Corporate Social Irresponsibility and Consumer Response in the Telecommunication Industry in South-East Nigeria: The Mediating Role of Corporate Reputation

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Abstract

This study examined the effect of corporate social irresponsibility on consumer response in the Nigerian telecommunication industry, with corporate reputation serving as a mediating variable. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The study population comprised 20,314,141 active voice subscribers of MTN, Airtel, Globacom, and 9mobile across the five South-East states of Nigeria. A sample size of 1,111 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula and selected through a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics, multiple regression analysis, and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) with SPSS and AMOS at a 5% level of significance. The findings revealed that social transgressions had a significant positive effect on consumer protest actions, ethical transgressions significantly increased negative word-of-mouth behaviour, while economic transgressions significantly influenced consumers' brand-switching decisions. Corporate reputation significantly mediated the relationship between corporate social irresponsibility and consumer response. Furthermore, the combined dimensions of corporate social irresponsibility significantly explained 60.6% of the variation in consumer response ($R^2 = 0.606$; $F = 559.721$; $p < 0.001$). The study concluded that corporate social irresponsibility significantly influences consumer response in the Nigerian telecommunication industry, while corporate reputation serves as an important mechanism for reducing the adverse effects of irresponsible corporate practices on consumer behaviour. The study recommended that telecommunication firms should institutionalise ethical business practices, improve service quality, ensure transparency in billing systems, strengthen customer relationship management, and invest in sustainable corporate social responsibility initiatives to enhance corporate reputation, restore consumer confidence, and minimise negative consumer responses.

Keywords: corporate social irresponsibility; consumer response; corporate reputation; negative word-of-mouth; brand switching; protest action; telecommunications; South-East Nigeria.

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has attracted considerable academic and practical attention because of its emphasis on creating economic value while considering the interests of customers, employees, communities and other stakeholders. However, responsible corporate conduct extends beyond undertaking socially beneficial activities to avoiding practices that violate stakeholder expectations or cause harm. Lin-Hi and Müller (2013) identify corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) as a distinct research domain concerned with corporate actions and omissions that disregard stakeholder interests. This distinction is important because organisations may engage in visible CSR initiatives while simultaneously adopting irresponsible practices in their routine operations. The issue is particularly relevant to the telecommunications sector, where consumers repeatedly encounter corporate practices through network access, billing, pricing, promotional claims, customer service, data protection and complaint resolution. When these practices are perceived as misleading, unfair or harmful, consumer reactions may extend beyond dissatisfaction to negative word-of-mouth, brand switching and protest behaviour. Research by Grappi et al. (2013), Xie and Bagozzi (2019) and Valour et al. (2022) collectively demonstrates that perceived corporate wrongdoing can trigger both evaluative and behavioural responses, including negative communication, complaints, boycotting and other punitive actions.

Corporate reputation provides an important perspective for understanding how perceptions of irresponsible corporate conduct relate to consumer responses. As a cumulative assessment of an organisation's past conduct, general favourability and expected future behaviour, reputation extends beyond consumers' evaluations of individual service encounters (Lange et al., 2011). In the Nigerian telecommunications context, reputation-related attributes such as trustworthiness, credibility and reliability have been associated with customer-related outcomes (Ananaba et al., 2021). Similarly, Nardella et al. (2023), through their review of 448 studies, establish the relevance of corporate reputation to the relationship between CSI and stakeholder evaluations. These insights align with the study by Valor et al. (2022), who emphasise the roles of antecedents, mediators and moderators in explaining consumer responses to CSI, and Xie and Bagozzi (2019), who demonstrate how moral evaluations and emotional reactions connect perceived corporate misconduct with negative word-of-mouth, complaints and boycotting. Taken together, these studies suggest that corporate reputation and consumers' evaluations are important considerations in understanding how irresponsible corporate practices translate into behavioural responses.

Despite these contributions, important conceptual and contextual gaps remain. First, although CSR and its relationship with consumer outcomes have received considerable attention, CSI is not consistently examined as a distinct, multidimensional construct in marketing research (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013; Nardella et al., 2023). Second, existing research recognises diverse consumer reactions to corporate misconduct, but negative word-of-mouth, brand switching and protest behaviour are not always integrated within a single analytical framework (Grappi et al., 2013; Valor et al., 2022). Third, the relationships among the ethical, social and economic dimensions of CSI, corporate reputation and these distinct consumer responses remain insufficiently established in the Nigerian telecommunications sector, particularly in South-East Nigeria. Addressing these gaps, the present study examines the relationship between CSI and consumer response, incorporating corporate reputation as an explanatory construct among telecommunications subscribers in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. By integrating the three dimensions of CSI and the three consumer-

response outcomes, the study seeks to extend empirical understanding of corporate irresponsibility and its consumer-related implications within an emerging-market context.

Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed by this study is the limited empirical understanding of how the ethical, social and economic dimensions of corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) relate to distinct consumer responses and whether corporate reputation helps explain these relationships in the telecommunications sector of South-East Nigeria. Although previous studies have examined consumer reactions to corporate misconduct (Grappi et al., 2013; Xie & Bagozzi, 2019; Valor et al., 2022), the relationships among these specific dimensions of CSI, negative word-of-mouth, brand switching, protest behaviour and corporate reputation require further examination within this context.

