Asian Journal of Social and Behavioral Research, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2026) https://doi.org/10.31098/ajsbr.v1i2.4795

Check for updates

Research Paper

Comparing Corporate Social Responsibility and Conventional Promotion: The Conceptual Credibility–Reach–Return Model

Trinanjan Gupta
East Bridge University, Qatar

Received: August 18, 2026	Revised: September 13, 2026	Accepted: October 16, 2026	Online: October 30, 2026

Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and conventional promotion are commonly evaluated through separate managerial logics, leaving unresolved how they differ as pathways for creating communication and stakeholder value. This conceptual paper develops the Credibility–Reach–Return (CRR) model to compare substantive CSR with conventional promotion without treating either approach as universally superior. An integrative conceptual synthesis connects CSR, advertising, cause-related marketing, source credibility, signaling, stakeholder theory, corporate reputation, and the resource-based view. The model proposes that observable and externally verified CSR may strengthen credibility; relational and earned diffusion may create deeper, though not necessarily broader, reach; and sustained, authentic CSR may contribute to longer-horizon reputational and relational returns. Conventional promotion remains more suitable when speed, precise message control, market entry, baseline awareness, or short-cycle response is required. Three small, closed LinkedIn polls are retained only as an exploratory professional-network illustration and not as model validation. Their non-probability, self-selected, single-item design, unknown respondent characteristics, and possible participant overlap prevent causal or population-level inference. The paper contributes a conditional comparison, theory-linked propositions, and a research agenda for matched experimental, longitudinal, and multi-source testing.

Keywords: *Conventional Promotion, Corporate Social Responsibility, Credibility, Signaling, Stakeholder Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and conventional promotion both shape stakeholder responses, yet scholars rarely compare them within a shared explanatory framework. Advertising scholarship examines paid, sponsor-controlled communication, message repetition, persuasion, memory, and response. CSR scholarship examines organizational responsibility, stakeholder relationships, reputation, legitimacy, and social outcomes.

Cause-related marketing links social causes to market exchange but typically remains campaign-based and promotion-linked. The unresolved issue is not whether CSR communicates or whether advertising can create value. The unresolved issue is how substantive CSR and conventional promotion differ in the credibility of their evidence, the patterns through which communication spreads, and the timing and durability of the outcomes they may generate.

Existing research establishes several parts of this problem. Corporate associations can shape product evaluations (Brown & Dacin, 1997), CSR responses depend on perceived fit and consumer characteristics (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), and awareness and motive attribution influence the value created by CSR communication (Du et al., 2010; Servaes & Tamayo, 2013).

Strategic CSR research argues that social initiatives become more consequential when integrated with organizational purpose and value creation rather than treated as peripheral philanthropy (Porter & Kramer, 2006, 2011). Cause-related marketing research shows that links among a company, a cause, and a marketed offer can affect consumer response. However, such arrangements remain distinguishable from broader, sustained CSR because the cause association

Copyright Holder:
© Gupta. (2026)
Corresponding author's email: trinanjang2007@yahoo.co.in
This Article is Licensed Under:

is frequently tied to a specific transaction or promotional campaign (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988).

Advertising research provides a necessary comparison. Advertising is a paid, controlled form of communication that can deliver rapid reach, message precision, repetition, and short-cycle responses. However, persuasion knowledge can lead audiences to recognize and discount attempts to influence them (Friestad & Wright, 1994), and advertising effects depend on attention, prior knowledge, message quality, frequency, media context, and brand familiarity. Conventional promotion can also contribute to durable brand associations. Therefore, it should not be reduced to a momentary or inherently less credible instrument. The comparison must concern tendencies under specified conditions rather than fixed differences.

The theoretical gap lies in integration and boundary specification. CSR, advertising, strategic CSR, cause-related marketing, credibility, stakeholder, signaling, and resource-based perspectives explain different parts of the value-creation process. However, the literature lacks a concise model that compares CSR and conventional promotion across credibility, reach, diffusion, and return while specifying when each pathway is more appropriate. Existing CSR-business value models also tend to explain outcomes within CSR rather than compare alternative communication investments directly.

This paper develops the Credibility–Reach–Return (CRR) model as a conditional conceptual comparison. The model asks: (a) under what conditions may substantive CSR receive greater credibility than an equivalent organization-authored promotional claim; (b) how may CSR and promotion differ in reach breadth, engagement depth, diffusion, and decay; and (c) how may their effects differ in timing and type of return? The paper does not conduct a formal financial investment analysis, claim that CSR is ethically justified by marketing value, or argue that CSR should replace advertising.

The paper contributes in three ways. First, it integrates stakeholder interpretation, source credibility, signaling, diffusion, reputation, and intangible-resource development into a dual-pathway model. Second, it identifies boundary conditions that protect the model from a universal-superiority claim. Third, it translates the comparison into propositions and a prioritized empirical research agenda. Three completed LinkedIn polls are retained as a small descriptive illustration only; they do not validate the model. The following sections review the relevant literature, explain the synthesis method, develop the model and propositions, interpret the illustrative polls, and conclude with theoretical, practical, and research implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The CSR-Marketing Interface

Carroll (1979, 1991) established CSR as a business-relevant construct by positioning economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities as simultaneous organizational obligations. Freeman (1984) complemented this view by defining the firm through its relationships with multiple stakeholders. These contributions made CSR strategically relevant, although they did not place it directly within marketing investment decisions.

Stakeholder theory provides the model's relational architecture. Stakeholders differ in power, legitimacy, urgency, proximity, prior relationship, and exposure to organizational conduct. CSR value therefore cannot be inferred from a general audience response; it depends on which stakeholder encounters which evidence and through what relationship. The theory explains why employees, beneficiaries, community partners, customers, regulators, and investors may evaluate the same activity differently and why relational reach may matter even when mass reach is modest.

Marketing research has since shown that perceptions of corporate conduct can affect responses to products and brands. Brown and Dacin (1997) found that corporate associations influence product evaluations, while Sen and Bhattacharya (2001) showed that consumer reactions

depend on personal characteristics and perceived fit between the initiative and the firm. Du et al. (2010) identified stakeholder awareness and motive attribution as critical conditions linking CSR activity to business value. CSR may therefore create marketing value, but the effect is neither automatic nor uniform.

