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CSR COMMUNICATION FROM A PUBLIC RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Public relations is a strategic communication discipline that focuses on understanding and advising the relationships between organizations and their publics. The discipline emphasizes that a key to organizational success is to meet and exceed stakeholders' and societal expectations in its relationship-building efforts through strategic communication, dialogue, and engagement. In terms of its conceptualization and emphasized objectives, public relations shares many similarities with corporate social responsibility (CSR). Edward Bernays (1923, 1975) –regarded as the father of modern public relations – argued that public relations focuses on “social good through accommodating public expectation” (Bartlett, 2011, p. 68) and is “the practice of social responsibility” (Clark, 2000, p. 368). Since that formulation, the concept of social responsibility or CSR has been continually emphasized throughout public relations history. Clark (2000) argued that both public relations and CSR stress the ethical responsibility of organizations and share a similar objective. It is to enhance the quality of an organization's relationships with varying stakeholders, not just shareholders. Kelly (2001) also suggested that the notion of CSR is philosophically well aligned with that of public relations due to its shared focus on interdependence between organizations and publics and a shared theoretical root in systems theory. Due to these shared similarities, Ferguson (1984, 2018) strongly advocated for CSR being considered a promising public relations paradigm.

This chapter will provide a road map on how public relations perspectives have contributed to CSR communication research. The chapter first defines CSR and CSR communication from a public relations perspective and provides an overview of CSR research trends, theoretical, and methodological frameworks adopted in the CSR research of public relations scholarship. The chapter sheds light on the current status of CSR research in public relations and the unique contributions of public relations to CSR communication research. Finally, the chapter addresses the challenges associated with the applications of public relations perspectives to CSR communication research and suggests directions for future research.

Definitions of CSR and CSR Communication in Public Relations

CSR is defined in public relations literature as organizational practice addressing economic, legal, ethical, environmental, and societal responsibilities of an organization in its relationships with stakeholders and a larger society (Bartlett, 2011; Bortree, 2014; Carroll, 1979). This definition of CSR

from a public relations perspective strays little from management perspectives. It basically adopts the well-established conceptualization of CSR put forth by Carroll (1979); that is, it consists of economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities. As noted above, due to the similarities of public relations with CSR regarding its definitions and objectives (Clark, 2000), public relations scholars, when defining CSR, have emphasized the aspects of relationships and alignments between organizations, stakeholders, and the society (Bartlett, 2011; Ferguson, 1984, 2018). As such, CSR in public relations literature has been regarded as a multi-relational approach to social responsibility that deals with the relationships between organizations, key stakeholders, and the larger society (Bartlett, 2011; Kim, 2019).

In addition, it is important to emphasize when defining CSR in public relations scholarship the inclusion of stakeholder expectations. Indeed, the focus shifts more to *stakeholders* or at least a balance is aimed for between organizations and stakeholders. With a greater emphasis on stakeholders' and/or societal expectations, CSR can thus be defined as *societal expectations of organizational practice* addressing economic, legal, ethical, environmental, and societal responsibility of an organization in *its relationships with* stakeholders and a larger society. Here CSR appears to be socially constructed through interactions and building relationships between organizations and stakeholders based on stakeholder and societal expectations of corporate practices. In a similar vein, CSR communication can be defined from a public relations perspective as the *exchange of meaning and information* regarding *societal expectations of organizational practice* addressing economic, legal, ethical, environmental, and societal responsibility of an organization between the organization, its stakeholders, and a larger society.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework of CSR Communication Research in Public Relations

Up until 2005, there was minimal growth in CSR communication research in public relations. Since the late 2000s, though, the growth has been tremendous. Lee (2017) carried out a quantitative study investigating 133 CSR articles from public relations perspectives published between 1980 and 2015. According to the study, up to 2005 only ten CSR-related articles had been published. Between 2006 and 2010, 50 articles were published, a 500% increase, and between 2011 and 2015, 73 articles were published, a 1,000% increase. Approximately 55% of articles were published between 2011 and 2015. Lee (2017) suggested that more than 90% of CSR research was published after 2006. Did this trend continue in recent years? To find out, we conducted a quick quantitative content analysis with 262 CSR articles from public relations perspectives published between 1980 and 2021. Our review confirms that this growth trajectory has continued in recent years. In this systematic review, more than half (56%) of the CSR research from public relations perspectives were published in the most recent years – i.e., between 2016 and 2021; the proportion of CSR articles published between 2011 and 2015 was less than half that (24.8%).

