhat more accepting of self-promotional tone in CSR ads than Western consumers, provided content is credible; Su & Zhong^[39] – highlights how companies in different Chinese regions focus on locally relevant CSR issues (showing adaptation of content to audience values); Chen et al.^[42] – influencer endorsements of CSR messages increased perceived credibility among young publics, boosting positive attitudes.</p> |
| 4. CSR Communication in Crises(Reputation Risk Management) | <p>– Reputation reservoir A strong prior record of CSR engagement and communication acts as a “reputation reservoir” that can soften backlash during a corporate crisis. Companies known for good CSR are often given the benefit of the doubt by stakeholders (a halo effect) when trouble arises.– Crisis response CSR Communicating CSR efforts during a crisis can aid in reputation recovery if stakeholders see it as relevant and sincere. If such efforts appear opportunistic or off-topic (“CSR washing”), they can be met with cynicism and potentially deepen the reputational damage.– Chinese stakeholders’ response Studies and cases in China show that when firms facing scandals</p> | <p>Ham & Kim^[34] – Prior CSR communication mitigated negative consumer attitudes in a crisis scenario (among low-skepticism consumers, who gave a trust benefit); Kim & Ji^[36] – Alibaba’s strong CSR track record pre-COVID meant its pandemic relief efforts were seen as authentic and reinforced its</p> |

| Theme | Key Findings | Related Studies |
|---|---|---|
| 5. Cultural and Institutional Context(China-Specific Factors) | highlighted their past CSR achievements, media and public reactions were somewhat less negative compared to firms with no CSR record. However, if the crisis directly contradicts the company's touted CSR image, the public backlash can be even more severe due to perceived hypocrisy. Alignment between crisis handling and past CSR values is crucial.– Media's role in crises Chinese media often reference a company's CSR history when reporting on crises. This framing can influence public opinion positively (reminding of good deeds) or negatively (highlighting inconsistency), thus companies need consistent communication. | reputation, rather than being dismissed as public relations. |
| | – Cultural values shape expectations Confucian values (benevolence, harmony, filial piety) and the collectivist orientation in China color stakeholder expectations for CSR. CSR communication that emphasizes collective benefits (community development, national prosperity, social harmony) tends to bolster reputation more effectively than messages focused only on the company or abstract global themes. Stakeholders see companies contributing to societal goals as more legitimate and trustworthy.– National pride and alignment Tying CSR efforts to government initiatives or national campaigns (e.g., poverty alleviation, “Beautiful China” environmental vision) often yields reputational rewards, as it aligns the company with widely supported societal objectives. This can enhance legitimacy in the eyes of both the public and regulators. – Media environment China's media landscape influences CSR communication impact. Traditional state-affiliated media are relatively trusted sources of information; a company featured positively in such media for its CSR will gain significant credibility. Social media in China (Weibo, WeChat, Douyin) is extremely active and can amplify CSR messages quickly, but it's a double-edged sword – it can also amplify criticism or uncover inconsistencies. Companies monitor online sentiment closely; engaging with netizens (for instance, responding to questions about CSR initiatives) in a timely, transparent way can further strengthen reputation for accountability. | Dong et al. [44] – highlights unique Chinese CSR themes like harmony and stability; Kim ^[40] – found cultural differences in how Mainland Chinese vs. Hong Kong consumers process CSR messages, reflecting underlying value differences yet overall appreciation for CSR authenticity is common; Graafland & Zhang ^[47] – noted institutional drivers (government mandates, social norms) for CSR in China, which in turn influence how firms communicate CSR to meet those expectations. |

Table 2. (Continued)

After synthesizing these themes, The following discuss each in narrative form, providing illustrative details from the literature.

4.1. Consumer responses and trust

Many studies documented that when Chinese consumers are presented with clear and sincere CSR information, their trust in the company increases, which leads to higher reputation assessments and a greater likelihood of supportive behaviors (such as purchase intentions or positive word-of-mouth). Kim^[3] demonstrated through a survey-based structural model that certain CSR communication factors (message clarity, transparency, and perceived sincerity) enhanced consumers' knowledge of the company's CSR and their trust in the company; this heightened trust directly improved consumers' evaluation of the company's overall reputation. This suggests that providing substantive CSR disclosures can tangibly lift corporate image among young stakeholders in China.

