



## Full Length Article

# Positive ripple effects of corporate leaders' CSR donations amid COVID-19 on corporate and country reputations: Multi-level reputational benefits of CSR focusing on Bill Gates and Jack Ma

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## ABSTRACT

Through cross-national surveys in the United States and China, this study investigates the positive ripple effects of corporate leaders' CSR donations amid COVID-19 on multi-level reputations of corporate leaders, companies, and countries. The study finds that public knowledge of celebrity corporate leaders' CSR donations can enhance the reputation of the origin country. The enhancement occurs through the improvement of their own personal reputations and affiliated corporate reputations across the two countries. In this ripple-effect mechanism, the role of perceived CSR motives can be changed by the level of publics' CSR knowledge. As people know more about corporate leaders' donation activities, the positive impact of altruistic motives increases and the negative impact of self-serving motives decreases. The study also finds that consumer willingness to accept self-serving CSR motives differs by the institutional development of the countries. American participants are more willing than their Chinese counterparts to accept self-serving motives.

## 1. Introduction

Since health officials first detected COVID-19 cases in December 2019, the way of life for most people has changed dramatically (De Vos, 2020). In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). The exponential increase in the number of deaths led many countries to declare states of emergency, closing borders, implementing lockdowns, imposing social distancing rules, banning social gatherings, and so forth (De Vos, 2020; Palma-Ruiz, Castillo-Apraiz, & Gómez-Martínez, 2020). Despite these disruptions to economic and social activities, the global pandemic has also provided a great deal of opportunities to those who have a vision of fulfilling broader social needs and addressing urgent global challenges (Palma-Ruiz et al., 2020).

As a response to the pandemic, many corporate leaders and companies have contributed to the fight against COVID-19—donating money, medical products, and equipment to help ward off the virus. For instance, during the early peak of the pandemic in March 2020, Microsoft co-founder, Bill Gates donated \$100 million to help countries hit hardest by the virus. Alibaba Group founder Jack Ma not only donated face masks and testing kits to the United States (US) but also

committed \$14 million from the Jack Ma foundation to help develop a vaccine (Yakowicz, 2020). Such voluntary and proactive CSR actions have attracted extensive news coverage and public attention worldwide (Palma-Ruiz et al., 2020). The question remains, though, of whether such proactive CSR donations can bring about multi-level reputational benefits. Did the corporate leaders' COVID-19-related CSR donations affect their companies' corporate reputation and in turn home-country reputation (i.e., the country from which corporate leaders and their related companies originate)?

Amid this pandemic, there have arisen various conspiracy theories as well as US-China conflict (Gertz, 2020; Rachman, 2020). Given this context, it would be interesting to know whether publics' knowledge of these individuals' CSR activities would have spillover effects on perceptions of reputations, that is, the individual's, the company's, and even the country's. Since 2018, the Trump-initiated trade war with China has been detrimental to the two countries' relationship (Rachman, 2020; Swanson, 2018). In watching the spread of COVID-19, conspiracy theorists have made allegations that either the US or Chinese military (depending on the theorist) created the virus (Gertz, 2020). Given that tensions between the US and China have persisted for years, this study has selected these two countries as a cross-national

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research context. It looks into whether knowledge of CSR donations from Bill Gates and Jack Ma had positive ripple effects on home-country reputations in the other country (i.e., Chinese perceptions of US reputation and Americans' perceptions of China's reputation). This context allows us to look into whether reputational benefits generated by CSR donations can be present among consumers in countries that have contentious relationships with the home country.

A major stream of reputation research has focused on the benefits of a favorable reputation. Such research has explored improved corporate financial performance (Deephouse, 2000; Weng & Chen, 2017), attraction of more qualified employees (Turban & Cable, 2003), and greater behavioral support from stakeholders and communities (Turban & Cable, 2003; Deephouse, 2000; Weng & Chen, 2017). Another major stream of reputation research emphasizes the examination of the antecedents or determinants of corporate reputation (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Kim, 2011). This line of research has applied signaling theory, focusing on the examination of how corporate-level factors such as varying corporate market or communication strategy positively or negatively signal publics' corporate reputation assessments (Deephouse, Newbury, & Soleimani, 2016; Kim, 2011). These streams have provided useful insights into our understanding of corporate reputation in a single country context. However, they have been relatively limited in their insights into cross-national differences in the mechanisms of multi-level reputations. Recently, scholars have called for research set in cross-national and global contexts (Swoboda & Bernhard, 2020). This study attempts to respond by comparing the ripple effects of CSR knowledge onto country reputation through corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation in two apparently disparate countries of the US and China. In addition, this study is based on the assumption that reputation is a multilevel and multidirectional construct (Newbury, 2012). Therefore, it examines the relationships among multilevel reputations: corporate leader reputation, corporate reputation, and country reputation in a specific context of corporate leaders' CSR donations amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

By proposing and empirically testing a theoretical framework of multi-level reputational benefits of CSR, this study extends our current understandings of CSR's contributions to multi-level reputations. It also highlights the importance of increasing CSR knowledge through communication in achieving multi-level reputational benefits during a pandemic. The proposed multi-level reputational benefit of CSR framework contributes to CSR communication scholarship by providing useful insight into the current knowledge of how CSR communication can play a critical role in reaping reputational benefits (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Kim, 2019). In addition, insights gained from our research involving the US and China can offer meaningful contributions to both international public relations and public diplomacy scholarship (e.g., Servaes, 2012) by suggesting the business sector's CSR can influence foreign relations between the two countries with contentious relationships and improve foreign publics' evaluations of the home-country.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Corporate figure reputation, corporate reputation, and country reputation

In the process of CSR, an important role is played by corporate leaders or business leaders such as CEOs or founders (Benn, Todd, & Pendleton, 2010; Grover, Kar, & Ilavarasan, 2019; Marais, 2012). A stream of research on leadership literature has investigated how business leadership and CEO characteristics influence CSR commitment, corporate reputation, and corporate financial performances (Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001; Waldman, Siegel, & Javidan, 2006). Integrity and altruism are two prominent characteristics of business leaders that are positively associated with CSR commitment and favorable corporate reputation, whereas narcissistic leaders are negatively

associated with CSR and its consequences (Borghesi, Houston, & Nar-anjo, 2014; Petrenko, Aime, Ridge, & Hill, 2016; Waldman et al., 2006). Recent research (Pham & Tran, 2020) supports the importance of business leaders' integrity, suggesting that it enhances the positive impact of CSR information disclosure on corporate reputation.