Firm-level work reinforces this conditional interpretation. Luo and Bhattacharya (2006) connected CSR with customer satisfaction and market value. Servaes and Tamayo (2013) showed that customer awareness shapes the CSR-value relationship, while Saeidi et al. (2015) reported indirect pathways through reputation, customer satisfaction, and competitive advantage. Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011) further argued that social initiatives create greater strategic value when connected to the organization's value chain rather than treated as peripheral philanthropy.

More recent work also highlights the importance of stakeholder involvement and communication design. Yang and Basile (2021) linked external stakeholder involvement and third-party evaluation with more productive CSR communication. Khanal et al. (2021) showed that digital media can support stakeholder engagement around CSR, although channel visibility alone does not establish credibility. Together, these studies suggest that CSR's communication value depends on what the organization does, how stakeholders participate, and how the activity is interpreted.

Credibility, Attribution, and Skepticism

Source credibility theory explains why organizational claims do not all receive equal weight. Hovland and Weiss (1951) showed that message effects depend partly on the perceived credibility of the source, and Ohanian (1990) operationalized related dimensions in a commercial setting. The organization openly controls a paid advertisement, whereas CSR may involve observable conduct, beneficiaries, partners, employees, or independent evaluation. When credible external evidence is available, the audience need not rely solely on the organization's own claim.

This potential advantage is fragile. Consumers assess why an organization is involved in CSR, and self-serving motives can weaken or reverse positive responses (Forehand & Grier, 2003). CSR advertising may also provoke skepticism when a claim appears greater than the underlying evidence (Pomering & Johnson, 2009). Morsing and Schultz (2006) emphasized stakeholder involvement over one-way information, while Elving (2013) showed that perceived fit and reputation shape skepticism. Vanhamme and Grobben (2009) further showed that an established CSR history can better protect against doubts than a recent commitment.

The credibility pathway should therefore be understood behaviourally. Stakeholders observe or hear about an initiative, infer the organization's motives, compare the claim with prior conduct, and decide whether the account deserves trust. Authenticity is not created by the label CSR. It is more likely when purpose, conduct, communication, and stakeholder experience are consistent. Recent conceptual work similarly treats authenticity as a mechanism through which participation in CSR can shape stakeholder outcomes (Odunjo et al., 2025).

Signaling, Reputation, and Intangible Resources

Signaling theory explains why costly and difficult-to-imitate actions may carry informational value under conditions of information asymmetry (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). Substantive CSR can require sustained expenditure, operational change, organizational commitment, and exposure to stakeholder evaluation. When those features are present, the initiative may be harder to imitate than a self-authored promotional message. The model does not assume that all CSR carries equal signaling value. Symbolic, short-lived, weakly aligned, or unverifiable activities may have little evidential weight.

Repeated credible signals may contribute to reputational capital, understood here as accumulated trust, credibility, and public goodwill. Fombrun and Shanley (1990) established

reputation as a market-relevant outcome of observable conduct. Godfrey (2005) proposed that responsible activity may provide insurance-like reputational protection, and Godfrey et al. (2009) found support for a risk-management pathway under particular conditions. Lins et al. (2017) likewise reported that social capital had value during a period of financial crisis.

The resource-based view helps distinguish an individual media placement from an established organizational capability. Sustained advantage may arise from resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). A competitor with comparable funds can usually purchase a media placement. By contrast, a trusted community relationship, credible environmental record, or authentic employee advocacy may take time to develop and may be harder to reproduce. Brand-equity research explains how favorable and distinctive associations may then contribute to customer-based value (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

The resource-based view is used narrowly and at the organizational level. The proposed strategic resource is not an isolated CSR event or its publicity. It is a historically developed configuration of credible routines, stakeholder relationships, implementation capability, and reputation that may be valuable, path dependent, socially complex, and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). The framework does not assume that all CSR meets these criteria; symbolic or easily replicated activities should not be described as strategic resources.

Employee effects also matter. Bhattacharya et al. (2009) linked CSR with stronger stakeholder-company relationships, while Glavas (2016) showed that authenticity can connect CSR with employee engagement. Employees may communicate organizational conduct to external networks as personally known sources. This pathway strengthens the behavioral relevance of CSR beyond consumer response and aligns the model with questions of engagement, identification, and advocacy at work.

Advertising, Promotion, and Cause-Related Marketing

Conventional promotion encompasses organization-sponsored communication intended to inform, persuade, remind, or activate a target audience. Its advantages include control over timing, message consistency, audience targeting, frequency management, and measurable short-cycle responses.

The hierarchy-of-effects tradition and later brand-equity research show that advertising may influence awareness, knowledge, affect, preference, and behavior while also contributing to longer-term memory structures. Accordingly, the CRR model does not assume that promotional effects necessarily disappear when spending stops; rather, decay is an empirical question shaped by repetition, creative quality, category involvement, and prior brand knowledge (Keller, 1993).

Persuasion knowledge theory explains why source control matters. Stakeholders may infer persuasive intent and adjust their responses to messages they recognize as marketing attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This does not make promotion ineffective. It means a self-interested source may need strong evidence, relevant messages, and repeated exposure to gain acceptance. CSR can face the same skepticism when communication appears disproportionate to conduct or when an initiative is perceived as opportunistic (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Pomering & Johnson, 2009).

Cause-related marketing matters because it combines social association with conventional market exchange. Varadarajan and Menon (1988) defined it as a process in which an organization contributes to a designated cause when customers engage in a revenue-providing exchange. It may create awareness and support, but it is conceptually narrower than CSR and more explicitly transaction-linked. The CRR model therefore compares substantive CSR with conventional promotion while recognizing cause-related marketing as a hybrid boundary case rather than treating every social campaign as CSR.

