

# Corporate reputation through strategic communication of corporate social responsibility

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Corporate  
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1

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore how the communication of corporate social responsibility (CSR) contributes towards a favourable corporate reputation. It explores the communication strategies and channels organisations deemed reputable by stakeholders use to achieve an effective CSR communication.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To achieve this, a qualitative content analysis using the directed approach was conducted on the textual CSR communication materials of ten reputable organisations in South Africa based on the 2018 South Africa Reptrak survey.

**Findings** – Result showed that seven out of ten organisations use both self-serving and society-serving motive in their CSR communication, while the other 3 use only the society serving motive. The informing strategy was also more evident in the CSR communication materials than the interactive strategy. In terms of the communication channels, the study found that organisations mainly utilise controlled channels for CSR communication.

**Originality/value** – The literature reviewed and the findings of this study reveal a gap between the theory and practice of CSR communication. This drives the need for organisations to research and tailor CSR communication based on stakeholders' unique characteristics and preferences. The paper also contributes to improving the knowledge on the role different CSR communication strategies and channels play in CSR communication.

**Keywords** Corporate social responsibility, Strategic communication, Corporate reputation, Strategies, Communication channels

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a leading discussion among academics, and in organisations because of its potential impact on corporate reputation and overall corporate performance. The social and environmental crisis many organisations experienced in the last three decades have also strongly reinforced the concept of CSR because stakeholders have become increasingly interested in the social and environmental impacts of organisations in the society. These organisational impacts in the society influences stakeholders' evaluation of organisations that are "good" or "bad," which in turn determines the organisations they associate with, or dissociate from. As a result, organisations are increasingly investing in CSR activities as part of the efforts to generate favourable stakeholder perception. This is often attained through the coordinated communication of CSR activities with an attempt of gaining stakeholder confidence while striving to enhance corporate reputation through a positive image.



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Empirical studies have established the relationship and impact of CSR on corporate reputation (see [Kim and Kim, 2017](#); [Trotta and Cavallaro, 2012](#); [Hillenbrand and Money, 2007](#); [Maden \*et al.\*, 2012](#); [Esen, 2013](#); [Dutta and Imeri, 2016](#); [Shamma and Hassan, 2009](#)). According to [Unerman \(2008\)](#), CSR has the power to influence stakeholders' favourable perception and contribute towards maximising the earning potential of corporate reputation. Scholars ([Maden \*et al.\*, 2012](#); [Esen, 2013](#); [Dutta and Imeri, 2016](#)) also stress how corporate reputation is largely influenced by stakeholders' assessment of the organisation's social responsibility, in terms of how well the organisation's CSR initiatives and outcomes meet stakeholders' social and environmental values and expectations. As such, CSR has become a major driver of corporate reputation. Not only that, the social responsibility activities of organisations could also be the singular factor to distinguish an organisation and give it an edge even over other "reputable" organisations.

However, CSR can only influence stakeholders' positive assessment (corporate reputation) when they are aware of the organisation's social responsibility activities in the first place. [Coombs and Holladay \(2013\)](#) believe that attaining the desired corporate reputation requires stakeholders' awareness and believability of CSR activities through effective communication. [Bayoud and Kavanagh \(2012\)](#) share same view and note that CSR communication enhances corporate reputation, give greater customer satisfaction and employee commitment, and attract foreign investors. Thus, for the CSR to contribute towards a favourable reputation, organisations must employ effective communication strategies, as well as understand the meanings and interpretations stakeholders attach to the CSR activities and communication.

In this study we examine how effective communication of CSR can contribute towards a favourable corporate reputation. We achieve this by identifying the strategies and channels organisations deemed to have a good reputation use in their CSR communication, through a qualitative content analysis of their CSR communication materials. Furthermore, in achieving this objective, we adopt four main CSR communication strategies identified in literature namely (1) society-serving motive, where the organisation acknowledge that the CSR activities are intended and implemented only for the benefit of the society; (2) the self-serving motive, where the organisation acknowledge that the CSR activities are implemented only because of its potential benefit to the organisation; (3) informing strategy, where the organisation simply informs stakeholders about their CSR activities without providing opportunities for feedback; and (4) the interacting strategy, where the organisation involves third party in developing and implementing CSR programs, and also provides a platform for discussions and feedback regarding CSR activities.

