

TRUST AS THE CORNERSTONE FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY RESILIENCE: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK LINKING PERCEIVED ESG, CORPORATE COMMUNITY BENEFITS, SOCIAL TRUST, AND COMMUNITY DIGITAL EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract: *This paper develops a conceptual structure which emphasizes Sustainable Community Resilience (SCR) through Perceived ESG Performance (PESG), Perceived Corporate Community Benefit (PCCB), Community-Corporate Social Trust (CCST), and Community Digital Empowerment (CDE) in the context of growing expectations for global corporate responsibility. The literature currently in publication has a substantial theoretical gap since it ignores the connection between ESG and community-level results with trust-based mechanisms and digital factors. To address this gap, seven proposals are introduced, incorporating stakeholder theory, societal exchange theory, social capital theories, empowerment theory, and community resilience theory. The model identifies Community-Corporate Social Trust (CCST) as the central mediator and Community Digital Empowerment (CDE) as a moderator. This framework makes new academic contributions to community-based research in developing countries, particularly Climate-Vulnerable Communities and Transition Urban Communities context, and provides important practical guidance for policy-makers, corporate authorities, and community development organizations.*

Keywords: Perceived ESG, Corporate Community Benefit, Social Trust, Sustainable Community Resilience, Stakeholder Theory

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the practice of corporate environmental, social and governance (ESG) has transformed from a marginal investment-assessment tool to a central pillar of corporate strategy, regulatory policy and academic research (Angeloni, 2026). Although the ESG concept was institutionalized in the 2004 UN Global Compact “Who Cares Wins” report, it has not been for more than twenty years since it was formally defined (Angeloni, 2026). Despite this rapid institutional expansion, significant and empirically proven disconnect remains: ESG research has been conducted primarily from a firm centric and investor oriented perspective, while the communities in whose name this practice is conducted have largely ignored how it is experienced in practice. A bibliometric study by (Kansal et al., 2024) found that the ESG literature is largely confined to Corporate centric.

In this context, elucidating how Perceived ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) and Corporate Community Benefit (PCCB)) initiatives support community resilience building,

strengthening, and long-term adaptive capability has emerged as a high priority and rapidly advancing research agenda within modern corporate governance and sustainable development scholarship (Leoni, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). (Malecha et al., 2025) recently noted that socio institutional linkages supporting resilience planning are still underdeveloped in the global setting. (Boston et al., 2024) in their multi sectorial study, have shown that inclusive strategies are essential for resilience. Systematic reviews have positioned social trust as a central element among the components of resilient communities. These studies demonstrate that community resilience is multidimensional and not solely infrastructural, trust and digital capacity are also integral components (Güngör & Elburz, 2024). Significant among the existing challenges are: First, the absence or inconsistency of ESG disclosure standards (Zhan et al., 2025) Second, the gap between corporate actions and the community's perceived reality (Wijen et al., 2025) Third, due to digital inequality, disadvantaged communities have limited access to corporate information (Scheerder et al., 2017) and fourth, there is a credibility gap between corporate promises and actual community development (Fan et al., 2025). A review of the research gap reveals at least four significant gaps in the existing literature. First, most ESG research is corporate centric, and the community perspective is absent (De Falco et al., 2024; Dwibedi et al., 2024). Second, there is lack of integrated model of how PCCB and PESG jointly affect sustainable resilience (Kansal et al., 2024; Marie et al., 2024). Third, the mediating role of social trust has not been tested in this context (Fan et al., 2025; Kaakeh & Kaakeh, 2025). Fourth, the variable impact of digital empowerment is completely overlooked (Tan et al., 2025; X. Xu & Sun, 2025).

This study offers numerous theoretical and practical advances. Theoretically, it builds a new explanatory framework combining five related theories. Practically, it provides guidance for improving corporate community relations in developing countries, especially in multinational societies. In terms of Policy, it emphasizes the need for a community centered approach in the formulation of ESG obligations and digital inclusion policies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Perceived ESG (PESG)

Although ESG has traditionally been viewed as a measure of corporate performance, recent research has highlighted the importance of examining it from a community perspective. (Van Zanten, 2025) has shown that, despite differences in ESG rating methodologies, there is significant alignment with SDG scores in measuring environmental and social impacts. (Nian & Said, 2025) in a systematic review, have shown that ESG performance plays a positive role in reducing organizational risk and enhancing financial stability. However, (Zhan et al., 2025) warn that ESG decoupling or inconsistent disclosure undermines corporate sustainability. (J. Kim & Yang, 2026) analyzed the evolution of ESG performance in the era of regulatory transformation during the 2020-2024 periods. (Wijen et al., 2025) argue that current ESG measurement methods prioritize the organizational perspective and cannot adequately capture social impact. (Du Toit, 2024) in a review of three decades of sustainability reporting, shows that community centered ESG assessment is still in its early stages of development. (Vilchis Zubizarreta & Tito Aquino, 2026) have provided a detailed analysis of the diversity and inconsistencies in ESG rating methods. (H. Xu et al., 2024) have shown that ESG influences customer retention, which is linked to community level trust. In the present investigation, PESG refers to the extent to which community members perceive a corporate entity's environmental stewardship, social contribution, and governance as active, meaningful, and credible. It is a second order structural variable composed of three dimensions: Environmental, Social, and Governance.