Research Gap

Three gaps follow from the review. First, the literature lacks a concise investment logic that integrates credibility, diffusion, and return while comparing CSR with conventional promotion. Second, many claims about CSR effectiveness do not specify the conditions under which promotion remains the better instrument. Third, the evidence base is dominated by consumer and firm-level outcomes, with less attention to how communication and marketing decision-makers might compare the two approaches when allocating resources.

The CRR model responds by organizing the literature around three proposed mechanisms and by treating allocation as conditional rather than universal. Its purpose is explanatory and agenda-setting. It brings together established theory, states what can and cannot presently be claimed, and provides propositions that future research can examine.

The Credibility-Reach-Return Model

The proposed CRR model positions CSR and conventional promotion as two strategic pathways for creating communication and stakeholder value. The model applies primarily to substantive and sustained CSR that is aligned with organizational conduct and open to credible stakeholder or third-party evaluation. It does not assume that every activity labeled CSR is authentic, effective, or difficult to imitate, and it does not assert the universal superiority of CSR.

Credibility

Conventional promotion usually persuades through claims the organization controls. The organization develops the message, funds its distribution, and decides how it is presented. CSR may persuade through demonstrated conduct. The organization undertakes an activity that can be experienced, observed, discussed, or independently evaluated. This creates an asymmetry in how audiences evaluate the two forms of communication.

Advertising claims may be discounted because audiences recognize their commercial purpose. Observable conduct accompanied by credible verification may carry greater evidential weight because the audience does not have to rely entirely on unsupported organizational assertion. The advantage is conditional, however. It may disappear when the initiative lacks relevance, when communication outweighs action, or when the organization has no consistent record of responsible behavior.

Proposition 1: When supported by observable conduct and credible external verification, CSR communication is likely to receive higher credibility evaluations than an equivalent self-authored promotional claim.

Reach

Promotional reach is purchased and normally linked to campaign duration and budget. Its effects may continue through memory and brand associations, but repeated exposure often requires continuing expenditure. CSR may extend through earned media, community relationships, institutional partners, beneficiaries, and employees. These pathways can broaden circulation without requiring equivalent media expenditure, although they still involve program, communication, and staff costs.

The model distinguishes reach breadth from reach depth. Breadth refers to the number or proportion of stakeholders exposed to the activity or message. Depth refers to the level of engagement, personal relevance, or relational involvement associated with that exposure. Decay refers to the period over which recall or attitudinal effects remain detectable. Promotion may provide broad and rapid visibility, whereas CSR may reach fewer people but create deeper contact

among stakeholders who participate in or directly observe the activity. Digital channels can support this diffusion, but visibility alone does not guarantee trust (Khanal et al., 2021; Yang & Basile, 2021).

Proposition 2: Compared with conventional promotion of similar cost, substantive CSR is expected to reach a narrower audience but produce deeper engagement and more persistent recall among directly affected stakeholders.

Return

Promotion and CSR may differ in the timing and character of the value they create. Promotion can produce rapid awareness, consideration, and conversion. CSR benefits may emerge more slowly through reputation, stakeholder trust, employee identification, advocacy, regulatory goodwill, and resilience. Return in the CRR model therefore includes both immediate behavioral outcomes and longer-term intangible assets; it is not limited to short-term financial return.

This difference creates a measurement imbalance with managerial consequences. Promotional activity can often be linked to campaign metrics within a short reporting period. CSR outcomes are distributed across stakeholder groups and may develop over a longer period. Organizations may therefore favor what they can measure quickly, even when longer-term relational or reputational benefits matter strategically. The model treats these outcomes as proposed tendencies, not fixed rules.

Proposition 3a: CSR investment is likely to produce less immediate transactional response than conventional promotion directed towards short-cycle conversion.

Proposition 3b: When CSR commitment is sustained and perceived as authentic, its reputational and relational benefits are likely to persist longer than the effects of a short-term promotional campaign.

Proposition 3c: Established CSR relationships may provide greater reputational protection during adverse events than promotional exposure alone.

Boundary Conditions and Portfolio Allocation

The model identifies four situations in which conventional promotion is likely to remain more suitable. First, promotion is preferable when rapid activation is required because media can be deployed faster than CSR credibility can be developed. Second, promotion is more appropriate when a message requires precise presentation, such as pricing, regulated information, product recall, or time-sensitive instructions. Third, promotion is better suited to short-cycle conversion in categories where immediate response is the principal objective. Fourth, an unfamiliar organization may require baseline awareness before stakeholders can recognize or evaluate its conduct.

CSR is expected to become more valuable when stakeholder relationships are central, involvement is higher, conduct can be demonstrated, and the planning horizon is longer. The practical implication is portfolio allocation rather than substitution. The managerial question is not whether CSR defeats advertising, but how investment should be divided between conduct that can build trust and communication that can create visibility, explanation, and response.

Proposition 4: The relative value of CSR increases when stakeholder relationships, higher involvement, and long-term outcomes are central, whereas conventional promotion becomes more valuable when organizations require rapid awareness, precise message presentation, market entry, or short-cycle conversion.

Model Summary

Figure 1 represents two parallel pathways. Conventional promotion moves from expenditure through purchased visibility towards awareness and transactional response. CSR moves from expenditure through substantive conduct, observation, and verification towards credibility, relational diffusion, trust, and longer-term intangible assets. Boundary conditions influence the relative weight of each pathway. The arrows are theoretical proposals rather than tested causal effects.

Table 1. Comparative Mechanisms of CSR and Conventional Promotion as Marketing Investment

Dimension	Conventional promotion	CSR investment
Mechanism	Organization-controlled assertion	Observable conduct and stakeholder evaluation
Source status	Interested organizational source	May include stakeholder or third-party verification
Reach pattern	Purchased and potentially broad	Earned, relational, and community-mediated
Engagement	Often lower personal involvement	Potentially deeper for directly affected stakeholders
Return timing	Often more immediate	Often more gradual and cumulative
Asset effect	Campaign and brand response	Relational and reputational assets
Crisis function	Primarily communicative	Possible protective reputational value
Measurement	Short-cycle campaign indicators	Longer-horizon relational and reputational indicators

Note. These are proposed tendencies rather than fixed differences. Outcomes may vary with CSR quality, communication strategy, stakeholder group, market conditions, and time horizon.

