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**Beyond the *Inform Button*: A Multi-Method Analysis of CSR
Communication Strategies in Nigeria's Most Reputable Banks**



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Beyond the *Inform Button*: A Multi-Method Analysis of CSR Communication Strategies in Nigeria's Most Reputable Banks

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication strategies of Nigeria's most reputable banks. It examines the prevalence of different strategies and the organisational factors shaping their selection.

Methodology: The study adopts a multi-method design to analyse how and why leading Nigerian banks disseminate CSR information. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with elite key informants, the heads of corporate communications of the banks. These were complemented by a rigorous qualitative content analysis of the banks' annual reports (2024 to 2025) and Facebook CSR communications (2024 to 2025). The integration of these data sources provides a holistic understanding of the banks' strategic CSR communication practices.

Findings: The findings reveal that while Nigeria's most reputable banks employ both informing and engaging CSR communication strategies, the informing approach predominates, with engagement remaining limited. The results further indicate that strategy selection is primarily driven by reputation management objectives, although CSR communication is viewed as a strategic communication function that serves multiple organisational goals. However, the adoption of the more dialogic, engaging strategy is significantly constrained by internal cultural conservatism and budgetary constraints, leading the banks to exhibit strategic dialogic restraint.

Unique contribution to theory, practice and policy: This study extends CSR communication scholarship by providing a multi-method examination of CSR communication strategy in the underexplored African banking context. It enriches stakeholder and legitimacy theories by demonstrating that organisational considerations such as reputation management priorities, internal culture, and resource limitations mediate the translation of theoretical ideals into practice. For communication practitioners, the findings provide evidence-based guidance for developing more balanced CSR communication programmes that move beyond the "inform button" of predominantly one-way information dissemination toward greater stakeholder engagement.

Keywords: *CSR Communication Strategies, Nigerian Banks, Reputation, Stakeholder Engagement, Legitimacy Theory*

JEL Codes: *M14, G21, M31, O55*

1. Introduction

The past several years indicate that organisations no longer face the question of whether to communicate their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities but how to do so (Dong et al., 2025; Roy & Quazi, 2022; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Jiang & Luo, 2020; Cho et al., 2017). Although multiple channels, including digital platforms, now exist for easier dialogic communication and stakeholder engagement on CSR initiatives, many organisations continue to treat CSR communication primarily as an exercise in disseminating information (Zhang, 2025; Dong et al., 2025; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Jiang & Luo, 2020). In other words, despite the avenues for interaction and engagement, such organisations often remain stuck at what this study describes as the *"inform button,"* a communication approach characterised by predominantly one-way dissemination of CSR information rather than sustained stakeholder dialogue.

Meanwhile, effective CSR communication is a strategic tool for ensuring that organisations reap the dividends of their philanthropic endeavours (Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Crane & Glozer, 2016; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Du et al., 2010; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Such effective communication is particularly important for gaining and maintaining organisational legitimacy and for ensuring a strong stakeholder relationship (Subedi et al., 2024; Riahi et al., 2024; Freeman, 2010; Coombs, 2007; Deegan, 2002). Banks, in particular, need to communicate their CSR activities effectively. Given that their products are intangible and that reputation is one of their strongest competitive differentiators, they must leverage CSR communication to boost their reputation (Eriqat et al., 2024; Shen et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2019).

The literature on CSR communication identifies diverse strategies through which organisations make stakeholders aware of their good deeds (Zhang, 2025; Dong et al., 2025; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Jiang & Luo, 2020; Lauritsen & Perks, 2015; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Prominent among these are the informing strategy and engaging strategy (Roy & Quazi, 2022; Morsing, 2006; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Morsing (2006) proposed these strategies following the earlier introduction of the information, response, and involvement strategies in CSR communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). The informing strategy is a one-directional approach to CSR communication in which the organisation focuses on disseminating information to its stakeholders, with little or no allowance for feedback or engagement. This approach often uses channels such as annual reports, sustainability reports, press releases, or company websites to provide stakeholders with information about the organisation's CSR programmes.

In contrast, the engaging CSR communication strategy, also called the interacting strategy, entails consulting and receiving the input of stakeholders during the planning as well as implementation stages of CSR programmes (Zhang, 2025; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Jiang & Luo, 2020; Morsing, 2006; Devin & Lane, 2014). It relies more on dialogic communication through channels such as town hall meetings or online engagements. Due to its bi-directional and ongoing communication

and interaction with stakeholders, the engaging strategy is seen as a way for the organisation to collaboratively co-create sense with its publics (Kargbo et al., 2025; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

CSR communication scholars have consistently advocated a shift from the unidirectional, informing strategy to the more dialogic, engaging strategy (Lim & Greenwood, 2017; Chaudhri, 2016; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Nonetheless, evidence repeatedly suggests organisations continue to rely on one-way communication (Zhang, 2025; Roy & Quazi, 2022; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021). Although scholars have repeatedly examined the strategies organisations use to disseminate information about their CSR initiatives to stakeholders, evidence on this has largely come from Europe (Koch et al., 2025; Lauritsen & Perks, 2015; Morsing & Schultz, 2006), North America (Dardis et al., 2025; Jiang & Luo, 2020; Lim & Greenwood, 2017), and Asia (Zhang, 2025; Dong et al., 2025; Roy & Quazi, 2022). Studies in the African context remain sparse. Where available, such do not focus on the banking sector (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021).

Furthermore, existing studies rely predominantly on experiments (Dardis et al., 2025; Koch et al., 2025), content analyses (Dong et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025), and surveys (Jiang & Luo, 2020; Lim & Greenwood, 2017; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). They seldom integrate the organisation's perspectives, through interviews or multiple methods, into actual communication outputs. Gaps, therefore, exist in both methodology and jurisdiction. Thus, although the CSR communication literature clearly advocates two-way communication between organisations and their stakeholders, there is insufficient evidence on whether African businesses actually practice this ideal, especially in the Nigerian banking system, and on the internal considerations that shape these strategic communication choices.

