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Platformed CSR communication in Iran's startup ecosystem: Reputational grammar and engagement networks on LinkedIn

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Abstract

Background: Corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication on professional platforms is shaped by organizational claims and the visible actions of professional audiences.
Aims: The study proposes reputational grammar as a four-part analytic framework for examining how CSR claims become recognizable within a professional platform.
Methodology: This study examines 76 purposively selected CSR-related LinkedIn posts associated with Iran's startup ecosystem and a directed engagement network comprising 5,525 accounts and 5,928 unique account-to-author ties. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four recurrent communicative dimensions: responsibility claims, identity positioning, evidentiary cues, and network uptake. Their configuration is conceptualized as *reputational grammar*, a middle-range framework describing how CSR claims become intelligible and assessable in a professional feed. Likes, comments, reposts, and follower counts are reported separately, without a composite engagement or influence score. Because the graph was seeded from posts selected for comparatively high engagement, focal-author prominence, density, and diameter are interpreted only as properties of the constructed network.
Findings: Communicative forms and observable relations within a visibility-conditioned case set, not the prevalence of CSR themes, population-level brokerage, stakeholder agreement, or substantive CSR performance.
Conclusion: The study contributes a context-sensitive account of digital CSR communication and specifies how platformed visibility can participate in legitimacy work without constituting evidence of legitimacy.

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In Press

Cyberspace Studies, Vol ?, No ?, ????

1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility is communicated increasingly through platform interactions as well as through reports and formal public-relations statements. A LinkedIn post can be endorsed, discussed, or redistributed by employees, founders, consultants, investors, and other professional audiences. These visible acts do not simply extend the reach of an organizational message; they help determine whether a claim of responsibility is recognized as credible, relevant, or opportunistic.

CSR scholarship has long treated responsibility as a combination of economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary obligations (Carroll, 1991). Communication research subsequently emphasized stakeholder interpretation and the difficulty of presenting responsible conduct without appearing self-congratulatory (Du et al., 2010; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Social media intensifies this problem because metrics, algorithmic distribution, and public responses place organizational claims within an observable economy of attention. CSR communication is therefore not a completed message transmitted to a passive audience. It is a relational process in which claims can be endorsed, elaborated, or contested.

LinkedIn is a useful setting for examining this process. The platform is organized around occupational identity, organizational reputation, career visibility, and expert status. Users generally appear as employees, founders, managers, consultants, investors, or civic professionals rather than as an undifferentiated public. An interaction with a CSR post consequently attaches a visible professional identity to the claim and can operate simultaneously as attention, endorsement, and self-positioning.

Startups provide a particularly revealing case. Compared with large corporations, they often have fewer formal CSR routines, more fluid identities, and a stronger dependence on external recognition. CSR may therefore become part of how an entrepreneurial organization presents its maturity, trustworthiness, and social relevance to investors, employees, customers, regulators, and peer communities. Communication does not prove substantive responsibility, but it can make the organization's commitments intelligible to stakeholders.

The Iranian context further conditions this process. CSR remains unevenly institutionalized and is mediated by sectoral culture, managerial interpretation, and local expectations (Farivar & Scott-Ladd, 2016; Nejati & Ghasemi, 2012). Iranian cyberspace research also emphasizes that online and offline social spaces are interdependent rather than separate domains (Ameli & Mohseni Ahooei, 2018; Kosari & Amoori, 2018). LinkedIn-based CSR communication should thus be read as part of a blended professional field connected to workplaces, sectors, educational histories, and economic constraints.

This study asks: How are CSR claims framed in a purposively

In Press

selected set of Iranian startup-related LinkedIn posts, and how is visible engagement arranged around their authors in the constructed graph? Two subquestions guide the analysis: Which themes and communicative objectives recur in the selected posts? What structural properties characterize the graph assembled from visible engagement with those posts? The study does not assess the material adequacy of the initiatives, infer audience motives, estimate the prevalence of CSR communication across Iranian LinkedIn, or identify population-level opinion leaders.

The article makes three contributions. First, it extends digital CSR communication research to an Iranian startup setting that is underrepresented in a literature centered largely on large corporations and Western platform contexts. Second, it integrates reflexive thematic analysis with a deliberately bounded network description, linking communicative meaning to visible interaction while making the sampling effects explicit. Third, it proposes *reputational grammar* as a four-part analytic framework for examining how responsibility claims, professional identities, evidentiary cues, and visible responses combine in platform-based legitimacy work.

1.1. CSR communication, legitimacy, and impression management

CSR communication asks audiences to recognize that an action counts as responsible, reflects an organization's identity, and is not merely promotional. Stakeholders may reward specificity, consistency, and relevance while questioning claims that appear inflated or detached from organizational conduct (Du et al., 2010). Morsing and Schultz's (2006) distinction among stakeholder information, response, and involvement is therefore important: it places CSR communication on a continuum from one-way disclosure to interaction and co-production.