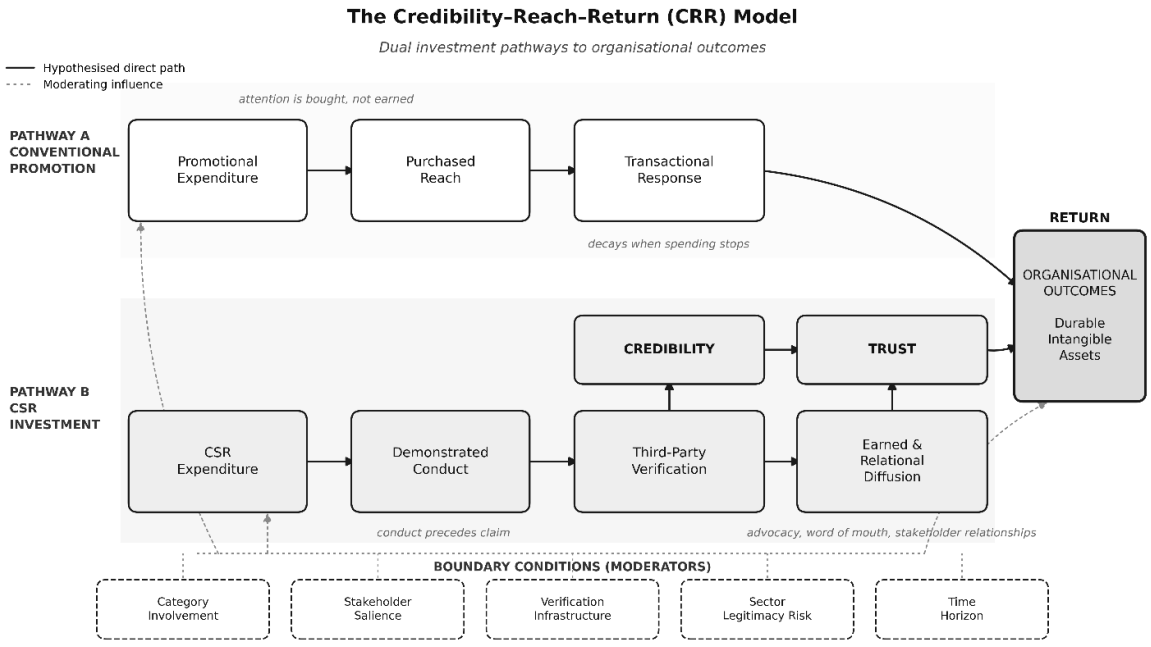


Figure 1. The Credibility-Reach-Return Model: Dual Investment

Pathways to Organizational Outcomes

Note. Solid arrows indicate proposed pathways; dashed lines indicate moderating conditions. The model is conceptual and does not represent tested causal effects.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

The paper used a two-stage design. Stage 1 involved an integrative conceptual synthesis to develop the CRR model and propositions. Stage 2 used three completed LinkedIn polls as a small exploratory professional-network pulse. The polls examined whether respondents recognized selected distinctions associated with recall, trust, and decision influence. They were not designed as a representative survey, experiment, or formal test of the CRR model.

Conceptual Synthesis Process

The source-identification process was structured but not systematic. Literature was identified through combinations of the terms corporate social responsibility, strategic CSR, CSR communication, advertising, conventional promotion, cause-related marketing, source credibility, persuasion knowledge, signaling, stakeholder engagement, corporate reputation, brand equity, diffusion, resource-based view, and intangible assets.

Backward and forward citation tracing was used to connect foundational works with later reviews and empirical studies. The conceptual time horizon extended from foundational studies published in 1951 through literature available to the author in 2025. Because a protocol, database export, duplicate-removal log, and screening flow were not retained, the manuscript does not report database-specific counts or claim exhaustive coverage.

Sources were included when they defined a focal construct, compared or explained communication effects, identified CSR mechanisms or boundary conditions, addressed stakeholder interpretation, or linked organizational conduct to reputation, relationships, brand outcomes, employee response, or firm value.

Sources were excluded when they used CSR only as an undifferentiated control variable, addressed social impact without a communication or stakeholder mechanism, or made investment claims without conceptual relevance to credibility, reach, or return. The synthesis coded each source by mechanism, unit of analysis, stakeholder group, outcome, time horizon, and boundary condition.

The three CRR dimensions were retained because they represented distinct managerial questions: whether a message or action is believed, how it travels and engages, and what type of value may follow over time. Competing and complementary explanations were then mapped to each dimension. Advertising literature was used to prevent the CSR pathway from being constructed as an artificially weak comparison. In contrast, skepticism and attribution research prevented CSR from being treated as inherently credible.

The conceptual development followed an integrative, theory-building approach rather than a systematic review. Literature was considered across five connected domains: CSR and stakeholder response, source credibility and attribution, signaling, corporate reputation, and intangible resource development. Foundational studies were combined with later work on communication, stakeholder involvement, employee response, digital diffusion, and authenticity.

The synthesis focused on recurring explanations of how responsible organizational conduct may create communicative and strategic value. The synthesis organized these explanations into credibility, reach, and return. Contrasting findings and situations in which advertising retained an advantage were then used to identify boundary conditions.

The proposed relationships were compared with the reviewed theory to ensure that each

proposition had a stated rationale. Because the process was interpretive rather than systematic, the review does not claim exhaustive coverage of all CSR or advertising research.