In studying the African context, the Nigerian banking sector provides a compelling domain. The banks are highly profitable and increasingly invest in CSR (Okamgba, 2025; Abimbola, 2024; Moses, 2025; Nairametrics, 2021). Nonetheless, they are often criticised by some stakeholders and face widespread public scepticism (Udunze, 2025; Umogun, 2023; Salako, 2022). Although some of the scepticism stems from the banks' lending practices, the severity suggests that the commentators do not take the banks' CSR efforts and other positive actions into account. Such commentary dents the banks' reputation and legitimacy, thereby detracting from the expected dividends of their CSR investment and consequent communication. As a result, the most reputable Nigerian banks provide a rich environment for investigating the CSR communication strategies of African institutions.

Research Questions

This study, therefore, investigates the following research questions.

RQ1: To what extent do Nigeria's most reputable banks rely on diverse CSR communication strategies?

RQ2: What factors influence CSR communication strategy selection in Nigeria's most reputable banks?

2. Theoretical Foundation

This study is grounded in two distinct but complementary theoretical perspectives. These are stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory.

2.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory posits that a firm navigates a web of stakeholder relationships (Freeman, 2010; Eriqat et al., 2024; Garba, 2026; Donaldson & Preston, 1995). It presupposes that the firm is not solely a tool for maximising shareholder wealth, but that a network of relationships exists among stakeholders interfacing with the company's operations. CSR communication is essentially a stakeholder communication process. While CSR activities may generate social and environmental value, such value cannot translate into reputational benefits unless relevant stakeholders are aware of and respond positively to those initiatives. Stakeholder theory, therefore, provides an important theoretical foundation for understanding why organisations communicate CSR in the first place. As Freeman (2010) argues, organisations create sustainable value not merely by satisfying shareholders but by balancing the interests of all stakeholders capable of affecting or being affected by organisational activities. Thus, stakeholders such as customers, employees, regulators, host communities, investors, and the media constitute legitimate audiences whose expectations the firm must continually address.

Within CSR communication research, stakeholder theory has shifted attention away from CSR as a philanthropic activity towards CSR as a communicative relationship. Organisations are no longer expected merely to undertake socially responsible initiatives, but are increasingly expected to explain, justify, and discuss these initiatives with stakeholders (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Consequently, communication is not simply an instrument for publicising CSR but an integral component of stakeholder relationship management. Accordingly, stakeholder theory provides a normative basis for the engaging CSR communication strategy. It suggests that effective CSR communication should involve continuous interaction rather than unilateral dissemination of organisational messages.

2.2 Legitimacy Theory

While stakeholder theory explains why organisations communicate with stakeholders, legitimacy theory explains why organisations seek to publicly demonstrate social responsibility. Legitimacy theory is founded on the notion that organisations operate under an implicit social contract with society (Deegan, 2018; Suchman, 1995; Kargbo et al., 2025; Riahi et al., 2024). Organisations maintain legitimacy when their values and actions are perceived to align with prevailing societal expectations. Conversely, legitimacy is threatened whenever stakeholders perceive a disconnect between organisational behaviour and accepted social norms.

Corporate social responsibility has become one of the principal mechanisms through which organisations demonstrate conformity with these societal expectations. Nevertheless, CSR activities alone cannot generate legitimacy if stakeholders remain unaware of them. Communication, therefore, becomes the mechanism through which organisations disclose evidence of responsible behaviour and reinforce perceptions of legitimacy (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Lindblom, 1994; Deegan, 2018; Suchman, 1995). Banks provide an especially appropriate context for legitimacy theory. Financial institutions operate under intense public scrutiny because they manage public funds, influence economic development, and are periodically associated with financial crises, corporate scandals and governance failures. Consequently, banks continually seek communication strategies that strengthen public confidence and preserve organisational legitimacy. Thus, legitimacy theory predicts that organisations will communicate CSR not merely to inform stakeholders but also to demonstrate responsible corporate citizenship and maintain societal approval. This study draws on both theories to examine how Nigerian banks balance these competing communication logics and how organisational considerations ultimately shape the strategies they adopt.

3. Literature Review

3.1 CSR Communication Strategies

CSR communication refers to the deliberate dissemination and exchange of information concerning an organisation's social, environmental, and ethical activities with relevant stakeholders (Du et al., 2010). This could be through any public communication channel, including annual reports, social media, and advertising. Over the past two decades, communication has evolved from a peripheral element of CSR to a central strategic function (Kim, 2019; Crane & Glozer, 2016).

Scholars have proposed several classifications of CSR communication strategies. Morsing and Schultz (2006) initially identified three approaches, which are the information, response, and involvement strategies. These reflected increasing levels of stakeholder participation in organisational communication. Building on this work, Morsing (2006) simplified the framework into two overarching approaches: informing and engaging (or interacting). This two-category classification has since become the dominant framework within CSR communication scholarship because it captures the fundamental distinction between one-way and two-way communication (Lim & Greenwood, 2017; Jiang & Luo, 2020; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Roy & Quazi, 2022).

Other scholars have proposed alternative typologies. For instance, Lauritsen and Perks (2015) distinguish between implicit and explicit non-interactive communication, while more recent studies continue to explore strategic adaptations across digital communication platforms (Dong et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). Nevertheless, these alternative classifications broadly correspond to a continuum from one-way information dissemination to interactive stakeholder engagement.