Prior research on systematic reviews of CSR research can also provide useful insights into general research trends of CSR communication in the field of public relations. Goodwin and Bartlett (2008) investigated 40 CSR articles published between 1998 and 2007 in three public relations journals: *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, and *Journal of Communication Management*. The authors identified three major research themes: (1) management function of CSR such as ethics- and professionalism-focused; (2) communication management function such as CSR reporting, discourse and dialogue, and new media technology focused; and (3) relationship management function of CSR such as building reputation, trust, and relationship focused. Given that both the number of studies being reviewed and the selected timespan are marginal in their research (i.e., only 40 and the 10-years period), readers should use caution when interpreting the research trends during this early stage of public relations-related CSR research. Later, with a much broader

timespan and journal selection, Lee (2017) investigated 133 CSR studies from public relations perspectives published between 1980 and 2015. His research identified four major CSR research themes in public relations during the selected time: (1) effects of CSR (e.g., effects of CSR types, fit, framing, and so forth); (2) systematic and descriptive examination of CSR practice and communication performed by organization or industry; (3) conceptual frameworks of CSR and roles of public relations; and (4) stakeholder perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs of CSR. His review also suggests that a dominant research theme changes over time. In the earlier or initial stage of up until 2000, most CSR research focused on discussing the conceptual frameworks of CSR and the roles of public relations. In the second stage, from 2001 to 2010, the most prevalent research theme was the investigation of CSR and CSR communication practice and status. The most researched theme in the last stage – 2011 to 2015 – was the effect of CSR. This major theme change provides useful insights into how CSR research has advanced in the public relations field. During the initial stage, when a new concept of CSR was introduced, scholars tried to make sense of it by discussing conceptual links between CSR and public relations and conceptual frameworks of CSR (Bartlett, 2011; Clark, 2000). After that, to understand how CSR is currently practiced, researchers investigated how CSR initiatives and CSR communication were practiced in the market. Then public relations scholars have started to place more attention to the identification of antecedents, processes, and consequences that make CSR/CSR communication effective or meaningful for society. These efforts of examining antecedents, processes, and consequences can further facilitate CSR theory-testing, theory-developing/building, and theory-polishing processes.

The top three theoretical frameworks adopted most often in CSR research of public relations are stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and attribution theory (T. Lee, 2017). Similarly, a bibliometric network analysis covering CSR research between 1980 and 2018 in the entire communication literature (not just public relations) identifies the same three theories as most frequently adopted frameworks in CSR research across the communication fields (Ji et al., 2021). Specifically, while attribution theory remains an all-time influential player in CSR research across the general communication literature, the influence of stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory has started to burgeon since 2000 and increased drastically after 2010 (Ji et al., 2021). This increased influence of stakeholder and legitimacy theories in CSR research in the general communication literature can be explained by the increased influence of CSR research from public relations perspectives. In Ji and colleagues' (2021) research, for instance, the proportion of CSR research published in public relations journals (e.g., *Public Relations Review*) represents the largest in their sample of the general communication journals. Given that CSR research from public relations perspectives has in recent years most often adopted stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory, it is no surprise that these two theories are being adopted more in general communication literature (T. Lee, 2017). Indeed, the recent increase in the influence of stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory in the general communication literature may be explained by the drastic increase of CSR research from public relations perspectives (Ji et al., 2021; T. Lee, 2017).