Legitimacy and impression management explain different aspects of this process. Legitimacy is a socially conferred judgment that an organization's conduct is appropriate within an accepted system of norms and values (Suchman, 1995). It is an audience-level condition or outcome, not a property contained in a post. Impression management, by contrast, emphasizes strategic efforts to shape favorable perceptions of corporate identity and conduct (Hooghiemstra, 2000). CSR communication can serve impression management, but it is not reducible to sender-controlled presentation. On a social platform, a founder's post, a corporate announcement, an employee's endorsement, and a consultant's response may appear in the same stream. Their combined activity can strengthen, qualify, or undermine the original claim.

This relational view is consistent with research that locates CSR across institutional, organizational, and individual levels (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012) and with accounts of the expanding public role of business (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Platform interaction brings these

In Press

Cyberspace Studies, Vol ?, No ?, ????

levels into an observable interface. It does not demonstrate that an organization is responsible, but it reveals some of the communicative work through which claims to responsibility seek recognition.

1.2. Platformed visibility and reputational grammar

Organizations use social media to report initiatives, frame moral identity, invite participation, and respond to stakeholders (Cho et al., 2017; Cortado & Chalmeta, 2016; Okazaki et al., 2020). Platform affordances also organize attention through metrics, algorithmic distribution, and publicly visible engagement. Social responsibility is therefore communicated within an environment in which reach and recognition are measurable but unequally distributed. Comparative research further shows that digital CSR practices vary across institutional and national contexts (Kvasnickova Stanislavska et al., 2020).

LinkedIn makes this relationship particularly visible because occupational identity accompanies interaction. A like, comment, or repost is not an equivalent measure of belief, but each action publicly associates a professional account with a CSR claim. Comments can add interpretation or scrutiny, and reposts can introduce the claim to another professional audience. Engagement is thus both a distribution mechanism and a trace of public association.

To describe the recurrent forms through which this process becomes recognizable, this study introduces *reputational grammar*. The term refers to a platform-specific communicative repertoire with four elements: (1) a responsibility claim that identifies an action, problem, or beneficiary; (2) identity positioning that presents the organization or professional as a particular kind of responsible actor; (3) an evidentiary cue, such as specificity about activities, partners, beneficiaries, continuity, or outcomes; and (4) network uptake, through which visible reactions endorse, extend, question, or ignore the claim. These elements need not all appear in every post, but their recurrent combinations make CSR discourse legible within the professional feed.

Reputational grammar is narrower than a general theory of legitimacy and more relational than conventional impression-management accounts. Legitimacy concerns the broader judgment that an actor is appropriate; the grammar concerns the communicative resources through which that judgment is solicited. Impression management usually foregrounds the presenting actor's strategy; the grammar also includes responses that the presenting actor does not control. The concept is therefore intended as a middle-range analytic device for identifying how platform-based CSR claims are assembled and circulated, not as evidence that favorable engagement equals legitimacy.

Corporate digital responsibility widens the context further by directing attention to firms' responsibilities in relation to digital

IN PRESS

technologies, data, and stakeholders (Lobschat et al., 2021). Iranian startups can be involved in both dimensions: they communicate responsibility through a platform, and many provide digital products or services whose own social consequences are relevant. The medium and the object of responsibility may consequently overlap.

1.3. Iranian startup context and networked circulation

CSR in Iran has developed under conditions different from those assumed in dominant North American and Western European models. Employee and managerial studies describe a field that remains developing and unevenly institutionalized, while also identifying online social networking as a possible vehicle for CSR communication (Farivar & Scott-Ladd, 2016; Nejati & Ghasemi, 2012). Persian-language scholarship conceptualizes digital social responsibility through humanitarian activity, responsible content, customer relations, digital citizenship, and responsible business performance (Abedin et al., 2022; Mousavi Haghshenas & Shahghasemi, 2022). Reactions to CSR failures during the coronavirus crisis further indicate public sensitivity to the credibility and consequences of corporate claims (Zarei et al., 2020).

Startups often lack the formal CSR infrastructure of mature corporations, yet depend heavily on trust and peer recognition among investors, employees, consumers, mentors, accelerators, and professional communities. CSR communication can consequently become part of the venture's broader account of innovation, organizational maturity, and social relevance. This communicative role should not be confused with material performance; it identifies how responsibility is presented as part of entrepreneurial identity.