Table 2. Theory and Literature Supporting the CRR Propositions

Proposition	CRR claim	Principal theoretical support	Illustrative literature
P1	Verified conduct may receive higher credibility than equivalent self-authored promotion.	Source credibility; attribution; persuasion knowledge	Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Forehand & Grier, 2003; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Pomering & Johnson, 2009
P2	CSR may provide narrower but deeper and more persistent engagement among affected stakeholders.	Stakeholder theory; relational communication; digital diffusion	Freeman, 1984; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Khanal et al., 2021; Yang & Basile, 2021
P3a	Promotion may produce a stronger immediate response under short-cycle conversion objectives.	Advertising response; controlled communication; persuasion	Keller, 1993; Friestad & Wright, 1994
P3b	Sustained authentic CSR may produce longer-lasting relational and reputational benefits.	Signalling; reputation; stakeholder relationships	Connelly et al., 2011; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Bhattacharya et al., 2009
P3c	Established CSR relationships may provide reputational protection during adverse events.	Moral capital; social capital; risk management	Godfrey, 2005; Godfrey et al., 2009; Lins et al., 2017
P4	Relative value depends on strategic objective, stakeholder relationship, involvement, familiarity, and time horizon.	Contingency logic; stakeholder theory; strategic CSR	Du et al., 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2006; Servaes & Tamayo, 2013

Poll Development and Conceptual Alignment

Each poll corresponded broadly, but not exclusively, with one part of the model. The recall poll related to the reach discussion; the trust poll related to credibility; and the decision-influence poll provided a possible indicator of stakeholder response relevant to return. Poll 3 was not treated as a direct measure of organizational or financial return. The questions used fixed response options available through LinkedIn, and only the aggregate totals displayed by the platform were retained for analysis.

Table 3. Exploratory Poll Questions and Conceptual Relevance

Poll	Conceptual relevance	Question	Votes
1	Recall relevant to reach	Thinking back 12 months: which do	14

		you still actually remember?	
2	Trust relevant to credibility	Which builds more trust in a company for you?	23
3	Decision influence as a possible stakeholder response	Has a company's CSR record ever changed a buying or job decision of yours?	27

Participants and Recruitment

Participation was voluntary and occurred through the author's LinkedIn network. We used no sampling frame, probability procedure, demographic screening, respondent quota, or verified occupational filter. Respondents could encounter each poll separately, so the voter groups cannot be assumed to be identical. The 64 poll-level responses therefore do not represent 64 separate individuals. The evidence is described as a professional-network pulse rather than a sample of verified CSR or marketing practitioners.

All three polls were closed before the manuscript analysis, as indicated by the retained LinkedIn results. The retained screenshots do not display the opening and closing calendar dates, and those dates were not preserved in the analytic record. Exact collection dates are therefore not reported or reconstructed. This documentation limitation is acknowledged because inventing a date range would create false methodological precision.

Data Preparation and Analysis

LinkedIn displayed whole-number percentages and total vote counts. Frequencies were reconstructed by applying the displayed percentages to the reported totals and selecting the integer counts that reproduced the platform's rounded percentages. Analysis was descriptive and included frequencies, percentages, modal responses, and cautious comparison with selected CRR ideas. No inferential tests, confidence intervals, reliability estimates, population estimates, or effect sizes were calculated because the polls involved small self-selected groups, single-item questions, and potentially different respondents.

Ethical and Privacy Considerations

No personal, sensitive, identifying, or demographic information was exported or analyzed. Although LinkedIn allows a poll author to view voting choices, only aggregate results were retained and reported. No names, profiles, employers, comments, or other identifying details were included. The evidence is therefore described as aggregated rather than fully anonymous. The author should provide any further ethics declaration requested by the journal during submission.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Results

The three polls recorded 64 poll-level responses: 14 for recall, 23 for trust, and 27 for decision influence. The totals are reported separately because individuals may have participated in more than one poll.

Table 4. Completed Poll Results

Poll	Response	Frequency	%
Recall (n = 14)	Social-impact work	5	35.7
	Advertisement	1	7.1
	Both	5	35.7

	Neither	3	21.4
Trust (n = 23)	CSR/community work	10	43.5
	Advertising campaigns	1	4.3
	Both equally	9	39.1
	Neither	3	13.0
Decision influence (n = 27)	Yes, more than once	8	29.6
	Yes, once	1	3.7
	No, never	5	18.5
	Never thought about it	13	48.1

Note. Percentages were calculated from reconstructed frequencies and may differ slightly from LinkedIn's displayed whole-number percentages because of rounding. Combined figures that include a 'both' response indicate inclusion, not superiority of CSR over advertising.

Recall and Reach

The recall poll offers limited descriptive support for examining Proposition 2, but not for accepting it. Social-impact work appeared in more recalled response categories than advertising, yet the shared 'both' response and absence of equivalent exposure data prevent a superiority claim. Proposition 2 concerns breadth, depth, and persistence, none of which was measured directly. The pattern therefore best suggests that social-impact activity can become memorable within this small network, consistent with relationally meaningful exposure, while remaining compatible with advertising-generated memory (Keller, 1993; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Trust and Credibility

The trust poll is directionally consistent with Proposition 1 because CSR/community work was selected more often than advertising alone. The result does not demonstrate the proposed mechanism. The poll did not measure source expertise, trustworthiness, motive attribution, prior reputation, verification, or whether respondents imagined equivalent claims. Attribution research indicates that CSR may attract skepticism when stakeholders infer self-serving motives, while prior responsible conduct can strengthen acceptance (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). The poll should therefore be interpreted as a preference signal requiring controlled testing, not as evidence that CSR is inherently more credible.

Decision Influence and Return

The decision-influence poll is relevant to the return pillar only at a preliminary behavioral level. Some respondents recalled CSR influencing a buying or employment decision, but almost half indicated that they had never thought about the issue. The item combined two unlike behaviors, supplied no counterfactual advertising measure, and could not separate actual behavior from retrospective interpretation. Consequently, it provides no evidence of financial return or the timing claims in Propositions 3a–3c. At most, it indicates that CSR entered conscious decision narratives for part of this small network, a possibility consistent with studies linking CSR perceptions to consumer and employee outcomes (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Glavas, 2016).

Relationship to the CRR Model

Taken together, the polls do not test the CRR model; they show only that recall, trust, and decision influence were recognizable questions within one professional network. Their principal analytical value is diagnostic. The frequent 'both' responses support the model's portfolio logic

more than a replacement thesis, while the 'neither' and 'never thought about it' responses show that neither CSR nor promotion should be assumed to command attention or trust automatically. The findings therefore sharpen the need for matched exposure, stakeholder segmentation, and mechanism-specific measurement in future testing.

