



SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH (SoGSaR)

FACULTY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS, MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

**AN EVALUATION OF THE USE OF CSR AS A TOOL FOR GAINING SOCIETAL
INFLUENCE AND POWER**

BY

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**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND
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ARTS DEGREE IN STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT**

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DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of dissertation laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication-Institute of Journalism, UniMAC-IJ.

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to examine the ethical implications of using Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a tool for societal influence, explore the strategic integration of CSR in public relations functions, identify factors that facilitate or hinder the success of CSR activities, and develop a framework for leveraging CSR as an influential tool in society. Grounded in Stakeholder Theory and Legitimacy Theory, the research adopted a qualitative approach, gathering data through interviews with ten participants from diverse organisational backgrounds. The findings revealed that while CSR is often integrated strategically into business and public relations practices, its effectiveness is influenced by transparency, ethical decision-making, and strong stakeholder engagement. Challenges such as resource constraints and public scepticism were identified as barriers. The study recommended that organisations adopt stringent ethical guidelines, emphasise stakeholder involvement, and align CSR activities with genuine community needs to enhance social impact and build trust. The research contributes valuable insights for practitioners seeking to navigate the complexities of CSR in the Ghanaian context, offering practical guidance for aligning corporate actions with societal expectations.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Public Relations, Stakeholder Theory, Legitimacy Theory, Ghana

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family, with special mention to my mother, Janet Awo Nyadrer, for her selflessness and unwavering belief in my potential.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

KPIFs – Key Practices and Impact Factors

PR – public relations

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an integral aspect of modern business practices. This reflects a commitment to ethical behaviour and contributions to economic development (Tandoh et al., 2022) while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large (Lee et al., 2018). Originating from the notion that businesses should not operate in a vacuum devoid of social accountability, CSR has expanded its reach, impacting stakeholders across a broad spectrum (Carroll, 2021). This expansion positions CSR activities not only as vehicles for community betterment but also as tools for strategic public relations (PR) and corporate governance.

As businesses continue to wield significant influence within societies, their engagement in CSR activities is frequently seen through the lens of PR (Awuah et al., 2021). Scholars like Doorley and Garcia (2015), and Somerville and Wood (2016) have argued that PR practices have morphed into a pivotal mechanism through which CSR policies are formulated and communicated, effectively shaping public perceptions and expectations of corporate behaviour. This blending of CSR with PR underscores the shift towards a more strategic approach in managing external stakeholder relationships (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021), where CSR initiatives are crafted to align with broader corporate goals, fostering goodwill and enhancing reputational capital (Wirba, 2023).

However, the intersection of CSR and PR extends beyond mere reputation management. The strategic deployment of CSR activities can, in certain instances, confer disproportionate societal influence on businesses (Alcadipani & de Oliveira Medeiros, 2020), thereby raising questions about the balance of power between corporations and the communities they serve

(Mudzanani & Anani-Bossman, 2023). For instance, Bhattacharya et al. (2009) and Carminati (2022) highlight how CSR can be used as a soft power tool, enabling corporations to accrue benefits that extend well into the realms of policy influence and market control. This raises ethical considerations regarding the extent to which business entities should engage in CSR activities and the implications of such engagement on democratic processes and societal equality.

Moreover, the perspective that CSR is fundamentally a function of PR invites a reevaluation of how these activities are integrated into the overarching strategic objectives of organisations. This reevaluation necessitates a deeper understanding of how CSR initiatives, while beneficial, might also serve as conduits for enhanced corporate control and influence, subtly embedding business interests within societal concerns (Carroll, 2016). The role of PR in this context is pivotal, as it mediates the relationship between corporate ambitions and community expectations (Osafu, 2020), crafting narratives that resonate with both internal and external stakeholders (Keith, 2023; Kent, 2015).

In light of these considerations, the study aims to elucidate the dual roles of CSR as both a contributor to societal welfare and a potential enhancer of corporate influence, scrutinized through the PR lens. Exploring this dual role involves examining the strategies through which PR professionals manage and communicate CSR activities, as well as the implications of these strategies on the power dynamics between corporations and communities. This exploration is vital for developing a comprehensive understanding of the ethical boundaries and strategic responsibilities inherent in the integration of CSR within PR practices.

1.2 Problem Statement

CSR has become an increasingly significant component of modern business strategy, often lauded for enhancing corporate reputation and fostering goodwill between companies and their communities (Barnett, 2019; Maon et al., 2019). Scholars have noted the symbiotic relationship between CSR and PR, where CSR initiatives are used to align corporate activities with societal values, thereby bolstering brand image and stakeholder trust (Doorley & Garcia, 2015; Somerville & Wood, 2016). However, there remains an under-explored dimension of CSR as a potential mechanism for accumulating disproportionate societal influence, particularly when strategically integrated within PR practices (Alcadipani & de Oliveira Medeiros, 2020; Bhattacharya, Korschun & Sen, 2009).

The current literature has extensively explored CSR as a tool for enhancing corporate reputation and building relationships with stakeholders (Pfajfar et al., 2022), yet it falls short of addressing the ways in which CSR can be used to consolidate power and exert influence over public policy and community decision-making. Scholars like Carminati (2022) and Wirba (2023) highlight CSR's capacity to function as "soft power," enabling corporations to subtly shape societal norms and priorities to their advantage. However, few studies critically examine this power dynamic, especially within the context of CSR's integration into PR strategies. This strategic alignment, while beneficial to corporate interests, raises ethical concerns regarding the potential for businesses to overextend their influence in ways that may not align with broader societal interests (Amo-Mensah & Tench, 2018; Mudzanani & Anani-Bossman, 2023). Moreover, there is a lack of substantial research on the ethical implications of CSR when viewed as a tool for corporate power, particularly in contexts where regulatory oversight is limited or weak, such as in developing nations like Ghana. Existing studies tend to focus on the positive outcomes of CSR, such as community development and environmental sustainability (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Tandoh et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2018), without adequately considering the potential for CSR to become a vehicle for accumulating undue

corporate influence. This oversight creates a critical gap in the literature, where the ethical challenges posed by CSR's influence on public policy, market regulation, and societal decision-making processes remain insufficiently scrutinized.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by evaluating how CSR, when strategically deployed within PR frameworks, can serve as a tool for consolidating societal influence and power. It will examine the ethical boundaries of this influence and explore how CSR initiatives, while ostensibly beneficial to society, may also act as conduits for extending corporate control (Carroll, 2016). The study will also assess the unique contextual factors in Ghana, where CSR activities are increasingly shaping community relations and public perceptions (Awuah et al., 2021). In doing so, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse by offering a comprehensive analysis of the dual role of CSR in both enhancing corporate reputations and potentially distorting democratic processes.

1.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are designed to critically analyse the integration, influence, and ethical considerations of CSR. Each objective seeks to uncover the dimensions of CSR as a strategic and influential tool in society, guiding the development of an operational framework. Thus, the study will intend;

- i. To examine the ethical implications of using CSR as a tool for gaining societal influence and power
- ii. To explore the strategic integration of CSR activities in PR Functions
- iii. To explore the factors that either facilitate or hinder the ability of CSR activities to achieve influence within society.
- iv. To develop a Framework for employing CSR activities as an influential tool in the society

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions have been formulated to probe the strategic, influential, and ethical dimensions of CSR activities in relation to public relations.

1. What are the ethical implications of using CSR as a tool for gaining societal influence and power?
2. How are CSR activities strategically integrated within public relations functions to align with broader organisational goals?
3. What factors facilitate or hinder the ability of CSR activities to achieve influence within society?
4. Can a framework be developed to employ CSR activities as an influential tool?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study emerges from illuminating the roles CSR activities play in society. By delving into the operational and ethical dimensions of CSR, this research enriches the academic discourse on the intersection of public relations and social responsibility, thus offering novel insights into how CSR can be effectively managed and utilized to secure a balance between corporate interests and societal welfare.

From a knowledge contribution standpoint, this study introduces a conceptual framework that elucidates the pathways through which CSR activities can become influential tools within society. It extends current understandings by situating CSR firmly within PR strategies, thereby advancing theoretical models that encapsulate the dual role of CSR in both benefiting society and enhancing corporate influence. The development of this framework not only fills a gap in existing literature but also serves as a foundational reference for scholars seeking to explore the dynamic interactions between corporate operations and social ethics.

On the policy front, the findings of this research have the potential to inform policymakers about the implications of corporate influence through CSR. As companies increasingly adopt CSR strategies to shape public policy and community perceptions, understanding these dynamics is crucial for the creation of regulations that promote transparency and ethical conduct in corporate engagements with society. This study offers evidence-based insights that could guide the formulation of policies aimed at ensuring that CSR activities contribute positively to societal development without compromising democratic processes or community autonomy.

In terms of practical relevance, PR professionals stand to benefit significantly from the insights provided by this study. It equips them with strategic knowledge on how to craft CSR initiatives that align with corporate goals while maintaining ethical standards and fostering genuine societal engagement. This can enhance their ability to manage stakeholder expectations and build trust within the community, thereby reinforcing the role of PR as a pivotal element in the successful implementation of CSR initiatives. Furthermore, the research findings will be of interest to a diverse array of stakeholders including corporate managers, community leaders, and CSR practitioners. Each group can utilize the outcomes to better understand the broader impacts of CSR activities and develop more informed strategies that reflect both corporate and community interests.

Finally, the study lays a fertile ground for future research by identifying areas where additional investigation is needed, particularly in the application of the developed framework in different industrial contexts or cultural settings. Subsequent studies could explore the variability of CSR impacts across sectors, thereby broadening the scope of knowledge and refining the strategic approaches to CSR in varying organisational landscapes. This ongoing inquiry will continue to enhance the depth and breadth of understanding regarding the strategic use of CSR within public relations, ensuring its relevance and applicability in a rapidly changing global environment.

1.6 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study will be confined to the examination of CSR activities within Ghana, focusing specifically on how these activities are managed through PR strategies by major corporations across diverse sectors. This will involve qualitative interviews with PR managers, and or CSR coordinators. Through this approach, the study will provide comprehensive insights into the complex dynamics of CSR within the Ghanaian context.

1.7 Organisation of the Study

The structure of this study is segmented into five cohesive chapters. Chapter One initiates the discourse by establishing the study's foundation through an extensive introduction to CSR and its integration within PR frameworks. This chapter sets the stage by delineating the study's objectives, rationale, and the theoretical underpinnings that guide the subsequent investigation. It provides a comprehensive backdrop, situating the relevance of CSR within modern corporate strategies and societal expectations. Progressing from the foundational to the explorative, Chapters Two through Five delve deeper into the core of the study. Chapter Two presents a critical review of existing literature, mapping out the evolution of CSR and its symbiotic relationship with PR, highlighting previous studies and identifying the gaps this study aims to fill. Chapter Three describes the methodological approach, detailing the qualitative techniques employed to gather and analyse data, thus ensuring the research is grounded in robust empirical evidence. The fourth chapter unveils the research findings, drawing connections between the data and the theoretical frameworks established earlier. This chapter is pivotal as it interprets the implications of CSR in society through the lens of PR. Finally, Chapter Five synthesises the entire study, discussing the implications of the findings for stakeholders, offering recommendations for both practice and policy, and suggesting avenues for future research. This last chapter closes the study, leaving the reader with a thorough understanding of the dynamic interplay between CSR activities and public relations practice.