Iranian cyberspace scholarship also cautions against treating LinkedIn as a detached virtual sphere. Online and offline spaces are blended and connected to workplaces, sectors, educational backgrounds, reputations, and economic constraints (Ameli & Mohseni Ahooei, 2018; Kosari & Amoori, 2018). Network analysis is useful in this context because it describes observable relations among authors and interacting accounts (Borgatti et al., 2009). Concepts such as weak ties and bridging remain relevant to the possible movement of information between professional communities (Granovetter, 1973), but their interpretation requires a sampling design that can identify such positions independently. The present graph was seeded from selected high-engagement posts and does not meet that condition. It is therefore used descriptively and makes no claim that focal authors are population-level brokers.

2. Methodology

The study combines reflexive thematic analysis with a descriptive social network analysis. The qualitative component examines the

In Press

meanings, objectives, and identity claims contained in CSR-related posts. The network component describes visible account-to-account engagement around those selected posts. The components are complementary but not equivalent: the thematic analysis interprets the sampled content, whereas the graph records a bounded set of observable platform relations. LinkedIn was selected because Iranian entrepreneurs, managers, CSR and public relations practitioners, investors, and employees use the platform to present organizational and occupational identities. Only publicly accessible posts and profile attributes were examined. No private messages, closed-group content, hidden data, or non-public profile information were accessed.

Data were collected during January and February 2023. Sampling proceeded in two stages. First, LinkedIn searches were conducted using "corporate social responsibility", "CSR", and their commonly used Persian equivalents. Profiles and posts were screened for an identifiable connection to Iranian startups or adjacent entrepreneurial, sustainability, CSR, and public relations communities. Second, the resulting pool was reviewed purposively to identify CSR-related posts with comparatively high observable engagement at the time of collection.

The final corpus comprised 76 posts and their 76 focal authors. The authors are described here as *engagement-seeded authors* because their posts formed the points of entry to the graph. Selection was not based on a probability sample or a fixed population-wide threshold, and the 76 posts should not be interpreted as the most engaged CSR posts on Iranian LinkedIn. The design was intended to examine a visible engagement field, not estimate the frequency of CSR themes or identify population-level opinion leaders.

For each focal author and post, the dataset recorded an anonymized node label, public biographical description, visible occupation and organization, sector, educational background when available, follower count, likes, comments, reposts, and coded CSR theme. For other accounts, the dataset recorded a visible engagement relation with at least one selected post. Counts represent the public values visible during the collection window and may subsequently have changed.

The unit of analysis in the graph was a LinkedIn account; posts were attributes of focal-author nodes rather than separate nodes. A directed tie ran from an engaging account to the focal author whose selected post it engaged (engager $i \rightarrow$ author j). The network was analysed as a simple directed graph: repeated engagement records involving the same engager-author pair were collapsed into one unweighted tie, whereas an account engaging with different focal authors contributed one tie to each author. Self-ties were excluded. The resulting graph contained 5,525 unique account nodes and 5,928 unique directed ties.

Gephi 0.10.1 was used for visualization and exploratory computation (Bastian et al., 2009). Gephi's Louvain implementation was used to

In Press

color the network visualizations (Blondel et al., 2008). Modularity class was used only to organize the visual display. It was not treated as evidence of stable or population-level professional communities. Degree, closeness, and betweenness centrality were not used in the reported analysis; consequently, no normalized centrality, brokerage, or influence ranking is presented.

Graph-level counts, density, and diameter were examined only as diagnostics of the constructed dataset. Density for the simple directed graph was calculated as $m/[n(n-1)]$. These values are strongly conditioned by the ego-centric architecture: focal authors receive most ties, and many other accounts appear because they engaged with one selected post. A diameter of 2 and very low density are therefore expected design properties and are not treated as evidence that Iranian CSR discourse is inherently sparse, decentralized, or efficient. A decentralization statistic is not reported because it is not required to describe this construction and would not support a population-level inference.

One researcher conducted the qualitative coding using a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Analysis began with descriptive coding of CSR field, communicative objective, and organizational sector. Repeated coding and comparison among categories were then used to refine broader interpretive patterns. The themes are treated as reasoned interpretations rather than variables presumed to exist independently of the analyst.

No inter-coder agreement coefficient was calculated. Reflexive thematic analysis treats coding as situated interpretive work rather than as a measurement exercise in which coders are expected to be interchangeable (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Analytic rigor was pursued through repeated engagement with the corpus, explicit definitions for descriptive categories, comparison of candidate patterns against the full set of 76 posts, and explicit separation of descriptive observations from theoretical interpretation.

Persian-language posts were read and coded in Persian by the researcher who conducted the thematic analysis. They were not translated into a separate English-language corpus. During manuscript preparation, only analytic category labels and interpretive summaries were rendered in English and checked against the Persian source material. No translated verbatim quotations are reproduced; this avoids presenting a decontextualized translation as direct textual evidence while retaining the original-language basis of the analysis.

