



Dissertation Proposal

ESG Communication, Pharmaceutical Innovation and Corporate Reputation in the Post-Pandemic Era: A Comparative Secondary Thematic Analysis of AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc

Student: Mohammed Nur Navi Jahin

Student ID: 2503765

Master of Business Administration

LCMB7035 Dissertation

Research Proposal

AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc

AI Use Acknowledgement

Generative AI support was used for limited research scoping, source checking, proofreading and presentation support. The final wording, interpretation, source selection and academic responsibility remain with the student.

1. Introduction

The pharmaceutical sector has faced renewed scrutiny since COVID-19 because large pharmaceutical companies are expected to combine scientific innovation with social responsibility, public-health value, transparent governance and environmental accountability. The pandemic strengthened public awareness of pharmaceutical innovation, but it also increased expectations that companies should explain how their research, access-to-healthcare commitments and responsible-business activities contribute to society. In this context, ESG communication is not only a reporting activity. It is also a way through which pharmaceutical firms present responsibility, legitimacy and trustworthiness to stakeholders.

AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc provide appropriate comparative cases because both are major UK-linked pharmaceutical companies with extensive public reporting on sustainability, responsible business, research and development, access to healthcare and corporate performance (AstraZeneca, 2026a; AstraZeneca, 2026b; GSK, 2026a; GSK, 2026b). Their documents offer sufficient secondary data for a qualitative thematic study while allowing comparison between two organisations operating in a similar sector context.

The research problem is that pharmaceutical companies increasingly connect ESG commitments with innovation narratives, but it is not always clear how these themes are combined, how they differ between comparable firms and what reputational functions they serve. Corporate reputation in the pharmaceutical sector depends on more than product success. It is also shaped by perceived responsibility, scientific credibility, stakeholder trust, access to medicines, governance and contribution to public health. This study therefore analyses communication and reputational positioning rather than directly measuring stakeholder perceptions.

For this study, the post-pandemic era is operationally bounded as 2021-2025. This timeframe captures the transition from immediate COVID-19 response and vaccine or public-health communication towards longer-term corporate narratives concerning ESG commitments, pharmaceutical innovation, social value, stakeholder trust and reputation. Documents available in 2026 will be used only to access and verify materials that fall within this boundary.

2. Research Framework

The aim of this research is to investigate how ESG communication and pharmaceutical innovation influence corporate reputation in the post-pandemic pharmaceutical sector through a comparative secondary thematic analysis of AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc.

The main research question is: How do ESG communication and pharmaceutical innovation influence corporate reputation in the post-pandemic pharmaceutical sector?

The research sub-questions are:

1. How have AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc communicated their ESG strategies in the post-pandemic era?
2. How is pharmaceutical innovation framed in relation to public value, trust and corporate responsibility?
3. Which ESG themes dominate the corporate communication of AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc?
4. How do AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc differ in their ESG and innovation communication strategies?
5. How do ESG communication and innovation communication reinforce reputational positioning?
6. What lessons can pharmaceutical communication managers learn from the comparison of these two organisations?

The objectives are:

1. To review relevant literature on ESG communication, pharmaceutical innovation and corporate reputation.
2. To examine how pharmaceutical innovation is communicated in the post-pandemic period.
3. To analyse the ESG communication strategies used by AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc.
4. To compare similarities and differences between AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc.
5. To explore how ESG communication and innovation communication contribute to corporate reputation.
6. To develop practical recommendations for corporate communication managers in the pharmaceutical sector.

The study is guided by four qualitative propositions. First, effective ESG communication contributes positively to corporate reputational positioning. Second, innovation communication can strengthen stakeholder trust when it is connected to public value and transparency. Third, transparent ESG reporting supports organisational legitimacy. Fourth, the integration of innovation and ESG messaging strengthens corporate reputation more effectively than treating them as separate communication themes. These propositions are not statistical hypotheses; they provide an analytical focus for thematic interpretation.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The study is positioned within literature on stakeholder relationships, organisational legitimacy, corporate signalling, CSR communication, pharmaceutical innovation and corporate reputation. Stakeholder theory argues that organisations should be understood through their relationships with groups that can affect, or are affected by, corporate activity (Freeman, 1984). This is particularly relevant to pharmaceutical companies because their stakeholders include patients, healthcare professionals, regulators, governments, investors, employees, communities and advocacy groups. ESG communication can therefore be examined as a way of addressing diverse stakeholder expectations.