2.2 Perceived Corporate Community Benefit (PCCB)

PCCB is the overall perception of community members that corporate activities are making a tangible contribution to enhancing their quality of life, capabilities, and opportunities (Chopova et al., 2024; Oh et al., 2024). The dimensions of Carroll's CSR pyramid economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic reflect the different levels of PCCB (R. C. Kim, 2024; Zaki et al., 2023). Another study by (Enechi & Pattberg, 2025), have shown that sustainability awareness and knowledge in multi stakeholder partnerships directly influence community participation. (Jiang & Luo, 2025) examined the dynamic coordination process for ESG performance in a tripartite evolutionary game and demonstrated that enhancing ESG results requires cooperation between businesses, communities, and governments. According to (Zhou, 2026), ESG performance enhances corporate resilience by reducing financing constraints, increasing innovation, and improving governance, which result in trickle down to the community level. The current study will measure PCCB along three dimensions: Economic & Livelihood Benefit, Community Capacity & Wellbeing, and Infrastructure & Service Access. These three dimensions are consistent with Carroll's various CSR levels and capture the real experiences of communities in a holistic manner.

2.3 Community-Community Social Trust (CCST)

Social trust is a central component of social capital theory (Lin et al., 2001; Putnam, 2000). CCST refers to the trust that community members place in a corporate entity based on its perceived intentions (Sondern & Hertel, 2024) capabilities and integrity (Hiatt et al., 2023), reflecting the core dimensions of organizational trustworthiness (Lee et al., 2024). (Fan et al., 2025) importantly shown that social trust drives corporate ESG performance, and that this relationship is bidirectional. (Kaakeh & Kaakeh, 2025) have demonstrated that social capital influences sustainable disclosure and that corruption plays a moderating role in this relationship. In the context of China (Shahab et al., 2025) have shown that social trust moderates the relationship between environmental violations and remedial actions. This demonstrates that trust is not merely a social goodwill sentiment but an effective mechanism for corporate accountability. In light of (Blau, 2017) social exchange theory, CCST is formed when the community perceives that corporate contributions are consistent with their expectations and established on a basis of mutual benefit.

2.4 Community Digital Empowerment (CDE)

Digital empowerment is a multidimensional construct encompassing access to digital technologies, digital skills and competencies, and the effective use of digital resources to improve individual and community outcomes (OECD 2023; van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2020), 2021; Van Laar et al., 2019). (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2018) explain the side effects of internet use and show that digital engagement has diverse effects on social, economic, and political outcomes. (Scheerder et al., 2017) identify the determinants of second and third level digital inequality, which include not only access but also skill and outcome inequalities. (Zhang et al., 2026) highlight the two-way impact of digital empowerment on rural environmental governance in China, namely that digital tools can simultaneously facilitate and complicate environmental governance. (Sabri et al., n.d.) Examine the relationship between digital capabilities, behavioral resilience, and financial inclusion in the context of Malaysia and Indonesia. (McCosker & Tucker, 2025) present a situational analysis of digital needs and collective capabilities in low-income households. (UNDP; 2022) has recognized digital transformation as a key driver of resilience. In the current study, CDE refers to the ability of communities to access, assess, and use digital technologies to demand corporate accountability for ESG information.

2.5 Sustainable Community Resilience (SCR)

Community resilience is a multidimensional and dynamic concept that refers to a community's capacity to withstand shocks, adapt, and recover after disasters (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Cutter et al., 2010). (Norris et al., 2008) defined community resilience as a metaphor, a theory, a set of capacities, and a disaster preparedness strategy. Considering the integrated perspective of (Berkes & Ross, 2013), resilience is not merely the result of external assistance, but rather an expression of a community's internal social capital and collective capacity. In recent research, (Derakhshan et al., 2025) identified the transformative drivers of community resilience and demonstrated that social connections and institutional trust are key prerequisites for resilience. A systematic review by (Scordato & Gulbrandsen, 2024) show that resilience and sustainability are mutually supportive. (Abdullah et al., 2026) analyzed resilience narratives during water supply disruptions in the era of climate change among multinational communities in Malaysia. Sustainable Community Resilience is not limited to immediate disaster response or post crisis recovery processes. Rather, it is a long term, multidimensional and dynamic capacity through which a community can consistently protect its ecological balance, maintain social cohesion and ensure economic stability (IPCC 2023; UNDRR 2024). (Kumar & Hashem Mehany, 2026) have shown that Infrastructure sustainability and resilience are increasingly understood as interrelated and mutually reinforcing constructs within sustainable development discourse. (Trott et al., 2026) examined the multi-level impacts of participatory planning on community-led climate resilience.

