

# Corporate Responsibility for Digital Innovation: A Systematic Review of the Literature

Tobias Knopf and Doreén Pick

Merseburg University of Applied Sciences, Merseburg, Germany

[tobias.knopf@hs-merseburg.de](mailto:tobias.knopf@hs-merseburg.de)

[doreen.pick@hs-merseburg.de](mailto:doreen.pick@hs-merseburg.de)

**Abstract:** The digital transformation of the economy and society is fundamentally changing the possible value creation processes of companies. These changes increasingly involve the processing of personal data into information and knowledge that can be used to create individualised user experiences or gain insights from aggregated data. Customer relationships and the interconnectedness of customers are similarly changing as a result of this digital transformation. As customers become more demanding and involved, voluntary activities that go beyond compliance and regulation are becoming increasingly important. At the same time, companies are increasingly recognising the potential of privacy-friendly goods and services. They are using the heterogeneity of their offerings to develop unique selling propositions that focus on fulfilling their digital responsibilities (e.g., Apple, Samsung). In this way, digital responsibility fosters innovation in goods, services and digital markets. The voluntary responsibility of companies in dealing with digital technologies and creating value from data is discussed under the term 'corporate digital responsibility' (CDR). This young field of research has its origins in the study of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and is often discussed in that context. However, with the growing importance of digital responsibility for organisations and the proliferation of related activities, it is increasingly establishing itself as a discipline in its own right. Correspondingly, research on CDR has also seen a sharp increase in the number of publications since 2019. The paper evaluates existing research approaches in a systematic literature review. It highlights definitional approaches, approaches to describing the entrepreneurial motivation for CDR activities and their consequences for corporations, their business relationships and society. Further, the paper identifies research gaps of CDR and provides a basis for further research. This paper shall also serve as a starting point for organisations to establish their own efforts in this area, as well as for the evaluation of existing activities.

**Keywords:** Corporate Digital Responsibility, Digital Ethics, Data Ethics, Data Protection, Digital Transformation

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## 1. Background, relevance and objectives

Corporate Digital Responsibility (CDR) has become an increasingly important concept in business practice and research. It was taken up at the political level in 2018 by the German Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection. In the course of this, an initiative was set up that meets at regular intervals and companies such as Deutsche Telekom, Otto Group, Telefonica and Zalando published their first CDR Reports in 2022 (Pick & Knopf, 2023). In parallel to the ministerial initiative, researchers from various disciplines have dealt with the term. While the first publications can be found in 2016 to 2017, the frequency of publications has increased since 2018.

Some researchers consider CDR to be a crucial aspect of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the digital age (Herden et al, 2021; Wade, 2020). Other researchers define it as a field of study in its own right that emerged from CSR (Lobschat et al, 2021; Mihale-Wilson et al, 2022) and digital ethics (Mueller, 2022; Wallimann-Helmer et al, 2021). Companies are increasingly aware of their digital responsibilities and the need to harmonize business practices with sustainability and social responsibility principles (Janiszewska-Kiewra, 2020; Yokoi et al, 2023). CDR emphasizes the discretionary and self-governed aspect of business dedication to ethical digital advancements, employing the established concept of CSR as a guiding structure. Simultaneously, this issue creates unique links between the notions of corporate responsibility and digital innovation (Trittin-Ulbrich & Böckel, 2022). The relevance of the topic in the context of data processing, especially through artificial intelligence, can be emphasised (Ashok et al, 2022; Elliott et al, 2021). CDR is multidisciplinary, involving areas such as information technology, business ethics, social responsibility, privacy and security.

Increasing regulation around data security and privacy further highlights the importance of CDR (e.g., European General Data Protection Regulation, ePrivacy Regulation, Data Act, AI Act). Many jurisdictions have introduced laws and regulations governing the responsibilities of businesses in their digital practices and data management. Companies that fail to comply can expect severe financial penalties and reputational damage.