1.8 Chapter Summary

The chapter serves as the introductory platform for the study, outlining the conceptual terrain of CSR within the broader spectrum of PR. It meticulously defines the study's scope, objectives, and the theoretical premises that underpin the analysis. By discussing the historical context and the evolving role of CSR in corporate strategy, this chapter sets the groundwork for a deeper exploration into how CSR initiatives can be effectively integrated into PR practices to enhance corporate influence while fostering societal well-being. The chapter concludes by delineating the research significance that guide the investigation, framing the study within current academic and practical discourses on CSR.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the existing body of knowledge surrounding CSR and its integration within PR. It explores key theories and frameworks that underpin CSR's role as both an ethical obligation and a strategic tool for organisations. Relevant literature has been critically analysed to provide insight into how CSR influences societal perceptions, corporate power, and stakeholder relations. Additionally, theoretical perspectives such as Stakeholder Theory and Legitimacy Theory are introduced to frame the study's examination of CSR's dual capacity to benefit society while enhancing corporate influence. These frameworks guide the critical inquiry into the operational and ethical dimensions of CSR practices.

2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a concept where businesses integrate social and environmental concerns into their operations and interactions with stakeholders (Carroll, 2015). It is rooted in the belief that companies, while pursuing profits, should also contribute positively to society (Tandoh et al., 2022). Historically, CSR emerged as a response to growing concerns about the negative externalities of industrialisation. Modern CSR frameworks encompass a range of activities, including ethical business practices, sustainability initiatives, philanthropy, and stakeholder engagement (Deigh et al., 2016). The ethical foundation of CSR lies in the notion that businesses hold a responsibility beyond maximizing shareholder value. This broader obligation emphasises their role in addressing societal issues such as environmental degradation, labour rights, and corporate governance (Tamvada, 2020). Effective CSR enhances corporate reputation, fosters trust, and creates long-term value for both the business and society (Yan et al., 2022).

2.3 CSR and Strategy

CSR has evolved from being an optional or secondary aspect of business into a central element of strategic management (Carroll, 2021). Adib et al. (2021) affirm that companies that strategically integrate CSR into their business models leverage it as a source of competitive advantage rather than viewing it as a mere ethical obligation. By embedding CSR into core business strategies, firms align their operations with broader societal expectations, creating synergies between corporate objectives and social good (Carroll & Brown, 2018). This approach not only enhances a company's public image but also enables innovation in products and services that meet the growing demands of socially conscious consumers. As companies compete in a global market increasingly shaped by social and environmental awareness, integrating CSR provides a unique opportunity to stand out (Siltaloppi et al., 2021).

Incorporating CSR strategically does more than enhance brand differentiation—it can improve risk management and employee satisfaction as well. Porter and Kramer (2018) argue that CSR-driven innovation leads to the development of new markets and sustainable business models, allowing firms to anticipate and mitigate risks associated with regulatory changes or societal pressures. Additionally, employees tend to be more engaged and loyal to organisations that demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility, further boosting productivity and reducing turnover rates (Carnahan et al., 2017). This kind of internal value creation complements external advantages, positioning CSR as an integral driver of both financial performance and sustainable growth, rather than a mere cost burden (Chandler, 2022).

A long-term approach to CSR ensures that it remains aligned with the company's strategic objectives, maximizing both social and financial returns. Rather than engaging in superficial or reactive CSR activities, firms that integrate environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors into their decision-making processes take a proactive stance on sustainability (Cheema & Langa, 2022). This proactive approach strengthens the company's position in navigating the complexities of modern business, where stakeholders increasingly expect corporations to act

as responsible agents of social change. By doing so, Žižek et al. (2021) point out that businesses not only contribute to societal well-being but also enhance their long-term competitiveness and resilience, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of social and business success.

2.4 CSR, Goodwill and Influence

CSR has long been positioned as a strategic tool to enhance goodwill and influence societal perceptions (Akbari et al., 2021). Defined as a business approach that contributes to sustainable development by delivering economic, social, and environmental benefits, Lu et al. (2021) elucidates that CSR engages multiple stakeholders, thus shaping a firm's reputation. Goodwill, rooted in this context, refers to the positive regard a company garners from the public, stakeholders, and consumers as a result of socially responsible practices (Javed et al., 2020). Theoretically, goodwill is seen as an intangible asset, valuable for its potential to facilitate long-term business success. However, Zhang et al. (2024) makes the point that CSR's ability to translate into real influence depends on various factors, both internal and external. Influence in this sense refers to the firm's capacity to shape societal values, consumer behaviour, or policy discussions through its CSR activities.

One critical factor facilitating the success of CSR in fostering influence is the alignment between the company's values and societal expectations. Husain et al. (2023) suggests that when CSR initiatives reflect genuine commitment rather than a superficial public relations effort, they are more likely to be embraced by society, thereby enhancing a company's influence. The authenticity of CSR efforts plays a significant role, as society tends to reward firms perceived as truly engaged in solving societal issues (Fatma & Khan, 2022). This authenticity fosters trust, which, in turn, elevates goodwill, creating a favourable feedback loop where the company gains further legitimacy and influence.

Nevertheless, Kudłak et al. (2022) highlight that CSR's potential to yield influence is not without challenges. The primary hindrance arises when CSR efforts are viewed as disingenuous

or are misaligned with a firm's core business operations. According to Moehl and Friedman (2022), when CSR activities are perceived as mere window-dressing or when they conflict with the company's actual business practices, the resulting scepticism erodes goodwill and diminishes influence. Furthermore, CSR programs that fail to engage local communities or address specific societal needs often fall short of achieving widespread acceptance (Mohammed et al., 2022). Thus, the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which CSR is implemented significantly shape its success in generating influence.

2.5 CSR and Ethics

CSR encompasses practices that businesses engage in to contribute positively to society beyond profit-making objectives (Singh & Misra, 2022). This often includes environmental stewardship, philanthropy, and ethical labour practices, which allow corporations to project a socially responsible image. While these actions ostensibly serve altruistic purposes, the ethical implications of using CSR as a tool to gain societal influence and power warrant critical examination (Riyadh et al., 2024). When CSR initiatives are strategically aligned with corporate goals, there is a potential for the ethical line between genuine responsibility and calculated self-interest to blur (Starr-Glass, 2022). Scholars such as Le (2023), and Al-Shammari et al. (2022) suggest that firms might employ CSR as a means to enhance their reputation and market position, leveraging socially conscious actions for competitive advantage. This raises ethical questions about the sincerity of such efforts and whether the primary motivation is to address societal concerns or to fortify corporate influence.

Furthermore, Salam and Jahed (2023) explains that CSR has the potential to shift societal power dynamics by allowing corporations to exert disproportionate influence over public policies and community initiatives. A corporation's ability to control or influence social agendas through targeted CSR initiatives can be problematic, particularly when these actions align more with corporate interests than with the public good. For instance, Matten and Moon (2020) argue that CSR can serve as a mechanism for legitimizing corporate authority in social

spaces, giving firms undue power to shape social priorities. Such influence can lead to ethical dilemmas, especially when businesses prioritize their own economic objectives under the guise of CSR. In essence, the intersection of CSR and ethics becomes a contested space, where the boundaries between genuine societal contribution and corporate self-promotion require ongoing scrutiny.

2.6 Review of Related Studies

The growing interest in CSR within the construction industry, as evidenced by Zhang et al. (2024), underscored the increasing pressure from socially conscious stakeholders for companies to actively demonstrate their CSR efforts. The study sought to uncover key practices and impact factors (KPIFs) associated with CSR implementation in construction firms. Through the use of integrated institutional, stakeholder, and self-determination theories, the researchers developed a theoretical framework to explain the relationships among these factors. The data, gathered from extra-grade contractors through online questionnaires, were analysed using partial least square structural equation modelling. The findings revealed that CSR practices could be categorized into eight key dimensions, including shareholders' interests and government commitment. Additionally, three groups of impact factors, namely external institutional factors, intrinsic factors, and identified factors, were found to have statistically significant positive effects on these dimensions. Zhang et al. (2024) emphasised the practical implications of these findings, particularly for top management, as understanding these impact factors could help construction firms secure legitimacy and maintain competitiveness.

In a different context, Rashid et al. (2020) explored the relationship between CEO power and CSR disclosure, focusing on how stakeholder influence moderates this association. The study examined 986 firm-year observations from Bangladesh, utilizing content analysis to develop a CSR disclosure index and applying ordinary least squares regression for analysis. The findings revealed that CEO power negatively impacted the level of CSR disclosure, but this effect was mitigated by strong stakeholder influence. Furthermore, Rashid et al. (2020) found that CEO

power diminished the positive financial impact of CSR disclosure, a trend that was also lessened when stakeholders exerted significant influence. This study highlighted the need for both CEO power and stakeholder influence to be considered when examining CSR disclosure and its relationship to firm performance, adding complexity to the CSR-performance nexus identified in previous literature.

Transitioning to the role of social media in CSR, Bowen et al. (2020) examined how the integration of CSR and social media strategies could enhance strategic planning processes in business environments. Their qualitative case study adopted a reflective perspective, illustrating how social media facilitates two-way communication between firms and stakeholders while simultaneously reinforcing CSR efforts. Bowen et al. (2020) demonstrated that social media serves as a resource integrator, linking CSR with the overall strategic planning process. Their findings indicated that in volatile business environments, an integrated partnership between organisations and stakeholders is essential for overcoming challenges related to strategy formulation. The study argued that CSR, when aligned with social media strategies, acts as a reinforcement of trust and contributes to building stronger relationships between firms and their stakeholders.

Similarly, Lahtinen et al. (2018) contributed to the discourse by examining the role CSR plays in corporate strategy. The authors identified CSR's dual orientation, both internally toward firm operations and externally toward market dynamics, as a pivotal element in shaping strategy. Through case studies, Lahtinen et al. (2018) highlighted how companies are increasingly recognizing CSR as a driver of strategic change. The findings suggested that CSR could become a transformative force, influencing both business strategy and broader societal outcomes. The study encouraged executives to view CSR not merely as a compliance tool but as a strategic lever capable of generating substantial corporate and societal benefits. By recasting CSR's role in strategy, firms could drive positive change, both internally and within their external market environments.

Focusing on stakeholder interactions, Saxton et al. (2021) explored how social media platforms provide stakeholders with the ability to engage with firms regarding their CSR performance. Their study analysed the interactions between stakeholders and Fortune 200 companies through CSR-focused Twitter accounts, examining how firms responded to public messages. Saxton et al. (2021) found that a firm's response was significantly influenced by the stakeholder's connective power, which was positively associated with the likelihood of receiving a response. Conversely, a firm's own connective and normative powers were negatively correlated with the probability of response. Stakeholder urgency, characterized by message originality and positive sentiment, also influenced firm responses. The study advanced the understanding of how firms navigate the complexities of CSR communication in digital spaces, highlighting the importance of connective power and stakeholder urgency in shaping firm-stakeholder interactions.

Also, Parsa et al. (2021) explored the drivers of CSR and its reporting in the context of large Chinese companies, emphasizing the institutional pressures and stakeholder influences shaping these processes. The authors collected data through interviews with managers from Chinese listed firms, identifying how the government uses social organisations and intermediaries to mediate CSR practices and reporting. Parsa et al. (2021) found that these interactions helped companies gain political legitimacy domestically, while also maintaining legitimacy in international markets. The study showed how Chinese firms cooperated with social organisations to navigate both regional and global expectations, with CSR practices being tailored to meet varying societal demands. The findings also underscored the significance of regional differences, suggesting that the relationships between business and society fundamentally influenced CSR practices and their reporting mechanisms.