However, consumer skepticism is a recurring theme. If consumers suspect that a company's CSR communication is just a marketing ploy with no real substance behind it, trust is not gained and messages may even backfire. Several experiments have probed this. For instance, in an experimental study, Wang and Wu^[31] manipulated the tone of a CSR message (comparing a modest factual tone and an overly self-congratulatory tone) and found that the self-promotional style led to lower message credibility and no improvement in perceived reputation among Chinese consumers, especially those predisposed to be skeptical. In contrast, the more humble, matter-of-fact tone did improve credibility and modestly enhanced the

company's image. This underscores that Chinese audiences, while receptive to CSR information, can be turned off by communications that appear boastful or insincere.

Notably, historically low CSR awareness among Chinese consumers (as of a decade ago) implies that effective communication plays an educational role. Tian et al.^[46] observed that in the early 2010s, many Chinese consumers were not fully aware of firms' CSR activities unless those were actively publicized. Over the last decade, awareness has grown, partly due to increased media coverage of CSR and companies communicating more about their initiatives. By 2020 and beyond, consumers even start to expect CSR information; in fact, silence about CSR might be interpreted as the company having nothing to show or not being socially responsible. Thus, in the Chinese context, companies may face reputational risk both from communicating poorly and from not communicating at all. The net takeaway is that, done right, CSR communication builds consumer trust, a cornerstone of reputation, as long as the company's behavior and messaging are consistent. Authenticity is paramount consumers reward authenticity with trust and loyalty, but will penalize perceived hypocrisy swiftly via negative online buzz or brand avoidance.

4.2. Employee engagement and internal reputation

A newer stream of studies, especially since 2018, focus on employees as an important public in China's CSR communication–reputation link. These studies essentially ask How does CSR communication within an organization influence employees, and how might that translate to corporate reputation. Jiang et al.^[2] examined how employees perceive their company's CSR communications. They found that when employees view their company's CSR communication as credible and indicative of genuine concern (rather than window-dressing), it reduces their sense of 'corporate hypocrisy' and boosts their pride and identification with the firm. This not only improves the internal reputation (employees' own esteem for the company) but can also spill over externally – employees satisfied with and proud of their company's CSR are more likely to convey positive word-of-mouth, effectively acting as goodwill ambassadors. Another study by Huang et al.^[37] showed that employees' perception of their company's CSR sincerity was linked to greater organizational commitment, and importantly, that committed employees were more likely to defend the company's reputation in the face of external criticism. In an era of social media, employees often are on platforms where they can influence public opinion about their employer, so having engaged employees due to effective CSR communication is an indirect reputational asset.

Conversely, when internal CSR communication lacks authenticity, it can foster employee cynicism. Cheng et al.^[38] found that employees who perceived their company's CSR messaging as 'cheap talk', for example, bold claims in sustainability reports that were not substantiated by actual labor practices, were more likely to experience distrust and express intentions to leave the organization. Elevated turnover and dissatisfied former employees can pose significant reputational risks. This finding aligns with global research indicating that discrepancies between CSR rhetoric and reality are swiftly recognized and often penalized. In the Chinese context, where internal platforms enable employees to share candid opinions within private networks, internal dissatisfaction is unlikely to remain confined, making genuine internal CSR engagement essential for sustaining corporate reputation.

Thus, internal CSR communication (through channels like town hall meetings about CSR initiatives, intranet newsletters highlighting CSR achievements, or directly involving employees in volunteer events) is critical. Particularly in Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), researchers have observed internal narratives linking the company's CSR to national goals. This can strengthen employee identification by appealing to a sense of national pride or collective mission (an approach that might be unique to the cultural-political context). For example, an SOE might communicate to employees that by implementing green energy

projects, the company is contributing to the nation's development and environmental targets; employees then feel they are part of something larger, which boosts morale and loyalty.