Consequently, the informing-engaging framework provides an appropriate analytical lens for examining CSR communication practices within the Nigerian banking sector.

3.2 Informing Versus Engaging CSR Communication

The informing strategy represents a traditional communication model in which organisations disseminate information about CSR initiatives with little expectation of stakeholder feedback. Typical channels include annual reports, sustainability reports, press releases, and corporate websites, where communication remains largely organisation-centred (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Jiang & Luo, 2020; Cho et al., 2017; Morsing, 2006). The primary objective of informing communication is organisational visibility. Through disclosure, organisations seek to increase stakeholder awareness, reduce information asymmetry, and signal responsible behaviour.

On the other hand, the engaging strategy adopts a fundamentally different communication philosophy. Rather than treating stakeholders as passive recipients of information, organisations actively involve them in identifying social needs, planning CSR programmes, implementing initiatives, and evaluating outcomes (Lim & Greenwood, 2017; Devin & Lane, 2014; Zhang, 2025). Therefore, engaging communication reflects dialogic principles emphasising listening, consultation, responsiveness, and long-term relationship building. Digital communication platforms have significantly expanded opportunities for such engagement by enabling continuous interaction between organisations and stakeholders (Okazaki et al., 2020; Dong et al., 2025; Zhang, 2025). Despite widespread advocacy for dialogic communication, scholars consistently report that organisations continue to rely predominantly on informing approaches (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Roy & Quazi, 2022; Zhang, 2025). This persistence raises important questions about the organisational considerations that shape the selection of a communication strategy.

3.3 Emerging Trends in CSR Communication Strategies

Empirical research on CSR communication strategies has expanded considerably during the past two decades. European studies pioneered much of the foundational work, with Morsing and Schultz (2006) establishing the informing-engaging framework and Lauritsen and Perks (2015) examining implicit and explicit communication approaches. Subsequent research in North America has investigated stakeholder responses to different CSR communication strategies using surveys and experiments (Jiang & Luo, 2020; Lim & Greenwood, 2017; Dardis et al., 2025). Asian studies have increasingly focused on digital platforms and organisational use of social media for CSR communication (Dong et al., 2025; Roy & Quazi, 2022; Zhang, 2025).

Collectively, these studies demonstrate a broad consensus that dialogic communication generates stronger stakeholder trust, organisational credibility, and relationship quality than one-way communication. Nevertheless, many organisations continue to favour informing strategies (Zhang, 2025; Roy & Quazi, 2022; Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021). Research within Africa remains comparatively limited. Existing studies have largely examined CSR communication generally rather than

communication strategy specifically, and relatively few focus on financial institutions. For instance, Ajayi and Mmutle's (2021) South African study represents one of the few African investigations but includes only one banking organisation among its sample of ten institutions. Consequently, relatively little is known about how African banks strategically communicate CSR or the organisational considerations influencing these decisions.

The preceding review identifies four important gaps in existing scholarship. First, empirical evidence remains heavily concentrated in Europe, North America and Asia, leaving African contexts comparatively underexplored. Second, limited attention has been devoted specifically to the banking sector, despite banks' dependence on reputation, legitimacy, and stakeholder trust. Third, existing research explains what communication strategies organisations employ but provides comparatively little understanding of why organisations choose particular strategies. Finally, previous studies rarely integrate organisational perspectives with observed communication practices through multi-method designs. The present study addresses these gaps by examining the CSR communication strategies of Nigeria's most reputable banks through interviews with senior communication executives, combined with qualitative content analysis of annual reports and Facebook CSR communications. In doing so, it contributes empirical evidence from an underrepresented context while providing a more comprehensive explanation of both the adoption and organisational drivers of CSR communication strategies.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study employed a descriptive design, which is a qualitative design (Locke et al., 2013; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). However, to ensure a thorough and rigorous assessment of the CSR communication strategies of the banks, multiple research methods were used to investigate the research questions. The methods are in-depth interviews with senior executives of the selected banks, detailed analysis of their annual reports, and analysis of their Facebook CSR communication. The annual reports were analysed to obtain any formal self-professed approach to CSR communication as disclosed by the banks themselves. The Facebook CSR posts were analysed to independently assess the banks' actual CSR communication practices. Finally, the interviews aimed to understand the rationale for the chosen CSR communication strategies and to obtain further insights from the perspectives of the bank executives responsible for CSR and communication.

4.2. Population and Sampling Procedure

Given the objective of the present study to investigate the CSR communication strategies of the most reputable banks in Nigeria, the population is restricted to these banks only. Thus, a purposive sampling technique was used for the study. The most reputable Nigerian banks are also the top five in terms of total assets, tier-1 capital, customer base, and profitability (Minney, 2024; Ibemere,

2024; ARISE NEWS, 2024; Nairametrics, 2022). These are Zenith Bank, Access Bank, Guaranty Trust Bank (GTCO), First Bank of Nigeria, and United Bank for Africa (UBA). They are Nigeria's major Tier 1 banks, each with assets well above 10 trillion naira. In terms of the number of banks in Nigeria, these top five banks constitute less than 20% of the commercial banks. Nonetheless, they account for about 80% of the total assets of all the banks. They are particularly suited for the present study because they are also Nigeria's top five spenders on CSR (Nairametrics, 2021). Three of these top five – Zenith Bank, First Bank, and Access Bank – were selected for the study.

