

Digital Transformation of Corporate Social Responsibility: Crowdfunding, Community Building, Brand Activism, and Public Campaigns

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Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has moved from a largely compliance-oriented, report-based practice toward a set of visible, digitally mediated formats that include online crowdfunding for social causes, digital community building, corporate social activism, and public social media campaigns. This paper reviews these evolving formats and examines how digital platforms have changed both the mechanics and the risks of CSR practice. It surveys research on digital CSR communication and disclosure quality, donation-based and charitable crowdfunding as a fundraising and engagement format, corporate and brand activism as an extension of traditional CSR, and social media as the primary channel for public CSR campaigns. A comparative analysis contrasts traditional, report-centric CSR with digital-era, engagement-centric CSR, and a further comparison distinguishes conventional CSR communication from brand activism across audience expectation, risk profile, and authenticity requirements. The paper concludes that digital CSR formats expand a firm's reach and engagement potential substantially, but also raise the stakes for authenticity, since digitally amplified stakeholders scrutinize and can rapidly challenge any perceived gap between a firm's stated values and its actual practice.

Keywords: *corporate social responsibility; digital CSR communication; crowdfunding; brand activism; social media campaigns; community building; stakeholder engagement*

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility has historically been understood as a firm's voluntary commitment to environmental, social, and governance practices, communicated primarily through annual sustainability reports and formal disclosures aimed at investors and regulators. Over the past decade, this compliance-oriented model has been joined, and in many customer-facing contexts overtaken, by a set of digitally native CSR formats: online crowdfunding campaigns that mobilize the public directly around a cause, digital communities built around shared social or environmental goals, corporate social activism that takes explicit positions on contested societal issues, and public social media campaigns designed for broad visibility and engagement. Systematic review evidence confirms that going digital changes not just the channel but the effectiveness of CSR communication itself, with digitally accessible CSR content producing measurably stronger stakeholder relationships than traditional, report-based disclosure alone (Adanlawo & Chaka,

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2025). This paper reviews these evolving CSR formats, examines how they differ from traditional CSR communication in both mechanics and risk, and offers a comparative analysis of the resulting practice landscape.

2. From Compliance to Communication: The Evolution of CSR Formats

CSR practice has moved through recognizable stages, from formal compliance and reporting, to interactive digital communication, to public-facing activism and campaign-driven engagement. Each stage did not fully replace its predecessor; rather, contemporary CSR practice layers new formats atop existing ones, so that a single firm may simultaneously publish a formal sustainability report, run a donation-based crowdfunding campaign, and take a public stance on a social issue. Research on CSR communication argues that persuasive, elaboration-based engagement, where stakeholders actively process and respond to CSR messaging rather than passively receiving it, has become central to how CSR builds credibility with modern audiences (Camilleri, 2022). Table 1 summarizes this evolution across three broad eras of CSR practice.

Table 1. The Evolution of CSR Formats Across Three Practice Eras

Era	Primary Format	Stakeholder Relationship
Compliance era	Annual sustainability and CSR reports	One-way disclosure to investors and regulators
Digital communication era	Corporate websites, social media CSR content	Two-way but largely firm-controlled engagement
Activist/campaign era	Crowdfunding, activism, viral public campaigns	Public co-creation, scrutiny, and rapid feedback

3. Online Funding and Digital Crowdfunding as a CSR Format

Donation-based and charitable crowdfunding has become a significant CSR format, allowing firms and the causes they support to raise funds directly from the public rather than through traditional grant-making or corporate foundation channels alone. Research on charitable behaviour in digital crowdfunding platforms finds that donor motivations are shaped by a combination of cultural values, such as collectivism, and platform-specific factors including perceived trustworthiness and ease of use, with donors who are more involved in voluntary activities showing stronger charitable behavior on these platforms (Zaborek, Napiórkowska, Grudecka, & Witek-Hajduk, 2024). For firms, this means CSR-linked crowdfunding campaigns succeed not simply by publicizing a cause but by building the platform trust and narrative engagement that motivate voluntary giving. Compared to traditional corporate philanthropy, online funding campaigns compress the distance between the firm, the cause, and the public into a single, visible transaction, making the campaign itself, its updates, its transparency, and its perceived authenticity, part of the CSR communication rather than a separate reporting exercise.

4. Digital Community Building and Stakeholder Engagement

Beyond one-off fundraising, firms increasingly use digital platforms to build ongoing communities around CSR themes, sustainability challenges, volunteer networks, or cause-specific interest groups that persist between formal campaigns. This shifts CSR from episodic communication toward sustained relationship-building, echoing broader digital corporate communication research showing that social media allows organizations to create interactive, personalized CSR experiences with distinct stakeholder groups rather than broadcasting a single uniform message. However, empirical analysis of corporate CSR communication on platforms such as Twitter finds that many brands

still treat these channels as broadcast media, rarely taking full advantage of the dialogic, co-creative potential that would constitute genuine community building. Research on social media CSR engagement in specific industry contexts similarly shows that the way a firm frames its CSR messaging, whether it invites participation or simply announces achievements, significantly shapes public online engagement outcomes (Dong, Zhao, & Ngai, 2025). This suggests that digital community building is a distinct capability from digital CSR communication generally, requiring firms to design ongoing structures for participation rather than treating social media purely as an amplified press release channel.