In summary, RQ3 for internal stakeholders, effective CSR communication within a company tends to improve how employees view the company (internal reputation) and can indirectly bolster external reputation by turning employees into advocates. However, disingenuous internal communication can severely damage trust and create reputational risks via employee backlash.

4.3. Message strategies and credibility factors

Virtually all the reviewed studies touch on aspects of how CSR messages are crafted and delivered, because these factors heavily influence stakeholder reception. A robust finding, addressing RQ3 in terms of *how* to communicate, is that specificity and factualness enhance credibility. Companies that share concrete evidence of their CSR (including data, case examples, third-party certifications, etc.) have better stakeholder responses than those that use vague, feel-good statements. Pérez^[48] theorized that message authenticity comes from providing verifiable content, including numbers, impact stories, transparency about challenges, rather than only proclamations of being responsible. The review in this study found Chinese audiences are just as discerning as elsewhere in telling fluff from substance. A content analysis noted that Chinese companies who had more substantive CSR communication, especially those that maintained consistent CSR engagement over time, tended to fare better in public perception, particularly when a crisis hit^[32].

Regarding tone, there appears to be a culturally nuanced insight while Western stakeholders often strongly prefer humility and react negatively to any self-promotion in CSR messaging as bragging, Chinese stakeholders may allow a bit more leeway for a company to tout its achievements, provided the claims are believable. Kim^[40] compared Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong consumers indicate that Mainland Chinese are less inclined to penalize companies for a moderately promotional tone in CSR advertisements, provided the content demonstrates substantive merit. This tendency may reflect cultural communication norms, as Chinese firms frequently publicize their achievements as exemplars, conditioning stakeholders to accept promotional messaging. Nevertheless, an excessively boastful tone, particularly in the absence of verifiable evidence, can engender stakeholder skepticism. Consequently, practitioners should adopt a posture of confident sincerity, articulating pride in CSR initiatives through factual evidence and avoiding hyperbolic claims.

The source of the message is another critical element. Several studies and reports note that in China, trust in information is stratified by source. As Liu et al.^[49] found that a majority of Chinese respondents preferred learning about a company's CSR from news media or official channels rather than from the company's own social media. This suggests that third-party or traditional media validation carries weight. Traditional media in China is relatively high. Luo et al.^[50] correlated the volume of positive media coverage of a firm's CSR with improved reputation scores. Meanwhile, another trend is the rise of influencers and NGOs as carriers of CSR messages. Chen et al.^[42] showed that when a popular social media influencer talked about a company's CSR project, the youth audience found the information more credible than when it came directly from the company, resulting in higher regard for the company. This implies companies might strategically use external voices to amplify their CSR communication. On the corporate leadership side, personal involvement by CEOs in communication.

Last but not least, framing CSR messages in culturally resonant ways enhances stakeholder receptivity. Dong et al.^[44] observed that Chinese firms frequently incorporate concepts, including harmonious society and common prosperity, into their CSR narratives, thereby aligning with prevailing societal values and government slogans. When CSR initiatives are presented as contributing to social harmony, poverty

alleviation, or national development, stakeholders tend to respond more positively, since they perceive the company's efforts as advancing broader collective objectives. In contrast, framing CSR solely in terms of altruism, without reference to local priorities, may fail to resonate with Chinese stakeholders, who expect CSR activities to align with the nation's socio-economic goals.

In summary, in addressing RQ2 and RQ3 on message strategies, both Chinese and international scholarship concur that four elements critically determine the effectiveness of CSR communication on corporate reputation: message content, tone, source credibility, and cultural framing. First, clarity and authenticity in content are universally essential. Second, a modest tone is generally advisable, although cultural norms may permit more assertive expression in certain contexts. Third, leveraging credible and trusted messengers amplifies positive effects. Finally, embedding CSR narratives within the local cultural context enhances resonance with stakeholders and strengthens perceived credibility.

