



Corporate Social Responsibility Communication and Corporate Reputation in Select Indian Firms: Studying the Role of Sustainable Development Goals Achievement and Stakeholder Engagement

ABSTRACT

Research problem and purpose: Companies are obliged to function with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to achieve competitive advantage and improve their corporate reputation. In this regard, they develop CSR strategies to maintain a balance between the utilisation of available opportunities and the extraction of available resources. Thereby, organisations responsibly render support to the social and economic aspects of the environment. Few scholars have proposed the new principle of responsibility that emerges with rethinking CSR as a Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) achievement. The Brundtland report, *Our Common Future* from 1987 and the UN SDGs in 2015 are both part of an ongoing attempt to connect sustainability and responsibility across all segments of society (Kemp, 2008). It is essential for sustainable development, due to our global misuse of natural resources.

However, due to the unexpected impact of Covid-19 few SDGs initiatives were reversed, some went under suspension, resulting in sharp decline in the possibilities of reaching 2030 SDGs targets. Therefore, many organisations are redefining their policies and strategies and the same has been part of their CSR communication, which is an important public relation tool. Scholars have developed a few frameworks to ascertain the effectiveness of CSR communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017; Veltri & Nardo, 2013) and alignment with SDGs. This still remains ambiguous as the frameworks available suggest a weak integration of SDGs. (Olofsson & Mark-Herbert, 2020). Therefore, this study will further explore to address the CSR communication gap and propose a framework which can enhance the efficacy of CSR communication when integrated with SDGs. To widen the scope, the researcher used ESG lens additionally to investigate SDG reporting and achievement as firms now mostly self-report ESG data and there are no fixed ESG standards. CSR communication becomes an inherently essential tool for circulating CSR material to the public, that helps in maintaining good public relationships. CSR is becoming an effective strategic tool that helps in brand building and enhancing the goodwill (Ramesh et al. 2018; Shnayder et al. 2016) and corporate reputation (Apolo et al. 2017).

Corporate Reputation is defined as "the awareness of stakeholders regarding firm behaviour, level of compliance, commitments to its customers, employees, shareholders, and the general public" (Villafañe, 2008). In other words, CSR communications aim to build positive perception among the stakeholders, that would influence their decision-making of investments. According to Costa (2015), more than what a firm says and does, what the stakeholders perceive contributes to building a firm reputation. Toro & Pavia (2012) recognized many elements of corporate communication which is similar to CSR communication that build the reputation: Transparency, Independence, Confidence,

stakeholder engagement, empathy, social responsibility, attention, and information. Using these elements, organisations leverage their image and reputation among several types of stakeholders as organisational goals and their corporate communications is supposed to be in sync with their stakeholders' expectations (Camilleri, 2015; Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006). Thus, it is proposed that the combination of the firm's strategic CSR communication style with SDGs may help to enhance effective stakeholder engagement which will subsequently help in building corporate reputation.

Therefore, the current study is exploring the possibilities of integrating CSR communication with SDGs and stakeholder engagement and see if it can help in enhancing corporate reputation further and also in the achievement of SDGs. Accordingly, it will propose a framework.

Objectives: The research work will be carried out at the Mining and Port industries based in Odisha. The objectives are to explore the ways CSR communication takes place; to find out corporates understanding about adopting SDGs in their CSR framework; to know how CSR adds value to achieving SDGs and subsequently the reputation. The objectives of this research are stated below:

- To explore CSR activities and "how" CSR communication takes place.
- To investigate how CSR communication helps in achieving SDGs.
- To examine how the integration of CSR communication and SDGs together impacts corporate reputation
- To examine the moderating effect of stakeholder engagement in achieving the SDGs.

Methods: The current study will adopt mixed method approach to identify which of the elements mentioned in the literature are most effective in building reputation when CSR communication integrates with SDGs.

We will also employ an exploratory sequential mixed-method research design to explore the research work in line with predefined research objectives. It will first collect and analyse the qualitative data, followed by collecting and analysing the quantitative data. Samples would include participants from the mining, port, and media industries having operations in Odisha. During the qualitative phase, senior and middle management working professionals in the CSR, PR, and Media will be interviewed in a semi-structured (open-ended) format, and the data shall be analysed using thematic analysis. During the quantitative phase, the survey method will gather data from beneficiaries' (Common Public) and the data will be analysed.