In summary, CDR is a key challenge for companies to meet sustainable and responsible expectations. While the conceptualisation of CDR is progressing (Mueller 2022) and some researchers are beginning to explore the field industry-specific (Liyanaarachchi et al 2021; Weber-Lewerenz 2021; Wirtz et al, 2023) and empirically (Carl et al 2023; Merbecks 2023), there is still no clear, unified definition. This provides challenges for research and practice.

Some researchers have already conducted literature reviews on CDR. Londoño-Cardozo & Paz (2021) examined works that appeared up to 2019 addressing the emergence of CDR from CSR. Wallimann-Helmer et al (2021) focus on a related term of “Digital Ethics”. Yadav & Noida (2022) are the first to systematically list existing CDR concepts. However, the literature overview does not provide a content analysis of definitions of CDR. Thus, with our work we intend to close that research gap. The most recent systematic review by Bednárová & Serpeninova (2023) provides a list of definitions. They focus on artificial intelligence in their work and thus direct their attention to the CDR aspect of data processing, which can include recording, collecting, storing, analysing, accessing, disclosure and transfer of data (Pick & Knopf, 2022). For manifold reasons we consider an additional systematic literature review to be necessary. The authors only searched for “corporate digital responsibility”. We consider a more comprehensive keyword collection. Further, the authors noted that many publications are created in Germany. We assume that there is also a larger body of German-language literature on this topic. While previous systematic reviews only evaluated the literature in English, we also have the possibility to evaluate English and German definitions.

Our systematic literature review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various definitions, with their conceptualizations of CDR in the existing literature. The objectives include identifying common themes and divergences, discussing the implications for theory and practice, and proposing a unified definition or framework to guide future research and implementation of CDR initiatives. The study's findings will contribute to a much clearer understanding of CDR, benefiting researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in the development and implementation of effective CDR strategies. The research question for the paper is therefore as follows:

*RQ1: What definitions and underlying concepts of CDR are given in the scientific literature?*

We presume that existing definitions differ in terms of (1) the scope of responsibility taken, (2) the scope of activities to address this responsibility and (3) the scope of beneficiaries of those activities. We therefore address the following question:

*RQ2: Can a unified definition be reached across contexts (e.g. industries, cultures)?*

## **2. Methodology**

A comprehensive search of relevant databases was conducted to identify studies addressing CDR definitions and conceptualizations. We followed the approach from Bednárová & Serpeninova (2023) to search Scopus and Google Scholar databases but waived the Web of Science database because of its high overlap in indexed titles with Scopus (see for such analysis Singh et al 2021). In addition to the term “Corporate Digital Responsibility”, we included terms that are also frequently used in the discourse. To integrate the ethical focus of the CDR, we examined “digital ethics”. We also included the search prompt “Digital Responsibility” AND “Corporate” to address the limited freedom of sentence structure in abstracts. Further, we follow the arguments of Meier et al (2022) and assume that “Digital Responsibility” is also being written about outside of the corporate context and include the term as well. This also is reasonable because “Corporate” may have been substituted with other words such as “Business” or “Company”. Similar to other systematic reviews on CDR, we searched with these terms in title, abstract and keywords on the Scopus database. Google Scholar searches the full text by default and a reduction to title, abstract and keywords is not possible. To make the search process as transparent as possible and not to disadvantage publications to which the database has no full-text access, we reduced the search to the title of the publications and deactivated the search option “include citations”.

Basic descriptive analysis included all studies with the keywords mentioned, that were searchable on the first of May 2023. Studies were screened and full-text articles were reviewed for eligibility if they were published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings and were written in English or German. We also focused on publications with the Keyword “Digital Responsibility” as of the year 2018 for this step, due to findings from the descriptive results (little overlap of “digital ethics” and “digital responsibility” but very strong overlap of the keyword with “corporate digital responsibility”). Articles published before 2018, Non-English or -German works, unpublished manuscripts, and studies that did not specifically address “Digital Responsibility” were excluded.