4.4. CSR communication in crises

Some articles investigated whether CSR communication functions as reputational insurance during crises, a question of particular relevance to risk management (RQ3). Empirical evidence indicates that a well-established CSR reputation, cultivated through consistent and transparent communication, can mitigate reputational damage. However, its protective effect is contingent upon stakeholders' preexisting attitudes and the specific nature of the crisis.

Ham and Kim^[34] demonstrated experimentally that consumers who are not predisposed to skepticism toward CSR exhibit greater forgiveness when a firm encounters a product-harm crisis if they are aware of that firm's prior CSR engagement. In other words, a 'halo effect' or reservoir of goodwill affords socially responsible companies the benefit of the doubt. Conversely, individuals high in CSR skepticism derive no such protective benefit. Their distrust of CSR practices is entrenched, rendering previous communication efforts ineffective. This finding underscores the importance of audience segmentation, since CSR goodwill may not influence the perceptions of the most cynical stakeholders.

In summary, CSR communication can operate as a double-edged sword during crises. On the one hand, it builds a repository of positive sentiment that firms can draw upon when difficulties arise, stakeholders are more inclined to grant a socially responsible company a second chance or at least extend a fair hearing. Several studies conducted in China corroborate this buffering hypothesis. On the other hand, if a crisis exposes a significant divergence between a firm's CSR narrative and its actual behavior, prior CSR communication may backfire, intensifying accusations of hypocrisy. Accordingly, companies should embed CSR authentically within their operations rather than treat it as mere reputational insurance. Consistency between communicated CSR commitments and enacted practices is essential. Without substantive follow-through, CSR communication may prove more harmful than beneficial when a crisis occurs.

4.5. Cultural and institutional context

Lastly, the reviewed literature emphasizes that China's cultural and institutional context shapes the CSR communication reputation relationship in distinct ways (addressing RQ2 on contextual influence). Although authenticity and trust are universally valued, contextual factors shape their relative emphasis and interpretation.

Chinese cultural values, rooted in Confucianism and collectivism, place weight on community harmony, benevolence, and contributing to society. Stakeholders often expect companies to play a role in improving society, not just to make profits. This is partly cultural and partly reinforced by government rhetoric that promotes "socially responsible enterprises" as partners in development. As a result, CSR communication that

highlights how a company's actions benefit the community, employees, or nation resonates strongly. Dong et al.^[44] note that terms like harmonious society frequently appear in Chinese CSR reports. It signals alignment with a societal vision. Stakeholders reward that alignment by granting legitimacy a company seen as contributing to social harmony is often viewed as a responsible corporate citizen, enhancing its reputation.

The media environment represents another critical contextual factor influencing the perception of CSR communication in China. Trust in traditional media remains relatively high, particularly in official outlets such as People's Daily and CCTV. Endorsements or coverage by these sources often serve as implicit stamps of approval, substantially enhancing public trust in a company's CSR efforts. In contrast, social media introduces greater volatility. Chinese digital platforms, while powerful tools for engagement, can rapidly amplify public scrutiny, especially if users perceive insincerity or wrongdoing. In response, companies have become more proactive and transparent in their CSR communication on social media. For example, some firms now use platforms like Weibo to live-stream CSR initiatives or to promptly respond to public criticism. Such engagement strategies are designed to demonstrate accountability and foster trust, thereby reinforcing corporate reputation among the digitally engaged public.

5. Discussion

This systematic review set out to examine how CSR communication influences corporate reputation in China, and to benchmark the state of research on this topic (RQ1), the theoretical perspectives applied (RQ2), and the key empirical findings (RQ3). Overall, the findings from 20 studies over the past decade generally reinforce global theories of CSR communication and reputation, while highlighting important context-specific nuances for China. In this section, we synthesize what these findings mean theoretically and practically, addressing each research question and drawing connections across the themes.

Across the literature, a core proposition emerges CSR communication, when executed authentically and strategically, is positively associated with corporate reputation in the Chinese context, primarily by fostering stakeholder trust and identification. However, this relationship is contingent on stakeholders' attributions of corporate motives and on the alignment between communicated messages and actual behavior. These conclusions echo findings in other parts of the world – that authenticity and consistency are key, but the Chinese context adds layers regarding cultural expectations and media dynamics.