Then again, Dai et al. (2018) further investigated CSR within the Chinese context by examining the relationship between the quality of CSR reports and corporate legitimacy. The study demonstrated that firms issuing higher-quality CSR reports were perceived as having greater legitimacy, which in turn enhanced their financial performance. Dai et al. (2018) found that

government and media endorsements mediated this relationship, with government endorsement playing a stronger role for firms located in underdeveloped regions. This study reinforced the importance of CSR reporting in securing legitimacy from key stakeholders, while also illustrating the differential impact of these endorsements based on geographic and developmental factors. In this way, CSR disclosure was positioned not only as a tool for enhancing financial performance but also as a mechanism for gaining broader societal legitimacy.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

2.7.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory was introduced by Freeman (1984), addressing the relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders. It challenges traditional views that prioritize shareholders alone. Stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, and communities, influence and are influenced by the organisation. The theory assumes that organisations must balance the interests of these groups for long-term success. Key concepts include stakeholder engagement, corporate responsibility, and ethical management. The theory seeks to expand the purpose of the firm beyond profit maximisation to include value creation for all stakeholders. Its scope spans corporate governance, ethics, and sustainability. The theory is widely valued for its holistic approach to corporate management. It promotes inclusivity and ethical considerations in decision-making (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). However, its broad scope can be a limitation. Critics argue that balancing conflicting stakeholder interests can be impractical (Jensen, 2002). The theory may also lack clear guidelines for prioritizing stakeholders. Despite these challenges, its relevance persists in promoting corporate social responsibility and sustainability in business practices.

2.7.2 Legitimacy Theory

Legitimacy Theory was formalized by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), rooted in the notion that organisations must align with societal norms to survive. It assumes that organisational

legitimacy is a resource, and maintaining it is critical for survival. The theory's core concepts revolve around legitimacy, societal expectations, and disclosure practices. The purpose is to explain how organisations seek legitimacy by conforming to societal norms and responding to external pressures. Its scope includes corporate governance, environmental disclosures, and corporate accountability. The theory's strength lies in its ability to explain why organisations adjust their practices to gain legitimacy. It is particularly useful in analysing corporate social disclosures (Suchman, 1995). Nonetheless, the theory has limitations. It tends to be reactive, focusing on legitimacy maintenance rather than proactive strategies (Deegan, 2002). It also assumes that societal norms are clear and universal, which may not always be the case. Despite these limitations, Legitimacy Theory remains significant for understanding corporate behaviour in relation to societal expectations.

2.7.3 Suitability of Theories to the Study

Stakeholder Theory posits that organisations must balance the interests of various groups that can affect or are affected by their operations, while Legitimacy Theory suggests that businesses must continually seek to align their activities with societal expectations to maintain social acceptance. Stakeholder Theory aligns with the study's objective to explore how CSR activities are strategically integrated within PR functions to achieve organisational goals. By emphasizing the importance of addressing the needs and expectations of various stakeholders—including communities, employees, and regulators—this theory offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the multifaceted impact of CSR initiatives. The theory directly supports the study's investigation into the ethical implications of CSR activities, particularly in terms of balancing corporate interests with societal welfare. It also informs the analysis of how CSR can be both a tool for enhancing corporate influence and a mechanism for fulfilling stakeholder expectations, thus contributing to the study's goal of developing a framework for employing CSR as an influential tool.

Legitimacy Theory complements this analysis by providing a framework for understanding how organisations use CSR to gain, maintain, or restore legitimacy in the eyes of society. The theory underscores the role of PR in crafting and communicating CSR initiatives to ensure that corporations are perceived as legitimate and responsible actors. This is particularly relevant to the study's aim of scrutinizing how CSR can confer disproportionate influence on businesses, as Legitimacy Theory explains why organisations engage in CSR activities that may exceed basic ethical requirements in an effort to align with societal norms. The theory also supports the examination of the potential power dynamics between corporations and communities, suggesting that CSR can be strategically employed to enhance a company's standing, influence, and control over societal issues.

Conceptually, both theories are well-suited to explain the key phenomena related to CSR and PR. Stakeholder Theory offers insights into the relational dynamics between corporations and various groups, which is crucial in understanding how CSR activities are framed to serve broader organisational goals while addressing community needs. In parallel, Legitimacy Theory provides a critical perspective on the role of societal approval in shaping corporate behaviour, elucidating how companies might use CSR as a tool for maintaining or gaining influence. Together, these theories offer a comprehensive explanation of both the strategic and ethical dimensions of CSR activities within the public relations sphere, as the study seeks to explore.

Empirical studies cited in the provided document reinforce the application of these theories in CSR-related research. Scholars like Bhattacharya et al. (2009) and Carminati (2022) demonstrate how CSR can be used as a soft power tool to enhance corporate control and influence, supporting the integration of Stakeholder Theory. Furthermore, studies by Ajayi and Mmutle (2021) underscore the strategic importance of CSR within PR frameworks, aligning with Legitimacy Theory's focus on maintaining corporate reputation and societal approval. Empirical evidence from Mudzanani and Anani-Bossman (2023) also highlights the role of

CSR in shaping power dynamics, a key concern of the study, further validating the relevance of these theoretical frameworks.

The relevance of these theories in the context of this study is underscored by their ability to illuminate both the operational and ethical dimensions of CSR. Stakeholder Theory provides a robust framework for examining how CSR initiatives serve multiple interests and align with broader corporate objectives, while Legitimacy Theory offers critical insights into how corporations use CSR to enhance their societal standing. These theories collectively enable a nuanced examination of the potential for CSR to serve as a tool for accruing influence and shaping societal structures, thus making them particularly pertinent for understanding the intersections of CSR, PR, and corporate influence.

2.8 Chapter Summary

The chapter presented a comprehensive examination of the theoretical foundations and existing studies related to CSR and its intersection with PR. Previous research was evaluated to highlight key trends and gaps, particularly in the use of CSR as a tool for gaining societal influence. Theoretical models, including Stakeholder Theory and Legitimacy Theory, were discussed to provide a basis for understanding CSR's strategic and ethical implications. The chapter identified how these frameworks informed the study's approach to analysing CSR's role in shaping corporate and community dynamics. Throughout, relevant empirical evidence was utilized to support the theoretical exploration of CSR within corporate contexts.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological approach that was utilized to explore the research questions. It outlines the strategies employed to collect and analyse data, ensuring that the research objectives are systematically addressed. The choice of qualitative methods is discussed, alongside the rationale for selecting specific techniques and tools for data collection and analysis. Each step of the research process was carefully designed to align with the study's overall aims, providing a solid framework for gathering relevant insights. The chapter also details how participants were selected and how their contributions were recorded and interpreted to generate meaningful findings.

3.2 Research Approach

The qualitative research approach has been chosen for this study. Qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding phenomena in their natural context, often aiming to gain in-depth insights into human behaviour, social processes, and the meaning people attach to various experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It emphasises the subjective interpretation of participants' experiences, allowing researchers to explore complex issues that are difficult to quantify, such as motivations, perceptions, and feelings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This approach is particularly suited for research that seeks to uncover rich, descriptive data. Qualitative research often employs flexible and adaptive methods, which allows for adjustments in data collection and analysis as new insights emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In qualitative research, methods such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation enable the researcher to capture these varying perspectives, providing a holistic view of the subject matter (Patton, 2015).

The choice of a qualitative approach is well-suited to the objectives of this study. Since the study aims to evaluate the ethical and strategic implications of CSR as a means of gaining societal influence, it requires an approach that can capture the subjective and contextualized nature of corporate interactions with society. Quantitative measures alone would be insufficient to explore the depth of stakeholder experiences and the underlying motivations of corporate entities. By utilizing a qualitative approach, the study can provide a comprehensive, context-rich analysis that aligns with its broader objective of understanding CSR's role in societal power structures.

3.3 Research Design

A case study research design has been employed for this study. The case study design is a qualitative method that focuses on an in-depth exploration of a specific instance, event, or entity within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). Case studies allow researchers to investigate contemporary phenomena within their natural settings, where boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not always clearly defined (Stake, 1995). This design is particularly effective for research that aims to answer "how" and "why" questions, as it provides a detailed examination of the subject matter. In this case, the use of CSR as a tool for gaining societal influence is studied through the experiences and practices of specific corporations.

The case study design also offers the flexibility to incorporate multiple sources of evidence, including interviews, documents, and observations, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of complex issues (Simons, 2009). This triangulation of data ensures a comprehensive view of the case, capturing the multifaceted nature of CSR initiatives and their impacts on societal influence. By focusing on a specific case or a few cases, this design allows for a deeper exploration of the strategic integration of CSR into public relations functions and its ethical implications, making it a suitable choice for investigating how CSR can influence societal dynamics (Thomas, 2016).

The case study design is appropriate for this research because it aligns with the study's objectives to explore the specific ways CSR is utilized by businesses to gain societal influence. The case study design enables the research to focus on particular companies or sectors, allowing for an in-depth investigation of how CSR initiatives are communicated and managed within real-world corporate contexts. This level of detail would be difficult to achieve with broader designs such as surveys or experiments, making the case study design the best fit for this qualitative inquiry.

3.5 Study Population

A population in research refers to the entire group of individuals or entities relevant to the study, from which a sample is drawn for data collection (Bryman, 2016). The study population comprises of PR managers or personnel in charge of CSR from major corporations within the Ghanaian context. The study population is drawn from corporations operating in diverse sectors, including manufacturing, mining, and telecommunications, to ensure a broad understanding of CSR practices across industries. In this study, the population is specifically chosen to include those individuals who have direct involvement in CSR activities and their strategic integration within PR functions. These individuals are selected because of their expert knowledge and first-hand experience in designing, implementing, and communicating CSR initiatives.

3.6 Sampling Procedures

Sampling refers to the process by which a subset of individuals, units, or cases is selected from a larger population for the purpose of conducting a research study (Taherdoost, 2016). In research, it is often impractical or impossible to collect data from an entire population due to time, cost, or logistical constraints (Flick, 2018). Instead, researchers select a representative sample that accurately reflects the characteristics of the larger population. There are two primary categories of sampling: probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling is a method in which each member of the population has a known and

equal chance of being selected, which allows for statistical generalisation of results (Bryman, 2016).

Non-probability sampling, on the other hand, involves selecting participants based on specific criteria rather than random selection. In qualitative research, non-probability sampling is more common because it focuses on obtaining in-depth information from individuals who can provide rich, relevant insights into the research topic rather than on ensuring generalizability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study employs non-probability sampling due to its suitability for qualitative exploration.

3.6.1 Rationale for Using Non-Probability Sampling

Non-probability sampling was employed for this study, specifically utilizing purposive sampling. Non-probability sampling does not involve random selection but instead relies on the researcher's judgment to select participants who are most relevant to the research objectives (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling that involves deliberately selecting individuals or cases that possess specific characteristics or knowledge essential to addressing the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). This method ensures that participants who have direct experience or expertise in the area of interest are included, making it especially suitable for qualitative research, where the goal is to obtain detailed insights from those who are most knowledgeable about the topic.

Purposive sampling is particularly appropriate for this study because it focuses on CSR professionals and public relations managers who are actively involved in designing and implementing CSR initiatives. Since the research aims to understand how CSR is used as a tool for gaining societal influence, it is crucial to gather data from individuals with first-hand experience in the subject. These participants can provide detailed, context-specific insights that are essential for answering the research questions. Purposive sampling allows for the selection

of participants based on their relevance to the research, ensuring that the data collected is rich and directly related to the study's objectives (Patton, 2015).