4.3. Data Collection Procedures

The banks' annual reports for 2024 and 2025 were analysed to obtain part of the necessary data to address the research questions. Annual reports were incorporated as a complementary documentary data source to triangulate the banks' public CSR communication with their stated governance arrangements, stakeholder-management claims, and reported social outcomes. The reports were not treated as equivalent to Facebook communication. Because the annual-report genre is primarily disclosure-oriented, its contents were analysed separately before cross-channel comparison. Each relevant disclosure and Facebook post was coded as informing, engaging, or hybrid, using a common codebook. The Facebook posts were extracted manually by the researcher in collaboration with a research assistant. Message extraction was done bi-monthly to obtain all new posts up to that point. To obtain sufficient data for the study, the banks' Facebook posts for 12 months were collected. The period chosen was September 2024 to August 2025. The goal was to identify the extent to which the banks' CSR posts aligned with informing or engaging CSR communication strategy. A disclosure, on Facebook or in the annual report, was classified as engaging only if it provided evidence of stakeholder consultation, participation, responsiveness, co-creation, or feedback that influenced CSR-related decisions or actions. Generic references to stakeholder engagement were considered as claims rather than evidence of dialogic communication.

Given that the unit of analysis for the study is the bank as an entity rather than individual employees, the elite key-informant approach was adopted to interview one authoritative voice per bank (Dexter, 2014; Herzog & Ali, 2015). Such an interviewee should provide perspectives that represent the bank's strategic orientation rather than personal opinions. It was also necessary to interview an executive who is responsible for and understands both CSR and communication at each bank. As a result, the head of corporate communication was interviewed in each bank. For their respective banks, the head of corporate communication was responsible for functions such as CSR, branding, sustainability, ESG, internal & external communication, media relations, event management, and sponsorship. The interviews were conducted between 12th November and 17th December 2025. Since the interviews were semi-structured and the resultant data were qualitative, a thematic analysis was adopted. The themes were further refined deductively to align with the research questions. To address RQ1, the interview data were compared with data from the annual

reports and Facebook. In addressing RQ2, the interview data were used to explain the organizational factors underlying the observed strategy selection. Findings were integrated through bank-level joint displays that compared formal disclosures through annual reports, Facebook practices, and interview accounts.

5. Findings

This study investigated the CSR communication strategies adopted by Nigeria's most reputable banks and the organisational considerations underlying those strategic choices. Drawing on qualitative content analysis of annual reports and Facebook CSR communications, complemented by elite interviews with the heads of corporate communication of the selected banks, the findings provide a triangulated assessment of both observable communication practices and the organisational rationales that inform them. The presentation of the findings follows the research questions. First, evidence from annual reports and Facebook communications is examined to determine the extent to which the banks relied on informing and engaging CSR communication strategies. Subsequently, interview findings are presented to explain the organisational factors influencing the selection of these communication approaches.

RQ1: To what extent do Nigeria's most reputable banks rely on diverse CSR communication strategies?

Across the three data sources, the findings consistently indicate that Nigeria's most reputable banks rely predominantly on the informing CSR communication strategy. Although evidence of the engaging strategy was identified, particularly in selected Facebook posts and in the interview accounts, such instances were comparatively limited and rarely demonstrated sustained stakeholder participation throughout the planning, implementation, and evaluation of CSR initiatives. Rather, the banks' communication efforts were primarily directed towards publicising completed CSR activities, demonstrating organisational commitment to responsible business practices, and enhancing stakeholder awareness of their social investments. This pattern was consistently observed in the annual reports, Facebook CSR communications, and interviews with senior communication executives, thereby providing strong triangulated evidence of the predominance of one-way CSR communication.

5.1 Formal CSR Disclosure in Corporate Reporting

The analysis of the annual reports revealed that formal corporate reporting serves primarily as a vehicle for informing stakeholders about CSR activities rather than demonstrating evidence of dialogic engagement. Across the three banks, CSR disclosures predominantly documented philanthropic initiatives, sustainability programmes, environmental interventions, employee volunteering activities, governance commitments, partnerships, awards, and social impact achievements. These disclosures collectively portrayed the organisations as socially responsible institutions committed to sustainable development. However, they provided comparatively little

evidence that beneficiaries or external communities participated meaningfully in identifying social needs, shaping CSR programmes, or evaluating their outcomes.

Access Bank and FirstBank exhibited particularly strong disclosure-oriented approaches. Their reports provided extensive descriptions of CSR initiatives undertaken during the reporting periods, including programme objectives, implementation activities, beneficiary groups, partnerships, and measurable outputs. The disclosures successfully communicated the breadth of the banks' CSR portfolios and reinforced their commitment to responsible corporate citizenship. Nevertheless, the reports rarely explained how stakeholder perspectives influenced the design or implementation of those initiatives. Instead, communication largely flowed from the organisation to its stakeholders through narrative descriptions of completed activities.

For example, FirstBank reported the deployment of a bank-wide sustainability awareness programme designed to improve employees' knowledge of sustainability issues. Similarly, the bank highlighted the launch of an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) podcast intended to address contemporary sustainability issues. While these initiatives demonstrate active CSR communication, they primarily serve to disseminate organisational perspectives rather than facilitate reciprocal dialogue with external stakeholders. The annual report did not provide evidence that these communication platforms systematically incorporated stakeholder feedback into subsequent CSR decision-making.

Zenith Bank presented a pattern broadly similar to that of the other banks. Although the bank's annual report referred to a "participatory process" underpinning aspects of its CSR activities, it offered limited evidence of how this participation occurred or how stakeholder contributions influenced programme development. Consequently, while the disclosure suggested an orientation towards stakeholder engagement, the absence of concrete examples meant the reported communication remained largely consistent with an informing rather than an engaging strategy.

A notable observation across all three annual reports was the distinction between stakeholder engagement as a governance principle and engaging CSR communication as conceptualised by Morsing (2006). References to stakeholder engagement frequently appeared within discussions of corporate governance, regulatory compliance, employee development, investor relations, or sustainability management. Such disclosures demonstrate that the banks recognise the importance of maintaining relationships with multiple stakeholder groups. However, within the specific context of CSR communication, these references seldom provided evidence that intended beneficiaries participated in determining community priorities, co-designing CSR initiatives, or providing feedback that subsequently shaped organisational decisions. Consequently, the reports reflected institutional commitments to stakeholder management but did not necessarily demonstrate the dialogic communication processes characteristic of an engaging CSR communication strategy.