Transformational leadership theory can provide a foundation to connect possible links among corporate leaders, CSR, and corporate reputation or financial performance (Waldman et al., 2006). Transformational leadership theory emphasizes leaders' characteristics in terms of inspiring followers to change their value systems to look beyond self-interest for the collective and social good in the long-term (Bass, 1997; Waldman et al., 2006). Transformational leaders are thus characterized by their emphasis on vision, values, and intellectual stimulation and bring about changes in individuals and social systems (Bass, 1997; Verissimo & Lacerda, 2015; Waldman et al., 2006). Transformational leaders tend to manifest personal characteristics such as integrity or altruism, reflecting their visions and concerns for helping others (Brown & Trevino, 2006). On this subject, research suggests that the transformational leadership behaviors of corporate leaders tend to function as a mediator between integrity and CSR practices (Verissimo & Lacerda, 2015). That is, leaders' integrity characteristics serve as an essential driver of CSR practices, and their transformational leadership behaviors guide the company to commit more to CSR practices. Such CSR practices of a company would in turn shape what the company stands for with its key internal and external stakeholders, further defining its corporate reputation (Bromley, 2001; Garbett, 1988). In this regard, the characteristics and reputation of corporate leaders are inevitably associated with corporate reputation (Bromley, 2001).

As such, corporate reputation is inevitably entwined with its corporate leaders' reputations. Hence, companies often put forward their CEOs as corporate spokespersons to capture some halo effects on corporate reputation (Bromley, 2001; Weng & Chen, 2017). A recent study suggested that CEOs who are more active on social media in sharing CSR messages tend to more effectively enhance corporate reputation than those with an inactive social media presence (Grover et al., 2019). This is why CEOs and business leaders strategically engage with the public in efforts to become so-called celebrity or social CEOs (Hayward, Rindova, & Pollock, 2004). A connection between corporate leaders' transformational leadership and corporate performance can be more prominent, especially in uncertain situations like a crisis (Waldman et al., 2001). This prominent connection is partly due to the perceived para-social interactions people build with corporate leaders (Kim, Zhang, & Zhang, 2016). Para-social interaction (PSI) refers to a symbolic, long-term, one-sided, and non-reciprocal interaction between people and a media figure, and it helps people to build a sense of intimacy and friendship with the media persona (Horton & Whol, 1956). People have been able to develop this sense of intimacy and friendship with corporate leaders more easily with new technology; in this social media era, they are exposed more often to corporate leaders' messages and actions, enhancing their perceived PSIs with those corporate leaders (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). The reputation of a corporate figure may have a more persistent spillover effect on company's bottom line than corporate reputation, possibly due to the intimacy and friendship people feel with corporate leaders (Weng & Chen, 2017). For instance, Weng and Chen (2017) suggested that CEO reputation has a persistently positive effect on corporate financial performance even when a company has a poor reputation, while corporate reputation has no significant effect on financial performance if the CEO has a poor reputation. With the fast development of globalization and multinational corporations (MNCs), scholars have recommended that the reputation construct be considered in much broader contexts such as cross-national or global contexts. Deephouse et al. (2016) argued that both firm-level and country-level factors should be taken into consideration in reputation research. This is because the way corporate reputation functions in a global society can be largely affected by firm-level factors such as CEO reputation, leadership style, or strategic focus (Fombrun & Shanley,

1990; Kim, 2011) as well as country-level factors of institutional differences such as economic development conditions or national culture (Deephouse et al., 2016; Newburry, 2012).

As to the relationship between corporate reputation and country reputation, country-of-origin (COO) effect has been often used as a theoretical framework. A majority of research on COO effect has focused on how it impacts consumers' evaluation of product and service quality and purchase intention (Hong & Wyer, 1989; Li & Wyer, 1994; Rezvani et al., 2012). COO serves as an extrinsic cue for foreign consumers to evaluate a given country's corporations and their products especially when consumers have little direct experiences with the products (Hong & Wyer, 1989; Li & Wyer, 1994). Through this process, country reputation affects the reputation of the companies from the origin country. For instance, Newburry (2012) suggested that developed countries' corporations have better reputations than their developing countries' counterparts due to the spillover effects of country reputation to corporate reputation. Country reputation in this paper refers to the overarching perceptions of a given country based on publics' cumulative assessments about the country's varying aspects; this is not limited to economic aspects but also includes political, cultural, and social development (Nebenzahl, Jaffe, & Lampert, 1997). Although the spillover effect of country reputation on corporate reputation has been widely tested through the COO framework, relatively limited attention has been given to the inverse COO effect, that is, how corporate reputation can affect country reputation (Hong & Wyer, 1989; Li & Wyer, 1994; Rezvani et al., 2012).

In fact, the relationship between corporate reputation and country reputation is not simply unidirectional. It is reciprocal and dynamic, changing over time through a two-way interaction (Nebenzahl et al., 1997). The COO framework can be explained with either a halo or a summary effect (Han, 1989; Nebenzahl et al., 1997). The halo effect of COO indicates that people use a given country's reputation to make inferences about the product quality of that country's companies. In this case, the origin country's reputation serves as an extrinsic cue for outside observers to evaluate the country's companies and products. The summary effect of COO assumes that an origin country's reputation can be built from publics' experiences and assessments about companies and their products from the origin country. That is, by generalizing and summarizing their experiences of the companies and products, people tend to develop or revise their perceptions of the origin country's reputation (Han, 1989; Nebenzahl et al., 1997). In this regard, publics' perceptions of a company (i.e., corporate reputation) can improve its country's reputation (Anholt, 2002). In recent years, scholars have started to investigate the COO effect from an inverse perspective (Lopez, Gotsi, & Andriopoulos, 2011; White, 2012). For instance, White (2012) examined the inverse COO effect through an experiment and found that a company's brand reputation can enhance the reputation of the country from which the company originated.

As such, reputation is multidimensional (Newburry, 2012). Corporate leaders' reputations can add value to their companies (Waldman et al., 2001, 2006), and the companies' reputation can also have value as an intangible asset for countries (Anholt, 2002; White, 2012). In the context of CSR, Kelley, Hemphill, and Thams (2019) argued that CSR creates reputational value for both corporations and countries, and corporate reputation functions as a mediator between CSR and corporate financial performance. Based on leadership impacts on corporate reputation and the inverse COO effect discussed above, this study proposes that a corporate figure's reputation will have a direct relationship with a company's reputation as well as its country's. In this process, we argue that corporate reputation functions as a mediator between the reputation of a corporate figure and that of its country.

## 2.2. Public knowledge of CSR (CSR knowledge)

In their framework of CSR communication, Du et al. (2010) identified two key prerequisites for reaping reputational benefits: 1) creating

stakeholder awareness (i.e., CSR knowledge) and 2) managing public attributions of a company's CSR activities (CSR motives). Based on the framework of CSR communication (Du et al., 2010), this study considers CSR knowledge and CSR motives as key variables for improving multi-level reputational benefits. In the literature, many other researchers have argued that one of the most important prerequisite factors to improving corporate reputation is the public's knowledge of CSR (Kim, 2014, 2019; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009). In this paper, we define CSR knowledge as "an individual's awareness and understanding" of a corporate figure's CSR activities (Kim, 2019, p. 1147). Many empirical studies have supported that CSR knowledge plays an essential role in enhancing the effectiveness of CSR activities (Kim, 2019; Wigley, 2008). Literature has also argued that the most critical impediment to maximizing the reputational benefits of CSR activities is the lack of public knowledge of companies' CSR activities (Kim & Ferguson, 2018; Singh, Kristensen, & Villaseñor, 2009). This is partially due to the CSR communication dilemma: A paradox arises when a company whose main goal is to maximize profit actively promotes its CSR commitment for creating a better society (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). When a company itself promotes its CSR activities extensively through CSR communication, people may become more skeptical. Hence, companies tend to decline communicating their CSR activities, leading to a lack of public awareness (Kim, 2014, 2019; Singh et al., 2009).