3.6.2 Sample Size

A sample size of ten (10) participants was selected for this study. In qualitative research, the goal is not to generalize findings to a broader population, but to explore the depth, complexity, and richness of the phenomenon being studied (Guest et al., 2006). Qualitative studies often focus on smaller sample sizes because they rely on detailed, in-depth data collection methods such as interviews or focus groups as Mason (2010) espouses. The selected sample size allows for thorough exploration of the participants' experiences and insights without overwhelming the data analysis process. According to Ryan (2013), qualitative research often reaches saturation—where no new information emerges—with smaller sample sizes, making the sample size sufficient for a focused case study.

3.7 Data Collection

For data collection, interviews have been chosen as the primary method for this study. Interviews are a qualitative research technique that involves direct, face-to-face or virtual conversations between the researcher and the participants (Bryman, 2016). They enable the researcher to gather in-depth information on participants' experiences, beliefs, and perspectives regarding a specific topic (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Interviews are particularly effective for exploring complex phenomena. This method is appropriate for the study as it aligns with the research objectives, which aim to explore the strategic and ethical dimensions of CSR as a tool for gaining societal influence. Interviews allow for flexibility in questioning, enabling the researcher to follow up on interesting or unexpected responses, leading to richer and more nuanced data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Through direct dialogue with CSR professionals and public relations managers, interviews will offer a platform for obtaining detailed insights into how CSR initiatives are implemented and perceived within organisations, providing a thorough understanding of the subject matter.

3.7.1 Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview guide has been chosen as the instrument for data collection. This type of interview guide provides a flexible framework for conducting interviews, with a predetermined set of open-ended questions while allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses (Denscombe, 2014). Semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structured and unstructured interviews, giving the researcher the flexibility to explore relevant themes more deeply while still ensuring that all important topics are covered (Kallio et al., 2016).

The use of a semi-structured guide is appropriate for this study because it allows the researcher to focus on the key themes related to CSR, such as ethical considerations and power dynamics, while also giving participants the freedom to introduce new ideas and experiences. This flexibility is crucial for a study that aims to explore how CSR is strategically integrated into public relations and how it can be used as a tool for societal influence. A semi-structured format ensures that the interview process remains consistent across participants, enabling comparability of responses while allowing for individual perspectives to emerge (Bryman, 2016). This approach ensures that the data collected will be both comprehensive and relevant to the study's research questions.

3.8 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis has been selected as the method for analysing the data collected. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique used to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is a flexible method that allows for a rich, detailed, and complex account of the data. By organizing the data into meaningful categories, thematic analysis helps the researcher understand the underlying themes that emerge from participants' narratives and experiences (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Thematic analysis is appropriate for this study because it provides a systematic way to analyse the data collected from interviews, making it easier to identify recurring patterns in how CSR is employed as a tool for societal influence. The six steps of thematic analysis will be followed: (1) Familiarisation with the data, where the researcher will read through all interview transcripts; (2) Generating initial codes, by systematically coding interesting features of the data; (3) Searching for themes, where codes are grouped into potential themes; (4) Reviewing themes, by checking the validity of themes against the dataset; (5) Defining and naming themes, where themes are refined and clearly defined; and (6) Producing the report, where the researcher writes up the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step-by-step process will allow the study to thoroughly explore the ethical and strategic dimensions of CSR, ensuring that the analysis aligns with the research objectives.

Thematic analysis is well-suited to capturing the complexities of participants' experiences and perceptions, particularly in the context of CSR, where multiple perspectives and interpretations are likely to emerge. By using this method, the research will provide a detailed understanding of how CSR initiatives influence corporate power and societal perceptions, contributing to the study's aim of evaluating CSR's dual role in benefiting society and enhancing corporate influence.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the protection of participants' rights and maintain the ethical integrity of the research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study. Each participant was provided with a detailed information sheet that outlined the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the potential risks and benefits of participation. Participants were asked to sign a consent form, indicating their voluntary agreement to participate in the study.

Confidentiality and anonymity were carefully maintained throughout the research process. Identifying information was not recorded, and participants were assigned unique identifiers to ensure that their responses could not be traced back to them. Any potentially identifiable details mentioned during the interviews were removed or altered to protect privacy. Furthermore, data was stored securely on password-protected devices, and only the researcher had access to the raw data. Hard copies of documents were locked in a secure filing cabinet, and digital files were encrypted to prevent unauthorized access.

The study was designed to minimize any potential harm to participants. The interview questions were carefully crafted to avoid sensitive or distressing topics, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions they found uncomfortable. Additionally, participants were debriefed at the end of the interviews, providing them with an opportunity to ask questions or express concerns about their participation. Finally, the study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the institution overseeing the study. This approval ensured that all ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, data security, and participant well-being, were adequately addressed in line with institutional and legal standards.

3.10 Chapter Summary

The chapter explained the methods and procedures used to conduct the research. It outlined the approaches taken to ensure the collection of relevant data and explained the justification for the chosen strategies. Key elements, such as the sampling method, data collection techniques, and the analysis framework, were thoroughly discussed. These choices were guided by the study's objectives and the need for depth in understanding the phenomenon under investigation. By the conclusion of this chapter, the steps taken to gather and analyse the data were clearly detailed, ensuring the research was methodologically sound.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The chapter delves into the comprehensive analysis and interpretation of data collected from ten participants, each represented by pseudonyms: RES1, RES2, RES3, RES4, RES5, RES6, RES7, RES8, RES9, and RES10. The use of pseudonyms was deliberate, serving as an ethical measure to ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of the respondents. Given the sensitive nature of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices and strategic decision-making discussed, maintaining anonymity was essential in fostering candid responses and preserving the integrity of the study. This chapter explores the perspectives shared by the respondents, linking them to the study's objectives and underpinning theories, providing a critical examination of the themes that emerged.

4.2 What are the ethical implications of using CSR as a tool for gaining societal influence and power?

4.2.1 Conceptualizing Corporate Social Responsibility

The study aimed to uncover how organisations conceptualise CSR and the motivations behind its adoption, particularly as it pertains to strategic alignment within public relations functions. The responses garnered framed CSR not merely as a series of philanthropic gestures but as an integral part of the corporate ethos, underscoring a commitment to responsible business operations. This alignment demonstrated a common understanding of CSR as a holistic framework encompassing accountability, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable development. For instance, RES2 emphasised that “CSR is about ensuring that our business

does not operate in a vacuum. It is our obligation to address the social and environmental concerns of our stakeholders,” illustrating a shared view of CSR as a core responsibility tied to broader corporate objectives.

The findings exhibited a strong sense of moral and ethical responsibility, linking CSR to the enhancement of corporate reputation and the cultivation of goodwill among stakeholders. RES8, for example, described CSR as “stewardship,” highlighting the idea of responsibility towards both the environment and the communities impacted by corporate activities. The findings revealed that most participants perceived CSR as a strategic investment rather than a mere compliance exercise or public relations tactic. This perspective was echoed by RES3, who viewed CSR as “a company’s pledge to balance profit-making with its impact on society,” underscoring a dual commitment to economic gain and societal welfare. The idea of balancing profit with broader social responsibilities aligns with the ethical imperatives discussed by Singh and Misra (2022), who argued that genuine CSR initiatives must transcend profit motives to include a commitment to societal progress.

A striking theme emerged around the integration of CSR into the core strategic framework of organisations. Multiple participants, including RES9, articulated a vision of CSR that extends beyond isolated initiatives, framing it as a holistic approach: “I see CSR as a holistic approach where we integrate social, economic, and environmental considerations into our business operations.” This comprehensive view was consistent with the principles of Stakeholder Theory, as outlined by Freeman (1984), which suggests that businesses must balance the interests of diverse stakeholder groups to achieve long-term success. By embedding CSR into business strategies, respondents demonstrated an awareness of the broader implications of their corporate actions, striving to create value not just for shareholders but for a wider array of stakeholders.

The data also showed differences in the specific motivations behind CSR engagement. While RES5 noted that CSR was “a vital part of our corporate identity” and emphasised its role in fostering loyalty and goodwill, RES6 described it more as “business self-regulation,” aimed at integrating ethical practices into day-to-day operations. These varying motivations highlighted a tension between the intrinsic desire to contribute positively to society and the pragmatic benefits of enhanced brand image and stakeholder trust. This aligns with findings by Deigh et al. (2016), who contended that firms often undertake CSR activities as part of a broader strategy to build reputational capital and strengthen stakeholder relations. However, it also raises questions about the sincerity of these efforts, a critique supported by Alcadipani and de Oliveira Medeiros (2020), who cautioned against viewing CSR purely as a strategic manoeuvre devoid of genuine ethical commitment.

Additionally, participants like RES1 and RES7 articulated a clear sense of duty towards community engagement, viewing CSR as a platform for fostering stronger relationships with local communities. RES1 remarked, “CSR involves more than just philanthropic activities. It is a business approach where organisations take responsibility for their social, environmental, and economic impacts.” This sentiment was mirrored by RES7, who argued that “CSR means engaging with our stakeholders and addressing broader societal challenges,” reflecting a shared belief in the importance of addressing community needs. Such perspectives resonate with the findings of Mudzanani and Anani-Bossman (2023), who posited that effective CSR practices necessitate a deep engagement with local communities to truly meet societal expectations.

In contrast, a few respondents exhibited a more sceptical or pragmatic outlook on CSR. RES10, while acknowledging the ethical motivations, suggested that CSR also functions as a tool for building “a responsible image,” implying a calculated use of social responsibility as a branding exercise. This viewpoint aligns with the critiques raised by Moehl and Friedman (2022), who questioned the authenticity of CSR efforts when they are primarily aimed at reputation management rather than genuine societal benefit.

The Stakeholder Theory offers a fitting lens to interpret these findings. The responses highlighted a strong emphasis on balancing the needs and expectations of various stakeholder groups, which is central to Stakeholder Theory's premise that businesses cannot focus solely on profit maximisation but must also cater to the broader interests of all parties impacted by their operations. The theory's focus on engagement and relationship-building was evident across the responses, particularly in the way participants described their motivations for undertaking CSR as part of a broader strategy to align corporate objectives with societal welfare. For instance, the emphasis on building trust and fostering community relationships, as noted by RES4, aligns well with Freeman's (1984) assertion that addressing the concerns of all stakeholders leads to sustainable business success.

The implications of these findings suggest a complex interplay between genuine ethical responsibility and strategic business interests. The consistent framing of CSR as a strategic tool for stakeholder engagement and trust-building underscores its role as a mechanism for securing long-term organisational legitimacy. This aligns with the observations of Carroll (2021), who argued that strategic CSR can serve as a means of aligning corporate practices with societal norms, thereby enhancing both corporate reputation and societal trust. However, the tension between genuine ethical motivations and the strategic use of CSR for branding purposes highlights the need for further scrutiny of CSR practices, as posited by Starr-Glass (2022), who cautioned against the potential for CSR to be co-opted as a superficial branding tactic rather than a sincere effort to address societal issues.

4.2.2 CSR as a Strategic Function vs Tactical Role

Understanding the role of CSR as a strategic function rather than a mere tactic was critical in highlighting the potential for integrating socially responsible initiatives within broader PR strategies. The analysis revealed a consistent view among respondents that CSR transcends a mere tactical measure, positioning itself as an integral part of strategic business frameworks. Most participants framed CSR as an enduring commitment that aligns with broader corporate

objectives and shapes long-term organisational goals. RES6, for instance, remarked that CSR is “fundamentally strategic. It helps us shape long-term goals, manage risks, and enhance our reputation.” This perspective was echoed by several respondents, who described CSR as embedded in their core values rather than a transient public relations tool. RES8 portrayed CSR as a “strategic framework,” emphasising its influence on corporate policies and its role in meeting societal expectations.