Without such evidence, it remains unclear whether the different dimensions of perceived corporate irresponsibility are associated with consumer responses to the same extent and whether corporate reputation is significantly related to these responses. This limits the ability of telecommunications providers to understand the reputational and behavioural implications of irresponsible corporate practices. Accordingly, this study empirically examines the relationships between the ethical, social and economic dimensions of CSI and consumer responses, comprising negative word-of-mouth, brand switching and protest behaviour, while assessing the role of corporate reputation among telecommunications subscribers in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States. A combined structural model has been used to fill these gaps in this paper.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of the study was to examine the effect of corporate social irresponsibility on consumer response in the telecommunications industry in South-East Nigeria, with corporate reputation as a mediating variable. Specifically, the study sought to:

i. determine the effect of social transgressions on protest actions among telecommunications consumers;
ii. determine the effect of ethical transgressions on negative word-of-mouth among telecommunications consumers;
iii. determine the effect of economic transgressions on brand switching among telecommunications consumers;
iv. examine the mediating effect of corporate reputation on the relationship between corporate social irresponsibility and consumer response; and
v. determine the joint effect of social, ethical and economic transgressions on consumer response.

Research Hypotheses

$H_0$1: Social transgressions have no significant effect on protest actions among telecommunications consumers in South-East Nigeria.
$H_0$2: Ethical transgressions have no significant effect on negative word-of-mouth among telecommunications consumers in South-East Nigeria.
$H_0$3: Economic transgressions have no significant effect on brand switching among telecommunications consumers in South-East Nigeria.
$H_0$4: Corporate reputation does not significantly mediate the relationship between corporate social irresponsibility and consumer response.
$H_0$5: Social, ethical and economic transgressions do not jointly have a significant effect on consumer response.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Corporate Social Irresponsibility

Corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) refers to corporate actions, omissions or business practices that violate legitimate stakeholder expectations, breach ethical standards or cause avoidable harm to individuals and society. Lin-Hi and Müller (2013) argue that corporate responsibility requires organisations not only to contribute positively to society but also to avoid harmful practices. Similarly, Strike et al. (2006) demonstrate that organisations can engage in socially responsible and socially irresponsible activities simultaneously. Consequently, CSI should be examined as a distinct construct rather than simply as the absence of corporate social responsibility (CSR).

CSI is conceptualised through three dimensions: ethical transgression, social transgression and economic transgression. Although these dimensions are related, each captures a different form of corporate misconduct and stakeholder harm. Ethical transgression refers to corporate conduct that violates accepted moral principles, professional standards or expectations of honesty and fairness. Examples include deception, misleading communication, deliberate concealment of relevant information and other practices that undermine the integrity of business transactions. Such behaviour can weaken consumer trust because customers expect organisations to communicate honestly and fulfil their obligations. Grappi et al. (2013) demonstrate that consumers' perceptions of corporate wrongdoing can generate negative moral emotions and adverse responses towards the offending organisation. Ethical transgression is therefore relevant to the present study because it captures consumers' perceptions of dishonest or morally unacceptable conduct by telecommunications providers.

Social transgression refers to corporate actions or omissions that harm customers, communities or other stakeholder groups or demonstrate disregard for their welfare. It includes practices that undermine consumer well-being, neglect legitimate stakeholder interests or create adverse social consequences. In the telecommunications sector, perceived social transgressions may include persistent disregard for customer welfare, inadequate attention to complaints about service-related harm, or practices that disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable consumers. Such conduct can provoke negative consumer evaluations and resistance, particularly when stakeholders perceive that the organisation has disregarded its social obligations (Lin-Hi & Müller, 2013; Nardella et al., 2023). Accordingly, social transgression captures the extent to which consumers perceive telecommunications providers as acting contrary to their welfare and broader social expectations.

Economic transgression concerns corporate practices perceived as financially unfair, exploitative or detrimental to consumers' economic interests. It may involve unjustified charges, misleading billing arrangements, undisclosed fees, unfair pricing practices or the failure to provide the economic value reasonably expected by customers. Lin-Hi and Müller (2013) identify practices such as price-fixing and inaccurate product information as examples of corporate irresponsibility. In telecommunications, consumers may perceive economic transgression when charges are unclear, deductions are inadequately explained, or pricing arrangements are considered unfair. These practices can undermine perceptions of organisational fairness and contribute to adverse consumer responses. Economic transgression is therefore important to this study because it addresses the financial dimension of perceived corporate irresponsibility.

Taken together, ethical, social and economic transgressions provide complementary perspectives for examining CSI in the telecommunications industry. Ethical transgression concerns violations of moral and integrity standards; social transgression focuses on harm to stakeholder welfare; and economic transgression addresses perceived financial unfairness. Examining these dimensions separately allows the study to investigate whether different forms of perceived corporate irresponsibility are associated with different consumer responses.

Consumer Response

Consumer response refers to the communicative, attitudinal and behavioural reactions that consumers exhibit following their evaluation of an organisation's actions, services or conduct. In the context of CSI, such responses may be favourable, neutral or unfavourable, depending on how consumers interpret the seriousness of the perceived misconduct and its implications for their interests. Valour et al. (2022), in their systematic review of consumer punishment following CSI, distinguish between punitive and non-punitive responses. Similarly, Grappi et al. (2013) demonstrate that negative moral emotions arising from corporate wrongdoing can encourage negative word-of-mouth and protest behaviour. These findings suggest that consumer responses to corporate irresponsibility are multidimensional rather than uniform.