Indeed, reputational benefits would be minimal if publics were unaware of a company's or a corporate figure's CSR activities. For this reason, publics' CSR knowledge is considered a prerequisite to securing the reputation benefits of CSR activities (Singh et al., 2009). Research has also argued that negative CSR responses such as consumer skepticism often result from the lack of publics' CSR knowledge much more than any intrinsic doubt regarding CSR motives (Kim, 2019; Singh et al., 2009). In this regard, the global pandemic has provided corporations a great opportunity to increase publics' CSR knowledge without having to worry too much about the CSR communication dilemma. After all, CSR activities involving monetary and medical equipment donations can easily attract a wide range of media and public attention (Yakowicz, 2020). When a symbolic figure of a company commits to CSR activities, observers may not see it as the company trying to promote their good deeds.

As discussed earlier, this study adopts a multidimensional reputation approach (i.e., reputation is multidimensional, Newburry, 2012). A corporate figure's CSR activities amid COVID-19 would directly affect the person's reputation. Such philanthropic activities enhance the perceived benevolence of the person and further strengthen publics' perceptions of the reputation. Moreover, due to the strong association between the corporate figure and the company, the figure's reputational benefits may spill over to the company (Waldman et al., 2001). Based on the inverse COO effect, the company's improved reputation may affect its origin country's reputation (Anholt, 2002; White, 2012). Based on leadership impacts on corporate reputation and the inverse COO effect discussed above, this study proposes that CSR knowledge of corporate leaders' CSR donation amid COVID-19 will have direct relationships with multilevel reputations of corporate figure, company, and country. In this process, corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation will mediate the relationship between CSR knowledge and country reputation. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed.

**H1.** CSR knowledge is possibly associated with (a) corporate figure reputation, (b) corporate reputation, and (c) country reputation.

**H2.** Corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation would function as positive serial mediators between CSR knowledge and country reputation.

## 2.3. Perceived CSR motives: altruistic vs. self-serving motives

As the second prerequisite for securing reputational benefits of CSR, perceived CSR motives can function as a moderator in the effect of CSR

knowledge. The framework of CSR communication (Du et al., 2010) suggests that the key challenge in securing communication effectiveness of CSR knowledge is to minimize publics' skepticism regarding why a person or a company performs CSR activities, i.e., CSR motives. Prior research has considered the two types of perceived CSR motives—those that serve the public (altruistic) and those that are self-serving (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2012; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004). Public-serving motives indicate that people attribute altruistic motives to a person's or a company's CSR activities and perceive that the CSR activities are intended to serve public interests. Self-serving motives refer to public attributions of CSR motives as self-serving (Ellen et al., 2006).

Much of prior research has focused on the moderating role that perceived CSR motives play in strengthening the effect of CSR on various outcomes such as corporate reputation, publics' supportive intention, and purchase intention (Du et al., 2010; Ellen et al., 2006; Groza, Pronschinske, & Walker, 2011). Attribution theory in CSR contexts (Kelley, 1973) proposes that publics' psychological and behavioral responses are largely affected by how they attribute for organizational motives of conducting CSR (Kelley, 1973; Kim & Lee, 2012; Walker, Heere, Parent, & Drane, 2010). In general, when publics attribute high levels of altruistic motives and low levels of self-serving motives to CSR, the effectiveness of CSR tends to be greater, enhancing factorable corporate reputation (Ellen et al., 2006; Rifon et al., 2004). Prior research has also shown that due to public attributions of altruistic motives to the organization, proactive CSR tends to attract more positive public responses than reactive CSR (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, if corporate leaders of information technology companies donate medical products and money to those in need in other countries, publics are likely to view such CSR activities as altruistic. Although the donations occurred after the world found itself in a pandemic, as the corporate leaders did not cause the pandemic, the CSR activities are considered proactive. However, those who attribute high altruistic motives to the CSR actions do not necessarily reject self-serving motives; people can simultaneously hold both types of motive attributions (Ellen et al., 2006; Kim & Lee, 2012).

In addition, publics infer motives of a person's or a company's CSR activities based on their knowledge of such CSR activities. It is not likely that people have specific knowledge of corporate leaders' or companies' CSR motives (Rifon et al., 2004). Thus, publics' CSR knowledge of the same CSR activities can produce varying interpretations of CSR motives. Based on the knowledge of a corporate figure's CSR activities, publics could infer the corporate figure's CSR motives to be either altruistic,

self-serving, or both. Thus, we consider publics' CSR knowledge and perception of CSR motives to function together in the process of ripple effects of multi-level reputations. The study thus proposes that perceived motives of a corporate figure's CSR activities will function as a first-stage moderator in the ripple effect of CSR knowledge on country reputation. This will occur through serial mediations of corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation, especially interacting with CSR knowledge in affecting corporate figure reputation. That is, we expect the positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge on multi-level reputations to increase as attributions of altruistic motives increase and to decrease as attributions of self-serving motives increase. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed. Based on the above discussions, this study proposes a theoretical framework of multi-level reputational benefits of CSR (see Fig. 1 for the proposed framework).

**H3.** Public attribution of altruistic motives to corporate leaders' CSR donations amid COVID-19 positively moderates the ripple effect of CSR knowledge on country reputation through corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation, such that the positive effect of CSR knowledge on corporate figure reputation increases as attributions of altruistic motives increase (i.e., the first-stage moderated serial mediations).

**H4.** Public attribution of self-serving motives to corporate leaders' CSR donations amid COVID-19 negatively moderates the ripple effect of CSR knowledge on country reputation through corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation, such that the positive effect of CSR knowledge on corporate figure reputation increases as attributions of self-serving motives decrease (i.e., the first-stage moderated serial mediations).

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data collection and samples

During the initial peak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, this study employed a pair of equivalent online surveys to collect data in the US and China (CN), from May 17, 2020, to May 24, 2020. US participants were recruited through Mturk, and Chinese participants were recruited through a Chinese equivalent platform—Credamo ([www.credamo.com](http://www.credamo.com)). For the study contexts, this study selected Bill Gates (Gates hereafter) and Jack Ma (Ma hereafter) and their respective corporations—Microsoft and Alibaba Group. Both leaders are considered exemplars of transformational leaders and share similar personality characteristics (e.g., down-to-earth; Raffo & Williams, 2018). Gates is a

