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# Communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR): Stakeholder responsiveness and engagement strategy to achieve CSR goals

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## ABSTRACT

In this current study, we compared two contemporary CSR communication strategies (engagement vs. responsiveness), along with communication channels, in achieving CSR goals. We conducted an online survey with public relations, corporate communication, corporate social responsibility, investor relations and sustainability executives within the companies listed on the Wilshire 5000 Total Market Index of publicly traded U.S. companies. Results showed that CSR engagement strategy had a positive effect on achieving all three CSR goals we identified through factor analysis: business, community, and employees. The responsiveness strategy was positively associated with only business and community goal achievement. These findings lend support for the testimonials from industry CSR reports regarding the benefits of the engagement approach in achieving intended organizational goals, including attracting and retaining talented employees. In analyzing the impact of communication channels on goal achievement, we found that print ads played a significant role in achieving business goals.

## 1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) emphasizes the important role of corporate communication in establishing and maintaining transparent and open dialogues with diverse stakeholders to foster ethical and socially responsible courses of action for various issues (Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Kirat, 2015). Despite the increasing importance of corporate communication in CSR related goal achievement, little empirical research (Falkheimer et al., 2017) has examined the practitioners' perspectives of the CSR communication and their assessment of goal achievement.

The practice of CSR is undergoing a transition as the role of the stakeholder assumes new meaning in the business environment. Some scholars have extended the traditional concept of CSR to the notion of "corporate social responsiveness" (Carroll, 1999; Clark, 2000; Wood, 1991) and "stakeholder engagement" (Devin & Lane, 2014; Heath & Ni, 2010; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). These new concepts reflect the changing role of CSR from its traditional role of enhancing corporate image to one of managing issues and reputation based on boundary spanning.

While a plethora of studies in management and business ethics have described CSR practices, including the suggestion that CSR dates back to a proposal for sharing corporate wealth made by Henry Ford in 1917 (Lee, 2008), there remains a significant lack of understanding regarding how CSR communication strategies may have an impact on CSR goals from a company perspective. We attempt to fill this void. Drawing on literature in public relations and CSR, we aim to examine the effect that stakeholder engagement

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in CSR communication has on organizations' self-assessed CSR-related goal achievement, controlling for organizational size and type.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. CSR communication strategies

A firm's relationships with stakeholders through CSR hinge on its communication strategy that consider the impact of CSR on the welfare of those stakeholders (Kirat, 2015). CSR communication from the stakeholder management perspective has drawn considerable attention from public relations and CSR researchers in recent years. A number of studies (Dhanesh, 2015; Girard & Sobczak, 2012; Kim, 2014; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014; Trapp, 2014) have provided theoretical grounds on which CSR communication strategies can be based. Similar to a paradigmatic shift in public relations practices, public relations researchers maintained that CSR communication has evolved from one-way communication to two-way communication, listening to and reflecting key stakeholders' voice and interest.

The most common and widespread type of CSR communication is to promote what firms have done for society's interests, especially in the area in which they have caused harm, as a form of commercial or advertised CSR initiatives. This approach to communicating CSR efforts is called stakeholder information strategy (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

During the 1990s, CSR was heavily discussed in terms of the "stakeholder responsiveness strategy" (Carroll, 1999; Wood, 1991), which is based on the corporate issues/crisis management perspective (Wood, 1991). With this strategy, companies regard the communication of CSR activities as both proactive and reactive responses to current pressures and potential threats.

Over time, some firms have started to adopt the notion that companies need to invite their publics into their CSR initiatives and get them engaged in their CSR programs (Devin & Lane, 2014; Girard & Sobczak, 2012; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014). The process of CSR stakeholder engagement encompasses the activities of engaging key stakeholders in communication, dialogue and operations, as well as getting consent of the stakeholders (O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014). Although this trend is relatively new in practice, it appears to be drawing increasing attention from CSR practitioners. In 2010, stakeholder engagement has been defined, in ISO 26000 principles, as "activities that are undertaken to create opportunities for dialogue between an organization and one or more of its stakeholders with the aim of providing an informed basis for the organization's decisions" (ISO, 2010, p. 4).