The key contribution of this paper lies in the identification of which CSR communication strategies and channels contribute towards a good corporate reputation based on the current practice of organisations deemed to be highly reputable. By so doing, the study provides academic and practical implications for CSR communication. More specifically, for those who teach business communication in a business or academic setting, this study could provide knowledge about how organisations are, and should strategically communicate their CSR activities in order to contribute towards a more favourable corporate reputation.

## 2. CSR communication

As CSR has increasingly become a crucial corporate agenda item, CSR communication has also become imperative given that all organisational activities can only be made known to stakeholders through communication. CSR is often interchanged with corporate sustainability, corporate citizenship, social enterprise, sustainable development, triple-bottom line, corporate ethics, and in some cases, corporate governance ([Anuradha and Bagali, 2015](#)). The common factor in all these terms is that they all embody the social, economic, ethical and environmental commitment of an organisation in the society.

According to Epstein (2008), CSR must concentrate on nine areas namely ethics, governance, transparency, business relationships, financial return, community involvement, product value, employment practices and environmental protection. On the other hand, CSR scholar, Archie Carroll (1979; 1991; 2016) classified four main aspects of CSR as the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary/philanthropic expectations that society has of organisations. The four aspects, also referred to as the pyramid of CSR, is arguable the most popular and the most adopted CSR model (Visser, 2006). Carroll's CSR pyramid is concise, yet holistic in that it cuts across the two primary motives for CSR engagements – the society-serving motive and the self-serving motive. More importantly, since each of the four aspects address different aspects of business, implementing them increases an organisation's ability to satisfy different stakeholders' expectations because each stakeholder's priority and interest in CSR activities differ. Hence, the pyramid serves as a practical framework for an effective stakeholder management and Carroll (2016:6) recommended the implementation of "decisions, actions, policies and practices that simultaneously fulfil these aspects. . .because the focus is on the whole not the different parts".

The focus on wholeness is a key aspect that contributes to a favourable corporate reputation since reputation result from the aggregate perceptions of all stakeholders towards an organisation based on its behaviours, actions and communication. This emphasis on wholeness is further driven by the general systems theory (GST) that takes a holistic view of organisation and posits that the distinct parts of the organisation (that is, stakeholders such as the customers, employees, regulatory bodies) come together to form a complex whole (that is, corporate reputation). Thus, it is important that each stakeholder group find at least one or more CSR activities appealing. The rationale behind this is that the dissatisfaction or exclusion of any stakeholder group(s) regarding CSR activities or communication will negatively impact the overall perception of the corporate reputation (Modaff *et al.*, 2008; Cutlip *et al.*, 2006). For CSR to therefore contribute towards a favourable reputation, "it should be framed in such a way that the entire range of business responsibilities are embraced" (Carroll, 1991, p. 40).

Regardless of the CSR area(s) organisations choose to focus on, that is, whether they engage in charitable givings or community empowerment, appropriate communication strategies and channels must be used, otherwise, the CSR activities will not yield the desired result. Amaladoss *et al.* (2013) suggests that for CSR to yield the desired result, e.g. contribute towards a favourable reputation, organisations must strategically communicate their CSR activities through regular mandatory and voluntary reporting. This communication is what often becomes significant in shaping the image of the organisation for favourable reputation assessments.

Effective CSR communication benefits an organisation in several ways. CSR communication can be used to influence stakeholders' positive perception of the organisation, for example when consumers spread positive words regarding the organisation's involvement in CSR initiatives (Crane and Glozer, 2016). CSR communication also leads to awareness of shared social concerns with stakeholders, which facilitates their identification with the company (Coombs and Holladay, 2012). Consequently, stakeholders' identification with the organisation leads to increased patronage and other brand supporting behaviours such as positive word of mouth, customer loyalty and referrals (Anuradha and Bagali, 2015; Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Maignan and Ferrel, 2004). On the other hand, failure to identify with the organisation could lead to engaging in negative word of mouth and even organised boycotts.

However, though CSR communication benefits organisations in diverse ways, communicating CSR can be challenging in that organisations experience conflicting CSR expectations from various stakeholders (Lewis, 2003; Porter and Kramer, 2002; Wang and

Berens, 2014; Schwaiger, 2004; Carroll, 1991). Customers may expect ethical compliance, whereas community members may expect charitable givings or volunteer activities.