3. Critical Gap Analysis

An in-depth review of the existing literature identified at least five significant research gaps. First, the corporate-centricity of ESG research: Almost all ESG literature, including (J. Kim & Yang, 2026; Nian & Said, 2025; Sutrisno Mulkan Teguh et al., 2025), is driven by a corporate perspective. The influence of community perceptions of ESG activities on community resilience remains underexplored in the existing literature (Du Toit, 2024). Second, the absence of mediating mechanisms: Existing studies often directly derive ESG to community outcomes, ignoring the intermediate trust-based mechanisms. While (Fan et al., 2025; Shahab et al., 2025) examine the role of social trust, the specific mediating role of community-corporate trust is untested. Third, the lack of integrated analysis of PESG and PCCB: ESG and CSR research is typically conducted separately. No attempt has been made to examine the dual effects of community level sentiment in the context of Carroll's CSR framework and ESG (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Gillan et al., 2021).

Fourth, the absence of the modulating role of digital empowerment: While (Sabri et al.; 2025; Zhang et al., 2026) have examined some aspects of digital empowerment, how digital empowerment modifies this relationship in the ESG sentiment-trust-resilience nexus has never been examined. Fifth, the neglect of the context of developing countries and multinational societies: Most ESG and resilience research has been conducted in the context of Western developed countries. These relationships may manifest differently in a multinational, Climate-Vulnerable Communities and Transition Urban Communities society like Bangladesh and Malaysia, which is a completely new context to explore (Jamali & Mirshak, 2007; Lattemann et al., 2009). Regarding the inadequacy of existing theories, a single theoretical lens is not able to fully explain these complex relationships. Stakeholder theory alone cannot explain the active role of communities. Social exchange theory ignores power inequalities, Social capital theory does not include the digital dimension, and empowerment theory has not been specifically applied to corporate relationships. Therefore, a coherent theoretical framework is essential.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study follows a conceptual research design, where a new explanatory framework is proposed through a synthesis of existing theories and literature (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015; Jaakkola, 2020). The conceptual approach is applicable to cases where there are explanatory gaps in existing theories and new theoretical connections need to be made. The proposed framework is testable in the future with quantitative survey methods (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

4.2 Sampling

The proposed empirical stage can be followed by purposive sampling strategy. (Etikan, 2016) noted that this method is suitable for research on populations with specific characteristics, as it helps in selecting participants with characteristics that are consistent with the research objectives and relevant to them. In future empirical studies, appropriate communities can be selected based on the research objectives and context.

4.3 Sample

It is proposed to include a minimum of 350-400 adult community members (18 years of age or above) for future empirical validation. The proposed sample size is determined to achieve sufficient statistical power for PLS-SEM-based model estimation. Model complexity, anticipated effect size, significance level, statistical power, and potential non-response rate will be considered when determining the final sample size. Inclusion criteria may include adult members who are aware of local corporate ESG/CSR activities and have lived in the relevant community for at least one year (Irasanti et al., 2023).

4.4 Measurement

All variables will be measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) in a structured questionnaire. The 26-item 3-dimensional validated P-ESG Scale will be used to measure the independent variable PESG (Oh et al., 2024) . Items adapted and refined from the relevant dimensions of the CSR framework (Carroll, 1991) will be used to measure PCCB.

Validated social trust (Shahab et al., 2025) items will be used to measure the mediating variable CCST and scales adapted from the digital empowerment literature will be used to measure the controlling variable CDE. The five-dimensional community resilience measurement framework based on the CART Toolkit proposed by (Irasanti et al., 2023) will be used to measure the dependent variable SCR.

4.5 Analysis Plan

The proposed framework will be tested using the PLS-SEM method, which is suitable for prediction-oriented research and testing relatively new theoretical frameworks (Hair et al., 2019). Bootstrapping methods will be used to test the mediation effect of CCST and interaction effect analysis will be used to test the moderating effect of CDE. If necessary, Multi-Group Analysis (MGA) can be used to test differences in structural relationships across different communities or contexts in future empirical studies (Henseler et al., 2015).