The newly emerging stakeholder engagement strategy (Devin & Lane, 2014; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014) is grounded in the corporate stakeholder relationship perspective (Meintjes & Grobler, 2014), two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), and the dialogic theory of public relations (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Public relations researchers assert modern companies have become increasingly involved in interactive, collaborative, and mutually engaged relationships with stakeholders whose interests may go beyond corporate self-interests. In addition, stakeholder engagement is one of the corporate sustainability assessment criteria for global rating systems for social responsibility in which corporate entities are encouraged to share control of the engagement process with stakeholders. Among other standards, one such rating system proposes understanding the costs and benefits of stakeholder issues, reaching a common understanding of issues, agreement on the method of engagement, mutually agreed upon procedures and transparent reporting of results (SAM, 2012). This global perspective is similar to the dialogic theory perspective in which engagement requires the organization to manage relationships with multiple stakeholders through orientation, understanding, and shared responsibility (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Accordingly, the stakeholder engagement perspective dictates an organization make relational and ethical decisions that benefit all stakeholders who are involved, informed, and participating (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Consequently, stakeholder engagement is orientation to ethical communication (Taylor & Kent, 2014) and takes into account for moral aspect of communication for stakeholders who have vested interest in the company's areas of business operation (Girard & Sobczak, 2012).

We make the case that stakeholder engagement strategy also has a long history in two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig et al., 2002) in which listening, understanding and shared responsibility have played prominent roles, and that communication management scholars have identified stakeholder engagement as the best approach for building relationships with stakeholders (Devin & Lane, 2014; Taylor, Vasquez, & Doorley, 2003). CSR Europe, a leading European business network for CSR with many global companies as members, argues that the future of CSR/sustainability communication needs to shift its focus from 'informing' to 'engaging' by employing a range of different communication channels to fulfill diverse stakeholder needs.

The goal of the current research project is to examine the impact of stakeholder engagement on CSR goals as evaluated by executives in U.S. companies.

### 2.2. CSR goals: economic vs. non-economic dimensions

Organizations' business goals for their CSR activities have been much analyzed in theoretical as well as empirical research. Since the definition of CSR entails both self-interest and societal interest, it is natural for firms to pursue continued growth in terms of economic returns on their social and environmental investment as a primary goal.

Several management researchers have discussed the firms' CSR goals in three dimensions: economic, environmental and social goals (e.g., Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Porter & Kramer, 2006). The 2012 annual survey of Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes (DJSI) also identified three dimensions on which industries' CSR activities are rated: economic, environmental, and social (e.g., SAM, 2012). Criteria within those dimensions range from the general to the industry specific. Corporate governance, risk and crisis management, and codes of conduct/compliance/corruption and bribery are listed as general indicators under the economic dimension. Environmental reporting is a general indicator under the environment dimension. Social reporting, labor practice

indicators, human capital development, talent attraction & retention, and corporate citizenship & philanthropy are general indicators under the social dimension.

A more traditional approach in identifying the CSR goals, however, is to divide it into two components: economic versus non-economic goals (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010). Carroll and Shabana (2010) argue that CSR goals be viewed in a broad business model, or what they call a “syncretic model” (p. 93), where the primary goal of CSR concerns how business benefits tangibly (economically) and intangibly (non-economically) from engaging in CSR activities and practices.

However, corporate reputation researchers have proposed that CSR engagement can benefit corporations by creating intangible assets (Aksak, Ferguson, & Duman, 2016; Kim, 2014). The positive relationships between CSR and employee commitment, retention and attracting new employees also have been observed in empirical studies (Kim & Park, 2011; Sen, Bhattacharya, & Korschun, 2006).

A few management scholars have addressed the CSR goals from a sustainable community development point of view. In this view, CSR is utilized as a means of stabilizing and strengthening the communities where firms will operate for many years to come. It is a long-term approach, motivated by enlightened self-interest, which in turn may lead to achieving business goals.