The descriptive code families included ethical business practice, philanthropy and community engagement, social innovation, environmental responsibility, stakeholder engagement, transparency, education, sustainability, and crisis-related responsibility. Communicative objectives included reporting, appreciation, event notification, recruitment, sympathy, organizational pride, and criticism of corporate inaction.

In Press

Cyberspace Studies, Vol ?, No ?, ????

The qualitative and network components were connected through the anonymized focal-author label. Each selected post retained its thematic codes, public role and sector descriptors, and raw engagement counts, while its author was represented as a node in the graph. This structure allowed the analysis to compare the communicative content of focal posts with the visible engagement neighborhoods assembled around their authors.

Integration occurred after the two components had been analyzed for their respective purposes. Network diagnostics were not used to validate themes, and themes were not inferred for the thousands of engaging accounts from their ties alone. Instead, the graph bounded the observable relational field, while thematic analysis examined how the 76 posts articulated responsibility within that field. The role and sector attributes were used as descriptive context rather than explanatory variables.

Given the purposive sample and small focal-post corpus, the study did not test statistical associations between theme, occupation, sector, and engagement. Apparent differences were used to identify patterns for interpretive examination, not to estimate effects. This separation reduces the risk of turning engagement counts into evidence of audience agreement or treating visual clusters as self-explanatory social groups.

Three evidentiary criteria governed interpretation. First, the level of claim was matched to the level of observation. Post content can support claims about recurrent meanings in the selected corpus, and recorded ties can support claims about the constructed graph; neither supports a population estimate. Second, an engagement action was treated as a behavioral trace rather than an attitude. A like, comment, or repost shows that an account acted visibly in relation to a selected post, but not whether the user agreed with, trusted, or was persuaded by the CSR claim. Third, apparent prominence among focal authors was treated as design-dependent because post selection and graph construction increased their opportunity to receive observed ties.

These rules also delimit the mixed-method integration. Convergence between a visible engagement pattern and a thematic interpretation is not independent corroboration when both arise from the same purposively selected posts. Integration is used to place content and relational traces in a shared analytic frame, not to claim causal explanation or triangulated validation. Theoretical generalization is therefore limited to proposing concepts and boundary conditions that can be tested with post-independent, longitudinal, or comparative designs.

3. Results

The engagement-seeded graph contained 5,525 unique account nodes and 5,928 unique directed ties. Its density was approximately 0.000194, and its diameter was 2. Table 2 reports these values as diagnostics of

the assembled dataset. Most non-focal accounts entered the graph through engagement with a selected post, while the 76 post authors formed the sampling entry points. The count of ties exceeded the count of non-focal accounts because some accounts engaged with more than one focal author. No centrality or decentralization statistic is used to characterize the discourse field.

Table 1. Variables and analytical treatment

Variable	Operational meaning	Analytical treatment
Account node	Public LinkedIn account visible in the sampled engagement field	Anonymized before reporting
Directed tie	Unique visible engagement relation from an account to a selected post's author	One unweighted engager-author pair; self-ties excluded
Focal-author attributes	Public role, organization, sector, and education when available	Descriptive context, not population frequencies
Post engagement	Likes, comments, reposts, and followers	Separate raw counts; no composite score or influence ranking
Graph properties	Node and tie counts, density, diameter, and exploratory visual partition	Diagnostics of the constructed graph only
CSR theme	Interpretive pattern in the selected post	Reflexive single-coder thematic analysis

Table 2. Diagnostic properties of the engagement-seeded graph

Metric	Value	Interpretive boundary
Account nodes	5,525	Accounts visible through the 76 selected posts; not a population frame
Directed ties	5,928	Unique observed engager-to-author relations under the stated edge rule
Possible directed ties	30,520,100	$n(n-1)$, excluding self-ties
Density	0.000194	A property of the ego-centric construction, not of Iranian CSR discourse generally
Diameter	2	Expected to be short in a graph organized around selected focal authors

Figure 1 shows the hub-and-spoke form induced by sampling around focal posts, together with overlap created when an account engaged with more than one focal author. The alternative layout in Figure 2 displays the same node and tie set at a denser scale. Agreement between the layouts is not treated as independent confirmation; both are views of the same constructed graph.

In Press

Cyberspace Studies, Vol ?, No ?, ????