Legitimacy theory explains how organisations seek to demonstrate that their activities are appropriate within wider social norms and expectations (Suchman, 1995). This is important in the pharmaceutical sector because scientific innovation alone may not secure public legitimacy if stakeholders question access, affordability, transparency, environmental responsibility or governance. Signalling theory adds that organisations communicate selected information to reduce uncertainty and influence stakeholder interpretation (Spence, 1973). ESG reports, innovation narratives and access-to-healthcare statements can therefore be read as signals about responsibility, capability and credibility.

CSR and ESG communication literature highlights the importance of credibility. Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010) argue that CSR communication can support stakeholder understanding when messages are clear and credible, while Morsing and Schultz (2006) show that responsible-business communication can range from one-way information to stronger stakeholder involvement. Carroll's (1991) CSR framework also supports the view that corporate responsibility includes economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic dimensions. In the pharmaceutical sector, these dimensions may appear through research ethics, access commitments, environmental targets, patient focus and governance.

Corporate sustainability literature also suggests that sustainability can be embedded in organisational processes and performance rather than treated as an isolated reporting exercise (Eccles, Ioannou and Serafeim, 2014). Corporate reputation theory provides the direct link to the proposed study. Fombrun (1996) conceptualises reputation as an intangible asset shaped by stakeholder assessments, while Deephouse and Carter (2005) distinguish reputation from legitimacy. This distinction matters because a pharmaceutical company may be considered legitimate by meeting social expectations, but still build a stronger or weaker reputation depending on perceived quality, innovation, trust and responsibility. The resource-based view also helps explain why innovation capability, scientific expertise and reputational assets may support competitive advantage when they are valuable and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991).

Existing literature therefore supports the relevance of ESG communication and innovation to corporate reputation, but there remains a focused gap. Less attention has been given to how two comparable pharmaceutical firms combine ESG and innovation narratives in post-pandemic corporate communication. This study addresses that gap by comparing AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc through a secondary thematic analysis of public corporate materials.

4. Methodology

This study will follow Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill's (2019) research onion. The research philosophy will be interpretivism because the study examines how meaning is constructed through corporate language, reporting priorities and reputational narratives. The research approach will be primarily inductive. Themes will be developed from the documents, while stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, signalling theory, CSR communication, reputation theory and the resource-based view will be used as sensitising concepts rather than rigid coding categories.

The research strategy will be a comparative qualitative case study. Yin (2018) supports case-study research where the aim is to understand a contemporary phenomenon in context, and this study uses a multiple-case design by comparing AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc. The methodological choice will be mono-method qualitative, based on secondary documentary data. This design is suitable because the research questions ask how ESG and innovation are communicated rather than how frequently variables occur or whether one factor statistically causes another.

Document analysis is appropriate because corporate reports, webpages, speeches and press releases are meaningful communication artefacts rather than neutral data containers (Bowen, 2009). The core data will include annual reports, sustainability or responsible-business reports, ESG data annexes, corporate webpages, CEO or leadership statements, investor presentations, press releases, innovation and research communication, selected media interviews, corporate videos, LinkedIn communications where relevant, government or industry reports and academic literature. Company-produced documents will be used for thematic coding, while external sources will support contextual interpretation and reduce overreliance on corporate self-presentation.

Purposive sampling will be used. Documents will be included if they are publicly available, fall within the 2021-2025 operational period, relate directly to ESG, sustainability, innovation, access to healthcare, public-health value, stakeholder trust or corporate reputation, and contain enough text for qualitative analysis. Documents will be excluded if they are duplicated, purely promotional, outside the period, mainly financial with no relevant communication content, or not connected to the research questions. Comparable document types will be prioritised for both companies to support fair cross-case analysis.