Wakefield (2001) maintains that corporate communication should exist to preserve a consistent reputation and build relationships. Therefore, the linkage of CSR with reputation and other intangible CSR goals will be a suitable opening gambit for the business communication perspective of CSR study. Achieving a favorable reputation with various key publics is a business communication strategy for helping the corporation reach its business goals; a favorable reputation with critical publics confers a relative competitive advantage (Aksak et al., 2016).

Beyond the discussion related to communication strategies, CSR research (Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Du et al., 2010) pointed out a functional aspect of CSR communication underscoring the role of CSR communication channels. CSR managers, for effective CSR communication, should understand the role of CSR communication channels in addressing different stakeholders’ needs and expectations. A company’s choice of a communication channel for CSR not only reflects the stakeholder groups that the company seeks to engage but also gives insight into its communication strategy. According to a report from CSR Europe, companies are employing various communication channels to inform and engage with stakeholders on their CSR initiatives and activities.

Based on the literature review, the present study investigates the following research questions:

RQ1: Do the big US firms in this study perform CSR practices that can be identified as an engagement strategy distinct from a responsiveness strategy?

RQ 1 concerns whether the CSR communication strategies are separable, as argued in the literature review, in terms of engagement vs. responsiveness.

RQ2: What kinds of goals do the large U.S. firms aim to achieve through their CSR program?

RQ2 concerns what goals large U.S. companies are trying to accomplish with their investments in CSR activities, whether they be social goals, business goals, or reputation goals, as suggested in the literature.

RQ3: Are organizational communication channels related to CSR communication strategies?

RQ3 concerns whether or not communication channels can be identified with a particular communication strategy, as suggested in the literature.

RQ4: How are the different CSR communication strategies related to organizations’ self-assessed CSR-related goal achievement, when controlling for annual revenues and organizational size, as well as communication channels?

RQ4 concerns if and to what degree the two communication strategies being studied (engagement strategy and responsiveness strategy) affect the achievement of CSR goals.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Population and sample

We conducted an online survey of the highest-ranking executives within the functional categories of public relations, corporate communication, corporate social responsibility, investor relations or sustainability in companies listed on the Wilshire 5000 Total Market Index of publicly traded U.S. companies.

We developed the questionnaire from Morsing and Schultz’s (2006) presentation of the three CSR communication strategies, as well as insight developed from aforementioned research. The key question items addressed the executives’ self-assessed evaluation of CSR goal achievements and the level of stakeholder engagement in CSR communication. We also asked questions related to firms’ CSR concentration areas, organization-related information (e.g., number of employees, revenue, and industry), and respondents’ demographics and professional information. We employed standard surveying protocol by sending a 5948 recruitment/consent e-mail and two follow-up e-mails through Qualtrics to a pilot sample and a census-based survey from a contact list developed using Mint Global, an international business information service. The recruitment/consent e-mail contained an encrypted link to an anonymous, Web-hosted survey; an introduction to the researchers; an explanation of the purpose of the survey; a description of the benefit of the survey to the researchers and business communication managers; and a commitment to protect the confidentiality of the data.

#### 3.2. Measures

*CSR communication strategies: engagement vs. responsiveness.* Both items for the stakeholder responsiveness and engagement strategies were adopted from CSR literature. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they perform each task related to their

**Table 1**  
Factor Loadings of the CSR Communication Strategies.

Items	Factor 1: Engagement	Factor 2: Responsiveness
1. Collaborate with key stakeholders in making decisions about CSR efforts.	<b>0.84</b>	0.14
2. Hold meetings with stakeholder groups to solicit their opinions.	<b>0.84</b>	0.16
3. Solicit stakeholders' opinions about a particular CSR agenda.	<b>0.77</b>	0.28
4. Meet with representatives from different public sectors for feedback on CSR programs.	<b>0.71</b>	0.38
5. Engage in dialogue with employees about CSR programs.	<b>0.68</b>	0.29
6. Engage in dialogue with activists about CSR programs.	<b>0.66</b>	0.49
7. Conduct workshops or town-hall meetings to build consensus for addressing CSR issues.	<b>0.65</b>	0.09
8. Make changes to your CSR programs based on activists' comments.	<b>0.61</b>	0.51
9. Make changes to your CSR programs based on employees' comments.	<b>0.58</b>	0.24
10. Incorporate the interests of the communities where you operate.	<b>0.49</b>	0.41
11. Mitigate negative publicity.	0.07	<b>0.77</b>
12. Anticipate social concerns.	0.39	<b>0.73</b>
13. Anticipate social pressure.	0.40	<b>0.71</b>
14. Respond to social pressure.	0.27	<b>0.68</b>
15. Take a stance on issues.	0.24	<b>0.68</b>
16. Respond to threats.	0.20	<b>0.61</b>
17. Transform business portfolio to align with customer demand.	0.10	<b>0.51</b>
Eigenvalue	8.33	2.06
Variance explained	31.1%	25.1%