5. Theoretical Underpinnings

5.1 Stakeholder Theory

Freeman's Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) argues that organizations should consider the interests of all stakeholders, including shareholders, employees, customers, communities, and governments. In light of this theory, the community is not merely a consumer of corporate

activities it is an active stakeholder whose sentiments and expectations influence corporate strategy. In the current model, stakeholder theory provides the foundation for both the PESG and PCCB variables. The community, as a primary stakeholder, evaluates corporate ESG initiatives, and this evaluation influences their trust and resilience. (Miklian, 2026) analyzes the impact of control and polarization on corporate social engagement in high-risk situations, demonstrating that the diversity of stakeholder expectations complicates corporate strategy.

5.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory (Blau, 2017; Cropanzano et al., 2017) explains that social relationships are based on the exchange of mutual benefits. When corporate entities provide real benefits to the community, the community responds with mutual trust, support, and cooperation. This reciprocity is the key mechanism for the formation of CCST.

In light of exchange theory, both PESG and PCCB act as ‘inputs’ to social exchange on behalf of the corporate entity. When the community perceives these input as sufficient, fair, and credible, SCR increases through CCST. This process is consistent with (Cropanzano et al., 2017)’s refined social exchange theory, which incorporates power relations and resource dependence into the analysis.

5.3 Social Capital Theory

(Lin et al., 2001; Putnam, 2000) social capital theory argues that the value embedded in relationships integrating social networks, norms, and trust is the primary source of collective effectiveness. Community corporate trust is a specific application of this theory, where corporate entities can serve as an external source of community social capital. (Kaakeh & Kaakeh, 2025) have shown that social capital influences social publications, and corruption plays a variable role in this relationship. Putnam's observation in ‘Bowling Alone’ makes it clear that the erosion of social capital diminishes the community's collective efficacy. In the current model, CCST is a specific form of social capital that is effective at the corporate-community boundary.

5.4 Empowerment Theory

(Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) empowerment theory explains the process by which communities gain control over their own lives and environments. (Rachmad, Y. E. (2022), 2024) discusses contemporary applications of empowerment theory. Community digital empowerment (CDE) is a technology mediated form of this theory, in which digital tools enable communities to collect, analyze, and demand corporate accountability. Based on empowerment theory, CDE is not just a variable; it is an indicator of the active capacity of the community. Communities with high CDE can process information from PESG and PCCB more effectively and have a stronger foundation of trust, which has a positive impact on resilience.

5.5 Community Resilience Theory

(Norris et al., 2008) developed the community resilience theory, which interprets resilience as the interconnection of four core capacities: economic development, social capital, information and communication, and community capacity. (Berkes & Ross, 2013) present an integrated perspective in which the coordination of internal and external resources determines resilience. The rationale for the integrated application of these theories is that none of the five theories is complete in its explanatory power. Stakeholder theory establishes the legitimacy of corporate-community relationships, social exchange theory explains the dynamics of these relationships, social capital theory analyzes the social processes of trust formation, Empowerment theory

explains the role of digital enablement, and community-resilience theory provides the conceptual basis for the ultimate outcomes.

6. Conceptual Framework Development

The proposed conceptual framework is an integrated model consisting of five theories that explain the relationship between two independent variables (PESG and PCCB), a mediator (CCST), a moderator variable (CDE), and a dependent variable (SCR).

The rationale for the PESG → CCST relationship: When the community perceives corporate environmental, social, and governance activities as genuine and meaningful, trust in the corporate entity increases in accordance with the principle of reciprocity in social exchange theory. In light of stakeholder theory, the community evaluates ESG activities as an active stakeholder and determines the level of trust based on that evaluation.

The rationale for the PCCB → CCST relationship: In social exchange theory, the receipt of concrete benefits is the strongest prerequisite for building trust. When community members witness economic benefits, capacity building, and infrastructure development, their trust in the corporate entity naturally increases.

Rationale for the CCST → SCR relationship: In an integrated view of social capital theory and community-resilience theory, trust is an essential social resource that supports disaster resilience, recovery, and long-term adaptation. (Norris et al., 2008) posit that trust as a social capital component is a direct prerequisite for resilience.

The changing role of CDE: Based on empowerment theory, digitally enabled communities can process ESG information more quickly and effectively, verify corporate claims, and the CCST → SCR relationship is strengthened as a foundation of trust is strengthened.

7. Hypothesis Development

Based on the theoretical foundation of the conceptual framework and the literature review, the following propositions are presented:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Perceived ESG and Community Corporate Social Trust The more positive the perceived ESG (PESG) of community members, the stronger the Community-Corporate Social Trust (CCST).