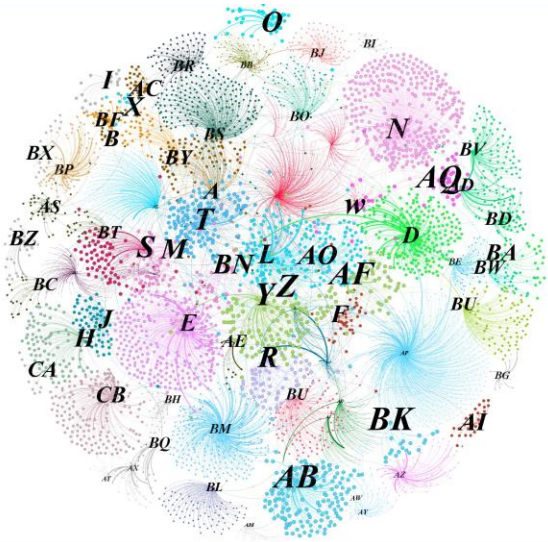


Figure 1. Hub-and-spoke form induced by sampling around focal posts, together with overlap created when an account engaged with more than one focal author

In Figure 2, letter labels identify focal authors. The figure reproduces the same 5,525 nodes and 5,928 ties as Figure 1 and is included to make overlapping engagement neighborhoods visible, not to support an additional structural inference.

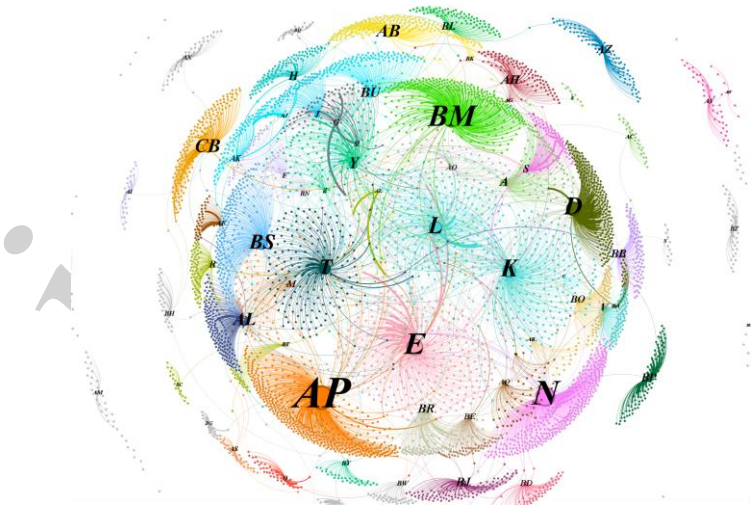


Figure 2. Alternative dense layout of the anonymized engagement-seeded network

3.1. Descriptive engagement profiles

Table 3 reports the separate reaction and follower counts for ten focal posts used for close descriptive comparison. The rows are ordered by anonymized node label rather than by a derived score. Likes, comments, and reposts are reported separately because they are different platform

actions, and follower counts are snapshots rather than exposure denominators. The cases are not used to estimate the distribution of engagement in the complete corpus or to rank authors by influence.

Table 3. Raw engagement profiles for ten illustrative focal posts

Node	Likes	Comments	Reposts	Followers	Professional context
AN	154	21	1	1,273	Entrepreneur; CSR
AP	220	13	5	1,840	Manager; retail platform
AZ	88	16	0	731	Researcher; sustainability
BM	614	22	13	2,873	Senior executive; FinTech
BS	284	18	7	2,400	Manager; technology
BT	26	0	0	141	Manager; sustainability
D	565	26	22	2,343	CSR; chain store
E	524	40	28	1,430	Public relations; technology
G	60	5	4	420	Entrepreneur; startup
K	180	11	4	1,700	Manager; startup

Across the ten cases, likes ranged from 26 to 614, comments from 0 to 40, reposts from 0 to 28, and follower counts from 141 to 2,873. Node BM recorded the largest like count (614) and follower count (2,873), whereas node E recorded the largest comment (40) and repost (28) counts despite having 1,430 followers. Node D also combined comparatively high values across likes (565), comments (26), and reposts (22). These observations show that the four indicators do not produce a single, self-evident ordering of the cases. The roles represented in the comparison include public relations, CSR, management, entrepreneurship, executive work, and research across technology, retail, sustainability, and startup-related sectors.

3.2. Thematic patterns in CSR discourse

The analysis identified recurring values involving ethical business practice, philanthropy and community engagement, social innovation, environmental responsibility, stakeholder engagement, transparency, education, technology, sustainability, and crisis-related empathy. These categories were not mutually exclusive. Posts frequently combined a substantive CSR topic with an organizational objective such as reporting, employer branding, recruitment, event notification, or expressions of appreciation.

Comparison across the coded posts produced four recurring analytic dimensions. Responsibility claims named an initiative, social problem, or beneficiary. Identity positioning linked the claim to an ethical, innovative, or community-oriented organizational character.

In Press

Cyberspace Studies, Vol ?, No ?, ????

Evidentiary cues described activities, partners, beneficiaries, continuity, or outcomes, although the level of specificity varied. Network uptake was observable through likes, comments, and reposts, without revealing the motivation behind those actions.