Another notable trend is an increase in the adoption of public relations theories in CSR research of the general communication literature in recent years (Ji et al., 2021). Those theoretical frameworks include dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and relationship management theory of organization–public relationship (OPR; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). In addition, the most central concepts identified in recent years for shaping CSR research in the general communication field are also highly related to public relations theories of dialogic theory and OPR such as the CSR concepts of commitment, trust, engagement, and transparency.

In the current systematic review, a similar pattern is found in the most adopted theoretical frameworks in the CSR research from public relations perspectives. Up until 2015, the most adopted theories are stakeholder, legitimacy, and attribution theories. In more recent years, though, there has been a drastic increase (from 10.7% up to 26.9% during 2016–2021) in the adoption of

public relations theories and concepts such as dialogic theory, OPR, dialogue, engagement, and trust concepts. At the same time, there has been a decrease in the adoption of stakeholder, legitimacy, and attribution theories in CSR research of public relations in more recent years. For instance, stakeholder theory adoption rate was 23% up until 2015, but decreased to 9% in the most recent period of 2016–2021, and the same pattern was found for legitimacy theory – a decrease from 16% until 2015 to 11% in the time of 2016–2021. These figures indicate that public relations theories and concepts have become more influential, while business and management theories and concepts have become less so in CSR research of public relations.

As to methodological frameworks, up until 2015, research methods adopted for CSR research in public relations seemed to be balanced with a slight edge for quantitative methods (51.1%) over qualitative (42.1%) and mixed methods (T. Lee, 2017). To see if this balance in the employed research methods is consistently found in the current CSR research in public relations, we also looked into the methodological frameworks adopted in our systematic review of public relations-based CSR studies published between 1980 and 2021. The current review found that quantitative research methods (64.4%) such as experiment (25.3%), survey (19.2%), and quantitative content analysis (13.4%) were adopted more frequently than qualitative research methods (31%) such as qualitative content analysis (11.8%), interview (6.1%), case study (5.4%), or mixed research methods (4.6%). This adoption of quantitative research methods only increased in recent years: 52.3% during 2011–2015 vs. 74.7% during 2016–2021. These numbers appear to indicate that, in the field of public relations, instrumental approaches to CSR are becoming more popular in CSR research.

Similarly, according to another recent systematic review of 534 CSR studies across all different disciplines – from public relations to marketing and accounting (Tuan et al., 2019), quantitative research method (58.6%) is also identified as a clearly dominant method being employed in CSR research compared to qualitative (33.8%) or mixed method (7.4%). The instrumental approach of CSR based on the positivistic paradigm is found to be dominant in CSR communication research across all different fields (Tuan et al., 2019). Thus, this broad adoption of quantitative research methods might be expected.

Another unique trend identified in the current systematic review is that in recent years, public relations scholars have tended to extend the publication outlets of their CSR research beyond public relations-focused journals (e.g., *Public Relations Review*) such as business journals (e.g., *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management* and *Journal of Business Ethics*) and other more general communication journals (e.g., *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*). According to our review, the proportion of CSR articles published in public relations journals has decreased over time – from 85% (1980–2010) to 69.4% (2016–2021), although public relations journals are still the dominant publication outlets for CSR research from public relations perspectives. In contrast, the proportion of CSR articles published either in business journals (from 17% to 20.4%) or other communication journals (from 4% to 10.2%) has increased in recent years. A similar tendency is found when comparing our review to the previous research of Lee (2017). Although a direct comparison to Lee's (2017) findings may invite some issues such as the differences in sample-selection procedures, we can still get a brief overview regarding the changes in the CSR research publication outlets over time. A majority of CSR articles (90%) included in Lee's (2017) sample were published in public relations journals, while only 6% were published in business journals, and 4% in other communication journals. In our sample, however, the proportion of business journals (19.5%) and other communication journals (7.3%) grew compared to Lee (2017), while that of public relations journals shrank (73.3%). Given Lee's review was done with CSR articles published up until 2015, there appears to have been in recent years a diversification in CSR publication outlets.