Note. Principal Axis Factoring with Varimax rotation. Primary loadings on each factor are in bold type. Factor 1 represents CSR engagement strategy and Factor 2 represents CSR responsiveness strategy.

company's CSR program on a 5-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

*CSR related goal achievement:* Following the CSR communication strategy assessment, respondents were also asked to self-assess the degree to which their CSR program has had a positive impact on each goal on a 5-point scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal). The items for CSR goal achievement were drawn from theoretical and empirical research (e.g., Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006; Weber, 2008; Zahra & LaTour, 1987).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on CSR communication strategies

In RQ1, we asked whether the big U.S. firms in this study perform CSR practices that can be identified as an engagement strategy distinct from a responsiveness strategy. The initial 19 items of CSR communication strategies were analyzed with EFA to identify the underlying factor structure in the item pool and to drop unrelated or cross-loading items on each core factor structure. Principal axis factoring (PAF) method was chosen because we assumed the two factors to be independent and to be equally loaded on each latent structure.

As expected, a two-factor structure – that is, CSR engagement vs. CSR responsiveness – emerged from PAF using varimax rotation. The rotated factor loadings are presented in Table 1. Reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for items loaded on the first factor was 0.92 and 0.87 for the items on the second factor. Each factor has an eigenvalue of more than one (CSR engagement, 8.33; CSR responsiveness: 2.06), accounting for 56.2% of the total variance.

### 4.2. Factor analysis on CSR goal achievement

In RQ2 we asked what goals firms attempt to achieve with CSR. An exploratory factor analysis using MLFA was performed with promax rotation to investigate the factors of the measuring instrument. When we developed the CSR goal achievement, we expected two factors that may be identified with financial goals and non-financial goals. Contrary to our expectations and the literature, three different factors were extracted from the factor analysis: business (or economic), community, and employee goals (see Table 2). It is notable that employee-related CSR goals were separated from other business goals.

Inter-item reliability was assessed by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.94 for economic goal achievement, 0.87 for community goal achievement and 0.90 for employee goal achievement. It is notable that improving relationships with key stakeholders and enhancing corporate reputation were loaded on economic goal achievement. The first factor identified not only had higher inter-item reliability, but it also accounted for larger explained variance (48.2%) than the second and the third factor.

### 4.3. Hierarchical regression analyses for CSR goal achievement

After confirming the unique structures of each CSR communication strategy, we conducted three hierarchical regression analyses to answer RQ3 and RQ 4. Three hierarchical regression models were tested to assess the effects of CSR communication strategies on organizations' self-assessed CSR-related goal achievement. For each regression model, a firm's type (e.g., manufacturing) and size