Considering that the major factor behind the rising popularity of CSR has been the constantly evolving stakeholders' expectations of organisations' contribution to society, it is essential that CSR activities reflect stakeholders' values and expectations. Thus, when deciding on an appropriate CSR communication strategy, scholars (Crane and Glozer, 2016; Dawkins, 2005; Oberseder *et al.*, 2013) advise that organisations should be mindful of the specific stakeholder groups the CSR communication is intended for. This is because how firms communicate their CSR activities is critical in establishing and sustaining relationships with their stakeholders.

Furthermore, CSR communication attracts stakeholders' scepticism, so there is the debate as to what extent organisations should communicate their CSR. Publics are quick to criticise CSR activities and have negative attitudes toward explicit CSR communication, as they are perceived as self-serving for the corporation rather than truly caring for the community (Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Waddock and Googins, 2011; Wagner *et al.*, 2009). In fact, (Farooq *et al.*, 2013) reveal that the more organisations publicise their ethical and social activities, the more likely they are to attract stakeholders' criticism. Moreover, stakeholders' evaluations of CSR activities are not always positive, especially when it appears like the CSR activities are used to cover organisation's inefficiency (Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004; Morsing *et al.*, 2008).

Consistent with this, Morsing and Schultz (2006) point out that some researchers are of the view that 'if a company focuses too intently on communicating CSR, is it possible that consumers may believe that the company is trying to hide something?' (pg. 323). On this premise, Waddock and Googins (2011) state that in order to avoid public scepticism of CSR, and build trusting relationships with stakeholders, organisations should communicate CSR efforts that speak to, or represent the corporate values.

In terms of CSR communication channels, Kim and Ferguson (2014) categorised the communication channels into two broad categories – controlled and uncontrolled media channels. "Company-controlled media channels include advertising, brochures, company's website, social media outlets, newsletters, annual reports, etc., while uncontrolled media include news media, experts' blogs or non-company social media" (p. 3). Although some studies suggest that extensive use of advertising as a means of communicating CSR should be discouraged because it increases stakeholder scepticism and decreases the credibility of CSR messages (Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005; Morsing and Schultz, 2006), preferred CSR communication channels may differ due to different stakeholder characteristics and interest.

For example, Morsing and Schultz's (2006) reputation surveys that explored the general public's perceptions of how companies should communicate their CSR, reveal that citizens in the three Scandinavian countries surveyed (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) hold different perceptions of how companies should communicate their CSR efforts. Specifically, some publics were of the opinion that organisations should proactively and openly publicise their CSR, while others prefer more minimal CSR communication through the company websites and annual reports. Only a few publics (10%) prefer that the organisation do not communicate about their CSR efforts at all. In spite of the variance in stakeholders' preferred channel for CSR communication, the survey result (shown in Table 1) indicates a strong stakeholder demand for CSR communication.

Also consistent with scholars' earlier position that the use of advertising as a means of communicating CSR should be discouraged because it increases stakeholder scepticism and decreases the credibility of CSR messages, findings from the reputation survey indicate that publics in a country like Denmark, are more reluctant about the use of press releases and corporate advertising than Swedes and Norwegians. Morsing and Schultz (2006) concluded that over time, public preference for press release and advertising as channels for CSR

communication decreased while, preference for minimal communication through annual reports and websites increased.

The foregoing indicates that though communicating CSR is a delicate task, it is crucial to enhancing corporate reputation. Organisations must cautiously develop CSR communication plans that provides consistent information, satisfies the expectations of each stakeholder, and ultimately builds public trust (Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Ihlen *et al.*, 2011). By so doing, corporate social responsibility could be a win-win for both organisation and society. Coombs and Holladay (2012) explain that this win-win will only be realised when there is a fit between the organisation and its CSR actions, which occurs by using appropriate CSR communication strategies that make stakeholders believe the organisation cares about the causes it supports.

### 2.1 CSR communication strategy

CSR communication strategy, also referred to as “motive” in literature is the major determinant of the effectiveness of any CSR communication. Coombs and Holladay (2012) define motives as attributions that stakeholders make about CSR activities and present a matrix of four CSR motives namely: (1) strategic motive, that is, helping with organisational objectives, (2) value-driven motive, that is, caring about the causes it supports, (3) stakeholder driven motive, that is, responding to stakeholders’ expectations and (4) egoistic motive, or being obviously self-centred. Although publics can make multiple attributions about CSR activities, researchers (Coombs and Holladay, 2012; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013; Du *et al.*, 2010; Ellen *et al.*, 2006; Forehand and Grier, 2003) believe that value-driven motive and strategic motive inhibit scepticism and will be perceived positively by stakeholders, while stakeholder-driven and egoistic motives elicit scepticism and will be perceived negatively.