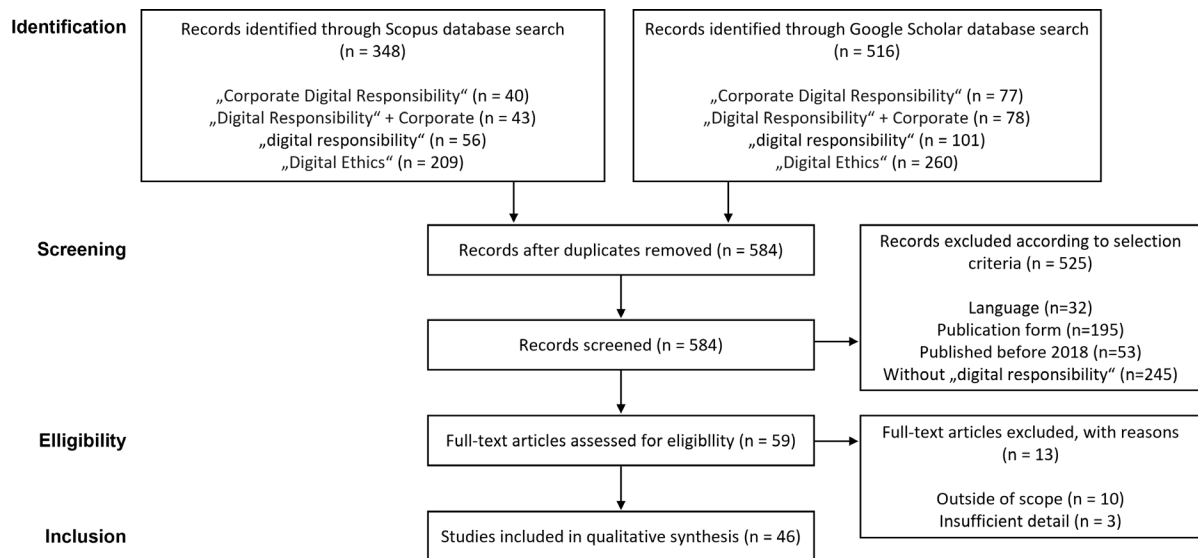
The PRISMA guidelines were followed for the study selection process. After removing duplicates, titles, abstracts and keywords were screened for eligibility. Full-text articles were assessed for inclusion, and the final set of studies was selected for data extraction and synthesis. For this in-depth content analysis of the articles, we selected and analysed only those that mentioned 'digital responsibility' in a corporate context and addressed the issue with definitions, conceptualisations or frameworks or empirically.

Data on study characteristics (e.g., publication year, geographic focus, study type), definitions, and conceptualizations of CDR were extracted and systematically synthesized to identify common themes and divergences.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Study Characteristics

As mentioned, our study follows the PRISMA Guidelines. The procedure with the corresponding samples can be taken from Figure 1. The search yielded a total of 864 studies, representing a diverse range of geographies, publication years, and study types.



**Figure 1: Records identified, selected and included for the systematic literature review (PRISMA Flow Diagram)**

Most studies were published in the last five years, reflecting the growing interest in CDR. Digital ethics has been researched more seriously since 2010. Digital responsibility is a more recent field, with publications only appearing on a more regular basis since 2019. Table 1 shows this by the number of publications per year found for this paper in the Scopus database. We can comprehend that publications about “Digital Responsibility” in a business context almost always use the term “Corporate Digital Responsibility”. From this high correspondence, we assume that CDR as a term has established itself.

**Table 1: Number of publications found on Scopus**

Search term	2010-2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*	Sum
“Digital Ethics”	13	8	9	15	26	30	57	42	9	209
“digital responsibility”	0	1	3	0	5	1	18	18	10	56
“Digital Responsibility” + Corporate	0	0	0	0	2	1	15	16	9	43
“Corporate Digital Responsibility”	0	0	0	0	2	1	13	16	8	40
<b>Sum</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>112</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>348</b>

\*only articles published by May 1, 2023

After removing duplicates, applying selection criteria and assessing full-text articles for eligibility, 46 Studies were included in the qualitative synthesis.