5.1. Theoretical implications and contributions (RQ2)

From a theoretical standpoint, this review affirms that foundational communication and reputation theories largely remain applicable within the Chinese context. However, they require thoughtful adaptation to account for the country's unique cultural and institutional characteristics.

Stakeholder theory and legitimacy The evidence strongly supports the idea that Chinese stakeholders reward companies with trust, goodwill, and loyalty when those companies meet societal expectations through genuine CSR engagement and transparent communication. This is in line with stakeholder theory^[10] and legitimacy theory^[11]. The Chinese case reinforces these theories in a non-Western setting, demonstrating their broad applicability. However, the review also suggests that *what* constitutes legitimacy can be culture-specific. For example, legitimacy in China is tied not only to profitability and ethical conduct but also to contributing to social harmony and national development. Thus, CSR communication that emphasizes how the company helps achieve shared social goals tends to enhance legitimacy and reputational credit more effectively in China than a generic, globally uniform CSR message might. In theoretical terms, this implies that legitimacy theory could be expanded to include alignment with state societal goals as a component of legitimacy in contexts like China.

Corporate authenticity One theoretical concept that repeatedly emerges is *authenticity*. Across many studies, perceived authenticity is the mediator between CSR communication and positive reputation outcomes. Authenticity in this literature is often implicitly defined as consistency between rhetoric and reality and sincerity of intent. In China, the cultural concept of sincerity or trustworthiness resonates with this being genuine is a deeply valued trait. The Chinese context thereby underlines authenticity as almost a *necessary* condition for CSR communication to succeed. This finding is theoretically important it suggests that any model linking CSR communication to reputation should explicitly include authenticity as a mediating variable.

Social identity and identification The review contributes to social identity theory applications by showing that CSR communication can increase stakeholder identification with a company, for both consumers and employees, which in turn bolsters reputation. This is known in Western contexts. The interesting culturally specific extension hinted at is that identification in China can have a collective dimension.

Attribution theory This review affirms attribution theory's relevance – stakeholders do differentiate intrinsic vs extrinsic CSR motives, and communication strategies influence these attributions. An interesting nuance from some studies^[14,40] is that Chinese stakeholders might, in some cases, give companies the benefit of the doubt more often regarding motives, at least initially, perhaps due to less entrenched cynicism than seen in some Western publics. For instance, one could argue that because CSR in China is a newer phenomenon (gaining traction mostly in the last 15 years), stakeholders haven't become as jaded yet – though this may be changing as people see more instances of talk without walk. However, once trust is broken, Chinese stakeholders react strongly to perceived deception, similar to elsewhere. This dynamic suggests a *trust reservoir* hypothesis companies in China might start with a modest trust advantage when they communicate CSR, but they should maintain it through consistent action, aligning with social exchange theory, initial trust can be reinforced or squandered by subsequent exchanges.

Signaling theory Signaling theory is useful for understanding how formal CSR reports or disclosures aimed at investors and media can shape reputation. In China, where there is high information asymmetry in a fast-changing market and regulatory environment, companies use CSR reporting as a signal of good governance and lower risk. The inclusion of studies connecting CSR communication to analyst perceptions and media sentiment broadens the typical scope of communication to consumers and reminds us that financial stakeholders also interpret CSR signals. Theoretically, this bridges CSR communication research with the investor relations and corporate governance literature. It suggests that a multidisciplinary approach could further illuminate how different stakeholders weigh CSR signals differently.

In summary, theories like stakeholder, legitimacy, identification, and attribution all receive support, but with culturally informed variables acting as moderators or additional factors. The Chinese experience enriches existing theory by illustrating that fundamental mechanisms (trust building, identification, skepticism mitigation) are universal yet operate within a particular cultural and institutional frame that can amplify or dampen their effects. It also shows that broad theories are robust across contexts, but for a full explanation one should integrate additional layers.