For the present study, consumer response is examined through three distinct dimensions: negative word-of-mouth, brand switching and protest behaviour. Negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) refers to consumers' communication of unfavourable opinions, experiences or evaluations about an organisation to other people. It may take the form of criticism, warnings, negative recommendations or the sharing of disappointing service experiences. Such communication can influence the perceptions and decisions of existing and prospective customers. Grappi et al. (2013) explain that consumers may communicate their disapproval of corporate irresponsibility through negative word-of-mouth, particularly when corporate conduct provokes adverse moral emotions. In the telecommunications sector, dissatisfied subscribers may warn others about a provider's perceived misconduct, share negative service experiences or discourage prospective customers from subscribing. Negative word-of-mouth therefore represents the communicative dimension of consumer response.

Brand switching refers to a consumer's decision or intention to discontinue using one brand or service provider in favour of another. Unlike negative word-of-mouth, which involves communicating dissatisfaction, brand switching represents a market-related behavioural response. Consumers may consider switching when they perceive a provider's conduct, pricing arrangements or service practices as unacceptable. Research on consumer responses to CSI indicates that corporate wrongdoing can encourage negative evaluations and behavioural reactions, including withdrawal from the offending organisation (Valor et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2019). In the telecommunications industry, brand switching may involve transferring one's primary usage to a competing network because of perceived unfair treatment, dissatisfaction or a loss of confidence in the existing provider. Thus, brand switching captures consumers' willingness to withdraw their patronage.

Protest behaviour refers to consumers' active efforts to express opposition to, challenge or seek corrective action against corporate practices they consider unacceptable. Such behaviour may include formal complaints, public criticism, organised consumer advocacy, petitions or collective actions intended to pressure an organisation to address perceived wrongdoing. Grappi et al. (2013) identify protest as an important form of consumer response to corporate irresponsibility, demonstrating that negative moral emotions can motivate consumers to oppose corporate conduct. Xie et al. (2019) likewise examine negative consumer responses, including complaint behaviour and boycotting, following perceptions of corporate irresponsibility. In telecommunications, protest behaviour may occur when subscribers formally challenge disputed charges, collectively demand improved services, or publicly call for corrective action. It therefore represents the active resistance dimension of consumer response.

These three dimensions capture different but potentially related forms of consumer reaction. Negative word-of-mouth involves communicating dissatisfaction, brand switching involves withdrawing or redirecting patronage, and protest behaviour involves actively challenging perceived corporate wrongdoing. Their inclusion provides a broader basis for examining how consumers respond to ethical, social and economic transgressions by telecommunications providers.

Corporate reputation refers to the overall evaluation of an organisation formed through stakeholders' accumulated experiences, information and judgements about its conduct and performance. Lange et al. (2011), in their review of organisational reputation research, identify three prominent conceptualisations: familiarity with the organisation, beliefs about what to expect from it in the future, and general evaluations of its favourability. These conceptualisations indicate that reputation encompasses more than public awareness; it also involves stakeholders' expectations and assessments of organisational standing.

Familiarity with an organisation refers to the extent to which stakeholders recognise or possess knowledge of the organisation through previous experiences, communications or exposure to its activities. Beliefs about future behaviour concern stakeholders' expectations regarding how the organisation is likely to perform or behave in subsequent interactions. Favourability refers to the positive or negative evaluation stakeholders form of the organisation based on their knowledge, experiences and perceptions (Lange et al., 2011). These dimensions help explain why organisations with high public visibility may not necessarily enjoy favourable reputations: familiarity can exist alongside negative evaluations.

Corporate reputation is relevant to CSI because perceptions of corporate misconduct can shape the information consumers use to evaluate an organisation's trustworthiness and legitimacy. Nardella et al. (2023) review the relationship between corporate reputation and the social regulation of CSI, showing the importance of reputation in understanding how stakeholders respond to corporate irresponsibility. Swaen et al. (2021) further demonstrate that consumers may hold positive perceptions of corporate social responsibility and negative perceptions of corporate social irresponsibility simultaneously. Their findings highlight the complexity of reputation formation and indicate that positive corporate conduct does not necessarily eliminate the adverse implications of irresponsible practices.

Evidence from the telecommunications industry also supports the relevance of reputation to consumer evaluations. Ananaba et al. (2021) examined corporate reputation and customer satisfaction in the Nigerian telecommunications context, providing an industry-specific basis for considering reputation in the assessment of consumer relationships with service providers. Accordingly, corporate reputation is an important construct for investigating how consumers interpret corporate conduct and evaluate telecommunications providers.

Overall, corporate reputation provides a basis for understanding consumers' accumulated judgements about telecommunications providers. Its consideration alongside CSI and consumer response allows the study to examine reputation-related evaluations within the broader relationship between perceived corporate irresponsibility and consumer reactions.

Theoretical Framework

Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder theory, developed by Freeman (1984), provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the responsibilities of organisations towards the various groups affected by their activities. The theory posits that organisations should consider the legitimate interests of their stakeholders rather than focus exclusively on the interests of shareholders. Its major tenets include stakeholder identification, stakeholder interests, stakeholder relationships and managerial responsibility. Stakeholder identification recognises that organisations have multiple stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, communities and regulatory authorities. Stakeholder interests emphasise the need for organisations to consider the needs and expectations of these groups when making decisions. Stakeholder relationships highlight the importance of maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders, while managerial responsibility requires organisations to take account of the consequences of their decisions for the groups affected by their operations.

