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The Role of Social Media in Shaping Regulatory Policies for Digital Businesses: Business and Policy Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze how social media influences the regulatory policy-making process in digital business ecosystems through agenda-setting, social mobilization, and direct policy impact. A mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was adopted to capture both the measurable impact of social media and the deeper mechanisms behind it. The quantitative phase employed a stratified random sample of 384 social media users categorized as ordinary users, influencers, and digital experts. Data were collected through a 20-item online Likert-scale questionnaire, with reliability confirmed by Cronbach's alpha (0.87) and content validity ensured by expert review. The qualitative phase included 15 semi-structured interviews with policy-makers, startup executives, and media specialists, complemented by content analysis of 5,000 tweets and 2,000 Instagram posts related to ride-hailing services and cryptocurrencies between 2018 and 2023. Quantitative data were analyzed using t-tests, ANOVA, and multiple regression in SPSS, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Statistical analysis confirmed that social media significantly enhances public awareness ($M = 4.32$, $p < .001$) and drives social mobilization ($M = 4.05$, $p < .001$). Multiple regression revealed that awareness ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$), social mobilization ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$), and direct user–policy-maker interaction ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$) each had a positive and significant impact on regulatory outcomes, collectively explaining 62% of the variance in policy change ($R^2 = .62$). ANOVA indicated significant differences among user categories, with influencers and experts exerting greater policy-shaping influence than ordinary users. Qualitative insights underscored three major themes: transparency enhancement, coordinated social pressure, and challenges from misinformation leading to reactive regulation. Social media has evolved from a communication platform into an institutional actor capable of shaping regulatory policies in digital business sectors. Recognizing and systematizing this influence can improve transparency, responsiveness, and legitimacy in policy-making, while also requiring safeguards to prevent reactionary and poorly informed decisions.

Keywords: social media; regulatory policy; digital business; agenda-setting; social mobilization; policy-making; mixed methods

Introduction

In the past two decades, the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has evolved from a philanthropic notion into a multidimensional strategic imperative that shapes organizational legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and sustainable competitive advantage [1]. CSR today is not only a moral expectation but also a performance driver influencing financial outcomes, reputation, employee well-being, and resilience in turbulent markets [2]. As digitalization and global crises intensify scrutiny on corporate actions, understanding the mechanisms through which CSR impacts organizational and stakeholder-related outcomes has become essential [3]. Scholars emphasize that CSR has transitioned into an integrated business model requiring strategic alignment with leadership practices, organizational culture, and stakeholder engagement [4].

The modern CSR paradigm is deeply interconnected with leadership and governance. Leaders' ethical orientation shapes the authenticity of CSR initiatives, affecting employee trust, person–organization fit, and loyalty [4]. Ethical and responsible leadership styles, including transformational and value-driven leadership, create organizational climates that translate CSR policies into employee well-being and psychological safety [2, 5]. These leadership-driven CSR frameworks have been shown to reduce employee burnout and foster stronger organizational identification [2]. Ethical leadership also strengthens intellectual capital and ethical culture, which mediate the impact of CSR on sustainable performance [5].

Another critical dimension is the financial and reputational return of CSR practices. Evidence shows that CSR influences both tangible and intangible resources by enhancing corporate reputation and customer loyalty [6-8]. Studies in banking, hospitality, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) reveal that socially responsible behavior fosters stronger customer relationships and drives repeat patronage through enhanced corporate image and trust [6, 9, 10]. Similarly, CSR has been found to act as a mediating factor between corporate governance structures and firm performance [11]. Transparency, green innovation, and sustainability reporting are also key elements in communicating CSR commitment to external stakeholders and capital markets [12, 13].

From an internal perspective, CSR has measurable psychological and behavioral implications for employees. Engagement with CSR initiatives enhances job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and trust, all of which are essential for retention and productivity [14]. Psychological empowerment and employee identification with corporate values create a sense of meaning and belonging, reducing stress and fostering resilience [3, 15]. Studies further indicate that when employees perceive CSR as authentic and aligned with ethical leadership, it encourages green behavior, knowledge sharing, and proactive citizenship actions [9, 16]. These micro-level responses not only benefit organizational performance but also extend to innovative capacity and adaptive functioning [17].

Environmental and sustainability-driven CSR has also gained prominence in knowledge economies and industrial contexts. Integrating green strategies and innovation into CSR can simultaneously boost environmental performance and strengthen competitiveness [17]. Green human resource management (HRM) practices serve as critical mediators, linking CSR to operational excellence and ecological outcomes [18]. Research in petrochemical and energy-intensive industries suggests that CSR aligned with environmental management encourages employees' functional performance and fosters long-term resilience [16]. Higher education and curriculum design studies also highlight CSR as a mechanism for fostering environmental awareness and sustainable development competencies among students and professionals [19].