5.2. Practical implications for communication management (RQ3 in practice)

For practitioners, communication executives, CSR managers, and PR professionals in China or engaging with Chinese stakeholders. This review yields several actionable insights on how to effectively communicate CSR to build and safeguard reputation as following:

Prioritize Authentic Content Companies should ensure their CSR communication is rich in factual detail and transparently discusses outcomes. Vague platitudes about being socially responsible are not convincing and may even raise suspicion. Instead, provide specifics communicate clear targets, achievements, and even acknowledge shortcomings honestly. Chinese stakeholders appreciate candor; acknowledging areas for improvement can build credibility. Being truthful, even when it means admitting not everything is perfect, aligns with the value of trustworthiness.

Align CSR Initiatives with Communication Communication teams should coordinate closely with those implementing CSR programs to ensure that messaging does not get ahead of reality. One viral negative post accusing a company of hypocrisy can quickly undermine years of reputation building. Therefore, if there's a known gap between what the company is touting and what it is actually doing, it's better to temper the communications. For example, if a company is still developing its policies on labor rights, it should not boast about being a leader in employee welfare in its CSR report, stakeholders (including employees) will see through it. Focusing on areas where the company genuinely excels in CSR while quietly improving weaker areas is a safer strategy.

Engage Stakeholders in Dialogue The literature suggests that moving beyond one-way communication to two-way or interactive strategies yields benefits in trust and reputation. Chinese audiences are active on platforms like Weibo, WeChat, and emerging video apps (Douyin) – which provides channels for engagement. Companies should solicit feedback on CSR initiatives and visibly respond to that feedback. Such responsiveness demonstrates accountability and care, strengthening reputation. At the same time, it helps calibrate communications to what stakeholders find salient.

Leverage Credible Voices Given the high trust in traditional media and social media influencer (SMI) in China, companies should consider third-party endorsements for their CSR communication. Press releases carry more credibility when picked up by respected news outlets or when an independent NGO verifies a project's impact. Similarly, involving community leaders or popular influencer in CSR projects can humanize the message and lend credibility. Many Chinese firms now invite media and social media influencer to participate in CSR events for this reason.

Maintain Consistent Messaging According review underscores that companies with an established CSR reputation fare better when crises strike. This implies that consistency and continuity in CSR communication act as a form of reputational insurance. Practitioners should treat CSR communication as an ongoing commitment, not as sporadic campaigns or only when convenient. Moreover, if a crisis occurs, it can be wise to remind stakeholders of the company's CSR values and track record *without* appearing deflective or self-congratulatory. The tone should be humble and empathetic.

Cultural Tailoring International companies operating in China should adapt their CSR communication to local culture. As findings show, messages emphasizing collective well-being, harmony, and alignment with societal goals resonate strongly. For instance, framing an environmental CSR program as contributing to the nation's "Beautiful China" vision (a government slogan for ecological progress) may gain more traction than using a generic global campaign tagline. However, this should be done sincerely – overt pandering or clumsy use of cultural symbols can backfire. Employing local CSR and PR experts who understand the cultural context is essential to strike the right tone. In essence, embed the company's CSR story within China's broader narrative of social development, but do so in an authentic way.

In implementing these strategies, companies should also continuously monitor stakeholder perceptions (through surveys, social listening, media analysis) to gauge the impact of their CSR communication and adjust accordingly. The integrated insight from this review is that CSR communication should be treated

with the same rigor and strategic planning as core business communications, given its demonstrated influence on reputation.

Comparison with Global Context It is instructive to highlight how these implications and patterns in China mirror or diverge from those observed elsewhere. Much of the global CSR communication literature similarly emphasizes authenticity, stakeholder engagement, and managing skepticism ^[51,19]. The review suggests that these principles are indeed globally relevant. Chinese stakeholders are not fundamentally different in wanting honest and engaging communication. However, certain differences emerged. In many Western markets, trust in traditional media has declined and audiences rely more on NGOs or independent ratings for credible CSR information. In China, while social media is hugely influential, state-aligned traditional media still carry substantial weight and can lend reputational legitimacy when they endorse a company's CSR efforts. Thus, securing coverage in trusted media is relatively more valuable in China's context. In summary, the Chinese experience reinforces universal worth practices while also reminding communicators to leverage local trusted channels and frame messages in line with local cultural values and institutional norms.