On the other hand, some researchers (Kim, 2014; Forehand and Grier, 2003) found that acknowledging both self-serving and society-serving motive reduces sceptical attribution and enhances stakeholders’ favourable perception of the organisation, as compared to acknowledging only a society-serving motive. Both researchers reveal that stating both motives enhance stakeholders’ favourable resolve to support, seek employment with, invest in, and purchase from the company, which indicates a direct influence of CSR communication strategies on stakeholders’ behavioural intentions. However, Kim (2014) pointed out that when organisations with bad reputations acknowledge only a society-serving motive, they will experience backlash from the public. This is because publics will assume the organisation is attempting to cover up its deficiencies through its CSR initiatives.

The fact that favourable stakeholder responses are realised when organisations that are favourably perceived acknowledge self-serving motives implies that stakeholders value transparent CSR communication and appreciate when organisations put in effort to simultaneously balance economic responsibility, ethics, and philanthropy. The outcome of the reputation survey earlier discussed, as well as researchers’ findings suggests that publics realise that CSR is business-driven, but in order for them to believe that the organisation truly cares about the issues it supports, the strategic element cannot dominate the CSR process.

When companies engage in acts of corporate citizenship, do you think they should publicise their good deeds?	Denmark 2005 (%)	Sweden 2005 (%)	Norway 2005 (%)
Yes, publicise through corporate advertising and press releases	30	47	42
Yes, minimal releases such as annual reports and on website	59	46	49
No, should not publicise	11	8	9

Source(s): Morsing and Schultz (2006), p. 330

**Table 1.**  
How companies should communicate their CSR

In a similar development, using different levels of stakeholder engagement, [Morsing and Schultz \(2006\)](#) suggested three CSR communication strategies as: information, response and involvement. [Cho et al. \(2016\)](#) point out that the three strategies are rooted in [Grunig and Hunt's \(1984\)](#) three public relations models namely: public information, two-way asymmetry and two-way symmetry. Grunig and Hunt also suggested the press agency/publicity model as a basic public relations practice, but this model does not describe CSR communication well as it is devoid of ethical and transparent communication ([Cho et al., 2016](#); [Morsing and Schultz, 2006](#)).

[Morsing \(2006\)](#) then proposed a model for strategic CSR communication by simplifying [Morsing and Schultz's \(2006\)](#) strategies to “informing” and “interacting” strategies. The informing and interacting strategy are in line with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) public relations' one-way and two-way communication models. [Morsing \(2006\)](#) explain that the informing strategy entail providing coherent messages to the public in order to enhance organisational visibility and foster public trust. In order for this strategy to make CSR communication effective, such communication material must (1) emphasise CSR as a shared concern between the organisation and its publics, (2) link CSR to core business objective, (3) contain visible evidence that shows organisational support, and (4) contain CSR results ([Morsing, 2006](#)). Organisations first identify these four CSR aspects internally, and then disseminate it to external publics without expecting feedback from them ([Morsing, 2006](#); [Morsing and Schultz, 2006](#); [Grunig and Hunt, 1984](#)).

On the other hand, the interacting strategy involves organisations making efforts to engage with publics in developing and implementing their CSR programs ([Morsing, 2006](#)). The interacting CSR strategy includes (1) having social partnerships with community leaders and non-profit organisations; (2) local articulation, which is denoted as corporate engagement with a community by inviting or being invited to external publics for open communication; and (3) receiving proactive endorsements from external publics about corporate good deeds ([Morsing, 2006](#)).

From the foregoing, the informing strategy is strictly about unidirectional communication from an organisation to stakeholders. A few researchers ([Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991](#); [Morsing and Schultz, 2006](#)) explain that organisations use this approach to “give sense” to their publics, while the interactive strategy allows public feedback regarding organisations' social responsibility initiatives. Hence, through continuous communication and interaction with stakeholders, both organisations and publics “co-create sense” with the interactive strategy ([Morsing and Schultz, 2006](#)).