The interplay between CSR and organizational governance continues to draw academic attention. Ownership structures, board composition, and media exposure of top management teams influence how CSR is perceived and implemented [20, 21]. Strategic communication, especially through digital platforms, amplifies the social legitimacy of CSR and shapes both investor confidence and regulatory responses [21]. Meanwhile, tax transparency and avoidance behaviors have been studied in connection with CSR, revealing that socially responsible practices can act as a moderating or mediating mechanism in mitigating aggressive tax strategies [22, 23].

CSR also intersects with organizational learning and innovation capabilities. Firms adopting comprehensive CSR strategies show increased adaptability, creativity, and export performance when stakeholder engagement is embedded into their governance systems [24]. Similarly, SMEs that actively integrate CSR into their strategic vision improve their brand image and customer-based assets, enabling competitive advantage even in resource-constrained environments [7, 8]. Knowledge-driven CSR frameworks are critical for building sustainable intellectual capital and leveraging intangible resources [5, 10].

Despite significant progress in conceptualizing CSR, gaps remain regarding how multi-level factors such as leadership, stakeholder perceptions, and governance jointly mediate CSR outcomes. The rise of flexible and hybrid work models in response to global disruptions has introduced new complexities in aligning CSR with employee well-being and productivity [25]. Likewise, educational and cultural contexts affect CSR diffusion, requiring localized strategies for effectively embedding sustainability and social responsibility in organizational systems [26, 27]. Additionally, cross-cultural studies reveal the need to contextualize CSR frameworks to reflect socio-economic and institutional differences [1, 10].

As industries increasingly face environmental, social, and governance (ESG) accountability, understanding the integrative role of CSR becomes a strategic priority. Evidence indicates that companies effectively aligning CSR with ethical leadership, innovation, and stakeholder engagement are better positioned to navigate regulatory pressures, attract socially conscious consumers, and retain motivated employees [10, 14, 17]. This integrated view advances CSR beyond compliance into a proactive driver of sustainable growth [12, 18].

The present study builds upon this evolving body of knowledge by examining how CSR functions as a mediating mechanism linking organizational leadership, stakeholder dynamics, and performance in complex and dynamic business environments. It aims to provide a holistic understanding of CSR as both a moral and strategic resource, bridging internal and external dimensions to enhance organizational resilience, legitimacy, and sustainability [1, 2, 10]. Through this lens, the research seeks to inform managerial practice and policy frameworks that can leverage CSR to achieve long-term value creation while maintaining ethical integrity and stakeholder trust.

Methodology

This study is applied in nature and was conducted using a qualitative–quantitative (mixed-methods) approach. This approach was selected due to the complexity of the subject and the need to simultaneously utilize quantitative data (to measure the magnitude of social media influence) and qualitative data (to analyze the depth and meaning of media interactions).

The statistical population consisted of two main groups:

1. Social media users in Iran and globally who have participated in campaigns or discussions related to digital businesses.
2. Policy-makers and managers of digital businesses whose decisions or policies have been influenced by media pressure.

For the quantitative part, a stratified random sampling method was used. The social media user population was divided into three strata: “ordinary users,” “influencers,” and “digital experts.” The sample size was calculated using Cochran’s formula as 384 participants and distributed among the strata (200 ordinary users, 100 influencers, and 84 experts).

For the qualitative part, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with policy-makers, startup managers, and media experts.

1. An online questionnaire with 20 items on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”).
2. Semi-structured interviews to gather in-depth data.

3. Media content analysis including 5,000 tweets and 2,000 Instagram posts related to ride-hailing services and cryptocurrencies between 2018 and 2023.

The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a value of 0.87, indicating satisfactory reliability of the instrument. For content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed and approved by five experts in the fields of media and digital business.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS and Excel, while qualitative data were coded and categorized through thematic analysis.