**Table 2**  
Factor Loadings of the CSR Goal Achievement.

Items	Factor 1: Business goal achievement	Factor 2: Community goal achievement	Factor 3: Employee goal achievement
Increasing competitive advantage	<b>0.82</b>	0.37	0.43
Improving revenue	<b>0.81</b>	0.40	0.39
Attracting new customers	<b>0.79</b>	0.30	0.48
Enhancing brand value	<b>0.79</b>	0.57	0.60
Improving customer satisfaction	<b>0.78</b>	0.50	0.44
Developing new markets	<b>0.77</b>	0.51	0.39
Meeting stakeholders' CSR expectations	<b>0.77</b>	0.61	0.48
Achieving sustainable industry standards	<b>0.76</b>	0.55	0.29
Improving relationships with key stakeholders	<b>0.72</b>	0.49	0.46
Enhancing corporate reputation	<b>0.72</b>	0.68	0.52
Encouraging suppliers to use sustainable practices	<b>0.70</b>	0.47	0.38
Enhancing operational efficiency	<b>0.68</b>	0.38	0.32
Reducing environmental hazards	<b>0.60</b>	0.53	0.17
Reducing CSR-related risk (e.g., lawsuits and boycotts)	<b>0.58</b>	0.50	0.25
Improving social health of local community	0.51	<b>0.89</b>	0.39
Improving economic health of local community	0.44	<b>0.82</b>	0.39
Improving employee recruitment and retention	0.57	0.44	<b>0.93</b>
Improving employee morale, engagement and commitment	0.40	0.39	<b>0.91</b>
Eigenvalue	9.33	1.58	1.40
Variance explained	48.2%	8.4%	6.3%

Note. MLFA with promax rotation. Primary loadings on each factor are in bold type.

(revenue, the number of employees) were controlled in the first block. We also entered several widely used communication channels as another block of independent variables. Finally, we examined whether the different CSR communication strategies accounted for significant additional variance in achieving each intended CSR goals—business goals, community goals, and employee goals. The hierarchical regression analyses shown in Table 3 were based on the standardized factor scores created through factor analysis for CSR goal achievement and CSR Communication strategies, respectively. Standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and changes ( $\Delta R^2$ ) in explained variance were examined.

#### 4.3.1. CSR business goal achievement as a dependent variable (Model 1)

The final model (*M1c*) of the first regression shows that both engagement ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and responsiveness strategies ( $\beta = 0.29$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) were positively associated with the CSR business goal achievement.

As for the importance of CSR communication channels, only print ads remained showing a significantly positive relation with CSR

**Table 3**  
Results of hierarchical regression analysis regressing CSR goal achievement on firm size, communication channels, and CSR communication strategies.

	Model 1: Business Goal Achievement			Model 2: Community Goal Achievement			Model 3: Employee Goal Achievement		
Blocks	<i>M1a</i>	<i>M1b</i>	<i>M1c</i>	<i>M2a</i>	<i>M2b</i>	<i>M2c</i>	<i>M3a</i>	<i>M3b</i>	<i>M3c</i>
Control Variables									
Revenue	0.07	−0.12	−0.08	−0.16	−0.30*	−0.26*	−0.02	−0.16	−0.14
Employees	0.26*	0.25*	0.24*	0.09	0.07	0.06	−0.01	−0.04	−0.02
Manufacturing	0.02	−0.11	−0.15	0.23*	0.09	0.04	−0.02	−0.13	−0.15
Fortune 500	0.06	−0.01	−0.07	0.21	0.14	0.04	0.26	0.19	0.20
Communication Channels									
Print ads		0.43**	0.43**		0.21	0.23		0.18	0.15
TV commercials		−0.11	−0.13		0.17	0.03		0.06	0.07
Website		0.08	−0.02		0.17	0.01		0.02	0.03
Social media		0.15	0.04		0.06	−0.05		0.25	0.15
Annual report		0.27	0.16		0.18	0.05		0.08	−0.04
Sponsorship		−0.13	−0.25*		0.07	−0.10		0.13	0.08
Communication strategies									
Engagement			0.33**			0.37**			0.32*
Responsiveness			0.29*			0.46***			0.03
Adjusted $\Delta R^2$	0.04	0.28***	0.08**	0.06	0.18**	0.15***	0.01	0.17**	0.05*
F for Regression	2.01	4.80***	5.39***	2.32	3.50**	5.18***	1.19	2.77**	2.92**
Total adjusted $R^2$ (%)			40.0***			0.39***			0.23***

Note: Entries are standardized regression coefficients.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .



business goal ( $\beta = 0.43, p < 0.01$ ) achievement. However, other communication channel variables (i.e., TV commercials, website, social media, and annual reports) did not make any contribution to predicting the business goal achievement in the final model (*M1c*). Perhaps, the lack of correlation of these variables with the dependent variable in *M1c* is due to the multicollinearity problem.