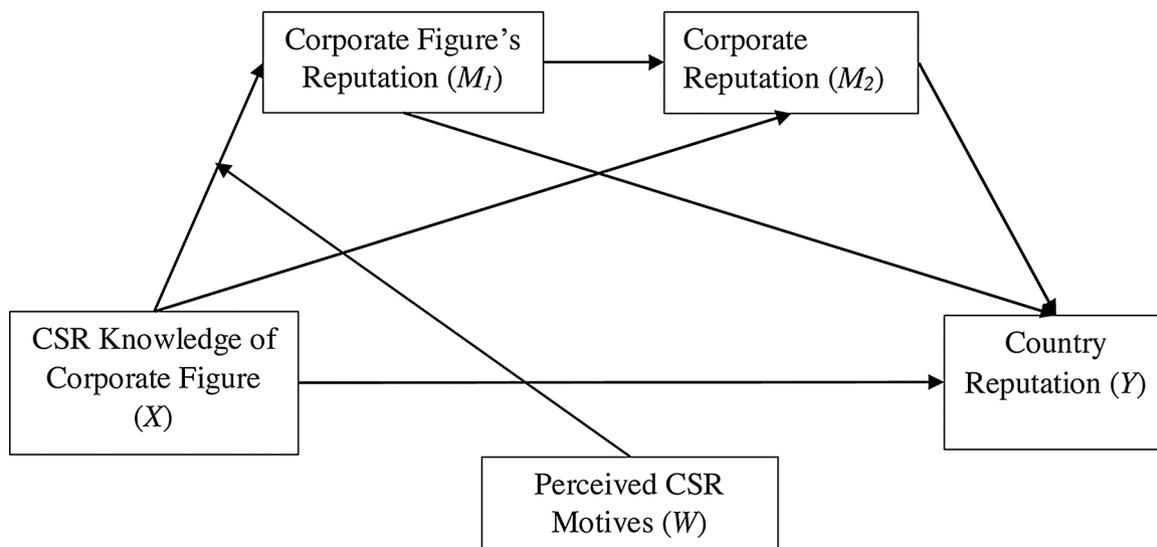


Fig. 1. A Theoretical Framework of Multi-Level Reputational Benefits of CSR.

co-founder of Microsoft and a philanthropist with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Ma is a founder of Alibaba Group and a philanthropist with Jack Ma Foundation. In March of 2020, both donated money, testing kits, and face masks to aid in the containment of the global pandemic (Yakowicz, 2020).

To ensure a representative sample of each country, US panels were recruited based on age, gender, and ethnicity distributions of 2018 US Census Bureau data. Chinese panels were recruited based on National Bureau of Statistics of China 2018 census data of age and gender distributions. In both regions, participants were given rewards for their participation. The US sample consisted of 724 responses, and the Chinese 1,056. At the outset, Chinese and Americans who resided in each region at the time of data collection (i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic) were directed to advance to the next screen. In addition, screening questions were used to filter Americans who had never heard of Ma and Chinese participants who had not heard of Gates. Due to the screening, in neither country was the age distribution of valid responses considered representative. The US sample consisted of more participants being over 40, and the CN sample consisted of more young adults (aged from 18 to 34). Respondents were then asked to demonstrate their knowledge of the corporate figure's COVID-19-related CSR activities, perceived CSR motives of such activities, reputation perceptions of the relevant corporate figure (Ma for US participants and Gates for CN participants), company (Alibaba for US participants and Microsoft for CN participants), and country (China for US participants and US for CN participants), and demographic questions.

Among Americans, 53.2 % were male ( $n = 385$ ). The ages ranged from 18 to 91 ( $M = 44.07$ ;  $SD = 15.1$ ). Approximately 10 % ( $n = 74$ ) identified themselves as being of Hispanic or Latino origin. The three quarters were White ( $n = 543$ ), followed by African Americans (12 %) and Asians (10.2 %). The majority were college graduates including master and doctoral graduates (84 %,  $n = 608$ ). A total number of 545 were fully employed (75.5 %). The annual household income of 52.4 % of participants ranged from US\$ 25,000 to 74,999 and that of 31.9 % was from US\$75,000 to 149,999. For the CN sample, 52.9 % ( $n = 559$ ) were male. The ages ranged from 16 to 56 ( $M = 29.58$ ,  $SD = 7.42$ ). Approximately 88 % held at least a college degree or higher ( $n = 929$ ). The majority were fully employed (80 %,  $n = 845$ ) while 2.8 % were unemployed ( $n = 30$ ). The annual household income of 34.2 % respondents ranged from CNY 80,000 to 149,999 and that of 37.5 % was from CNY 150,000 to 499,999. On average, the survey took 10 min to complete.

### 3.2. Survey instruments

All of the survey instrument items were borrowed from existing scales and, for the CN sample, translated into Chinese. To ensure the cultural equivalence, a back-translation method was employed (i.e., translating a US version into a CN version, and retranslating the CN version back into the US version and then comparing the two). For multilevel reputation measures, we considered the generalized favorability of publics, which can represent the overall level of respect the publics have toward Gates or Ma, Microsoft or Alibaba, and the US or China (Deephhouse et al., 2016). Each level of reputation was measured with the three items of overall likability, respect, and trust/reliability related to the emotional appeal dimension in the Harris-Fombrun reputation quotient scale<sup>1</sup> (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Server, 2000). CSR knowledge of corporate figure's COVID-19-related activities (CSR knowledge hereafter) was measured with three items adapted from

<sup>1</sup> We did not include as measure items Harris-Fombrun reputation quotient scale dimensions that are directly related with CSR leadership and economic aspects such as workplace, governance, citizenship, leadership, and products/services. This is because we were particularly interested in a more generalized favorability of the corporate figures, companies, and countries.

previous research (e.g., Kim, 2019). The three were as follows: I am very knowledgeable about the good for global society the corporate figure [replaced by the full names of either Ma or Gates] has been doing to combat COVID-19; I feel very knowledgeable about the corporate figure's socially responsibility activities during the COVID-19 pandemic; If a friend asks me about the corporate figure's donation activities contributed during the COVID-19 pandemic, I could explain them to my friend. The two types of perceived CSR motives were measured with three items each. They were as follows: The corporate figure's CSR donation effort during the COVID-19 pandemic was (1) genuine, (2) unselfish, and (3) altruistic for altruistic motives; and was done (1) out of an ulterior motive, (2) out of self-interest, and (3) to benefit himself for self-serving motives (Kim, 2014; Dean, 2002). All items were measured using a seven-point Likert scale, anchored by 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. For both samples, reliabilities of variables ranged from .84 to .94 (See Table 1). Demographic questions (i.e., age, gender, education, income, employment status, and political affiliation) were also measured and controlled for all data analyses.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Serial mediation analyses

H1 postulates positive direct relationships of CSR knowledge with (a) corporate figure reputation, (b) corporate reputation, and (c) country reputation. H2 is concerned with the positive serial mediation effects of corporate figure's and company's reputations on the relationship between CSR knowledge and country reputation. To address H1 and H2, the analyses of mediation models (model 6) using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS were performed. For the US sample, results showed that CSR knowledge of Ma's donations amid COVID-19 positively predicted (a) Ma's reputation ( $b = .42$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .0001$ , confidence intervals [CIs] = [.37, .45]), (b) Alibaba reputation ( $b = .18$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .0001$ , CIs = [.14, .22]), and (c) the country reputation of China ( $b = .27$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .0001$ , CIs = [.19, .34]). Thus for the US sample, all three H1s are supported. Results also revealed a significant serial mediation effect of CSR knowledge of Ma on the country reputation of China through the reputation perceptions of Ma and Alibaba as CIs levels were entirely above zero ( $Effect = .13$ ,  $SE = .02$ , CIs = [.08, .16]). Thus, H2 was also supported. In addition, the indirect effect of CSR knowledge on China's reputation was not significant when solely mediated by Ma's reputation, but it was significantly positive when solely mediated by Alibaba's reputation ( $Effect = .07$ ,  $SE = .01$ , CIs = [.04, .10]). However, the ripple effect of CSR knowledge on China's reputation was much larger when serially mediated by both Ma's and Alibaba's reputations than when mediated by Alibaba' alone.