The substantial 'both' responses also resist a replacement argument. CSR may create substantive conduct and relational meaning, while promotion may provide visibility, repetition, precise presentation, and speed. This pattern is more compatible with portfolio allocation than with a claim that one instrument is universally superior.

The findings should also be interpreted in light of the professional-network setting. Respondents may have been exposed to the polls because of an existing interest in CSR, communication, sustainability, or related professional topics. Social desirability may have favored socially responsible responses, while retrospective questions may be affected by memory limitations. The wording was not symmetrical: CSR and advertising were described differently, and the decision poll did not include an equivalent advertising question.

Theoretical Contribution

The paper's contribution is a conditional explanation rather than a claim of empirical validation. The CRR model integrates source credibility, attribution, signaling, stakeholder relationships, reputation, and intangible resources within one investment logic. It distinguishes immediate communication outcomes from accumulated relational assets and specifies where promotion is likely to remain more useful. It also places behavioral interpretation between organizational action and stakeholder response: stakeholders must notice conduct, interpret motives, and judge credibility before trust or action can follow.

Managerial Implications

If future research supports the model, managers could evaluate CSR and promotion with indicators appropriate to their proposed pathways rather than forcing both into the same short-cycle metric. Credibility could be examined through perceived authenticity, motive attribution, verification, and trust. Reach could distinguish exposure breadth, engagement depth, relational diffusion, and recall decay. Return could include immediate response, advocacy, employee identification, reputation, and resilience. These are proposed measurement categories, not conclusions established by the polls.

The model tentatively suggests beginning allocation with the desired outcome and stakeholder relationship. Promotion may be preferable for market entry, rapid awareness, precise instruction, and immediate conversion. Substantive CSR may matter more when the objective is long-term legitimacy, trust, employee identification, or community relationships. In practice, CSR may provide conduct worth communicating, while promotion may provide the speed and controlled presentation needed to make that conduct visible. This implication remains contingent on CSR quality, fit, stakeholder interpretation, and comparative cost.

Behavioral and Allocation Logic

The CRR model can also be understood as a sequence of managerial and stakeholder decisions. From the organization's perspective, allocation begins with the desired outcome. If the immediate need is awareness, instruction, or conversion, paid promotion offers speed and precision. If the objective is to strengthen trust, identification, or long-term relationships, investment in substantive CSR may be more appropriate. The choice is therefore not simply between two communication channels, but between different ways of creating value, each with its own time horizon, evidence requirements, and measurement challenges.

From the stakeholder's perspective, the process begins with exposure but does not end there. People first become aware of an organizational action or claim, then interpret why it was undertaken, whether it aligns with past conduct, and whether credible outside parties confirm it. These judgments shape whether people accept, discount, or reject the information. Credibility may support trust, but trust does not automatically produce behavior. Personal relevance, available alternatives, price, employment conditions, and individual values may all affect the eventual response. The model therefore avoids assuming that CSR activity leads directly to commercial return.

This distinction is important for measurement. Exposure indicators such as impressions and reach show how widely information traveled, but they do not reveal whether the audience believed it. Trust scores describe an attitude but do not necessarily indicate a purchase, job application, recommendation, or retention decision. Behavioral outcomes may also be observed without proving that CSR caused them. Evaluation should therefore connect indicators across the stages of exposure, interpretation, trust, and response, while recognizing that each stage answers a different question.

The model also suggests that authenticity is partly relational. An initiative may appear credible to employees, beneficiaries, or community members who experience it directly, yet remain unknown or unconvincing to more distant audiences. The same activity may therefore produce different levels of reach, trust, and return across stakeholder groups. Managers should not treat the audience as a single, uniform category. Evaluation should identify who encountered the activity, whether that contact was direct or mediated, what prior relationship existed, and which outcome mattered to that stakeholder group.

Portfolio allocation also requires attention to opportunity cost. CSR and advertising cannot be compared fairly unless the assessment considers program costs, communication costs, duration, stakeholder coverage, and the type of value expected. Equal spending does not necessarily create equal exposure or operate over the same time horizon. Future empirical studies should therefore define comparable conditions carefully rather than assuming two activities with the same budget are equivalent.

Finally, the model places ethical restraint within strategic effectiveness. Treating CSR as an investment does not justify exaggerating social outcomes or selecting initiatives only for publicity. If communication becomes disproportionate to substantive action, stakeholders may infer opportunism and the credibility advantage may weaken. The model therefore assumes that strategic value follows responsible conduct rather than replacing it. This ordering protects the social purpose of CSR while explaining how meaningful conduct may also create communication and organizational value.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper fulfills its objective by developing a conditional conceptual comparison of substantive CSR and conventional promotion. Its specific theoretical contribution is the CRR model, which integrates stakeholder interpretation, source credibility, attribution, signaling, diffusion, reputation, and organizational resources into two parallel pathways.

Credibility concerns the evidential status of claims and conduct; reach distinguishes purchased breadth from potentially deeper relational diffusion; and return distinguishes short-cycle response from longer-horizon relational and reputational value. The model also clarifies that stakeholder theory explains heterogeneous evaluation, whereas the resource-based view applies only when CSR-related routines and relationships form a path-dependent organizational capability.

The practical implication is not to replace promotion with CSR, but to align the instrument with the outcome, stakeholder, evidence base, and time horizon. The polls remain an exploratory

illustration and do not establish model validity.

Future empirical work should prioritize Proposition 1 through matched credibility experiments, Proposition 2 through longitudinal measurement of reach breadth, engagement depth, and decay, and Propositions 3a–3c through multi-period behavioral and reputational outcomes. Proposition 4 should then be tested as a contingency model across stakeholder groups, sectors, and market conditions.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

The CRR model has not been empirically validated. The polls were small, voluntary, self-selected, and drawn from one LinkedIn network. Demographic and occupational information was not collected, respondent groups may have differed across polls, and each topic was represented by one unvalidated question. The author's professional network may have increased visibility among people already interested in CSR or communication. Responses may also reflect social desirability, retrospective recall bias, or post hoc interpretation.