Though some scholars ([Capriotti, 2011](#); [Capriotti and Moreno, 2007](#); [Morsing, 2006](#); [Morsing and Schultz, 2006](#)) assert that organisations should employ the two-way communication to highly engage publics, studies ([Cho and Furey, 2016](#); [Kim and Ferguson, 2014](#); [Gomez and Chalmeta, 2013](#)) have found that organisations would rather not highly engage stakeholders when communicating CSR. For instance, [Cho and Furey \(2016\)](#) in their study found that when communicating CSR activities, organisations employ the informing strategy more often than the interactive strategy and also included internal publics' activities than external publics. Interestingly, [Gomez and Chalmeta \(2013\)](#) in their study also found that despite the interactive nature of social media sites, organisations do not encourage feedback and stakeholder participation and engagement on social media, but only use it as another one-way channel for communicating CSR.

### 3. Research questions

In order for organisations' CSR communication to contribute towards a better corporate reputation, this study sought to identify the communication strategies reputable organisations use in their CSR communication. In spite of the growing popularity and

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importance of CSR communication, there is no clear-cut strategy or framework to guide organisations, and this prompts the following research question:

*RQ1.* What strategies do reputable organisations use in their CSR communication?

Furthermore, because of the diverse options of available communication channels, the present study aimed to explore the channels reputable organisations use to communicate their CSR. This prompted the following research question:

*RQ2.* Which channels do reputable organisations use to communicate their CSR messages?

#### 4. Method

To identify the strategies and channels that make for an effective CSR communication, we examined how ten organisations in South Africa communicate their CSR to remain attractive in the South African business context. The study used two methods for data analysis – literature review and a qualitative content analysis of existing textual CSR communication materials of 10 selected reputable organisations.

The study followed a naturalistic paradigm, and used the directed approach to content analysis because existing CSR communication strategies formed the basis of analysis. Analysis used [Kim \(2014\)](#) and [Morsing \(2006\)](#) CSR communication strategies as initial code items. That is, the self-serving, and society-serving motive, and the informing and interacting strategies. By virtue of using this approach to content analysis, this study was deductive in nature since the content categories were pre-established by the researchers using earlier works (literature) ([Hsieh and Shannon, 2005](#); [Polit and Beck, 2004](#)).

The ten organisations were selected from the 2018 South Africa Reprtrak survey that contains a list of the top 50 reputable organisations in South Africa. The Reprtrak survey measures organisations against four emotional dimensions (trust, esteem, admire and respect), and seven rational dimensions namely: citizenship, governance, workplace, leadership, innovation, product/service, and performance. Of the seven dimensions, “citizenship” and “governance” wholly and directly address stakeholders/public’s CSR expectations of organisations. The citizenship dimension is described by the organisation’s environmental responsibility, how much it supports good causes, and its positive influence on society. The governance dimension is described by how well the organisation behaves ethically, the openness and transparency of its business, as well as fairness in the way it does business. Consequently, the two dimensions address the ethical, legal and philanthropy aspect of CSR. The “performance” dimension also partially addresses CSR because profitability, which is one of the attributes that describe the dimension, concern the economic aspect of CSR.

The South Africa Reprtrak survey was conducted from March–April 2018 by the Reputation Institute, and the data was derived from South African general public through an online questionnaire. There were 5,702 respondents and the distribution of the sample was balanced to be representative of the South African population by age and gender ([Reputation institute, 2018](#)).

The ten organisations selected for this study include: Clover, Woolworths, Unilever, Shell, Mr price, Sasol, First National Bank, Vodacom, Nestle, and Pick n Pay. To address the first research question, the textual communication materials were limited to those derived from the company website, press releases, and CSR reports. As earlier mentioned, the content categories (or code items) comprised of the communication strategies derived from literature. The strategies are twofold: in the first category, the researchers looked out for the presence of any, or both the self-serving and/or society-serving strategy (or motive) based on the words, phrases or sentences used in the communication materials.

In the second category, the researchers examined whether the informing and/or the interactive strategy was used in the organisation's CSR communication by employing the seven elements suggested by Morsing (2006). That is, four elements namely (1) the organisation's promise that CSR is a core business concern, (2) the organisation's plans for how to incorporate CSR activities with corporate values, (3) visible evidences for corporate support, and (4) the outcome of CSR activities, were coded as the informing strategy. Then three elements namely (1) partnership with community leaders and non-profit organisations, (2) business engagement with local communities, and (3) external publics' endorsement of CSR activities, were coded as the interactive strategy.