Corporate social irresponsibility (CSI) is applicable to stakeholder theory because it involves organisational actions or omissions that disregard or undermine the legitimate interests of stakeholders. In the telecommunications industry, such conduct may include misleading advertising, unfair billing practices, inadequate disclosure of service charges, poor complaint resolution and persistent service failures. These practices can undermine customer confidence, damage stakeholder relationships and generate negative consumer responses.

Stakeholder theory is relevant to this study because each dimension of corporate social irresponsibility represents a potential violation of stakeholder interests and expectations. Telecommunications customers expect providers to deliver reliable services, communicate accurate information, charge fairly and respond appropriately to complaints. When these expectations are repeatedly disregarded, customers may respond through negative word-of-mouth, switching to competing providers or expressing dissatisfaction publicly. Such responses can also affect corporate reputation, as consumers may develop unfavourable perceptions of companies that consistently fail to fulfil their responsibilities. Therefore, Stakeholder Theory helps explain how irresponsible corporate conduct can influence consumer responses and corporate reputation beyond the immediate consequences of service delivery.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Expectancy violations theory is associated with Burgoon's work on interpersonal expectations and expectancy violations, particularly Burgoon (1993). The theory explains how individuals develop expectations about appropriate behaviour and evaluate the behaviour of others against those expectations. When an individual or organisation behaves in a manner that contradicts established expectations, the resulting violation may influence the evaluation of that individual or organisation and shape subsequent responses.

In the telecommunications industry, customers generally expect transparent pricing, truthful advertising, reliable service delivery, fair treatment and timely responses to complaints. When telecommunications providers fail to meet these expectations, customers may interpret the conduct as unfair, irresponsible or unacceptable. Such negative evaluations may lead to dissatisfaction, complaints, negative word-of-mouth and customer switching.

The theory is particularly relevant to this study because the ethical, social and economic dimensions of corporate social irresponsibility represent different forms of expectation violation. Ethical violations may involve dishonesty or misleading communication; social violations may involve disregard for customer welfare and broader social responsibilities; and economic violations may involve unfair charges or practices that disadvantage consumers financially. Although these violations differ in nature, each may undermine customers' expectations of responsible corporate conduct.

Expectancy violations theory also helps explain the potential role of corporate reputation in shaping consumer responses. Repeated violations may gradually alter consumers' overall evaluations of a telecommunications provider, resulting in a less favourable corporate reputation. When a company develops a negative reputation, consumers may become less willing to trust its claims, tolerate service problems or maintain their relationship with it. Corporate reputation may therefore influence how consumers interpret corporate misconduct and how strongly they respond to it.

Taken together, stakeholder theory and expectancy violations theory provide complementary explanations for the relationships examined in this study. Stakeholder Theory emphasises the responsibilities organisations have towards their stakeholders, whereas Expectancy Violations Theory explains how consumers evaluate and respond to corporate conduct that contradicts their expectations. These perspectives support the study's examination of how corporate social irresponsibility relates to consumer responses and how corporate reputation may help explain this relationship.

Empirical Review

Author(s)/Year	Focus	Method	Key implication
Grappi et al. (2013)	Consumer response to corporate irresponsible behaviour	Survey/experimental consumer research	Corporate wrongdoing can trigger moral emotions and adverse consumer responses, including negative communication and protest.
Sweetin et al. (2013)	Willingness to punish the corporate brand for CSI	Experimental design	Consumers exposed to socially irresponsible corporate conduct showed greater willingness to punish and less willingness to reward the brand.
Xie and Bagozzi (2019)	Consumer responses to CSI	Empirical consumer study	Moral emotions and evaluations helped explain negative word-of-mouth, complaint behaviour and boycotting following corporate transgressions.
Swaen et al. (2021)	CSR/irresponsibility perceptions and reputation	Survey research	Consumers may hold simultaneous CSR and CSiR perceptions; irresponsibility has implications for corporate reputation.
Ananaba et al. (2021)	Corporate reputation and satisfaction in Nigerian telecommunications	Survey; regression	Trustworthiness, CSR, credibility and reliability were positively associated with customer satisfaction.
Valor et al. (2022)	CSI and consumer punishment	Systematic review	Consumer responses to CSI can be punitive or non-punitive; antecedents, mediators and moderators require further study.
Nardella et al. (2023)	CSI, reputation and social regulation	Systematic review of 448 studies	Corporate reputation provides an important mechanism for understanding how CSI is socially regulated.
Abina & Ajayi (2023)	Service quality and switching in Nigerian mobile telecommunications	PLS-SEM	The study demonstrates the relevance of switching behaviour in Nigerian mobile telecommunications,

Author(s)/Year	Focus	Method	Key implication
			while differing from CSI-focused research.

As the empirical data show, CSI can cause adverse consumer reactions, but it also shows that this is a more complicated process than a direct relationship. Consumers perceive the seriousness and the responsibility of a business event, generate affective and appraisal feelings, and consequently make decisions to either express, complain, quit or punish. The literature thus aids in considering mediation mechanisms and not hypothesising the potentiality of each perception of CSI generating the same behavioural consequences.