5. Corporate Social Activism and Brand Advocacy

Corporate social activism represents the most visible and highest-risk evolution of CSR, extending beyond a firm's operational footprint to explicit public positioning on contested political, social, or environmental issues. Literature reviews of brand activism distinguish it from traditional CSR precisely on this basis: CSR is typically embedded in operational strategy and seeks incremental improvement, while activism is characterized by strong, sometimes deliberately provocative communication on issues that do not necessarily enjoy public consensus (Cammarota, D'Arco, Marino, & Resciniti, 2023). This distinction matters for how firms should manage activism differently from conventional CSR communication: activist positioning generates polarized stakeholder reactions almost by design, meaning firms must anticipate both strong positive engagement from aligned audiences and equally strong backlash from opposed ones. The literature identifies authenticity, the perceived alignment between a brand's public stance and its actual corporate practice, as the single most important factor determining whether activism strengthens or damages stakeholder relationships, with inauthentic or opportunistic activism (sometimes termed 'woke-washing') producing reputational damage that a purely compliance-oriented CSR report would never risk.

6. Public Campaigns and Social Media CSR Communication

Public CSR campaigns, time-bound, high-visibility initiatives designed to mobilize broad audience attention around a cause, represent a fourth evolving format that often combines elements of the previous three: they may include a crowdfunding component, aim to build a lasting community, and sometimes edge into activist territory depending on the issue addressed. Research on social media disclosure quality finds that the intensity and structure of information interactions on social platforms, not merely the volume of CSR content posted, significantly shapes how the public perceives the credibility of a firm's CSR disclosure (Niu, Wang, Wang, Wang, & Zhu, 2024). This indicates that successful public campaigns depend on sustained, responsive interaction patterns rather than one-directional messaging bursts, reinforcing the broader finding that digital-era CSR success is measured by engagement quality and perceived authenticity rather than reach or publication volume alone.

7. Comparative Analysis: Traditional versus Digital-Era CSR Formats

Table 2 compares traditional, report-centric CSR against the digital-era formats reviewed above across audience, communication direction, and primary success metric, clarifying how the underlying logic of CSR practice has shifted alongside its channels.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Traditional versus Digital-Era CSR Formats

Dimension	Traditional (Reports/Disclosure)	Digital-Era CSR (Funding/Community/Activism/Campaigns)
Primary audience	Investors, regulators, analysts	General public, customers, and online communities

Dimension	Traditional CSR (Reports/Disclosure)	Digital-Era CSR (Funding/Community/Activism/Campaigns)
Communication direction	One-way disclosure	Two-way, often public and co-created
Success metric	Compliance completeness, disclosure quality	Engagement, donations raised, sentiment, authenticity perception
Risk profile	Legal and reporting accuracy risk	Reputational risk from backlash or perceived inauthenticity

8. Comparative Analysis: CSR Communication versus Brand Activism

Because brand activism carries a materially different risk profile than routine CSR communication, Table 3 compares the two directly across the dimensions most relevant to firms deciding whether and how to take a public stance on a social issue.

Table 3. Comparative Analysis of Conventional CSR Communication and Brand Activism

Dimension	Conventional CSR Communication	Brand/Corporate Activism
Issue scope	Operational sustainability and social impact	Contested political, social, or cultural issues
Audience reaction	Generally consistent, low polarization	Polarized, with strong positive and negative reactions
Authenticity requirement	Consistency with disclosed practices	Deep alignment between stance and demonstrated action
Failure mode	Perceived as incomplete or generic disclosure	Perceived as opportunistic 'woke-washing'

9. Challenges and Risks

The evolution toward digitally mediated CSR formats introduces risks that traditional, report-based CSR rarely faced at the same intensity. Perceived inauthenticity is the most consequential of these: because digital audiences can quickly compare a firm's public statements against its actual behavior, any gap between the two is likely to surface and spread rapidly, damaging trust more severely than a merely incomplete disclosure would. Crowdfunding and community-building formats introduce their own risks around donor trust and platform credibility, since research shows charitable giving on digital platforms is highly sensitive to perceived platform trustworthiness, meaning a poorly managed campaign can undermine giving well beyond the specific cause involved (Zaborek et al., 2024). Corporate activism carries the additional risk of polarization, as firms taking a public stance on contested issues should expect and prepare for backlash from opposed stakeholders as a structural feature of the format rather than an occasional exception. Finally, the sheer visibility of digital CSR formats means that missteps are amplified and archived, creating longer-lasting reputational consequences than the comparatively low-visibility failures possible in traditional CSR reporting.

10. Conclusion

CSR has evolved from a compliance-oriented reporting exercise into a set of digitally mediated formats, online funding, community building, social activism, and public campaigns, that engage stakeholders directly and continuously rather than through periodic disclosure alone. The comparative analysis presented here shows that this evolution raises both the potential reach and the potential risk of CSR practice, since digitally amplified stakeholders can validate or challenge a firm's CSR claims far more quickly than traditional reporting cycles allowed. Firms that succeed in this environment are those that treat digital CSR formats as authentic extensions of demonstrated practice rather than as standalone communication campaigns, recognizing that in an environment of continuous public scrutiny, the format of CSR communication matters less than the consistency of the underlying commitment it represents.

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