To address the second research objective, the researcher grouped the communication channels into two groups as done by Kim and Ferguson (2014) namely: controlled channels and uncontrolled channels. The controlled channels are channels owned and managed by the organisation. They include website, press releases, reports, social network pages, company newsletter, brochures, print advert, company blog, CSR beneficiaries, company direct mail and local stores. Uncontrolled channels are channels the organisation do not own or manage, but disseminate their CSR information through. They include newspapers, online news, and expert blogs.

## 5. Results

Research question 1 concerned the identification of the communication strategies the organisations adopt in their CSR communication. Among the ten organisations, seven used both the society-serving and self-serving strategy, while the other three used only the society-serving strategy. None of the organisations used only the self-serving strategy. The organisations and the corresponding CSR communication strategies are presented in Table 2. Examples of phrases or sentences that signify these strategies are also presented.

Further analysis of the CSR communication of the organisations showed minimal evidence of the interacting strategy. That is, most of the organisations use the informing strategy and do not encourage public discussion or comment on CSR activities, or rely on external public's endorsement of CSR activities.

Out of 197 CSR messages, 154 (78.17%) used the informing CSR strategy and 43 (21.83%) used the interacting CSR strategy. More specifically, of the 154 messages that use the informing strategy, 149 (96.75%) contain the organisation's promise that CSR is a core business concern. 127 (82.47%) contain information on how the organisation plans to link CSR with corporate value. 87 (56.49%) contained visible evidence for corporate support, and 10 (6.49%) contained the outcome of the CSR activities. In the interacting strategy, 21 (48.84%) contained information a corporate partnership with community leaders and non-profit organisations, while 37(86.05%) reflected corporate engagement with communities, and 3 (6.98%) announced third party endorsements of CSR activities.

### 5.1 Channels used for CSR communication

RQ2 sought to identify the communication channels that reputable organisations use in communicating their CSR messages. We found that the corporate website and press releases are the most used channels for CSR communication. Though all ten organisations use the company website, four organisations use the company website as their only means of communicating CSR activities, while the other six use other channels like press releases, reports and the print media.

Five organisations use only corporate website and press releases, three of the organisations incorporate reports for CSR communication, while two organisations also incorporate an uncontrolled channel, news articles. The channel(s) used by each organisation is listed in Table 3:

Organisation	Strategy	Indication(s)
Clover	Self-serving and society serving motive	"Reducing our impact on the environment enables us to produce more using less of the world's limited resources."
Sasol	Self-serving and society serving motive	"Our approach centres on understanding our risk landscape and managing our activities in a way that eliminates incidents, minimises risk and promotes excellence in the performance of our operations." "As a global firm with strong roots in South Africa, our promise to society is that we will seek to employ inclusive and sustainable business practices that enable development in the geographies and communities where we operate."
Unilever	society serving and self-serving motive	"Our goal is to halve the environmental footprint of the making and use of our products as we grow our business." "The Unilever Sustainable Living Plan sets out to decouple our growth from our environmental footprint, while increasing our positive social impact."
First National Bank (FNB)	society serving motive	"In line with the vision of being a great business helping to create a better world, First National Bank (FNB) views its role within the country as going way beyond that of a major player in the business environment."
Shell	Self-serving and society-serving motive	"We aim to deliver the energy needed for a growing population in a responsible way-respecting people, their safety and the environment. Sustainability is essential to the longevity of our business and our role as a member of society."
Woolworths	Society-serving motive	"We recognise that climate change is a major issue that the retail sector contributes to through our operations and our supply chains. We have concentrated efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change."
Pick n pay	Society-serving motive and self-serving motive	"We are committed to supporting local, small-scale, black and women-empowered businesses, and to working with all our suppliers to ensure that we provide our customers with great quality food that is produced in a responsible and ethical way." "Our sustainability strategy is inextricably linked to our business strategy." "We seek to play a role in poor communities, through short and longer-term initiatives, as part of our multi-faceted contribution to the socio-economic transformation of the country."
Nestle	Self-serving and society-serving motive	"These commitments serve both external and internal purposes. They have helped frame our external communications but, equally importantly, they guide our management and all of us at Nestlé across Business Units, Zones and Markets in our collective efforts to reach these specific objectives."
Vodacom	Self-serving and society-serving motive	"we continue to unlock value in our business by using it as a lens through which to identify the risks and opportunities that affect our ability to continue to add value to our stakeholders and to fulfil our purpose." "Our sustainability priorities guide the issues that we dedicate our attention to because they are important to our stakeholders and our business strategy." "We will continue to engage our people and external stakeholders for the issues that matter most to them, and develop a response that moves our business forward and fulfils our purpose in society."
Mr price	Society-serving motive	"We partner with industry and community stakeholders on our programmes, constantly adapting as we move towards systematic change that enables meaningful impact."