The second observation pertains to context. Most of the existing literature in the CSI sector has been developed beyond Nigeria, while studies in Nigerian telecommunications have focused on service quality, satisfaction, reputation or switching. For example, Ananaba et al. (2021) took into account corporate reputation and customer satisfaction within the Nigerian telecommunications industry; nevertheless, they did not examine CSI as a predictor of corporate reputation or consumer punishment. This forms a contextual gap in terms of how perceptions of irresponsible corporate behaviour operate among South-East Nigerian telecommunications consumers.

The current research fills this research gap by integrating three dimensions of CSI, three consumer-response dimensions and corporate reputation within a single structural framework. This approach is also a response to the call of Valour et al. (2022) to explain consumer reactions to CSI in a more nuanced way and, in line with Nardella et al. (2023), focuses on the connection between CSI and reputation.

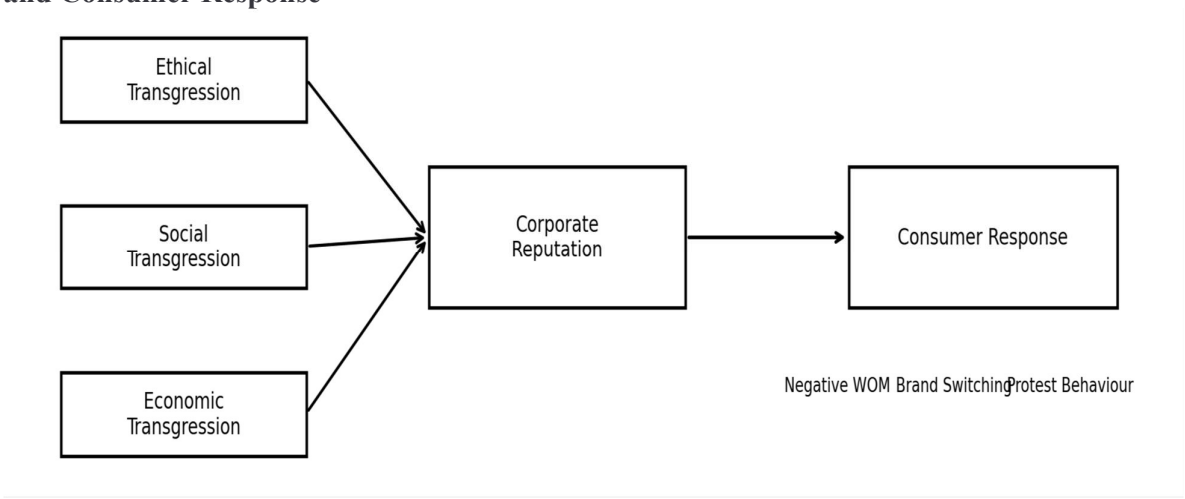
Research Gap

The review has determined that there is a conceptual gap, a contextual gap and a methodological gap. In theory, researchers often focus on an individual type of corporate misbehaviour or one type of consumer response, but the current research combines ethical, social and economic violations with negative word-of-mouth, brand switching and protest behaviour. In terms of context, there is limited empirical data devoted to telecommunications consumers in South-East Nigeria. Regarding methodology, past studies have provided evidence of direct relationships, with fewer studies exploring corporate reputation as an explicit mediating variable between CSI and consumer response. The existing study therefore provides a mechanism-based and context-specific model.

Conceptual Model

The conceptual framework examines the main aspects of corporate social irresponsibility as ethical, social and economic violations. Such dimensions would impact negative consumer reactions, whereas corporate reputation will offer a mediating route. This model is based on the assumption that the consumer's reputational assessment of a provider may be harmed by irresponsible behaviour and that a decrease in reputation may in turn reinforce negative word-of-mouth, switching and protest behaviour.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Corporate Social Irresponsibility, Corporate Reputation and Consumer Response



Methodology

Research Design

The design that we adopted was a quantitative descriptive survey research design. The method used was suitable since the study aimed at retrieving perceptions of corporate social irresponsibility, corporate reputation and consumer responses from a defined population of telecommunications subscribers in South-East Nigeria.

Population and Sample

The study population comprised 20,314,141 active voice subscribers of MTN, Airtel, Globacom and 9mobile across Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States (Nigerian Communications Commission [NCC], 2023). The sample size of 1,111 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's (1967) sample-size determination formula at a 3% margin of error. The 3% margin was adopted to achieve a higher level of sampling precision than the conventional 5% margin, given the study's objective of examining the relationships between the dimensions of corporate social irresponsibility, corporate reputation and consumer responses. The resulting sample was distributed proportionately across the five states. Of the 1,111 questionnaires administered, 1,096 were returned and deemed usable, representing a response rate of 98.65%.