Data category	AstraZeneca plc	GSK plc	Analytical purpose
Annual reports	2021-2025 annual reports and Form 20-F materials	2021-2025 annual reports and Form 20-F materials	Strategy, performance, innovation and reputation framing
ESG and responsibility reporting	Sustainability reports, sustainability data annexes and ESG resources	Responsible business reports, ESG summaries and related resources	ESG priorities, governance, access and stakeholder responsibility
Innovation communication	R&D, portfolio, access-to-healthcare and selected corporate communications	R&D, vaccines, medicines, access and selected corporate communications	Innovation narratives and public-value claims
Contextual sources	Academic, government, industry and credible external sources	Academic, government, industry and credible external sources	Triangulation and interpretation of reputational implications

The data will be analysed manually using thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the process will involve familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and interpretation. Braun and Clarke (2022) also emphasise the reflexive role of the researcher in qualitative thematic work; therefore, coding decisions will be recorded with notes explaining why extracts are assigned to particular themes. A manual coding approach is appropriate because it keeps the analytical process transparent, reproducible and manageable without depending on specialist qualitative-analysis software whose availability can vary according to institutional access and cost. Possible initial codes may include access to medicines, health equity, ethical research, patient-centred innovation, environmental responsibility, partnerships, transparency, scientific credibility, stakeholder trust and social value.

The comparative stage will examine both theme presence and theme treatment. The study will consider not only whether both companies discuss access, sustainability or innovation, but also whether these topics are framed through patients, science, partnerships, governance, environmental performance, social value or trust. This distinction is important because two companies may use similar ESG vocabulary while constructing different reputational narratives.

Trustworthiness will be strengthened through credibility, dependability, confirmability and transparency (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). A coding trail will record document source, year, extract, initial code, final theme and related research question. The study will compare statements across document types, identify contradictory or limited evidence, and separate descriptive coding from interpretive judgement. Ethical risk is low because the study uses public secondary documents and does not involve human participants, but ethical approval will still be obtained and all research materials will be stored securely.

5. Expected Findings and Contribution

The study is expected to identify how AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc use ESG and innovation communication to construct reputational positioning in the post-pandemic pharmaceutical sector. It may reveal themes around access to medicines, health equity, vaccine and medicine innovation, environmental responsibility, governance, partnerships, scientific credibility and stakeholder trust. However, the proposal does not assume the final findings in advance; the themes will be developed through systematic coding of the documents.

The academic contribution will be to connect ESG communication, pharmaceutical innovation and corporate reputation within a focused comparative case study. The research will add value by showing how responsibility and innovation narratives operate together rather than as separate communication areas. The managerial contribution will be to support corporate communication managers in developing more credible ESG and innovation messages, strengthening transparency and improving stakeholder trust. The comparison may also identify lessons for how pharmaceutical firms can communicate public value without overstating reputational impact.

6. Limitations

The main limitation is reliance on secondary documents, many of which are produced by the companies themselves. These documents are suitable for analysing communication, but they may present selective accounts of organisational activity. This limitation will be managed through cross-document comparison and contextual use of credible external sources. A second limitation is that the study does not directly measure stakeholder perceptions, so conclusions will be framed as reputational implications rather than proven effects. A third limitation is possible imbalance in document availability between the two companies. This will be managed by prioritising comparable document categories and explaining any differences in the final methodology.

7. Timeframe

The dissertation will be completed over a proposed 12-week period. The schedule allows time for proposal approval, literature development, document collection, screening, coding, thematic analysis, writing, supervisor review and final editing. The plan is presented by week rather than by exact dates because the final start date is not yet confirmed.