Overall, the annual reports projected carefully managed corporate narratives emphasising transparency, accountability, and social responsibility. Their principal communicative function was to document organisational achievements and demonstrate responsible corporate conduct to shareholders, regulators, investors, and other external audiences. Consistent with the disclosure-oriented nature of annual reports, communication remained overwhelmingly organisation-centred, with limited evidence of reciprocal interaction between the banks and the ultimate beneficiaries of their CSR programmes. Taken together, the annual report findings indicate that formal corporate reporting functions primarily as an institutional mechanism for informing stakeholders about CSR performance rather than as a platform for sustained stakeholder dialogue.

This conclusion aligns closely with the broader pattern observed across the study. While all three banks publicly emphasised their commitment to stakeholder engagement and responsible corporate citizenship, the documentary evidence suggests that formal CSR disclosure continues to privilege information dissemination over collaborative communication. Consequently, the annual reports provide the first strand of evidence supporting the conclusion that informing remains the dominant CSR communication strategy among Nigeria's most reputable banks, a pattern examined further in the next subsection through the banks' Facebook CSR communications.

5.2 CSR Communication in Practice on Facebook

While the annual reports provided insight into the banks' formal and self-professed approach to CSR communication, analysis of their Facebook CSR posts offered an opportunity to observe how these organisations communicated their social responsibility initiatives in a more dynamic public environment. Unlike annual reports, social media platforms provide affordances for dialogue, immediate feedback, and stakeholder participation. Consequently, Facebook communication provides a useful basis for assessing whether the banks capitalise on these interactive capabilities or continue to rely primarily on one-way communication.

The analysis revealed that the banks employed both informing and engaging CSR communication strategies on Facebook. However, consistent with the evidence from the annual reports, the informing strategy overwhelmingly predominated. Most CSR-related posts served to publicise completed initiatives, celebrate beneficiaries, showcase partnerships, document employee volunteerism, report sponsorships, and highlight the social impact of the banks' interventions. Although these posts increased public awareness of the organisations' CSR activities, relatively few demonstrated the dialogic characteristics associated with an engaging communication strategy.

Across the three banks, Facebook functioned principally as a platform for communicating organisational accomplishments rather than facilitating stakeholder dialogue. The overwhelming majority of CSR posts reported activities that had already been completed and presented the banks as responsible corporate citizens committed to social development. These communications

typically emphasised programme outcomes, beneficiary success stories, institutional partnerships, and visual evidence of project implementation. Consequently, stakeholders were positioned primarily as recipients of organisational benevolence rather than as active participants in the identification, design, implementation, or evaluation of CSR initiatives.

This pattern was particularly evident in Access Bank's Facebook communication. The bank regularly showcased entrepreneurship programmes, educational initiatives, healthcare campaigns, community development projects, and youth empowerment activities. For example, posts relating to the *Accesspreneur* programme celebrated successful participants during events organised across National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) orientation camps, while other posts documented initiatives such as the *Womenpreneur Pitch-a-ton*, support for sickle-cell awareness during the *Access Bank Lagos City Marathon*, the British Council Recognition and Outstanding Cambridge Learner Awards, and skills acquisition programmes for market traders. Although these communications demonstrated investment in community development, they were primarily retrospective accounts celebrating completed programmes and successful beneficiaries. None of these posts invited discussion regarding community priorities, sought stakeholder feedback, or encouraged collaborative decision-making concerning future CSR activities.

FirstBank exhibited a comparable communication pattern. Its Facebook posts predominantly documented partnerships, sponsorships, charitable donations, employee volunteering activities, environmental sustainability programmes, and outreach initiatives undertaken during the bank's *Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability Week*. Similarly, messages associated with the bank's *Start Performing Acts of Random Kindness (SPARK)* initiative focused on reporting visits to vulnerable communities, donations to charitable institutions, and employee-led volunteer activities. Rather than encouraging stakeholder dialogue, these posts primarily communicated evidence of the bank's social contributions through photographs accompanied by brief descriptive narratives.

Zenith Bank likewise relied predominantly on disclosure-oriented communication. Its CSR-related Facebook posts documented sponsorship of sporting events, educational initiatives, healthcare interventions, and other philanthropic activities, including support for the *Nigerian Basketball Federation Women's League*. As observed with the other participating banks, these communications were principally designed to publicise completed CSR initiatives and reinforce the bank's reputation as a socially responsible institution. Opportunities for followers to influence future CSR activities or participate in dialogue surrounding community needs were rarely evident.

An important characteristic common to the Facebook communication of all three banks was the dominant use of visual storytelling. Most CSR posts consisted primarily of photographs documenting completed activities, accompanied by relatively brief explanatory captions. The images frequently depicted beneficiaries receiving donations, bank officials interacting with community members, employee volunteers participating in outreach activities, or ceremonial

presentations associated with sponsorship programmes. While such visual communication effectively demonstrated organisational involvement in CSR initiatives and strengthened message credibility, it simultaneously reinforced the one-way nature of communication by emphasising documentation rather than dialogue. In effect, Facebook was utilised more as a digital showcase of CSR achievements than as an interactive forum for stakeholder engagement.

Consequently, the Facebook analysis indicates that the banks primarily employed social media to extend the reach of their informing communication strategy rather than to exploit the interactive affordances that distinguish digital communication platforms. Although Facebook inherently enables comments, discussion, feedback, and ongoing interaction between organisations and stakeholders, relatively few CSR posts were deliberately structured to encourage such engagement.