6. Conclusion

Corporate social responsibility communication has emerged as a critical driver of corporate reputation in China over the past decade. This systematic review of studies from 2015–2024 confirms that *how* companies communicate their CSR efforts substantially influences stakeholders' trust, identification, and overall evaluation of the company. When CSR communication has a good practice, including transparent, two-way, culturally resonant, and backed by genuine actions. It leads to stronger reputational outcomes marked by stakeholder goodwill, loyalty, and advocacy. Conversely, dissonance between words and deeds or overtly insincere messaging can quickly damage a company's credibility and reputation, as stakeholders perceive corporate hypocrisy.

The Chinese context brings into focus the importance of aligning CSR communication with broader societal values and government expectations. Companies that support social goals and communicate that alignment often have enhanced legitimacy and reputational benefits in China's environment. At the same time, the Chinese public is increasingly expecting corporations to show real impact, empty slogans or perfunctory reports are no longer effective. The rise of digital media means any stakeholder can voice skepticism and gain traction if a company's CSR narrative does not ring true.

This review contributes to both scholarship and practice. Theoretically, it shows that classic frameworks of CSR communication and reputation largely hold in the Chinese context, while highlighting extensions needed to account for culture. Synthesized how various theories interplay stakeholder engagement and authenticity emerge as cross-cutting themes tying together stakeholder, identity, attribution, and signaling perspectives. By incorporating studies to 2024, captured contemporary trends including the use of social media influencers in CSR messaging and the growing importance of internal CSR communication for employee engagement – extending theory into new domains. Practically, the findings offer evidence-based guidance for companies to build reputation through CSR communication in China, firms should embed authenticity in messaging, engage stakeholders interactively, utilize trusted information channels, and maintain communication efforts consistently.

7. Future research directions

Although this review is comprehensive in covering 2015–2024 research, there remain areas for further exploration. It notes a few promising future research directions.

Broadening Stakeholder and CSR Dimensions The landscape of CSR is continuously evolving. One emerging domain is the rise of ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) investing and its implications for corporate reputation. As investors and rating agencies put more emphasis on ESG performance, future studies could examine how Chinese companies communicate CSR/ESG to financial stakeholders and how that influences reputational capital in financial markets. This would extend the current consumer/employee focus to include investors and regulators as key audiences of CSR communication. Park and Jiang^[41] provide an initial look at how such advocacy can build brand loyalty via identification on Chinese social media. Given the cautious environment in China for political engagement, more research is needed to see how far companies can or should go in advocacy communication, and what reputational risks or rewards that entails among different stakeholder segments.

Digital Media and Technology in CSR Communication With the rapid digital transformation, new tools and platforms are reshaping how CSR information is delivered and perceived. Future research should examine, for example, the role of AI-driven communication. Additionally, personalization algorithms could tailor CSR messages to individual stakeholder interests. It would be valuable to study whether such personalized CSR communication increases engagement or trust, or if it raises privacy/credibility concerns. Moreover, social media trends offer new formats for CSR storytelling that have scarcely been studied. As Rózsa et al.^[45] note, companies face evolving challenges in the digital media landscape from information overload to viral misinformation, which will require agile and transparent CSR communication strategies. Scholars could explore how Chinese firms navigate these challenges what innovative practices are emerging including integrating CSR messages into entertainment content, collaborating with influencers in meaningful ways and how effective they are in shaping reputation.

In conclusion, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication in China is a dynamic and evolving field that reflects the country's shifting social contract between business and society. This systematic review contributes to the literature by organizing previously fragmented studies into coherent thematic categories, offering deeper conceptual and practical insights. As CSR gains increasing prominence and stakeholder expectations continue to evolve, ongoing research and corporate communication efforts benefit from emphasizing authenticity, cultural relevance, and dialogic engagement. These elements play a critical role not only in building a credible corporate reputation in China but also in advancing the broader goal of aligning business practices with societal well-being in a transparent and trustworthy manner.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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