The data illustrated that participants generally viewed CSR as central to guiding corporate behaviour and decision-making. RES2 described it as “a strategic pillar that guides our decision-making process,” suggesting a deep integration into the company’s foundational strategies rather than isolated promotional tactics. This aligns with the strategic perspective posited by Carroll (2021), who argued that the integration of CSR within corporate strategies can lead to enhanced stakeholder engagement and long-term value creation. The idea of CSR as a strategic function is well supported by the literature, including the views of Porter and Kramer (2018), who contended that strategically embedded CSR initiatives contribute to a firm’s competitive advantage by addressing both business and societal needs.

However, a few participants offered more nuanced perspectives, suggesting that CSR is both a strategy and an ethos beyond traditional strategic frameworks. RES4 articulated this sentiment clearly:

CSR is both a strategy and something beyond that. It is a mindset that drives how we operate. We see it as an essential part of our brand positioning and reputation management efforts, rather than a mere promotional tactic.

This response indicated a deeper conceptualisation of CSR as a corporate philosophy that permeates all aspects of business operations, rather than simply a function or tactic. Such views are aligned with Stakeholder Theory, particularly Freeman’s (1984) assertion that businesses must balance the needs of diverse stakeholders, integrating their interests into a cohesive strategic approach. The commitment to CSR as part of the organisational ethos, as highlighted

by participants, aligns with Adib et al. (2021), who affirm that genuine CSR efforts are embedded in corporate culture and inform the company's long-term strategic vision.

Despite the general agreement on the strategic nature of CSR, some discrepancies emerged regarding the extent to which CSR functions purely as a strategic tool versus a core principle guiding all operations. RES10 characterised CSR as “part of our corporate DNA, shaping how we interact with our stakeholders and the community,” indicating a broader conceptualisation that transcends typical strategic functions. This perspective aligns with the ethical arguments raised by Singh and Misra (2022), who noted that authentic CSR practices reflect deep-seated corporate values rather than surface-level tactics aimed at enhancing brand image.

The results highlighted a shared recognition of the strategic significance of CSR, while also revealing differences in the extent to which it is embedded within organisational business practices. The widespread endorsement of CSR as a strategic element suggests its alignment with Legitimacy Theory, as described by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), where companies adopt socially responsible practices to align with societal norms and secure their legitimacy. However, the emphasis on CSR as an intrinsic corporate value points to a broader interpretation that integrates ethical and strategic motivations, illustrating a dynamic interplay between stakeholder engagement and corporate responsibility.

4.2.3 Integrating CSR with PR Strategies

Investigating the methods of aligning CSR activities with overarching organisational goals was necessary to reveal best practices and potential areas for enhancing strategic coherence. The responses highlighted a strong consensus on the integration of CSR into PR strategies, with participants viewing CSR as a critical component of their communication efforts. Many respondents described the alignment of CSR initiatives with PR objectives, using these

activities as vehicles to enhance corporate reputation and foster stakeholder trust. RES5 emphasised the role of storytelling, noting that

My approach focuses on using CSR as a key storytelling element in our PR activities. We share our CSR achievements with the public through various channels, enhancing our credibility and demonstrating our social responsibility.

This approach reflects the strategic communication theories discussed by Doorley and Garcia (2015), who argued that effective PR integrates CSR into corporate narratives, thereby reinforcing brand credibility.

The data also revealed that respondents considered CSR integration in PR as a method of reinforcing corporate identity. RES4 highlighted the alignment between CSR and the company's mission, stating that "every initiative is linked to our communication plan, ensuring that our CSR activities resonate with our target audience and strengthen our public image." This reflects the broader strategic integration of CSR, as posited by Lahtinen et al. (2018), who suggested that incorporating CSR into corporate communication plans not only enhances the brand's image but also builds long-term stakeholder relationships.

Interestingly, the data indicated a diverse range of strategies used to embed CSR into PR efforts. For example, RES7 described a multi-faceted approach involving media releases, social media updates, and community events, noting that this strategy "helps build a positive brand image and engages our audience." This reflects a tactical aspect of CSR integration, aligned with the views of Kent (2015), who argued that multi-channel engagement in PR can amplify CSR efforts and enhance the company's public perception.

The findings suggested that while participants shared a unified view of CSR's strategic role in PR, the methods of integration varied across organisations. RES1, for example, focused on aligning CSR with "key communication goals" and incorporating CSR initiatives into brand messaging, highlighting a direct link between CSR efforts and media engagements. In contrast, RES3 described a broader integration approach, embedding CSR within "broader PR

objectives” and leveraging these initiatives as tools to showcase the company’s values through community engagement. Such differing approaches highlight the flexibility of CSR as a strategic PR tool, aligning with findings by Bowen et al. (2020), who noted that effective CSR integration within PR requires adaptive strategies tailored to specific organisational contexts.

The alignment of CSR and PR also reflects the principles of Legitimacy Theory, particularly the need for corporations to gain social approval through their public actions. By integrating CSR into PR strategies, companies not only demonstrate their commitment to societal welfare but also enhance their legitimacy and social standing. This strategic use of CSR aligns with the observations of Carroll (2016), who argued that CSR activities serve as a form of corporate social disclosure, aimed at maintaining and enhancing corporate legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders.

In summary, the findings illustrated a strong emphasis on integrating CSR into PR strategies as a means of reinforcing corporate reputation and credibility. The diverse approaches employed by participants highlighted the adaptability of CSR as a strategic communication tool, demonstrating its critical role in shaping public perception and stakeholder engagement. The alignment with Legitimacy Theory underscores the broader implications of these practices, suggesting that effective CSR integration in PR can serve as a powerful mechanism for building and maintaining corporate legitimacy in an increasingly socially conscious business environment.

4.2.4 Aligning CSR Initiatives with Organisational Goals

The data indicated a comprehensive approach among respondents towards ensuring that CSR activities align with broader corporate objectives, highlighting the integration of CSR into strategic planning and business operations. RES10 described a method grounded in strategic integration, noting that CSR is “embedded into the company’s core planning documents,

making it a key performance area.” This perspective illustrates the depth of alignment, where CSR is not treated as an auxiliary activity but as a central component of the organisation’s strategic vision. Such an approach aligns with the argument by Chandler (2022), who posited that embedding CSR within core business strategies enables companies to harness social responsibility as a driver for sustainable growth.

The responses consistently showed a strong focus on aligning CSR initiatives with corporate values and long-term goals. RES2 highlighted a cross-functional approach, explaining that

Our CSR team collaborates closely with other departments... This cross-functional approach allows us to ensure that our initiatives support both short-term and long-term business goals.

This reflects a comprehensive alignment strategy where CSR projects are developed in close consultation with various departments, ensuring consistency with the company’s overall vision. Such integration is in line with the principles outlined by Carroll and Brown (2018), who argued that a cross-departmental approach fosters strategic coherence and helps in achieving both social and business objectives.

A recurrent theme across the findings was the use of structured mechanisms like key performance indicators (KPIs) and feedback loops to track alignment and impact. RES1 discussed using KPIs, stating that

we use key performance indicators to track progress and assess the impact of our CSR efforts. Regular review meetings help us adjust and realign projects if needed.

This data-driven approach illustrates the commitment to continuously evaluating CSR activities to ensure they align with strategic objectives, a practice that resonates with findings by Adib et al. (2021), who emphasised the importance of performance metrics in assessing the alignment and effectiveness of CSR initiatives. The responses also highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement in aligning CSR efforts with broader goals. RES8 noted that:

We align CSR activities with our organisational goals by conducting a thorough stakeholder analysis. This helps us identify community needs that resonate with our business strategy.

This emphasis on stakeholder analysis reflects the principles of Stakeholder Theory, particularly the notion that businesses must balance the interests of diverse stakeholders to create value for all parties involved. Freeman (1984) argued that such an inclusive approach not only strengthens the alignment between CSR and business goals but also enhances the overall legitimacy of the company's actions.

While most respondents stressed the importance of structured and collaborative approaches, there were variations in the methods used to achieve alignment. For example, RES7 described integrating CSR into the company's balanced scorecard, using both financial and non-financial metrics to gauge the success of initiatives. In contrast, RES5 prioritised regular consultations with stakeholders to refine CSR projects, ensuring they remain relevant and aligned with the company's core objectives. These differing methods underscore the flexibility in approaches but also highlight a shared commitment to strategic coherence and alignment.

The emphasis on integrating CSR within broader strategic frameworks aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of Stakeholder Theory. The data illustrated a clear recognition of the need to address the expectations of various stakeholders while simultaneously pursuing corporate objectives. This integration, supported by comprehensive planning, stakeholder engagement, and performance measurement, aligns well with the assertions of Kent (2015), who argued that CSR, when strategically aligned, serves as a tool for building sustainable stakeholder relationships and enhancing corporate reputation.

4.3 How are CSR activities strategically integrated within public relations functions to align with broader organisational goals?

4.3.1 Drivers of Successful CSR in Community Relations

The study sought to identify key factors that facilitate the success of CSR activities in fostering strong relationships with the community. This inquiry was essential to pinpoint the elements that contribute to impactful CSR, aiding organisations in strengthening their societal engagement efforts. The analysis of factors contributing to the success of CSR initiatives in building strong community relationships revealed several recurring themes. Respondents widely acknowledged the importance of trust, transparency, and community involvement. RES1 emphasised, “trust and transparency are crucial. Open communication about our CSR projects builds credibility with the community.” This sentiment reflects the broader perspective within the data that consistent and transparent communication is foundational to fostering positive relationships. The emphasis on transparency aligns with the views of Awuah et al. (2021), who suggested that effective communication strategies are essential for building trust and credibility in CSR practices.

A significant number of respondents highlighted the importance of relevance and alignment with local needs. RES5 noted that

The most critical factor is relevance. Our initiatives must meet genuine community needs. When our CSR projects address issues that matter to the local population, it leads to greater acceptance and support.

This perspective underscores the necessity for CSR initiatives to be tailored to the specific needs of the community, reinforcing the idea that generic projects may not yield the same level of impact. This aligns with the findings of Mohammed et al. (2022), who argued that CSR efforts must be context-sensitive and aligned with the unique characteristics of the target community to achieve meaningful results.

The findings also pointed to the role of consistent and long-term engagement. RES7 stated that “long-term engagement is important. One-off projects do not create lasting bonds. We focus on sustained efforts that show our ongoing commitment.” This focus on continuity rather than sporadic interventions reflects a strategic approach aimed at building deeper, more resilient relationships over time. This perspective is supported by Rashid et al. (2020), who found that sustained CSR engagement strengthens stakeholder relationships and enhances corporate legitimacy.

Several participants underscored the significance of involving the community in the planning and implementation stages. RES2 explained, “Community involvement is key. Engaging the community in the planning and implementation stages makes them feel invested.” This approach of co-creation fosters a sense of ownership among community members, enhancing the perceived legitimacy of the initiatives. Such participatory methods resonate with the principles of Stakeholder Theory, which emphasises collaborative engagement as a means of balancing corporate and community interests, thereby creating mutual value.