Unique Contributions of Public Relations to CSR Communication Research

Over the past couple of decades, public relations scholarship has made several notable contributions to CSR communication research. Above all, public relations scholars have facilitated and accelerated the shift of a CSR communication research paradigm from organization/shareholder-centric to society/stakeholder-centric through following endeavors. First, public relations scholars have branched out to a unique instrumental approach to CSR communication research. (I would call it “a hybrid instrumental approach to CSR in public relations”.) This has been done through researchers’ embrace of and emphasis on original public relations concepts in CSR research of public relations. These concepts include, among others, the following: stakeholder feedback and dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2016), public/stakeholder expectation and pressure (Kim, 2019), public trust, transparency, and engagement (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016; Rim et al., 2019), and OPR outcomes (S. Y. Lee et al., 2019).

Admittedly, CSR communication research in public relations has been largely affected by management perspectives such as instrumental approaches to CSR (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Instrumental approaches are largely based on business and management traditions and conceptualize CSR and CSR communication as a strategic tool to achieve optimal outcomes that can contribute to organizations’ economic gains such as direct and more tangible outcomes of financial returns (Chaudhri, 2016; Porter & Kramer, 2006). A good deal of CSR communication research in public relations has thus adopted instrumental approaches to CSR. Researchers have investigated the roles of CSR and CSR communication in improving public perceptions of corporate reputation (e.g., Kim, 2011) as well as its relationship with perceived CSR motive or fit, and still others (e.g., Aksak et al., 2016; Go & Bortree, 2017).

Yet the instrumental approach to CSR in public relations has evolved. It is now a hybrid of instrumental approaches to CSR as it also takes on ethical and normative approaches to CSR (Garriga & Melé, 2004; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Ethical and normative approaches to CSR have placed much more emphasis on the ethical and political roles of companies in creating shared societal norms and values through interacting with societal and public expectations and pressure (Kim, 2019). This hybrid instrumental approach seems natural, perhaps inevitable. After all, it is the nature of public relations to emphasize ethical concerns from normative perspectives and symmetrical communication for building relationships (e.g., Grunig, 2001). Thus, the hybrid instrumental approaches to CSR in public relations emphasize the importance of social pressure and public pressure as well as the importance of dialogue processes between organizations and societal expectations of stakeholders, while considering CSR communication as a strategic tool for achieving desirable outcomes.

As a result, in defining or investigating the optimal outcomes of CSR, the hybrid instrumental approaches to CSR in public relations scholarship offer unique distinctions. The optimal outcomes of CSR do not necessarily promise financial gains through competitive advantages, as do the traditional instrumental approaches (Porter & Kramer, 2006). Instead, they refer to more enduring relationship-based public- or stakeholder-focused outcomes with much more emphasis on publics’ perceptions and expectations and societal pressure and expectations. As such, CSR research in public relations has investigated the roles of CSR and CSR communication with an increased emphasis on optimal outcomes from stakeholder-centric perspectives. These outcomes can encompass the following: stakeholder feedback and dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2016), public/stakeholder expectation and pressure (Kim, 2019), public engagement (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016), public trust and distrust (Park & Kang, 2020), organization-public relationships (S. Y. Lee et al., 2019), and still more. These optimal or desired outcomes of CSR are closely related to original public relations concepts and objectives such as building and enhancing the quality of an organization’s relationships with

stakeholders and society through dialogue, two-way symmetric communication, trust building, and so forth (Ferguson, 1984, 2018; Kelly, 2001).