For the CN sample, results presented similar findings, i.e., supporting H1a, H1b, H1c, and H2. Among the Chinese, CSR knowledge of Gates' CSR donation was a positive predictor of (a) Gates's reputation ( $b = .40$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .0001$ , CIs = [.36, .44]), (b) Microsoft's reputation ( $b = .17$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $p < .0001$ , CIs = [.14, .21]), and (c) America's reputation ( $b = .15$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .0002$ , CIs = [.07, .23]). And supporting H2, Gates's reputation and Microsoft's reputation functioned as significant positive serial mediators between CSR knowledge and US country reputation

**Table 1**  
Reliabilities and Descriptive Statistics of Variables.

Variables	US sample		China (CN) sample	
	$\alpha$	$M$ ( $SD$ )	$\alpha$	$M$ ( $SD$ )
Corporate Figure's Reputation	.93	4.85 (1.44)	.89	5.71 (1.01)
Corporate Reputation	.91	4.53 (1.50)	.89	5.62 (1.04)
Country Reputation	.89	3.34 (1.68)	.93	2.84 (1.50)
CSR Knowledge	.94	3.73 (1.85)	.92	5.02 (1.39)
Perceived Altruistic Motives	.84	5.07 (1.31)	.91	5.57 (1.13)
Perceived Self-serving Motives	.88	4.69 (1.64)	.90	2.80 (1.49)

(Effect = .08, SE = .01, CIs = [.05, .11]). Similar to the US sample, the CN sample revealed that the indirect ripple effect of CSR knowledge onto country reputation (US reputation) through corporate reputation of Microsoft alone was also positively significant (Effect = .06, SE = .01, CIs = [.03, .09]). However, the ripple effect size was smaller than when it was mediated by both Gates's and Microsoft's reputations. One finding among the Chinese participants was that the indirect effect of CSR knowledge on US reputation turned negative when mediated by Gates's reputation alone (Effect = -.06, SE = .02, CIs = [-.10, -.008]). This indicates that although the knowledge of Gates's donations amid COVID-19 positively affected his reputation, Chinese people with more positive perceptions of Gates's reputation tended to rate America's reputation lower. Nevertheless, for both samples, the positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge onto country reputation was serially mediated by corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation.

4.2. Conditional serial mediation analyses

To examine conditional serial mediations (H3 and H4), researchers carried out two moderated-serial mediation model analyses (using PROCESS macro model 83). These were done by considering the altruistic and self-serving motives each as the first-stage moderator (W). H3 posits that the ripple effects of CSR knowledge—through serial mediations—on country reputation are positively moderated by altruistic motives, increasing as altruistic motive attribution increases. Results of the US sample revealed that the interaction between CSR knowledge and altruistic motives was significantly positive (b = .08, SE = .02, p < .0001, CIs = [.05, .12], see Table 2). This indicates that the effect of CSR knowledge of Ma's reputation increased as people attributed more altruistic motives to his CSR contributions. The index of moderated mediation also revealed that the indirect spillover effect of CSR knowledge about Ma's donations onto the country reputation of China significantly increased through the serial mediations of Ma's and Alibaba's reputations as altruistic motive attribution increased (Index = .024, SE = .01, CIs = [.011, .040], see Table 3). Thus for the US sample, H3 was supported. When mediated by Ma's reputation alone, the moderated mediation was not significant (see Table 3).

For the CN sample, however, the positive ripple effects of CSR knowledge on America's reputation did not change according to level of altruistic motive attribution as CIs levels included zero for the index of moderated mediation (see Table 3). Although both CSR knowledge (b = .24, SE = .07, p < .0001, CIs = [.10, .38]) and altruistic motive attribution (b = .45, SE = .06, p < .0001, CIs = [.33, .57]) significantly enhanced Gates's reputation, there was no interaction between CSR knowledge and altruistic motive attribution (see Table 4). That is, regardless of the altruistic-motive-attribution levels among Chinese, there was a persistently positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge on country reputation through the reputations of the corporate figure and company. Thus for the CN sample, H3 was not supported.

H4 proposes that the ripple effects of CSR knowledge—through serial mediations—on country reputation are negatively moderated by self-serving motives, increasing as self-serving motive attribution decreases. Results suggest that the positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge on country reputation was significantly moderated by self-serving CSR motives in both samples, but the direction was opposite from the hypothesis. In other words, the spillover effect of CSR knowledge on country reputation through the reputations of the corporate figure and company significantly increased as attributions of a self-serving motive increased. Thus in neither sample was H4 supported.

With the US sample, the direct effect of CSR knowledge of Ma's donations on his reputation increased as self-serving motives increased (b = .07, SE = .01, p < .0001, CIs = [.04, .10]), although the self-serving motive itself had negative impacts on Ma's reputation (see Table 2). Among Americans with high levels of CSR knowledge of Ma's COVID-19-related donations, people attributing high levels of a self-serving motive had much more positive perceptions of Ma's reputation than those with low levels of a self-serving motive. However, when people had low levels of CSR knowledge, those with low attribution levels of self-serving motives rated his reputation much higher than those with high attribution levels of self-serving motives (See Fig. 2). This indicates that as people know more about a corporate figure's CSR activities amid COVID-19, the generally considered negative effect of self-serving motives can transform into a positive one (See Fig. 2). In addition, this positively moderated mediation was only significant when mediated by

**Table 2**  
Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients with Confidence Intervals(CI) Estimating Corporate Reputation and Country Reputation (US Sample).