Nevertheless, evidence of the engaging communication strategy was not entirely absent. A small number of Facebook posts explicitly invited stakeholders to participate in CSR-related initiatives. These communications differed from the dominant disclosure-oriented pattern because they encouraged prospective beneficiaries or participants to take part in programmes sponsored by the banks rather than merely informing audiences that such programmes had occurred.

One illustration was Access Bank's promotion of the *Access ART X Prize*, which invited emerging artists to submit entries for a competition sponsored by the bank. Rather than simply announcing its sponsorship of the initiative, the post directly appealed to artists to participate. The post read: *"CALLING ALL EMERGING ARTISTS!... The Access ART X Prize is OPEN for entries... Showcase your talent and creativity at ART X Lagos... Don't miss the opportunity to make your mark in the art world!"*

Unlike the disclosure-oriented posts discussed earlier, this communication incorporated an explicit invitation for stakeholder participation. Similarly, *Access Bank's Business Clinic* campaign encouraged small and medium-sized enterprises to register for free business consultations and professional advisory services. Rather than reporting a completed programme, the communication invited prospective beneficiaries to become active participants by registering for the initiative. Zenith Bank demonstrated a comparable approach by inviting entrepreneurs to enrol in its *SME Scale-Up Boot Camp*.

Although these examples exhibit characteristics associated with the engaging strategy, they nevertheless represent a relatively limited form of engagement. The invitations encouraged participation in pre-designed programmes but did not demonstrate that stakeholders had contributed to identifying community priorities, shaping programme objectives, or influencing organisational decision-making. Consequently, the observed engagement was largely participatory rather than dialogic. Stakeholders were invited to participate in activities designed by the banks, but evidence that their perspectives informed the conception or evolution of those activities remained limited.

The presence of these posts also suggests that informing and engaging communication strategies should not necessarily be viewed as mutually exclusive categories. Some Facebook messages simultaneously communicated information about a CSR initiative while inviting stakeholders to register, apply, or participate. These hybrid messages indicate that elements of both strategies can coexist within a single communication. Nevertheless, within the overall dataset, such hybrid posts constituted a relatively small proportion of the banks' CSR communication and did not alter the dominant pattern of one-way information dissemination.

Taken together, the Facebook findings reinforce and extend the conclusions drawn from the annual reports. Despite operating on a platform specifically designed to facilitate interaction and dialogue, the banks continued to rely primarily on communication that publicised CSR achievements rather than fostering sustained stakeholder engagement. The consistency of this pattern across both formal corporate reporting and social media communication provides strong triangulated evidence that informing remains the dominant CSR communication strategy among Nigeria's most reputable banks. The next section draws on the interview data to explain the organisational considerations that underpin this strategic preference.

5.3 Organisational Rationales for CSR Communication Strategy Selection

The interview findings provide important explanatory insights into the strategic considerations underlying the communication patterns observed in the annual reports and Facebook analyses. While the documentary evidence established that the participating banks relied predominantly on the informing CSR communication strategy, the interviews explain *why* this preference persists despite the growing scholarly advocacy for more dialogic stakeholder engagement. Three interrelated themes emerged consistently across the interviews: reputation management as the primary communication objective, institutional conservatism in corporate communication, and resource constraints associated with more intensive stakeholder engagement. Collectively, these themes explain why the banks continue to favour predominantly one-way CSR communication while selectively incorporating limited forms of stakeholder engagement.

RQ2: What factors influence CSR communication strategy selection in Nigeria's most reputable banks?

5.3.1 Reputation management as the primary communication objective

The most consistent explanation offered by the interviewees concerned the strategic objectives of CSR communication itself. Across all three banks, CSR communication was viewed primarily as a mechanism for strengthening corporate reputation and reinforcing organisational legitimacy rather than as an end in itself. Consequently, communication activities were deliberately designed to increase stakeholder awareness of the banks' social investments and to enhance favourable perceptions among key stakeholder groups.

One interviewee explained this objective succinctly: *"The primary goal is to project the brand... Our CSR is not an isolated activity as a strategy. It is embedded... as one of the cardinal points... of projecting the brand."* A second executive similarly emphasised the reputational dividends expected from CSR communication: *"... sustainability and social impact are ingrained into our corporate philosophy... it has endeared brand love to us, brand equity... improved our reputation across the communities where we operate, and also bolster our reputation before investors, DFIs, and regulators."*

The third interviewee likewise identified enhanced organisational reputation as the principal motivation for communicating CSR initiatives, while extending the rationale to include broader strategic objectives such as attracting investors, creating stakeholder value, and mitigating regulatory risk. As the executive explained: *"While we communicate our sustainability initiatives to our stakeholders to enhance our brand reputation, this also underpins the need to create value for our stakeholders... attract investors and mitigate regulatory and other risks."*

These responses demonstrate a remarkable degree of convergence across the participating banks. Rather than viewing CSR communication primarily as a process of collaborative stakeholder dialogue, the interviewees consistently framed it as a strategic communication function supporting broader organisational objectives. Reputation enhancement emerged as the dominant motivation, complemented by goals such as strengthening stakeholder confidence, attracting investment, complying with regulatory expectations, and reinforcing organisational legitimacy. In this sense, CSR communication functions as an integral component of corporate branding and strategic communication rather than as a standalone CSR activity.

It is noteworthy that this emphasis on reputation management helps explain the predominance of the informing strategy observed across the documentary evidence. If the principal objective of communication is to increase awareness of organisational achievements and reinforce favourable corporate perceptions, then one-way dissemination of carefully curated CSR information becomes a strategically rational communication choice. The interview findings, therefore, provide an organisational explanation for the disclosure-oriented communication practices identified in both the annual reports and Facebook analyses.