Table 4. Empirical indicators used to identify the four analytic dimensions

Analytic dimension	Indicator in the coded material	Empirical boundary
Responsibility claim	Identification of an initiative, social issue, beneficiary, or obligation	Describes what is presented as responsible; does not verify performance
Identity positioning	Association of the claim with an ethical, innovative, caring, or accountable organizational identity	Identifies self-presentation; does not establish audience acceptance
Evidentiary cue	Specificity concerning activities, partners, beneficiaries, continuity, or outcomes	Indicates assessable detail; does not independently validate the claim
Network uptake	Visible likes, comments, or reposts associated with the selected post	Records action; does not reveal motive, agreement, or legitimacy

The occupationally annotated layout in Figure 3 provides contextual information about the professional descriptors associated with focal authors. Repeated terms in the image are node-level labels rather than aggregated categories. The figure is therefore not used to calculate an occupational distribution or to infer which professions are most common among Iranian CSR communicators.

In Figure 3, labels reproduce coded public profile descriptors for focal authors. Repetition indicates separate annotated nodes and must not be interpreted as an occupational frequency or a population estimate.

4. Discussion

The analysis proposes reputational grammar as a communicative repertoire rather than a synonym for reputation or an empirically validated scale. Its four elements—responsibility claim, identity positioning, evidentiary cue, and network uptake—describe how a CSR initiative can be made legible in a professional feed. Legitimacy theory identifies the broader audience judgment that organizational conduct is appropriate (Suchman, 1995), whereas impression-management research emphasizes strategic efforts to shape that judgment (Hooghiemstra, 2000). Reputational grammar concerns the intermediate communicative resources through which such efforts become recognizable and the visible responses through which they may be extended or qualified.

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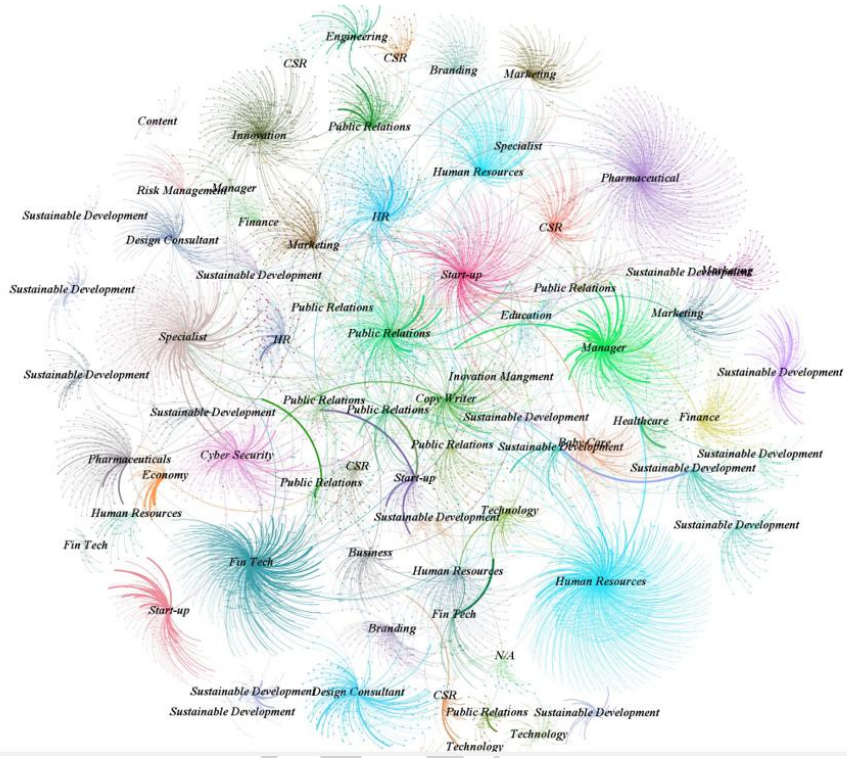


Figure 3. Exploratory occupation- and sector-annotated layout of the engagement-seeded network

The distinction matters because LinkedIn interaction is not controlled fully by the originating organization. A post may frame an initiative as evidence of ethical commitment, but other accounts decide whether and how to react publicly. A comment may add evidence or criticism, and a repost may place the claim before another audience. These actions are observable traces of association, not direct measures of acceptance, trust, or legitimacy. Treating network uptake as one element of the framework therefore marks the relational setting without converting reaction counts into evidence of favorable judgment.

The framework's theoretical work lies in separating four questions that are often compressed into a single claim about "good CSR communication". What responsibility is asserted? Which organizational or professional identity is attached to it? What information makes the assertion assessable? What visible response follows? This decomposition differs from legitimacy theory because it does not designate an organizational outcome, and from impression management because it does not assume that the originating actor controls the response. It also makes the concept open to disconfirmation. A comparative study may find that one element is absent, that evidence cues do not accompany positive responses, or that platform and audience conditions produce a different configuration.