The conceptual review also has limitations. It was structured and theory-led but not systematic; it did not retain database-specific search logs, screening counts, or a preregistered protocol. English-language and highly cited sources may be overrepresented, and the synthesis may understate advertising traditions, regional CSR scholarship, and research using different terminology. The dimensions were derived interpretively, so alternative models could group credibility, reach, and return differently.

The questions were not designed as a balanced experimental comparison. Terms such as social-impact work, CSR/community work, advertisement, and advertising campaigns may carry different meanings and moral associations. Poll 3 combined buying and employment decisions and did not include a parallel item about advertising. The results therefore describe responses to three individual questions and should not be treated as measures of the full CRR constructs.

Future research should develop validated multi-item measures of credibility, motive attribution, verification, reach breadth, engagement depth, decay, and return. Experimental studies could compare matched CSR and advertising stimuli while controlling message quality, exposure, expenditure, and organizational familiarity. Longitudinal work could examine whether trust and recall persist and whether they predict behavior. Multi-source studies should combine stakeholder perceptions with indicators such as earned media, advocacy, employee retention, customer response, and reputational resilience.

Cross-cultural research is also required. The model should be examined across sectors, stakeholder groups, and institutional settings, including Asian markets where community relationships, stakeholder expectations, and attitudes towards corporate responsibility may differ. Such research would clarify which mechanisms are general and which depend on culture, regulation, industry, or market maturity.

The model's scope is bounded. It applies most plausibly to substantive, sustained CSR that is visible to relevant stakeholders and supported by evidence. It may travel poorly to low-involvement purchases, purely business-to-business settings, highly regulated communication, unfamiliar organizations, or contexts in which stakeholders cannot observe or verify conduct. 'Return' remains intentionally broad and risks conceptual stretching unless future studies define the focal stakeholder, outcome, time horizon, and counterfactual investment. The model also does not evaluate the social impact of CSR or resolve the ethical tension created when responsibility is framed through marketing value.

REFERENCES

Aaker, D. A. (1991). Managing brand equity: Capitalizing on the value of a brand name. Free Press.

Barney, J. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. Journal of Management, 17(1), 99–120. https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700108

Bhattacharya, C. B., Korschun, D., & Sen, S. (2009). Strengthening stakeholder-company relationships through mutually beneficial corporate social responsibility initiatives. Journal of Business Ethics, 85(S2), 257–272. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9730-3

Brown, T. J., & Dacin, P. A. (1997). The company and the product: Corporate associations and consumer product responses. Journal of Marketing, 61(1), 68–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299706100106

Carroll, A. B. (1979). A three-dimensional conceptual model of corporate performance. Academy of Management Review, 4(4), 497–505. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1979.4498296

Carroll, A. B. (1991). The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organisational stakeholders. Business Horizons, 34(4), 39–48. https://doi.org/10.1016/0007-6813(91)90005-G

Connelly, B. L., Certo, S. T., Ireland, R. D., & Reutzel, C. R. (2011). Signalling theory: A review and assessment. Journal of Management, 37(1), 39–67. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310388419

Du, S., Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2010). Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility: The role of CSR communication. International Journal of Management Reviews, 12(1), 8–19. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00276.x

Elving, W. J. L. (2013). Scepticism and corporate social responsibility communications: The influence of fit and reputation. Journal of Marketing Communications, 19(4), 277–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/13527266.2011.631569

Fombrun, C., & Shanley, M. (1990). What's in a name? Reputation building and corporate strategy. Academy of Management Journal, 33(2), 233–258. https://doi.org/10.2307/256324

Forehand, M. R., & Grier, S. (2003). When is honesty the best policy? The effect of stated company intent on consumer scepticism. Journal of Consumer Psychology, 13(3), 349–356. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327663JCP1303_15

Freeman, R. E. (1984). Strategic management: A stakeholder approach. Pitman.

Friestad, M., & Wright, P. (1994). The persuasion knowledge model: How people cope with persuasion attempts. Journal of Consumer Research, 21(1), 1–31. https://doi.org/10.1086/209380

Glavas, A. (2016). Corporate social responsibility and employee engagement: Enabling employees to employ more of their whole selves at work. Frontiers in Psychology, 7, Article 796. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.00796

Godfrey, P. C. (2005). The relationship between corporate philanthropy and shareholder wealth: A risk management perspective. Academy of Management Review, 30(4), 777–798. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2005.18378878

Godfrey, P. C., Merrill, C. B., & Hansen, J. M. (2009). The relationship between corporate social responsibility and shareholder value: An empirical test of the risk management hypothesis. Strategic Management Journal, 30(4), 425–445. https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.750

Hovland, C. I., & Weiss, W. (1951). The influence of source credibility on communication effectiveness. Public Opinion Quarterly, 15(4), 635–650. https://doi.org/10.1086/266350

Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. Journal of Marketing, 57(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299305700101

Khanal, A., Akhtaruzzaman, M., & Kularatne, I. (2021). The influence of social media on stakeholder engagement and the corporate social responsibility of small businesses. Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management, 28(6), 1921–1929. https://doi.org/10.1002/csr.2169

Lins, K. V., Servaes, H., & Tamayo, A. (2017). Social capital, trust, and firm performance: The value of corporate social responsibility during the financial crisis. Journal of Finance, 72(4), 1785–1824. https://doi.org/10.1111/jofi.12505

Luo, X., & Bhattacharya, C. B. (2006). Corporate social responsibility, customer satisfaction, and market value. Journal of Marketing, 70(4), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkg.70.4.001

Morsing, M., & Schultz, M. (2006). Corporate social responsibility communication: Stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies. Business Ethics: A European Review, 15(4), 323–338. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8608.2006.00460.x

Odunjo, O., Crane, A., & McDonagh, P. (2025). Stakeholder existential authenticity and corporate social responsibility. Journal of Management Studies, 62(1), 260–291. https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.13028

Ohanian, R. (1990). Construction and validation of a scale to measure celebrity endorsers' perceived expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Journal of Advertising, 19(3), 39–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1990.10673191

Pomering, A., & Johnson, L. W. (2009). Advertising corporate social responsibility initiatives to communicate corporate image: Inhibiting scepticism to enhance persuasion. Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 14(4), 420–439. https://doi.org/10.1108/13563280910998763

Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2006). Strategy and society: The link between competitive advantage and corporate social responsibility. Harvard Business Review, 84(12), 78–92.