However, some participants, such as RES8, emphasised authenticity as a distinct factor, arguing that

For us, authenticity is the cornerstone of success. Communities can tell when a company is genuinely committed versus when it is simply seeking publicity.

This view highlights a potential scepticism from communities towards CSR efforts that appear insincere or purely self-serving. The literature echoes this concern, with Moehl and Friedman (2022) cautioning that perceived inauthenticity can undermine the credibility of CSR initiatives and erode community trust.

The findings showed a strong agreement on the essential factors that influence the success of CSR in building relationships with the community. These factors include trust, the relevance of initiatives, consistent engagement, and active community participation. These factors align

with the principles of Stakeholder Theory, as they reflect a comprehensive approach to balancing the needs of the company with those of the community. The emphasis on collaborative engagement and long-term commitment supports the argument by Carroll (2015) that strategic CSR practices are instrumental in fostering lasting stakeholder relationships and enhancing corporate reputation.

The implications of these findings suggest that companies must prioritise sustained, context-sensitive, and authentic CSR efforts to build strong community ties. This requires a proactive engagement strategy that listens to and incorporates community feedback, thereby creating initiatives that are not only aligned with corporate goals but also resonate deeply with local needs and expectations. Such an approach can enhance the effectiveness of CSR initiatives, fostering mutual respect and trust between companies and the communities they serve.

4.3.2 Challenges and Barriers to CSR Effectiveness

The investigation into challenges and barriers faced by organisations in executing CSR was crucial for providing a comprehensive understanding of what hinders the effectiveness of these initiatives. The analysis of challenges faced in implementing CSR initiatives highlighted several recurring themes, centring around resource limitations, regulatory constraints, and public perception issues. Many respondents indicated that financial constraints hindered the scale and scope of their CSR activities. For instance, RES5 remarked, “funding limitations have always been a barrier. We cannot support every project to its full potential.” This view was mirrored by RES1, who noted that limited resources often restricted their ability to expand CSR efforts, particularly when demand from the community exceeded the company’s budget allocations. Such financial challenges are consistent with the observations made by Tandoh et al. (2022), who identified budget constraints as a common issue that companies face when attempting to implement comprehensive CSR strategies, particularly in developing economies.

Logistical issues and regulatory challenges were also frequently cited by participants. RES2 discussed the complexities of coordinating with local authorities, stating that “logistical issues, such as coordinating with local authorities and ensuring projects are implemented efficiently, can take longer than anticipated, affecting our impact.” This aligns with findings by Zhang et al. (2024), who argued that bureaucratic hurdles and the intricacies of regulatory compliance often delay the implementation of CSR projects, undermining their intended impact. Additionally, RES4 highlighted difficulties in meeting diverse community expectations, noting that it was “not always possible to satisfy every stakeholder,” a sentiment echoed across the data. The challenge of balancing multiple, and sometimes conflicting, stakeholder interests aligns with the principles of Stakeholder Theory, which emphasises the complexity of addressing the needs of varied groups effectively (Freeman, 1984).

Public scepticism emerged as another significant barrier. RES3 pointed out that “public scepticism is a barrier. Some community members question our motives, which can affect participation.” This finding underscores the importance of perceived authenticity in CSR initiatives, a concern addressed by Moehl and Friedman (2022), who argued that when CSR activities are viewed as self-serving, they fail to engender trust and may even provoke backlash from the community. Similarly, RES10 noted the challenge of gaining community trust, which is a gradual process requiring consistent and visible engagement. This highlights the need for long-term commitment to CSR, as opposed to short-term, ad hoc efforts, in building sustainable relationships with communities, as suggested by Lahtinen et al. (2018).

Organisational dynamics and internal coordination issues were also identified as obstacles. RES6 discussed the difficulty of aligning CSR initiatives across different corporate functions, observing that “the complexity of coordinating across different departments can be a real hindrance. Aligning our CSR initiatives with other corporate functions takes time and effort.” This internal fragmentation often delays decision-making and can limit the effectiveness of

CSR projects, a concern noted by Mudzanani and Anani-Bossman (2023), who highlighted the importance of cohesive internal strategies in executing CSR effectively.

In essence, the data illustrated a shared understanding of the various barriers to effective CSR implementation, including financial constraints, regulatory challenges, public scepticism, and internal coordination issues. These findings align with the broader discourse in CSR literature, which underscores the multifaceted nature of challenges that organisations face, particularly when attempting to balance diverse stakeholder expectations with limited resources. The emphasis on financial and logistical barriers also resonates with Legitimacy Theory, as companies may struggle to maintain their social licence to operate when they cannot fulfil community expectations due to these constraints (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975).

4.3.3 Balancing Societal Expectations and Corporate Objectives

Additionally, exploring how CSR activities meet societal expectations while balancing corporate objectives was vital to assessing the alignment between community needs and organisational interests. The analysis of strategies employed by respondents to balance societal expectations with corporate objectives in CSR activities revealed a strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement, needs assessment, and strategic planning. Respondents widely acknowledged the importance of understanding community needs to design relevant CSR initiatives. RES1 mentioned that:

We start by conducting thorough needs assessments to understand community priorities. This helps us design initiatives that address relevant issues while aligning with corporate goals.

This proactive approach highlights the significance of initial research and consultation, aligning with the views of Pfajfar et al. (2022), who argued that effective CSR planning requires a deep understanding of local contexts and needs to ensure relevance and alignment.

Many participants underscored the importance of engaging stakeholders early in the process. RES2 noted that “by involving the community early on, we ensure that our CSR activities are relevant and meet their needs.” This sentiment was echoed by RES6, who emphasised regular feedback sessions with community members to maintain alignment between CSR projects and societal expectations. The emphasis on stakeholder consultations reflects the core tenets of Stakeholder Theory, which posits that engaging with affected parties not only improves the quality of CSR initiatives but also enhances their legitimacy and acceptance (Freeman, 1984).

The findings also discussed the importance of setting measurable objectives to balance social impact and corporate goals effectively. RES9 explained, “I ensure balance by setting clear, measurable objectives for our CSR projects. This way, we can track social impact without compromising on corporate resources.” The data suggested that such structured approaches help companies evaluate the effectiveness of their CSR activities, aligning them with both business and societal priorities. This practice aligns with the strategic management perspective advocated by Porter and Kramer (2018), who argued that setting clear targets enables companies to create shared value by addressing social issues while advancing corporate interests.

Moreover, the use of continuous monitoring and evaluation emerged as a common theme across the data. RES7 highlighted regular assessments as a key practice, stating, “We conduct regular assessments to verify that our projects align with corporate objectives while remaining responsive to community feedback.” This iterative process of review and adjustment aligns with the best practices identified by Siltaloppi et al. (2021), who argued that dynamic evaluation mechanisms are essential for maintaining the relevance and effectiveness of CSR initiatives over time.

Several respondents also highlighted the importance of transparency in managing community expectations. RES3 pointed out that “prioritising open communication helps us keep the

community informed and manage expectations.” This focus on clear and honest dialogue reflects the principles of Legitimacy Theory, as it addresses the need for companies to be perceived as credible and trustworthy actors in their CSR engagements (Suchman, 1995). The emphasis on transparency aligns with findings by Deigh et al. (2016), who noted that regular and open communication with stakeholders helps to bridge the gap between corporate intentions and public perceptions, thereby enhancing the overall impact of CSR efforts.

In conclusion, the data underscored a multifaceted approach to balancing societal and corporate priorities in CSR, characterised by early stakeholder involvement, clear goal-setting, and continuous monitoring. The strong emphasis on stakeholder engagement and needs assessment aligns well with Stakeholder Theory, suggesting that businesses that actively consult and involve their communities are better positioned to meet societal expectations while achieving their own strategic objectives. This alignment not only enhances the credibility of CSR initiatives but also contributes to building stronger, more sustainable relationships with the communities they serve, reinforcing the notion that effective CSR requires a careful balancing act between corporate strategy and social responsibility.

4.4 What factors facilitate or hinder the ability of CSR activities to achieve influence within society?

4.4.1 Navigating Ethical Dilemmas in CSR for Societal Influence

The study aimed to examine how organisations manage the ethical implications of leveraging CSR for societal influence and power. This exploration was necessary to address the potential conflicts between ethical considerations and the pursuit of influence, providing insights into the integrity of CSR practices. The data presented a strong, unified emphasis on prioritising ethical integrity in CSR activities, with respondents consistently stressing the importance of transparency, accountability, and community-focused objectives. Many participants indicated

a commitment to ethical decision-making as a safeguard against the risk of appearing manipulative or self-serving in their CSR practices. For example, RES3 remarked that

Transparency is key in managing this balance. We are open about our intentions and make sure our actions align with our stated values. Ethical considerations are always at the forefront of our planning, and we avoid any activities that may seem like mere self-promotion.

This focus on aligning actions with declared values underscores a dedication to authenticity, a sentiment echoed widely across the data.

A prevalent theme was the rejection of using CSR purely as a tool for reputation enhancement. Instead, respondents highlighted the importance of delivering genuine benefits to the community as a primary objective, suggesting that any resulting influence is a secondary, incidental outcome. RES5 underscored this point, noting that

Ethical integrity is at the core of our CSR strategy. We begin by establishing clear, socially responsible goals that align with our company's values. Our focus remains on making a tangible impact, not just on how the activities may enhance our public image.

Such statements reflect the broader ethical discourse in CSR literature, particularly the arguments by Carroll (2016), who posited that authentic CSR practices are those grounded in a genuine commitment to societal welfare rather than strategic self-interest. While the majority of the data revealed a shared focus on ethical transparency, there were subtle differences in the mechanisms employed to maintain this balance. Several respondents, including RES9, described a structured approach that incorporates regular audits and feedback loops:

We prioritise ethical decision-making in our CSR activities by focusing on long-term community impact. It is important for us that our actions do not appear self-serving. We use regular audits and feedback loops to check our motives and outcomes.

This meticulous evaluation process aligns with the practices advocated by Moehl and Friedman (2022), who argued that consistent, transparent audits help reinforce the credibility of CSR initiatives, especially in contexts where public scepticism might be prevalent.

Another method highlighted was the emphasis on stakeholder engagement and direct communication. RES10 explained that:

Our approach centres on transparency and ethical consistency. We make sure our CSR projects are well-grounded in social needs rather than corporate ambition. This involves engaging with community leaders to ensure our activities are beneficial and well-received.

Such active engagement with community representatives underscores the importance of aligning CSR activities with local priorities, a strategy that resonates with the principles of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984). By involving community leaders in the planning and implementation stages, the respondents demonstrated a commitment to addressing local needs rather than pursuing projects that merely serve corporate interests.

However, some discrepancies appeared in the data regarding the extent to which CSR activities are seen as opportunities for influence versus purely altruistic endeavours. RES7, for instance, acknowledged that while the company avoids overstating contributions, “any influence we gain is a byproduct of genuine goodwill.” This pragmatic view suggests a recognition that influence, while not the stated goal, may still be a beneficial outcome of effective CSR practices. Such an approach aligns with Carroll and Brown’s (2018) argument that well-executed CSR inherently boosts a company’s reputation and standing within the community, even if this influence is not explicitly sought.

A notable aspect of the findings was the shared emphasis on ethical guidelines and transparency as safeguards against the misuse of CSR for corporate gain. RES2 articulated this approach clearly:

For us, it starts with setting clear ethical guidelines that govern all our CSR projects. We believe that CSR should not be exploited for gaining undue influence, so we put the community's needs first. Transparency and regular stakeholder engagement play crucial roles in our process. This way, any influence we gain comes naturally from the positive impact of our initiatives, not from manipulation.