### 3.2 Identified Definitions of Corporate Digital Responsibility

We found four publications (Herden et al, 2021; Mueller, 2022; Bednárová & Serpeninova, 2023; Cheng & Zhang, 2023) listing a summary of definitions and included definitions that could be found in these papers and had not yet been discovered in our own research. This concerns early definitions that were mostly quoted from website articles (Dörr, 2018; Joynton, 2018; Price, 2018, Wade, 2020). Since these authors have already made an effort to harmonise their definitions, we integrated their results here (Dörr et al, 2021). In

Table 2 we summarised selected definitions of CDR from literature.

**Table 2: Definitions of Corporate Digital Responsibility (Source: own compilation)**

Authors	Definition
<b>BMUV (2021)</b>	"CDR is a voluntary corporate activity, particularly considering the consumers' perspective, which strives to go beyond what is required by law to shape the digital world for the advancement of society"
<b>Carl et al (2022)</b>	"CDR activities exceed the legally binding (national) minimum requirements and rather describes the voluntary acceptance of additional responsibilities"
<b>Dörr et al (2021)</b>	"a set of practices and behaviours that help an organisation use data and digital technologies in ways that are perceived as socially, economically, and environmentally responsible"
<b>Driesens et al (2017)</b>	"CDR is a voluntary commitment. It starts with the need to conform to legal requirements and standards – for handling customer data, confidential, intellectual property and so on – but it also extends to wider ethical considerations and the fundamental values that an organization operates by"
<b>Elliott et al (2021)</b>	"a potential collaborative mechanism to navigate such complexity, proposing guidance frameworks towards responsible corporate digital actions in preserving societal interests"; "a voluntary commitment by organisations fulfilling the corporate rationalisers' role in representing community interests to inform "good" digital corporate actions and digital sustainability (i.e. data and algorithms) via collaborative guidance on addressing social, economic, and ecological impacts on digital society"
<b>Herden et al (2021)</b>	"is an extension of a firm's responsibilities which takes into account the ethical opportunities and challenges of digitalization"
<b>Huber (2022)</b> <i>Translated from German</i>	"Framework for action and decision-making that shows how AI risks and opportunities are to be balanced in order to meet the social responsibility of companies with regard to digital issues"; "perception of a voluntary, beyond the legally prescribed, corporate responsibility for the consequences of the development, dissemination or use of digital technologies on society as a whole, but also on the concrete individual person"
<b>Kenning (2020)</b> <i>Translated from German</i>	"Extent [...] to which companies and organisations use digital technologies to achieve societal goals in the areas of ecology, economy and social issues, as well as the extent to which companies and organisations take into account aspects of data protection and data security as well as use data and digital technologies responsibly"
<b>Leonard (2016)</b>	"Expanding the remit of CSR to address the impact of the digital tools and environments that businesses operate in"
<b>Lobschat et al (2021)</b>	"the set of shared values and norms guiding an organization's operations with respect to the creation and operation of digital technology and data"
<b>Mihale-Wilson et al (2021), (2022)</b>	"CDR seeks to ensure an ethical and responsible development, deployment, and use of digital technologies and data", Part of the "obligations that companies have toward society"
<b>Schymura (2018)</b> <i>Translated from German</i>	"Corporate Digital Responsibility is an understanding of corporate responsibility in and for a digital society. It involves a regulated and a voluntary level: on the one hand, the observance of relevant laws or directives, on the other hand, the exercise of a voluntary responsibility in shaping the digital society"
<b>Suchacka (2019)</b>	"CDR means the awareness of duties binding the organisations active in the field of technological development and using technologies to provide services"
<b>Thelisson et al (2019)</b>	"... means a kind of digital corporate social responsibility"
<b>Trittin-Ulbrich &amp; Böckel (2022)</b>	"CDR emphasizes the voluntary, self-regulatory character of corporate commitment to responsible digital innovation"
<b>van der Merwe &amp; Al Achkar (2022)</b>	"as the set practices, policies, and governance structures of corporations as they relate to the digital transformation"
<b>Weißberger &amp; Marrocco (2022)</b>	"CDR is a voluntary corporate orientation to ensure a responsible use of digital technologies"
<b>Wirtz et al (2023)</b>	"We define CDR in the context of service as the principles underpinning a service firm's ethical, fair, and protective use of data and technology when engaging with customers within their digital service ecosystem"