A stronger empirical test would sample posts independently of their engagement, specify coding rules before comparing cases, retain the semantic content of comments, and observe reactions over time. Audience interviews or survey measures could then test whether configurations of claims, identity, and evidence are associated with perceived legitimacy. The present study supplies the analytic vocabulary and a contextual application; it does not perform that validation.

The evidentiary element also clarifies the difference between substantive and symbolic CSR communication. Symbolic representation is necessary to make an initiative publicly intelligible, but its credibility depends on its relation to accountable practice. In the corpus, posts varied in the specificity with which they described activities, beneficiaries, partners, continuity, or outcomes. General expressions of pride or concern performed identity work, whereas more specific reporting also provided audiences with material against which the claim could be assessed. Reputational grammar therefore does not presume that CSR communication is authentic or deceptive; it identifies the cues through which that question becomes available for professional judgment.

4.1. Sampling reflexivity and structural limits

The visual convergence of ties on focal authors must be interpreted in relation to the sampling design. Their posts were selected because they had comparatively high visible engagement, and engagement with those posts defined entry into the graph. Focal-author prominence is therefore partly induced by the research design rather than discovered independently. The graph cannot establish that entrepreneurs, creative-sector professionals, or any other occupational group are population-level brokers in Iranian CSR discourse.

The term *routing position* remains useful only in a local and design-bounded sense. Within the assembled graph, a focal author serves as a point through which a CSR claim and an engagement neighborhood are connected, and overlapping neighborhoods show where the same account acted in relation to more than one focal author. This usage describes the organization of sampled relations; it does not imply that the author connects otherwise separate communities, causes diffusion, or would remain prominent under a post-independent sampling frame.

The selected corpus includes communication by managers, entrepreneurs, public relations practitioners, executives, researchers, and sustainability actors in several sectors. These descriptors establish heterogeneity within the case set but do not show that the roles are prevalent among all Iranian CSR communicators. Similarly, the visual modularity partition supports legible network graphics but does not identify stable professional communities.

Density and diameter likewise diagnose an engagement-seeded, ego-

In Press

centric construction. They do not establish that Iranian CSR discourse is sparse or decentralized, or that information circulates efficiently. The mixed-method value is therefore one of disciplined juxtaposition: the graph bounds the observed relational field, while the thematic analysis interprets recurring communicative forms within the selected posts. Neither component validates the other.

4.2. Platform and contextual implications

LinkedIn's professional setting connects CSR claims to occupational identity. Users may engage because they support an initiative, know the author, value the topic, seek professional visibility, or wish to be associated with responsible discourse. These motives cannot be distinguished from platform traces alone. Nevertheless, their public co-presence means that CSR communication is produced through association as well as through organizational authorship.

Within the selected corpus, responsibility appeared alongside accounts of innovation, recruitment, community, and social impact rather than only through a separate corporate reporting function. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that CSR communication participates in the identity work of emerging ventures. It does not establish that such communication improves credibility, that startup CSR is more authentic than corporate CSR, or that the observed pattern is prevalent across Iranian startups.

These interpretations are compatible with prior research describing uneven CSR institutionalization and an expanding role for digital communication in Iran (Abedin et al., 2022; Farivar & Scott-Ladd, 2016; Nejati & Ghasemi, 2012). The present purposive corpus cannot test those field-level propositions. It shows more narrowly that LinkedIn provides a professional arena in which selected responsibility claims and visible reactions can be observed together. This supports a field-sensitive research agenda in which platform affordances, sectoral relations, and professional identities are examined as conditions of visibility rather than assumed causes of legitimacy.

4.3. Professional visibility arena and conceptual scope

The data support describing LinkedIn as a professional visibility arena, not establishing it as an open or deliberatively equal public sphere. Visibility is filtered by platform ranking, network composition, occupational status, language, access, and incentives for professional self-presentation. A reaction can coexist with deliberation, routine acquaintance, strategic visibility, or disagreement, none of which can be distinguished here. "Professional public sphere" should therefore remain a theoretical possibility for future research that directly examines deliberation, rather than an empirical label for this graph.

The proposed reputational grammar is similarly platform-sensitive. On LinkedIn, identity positioning is unusually explicit because

In Press

occupations and organizational affiliations accompany posts and reactions. On a platform organized around anonymity, entertainment, or intimate social ties, the same four elements could combine differently. The construct should therefore be tested as a comparative heuristic rather than treated as a fixed universal model. Researchers can ask which responsibility claims, identity cues, forms of evidence, and modes of uptake are available on a given platform and how its technical and cultural conditions alter their relationship.

For startup legitimacy, the temporal dimension is also important. Communication may precede formal CSR infrastructure and help stabilize an emerging account of what the venture stands for. Yet early visibility can also create commitments against which later conduct is judged. The framework therefore generates a longitudinal proposition: public claims and visible reactions create a record that stakeholders may revisit if later conduct changes or contradicts the narrated identity. The cross-sectional data in this study do not test that proposition.