US Sample	Ma' Reputation (M1)		Alibaba Reputation (M2)		China Reputation (Y)	
	Coeff (se)	CI levels	Coeff (se)	CI levels	Coeff (se)	CI levels
CSR KN. (X)	-.10(.09)	[-.30, .09]				
Altruistic M. (W)	-.04(.07)	[-.16, .09]				
X × W	.08***(.02)	[.05, .12]				
Employment	-.11*(.06)	[-.22, -.003]				
X			.18***(.02)	[.14, .22]		
M1			.73***(.03)	[.68, .78]		
X					.27***(.04)	[.19, .34]
M1					-.01(.06)	[-.14, .11]
M2					.39***(.06)	[.27, .52]
Political Affiliation					.23**(.07)	[.09, .37]
Constant	3.77 (.47)	[2.85, 4.69]	.35 (.24)	[-.12, .83]	.63 (.41)	[-.17, 1.43]
	R <sup>2</sup> = .36		R <sup>2</sup> = .70		R <sup>2</sup> = .33	
	F (9, 711) = 45.03		F (8, 712) = 207.76		F (9, 711) = 38.48	
CSR KN. (X)	.05(.08)	[-.10, .20]				
Self-serving M.(W)	-.28***(.06)	[-.40, -.17]				
X × W	.07***(.01)	[.04, .10]				
X			.18***(.02)	[.14, .22]		
M1			.73***(.03)	[.68, .78]		
X					.27***(.04)	[.19, .34]
M1					-.01(.06)	[-.14, .11]
M2					.39***(.06)	[.27, .51]
Political Affiliation					.23**(.07)	[.09, .37]
Constant	4.63(.43)	[3.78, 5.47]	.35 (.25)	[-.12, .83]	.63(.41)	[-.18, 1.43]
	R <sup>2</sup> = .33		R <sup>2</sup> = .70		R <sup>2</sup> = .33	
	F (9, 711) = 38.74		F (8, 712) = 207.76		F (9, 711) = 38.48	

Note. CSR KN refers to CSR knowledge; Altruistic and self-serving M refers to altruistic CSR motives and self-serving CSR motives. Only significant demographic variables are presented here. \*\*\* p < .001, \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05.

**Table 3**  
Conditional Spillover Effect of CSR Knowledge (X) on Country Reputation (Y) through Corporate Figure's Reputation (M<sub>1</sub>) and Corporate Reputation (M<sub>2</sub>).

US Sample	Moderator (W)	Effect (SE)	BootLLCI	BootULCI
<b>Indirect Effects</b>				
<b>Altruistic M.</b>				
X → M <sub>1</sub> → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Low	.066 (.02)	.0360	.0995
	Average	.089 (.02)	.0567	.1248
	High	.121 (.02)	.0787	.1665
Index of moderated mediation		.024 (.01)	.0107	.0389
X → M <sub>1</sub> → Y	Low	-.003 (.01)	-.0301	.0209
	Average	-.005 (.02)	-.0385	.0289
	High	-.006 (.02)	-.0511	.0394
Index of moderated mediation		-.001 (.01)	-.0100	.0086
X → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Mediation	.069 (.01)	.0441	.0961
<b>Self-serving M.</b>				
X → M <sub>1</sub> → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Low	.076 (.02)	.0462	.1115
	Average	.103 (.02)	.0692	.1407
	High	.143 (.03)	.0966	.1970
Index of moderated mediation		.020 (.01)	.0103	.0325
X → M <sub>1</sub> → Y	Low	-.004 (.02)	-.0339	.0242
	Average	-.005 (.02)	-.0451	.0329
	High	-.007 (.03)	-.0628	.0462
Index of moderated mediation		-.001(.004)	-.0092	.0068
X → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Mediation	.069 (.01)	.0445	.0979
<hr/>				
CN Sample	Moderator (W)	Effect (SE)	BootLLCI	BootULCI
<b>Indirect Effects</b>				
<b>Altruistic M.</b>				
X → M <sub>1</sub> → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Low	.038 (.01)	.0200	.0577
	Average	.035 (.01)	.0211	.0513
	High	.033 (.01)	.0177	.0509
Index of moderated mediation		-.002 (.01)	-.0088	.0053
X → M <sub>1</sub> → Y	Low	-.028 (.01)	-.0567	-.0044
	Average	-.026 (.01)	-.0514	-.0042
	High	-.024 (.01)	-.0507	-.0038
Index of moderated mediation		.001(.003)	-.0044	.0076
X → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Mediation	.058 (.01)	.0348	.0849
<b>Self-serving M.</b>				
X → M <sub>1</sub> → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Low	.060 (.01)	.0381	.0838
	Average	.070 (.01)	.0451	.0957
	High	.082 (.02)	.0505	.1165
Index of moderated mediation		.008(.004)	.0002	.0154
X → M <sub>1</sub> → Y	Low	-.044 (.02)	-.0831	-.0067
	Average	-.052 (.02)	-.0961	-.0080
	High	-.061 (.03)	-.1146	-.0090
Index of moderated mediation		-.006(.004)	-.0139	.0002
X → M <sub>2</sub> → Y	Mediation	.058 (.01)	.0345	.0859

Note. X = CSR Knowledge, M<sub>1</sub> = Corporate Figure's Reputation, M<sub>2</sub> = Corporate Reputation, Y = Country Reputation.

both Ma's and Alibaba's reputations (*Index* = .02, *SE* = .01, *CI*s = [.010, .033]). When mediated by the corporate figure's reputation alone, the ripple effect of CSR knowledge on the country's reputation was not moderated by self-serving motives (see Table 3).

Similar to the US sample, results of the CN sample suggest that the positive impact of CSR knowledge on Gates's reputation increased as self-serving CSR motive attribution increased (*b* = .04, *SE* = .01, *p* < .001, *CI*s = [.02, .063], see Table 4). However, the specific pattern was a bit different from the US sample. As seen in Fig. 2, as CSR knowledge of Gates's donations increased, the negative effects of self-serving motives on his reputation decreased instead of turning into positive ones as happened with the US sample case. In addition, the positive moderated mediation by the self-serving CSR motive was significant only when serially mediated by both Gates's and Microsoft's reputation (*Index* = .007, *SE* = .004, *CI*s = [.002, .015]). When mediated by Gates's reputation alone, the ripple effect of CSR knowledge on US reputation was (similarly to the US sample case) not moderated by self-serving motives (see Table 3).

In addition, for all analyses, we set as covariates demographic questions. For the US sample, employment status mattered for Ma's reputation, and political affiliation was significantly associated with China's reputation. Employed participants tended to rate Ma's reputation much higher than their unemployed counterparts, and republicans

rated China's reputation significantly lower than did democrats (see Table 2). For the CN sample, female and communist party-affiliated participants tended to perceive Gates's reputation more favorably than males and non-communist party-affiliated participants (see Table 4). In China, younger and more educated participants tended to rate America's reputation much higher (see Table 4).

## 5. Discussion

Through its investigation of the mechanism of CSR's reputational benefits in cross-national contexts, this study's findings have yielded valuable insights. They concern the ripple effects of consumers' CSR knowledge of corporate leaders' CSR donations during a pandemic on multi-level reputation perceptions (i.e., corporate leaders' reputation, corporate reputation, and country reputation).

### 5.1. The positive ripple effects of CSR donations amid COVID-19 on multilevel reputations

This study delineates how CSR actions can yield reputational benefits during a global pandemic. The findings of this study suggest that CSR knowledge of corporate leaders' COVID-19-related donations can significantly improve their home country reputations through increasing their own personal reputations and affiliated companies' reputations. This ripple effect of CSR knowledge on multi-level reputations was consistently evident across both the US and China, although specific patterns differed somewhat between the two.