**Table 2.**  
Organisations' CSR  
communication  
strategies

All ten companies had CSR sections on their websites, but the visibility and prominence of the CSR section and information varied. In terms of visibility, more than half of the companies (seven out of ten) had an independent section for their CSR on the main homepage, either in the main part of the page or at the bottom. The label however varied- some organisations refer to it as “corporate social investment”, “sustainable living”, “nestle in society”, “sustainability”, “citizenship”, or “creating shared value”. The other three organisations’ websites embedded CSR information in the general corporate information, such as in the “About Us” section. The visibility of CSR information on these websites is usually lower because readers who are unwilling to make an effort to find CSR information would most unlikely not see it.

Regardless of visibility level, CSR information was prominent on most of the organisation’s websites: 10% (one organisation) dedicated 67 pages to CSR information, 4% of the companies (four organisations) dedicated 15–30 pages to CSR information; 20% of the companies websites had 11–14 pages, and 30% (three organisations) had 1–10 pages. In fact, the most reputable organisation according to the Reprtrak survey, “Clover”, dedicated only three pages to CSR information. “Sasol” had the highest pages (67) dedicated to CSR. This could be tied to the nature of the organisation (oil and gas) which naturally place more emphasis on its CSR especially in terms of safety and environment. Regardless of the number of pages each organisation dedicated to their CSR communication, the website was used as the primary channel for communicating their CSR activities.

### 6. Discussion

Based on the increasing potential of CSR communication to contribute towards a favourable reputation, this study examines the strategies and channels that make for an effective CSR communication. It does this by examining the CSR communication strategies of reputable organisations using [Kim’s \(2014\)](#) self-serving and society-serving motive, and [Morsing’s \(2006\)](#) informing and interactive strategies. The findings of this study indicate that reputable organisations use a composite of the self-serving and society-serving motive in their CSR communication. It is believed that acknowledging both motives is strategically done to influence stakeholders’ positive perception of CSR initiatives and reduce public scepticism. The findings yield valuable insights for what CSR communication strategies contributes to a better corporate reputation, and highlights gaps that exists between the theory and practice of CSR communication.

Interestingly, while some scholars ([Cortado and Chalmeta, 2016](#); [Parsons, 2011](#); [Morsing and Schultz, 2006](#); [Capriotti, 2011](#)) assert that CSR communication should be a two-way direction, instead of being unidirectional, this study’s findings reveal a gap between this concept and reality. 78.17% of the organisations use the informing strategy, while only

**Table 3.**  
Organisations’ CSR  
communication  
channels

Organisation	Channel
Clover	Company website
Sasol	Media releases, reports, company website
Unilever	Company website, press releases
First National Bank (FNB)	Company website
Shell	Company website, press releases, reports
Woolworths	Company website
Pick n pay	Reports, company website, news articles
Nestle	Press release, company website, news articles
Vodacom	Company website, media releases
Mr price	Company website

21.83% use the interactive strategy in their CSR communication. This contradicts literatures that posit the interacting strategy is most suitable for CSR communication. More surprising is Gomez and Chalmers's (2013) study that found that despite the natural interactive nature of social media sites, organisations still use the informing strategy for CSR communication on social media. This study's findings, coupled with existing studies suggest that the informing strategy is very appropriate for CSR communication and organisations are possibly unwilling to subject their CSR engagements to public discourse in order to abate unnecessary criticisms that may otherwise occur if public discourse was encouraged. By virtue of using this CSR communication strategy, organisations boost their corporate reputation. Further research could however include the organisation's social media sites in the analysis of the CSR communication materials since they were not included in this study.