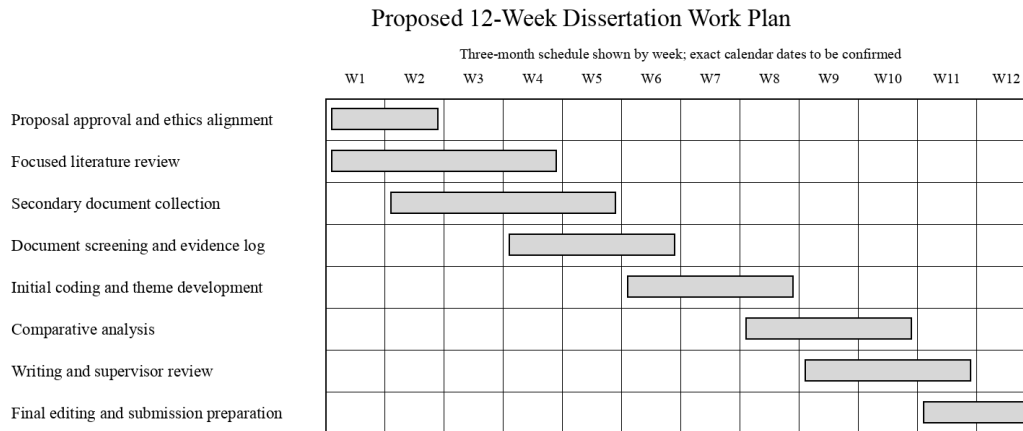


Figure 1. Proposed 12-week dissertation work plan. Source: author's own work.

8. Conclusion

This proposal presents a feasible secondary qualitative study of ESG communication, pharmaceutical innovation and corporate reputation in the post-pandemic pharmaceutical sector. AstraZeneca plc and GSK plc are suitable cases because both publish extensive corporate materials and operate where trust, scientific capability and responsibility are closely connected. By using a comparative case-study design and Braun and Clarke thematic analysis within Saunders' research onion framework, the study can examine how ESG and innovation narratives are constructed and how they may support reputational positioning. The project is manageable within the proposed timeframe and offers both academic and managerial contribution.

9. References

- AstraZeneca (2026a) *Annual Report and Form 20-F Information 2025*. Available at: <https://www.astrazeneca.com/investor-relations/annual-reports/annual-report-2025.html> (Accessed: 6 July 2026).
- AstraZeneca (2026b) *Sustainability reports and resources*. Available at: <https://www.astrazeneca.com/sustainability/resources.html> (Accessed: 6 July 2026).
- Barney, J. (1991) 'Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage', *Journal of Management*, 17(1), pp. 99-120. doi: 10.1177/014920639101700108.
- Bowen, G.A. (2009) 'Document analysis as a qualitative research method', *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), pp. 27-40. doi: 10.3316/QRJ0902027.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2022) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE.
- Carroll, A.B. (1991) 'The pyramid of corporate social responsibility: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders', *Business Horizons*, 34(4), pp. 39-48. doi: 10.1016/0007-6813(91)90005-G.
- Deephouse, D.L. and Carter, S.M. (2005) 'An examination of differences between organisational legitimacy and organisational reputation', *Journal of Management Studies*, 42(2), pp. 329-360. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2005.00499.x.
- Du, S., Bhattacharya, C.B. and Sen, S. (2010) 'Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility (CSR): The role of CSR communication', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 12(1), pp. 8-19. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00276.x.
- Eccles, R.G., Ioannou, I. and Serafeim, G. (2014) 'The impact of corporate sustainability on organizational processes and performance', *Management Science*, 60(11), pp. 2835-2857. doi: 10.1287/mnsc.2014.1984.
- Fombrun, C.J. (1996) *Reputation: Realizing Value from the Corporate Image*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Freeman, R.E. (1984) *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Boston: Pitman.
- GSK (2026a) *Annual Report 2025*. Available at: <https://www.gsk.com/en-gb/investors/financial-reports/corporate-reports-archive/> (Accessed: 6 July 2026).
- GSK (2026b) *Responsible Business Report 2025*. Available at: <https://www.gsk.com/en-gb/investors/financial-reports/corporate-reports-archive/> (Accessed: 6 July 2026).
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills: SAGE.
- Morsing, M. and Schultz, M. (2006) 'Corporate social responsibility communication: stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies', *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 15(4), pp. 323-338. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8608.2006.00460.x.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2019) *Research Methods for Business Students*. 8th edn. Harlow: Pearson.
- Spence, M. (1973) 'Job market signaling', *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), pp. 355-374. doi: 10.2307/1882010.
- Suchman, M.C. (1995) 'Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches', *Academy of Management Review*, 20(3), pp. 571-610. doi: 10.5465/amr.1995.9508080331.
- Yin, R.K. (2018) *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. 6th edn. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.