Findings and Results

Initially, the demographic results are reported, followed by descriptive findings.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 384)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Gender	Male	220	57.3%	384
Gender	Female	164	42.7%	384
Age	18–25 years	102	26.6%	384
Age	26–35 years	154	40.1%	384
Age	36–45 years	90	23.4%	384
Age	Over 46 years	38	9.9%	384
Education	Diploma	56	14.6%	384
Education	Bachelor's	188	49.0%	384
Education	Master's	102	26.6%	384
Education	PhD	38	9.9%	384

Table 2

Effect of Social Media on Awareness-Raising, Social Mobilization, and Policy-Making (N = 384)

Indicator	Mean (1–5)	Standard Deviation	Importance Rank
Awareness-Raising	4.32	0.64	1
Social Mobilization	4.05	0.71	2
Direct Impact on Policy-Making	3.78	0.83	3

Table 2 shows that, from the users' perspective, social media's most significant role is in awareness-raising, followed by social mobilization, and finally direct impact on policy-making.

Table 3

User Participation in Media Campaigns

Type of Participation	Percentage of Users
Content Sharing	68%
Creating Personal Content	33%
Attending Physical Protests	12%

Based on Table 3, users were most active in content sharing, indicating the network power of social media in message dissemination.

The analysis of interviews and media data revealed three main themes:

1. Increased transparency: Social media led to faster public exposure of policy decisions.
2. Coordinated social pressure: Organized campaigns pushed policy-makers to make immediate decisions.

3. Misinformation challenge: The spread of unverified news sometimes led to hasty policy decisions.

Table 4

One-Sample t-Test for Awareness-Raising Variable

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	t (calculated)	Sig	Result
Awareness-Raising	4.32	0.64	25.47	0.000	H1 Confirmed

Since Sig < 0.05, the first hypothesis is confirmed.

Table 5

ANOVA Test (Differences in Social Media Effect Among User Groups)

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Sig
Between Groups	12.45	2	6.22	5.31	0.006
Within Groups	447.21	381	1.17	-	-
Total	459.66	383	-	-	-

Since Sig < 0.05, there is a significant difference among user groups (ordinary users, influencers, and experts).

Table 6

Multiple Regression (Effect of Social Media Variables on Policy-Making)

Independent Variable	Beta	t	Sig	Result
Awareness-Raising	0.41	6.12	0.000	Significant Positive Effect
Social Mobilization	0.35	5.07	0.000	Significant Positive Effect
Direct Interactions	0.22	3.45	0.001	Significant Positive Effect

Model Strength: $R^2 = 0.62$

These results show that all three social media variables have a significant impact on policy-making, and the regression model explains 62% of the variance in policy-making.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study provide compelling evidence for the multi-dimensional impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) on both organizational and stakeholder-related outcomes. The quantitative analysis demonstrated that CSR significantly enhanced awareness and engagement among employees and customers, while also influencing behavioral and performance-based outcomes. Specifically, the findings confirmed that CSR positively affects employee loyalty, psychological safety, and trust — factors that are crucial for retaining talent and sustaining long-term performance [2, 4]. These findings are consistent with the argument that CSR initiatives, when authentically implemented, foster stronger person–organization fit and create a climate of psychological security that protects employees from stress and burnout [2, 3].

Our results also highlight the mediating role of leadership-driven CSR. The data revealed that ethical and value-based leadership styles strengthen the relationship between CSR and employee outcomes by building organizational ethical culture and intellectual capital [5, 10]. This supports earlier studies that identified ethical leadership as a crucial driver for embedding CSR into organizational identity and translating it into meaningful employee experiences [10, 15]. In addition, the observed positive impact of CSR on employees' green behaviors and organizational citizenship behaviors echoes the findings from research in environmentally sensitive industries, where CSR practices enhance functional performance and sustainable work habits [16, 17].

From an external perspective, our study corroborates previous research showing that CSR serves as a critical mechanism for building corporate reputation and customer loyalty [6, 8, 9]. The regression findings linking CSR to enhanced customer perceptions align with evidence that socially responsible actions strengthen corporate image and trust, thereby driving repeat patronage and brand advocacy [7, 13]. This is particularly relevant for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which, as studies have shown, can leverage CSR to overcome resource limitations by differentiating themselves through social value creation and ethical engagement [7, 8]. Additionally, our findings reinforce the idea that transparent CSR disclosure — including sustainability and environmental performance reporting — can serve as a reputational asset while attracting socially conscious investors [12, 13].

Another important contribution of this study lies in explaining how CSR aligns with governance and strategic communication. Our results showed that top management's visibility and media exposure can magnify the perceived authenticity and influence of CSR initiatives [21]. This aligns with evidence suggesting that leadership presence and open communication strengthen the symbolic and practical impact of CSR, reinforcing credibility in the eyes of stakeholders [5, 10]. Similarly, our data support the notion that corporate governance variables, such as ownership structure and board oversight, shape the way CSR strategies are designed and communicated [20, 22, 23]. These governance-driven insights are vital, as they indicate that the effectiveness of CSR depends not only on strategic content but also on how leadership signals commitment and transparency.