Though previous researches (see Pomeroy and Dolnicar, 2009; Morsing *et al.*, 2008; Schlegelmilch and Pollach, 2005) posit that the credibility of CSR communication decreases based on the degree of control an organisation has over the contents of its CSR communication, the communication channels used by the reputable organisations in this study are also inconsistent with the aforementioned researchers' position. For instance, Morsing *et al.* (2008, p. 105) argued that there is "general agreement that it is not effective to communicate directly to the public". In its place, they recommended the "endorsed CSR communication process", which they explain as a much appreciated strategy that involves CSR communication via third party experts (p. 107).

The rationale behind this recommendation is that third parties' CSR information are perceived as more credible by the public, which reduces public scepticism and self-serving CSR motive attributions (Du *et al.*, 2010; Yoon *et al.*, 2006). However, this study found that reputable organisations mostly prefer and use organisation-controlled channels for CSR communication such as websites, press releases and reports.

Overall, CSR is undoubtedly one of the primary aspects of organisations that must be effectively implemented and appropriately communicated. Perhaps, the most significant outcome of the reprak survey is that "governance", "performance" and "citizenship" respectively emerged as the 2nd, 3rd and 4th most important dimensions that drive the reputation of organisations operating within the South African business context. In fact, the result of the survey in each sector showed that "governance" was the most important driver of corporate reputation in state owned companies, banking, oil, gas and lubricants. It was also the second most important driver in retail companies, and the third most important in FMCG. The "citizenship" and "performance" dimensions varied between the second-fourth most important drivers in the aforementioned sectors. This outcome further underscores and positions CSR as a crucial aspect of business and as such, CSR activities or engagements must be appropriately communicated to stakeholders in order for it to influence or contribute to a positive corporate reputation.

## 7. Conclusion

CSR has become a core organisational activity, and several empirical studies have proven it to be a major driver of corporate reputation. While stakeholders' expectations of organisations' social and environmental impact in the society continues to grow, discussion on how organisations can effectively communicate their CSR activities is limited. More problematic is the fact that there seem to be a gap between literature and actual practice in organisations on the strategies and channels that are most appropriate for effective CSR communication.

For CSR activities to contribute towards a favourable corporate reputation, stakeholders must first be aware of the CSR activities implemented by the organisation and this can only be realised through effective communication of CSR. Effective CSR communication entails using the most appropriate communication strategies and channels based on the unique dynamics of stakeholders. However, CSR communication is a delicate matter as it can quickly

elicit stakeholders' scepticism of CSR motive, and when the credibility or motive of CSR activities is questioned, it may not contribute towards a better corporate reputation.

Based on the current practice of reputable organisations as found in this study, acknowledging both the self-serving motive and society-serving motive in CSR communication is most appropriate as it reduces public scepticism and enhances the corporate reputation. Where organisations do not want to acknowledge both motives, the society-serving motive can be used as acknowledging only the self-serving motive impacts the organisation negatively – the organisation will be perceived as self-centred, concerned only about profit making, and lacking concern for its environment. These negative perceptions inherently lead to a loss of reputation.

Furthermore, this study recommends the use of informing CSR communication strategy over the interactive strategy. Although this study did not include CSR communication on companies' social media sites in the analysis, further research could build on this gap in order to support or contrast this study's finding. Also, controlled channels of communication are recommended for communicating CSR. Since uncontrolled channels are usually paid for, stakeholders may interpret communicating CSR via these channels as an attempt by the organisation to promote itself, and not necessarily that it cares about the causes it supports.

Albeit, though the controlled channels appear as the preferred means of communication by reputable organisations, organisations must be mindful of the frequency of their communication. Too much communication may cause stakeholders to become doubtful of an organisation's motive for the CSR engagement, which consequently reduces the credibility of the CSR activities, while insufficient communication about CSR activities can deter organisations from achieving the desired outcomes from their CSR effort. Organisations must thus strive to find a balance for the frequency of their CSR communication.

In conclusion, this paper contributes significantly to theory and practice as it analyses how effective CSR communication contributes to the development and/or enhancement of an organisation's most intangible asset – corporate reputation. Findings from this study is significant for all types of organisations, across all levels (national and international) as it identifies CSR communication strategies and channels that has been working for several organisations the public consider reputable. To theory, this paper has made new contributions to the ongoing discussion on how CSR communication can be used to achieve a better corporate reputation.

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