Model 1 also revealed that the number of employees was a positive predictor for the dependent variable ( $\beta = 0.24, p < 0.05$ ).

The first regression equation with CSR business goal achievement as a dependent variable explained about 40 percent of total variance. Among the variance explained, the second model (*M1b*) made the largest contribution accounting for about 28% of shared variance (adjusted  $\Delta R^2 = 0.28, p < 0.001$ ).

#### 4.3.2. CSR community goal achievement as a dependent variable (Model 2)

As displayed in the last model *M2c*, both CSR engagement ( $\beta = 0.37, p < 0.01$ ) and responsiveness ( $\beta = 0.46, p < 0.001$ ) strategies were positively correlated with CSR community goal achievement. However, none of the communication channel variables was significantly associated with the CSR community goal achievement.

Another of the significant variables in predicting CSR community goals achievement was a firm's recent revenue, which was negatively correlated with community goal achievement ( $\beta = -0.30, p < 0.05$ ). The revenue variable became a significant predictor in *M2b* and *M2c*, which indicates this variable is not a direct predictor for the dependent variable but presumably an indirect predictor in a causal structural modeling. It is also notable that *M2b* model explained 18 percent of incremental variance with the only significantly negative variable, revenue. The full model (*M2c*) accounted for 39 percent of total shared variance with both engagement and responsiveness contributing significantly to CSR community goal achievement (adjusted  $\Delta R^2 = 0.18, p < 0.01$ ).

#### 4.3.3. CSR employee goal achievement as a dependent variable (Model 3)

After the company profile variables and communication channels were controlled for, the full model (*M3c*) of our regression model 3 explained a significant amount of variance in CSR employee goal achievement (adjusted total  $R^2 = 0.23, p < 0.001$ ), with a significant, positive effect from CSR engagement strategy ( $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.05$ ). Unlike the other two regression models for CSR business goal achievement and CSR community goal achievement, CSR responsiveness strategy did not make any contribution in predicting CSR employee goal achievement.

It is also notable that the second bloc (*M3b*) of this model 3 yielded a relatively high explained variance (adjusted  $\Delta R^2 = 0.17, p < 0.01$ ) without any single significant variable in predicting the dependent variable. A closer examination of this model revealed that none of predicting variables was significant at the 0.05 level.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Discussion on findings and theoretical implications

In this study, we attempted to examine the roles of CSR communication in achieving organizational goals by identifying evolving CSR practices that companies currently employ within the framework of the stakeholder engagement strategy. We also examined the roles of functional (i.e., communication channels) and strategic (i.e., communication strategies) tools of CSR communication employed by the large U.S. firms in achieving different dimensions of CSR goals.

In answering RQ1, the current study explicated the dimensions of two-way CSR communication strategies—responsiveness and engagement—building on the normative theoretical framework for CSR communication (Morsing & Schultz, 2006) and recent research on the stakeholder engagement strategy of CSR communication (Devin & Lane, 2014; Dhanesh, 2015; Trapp, 2014). Therefore, items that represent each dimension of two-way CSR communication strategies reflect the symmetric and asymmetric communication framework established in the normative theory of public relations (Grunig et al., 2002). The initial items in each dimension were refined through a pilot study and a main survey. Consistent with conceptual distinctions in the typology of CSR communication strategies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), the proposed items were loaded on two dimensions of responsiveness versus engagement strategy of CSR communication. We believe that findings from the factor analysis will contribute to public relations by delineating stakeholder engagement strategy from responsive strategy, another type of two-way CSR communication. Results of the factor analysis on CSR communication indicate that respondents of the current study—executives of public relations, corporate communication, and CSR in companies—recognized the different approaches in communicating CSR. Reflecting theorizing effort from recent research (Devin & Lane, 2014; Dhanesh, 2015; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Trapp, 2014), the extracted items for the engagement strategy factor show that engagement highlight three components: (1) proactive dialogue with stakeholders, (2) co-constructing CSR efforts, (3) reflecting the voice and interest of both internal and external stakeholder into CSR programs.