5.3.2 Institutional conservatism and organisational communication culture

A second theme that emerged consistently from the interviews concerns the influence of institutional culture on CSR communication strategy selection. The interviewees repeatedly described their organisations, and the Nigerian banking sector in general, as inherently conservative. This conservatism was portrayed not simply as a characteristic of CSR communication but as a broader organisational philosophy shaping all aspects of external communication.

One executive explained that their bank is: *"... a very conservative financial institution. And, because of that, that culture of conservatism permeates the entire fabric of our communication... We are not aggressive ..."* The interviewee further noted that this conservative orientation influenced decisions regarding the communication of CSR initiatives. Rather than promoting CSR aggressively through dedicated campaigns or paid advertising, the bank preferred to integrate CSR messages into its broader corporate branding activities. Consequently, CSR communication was positioned as part of the institution's overall corporate identity rather than as an independent promotional activity.

A second interviewee expressed a similar philosophy, arguing that the credibility of CSR communication is enhanced when positive narratives originate from beneficiaries or independent third parties rather than from the organisation itself. According to them: *"...we prefer those stories about the amazing things we do, coming from our customers, coming from the people who benefited from what we do, coming from third parties... I think financial institutions, generally, are expected to be conservative."*

Although the third bank adopted a slightly less restrictive approach by acknowledging the occasional use of paid advertising for major CSR initiatives, its communication philosophy similarly reflected a preference for integrating CSR within broader corporate messaging: *"...we weave the impact of our initiatives into the larger messaging of the brand. We use paid advertising occasionally to highlight specific initiatives when the project is large-scale, but usually, Sustainability/ESG is integrated into broader brand campaigns and reports."*

Collectively, these responses indicate that organisational culture exerts a significant influence on CSR communication strategy selection. Rather than aggressively promoting CSR initiatives or pursuing highly interactive communication campaigns, the participating banks deliberately favour measured, institutionally consistent communication that aligns with the conservative norms traditionally associated with the banking industry. This communication philosophy naturally reinforces the predominance of the informing strategy, since information dissemination through annual reports, corporate websites, news releases, and carefully managed social media content is perceived as more consistent with institutional expectations than continuous public dialogue.

5.3.3 Resource considerations and the cost of stakeholder engagement

The third major theme relates to the practical resource implications of implementing more extensive stakeholder engagement. While the interviewees generally recognised the value of engaging stakeholders throughout the CSR process, they acknowledged that meaningful dialogue requires considerable organisational resources. Consequently, financial and operational considerations frequently constrain the adoption of more participatory communication approaches.

One executive explained that securing adequate funding for CSR communication is often challenging because internal stakeholders tend to focus primarily on the direct costs of implementing CSR projects rather than on communicating their impact:

"The challenge is budgetary constraints... many people do not understand, within the bank, the value of CSR projects, and you will not blame them so much. As the economy gets harder... we need much more than ever to justify CSR spending, CSR communication and all activities around our CSR... sometimes, it is a big challenge explaining adequate budgetary provision for these efforts."

This observation suggests that communication activities themselves compete for limited organisational resources. Once substantial financial investments have already been committed to implementing CSR programmes, obtaining additional resources for stakeholder consultation, community meetings, continuous engagement, monitoring, and feedback mechanisms becomes considerably more difficult. As a result, organisations may rationally favour communication approaches that efficiently publicise completed initiatives rather than more resource-intensive engagement processes extending throughout the programme lifecycle.

The implications of this constraint are particularly important for understanding the communication patterns identified in the documentary analyses. Meaningful stakeholder engagement often requires repeated consultations, community needs assessments, participatory planning sessions, monitoring activities, evaluation meetings, and mechanisms for incorporating stakeholder feedback into organisational decision-making. Such activities inevitably demand greater investments of time, personnel, logistics, and financial resources than producing annual report disclosures or social media posts announcing completed CSR initiatives. Consequently, resource limitations reinforce the strategic preference for communication approaches centred on information dissemination rather than sustained stakeholder dialogue.

5.4 Cross-Method Integration and Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the interview findings provide a coherent organisational explanation for the communication patterns observed across the annual reports and Facebook analyses. Although the participating banks acknowledged the value of stakeholder engagement and described instances of consultation with regulators, investors, implementing partners, government agencies, and non-governmental organisations, these interactions were generally concentrated among institutional stakeholders responsible for governance, regulation, funding, or programme implementation rather than the ultimate beneficiaries of CSR initiatives.

Accordingly, the interviews complement rather than contradict the documentary evidence. The annual reports and Facebook posts demonstrate that informing communication predominates in observable organisational practice, while the interviews explain why this strategic preference persists. Reputation management provides the primary strategic objective, organisational

conservatism shapes communication philosophy, and resource constraints limit opportunities for sustained stakeholder dialogue. Together, these organisational considerations help explain why the banks continue to rely predominantly on one-way CSR communication despite increasing scholarly advocacy for more participatory approaches.

Collectively, the findings from all three data sources converge on the same conclusion. Nigeria's most reputable banks have incorporated elements of stakeholder engagement into selected aspects of their CSR activities. However, their overall communication remains firmly anchored in the informing strategy. The evidence therefore suggests that the principal challenge is not a lack of organisational commitment to CSR, but the limited translation of stakeholder engagement principles into consistently dialogic CSR communication practices. This integrated finding provides the foundation for the discussion that follows, where the results are interpreted in relation to stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and the broader CSR communication literature.