Public relations scholarship has continually emphasized the strategic values of CSR and CSR communication. These values are manifested in protecting and enhancing corporate reputation through investigating its relationship with CSR motives, CSR fit, and/or CSR strategy (Bae & Cameron, 2006; David et al., 2005; Kim, 2011; S. Y. Lee, 2016). Nonetheless, public relations scholarship has contributed to CSR communication research by generating its own unique hybrid instrumental approaches to CSR communication. In doing so, public relations scholarship has widened the scope of emphasis to intangible and long-term public outcomes of organization-public relationships; such outcomes include stakeholder pressure and expectations, trust and engagement, stakeholder feedback and dialogue, and so forth (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016; Kent & Taylor, 2016; Kim, 2019; S. Y. Lee et al., 2019). For instance, taking a hybrid approach to CSR, Kim (2019) argued that, in developing and testing the process model of CSR communication, her study was fundamentally based on the instrumental and strategic approach to CSR. At the same time, though, it emphasized the importance of social pressure or the pressure of public expectations of a business. Lee and colleagues (2019) have also taken a hybrid instrumental approach. They emphasized the quality of organization-public relationship (OPR) and held it up as an optimal CSR outcome.

Second, another notable contribution of public relations scholarship to CSR research is the obvious increased influence of public relations theories and concepts on CSR scholarship. Public relations scholars have actively incorporated public relations theories and concepts into CSR research such as dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002), relationship management theory of OPR (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), and engagement. A systematic review of CSR research in all of the communication subfields (Ji et al., 2021) finds that the most highly adopted theories in CSR research are from the public relations field when excluding theories originated from business and psychology (e.g., stakeholder theory, legitimacy theory, and attribution theory). These most highly adopted public relations theories include the relationship management theory of OPR, followed by dialogic theory and excellence theory. In addition, public relations journals such as *Public Relations Review* (#2) and *Journal of Public Relations Research* (#4) were identified as being among the five most-cited publication sources in CSR research. The other three most-cited publication outlets were all from business – *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Journal of Marketing* (Ji et al., 2020). Ji and her colleagues (2021) have also found that, to guide its studies, CSR research tends to adopt multiple theories and concepts from varying disciplines; these include business, psychology, and public relations theories and concepts. Among these varying theories and concepts, the authors report – based on betweenness centrality in their bibliometric network analysis – that public relations theories and concepts play a dominant role in guiding CSR research in the broader communication field. By bridging theories and concepts from multiple disciplines, it seems that public relations scholarship contributes to the interdisciplinary nature that characterizes CSR research. In other words, public relations scholarship has facilitated interdisciplinary theory-building in CSR research and contributed to bridging different though related CSR theories and concepts.

Third, CSR research in the field of public relations has contributed to the extension of the CSR concept's applicability beyond profit-organizations and consumer stakeholder groups. That is, by extending CSR contexts and concepts to non-profit organizations (e.g., Cho et al., 2021; Ott et al., 2016) and even to government organizations (e.g., Ji & Kim, 2019), public relations scholars have pointed out that non-profit and government organizations are not exempt from societal expectations of socially responsible practice and behavior. In addition, public relations research has paid attention to various stakeholder groups beyond just consumers such as community members, non-profit organization members, employees, activists, and so forth (Austin et al., 2020; Chen & Hung-Baesecke, 2014; de Bussy & Suprawan, 2012; Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018; Hall, 2006). This has certainly contributed to a broadening of the CSR research scope.

Challenges and Future Directions of CSR/CSR Communication Research in Public Relations