In RQ2, we posed a question of what goals the large U.S. firms would aim to achieve through their CSR programs. Although we assumed two-factor CSR goals, corporate executives who participated in the current study distinguished community and employee related CSR goals from general business-oriented goals. The identification of three factors provides some insights into what U.S. companies aim to achieve with CSR practices. First, the large U.S. firms selected for this current study tend to consider CSR as a tool for achieving their business goals. The factor analysis found that relationship and reputation goal achievement items loaded predominantly on the business factor. While we assumed that some measures such as “enhancing corporate reputation” and “improving relationships with key stakeholders” would be identified as non-economic goals, they were loaded in what could be interpreted as business goal achievement. Second, when it comes to non-economic goals, managers and executives of big U.S. firms tend to consider two factors (i.e., community and employees) on which their CSR efforts could make a significant impact. The results indicate that executives of public relations and corporate communication have a distinctive set of goals for employee and community relations that

are perceived separately from traditional business goal achievements. A few recent studies in public relations (de Bussy & Suprawan, 2012; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014) also stressed that companies are motivated to be socially responsible to achieve goals related to community relations (e.g., improve local community) and employee relations (e.g., recruit and retain employees). Taken together, these findings are consistent with the findings that employees and community along with customers are nearly always pertinent to key stakeholder clusters in relation to CSR communication.

In answering RQ3, we found that print ads were the most significant predictor of companies' business goal achievement. The variance that the print ads explained (28%) was greater than that explained by two communication strategy variables (8%). However, no significant correlation was found for the effects of print ads on non-economic goal achievement (i.e., community and employee goals). The results are interesting because several researchers argued that communicating CSR through advertising may not help firms achieve intended CSR goals because consumers tend to view advertising as the least credible source of information. However, another study (Moore & Rodgers, 2005) showing higher levels of trust and credibility for newspaper advertising than other forms of advertising may shed some light on the findings.

In answering RQ4, we found that the CSR engagement strategy was positively associated with all three factors of CSR goal achievement. We also found that CSR responsiveness strategy was positively associated with business and community goal achievement but not with employee goal achievement. It is notable that the positive correlations between CSR strategies and CSR business goal achievement were slightly stronger for CSR engagement strategy than for CSR responsiveness strategy. But the results for the same analysis for CSR community goal yielded an opposite pattern, displaying a slightly stronger standardized regression coefficient for CSR responsiveness strategy than for CSR engagement strategy. The results show the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement strategy in achieving all three dimensions of CSR goals. It is noteworthy that the more engagement-based strategic communication tasks are performed, the higher employee-related goals are reportedly achieved. Taken together, the results are well aligned with others studies (de Bussy & Suprawan, 2012; Dhanesh, 2015; Pastrana & Sriramesh, 2014) that identified employees and community as primary and most valuable stakeholders of CSR communication.

## 5.2. Managerial implications

We believe that the stakeholder engagement strategy carries some implications for ethics and accountability in CSR communication. Moving the strategic focus of CSR communication from responsiveness to engagement reflects a paradigmatic shift in planning and implementing the CSR programs/initiatives and communicating with key stakeholders. With a strong foundation in the two-way symmetrical public relations, the stakeholder engagement strategy guides the companies to a more dialogic, transparent and collaborative direction than other models such as stakeholder information strategy and stakeholder responsiveness strategy (Wen & Song, 2017).

Addressing a special challenge corporations face in communication CSR, Coombs and Holladay (2011) warned that the company might get backlash if stakeholders viewed it as overly self-promotional. The engagement strategy of CSR communication we proposed and tested in this study could increase corporations' perceived sincerity as a result of their following through on what they have promoted.

According to Edelman's (2008) Corporate Responsibility & Sustainability Communications Report, the media view a company's CSR communication as the least credible source for information about its CSR activities and are skeptical of its CSR reports. As stated in the Edelman's Report, the main reason for the media's skepticism about official company documents stems from their perception that companies just talk about what they are doing without actually doing anything.