Sampling and Instrument

A multistage sampling procedure involving four stages was adopted: stratification of the study population across Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States to ensure geographical representation; purposive selection of accessible data-collection locations, including urban centres, markets, higher institutions and commercial areas; proportional allocation of the 1,111 respondents across the five states according to subscriber distribution; and screening and random selection of eligible active telecommunications subscribers. Primary data were collected using a structured, researcher-designed questionnaire developed from the study objectives and relevant literature, comprising 7 items for social transgression, 7 for ethical transgression, 7 for economic transgression, 11 for corporate reputation, 5 for negative word-of-mouth, 5 for brand switching and 4 for protest action, giving a total of 46 measurement items across the seven constructs. The questionnaire items were formulated to reflect the conceptual dimensions of the constructs and reviewed by two experts in Management Sciences for clarity, relevance and content validity. All seven constructs were measured using a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree. The four-point scale was

adopted to encourage respondents to express a directional opinion without a neutral midpoint, thereby facilitating clearer assessment of their perceptions and experiences.

Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency was determined using Cronbach's alpha. Confirmatory factor analysis was done using AMOS to assess the measurement model. Analysis was done on composite reliability, average variance extracted, Fornell-Larcker and heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT). Even though composite reliability exceeded the .70 standard, the AVE values were below the .50 mark; hence, convergent validity was interpreted cautiously. HTMT values were found to be less than .85 across the board, supporting discriminant validity according to that criterion.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modelling and multiple regression were used to analyse the data. Hypotheses were tested at the 5% level of significance. Mediation was evaluated using bootstrapped standardised indirect effects and bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. Any p-value of less than .05 was regarded as statistically significant.

Results

Response Rate and Respondent Profile

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	577	52.6
	Female	519	47.4
Age	18–25	312	28.5
	26–35	431	39.3
	36–45	230	21.0
	46 and above	123	11.2
Marital status	Single	533	48.6
	Married	502	45.8
	Divorced	61	5.6
Education	No formal education	63	5.7
	WASSCE/NECO	208	19.0
	OND/NCE	257	23.4
	BSc/HND	407	37.1
	MSc/MBA	138	12.6
	PhD	23	2.1
Occupation	Student	277	25.3
	Civil/Public servant	283	25.8
	Business owner	341	31.1
	Others	195	17.8

The data used to conduct the analysis were from 1,096 usable questionnaires. Male respondents constituted 52.6% and female respondents 47.4%. The largest age group was respondents aged 26–35 years (39.3%). The largest educational group (37.1%) was BSc/HND graduates, while the most dominant occupational group was business owners (31.1%).

Descriptive Results

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Construct	Grand Mean	SD	Decision
Social transgression	2.54	0.610	Accepted
Ethical transgression	2.57	0.628	Accepted
Economic transgression	2.74	0.612	Accepted
Corporate reputation	2.44	0.594	Rejected
Negative word-of-mouth	2.55	0.633	Accepted
Brand switching	2.65	0.618	Accepted
Protest action	2.43	0.685	Rejected

Social transgression (M = 2.54), ethical transgression (M = 2.57), economic transgression (M = 2.74), negative word-of-mouth (M = 2.55) and brand switching (M = 2.65) were accepted using the 2.50 decision benchmark. Corporate reputation (M = 2.44) and protest action (M = 2.43) were rejected at the descriptive level because they did not meet the benchmark.

Reliability Analysis

Table 3: Reliability Statistics

Construct	Items	Cronbach's α	Decision
Social transgression	7	0.802	Reliable
Ethical transgression	7	0.837	Reliable
Economic transgression	7	0.820	Reliable
Corporate reputation	11	0.881	Reliable
Negative word-of-mouth	5	0.753	Reliable
Brand switching	5	0.740	Reliable
Protest action	4	0.743	Reliable

All the constructs had acceptable internal consistency, as their alpha values ranged from 0.740 to 0.881 and were above the 0.70 benchmark.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Measurement Validity

Table 4: CFA Measurement Model Fit

Fit index	Obtained value	Recommended threshold
CMIN	1069.104	—
df	968	—
CMIN/DF	1.104	< 3.00
RMR	0.018	Lower preferred
GFI	0.960	≥ .90
AGFI	0.955	≥ .90
NFI	0.935	≥ .90
IFI	0.994	≥ .90
TLI	0.993	≥ .90
CFI	0.993	≥ .90
RMSEA	0.010	≤ .08
PCLOSE	1.000	> .05

The CFA measurement model demonstrated acceptable overall fit: CMIN/DF = 1.104, GFI = .960, AGFI = .955, NFI = .935, IFI = .994, TLI = .993, CFI = .993, RMSEA = .010 and PCLOSE = 1.000. The values indicate that the proposed measurement structure was suitable for the observed data.

Table 5: Measurement Validity Statistics

Construct	Loading range	α	CR	AVE
Social transgression	0.552–0.664	0.802	0.803	0.369
Ethical transgression	0.598–0.684	0.837	0.837	0.424
Economic transgression	0.567–0.687	0.820	0.821	0.397
Corporate reputation	0.557–0.699	0.881	0.882	0.405
Negative word-of-mouth	0.579–0.650	0.753	0.753	0.379
Brand switching	0.527–0.672	0.740	0.740	0.364
Protest action	0.594–0.677	0.743	0.746	0.424

Composite reliability was between .740 and .882, which met the benchmark of .70. However, the AVE range was between .364 and .424, which is lower than the conventional value of .50, indicating weaker-than-ideal convergent validity. The Fornell-Larcker criterion yielded mixed results for discriminant validity, while HTMT supported discriminant validity, with all values below .85. When interpreting the structural findings, this measurement limitation must be taken into consideration.