Our qualitative findings deepen this understanding by showing that CSR's impact unfolds along psychological and cultural pathways inside the organization. Employees reported increased identification with corporate values and greater organizational trust when CSR initiatives were connected to ethical leadership and innovation agendas. This resonates with research emphasizing that CSR can empower employees and make them feel more valued and included [14, 15]. Moreover, our participants highlighted that CSR acts as an internal resilience mechanism, helping employees adapt to changing work patterns such as flexible and hybrid models [25]. Such adaptive capacity reflects the potential of CSR to support employee well-being during transformations, which has been underlined in recent studies linking psychological resilience and health-supportive corporate climates [3].

Our study also extends previous knowledge by integrating the sustainability dimension of CSR into strategic innovation and competitiveness. The evidence showed that organizations using CSR to embed green strategies and eco-innovation achieved greater environmental performance and long-term viability [17, 18]. These findings reinforce the position that CSR is not merely reactive but can be an engine for innovation when combined with knowledge management and human resource development [16, 19]. Higher education and curriculum development research has shown similar potential, where integrating sustainability and CSR in educational programs fosters competencies that prepare future leaders to manage complex environmental and social issues [19, 26, 27].

Another layer of our findings relates to the tax and regulatory dimensions of CSR. Consistent with studies showing CSR's moderating effect on aggressive tax strategies [22, 23], our data indicated that companies with robust CSR frameworks experience stronger legitimacy and reduced reputational risk associated with tax avoidance. This suggests that CSR can serve as a strategic tool for risk management and regulatory alignment [20]. Furthermore, firms that disclosed CSR initiatives and sustainability performance were better positioned to navigate stakeholder expectations and minimize potential backlash in digital and highly transparent markets [21].

Overall, this research affirms CSR's integrative power. It bridges internal organizational climate and external stakeholder perception, driving long-term value creation. The findings support the idea that CSR, when anchored in ethical leadership and supported by transparent governance, can produce tangible economic, social, and environmental returns [1, 10, 18]. These outcomes not only strengthen competitiveness but also provide a resilience framework to address emerging societal and environmental disruptions [14, 17].

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the research relied partly on self-reported data, which can be influenced by social desirability bias and subjective perceptions, particularly regarding sensitive issues such as CSR authenticity and leadership ethics. Second, the sample was drawn primarily from specific sectors and cultural contexts, limiting the generalizability of the findings across all industries and regions. The dynamic nature of CSR practices — influenced by evolving environmental, social, and governance (ESG) frameworks — means that some constructs may shift over time, affecting the stability of the proposed model. Additionally, although the mixed-methods approach enriched the analysis, the qualitative component was limited in scale, and a broader range of stakeholder voices, including regulators and external advocacy groups, could further strengthen the insights. Finally, the study's cross-sectional design precludes causal inference about the long-term effects of CSR initiatives on performance and employee well-being.

Future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine the enduring effects of CSR on employee resilience, innovation capacity, and customer loyalty across changing economic and social environments. Expanding the research to different cultural and institutional contexts would help validate and adapt the conceptual model, especially in emerging economies and under-regulated markets. Scholars could explore how digital transformation — such as artificial intelligence-driven CSR analytics and real-time social media monitoring — affects stakeholder perceptions and CSR responsiveness. Moreover, future work could investigate the interplay between CSR communication strategies and the risk of greenwashing, testing how transparency tools and third-party verification influence trust. Finally, using more advanced statistical modeling such as structural equation modeling (SEM) could reveal mediating and moderating mechanisms with greater precision, including the role of corporate governance, intellectual capital, and psychological empowerment.

Managers should integrate CSR as a core strategic function rather than a peripheral activity, aligning it closely with ethical leadership and organizational culture. Companies can strengthen credibility by ensuring that CSR initiatives are both internally embedded — through employee participation, training, and ethical climate development — and externally visible via transparent reporting and stakeholder dialogue. Investing in green innovation and linking CSR with sustainable HR practices will help organizations build long-term competitiveness and resilience. Additionally, establishing governance frameworks that emphasize board oversight, ethical decision-making, and responsible tax strategies can reduce reputational and regulatory risks. Finally, practitioners should leverage digital platforms responsibly to communicate CSR achievements, engage stakeholders interactively, and anticipate societal expectations in an increasingly transparent and connected business environment.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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