### 3.3 Common Themes and Divergences of CDR definitions

To compare and structure the given definitions, we differentiate (1) the scope of responsibility taken, (2) the scope of activities to address this responsibility and (3) the scope of beneficiaries of those activities.

On the evaluation of the scope of responsibility we use the CDR pyramid of Herden et al (2021). This structure helps to differentiate between economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibility that is covered in the definitions.

To compare definitions in the scope of activities that address this responsibility, we apply the ESG framework (Environmental, Social, and Governance) and map the stakeholders that are affected by the responsibilities.

Finally, we assess if definitions mention the scope of beneficiaries of those CDR activities. For this, we use the CDR framework provided by Deloitte (2022), which considers the corporate itself, corporate relations (including customers and suppliers) and society. Focusing on individual beneficiaries could help researchers to derive motivations and companies to implement stakeholder-specific activities. Table 3 shows the evaluations according to these criteria for the definitions found.

**Table 3: CDR Definitions by scope of responsibility, activities and beneficiaries (Source: own compilation)**

Categories	Scope of responsibility				Scope of activities			Scope of beneficiaries		
	Eco-nomic	Legal	Ethi-cal	Philan-thropic	Envi-ronmental	Social	Gover-nance	Corp-orate	Corporate relations	Society
<b>Sum</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>
BMUV (2021)		×	×	×		×		×	×	×
Carl et al (2022)		×	×							
Dörr et al (2021)	×		×		×	×	×	×		
Driesens et al (2017)		×	×	×		×				×
Elliott et al (2021)	×	×	×	×	×	×	×			×
Herden et al (2021)			×							
Huber (2022)		×	×			×	×	×	×	×
Kenning (2020)		×			×	×	×			
Leonard (2016)					×		×			
Lobschat et al (2021)			×				×			
Mihale-Wilson et al (2021), (2022)		×	×			×	×			×
Schymura		×	×	×						×
Suchacka (2019)		×					×			
Thelisson et al (2019)						×				
Trittin-Ulbrich & Böckel (2022)			×	×						
van der Merwe/Al Achkar (2022)		×					×			
Weißberger & Marrocco (2022)			×							
Wirtz et al (2023)		×	×				×		×	

The review identified various conceptualisations and frameworks for CDR, including those that address the relation to CSR (as an extension or distinct field) and guidance for corporate activities. These concepts are reflected in the definitions presented. Several definitions of CDR were identified, highlighting the multifaceted

nature of the concept. Some definitions emphasise the voluntary aspect of firm behavior, which goes beyond legal aspects. While some definitions focused on ethical considerations, others emphasized the role of digital technology in addressing social and environmental challenges.

The definitions are very general in that they refer to norms. However, these are often not further defined (scope of activities). Most definitions agree that the responsibility goes beyond legal regulations (scope of responsibility) and they are based on constructs such as culture (practices and expected behaviours based on shared values), some of which are vague and in need of a further refinement (culture-relatedness).