Structural Model Fit

Table 6: Structural Equation Model Fit

Fit index	Obtained value	Recommended threshold
CMIN	1072.854	—
Df	971	—
CMIN/DF	1.105	< 3.00
RMR	0.019	Lower preferred
GFI	0.960	≥ .90
AGFI	0.955	≥ .90
NFI	0.935	≥ .90
IFI	0.993	≥ .90
TLI	0.993	≥ .90
CFI	0.993	≥ .90
RMSEA	0.010	≤ .08
PCLOSE	1.000	> .05

The structural model also showed acceptable fit, with CMIN/DF = 1.105, GFI = .960, AGFI = .955, NFI = .935, IFI = .993, TLI = .993, CFI = .993, RMSEA = .010 and PCLOSE = 1.000.

Structural Path Coefficients

Table 7: Selected SEM Structural Paths

Path	B	C.R.	p	β	Decision
Social transgression → Corporate reputation	−0.228	−6.202	< .001	−0.254	Significant
Ethical transgression → Corporate reputation	−0.143	−3.747	< .001	−0.164	Significant
Economic transgression → Corporate reputation	−0.287	−7.136	< .001	−0.315	Significant
Corporate reputation → Protest action	−0.181	−4.100	< .001	−0.166	Significant
Corporate reputation → Negative WOM	−0.309	−6.579	< .001	−0.268	Significant
Corporate reputation → Brand switching	−0.106	−2.244	.025	−0.087	Significant
Social transgression → Protest action	0.495	10.144	< .001	0.506	Significant
Ethical transgression → Negative WOM	0.395	8.441	< .001	0.392	Significant
Economic transgression → Brand switching	0.595	10.668	< .001	0.540	Significant

Social transgression was a notable predictor of protest action (β = .506, p < .001), ethical transgression was a notable predictor of negative word-of-mouth (β = .392, p < .001), and economic transgression was a notable predictor of brand switching (β = .540, p < .001). Corporate reputation was negatively associated with protest action (β = −.166, p < .001), negative word-of-mouth (β = −.268, p < .001) and brand switching (β = −.087, p = .025). Each CSI dimension also had a negative association with corporate reputation.

Explained Variance

Table 8: Squared Multiple Correlations

Endogenous construct	R^2
Corporate reputation	0.361
Protest action	0.566
Brand switching	0.596
Negative word-of-mouth	0.588

This model explained 36.1% of the variance in corporate reputation, 56.6% in protest action, 59.6% in brand switching and 58.8% in negative word-of-mouth. Brand switching was thus the best explained of the three consumer-response outcomes.

Mediation Analysis

Table 9: Bootstrapped Standardised Indirect Effects

Indirect path	β indirect	95% CI	p	Decision
Economic → Reputation → Protest	0.052	[0.031, 0.079]	< .001	Significant
Ethical → Reputation → Protest	0.027	[0.014, 0.048]	.001	Significant
Social → Reputation → Protest	0.042	[0.025, 0.063]	< .001	Significant
Economic → Reputation → Switching	0.028	[0.008, 0.051]	.024	Significant
Ethical → Reputation → Switching	0.014	[0.004, 0.031]	.017	Significant
Social → Reputation → Switching	0.022	[0.007, 0.043]	.021	Significant
Economic → Reputation → Negative WOM	0.084	[0.059, 0.115]	< .001	Significant
Ethical → Reputation → Negative WOM	0.044	[0.024, 0.070]	.001	Significant
Social → Reputation → Negative WOM	0.068	[0.048, 0.093]	< .001	Significant

All reported indirect effects through corporate reputation were significant, with confidence intervals excluding zero. The indirect effects ranged from .014 to .084. The largest mediated pathway was economic transgression → corporate reputation → negative word-of-mouth (β = .084, $p < .001$). As the structural model contained significant direct paths alongside the significant indirect effects, the overall pattern was consistent with partial rather than full mediation.

Joint Effect of CSI Dimensions on Consumer Response

Table 10: Joint Effect Model

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	F	df	p
Social + Ethical + Economic transgressions → Consumer response	0.778	0.606	0.605	559.721	3, 1092	< .001

Table 11: Regression Coefficients for the Joint Effect

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	VIF
Constant	0.461	0.052	—	8.898	< .001	—
Social transgression	0.277	0.017	0.344	16.122	< .001	1.260
Ethical transgression	0.234	0.018	0.299	13.184	< .001	1.429
Economic transgression	0.284	0.018	0.354	16.076	< .001	1.342

The three CSI dimensions jointly explained 60.6% of the variation in consumer response ($R = .778$, $R^2 = .606$, adjusted $R^2 = .605$, $F(3, 1092) = 559.721$, $p < .001$). The three predictors all had significant contributions. Economic transgression had $\beta = .354$, social transgression $\beta = .344$ and ethical transgression $\beta = .299$. VIF values of 1.260–1.429 indicated that there was no problem of multicollinearity within the joint model.

Discussion of Findings

The initial finding was that social transgression was a significant predictor of protest action among telecommunications consumers. The positive relation ($\beta = .506$, $p < .001$) shows that higher perceived lack of social responsibility is related to greater consumer resistance. This observation aligns with the stakeholder approach since telecommunications providers have an impact on their customers, communities and other stakeholder audiences, whose demands go beyond delivering network services. It also coincides with the logic of Expectancy Violations Theory: when companies depart from perceived norms of socially responsible practices, consumers may respond through collective or public opposition. The result also goes hand-in-hand with the literature on the subject of CSI as a whole, which identifies protest and additional punitive responses as major effects of perceived firm misconduct (Grappi et al., 2013; Valor et al., 2022).