Based on the results of this study, we believe that executing stakeholder engagement in the process of CSR communications is the best way to ensure accountability while reporting a company's CSR efforts. Accordingly, this stakeholder engagement approach to CSR communications appears to be well in tune with the idea that a company's CSR should be evaluated by actions, not aspirations.

## 5.3. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Our study has some limitations in interpreting the results and generalizing the findings, which we believe will open new research opportunities for CSR and business communication researchers.

A limitation of the current study comes from the inventory of our CSR goals. Although our review of the literature on CSR goals was extensive, we did not explicate CSR goals sufficiently enough to develop the items for a social goal measure. To some extent, we relied on industry reporting mechanisms, and ISO 26000 in particular, to serve as a surrogate for social goals. In retrospect, this should be addressed directly in future questionnaire development. As has been demonstrated in the industry, social issues in the external environment significantly affect contemporary firms' strategic CSR engagement. Some companies participate in social causes by developing a partnership with other social organizations and launching social initiatives, as was the case of Pampers' "1 Pack = 1Vaccine" campaign (Du et al., 2010). Future research will need to delve into these social goals, along with business, employee, and community goals.

In developing our questionnaire, we did not consider CSR information strategy that was explicated in Morsing and Schultz (2006) because we considered it a very basic form of CSR communication and thought there would not be much difference in firms' practicing of information strategy. While we have not considered stakeholder information strategy as a distinctive strategic choice for the big U.S. firms, future research may examine the role of stakeholder information strategy in achieving different types of CSR goals. This comparison would be especially useful for firms in developing countries, where the conception of CSR may be at a rudimentary level of development.

Regarding the impact from communication channels, we did not consider earned media such as publicity in print and electronic media. As reported in the answer to RQ3, only print ads among all measured paid and owned media had a positive impact on the business related goal achievement. It is not known whether consumers were more influenced by print ads in evaluating a firm's CSR performance. We call for future research that includes measures for earned media along with paid and owned media.

We believe this study has provided a previously unseen glimpse into the minds of CSR managers in the U.S. and their motivations for CSR strategy. Further, we have found support for the continued use of stakeholder engagement strategy in achieving firms' business, community, and employee goals. We feel these contributions open doors for future CSR research that will benefit firms, their communities, and their employees.

#### 5.4. Conclusions

This study delineated the stakeholder engagement strategy from the stakeholder responsiveness strategy and showed its perceived effectiveness in achieving business goals as well as employee and community goals, from a managerial perspective. The most significant finding of the current study is the identifications of specific strategies that represent stakeholder engagement strategy in CSR communication. The identified strategies are well aligned with the conceptual definition of stakeholder engagement, referred to as the process in which an organization involves its key stakeholders in dialogues, communication and operation to establish mutual consensus. Corporate executives of public relations, communication and CSR/sustainability who responded to the current study identified engagement strategies that are distinctively different CSR responsiveness strategy. We believe that the current definition will provide measurable indicators for stakeholder engagement within the dialogic theory perspective (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Although this study focuses more on the impact of stakeholder engagement strategy, executives of large U.S. companies also identified the responsiveness strategies that use CSR as strategic issues management tool that is both proactive and reactive. The results indicate that corporate public relations executives are aware of different strategies in communicating CSR—that is, either engaging key stakeholders or responding to external pressure and issues.

When comparing the relative contributions of two different communication strategies to achieving CSR related goals, the results demonstrated that both strategies were effective in achieving these goals. It is hard to make a conclusion about which strategy is more effective in achieving business goals and community goals since both strategies were equally positively correlated with these goals. However, the stakeholder engagement strategy turned out to be the sole contributor to achieve employee related goals. On the one hand, the results may indicate that both types of CSR communication strategies are perceived to be effective among corporate executives in achieving business goals and community goals. On the other hand, the results imply that corporate executives tend to believe that enacting employee engagement in CSR communication will be stronger strategy to attract and retain talented employees than using CSR as issues management tool. In conclusion, we reiterate that the engagement strategy of CSR communication is gaining importance in achieving CSR goals that are both directly and indirectly related to a firm's bottom line.

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