Rationale: Based on stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and social exchange theory (Blau, 2017), ESG acts as a signal of corporate social exchange, which according to (Fan et al., 2025) positively influences social trust.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Perceived Corporate Community Benefits and Social Trust the higher the perceived corporate community benefits (PCCB) of the community, the stronger the Community-Corporate Social Trust (CCST).

Rationale: According to social exchange theory, direct benefits are the foundation for trust formation (Cropanzano et al., 2017), and the economic, welfare, and infrastructural benefits of PCCBs create trust by improving the quality of life of the community.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Social Trust and Sustainable Community Resilience The stronger the community corporate social trust (CCST), the greater the increase in sustainable community resilience (SCR).

Rationale: In line with (Norris et al., 2008)'s community resilience theory and (Putnam, 2000)'s social capital theory, trust is an essential resilience asset. (Derakhshan et al., 2025) identified social connections as a central element in analyzing the drivers of changing community resilience.

9. Theoretical Contributions

This research makes at least five significant theoretical contributions.

First, the inclusion of a community-centered perspective in ESG research: existing ESG literature is corporate-centric. This study establishes community sentiment as a central variable, responding to (Wijen et al., 2025) critique of measurement limitations. Second, the theoretical establishment of the mediating role of social trust: CCST is theoretically established as a mediating variable between ESG and resilience, which situates the findings of (Shahab et al., 2025) and (Fan et al., 2025) in a broader context. Third, the theoretical construction of the variable role of digital empowerment: The proposition of the variable role of CDE in the ESG-trust-resilience nexus represents an unprecedented synthesis of empowerment theory, digital divide research, and resilience theory (van Dijk, J. A. G. M. (2020), 2021; Van Laar et al., 2019). Fourth, an integrated framework of five theories: the integrated application of stakeholder theory, social exchange theory, social capital theory, empowerment theory, and community resilience theory transcends the limitations of previous single-theoretical studies (Blau, 2017; Freeman, 1984; Lin et al., 2001; Norris et al., 2008; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Putnam, 2000). Fifth, the proposition of second-order structural models: Both PESG and PCCB are proposed as second-order structural variables, ensuring both measurement validity and theoretical richness (Becker et al., 2012; Hair et al., 2021; Sarstedt et al., 2019).

10. Practical Implications

For corporates: First, community perspectives should be central to the design of ESG activities. (Van Zanten, 2025) analysis of SDG scores shows that there can be a gap between external ratings and community perceptions. Therefore, corporations need to actively measure community ESG perceptions and adjust strategies accordingly. Second, long-term investment is needed to increase PCCB. While short-term CSR activities are visible, delivering long-term and collective benefits is essential to building sustainable trust. (Zhou, 2026) explains that ESG performance builds long-term resilience through financing and innovation. For community development organizations: Increasing community CDE by implementing digital literacy activities should be a priority. (McCosker & Tucker, 2025) show that collective approaches are effective in bridging the gap between digital needs and collective capabilities in low-income households.

11. Policy Implications

This report offers several significant policy recommendations for policymakers in developing countries. First, ESG disclosures should be standardized and community-centered assessment systems should be introduced. (Vilchis Zubizarreta & Tito Aquino, 2026) analyzed the inconsistencies in ESG rating systems and highlighted the need for a standardized system. Second, corporate ESG obligations should include provisions to ensure community involvement. (Enechi & Pattberg, 2025) showed that sustainability awareness increases in multi-stakeholder partnerships. Third, digital inclusion policies & resilience policies ought to be connected. (Malecha et al., 2025) noted that the inclusion of digital capabilities in local level resilience planning is still insufficient. Fourth, regular national surveys should be conducted to monitor corporate community trust. The data from these surveys can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of ESG policies.

12. Conclusion

This paper introduces a cohesive conceptual model that provides a theoretical explanation how sustainable community resilience is shaped by the interrelated effects of corporate ESG sentiment, community benefit sentiment, social trust, and digital empowerment. Key contributions include: first, the theoretical establishment of CCST as a central mediator, second, highlighting the impact of digital inequality on resilience by incorporating CDE as a variable, third, an integrated framework of five theories that overcomes the limitations of a single theoretical perspective, and a review of the connection between ESG, community, along with resilience in the context of emerging developing multinational society are some of the major contributions. In the triple challenge of the global climate crisis, social inequality, and digital transformation, corporate-community trust is becoming increasingly important as a strategic asset. This framework provides a holistic view for corporate leaders, community development workers, and policymakers in which trust is not just a value, but an effective tool for resilience.

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