The biggest challenge identified in CSR communication research is the lack of CSR-focused theoretical frameworks that can facilitate further theory-building and testing. Although a growing number of CSR studies from public relations perspectives have adopted multiple theories from different disciplines such as business, psychology, and public relations, there is still a lack of CSR-specific theoretical frameworks that can help us understand, explain, and predict the CSR phenomenon from stakeholder-centric perspectives. This lack of CSR-specific theories is an issue not only for public relations but also for many other disciplines. This may be partially due to the fact that CSR is multidisciplinary in nature and encompasses many realms of corporate practices and relevant sectors. Due to the complexity and extensiveness of the CSR concept, there might be no single macro- or micro-level CSR-focused theory that can cover and explain the multifaceted phenomena of CSR communication. To overcome this, scholars may need to classify the phenomena of CSR communication into various levels and focus more on developing meso-level theories that can connect macro and micro levels. Meso-level CSR communication theories may help us explain the characteristics of CSR communication at a meso level such as industry- or community-level, crisis-situation- or non-crisis-situation-level, or stakeholder-level practices and feedbacks. This chapter calls for future research to focus more on meso-level CSR communication theory development and testing. Future research should focus on developing CSR-specific theory building to facilitate further empirical testing. Such CSR-specific theory-building efforts could start from actively adopting multiple theories from different disciplines and synthesizing relationships among core constructs at meso-levels.

Another challenge that we need to overcome in CSR research of public relations is related to a lack of cultural consideration of CSR communication research. Although more studies have focused on comparative research in recent years (e.g., Rim et al., 2019) or CSR communication of non-Western contexts (e.g., Kim, 2017), CSR research of public relations is still predominantly Western focused and can be found lacking in its cultural considerations. In this regard, I call for more comparative CSR research and non-Western-focused CSR research in the future in order to provide global and culturally sensitive perspectives to CSR research and facilitate both culturally general and specific theory building in the field.

We have identified as a unique contribution of public relations a shift in the CSR research paradigm to a more stakeholder-centric one. Nevertheless, the shift is not complete. A decade ago, the dominance of organization-centric perspective was often identified as one of the major problems in CSR communication research, with too strong a focus on the interests of an organization and its success (Bartlett, 2011). However, we have observed that in recent CSR research more studies have tried to accommodate stakeholder-centric perspectives, focusing more on publics' expectations, attitudes, and reactions rather than organizations' CSR strategies or message strategies. Despite this stakeholder-centric paradigm shift, the research themes that focus on the description of CSR practices or CSR communication, effects of CSR (e.g., effects of CSR framing, priming, types of CSR message strategies) are still prevalent in the current knowledge of CSR research. Thus, I suggest that more emphasis be given to stakeholder-centric research themes such as investigating stakeholder's perception, attitudes, expectations, engagement, trust, supportive behaviors, and so on.

Lastly, CSR research in public relations has developed a unique approach to CSR – the hybrid instrumental approaches to CSR that encompass both strategic/instrumental, normative, and ethical approaches. And yet among the varying approaches, tension remains regarding their perspectives and adopted methodologies. Some may argue that varying approaches to CSR such as instrumental and political/constitutive approaches are mutually exclusive and cannot be integrated due to each paradigm's ontological and epistemological differences. In a similar vein, a recent study argued that

in order to overcome organization-centric perspectives in CSR communication research, more research should adopt normative and constitutive paradigms (Tuan et al., 2019). This argument seems to have a basic assumption that instrumental approaches are inherently organization-centric. However, I wonder if instrumental approaches to CSR – treating CSR communication as a strategic or persuasion tool – are de facto organization centric. I feel they are not. I argue that research with instrumental approaches to CSR can still be stakeholder centric, emphasizing the importance of dialogue or communication processes between organizations and stakeholders like normative or constitutive approaches. The public relations field has developed its own unique hybrid instrumental approaches to CSR due to its long-held emphasis on ethics and normative approaches such as two-way symmetric communication public relations (e.g., Grunig, 2001). In spite of this development, I argue that researchers should integrate more the varying approaches to CSR. Moreover, researchers should be more flexible regarding the methods they adopt in their different approaches to CSR.

Discussion Questions

- 1 What unique contributions has public relations scholarship made in advancing CSR and CSR communication research in terms of methodological and theoretical frameworks, research paradigm, and research scope?
- 2 What is a unique approach to CSR (named as the hybrid instrumental approach in this chapter) developed by CSR research in public relations? How can this be further advanced?
- 3 Identify limitations and challenges in CSR research of public relations and discuss potential research agendas to overcome such limitations and challenges.

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