In both countries, the positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge on country reputation was evident both through corporate figure reputation and corporate reputation and through the latter on its own. Differences between the two countries emerged when the ripple effect was considered through Gates's or Ma's reputation alone. For Americans, the positive ripple effect to country reputation vanished, and for the Chinese it turned negative. It is possible that the positive reputations of corporate leaders, strengthened by CSR knowledge, may trigger strong mental contrasts between the actions of corporate leaders and their home countries. For example, Chinese participants may have perceived that Bill Gates did good in helping fight the virus, and contrasted that with the US government doing nothing for it (Bella, 2020). This implies that for a country to reap the reputational benefits of CSR, consumers have to strongly associate the corporate figure's CSR actions with the affiliated company. Then through the inverse COO effect—the summary effect based on their assessments about the company—the corporate reputation can impact the country's reputation (Anholt, 2002; Han, 1989; Nebenzahl et al., 1997). Thus, when mediated by the corporate figure's reputation alone without activating the assessments of the affiliate company (i.e., corporate reputation), the ripple effect may either disappear or turn negative. It is important to note, though, that despite people drawing negative contrasts between corporate leaders' activities and those of the origin countries, the positive ripple effect on country reputation was the largest when mediated by both reputations of corporate leaders and companies (i.e., through assessments of both the corporate leaders and companies).

Prior reputation research has provided insights into CSR actions' reputational benefits mostly in a single-country context and limited to the contexts of corporate-level reputation or financial performance (Deephouse, 2000; Kim, 2011; Weng & Chen, 2017). By extending such single-country-focused and corporate-focused reputational contexts to cross-national and national-level reputational contexts, this study contributes to the current knowledge of reputational benefits of CSR, especially in regard to the inverse COO effect framework (Anholt, 2002; Lopez et al., 2011; White, 2012). The study provides empirical evidence of why companies and business leaders should proactively commit to CSR actions during a pandemic, the latest contribution to our understanding of how proactive CSR can improve a company's reputation (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Kim, 2011; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006).

**Table 4**  
Unstandardized OLS Regression Coefficients with Confidence Intervals (CI) Estimating Corporate Reputation and Country Reputation (CN Sample).

CN Sample	Gates' Reputation ( $M_1$ )		Microsoft Reputation ( $M_2$ )		US Reputation ( $Y$ )	
	Coeff (se)	CI levels	Coeff (se)	CI levels	Coeff (se)	CI levels
CSR KN. (X)	.24***(.07)	[.10, .38]				
Altruistic M. (W)	.45***(.06)	[.33, .57]				
X × W	-.01 (.01)	[-.03, .01]				
Gender	.16***(.05)	[.07, .25]				
Political Affiliation	-.03*(.01)	[-.06, -.01]				
X			.17***(.02)	[.14, .21]		
$M_1$			.57***(.03)	[.52, .62]		
X					.15***(.04)	[.07, .23]
$M_1$					-.14*(.06)	[-.26, -.02]
$M_2$					.33***(.06)	[.22, .45]
Age					-.03***(.01)	[-.05, -.02]
Education					.16*(.07)	[.02, .30]
Constant	2.16 (.37)	[1.44, 2.90]	1.55 (.23)	[1.09, 2.01]	1.55 (.46)	[.64, 2.5]
	$R^2 = .44$		$R^2 = .71$		$R^2 = .10$	
	$F(9, 1046) = 92.46$		$F(8, 1047) = 134.52$		$F(9, 1046) = 13.36$	
CSR KN. (X)	.26***(.04)	[.18, .34]				
Self-serving M. (W)	-.32***(.06)	[-.44, -.19]				
X × W	.04***(.01)	[.02, .06]				
Gender	.19***(.05)	[.09, .29]				
Political Affiliation	-.04*(.02)	[-.07, -.01]				
X			.17***(.02)	[.14, .21]		
$M_1$			.57***(.03)	[.51, .62]		
X					.15***(.04)	[.07, .23]
$M_1$					-.14*(.06)	[-.26, -.02]
$M_2$					.33***(.06)	[.22, .45]
Age					-.03***(.01)	[-.05, -.02]
Education					.16*(.07)	[.02, .30]
Constant	4.45(.32)	[3.82, 5.07]	1.55 (.23)	[1.09, 2.01]	1.55(.46)	[.64, 2.4]
	$R^2 = .35$		$R^2 = .51$		$R^2 = .10$	
	$F(9, 1046) = 62.66$		$F(8, 1046) = 134.52$		$F(9, 1046) = 13.36$	

Note. CSR KN refers to CSR knowledge; Altruistic and self-serving M refers to altruistic CSR motives and self-serving CSR motives. Only significant demographic variables are presented here. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ .

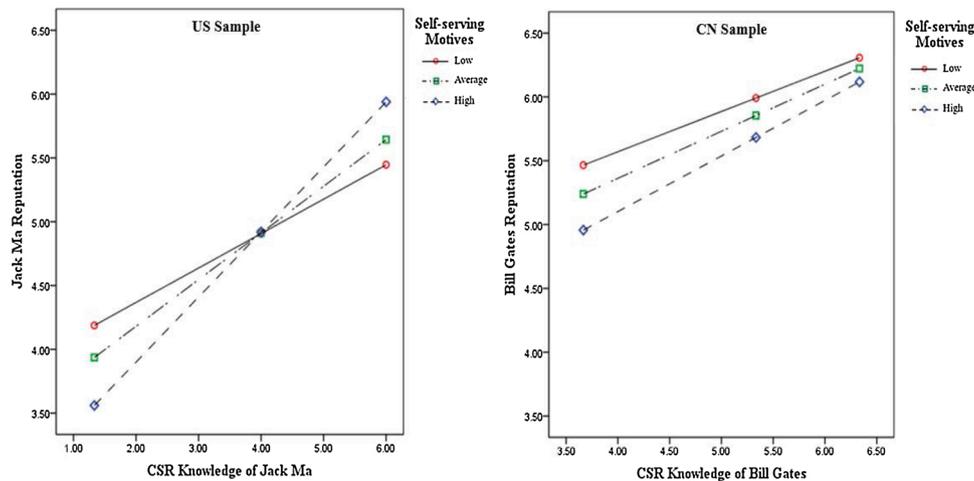


Fig. 2. The Conditional Effects of Self-Serving CSR motives.

By contextualizing the research within the US and China (whose relationship is tense; [Rachman, 2020](#); [Swanson, 2018](#)), the study provides empirical evidence that positive ripple effects of CSR knowledge on home country reputation through corporate leaders' and companies' reputations can be prevalent even among consumers in these countries. This provides important insight into both of the public and private sectors given reputational benefits can occur reciprocally ([Nebenzahl et al., 1997](#); [Newbury, 2012](#)). The government sector should encourage the private sector to exercise more CSR commitments. It could do so by providing CSR activities that contribute to social welfare and sustainable system development for supportive policies such as tax benefits and exemptions ([Glomm, Kawaguchi, & Sepulveda, 2008](#)). The private

sector should also acknowledge the importance of CSR actions amid a pandemic in improving reputational benefits. Both sectors should be aware of the importance of building a good public-private relationship as both can benefit from CSR activities ([Škare & Golja, 2014](#)). That is, an improved corporate reputation through CSR activities can benefit the origin country's reputation in global contexts, improving foreign consumers' positive perceptions toward the country which benefit the public sector. In turn, an improved national reputation can benefit companies in global contexts through a halo effect on foreign consumers' perceptions of the country of origin's companies ([Newbury, 2012](#)).