Few definitions address the economic responsibility (be profitable). One could argue that, according to the CDR pyramid, the perception of legal responsibilities already includes economic responsibility as a fundamental requirement. Accordingly, one could conclude that definitions that emphasise voluntariness also implicitly include legal and economic responsibilities. However, differences can be found in the characteristics of this voluntariness. Most of the definitions focus on the ethical expectations of society and only a few of them describe a philanthropic attitude of the organisation.

Although ethics is a common theme, very few definitions address the scope of beneficiaries of CDR activities. Only 8 out of 18 definitions mention any beneficiaries, of which 6 refer to society, only 3 to the corporate itself and 3 to its relations. As with the scope of responsibility, we could argue that Corporate and their relations are part of society and are implicitly included by mentioning the latter. However, not explicitly mentioning individual categories of beneficiaries makes the separation of priorities difficult to comprehend and thus to evaluate activities, which could be a motivation for companies. Context-specific definitions of CDR should become more specific here.

#### **4. Discussion, conclusion, and further research**

The goal of our study was to summarize given concepts of CDR and to derive a definition. Our systematic literature review lists most relevant existing definitions, with its conceptualizations of CDR and provides a comprehensive overview of the field. The study contributes to a better understanding of CDR and its implications for research and practice by identifying common themes and divergences. We highlight several gaps in the literature, such the lack of consensus on a unified CDR definition.

Publications in the field have rarely focused on the business perspective. CDR research is still in its infancy, so it may be too early to draw reliable business implications. However, it is of paramount importance to draw implications from the research for companies' CDR policies and practices. A clearer understanding of CDR can contribute to more robust theoretical frameworks and guide the development of practical strategies for organizations navigating the digital landscape. Establishing a shared understanding of CDR is essential for developing effective strategies to address the ethical, social and environmental impacts of digital technologies.

A unified definition can guide future research, practice and policy, with researchers refining their approaches based on common themes and divergences identified in this review. Based on the findings of this review, we propose following unified definition:

*Corporate Digital Responsibility is a voluntary commitment, beyond what is legally required, that an organisation makes to itself and to society as a whole, as well as to the individual.*

*It is also a framework that guides an organisation's operations by providing a business orientation with a set of practices, behaviours, policies and governance structures based on a set of shared values and norms to achieve economic, social and environmental goals when engaging with stakeholders or shaping the digital world with responsible digital innovation for the advancement of society.*

Building on this unified definition, a comprehensive framework for CDR should encompass several key dimensions. These dimensions could be based on the ESG framework but should also take into account the individual characteristics of CDR. Empirical studies examining the scope of responsibility and activities at a granular level are needed to refine and validate frameworks. Definitions, with their conceptualizations have evolved, but are still at a rather generic level. It is difficult to generalise about the required activities and their design, as companies' business models are too diverse and their environmental, social and governance impacts are too varied, so that the requirements for companies must also be considered in a differentiated manner. More specific conceptualisations and definitions might only be possible through more context-specific adaptations (e.g. in specific industries and/or cultures). Some industries are very advanced in their digital transformation or have a long history in this field, such as retail banking, insurance and retail. Stakeholders can

be expected to be particularly interested in responsible corporate behaviour in these sectors. Simultaneously, a fine-grained CDR approach can be particularly useful for these companies to differentiate themselves from their competitors. These reflections follow another gap in the literature we found, the consideration of beneficiaries of CDR activities. When assessing CDR measures, evaluators should take those into account to better understand motivations and to distinguish whether economic, ethical or philanthropic responsibility have been taken. We attempted an initial classification of motivational factors in a first approach (Pick & Knopf, 2023). The extent to which actors benefit from activities has hardly been researched yet. These potential or given benefits need to be researched and understood to motivate more companies to conceptualize and implement their CDR approaches. For example, if firms benefit from their CDR concept and its communication in image and turnover, more firms might be motivated to apply CDR.

Continued research and collaboration among academics, practitioners, and policymakers are necessary to refine and develop the concept of CDR further. By working together, stakeholders can create a more sustainable and responsible digital future for all.

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