Porter, M. E., & Kramer, M. R. (2011). Creating shared value. Harvard Business Review, 89(1–2), 62–77.

Saeidi, S. P., Sofian, S., Saeidi, P., Saeidi, S. P., & Saaeidi, S. A. (2015). How does corporate social responsibility contribute to firm financial performance? The mediating role of competitive advantage, reputation, and customer satisfaction. Journal of Business Research, 68(2), 341–350. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2014.06.024

Sen, S., & Bhattacharya, C. B. (2001). Does doing good always lead to doing better? Consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility. Journal of Marketing Research, 38(2), 225–243. https://doi.org/10.1509/jmkr.38.2.225.18838

Servaes, H., & Tamayo, A. (2013). The impact of corporate social responsibility on firm value: The role of customer awareness. Management Science, 59(5), 1045–1061. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1120.1630

Spence, M. (1973). Job market signalling. Quarterly Journal of Economics, 87(3), 355–374. https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010

Vanhamme, J., & Grobben, B. (2009). Too good to be true! The effectiveness of CSR history in countering negative publicity. Journal of Business Ethics, 85(S2), 273–283. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-008-9731-2

Varadarajan, P. R., & Menon, A. (1988). Cause-related marketing: A coalignment of marketing strategy and corporate philanthropy. Journal of Marketing, 52(3), 58–74. https://doi.org/10.1177/002224298805200306

Yang, J., & Basile, K. (2021). Communicating corporate social responsibility: External stakeholder involvement, productivity and firm performance. Journal of Business Ethics, 178, 501–517. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04812-5

APPENDIX

The screenshots are included for transparency regarding the wording and response options. They do not establish respondent identity, exposure, or sampling quality.

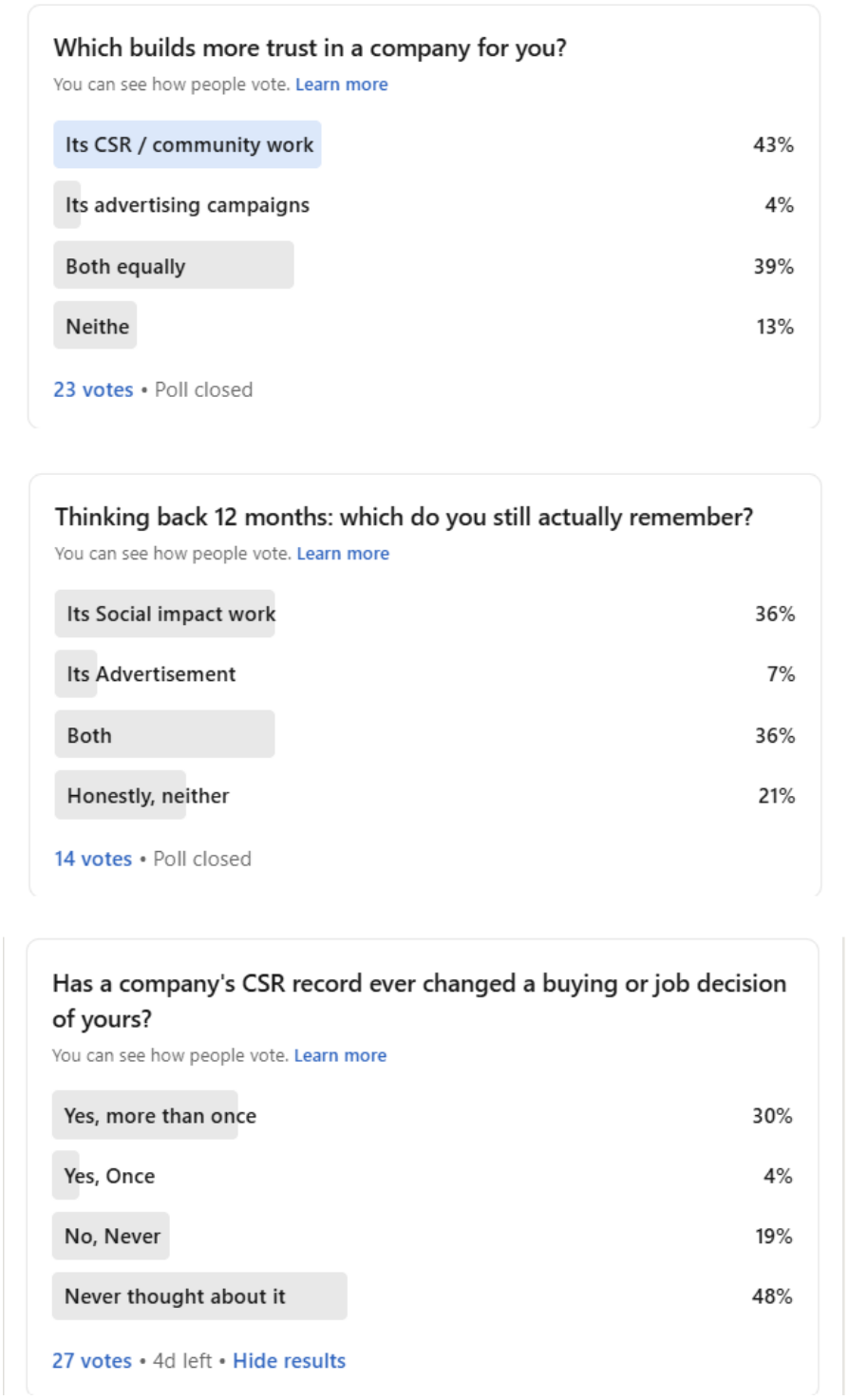


Figure A1. LinkedIn poll questions and displayed aggregate results.