This perspective aligns closely with Legitimacy Theory, particularly the framework proposed by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), which posits that organisations engage in socially responsible activities to maintain or enhance their legitimacy within society. The emphasis on ethical integrity and transparency suggests a deliberate strategy to ensure that CSR efforts are perceived as genuine, thereby supporting the organisation's social licence to operate.

The implications of these findings indicate that companies committed to ethical CSR practices are more likely to foster trust and maintain a positive relationship with their communities. The alignment of CSR activities with ethical standards, as described in the data, not only mitigates the risk of public scepticism but also enhances the perceived legitimacy of the organisation's efforts. This is supported by Kent (2015), who argued that transparent and ethical CSR practices are essential in building long-term credibility and trust among stakeholders.

In conclusion, the data underscored a consistent prioritisation of ethical integrity over the pursuit of influence in CSR activities. The focus on transparency, stakeholder engagement, and alignment with genuine community needs reflects a commitment to responsible corporate behaviour, resonating with the ethical considerations outlined in the broader CSR literature. While some respondents acknowledged the incidental influence gained through these efforts, the predominant narrative was one of authentic engagement, guided by clear ethical standards and a genuine concern for societal impact. This approach aligns well with the principles of Legitimacy Theory, suggesting that companies adhering to these practices are better positioned to secure social approval and maintain their standing within the communities they serve.

4.4.2 Ensuring Community-Centric vs Organisational-Centric CSR

The inquiry into ensuring that CSR efforts genuinely benefit the community, beyond serving the organisation's interests, was critical for assessing the authenticity of these initiatives. The analysis of how respondents ensure their CSR activities benefit the community rather than

merely serving corporate interests revealed a strong emphasis on direct engagement and needs assessment. Many participants described processes focused on understanding and prioritising community needs as a starting point. RES3 highlighted a comprehensive consultation approach:

We have a comprehensive approach that involves thorough community consultations before launching any CSR project. This helps us identify pressing local issues, ensuring our efforts align with community needs. We also implement a feedback mechanism, where we gather input after each project.

Such active dialogue reflects a genuine attempt to prioritise social impact, in line with the principles of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which emphasises the importance of including stakeholder voices in decision-making. The data consistently illustrated that respondents sought to avoid projects that appeared self-serving. RES5 explained their approach to prioritising community needs:

We listen carefully to their concerns and adjust our projects accordingly. We make it a point to avoid initiatives that solely promote our brand without offering tangible benefits. Regular impact assessments and open community forums help us stay accountable.

This commitment to accountability and responsiveness aligns with the findings of Deigh et al. (2016), who argued that transparent and responsive CSR practices help build trust and credibility within the community, enhancing the legitimacy of the initiatives. There was also a strong emphasis on partnerships with local organisations to ensure the relevance of CSR projects. RES6 noted the value of collaboration, stating that

We ensure genuine community benefit by collaborating closely with local organisations. This partnership helps us understand the specific needs of the community. We also conduct regular evaluations, comparing the intended and actual outcomes of our projects.

This approach reflects the collaborative engagement strategies advocated by Kent (2015), who posited that partnerships with local stakeholders help tailor CSR activities to address community-specific needs effectively. Differences emerged in how companies measured the impact of their initiatives, with some relying on direct feedback while others used more

formalised assessments. For instance, RES4 highlighted the use of measurable goals to evaluate the success of their projects, stating that:

We also set clear, measurable goals to assess the impact of our projects. This helps ensure that our activities genuinely benefit the community rather than just boosting our corporate image.

This data-driven approach is consistent with the practices outlined by Chandler (2022), who suggested that clear metrics are essential for evaluating the social effectiveness of CSR initiatives and ensuring they align with both community and corporate objectives.

While most respondents prioritised authentic community engagement, some indicated potential challenges in balancing these efforts with corporate aims. RES8, for example, emphasised transparency in their process but acknowledged the difficulty of aligning community needs with organisational goals without compromising one for the other. This tension reflects broader concerns in the CSR literature, particularly those raised by Carroll and Brown (2018), who noted that balancing genuine community impact with strategic corporate interests often requires careful negotiation and ethical foresight.

In summary, the findings showed a shared focus on transparency, direct engagement, and careful evaluation as methods for ensuring that CSR activities provide genuine community benefits. The emphasis on stakeholder involvement and the avoidance of self-promotional tactics align well with the principles of Stakeholder Theory, highlighting the importance of prioritising the needs of the community over corporate interests. This commitment to social responsibility suggests that companies adhering to these practices are more likely to build trust and long-term positive relationships with the communities they serve, reflecting the broader arguments of Kent (2015) on the value of authentic CSR.

4.4.3 Ethical Guidelines Governing CSR Initiatives

Finally, examining the ethical guidelines and policies governing CSR decisions was essential in evaluating the adherence to ethical principles in shaping CSR strategies. The analysis of data CSR policies and the ethical guidelines that inform their initiatives highlighted a structured and principle-based approach across the data. The majority of participants reported having formal CSR policies that outline specific ethical standards, focusing on transparency, accountability, and community engagement. RES10 articulated their policy's core principles, noting that

We have a comprehensive CSR policy that forms the backbone of our social responsibility strategy. It is based on ethical principles such as fairness, honesty, and environmental responsibility. When deciding on CSR initiatives, we conduct thorough ethical evaluations, considering the long-term effects on the community.

This detailed approach aligns with the practices discussed by Yan et al. (2022) and, Fatma and Khan (2022), who argued that robust ethical frameworks are essential for guiding responsible CSR activities and maintaining community trust. A recurrent theme was the emphasis on transparency and stakeholder involvement as central tenets of ethical CSR decision-making. RES2 explained that their policy prioritised inclusivity and transparency, stating that

Our CSR policy is built on principles of sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical engagement. When deciding on initiatives, we focus on transparency and stakeholder involvement to ensure that our projects meet both community needs and corporate standards.

This focus on stakeholder engagement supports the core ideas of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which advocate for involving affected groups in the decision-making process to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of corporate actions. The data also revealed a strong commitment to aligning CSR initiatives with broader environmental and social sustainability goals. RES7 emphasised the importance of ethical business conduct and environmental sustainability, noting that

We focus on projects that are environmentally sustainable and socially beneficial. Ethical guidelines ensure that our activities do not exploit the community but instead foster mutual growth.

This alignment with sustainability objectives reflects the principles outlined by Carroll (2015), who argued that CSR activities grounded in ethical standards and sustainability are more likely to yield long-term positive outcomes for both the company and the community.

Variations were observed in the specificity of ethical guidelines across the respondents. Some, like RES5, described their CSR policy as a detailed roadmap with explicit standards for integrity and accountability:

Our CSR policy acts as a roadmap for all our social initiatives. It outlines clear ethical standards, including integrity, accountability, and sustainability. Regular audits help us ensure compliance with our policy guidelines.

The practice of conducting regular audits aligns with the best practices identified by Zhang et al. (2024), who argued that consistent auditing helps organisations maintain high ethical standards and respond proactively to potential issues.

In contrast, other respondents, such as RES8, focused more broadly on principles like social justice and environmental stewardship without detailing specific processes. This broader approach, while still rooted in strong ethical commitments, may lack the procedural rigor described by other participants. Such differences suggest a diversity of implementation strategies, reflecting varying organisational priorities and capacities. This divergence aligns with the findings of Moehl and Friedman (2022), who noted that while the commitment to ethical CSR is widespread, the depth and specificity of policy frameworks can vary significantly across organisations.

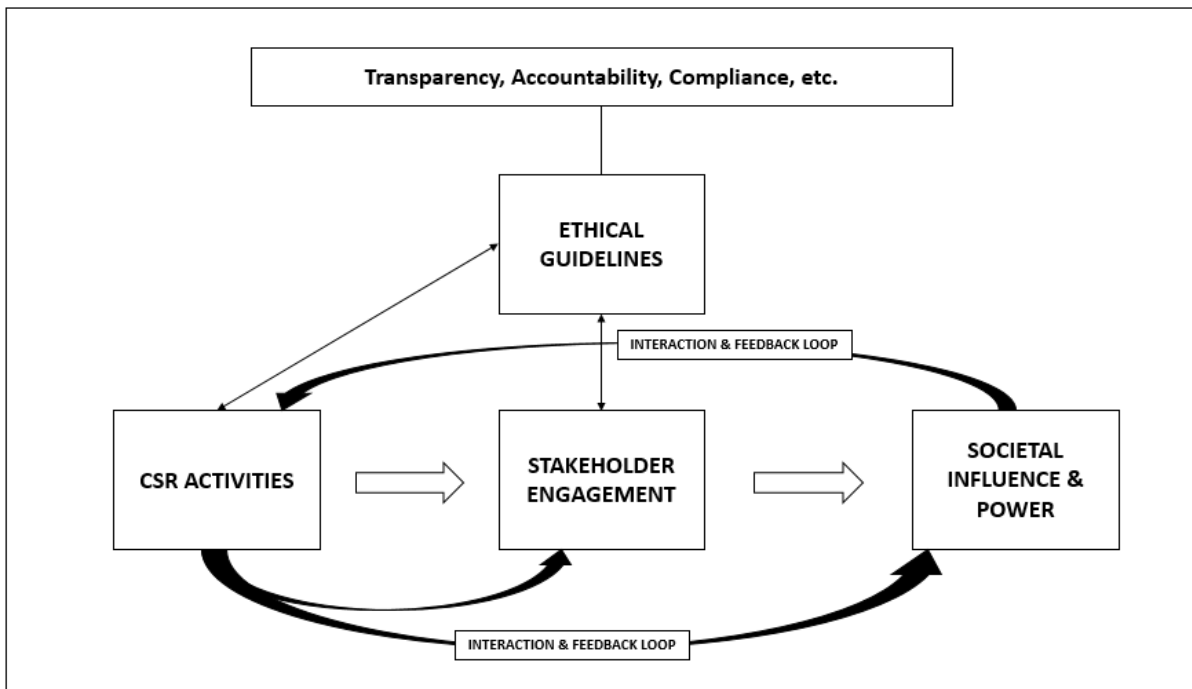
The implications of these findings highlight the importance of a well-defined CSR policy in guiding ethical decision-making and enhancing the credibility of CSR activities. The consistent emphasis on transparency, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability suggests a strong alignment with Legitimacy Theory, as companies strive to demonstrate their social

responsibility and align their actions with societal expectations (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). This focus on ethical principles not only enhances the perceived legitimacy of the CSR initiatives but also supports the development of trust and positive relationships with stakeholders, reinforcing the broader arguments in the CSR literature about the value of principled, community-focused engagement.

4.5 Proposed Framework

The *CSR Influence and Power Model* represents the dynamic interplay between CSR activities and their impact on gaining societal influence and power. The framework is structured around three core components: independent variables, moderating/mediating variables, and the dependent variable. At the heart of the model are the independent variables, which encompass a range of CSR activities, community engagement initiatives, and adherence to ethical practices. These elements form the foundation of an organisation's CSR strategy, directly shaping how the company interacts with the community and addresses social issues. The independent variables are designed to influence the central outcome of interest—societal influence and power—by creating value and demonstrating corporate responsibility.

