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COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS IN CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: THE CASE OF CHINA

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ABSTRACT

In today's increasingly self-centered society, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has received increasing attention from scholars, politicians, and the public. China is no exception. China's rapid economic development has cast a stronger spotlight on social contributions of corporations, for example social entrepreneurship.Given the important role played by CSR in society across the world, this study examines Chinese college students' attitudes toward CSR in China. The study investigates using a survey of 136 Chinese college students how they perceive the effectiveness of CSR communication by Chinese corporations. The study also considers those factors they perceive to be most important in terms of effective CSR communication. The study also evaluates any gender differences in results. The respondents generally had a favorable view of the communication effectiveness of CSR by Chinese corporations. They emphasized community involvement as the most important factor in terms of greater CSR communication effectiveness, with male students emphasizing social media communication and female students highlighting community involvement. The results have important practical implications for the Chinese government and corporations.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Communication, Perception, Effectiveness, College Student

I. INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly self-centered society, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has received increasing attention from scholars, politicians, and the public because CSR is an important way for corporations to "give back" to society from which it profits. China is no exception. China's rapid economic development has cast a stronger spotlight on social contributions of corporations, for example social entrepreneurship. Many forms of social enterprises have sprung up across China in recent years as a way to contribute to society.

However, a bigger role should be played by corporations, and one important means for playing this role effectively is through CSR. There are many ways corporations can practice CSR, including donating funds to needy groups, sponsoring events that benefit the public, and being more vocal in social inequality.

Given the important role played by CSR in society across the world, this study examines Chinese college students' attitudes toward CSR in China. The study investigates how Chinese

college students perceive the effectiveness of CSR communication by Chinese corporations. The study also considers those factors they perceive to be most important in terms of effective CSR communication. The study also evaluates any gender differences in results.

II. Theoretical Framework

Previous studies have examined many factors influencing the effectiveness of CSR. And one of the most important factors is communication, that is, the ability of corporations to effectively communicate with CSR initiatives to the public for better feedback and appreciation. Arvidsson (2010) found that corporations generally feel the need to communicate their CSR activities to the public for greater recognition and appreciation. In addition, Hartman, Rubin &Dhanda (2007) reported that companies tend to communicate about and justify CSR. This suggests that the success of CSR depends largely on corporations' ability to effectively communicate their CSR activities. In this regard, many factors have been found to influence the effectiveness of CSR communication by corporations.

Eberle, Berens & Li (2013) found that interactive CSR communication is effective in furthering corporate CSR goals. In addition, Heidinger (2012) reported that the interactivity of social responsibility issues on corporate websites can positively impact CSR communication. This suggests that interactivity may have a positive effect on the public's perception of CSR effectiveness.

Lim, Kang & Kim (2016) found that community-based programs have a positive effect on CSR communication for corporations. In addition, Sharm (2013) reported that community involvement has a positive effect on CSR perceptions. This suggests that community involvement may have a positive effect on the public's perception of CSR effectiveness.

Lamberg (2012) found that social media can have a favorable impact on CSR communication of corporations. In addition, Huang (2012) reported that social media can be an effective means of communicating CSR activities of companies. This suggests that social media communication may have a positive effect on the public's perception of CSR effectiveness.

Skard&Thorbjørnsen (2014) found that publicity is an important component of CSR communication. In addition, Diehl, Terlutter& Mueller (2016) reported that publicity can help corporations facilitate their CSR goals. This suggests that publicity may have a positive effect on the public's perception of CSR effectiveness.

The study also considers any gender differences in respondent perceptions because previous studies have noted some significant gender differences in attitudes toward various factors such as education (Zhou & Xu, 2007; Liaw& Huang, 2011) and social support (Kafetsios, 2007).

Based on the aforementioned discussion and factors, this paper is guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese college students perceive the effectiveness of CSR communication by Chinese corporations? Is there any gender difference in their perceptions?

RQ2: What factors do Chinese college students emphasize in terms of effective CSR communication by Chinese corporations? Is there any gender difference in their views?

III. Methods

Participants

A total of 136 college students in China were surveyed (70 males and 66 females). All these participants were students currently attending college in the greater Shanghai region of China. Their levels varied from freshmen to seniors.

Procedure

A questionnaire was given to a total of 150 students to complete. These students were selected randomly at entrances and vicinities of three major colleges in the greater Shanghai region. Fourteen students declined to participate, giving a response rate of 91%. The questionnaire took about 5 minutes to complete. Standard survey techniques were used, and the survey was administered anonymously (no names were asked). All participants were notified of the voluntary and confidential nature of the survey. The survey was administered in July of 2017.

Instrumentation

One item was used to determine the gender of the participant (nominal scale).