6. Discussion

This study sought to determine the extent to which Nigeria's most reputable banks rely on diverse CSR communication strategies and to explain the organisational factors shaping those choices. Across the three data sources, the findings consistently indicate that the banks remain largely positioned at the *"inform button"* of CSR communication. Although elements of stakeholder engagement were evident, particularly on Facebook and in interview accounts, communication was overwhelmingly characterised by one-way dissemination of information rather than sustained dialogue. The convergence of evidence across annual reports, Facebook communications, and executive interviews strengthens confidence in this conclusion and demonstrates the value of the study's multi-method design.

The predominance of the informing strategy corroborates a growing body of scholarship showing that organisations continue to favour disclosure-oriented CSR communication despite sustained advocacy for dialogic engagement (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021; Roy & Quazi, 2022; Zhang, 2025). While previous studies have documented this pattern through surveys, experiments, or content analyses, the present study advances the literature by demonstrating not only *what* communication strategy Nigerian banks employ but also *why* they do so. The interview findings reveal that the preference for informing is neither accidental nor merely a consequence of communication habits. Instead, it reflects deliberate strategic choices shaped by organisational priorities and institutional realities. Thus, Nigerian banks can be said to exhibit strategic dialogic restraint. This implies that they selectively engage only when it advances their reputation, while retaining overall control of the CSR narrative.

The findings also provide nuanced insights into stakeholder theory. The banks clearly recognise the importance of multiple stakeholders and communicate CSR to strengthen relationships with customers, investors, regulators, employees, and communities. However, stakeholder participation

is concentrated primarily among institutional actors involved in governance and programme implementation, while intended beneficiaries remain largely recipients of CSR communication rather than co-creators of CSR initiatives. Consequently, the study suggests that stakeholder theory is only partially realised in practice. Organisations acknowledge the stakeholders conceptually, yet the dialogic engagement envisaged by Morsing (2006) remains limited. Thus, stakeholder management appears stronger than stakeholder participation.

Similarly, the findings reinforce legitimacy theory. The interviewees consistently framed CSR communication as a mechanism for protecting organisational reputation, strengthening public confidence, attracting investment, and demonstrating responsible corporate citizenship. These motivations explain why carefully managed, one-way communication remains attractive. Rather than facilitating open-ended dialogue, the informing strategy enables organisations to exercise greater control over CSR narratives while signalling conformity with societal expectations. The findings therefore support legitimacy theory's proposition that organisations communicate CSR to maintain their social licence to operate. At the same time, they extend the theory by demonstrating that organisational culture and resource constraints mediate the pursuit of legitimacy through communication.

Perhaps the most important implication of this study is that the challenge facing Nigerian banks is not insufficient CSR activity but an incomplete transition beyond the *"inform button."* The interactive affordances of digital platforms such as Facebook remain underutilised for dialogue, consultation, and collaborative decision-making. Consequently, the banks risk limiting the relationship-building potential that scholars increasingly regard as the distinguishing value of strategic CSR communication.

7 Conclusion and Recommendations

In view of the foregoing, this study concludes as follows and further provides the corresponding recommendations below.

7.1 Conclusion

This study examined the CSR communication strategies of Nigeria's most reputable banks using a multi-method design that integrated qualitative analyses of annual reports, Facebook CSR communications, and interviews with senior corporate communication executives. The findings consistently demonstrate that while the banks employ both informing and engaging CSR communication strategies, the informing strategy remains dominant across formal reporting and digital communication channels. Although examples of stakeholder participation were identified, these were generally limited to participation in pre-designed initiatives rather than genuine dialogue or co-creation.

Beyond identifying the prevailing communication strategy, the study explains why this pattern persists. Reputation management emerged as the principal driver of CSR communication, while

organisational conservatism and budgetary constraints further reinforced the preference for carefully managed, one-way communication. These findings contribute to CSR communication scholarship by extending evidence from an underrepresented African context and by demonstrating how organisational realities mediate the translation of stakeholder and legitimacy theories into communication practice.

The "*inform button*" metaphor encapsulates the central conclusion of this study. Nigeria's leading banks have successfully developed sophisticated mechanisms for communicating their CSR achievements, yet they have not fully progressed beyond informing to sustained stakeholder dialogue regarding the beneficiaries of their CSR programmes. As digital communication increasingly privileges participation, organisations that remain anchored primarily at the inform button may forgo opportunities to deepen stakeholder relationships, strengthen legitimacy, and enhance the long-term reputational value of their CSR investments.

7.2 Recommendations

The findings suggest that Nigeria's most reputable banks should progressively move beyond the "inform button" by complementing effective information dissemination with more deliberate stakeholder engagement. Notwithstanding the identified constraints, banks can do more to improve dialogic communication with the beneficiaries of their CSR activities. Rather than relying predominantly on retrospective reporting of completed CSR initiatives, communication strategies should incorporate mechanisms that enable stakeholders to contribute to identifying community priorities, shaping programme design, and evaluating outcomes. Such dialogue would better align CSR communication with the principles of stakeholder theory and strengthen organisational legitimacy.

Communication practitioners should also exploit the interactive capabilities of social media more strategically. Features such as polls, moderated discussions, feedback sessions, and participatory digital campaigns can transform social media from a showcase of CSR achievements into a platform for sustained stakeholder relationships. At the organisational level, management should recognise stakeholder engagement as a strategic investment rather than merely an additional communication cost by allocating adequate resources to dialogic CSR communication.

Finally, future research should examine whether similar communication patterns exist in other African industries and countries and investigate how stakeholders themselves perceive the effectiveness of informing and engaging CSR communication strategies. Comparative and longitudinal studies would further illuminate whether organisations are gradually moving beyond the inform button towards genuinely participatory CSR communication.

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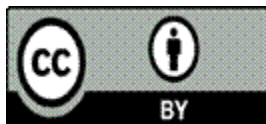
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