Ethically, the study demonstrates that public data are not ethically frictionless data. Network figures can amplify the visibility of individuals far beyond the original context of a post. Anonymized node labels and aggregate descriptions preserve the relational evidence needed for analysis while reducing unnecessary exposure. This data-minimization principle should remain central in studies of professional-platform networks.

4.4. Practical and research implications

For startups and communication practitioners, the proposed grammar offers a provisional diagnostic rather than a tested prescription. A CSR post can identify the responsibility at issue, explain how it relates to organizational identity, offer proportionate evidence, and make space for stakeholder response. Specificity about what was done, for whom, with which partners, and with what continuity gives audiences more information on which to evaluate a claim; this study does not show that specificity causes higher engagement or legitimacy.

Evidence should also be proportionate to the claim. A limited charitable activity does not warrant an expansive assertion about organizational character, while a long-term program should be accompanied by enough context for audiences to assess continuity and outcomes. Practitioners can strengthen credibility by distinguishing planned commitments from completed activities, identifying limits as well as achievements, and linking follow-up reports to earlier promises. This approach treats engagement as an opportunity for accountability rather than as proof of success. It also reduces the risk that comments and reposts will be presented as substitutes for evidence about beneficiaries or material impact.

Communication should also remain consistent across corporate and individual accounts. Founders, employees, CSR specialists, public

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relations practitioners, and partner organizations can communicate different aspects of an initiative, provided their claims are coherent and grounded in organizational practice. The analysis does not justify using employees as promotional instruments; it suggests that credible multi-actor communication depends on responsibility being embedded enough for several participants to describe it without contradiction.

For researchers, the findings support a field-based rather than purely channel-based approach. The analytical question is not only how an organization sends CSR information, but how platform affordances, occupational identities, sectoral relations, and stakeholder responses jointly shape its visibility. Future network studies should use designs that permit non-seed actors to become central and should compare results across alternative sampling frames.

4.5. Limitations and future research

The purposive, engagement-seeded sample is the principal limitation. It privileges authors whose posts were already visible and active, excludes less visible CSR communication, and makes the centrality of focal authors partly mechanical. The findings therefore cannot identify the most important CSR actors in Iran or estimate the prevalence of themes across LinkedIn.

Search visibility is also platform-conditioned. LinkedIn's ranking and search interfaces shape which public posts can be found, while deleted, restricted, unindexed, and low-visibility material is unavailable to the sampling process. The observed corpus is therefore better understood as a visibility-conditioned case set than as a complete archive. Public profile attributes can also be incomplete, self-described, or updated after collection; role and sector labels were consequently used only as contextual descriptors. These conditions preclude claims about the occupational composition of the broader field.

The graph records observable platform actions rather than exposure or user motivation. A like, comment, or repost may reflect endorsement, professional acquaintance, disagreement, strategic self-presentation, or other motives. Users who saw a post but did not react are absent, and follower counts do not establish how many users were exposed to a post. The separate reaction counts are therefore descriptive traces, not measures of attitude, communicative quality, or influence. Longitudinal data, interviews, surveys, or platform-provided impression data would be needed to examine interpretation, trust, and legitimacy outcomes.

Finally, the study covers public LinkedIn activity within one collection window and does not assess material CSR performance. Comparative work could examine less engagement-centered samples, other professional or domestic platforms, sector-specific networks, and change over time. Linking platform communication to independently documented CSR outcomes would also help distinguish communicative credibility from substantive performance.

In Press

Cyberspace Studies, Vol ?, No ?, ????

5. Conclusion

This study examined public CSR communication around 76 engagement-seeded LinkedIn posts associated with Iranian startup and professional actors. The thematic analysis identified recurring combinations of responsibility claims, organizational identity, evidentiary cues, and visible audience response. On that basis, the study proposes reputational grammar as a four-part analytic framework for examining how CSR claims become recognizable within a professional platform. The framework remains a proposition for comparative and longitudinal testing, not a validated measure.

The network analysis shows how engagement was arranged in the constructed account-interaction graph, but its interpretation is deliberately bounded. Focal authors were structurally privileged because their posts seeded the graph. Density and diameter describe that construction, and modularity is retained only as a visual partition. Routing positions refer only to focal points within this sampled configuration; the data do not establish population-level brokerage, diffusion, or the occupational distribution of Iranian CSR communicators.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

The study used only publicly accessible LinkedIn posts and profile information. No private messages, closed-group content, confidential information, or non-public data were collected. The manuscript reports aggregate findings and anonymized node labels. As no direct intervention, experiment, or interaction with human participants was conducted, consent to participate and consent to publish are not applicable.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the author on reasonable request.

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