Four items were used to assess the respondents' perception of CSR communication effectiveness. These items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5). The internal consistency and reliability of these four items were assessed using Cronbach's α (.784), which indicated sufficient internal consistency and reliability (Nunnally, 1978). These four items included the following: "I frequently hear about CSR activities of Chinese corporations," "Based on my exposure to news stories about CSR activities of Chinese corporations, I think they are doing their part in improving Chinese society," "I have come to appreciate Chinese corporations more because I have heard about their CSR activities," and "People around me often tell me about CSR activities of Chinese corporations."

For the respondents' perception of factors considered to be most important in terms of CSR

communication effectiveness of Chinese corporations, each respondent was asked to select one of four factors as the most important one: "interactivity," "community involvement," "social media communication," and "publicity."

Analysis

For RQ1, means and standard deviations for the four items for CSR communication effectiveness of Chinese corporations were analyzed. In addition, the difference in means between male and female students was examined through an independent-samples t-test. For RQ2,a chi-square test was conducted using factors.

IV. RESULTS

RQ1

The respondents generally had a favorable perception of CSR communication effectiveness of Chinese corporations. The mean was 3.3824 (SD=.82099). Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for respondent perceptions.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for respondent perceptions of CSR communication effectiveness

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
score	136	1.25	5.00	3.3824	.82099
Valid N (listwise)	136				

Group Statistics

	gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
score	female	66	3.2083	.83041	.10222
	male	70	3.5464	.78285	.09357

Male respondents (3.5464 (SD=.78285)) showed a higher mean than female respondents (3.2083 (SD=.83041)). The results of the independent-samples t-test in Table 2 show a significant gender difference (t(134)= 2.444, p=.016) inrespondent perceptions.

Table 2. The independent-samples t-testfor respondent perceptions

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
score	Equal variances assumed	.001	.975	-2.444	134	.016	-.33810	.13833	-.61170	-.06449
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.440	132.157	.016	-.33810	.13858	-.61221	-.06398

RQ2

As shown in Table 3, the respondents emphasized community involvement as the most important factor in terms of CSR communication effectiveness of Chinese corporations, followed by social media communication, interactivity, and publicity, in that order.

Table 3.Most important factors for CSR communication effectiveness by gender (N, %)

			factors				
			Interactivity	Community involvement	Social media communication	Publicity	Total
gender	female	Count	13	26	16	11	66
		% within gender	19.7%	39.4%	24.2%	16.7%	100.0%

	male	Count	18	21	24	7	70
		% within gender	25.7%	30.0%	34.3%	10.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	31	47	40	18	136
		% within gender	22.8%	34.6%	29.4%	13.2%	100.0%

As shown in Table 3, in terms of the most important factor in CSR communication effectiveness of Chinese corporations, male respondents were most likely to identify social media communication(34.3%), followed by community involvement (30.0%), interactivity (25.7%), and publicity (10.0%). On the other hand, female respondents were most likely to identify community involvement (39.4%), followed by social media communication (24.2%), interactivity (19.7%), and publicity (16.7%). The results of the chi-square test for the relationship between gender and these factors showno significant relationship ($\chi^2(3) = 3{,}713$, p=.294). Cramer's V was .165, implying a strong relationship.

V. DISCUSSION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has received increasing attention from scholars, politicians, and the public, and China is no exception. China's rapid economic development has cast a stronger spotlight on social contributions of corporations, and given the important role played by CSR in society across the world, this study examines Chinese college students' attitudes toward CSR in China. The study investigates using a survey of 136 Chinese college students how they perceive the effectiveness of CSR communication by Chinese corporations and considers those factors they perceive to be most important in terms of effective CSR communication. The study also evaluates gender differences in results.

According to the results, the respondents generally had a favorable perception of CSR communication effectiveness of Chinese corporations. The mean was 3.3824 (SD=.82099). Male respondents (3.5464 (SD=.78285)) were more likely to have a favorable perception than female respondents (3.2083 (SD=.83041)), and three was a significant gender difference (t(134)= 2.444, p=.016). In addition, the respondents emphasized community involvement as the most important factor in terms of CSR communication effectiveness of Chinese corporations, followed by social media communication, interactivity, and publicity, in that order. Male respondents were most likely to identify social media communication (34.3%), followed by community involvement (30.0%), interactivity (25.7%), and publicity (10.0%). On the other hand, female respondents were most likely

to identify community involvement (39.4%), followed by social media communication (24.2%), interactivity (19.7%), and publicity (16.7%).

These results have important practical implications for the government and corporations. Chinse students generally have favorable perception of Chinese corporations' CSR activities, so the government and corporations should focus on maintaining and strengthening this positive perception. Publicity was rated the lowest for both male and female students. Therefore, the government and corporations should do more in publicizing their CSR regulations and efforts.

This study has some limitations. The sample included only college students in Shanghai, China. However, Shanghai, although a large city, may not represent the attitudes of college students across China. In addition, different age groups may have different perceptions. In this regard, future research should consider a larger sample and a wider range of age groups as well as physical locations.

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