Figure 1: CSR Influence and Power Model



Source: Researcher's Own Construct (2024)

The second layer of the model introduces the moderating and mediating variables, which include stakeholder engagement, transparency, and ethical guidelines. These components act as crucial factors that either strengthen or weaken the impact of the independent variables on the dependent variable. For instance, stakeholder engagement enhances the credibility of CSR activities by involving community members and soliciting their input, which helps align corporate actions with public expectations. Transparency ensures that the intentions behind CSR initiatives are clear, preventing scepticism and reinforcing trust. Ethical guidelines serve as a compass for decision-making, ensuring that CSR efforts are driven by genuine concern for societal welfare rather than solely for corporate gain. These moderating and mediating elements provide a layer of influence that can alter the direct effects of CSR activities on societal outcomes.

At the core of the model lies the dependent variable—societal influence and power—which is the ultimate outcome of the organisation's CSR efforts. The framework posits that when CSR

activities are strategically implemented and supported by strong ethical practices, they lead to enhanced societal influence, allowing organisations to shape public perceptions, build trust, and secure legitimacy. The interaction between the independent variables and the moderating/mediating factors creates a feedback loop, where ongoing stakeholder engagement and transparent reporting inform the refinement of CSR strategies. This adaptive process allows organisations to continuously align their CSR activities with evolving community needs, maximising their societal impact and sustaining their influence over time. The model, therefore, serves as a comprehensive guide for understanding how strategic CSR efforts can be leveraged to build sustainable relationships and enhance an organisation's power within the societal context.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter offered an in-depth analysis of the field data, providing a thorough examination of how organisations strategically integrate CSR within their public relations functions while addressing the ethical complexities involved. The findings presented a broad perspective on the diverse methods companies employ to conceptualise and execute CSR, shedding light on common strategies as well as notable challenges. The analysis explored the dynamic interplay between corporate aims and community expectations, highlighting essential factors that contribute to effective CSR initiatives, such as robust ethical frameworks, active stakeholder engagement, and strategic alignment with business goals. The study also uncovered several barriers, including resource constraints, public scepticism, and difficulties in internal coordination, which limited the overall effectiveness of CSR activities. The chapter's insights culminated in the development of the CSR Influence and Power Model, a framework that visually and descriptively captures the relationships between CSR activities, moderating factors, and the resulting societal influence, offering a holistic understanding of how these elements interact to shape organisational outcomes.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The chapter presents a synthesis of the study's findings, drawing on the data analysis to provide a comprehensive summary of key insights related to the strategic and ethical implications of CSR. This chapter aims to distil the core outcomes of the research, offering a clear conclusion that addresses the research questions and objectives outlined earlier. It also provides practical recommendations for organisations and policymakers, based on the identified trends and challenges in the effective implementation of CSR. The chapter concludes by suggesting areas for further research, pointing to gaps in the current study and new avenues for exploration within the context of CSR practices in Ghana.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

The study aimed to investigate the complex dynamics of CSR as a strategic tool within public relations, focusing particularly on its ethical implications, the factors influencing its societal impact, and the potential to develop a comprehensive framework for employing CSR as a tool of influence. The objectives were fourfold: first, to examine the ethical concerns associated with using CSR for societal power and influence; second, to explore the strategic integration of CSR activities within public relations functions; third, to identify the factors that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of CSR in achieving influence within society; and finally, to propose a structured framework for utilising CSR activities effectively as a means of societal influence.

The findings demonstrated a widespread recognition among respondents that CSR, when authentically implemented, goes beyond mere philanthropy, serving as a core strategic function that aligns with long-term business objectives. Participants consistently viewed CSR as an integrated part of their organisational ethos, reflecting a deep commitment to balancing profit

motives with ethical and social considerations. Many respondents underscored the importance of transparency and stakeholder engagement as fundamental elements for ensuring the credibility and effectiveness of CSR initiatives. The data highlighted that ethical decision-making played a central role in shaping CSR activities, with companies striving to avoid actions that might be perceived as exploitative or self-serving. Respondents prioritised the community's welfare over corporate gains, suggesting a genuine commitment to addressing societal needs while recognising the incidental benefits of enhanced reputation and stakeholder trust.

Regarding the strategic integration of CSR in public relations functions, respondents framed CSR as a vital component of corporate identity and communication strategies. CSR activities were often embedded into public relations efforts, aiming to build brand credibility and foster stronger relationships with stakeholders. The study found that many organisations used CSR as a tool to align their corporate messaging with societal expectations, thereby reinforcing their legitimacy. The emphasis on consistency, storytelling, and transparency in integrating CSR into public relations practices highlighted the importance of presenting CSR initiatives as authentic and community-focused.

The study also identified several factors that either facilitated or impeded the success of CSR activities in achieving societal influence. Key facilitators included effective stakeholder engagement, ongoing community consultations, and the use of performance metrics to assess the impact of CSR initiatives. These strategies enabled organisations to align their CSR efforts with local needs, enhancing the perceived authenticity and relevance of their actions. However, challenges such as limited resources, regulatory hurdles, public scepticism, and internal coordination issues were frequently cited as barriers. Many respondents acknowledged difficulties in balancing the often competing demands of stakeholders and the logistical complexities of implementing large-scale CSR projects, particularly when dealing with diverse communities or regulatory environments.

In examining the ethical implications of using CSR as a tool for societal influence, the study found that most participants were acutely aware of the potential risks associated with leveraging CSR for corporate power. There was a clear preference for prioritising ethical integrity over strategic gains, with respondents emphasising transparency, accountability, and community-centric approaches. Many organisations implemented strict ethical guidelines and conducted regular assessments to ensure that CSR activities did not cross the line into exploitative practices. This ethical commitment was seen as a necessary safeguard to maintain trust and avoid the pitfalls of appearing manipulative or insincere in their social responsibility efforts.

Based on these findings, the study proposed a framework for effectively employing CSR as an influential tool within society. The framework emphasises the importance of aligning CSR initiatives with core organisational values while maintaining a strong focus on stakeholder engagement, transparency, and ethical standards. It highlights the need for continuous monitoring and feedback mechanisms to adapt CSR strategies in response to changing community needs and expectations. By integrating these elements, the framework seeks to guide organisations in leveraging CSR not only as a strategic business tool but also as a means of contributing positively to societal well-being and fostering sustainable, long-term relationships with stakeholders.

The findings suggest that while CSR holds significant potential as a vehicle for both corporate influence and community development, its success largely depends on a principled approach that prioritises genuine social impact over superficial reputation enhancement. This study contributes to the understanding of CSR's strategic value and offers practical insights for businesses seeking to navigate the complexities of implementing socially responsible practices that align with both corporate and societal interests.

5.3 Conclusion

Societal influence and power represent an organisation's capacity to shape public perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, extending its impact beyond traditional business boundaries into broader social realms. This form of influence is built on trust, credibility, and a sustained presence within the community, enabling companies to affect change, advocate for causes, and drive social dialogue. Public relations plays a crucial role in cultivating this influence, acting as a bridge between the organisation and its stakeholders, using strategic communication to build a positive image, manage reputation, and foster relationships rooted in mutual respect. Through well-crafted messaging, stakeholder engagement, and consistent narratives, public relations amplifies an organisation's social capital, enhancing its ability to sway public opinion and gain legitimacy. The significance of this influence lies in its capacity to secure a social licence to operate, shape industry standards, and foster long-term loyalty among stakeholders, which are vital components of sustainable business success and societal impact.

The industry of CSR has evolved from a peripheral business activity into a central element of organisational strategy, reflecting the increasing importance placed on ethical conduct and societal engagement in today's business landscape. The growing expectation for companies to contribute positively to the communities they operate in underscores the industry's role in shaping corporate behaviour, public perception, and broader social welfare. Within the Ghanaian context, the significance of CSR is heightened by the country's socio-economic landscape, where businesses are often seen as pivotal players in addressing local challenges, supporting community development, and enhancing social well-being.

The study's implications for practice are profound, offering insights into how organisations can effectively align their CSR efforts with strategic objectives while maintaining ethical integrity and stakeholder trust. By examining the strategic integration of CSR within public relations functions and exploring the ethical dimensions of using CSR as a tool for societal influence, the study provides a framework that organisations can adopt to enhance their impact and

societal legitimacy. This research is particularly relevant in Ghana, where the interplay between business activities and community needs is vital for sustainable development. The findings help illuminate best practices that can guide Ghanaian businesses in leveraging CSR to build stronger, more resilient relationships with their communities, thereby contributing to long-term social and economic progress.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations have been identified to enhance the effectiveness of CSR practices, particularly in the Ghanaian context. These suggestions are aligned with the objectives of the study and offer actionable guidance for organisations, policymakers, and industry stakeholders to ensure a more impactful and ethical approach to CSR.

Organisations should prioritise the ethical integration of CSR within their strategic frameworks, ensuring that all CSR initiatives are designed with transparency and a clear commitment to addressing genuine community needs. Companies must implement stringent ethical guidelines and establish comprehensive feedback mechanisms, allowing continuous assessment and adjustment of CSR activities to avoid perceptions of self-serving motives. It is essential for senior management to champion these practices, promoting a culture of integrity and community engagement throughout the organisation.

Public relations professionals should play a central role in embedding CSR activities into the core communication strategy of the organisation. This requires a shift from viewing CSR as an isolated function to incorporating it as a fundamental element of stakeholder engagement. Practitioners must focus on consistent messaging and storytelling that highlights the authentic social impact of CSR initiatives, thereby building trust and enhancing the organisation's societal influence.

Policymakers and regulatory bodies are urged to develop frameworks that provide clear guidelines for CSR implementation. By enforcing standards that promote accountability and ethical practices, regulatory authorities can help ensure that companies' CSR efforts are both meaningful and aligned with national development goals. This will facilitate a stronger partnership between the corporate sector and the community, fostering sustainable development.

Additionally, organisations must invest in capacity-building initiatives for their CSR teams. This includes training on ethical decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and impact assessment. Developing these skills will help CSR practitioners navigate the complexities of balancing corporate goals with community expectations, leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.

5.5 Areas for Future Research

Future research could explore the long-term impact of strategic CSR integration on corporate performance and community development, particularly in emerging markets like Ghana. While this study has highlighted the importance of transparency, ethical guidelines, and stakeholder engagement, further studies could investigate the specific mechanisms by which these elements contribute to sustainable business practices. Additionally, research examining the role of technology and digital platforms in enhancing the visibility and effectiveness of CSR activities would provide valuable insights for practitioners seeking to modernise their approaches. Such inquiries could offer a deeper understanding of how evolving business practices can meet the changing needs of society, fostering a stronger alignment between corporate actions and community aspirations.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Objective 1: To explore the strategic integration of CSR activities in PR functions

1. How do you conceptualize CSR? What is your motivation for undertaking it?
2. Would you say CSR a strategic function or a tactic or something more?
3. How do you approach the integration of CSR activities into your public relations strategies?
4. In what ways do you ensure that CSR activities align with the broader organisational goals?

Objective 2: To explore the factors that either facilitate or hinder the ability of CSR activities to achieve influence within society

1. What factors do you believe contribute to the success of CSR initiatives in building relationships with the community?
2. Can you identify any challenges or barriers that have or continue to hinder the impact of your CSR activities?
3. How do you ensure that CSR activities meet societal expectations while balancing corporate objectives?

Objective 3: To examine the ethical implications of using CSR as a tool for gaining societal influence and power

1. How do you balance the ethical considerations of CSR activities with the potential for gaining societal influence?
2. In what ways do you ensure that CSR activities are genuinely beneficial to the community, rather than just serving the organisation's interests?
3. Do you have a CSR policy? What ethical guidelines or principles do you follow when deciding on CSR initiatives?