



## Full length article

# The status of corporate social responsibility research in public relations: A content analysis of published articles in eleven scholarly journals from 1980 to 2015



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## ABSTRACT

This quantitative content analysis of 133 articles published in eleven academic journals sheds light on the research topics, theories, methods, and authorship in corporate social responsibility (CSR) research in public relations scholarship. The findings indicate that CSR research in public relations has increased dramatically since 2006. Although theoretically grounded studies still do not represent the majority of the research in this area, the stakeholder theory is the one that is most often invoked, followed by legitimacy and attribution theories. Regarding the methodological approach, a balance between qualitative and quantitative research is evident, with a recent increase in mixed-method approaches. Content analysis was the most often used, followed by experiment, survey, comprehensive literature review, and case study. Research topics that involve CSR effects as well as descriptions of CSR practices and communication have consistently received significant attention. However, research topics that involve the role of public relations and perceptions of stakeholders have decreased in recent years. The work from the most productive researchers and institutions suggests that a broad spectrum of public relations scholarship in CSR research exists outside the United States.

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## 1. Introduction

Broadly, the term *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) refers to business practices that address an organization's various economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities as they pertain to a wide range of stakeholders (Carroll, 1979, 1999; Maignan & Ferrell, 2004). The core idea behind CSR is that businesses are now increasingly expected to fulfill social expectations that go above and beyond what is required under the law or the customary expectations of profit-making (Falck & Heblich, 2007).

*Cone Communications'* (2015) recent survey of consumers' perceptions of CSR indicates that consumers now understand the concept of CSR very well and that they are more willing than ever before to reward or punish companies based on evaluations of CSR initiatives. Consumers' more sophisticated understanding of CSR strengthens the significance of CSR communication in the context of successful CSR implementation (*Cone Communications*, 2015). Thus, *Bortree* (2014) argues that more refined CSR communication has become an increasingly significant agenda for both research and practice in the public relations arena.

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In line with the significance of CSR communication in practice, academia has also paid increasing attention to CSR, as evidenced by various publications on the subject of CSR, including the recent publication of a comprehensive handbook about CSR communication (Ihlen, Bartlett, & May, 2011) and special issues of CSR articles in *Public Relations Journal* in 2014 and in *Corporate Communication: An International Journal* in 2013. Although the number of research studies that investigate CSR in public relations has increased substantially in recent years, systematic literature reviews of academic articles pertaining to this subject have been scarce (cf. Golob et al., 2013; Goodwin & Bartlett, 2008). Thus, it remains unclear how public relations research into CSR has developed over time in terms of research topics, theories, methods, and samples. To address this deficit in the literature, this study aims to investigate all the public relations articles on CSR in eleven scholarly journals that have been major venues for public relations CSR research in order to understand the current status of CSR research and identify directions for future research.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Corporate social responsibility research in public relations

While the fundamental significance of CSR in public relations scholarship has long been emphasized, as found, for example, in Bernays' quote, "Public relations is the practice of social responsibility" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 47), scholars have pointed out that the public relations research into CSR has received "far too little attention" (Botan & Hazleton, 2006). In fact, public relations scholarship has started to pay increasing attention to the concept of CSR in recent years (Bartlett, 2011; Bortree, 2014) as scholars (e.g., Clark, 2000; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) have identified a conceptual similarity between CSR and public relations, and pointed out the lack of effective communication methods as a crucial issue in effective implementation of CSR initiatives.

The approach of public relations scholarship toward CSR has been distinctive in terms of the nature of the desired outcomes of CSR initiatives. While other disciplines, including business, have focused on direct, tangible, and immediate outcomes such as financial returns, public relations has placed a comparatively high importance on public and ethical concerns involving, for instance, the public engagement aspect of CSR (Bartlett, 2011), together with the strategic value of CSR involving the effective management of reputation (David, 2004) or the enhancement of positive corporate identity and purchase intent (David, Kline, & Dai, 2005).

In particular, the business literature tends to focus on the utilitarian and strategic implications of CSR outright by stating, for example, that only strategic CSR is legitimate, since it brings benefits to businesses, as compared to altruistic CSR (Lantos, 2001). Although the strategic consideration has also been regarded as significant in public relations in terms of the enhancement of corporate reputation (Lewis, 2003) or a positive corporate image (Hooghiemstra, 2000), public relations scholarship has gradually moved to place CSR more in the context of two-way communication (Bartlett, 2014; Bortree, 2014) by emphasizing engagement and relationship with stakeholders (e.g., Bartlett, Tywoniak, & Hatcher, 2007; Golob & Bartlett, 2007; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Thus, CSR has provided "a context that allows for greater interaction between organizations and publics" (Taylor & Kent, 2014; p. 386) for public relations scholars, making the consideration of publics a crucial dimension in CSR research, as compared to more tangible and direct outcomes, like financial performance (e.g., Cochran & Wood, 1984), that have been emphasized in the business scholarship.

The growing emphasis on the public's perspectives in public relations research into CSR has in turn invited questions as well as concerns over the distinctive role of public relations (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Heath & Ryan, 1989) and the ethical implications of CSR (e.g., Boynton, 2002; Breen, 2007; L'Etang, 1994). Thus, public relations scholars have consistently delved into examining the role of public relations in CSR, conferring a significant and distinctive role on the profession, as opposed to merely catering to the business decisions made in other managerial departments (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2009; Heath & Ryan, 1989). Moreover, scholars have also asked questions regarding the ethics of public relations professionals in the context of CSR. L'Etang (1994), for example, pointed out that the use of CSR for public relations purposes may raise "moral problems over the motivation of corporations" (p. 111), arguing that if "corporations and their public relations consultants are motivated only by the self-interested desire to achieve publicity at the outset rather than out of a sense of duty or obligation to society then, on a Kantian account of morality, they are acting immorally" (p. 121).

Therefore, public relations scholars have suggested a holistic approach that encompasses the public's perspectives and emphasizes the ethics and role of public relations professionals (Bartlett, 2014; Bortree, 2014) as well as the strategic value of CSR, thereby implying a distinctive academic research agenda with regard to CSR in public relations.

### 2.2. Trend studies in public relations

It appears that trend studies in public relations can be grouped largely into (1) a general overview of the entirety of public relations scholarship and (2) detailed analysis of a specific research area (cf. Ye & Ki, 2012). The first type of trend study tends to provide a diagnosis of the current status of public relations scholarship at a macro level and a direction for future research. For example, Botan and Taylor (2004) provided a comprehensive overview of public relations scholarship by combining previous bibliometric and metatheoretical analyses. They advanced two overarching perspectives on public relations research, pertaining to functional and co-creational approaches, respectively, and proposed the subject of issue management as a platform for future research.

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