The second outcome showed that the relationship between ethical transgression and negative word-of-mouth was significant and positive ($\beta = .392$, $p < .001$). The implication of the outcome is that deceptive communication, perceived unfairness, privacy concerns and other ethical failures can prompt consumers to generate negative communication about telecommunications providers. Negative word-of-mouth is readily available since consumers can warn friends, family and other users without bearing the costs of a formal protest or even switching. This finding is consistent with that of Xie and Bagozzi (2019), who illustrate that negative consumer reactions to corporate irresponsibility could be interpreted through the prism of moral judgments and feelings.

The third result was that brand switching was significantly and positively related to economic transgression ($\beta = .540$, $p < .001$). It was the largest standardised coefficient among the focal direct relationships. The result suggests that perceived overpricing, hidden costs, low value for money and other pertinent financial issues may motivate consumers to look at rival

telecommunications companies. That result coincides with the economic rationality of consumer punishment: when consumers believe an asymmetry exists between the price paid and value received, switching provides a direct market response. It also reiterates the significance of pricing equity and open billing in telecommunications relationships.

The fourth finding revealed that corporate reputation was a significant mediator. Each of the nine reported indirect pathways via reputation was significant at the .05 level and had confidence intervals not covering zero. CSI dimensions had inverse relationships with corporate reputation, while corporate reputation had inverse relationships with protest action, negative word-of-mouth and brand switching. The outcome suggests that corporate reputation acts as an appraisal channel through which irresponsible behaviour becomes behaviourally significant. These findings may be compared with research showing that corporate reputation has been associated with the social management of CSI and that corporate irresponsibility may darken the assessment of the business as a whole (Nardella et al., 2023; Swaen et al., 2021).

The fifth outcome was that social, ethical and economic transgressions jointly explained 60.6% of the variation in consumer response. The significant F-statistic supports the fact that the dimensions, as a set, provide a significant level of explanatory power. This observation substantiates a multidimensional perspective of CSI: consumer reactions might indicate cumulative perceptions in social, ethical and economic spheres and not a one-off event. The observation further supports Valour et al. (2022), who emphasise that antecedents and response mechanisms shape consumer punishment following CSI.

Theoretical Implications

The study develops Stakeholder Theory by demonstrating that perceived failures in corporate responsibilities are associated with observable consumer responses in telecommunications. It also relies on Expectancy Violations Theory in explaining how non-adherence to perceived standards of fairness, honesty and social responsibility can lead to negative communication, switching and protest. The mediation evidence also indicates that reputation is one of the evaluative mechanisms that has an impact on the relationship between corporate behaviour and consumer reaction.

Managerial Implications

Preventing CSI should be considered by telecommunications managers as part of reputation and customer-relationship management. The results show that social, ethical and economic transgressions are not mere image matters but are associated with measurable consumer responses. Companies ought to enhance community involvement, open complaint procedures and customer-welfare measures, ensure truth in advertisements, service promotional reports and invoicing, make their communications precise and predictable, and maintain transparent prices and billing frameworks.

The mediation outcomes also indicate that conventional indicators of service should be supported with reputation monitoring. Variables that managers should monitor include changes in trust, credibility and perceived integrity, alongside complaints, switching intentions and negative word-of-mouth. The first indication of reputational loss may provide an opportunity for corrective action before dissatisfaction becomes manifest as broader consumer resistance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that consumer action is significantly related to corporate social irresponsibility in the telecommunication industry in South-East Nigeria. Protest action was significantly and positively related to social transgression, negative word-of-mouth was significantly and positively related to ethical transgression, and brand switching was significantly and positively related to economic transgression. Corporate reputation significantly mediated the relationships between the CSI dimensions and consumer-response

outcomes. Besides, the three CSI dimensions had a combined contribution of 60.6% of the variation in consumer response.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that telecommunications companies improve their policies on social responsibility and stakeholder responsibility; improve transparency in advertising, privacy and customer communication; maintain reasonable and understandable bills and prices; and address consumer grievances through responsive mechanisms. Corporate reputation should be tracked as a strategic indicator since harm to reputation can transmit the impact of irresponsible behaviour into wider consumer reaction.

Contribution to Knowledge

The paper provides empirical evidence from the South-East Nigerian context, integrating the social, ethical and economic facets of CSI into three consumer-response outcomes. It also shows the mediating influence of corporate reputation and the significance of integrating the CSI dimensions in explaining a substantial proportion of variance in consumer response. Through this paper, therefore, the study goes beyond a service-quality approach and provides a multidimensional description of the effect of corporate behaviour on consumer behaviour in telecommunications.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

The cross-sectional design limits sound temporal causal interpretation because perceptions and reactions were measured at one given moment. Additionally, the measurement model yielded AVE values lower than the conventional .50 cut-off; composite reliability was acceptable, while HTMT supported discriminant validity. Future research should follow up the model with longitudinal data, alternative samples and other regions of Nigeria. Other moderators that may be researched in future are consumer loyalty, switching costs, perceived severity, perceived controllability and prior reputation.

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