## 5.2. Roles of perceived CSR motives in the ripple effects of CSR donations amid COVID-19

This study also suggests important insights into how public attribution of CSR motives function in the ripple effects of CSR knowledge on multi-level reputations. The findings indicate somewhat varying patterns between the US and China in how altruistic and self-serving CSR motives function in the CSR ripple effect. Among American participants but not among Chinese counterparts, the positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge about corporate leaders' donations increased as altruistic motive attribution increased. Among Chinese, the ripple effect of CSR knowledge did not differ by publics' altruistic motive attribution, remaining persistently positive regardless. As to self-serving motives, the positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge about corporate leaders' donations increased as people attributed more self-serving motives to the CSR actions in both countries. This is different from our original prediction that CSR knowledge impact would be larger among those with low self-serving CSR motive attribution (Rifon et al., 2004). This suggests that the importance of increasing CSR knowledge is even greater for people with high attribution levels of self-serving CSR motive than for those with low levels.

The pattern varies, however, between the two countries. For Americans, when they have little knowledge about a corporate figure's CSR donations, those with low attribution levels of self-serving motives tended to rate higher multi-level reputations (i.e., corporate figure, company, and country reputations) than those with high attribution levels of self-serving motives. However, as people learned more about the corporate figure's CSR donations amid COVID-19, the originally negative effect of self-serving motive turned into a positive one, meaning that people with high attribution levels of self-serving motive rated much higher multi-level reputations as they become more knowledgeable of the CSR donations than those with low attribution levels of self-serving motives.

Among Chinese though, as CSR knowledge increased, the negative effect of self-serving motives merely diminished rather than turning into a positive one. This particular finding suggests that the way perceived CSR motives operate in the mechanism may be more complex than we assumed. The pattern differences can be explained by the varying levels of consumers' acceptance of corporate leaders' or companies' pursuit of self-interests in CSR activities, possibly resulting from institutional development differences between the two countries (Deephouse et al., 2016). In fact, Americans in our sample attributed much higher self-serving motives and much lower altruistic motives to the COVID-19-related donations than did their Chinese counterparts. In addition, Americans rated the reputations much lower at all levels than did their Chinese counterparts. Institutional theory can be useful in explaining such differences between the two countries (Brammer & Jackson, 2012; Deephouse et al., 2016). According to institutional theory, public expectations of the business sector are largely affected by institutional development (Deephouse et al., 2016). Consumers in more developed countries tend to hold higher expectations of the business sector than do those in less institutionally developed countries. These higher expectations often become embedded in formal institutions through more frequent and easier organization of varying consumer interest and pressure groups (Bischoff, 2003). This leads to more frequent violations of public expectations, greater consumer skepticism, and reputational penalties for the business sector (Deephouse et al., 2016). While consumers in more institutionally developed countries hold greater consumer skepticism of the business sector, they may also possess greater acceptance of the business sector's pursuit in profit maximization through CSR due to their frequent exposure to companies' CSR practices (Groza et al., 2011). In this regard, research has also indicated that consumers in developed countries are savvy enough to "acknowledge and willing to accept the main purpose of business (having firm-serving motives) in our society" in the contexts of CSR (Kim & Lee, 2012). And such willingness to accept the self-serving motives

can also differ according to the institutional development of each country. Consumers in developed countries (e.g., US) could be more willing to accept self-serving CSR motives because they tend to view companies' CSR activities as being both strategy-driven (i.e., to serve a firm's strategic goal) and value-driven (i.e., for public-serving purposes) than those in less developed countries (e.g., China). In a similar vein, research suggests that consumers in developed countries tend to view the company to be most trustworthy when they attribute both high altruistic and self-serving motives to the company's CSR (Kim, 2014; Kim & Lee, 2012). In this regard, our study further contributes to the existing knowledge of CSR motives by suggesting that such willingness to accept self-serving motives can be magnified as consumers learn more about a person's CSR actions. Although this tendency is more salient among consumers in developed countries, the same tendency exists among consumers in less developed countries.

Based on the significant findings, a few notable implications emerged. First, our study has extended the importance of CSR knowledge in achieving reputational benefits in multi-level reputations. While prior research has investigated how CSR knowledge affects various outcomes in a single-company or -country context, our research examines the role of CSR knowledge in cross-national and proactive CSR contexts, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study contributes to the reputation research by adding the empirical evidence that the positive ripple effect emanating from knowledge of CSR can be extended to the origin country's reputations through the enhancement of a corporate figure's personal reputation and the reputation of the affiliated company. Second, our findings underscore the notion that such ripple effects can occur even among consumers from countries that have contentious relationships with the country of origin. This has diplomacy implications. Perhaps a government should be more proactive about encouraging the business sector's CSR commitment so as to improve foreign relations. Third, this study adds a new layer to our understanding of consumer attribution. Consumer willingness to accept corporate figure's self-serving CSR motives might differ by the institutional development of countries, but as consumers' CSR knowledge increases, such willingness can drastically increase across countries, further enhancing the positive ripple effect of CSR knowledge. Based on this, practitioners should pay more attention to creative ways to improve publics' CSR knowledge. Proactive CSR in a global pandemic could be a good destination, not just for the purposes of positive social impacts, but also for ensuring reputational benefits for corporations.

## 5.3. Limitation and future research

This study has several limitations and thus its findings should be interpreted with caution. First, the study employed an online survey to investigate the relationships among multi-level reputations. Although the survey data were collected during the first peak of the global pandemic—after Gates's and Ma's CSR donations—our data cannot properly detect causal relationships therein. Despite such a limitation, since we assume reputation is multidirectional (Newbury, 2012), the study results can still provide valuable insights. In addition, our cross-national samples are essentially convenience samples. Thus, we call for future research with more representative samples in varying countries that are in conflict to examine the ripple effects of CSR knowledge on country reputation. Finally, we call for future research to further explore cross-national differences in the roles of CSR motive attributions—altruistic and self-serving—in the reputational benefit mechanism of CSR. Our study presents the initial evidence of cross-national differences in the role of CSR motive attribution. However, whether consumer willingness to accept self-serving motives in CSR indeed increases as CSR knowledge increases as well as whether it differs by the institutional development of countries should be further investigated in other cross-national contexts.

#### 5.4. Conclusion

We find that publics' CSR knowledge of corporate leaders' donations gives rise to positive ripple effects, in both nations, on a corporate figure's reputation, a company's reputation, and a country's reputation. That is, celebrity corporate leaders' CSR donations can even enhance the origin country's overall reputation through improving their personal reputations and their affiliated companies' reputations among consumers in countries that have contentious relations with the origin country. Such ripple effects on a country's reputation can be largest when people strongly associate corporate leaders with their affiliated companies, i.e., through the spillover effect of corporate figure reputation on corporate reputation. In the confirmed ripple effect mechanism of multi-level reputations, the role of CSR motives can change according to the level of CSR knowledge. As people know more about one's CSR activities, the positive impact of altruistic motives can increase while the negative impact of self-serving motives can decrease. We look forward to further research linking CSR and multilevel reputations.

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#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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