Linking corporate social responsibility attributions and creativity: Modeling work engagement as a mediator

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this paper is to examine whether employees attribute different motives to corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices of the organization and if these motives predict employee creativity. In addition, the study aims to explore the underlying psychological mechanism by proposing work engagement as a mediator of the relationship between CSR attributions and creativity. Sample for the study consisted of 219 employees from various IT organizations in India known for their CSR engagement. Exploratory factor analysis, CFA and SEM bootstrapping procedures were used to test the study hypotheses with the help of SPSS AMOS 24. Results indicate that employees differentiate the motives behind organizational CSR engagement as intrinsic and extrinsic. These motives were found to differentially impact work engagement and creativity. Intrinsic CSR attributions related positively and significantly with creativity, and work engagement fully mediated the relationship. However, extrinsic CSR attributions failed to show any significant relationship with both work engagement and creativity. By highlighting the role of the attributions in the context of CSR, this research provides important information on why organizational CSR involvement may not always yield positive results for the organization. The study identifies managing employees' skepticism as a critical success factor in the implementation of CSR to optimize the returns on CSR investments. The findings also carry significant implications for managers and policy makers of Indian IT industry in terms of how they devise, implement and communicate CSR plans and strategy.

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1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) which refers to "the corporate behaviors that aim to affect stakeholders positively and that go beyond its economic interests" (Turker, 2009), has been gaining heightened attention from the practitioners, more so in India after the new Companies Act, 2013 which has made CSR investments mandatory for the profitable organizations. Following the increasing importance of CSR in the corporate sphere, academic research in the field of CSR has also gained momentum. Most of the prior research in the CSR stream has highlighted positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of organizational engagement in CSR. For instance, employees' perception of organizational involvement in CSR has been related to organizational identification (Kim et al., 2010), organizational commitment (Farooq et al.,

2014; Hofman and Newman, 2014), job satisfaction (Rahman et al., 2016), in-role performance (Jones, 2010), and organizational citizenship behaviors (Rupp et al., 2013; Hansen et al., 2011). Since the organizations pursue CSR for various reasons and differ in the extent of their CSR involvement, just the organizational involvement in CSR may not help us fully understand employee attitudes and behaviors at work. Recurrent reports of corporate involvement in frauds and other deceptive and unethical behaviors have made stakeholders more wary and skeptical of the motives behind much publicized CSR activities of the organizations (Parboteeah and Cullen, 2015). Causal attribution inferences with regard to real intent behind CSR activities of the organizations are plausible to being evoked in such a context characterized by widespread suspicion (Vlachos et al., 2013a). Management of stakeholder skepticism, fuelled by recent upturn in the instances of corporate scandals and ethical transgressions, has been identified as a principal challenge in CSR implementation (Du et al., 2010). Since stakeholders have a tendency to evaluate and judge the motives behind organization's CSR involvement which determines their

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attitudes and behaviors toward the organization (Rupp et al., 2006; Gond et al., 2010), taking employees' attributions into consideration while interpreting their responses to CSR actions of the organization may provide valuable information for effective CSR implementation in the organizations. Vlachos et al. (2013a) also suggested CSR attributions as an important mechanism that can decipher the link between CSR exposure and stakeholder outcomes. However, attributional processes have received very limited attention in the CSR literature.

Against this background, this research aims to find answers to the following research questions: (a) whether employees associate different motives to CSR activities of the organization? (b) Do these attributions differentially impact employee behaviors?, and (c) what are the underlying psychological processes through which these attributions influence employee behaviors? HRM literature highlights the role of attributions in evoking diverse responses among employees (Nishii et al., 2008). Applying the attribution theory in the context of CSR, we argue that attribution of motives to organizational CSR activities may elicit disparate attitudinal responses on the part of employees. Since individuals tend to attribute causes to the observed behavior, attribution theory provides a useful framework to examine employees' response to CSR (Kelley, 1973). The use of attribution theory which envisages individuals as attribution targets is relevant in the present context as employees appraise organizations in the same manner as they evaluate people (Davies et al., 2003). Direct association of employees with the organization allows them to observe organization's CSR behavior over several occasions (Kelley, 1973). In particular, this study attempts to examine how subjective employee interpretations of intentions behind organizations' engagement in CSR affect their creativity through positive intrinsic work engagement. Employees were chosen as a key stakeholder group in the present study as we believe that employees are better positioned to judge the organizational motives due to their direct involvement in organizational practices and culture. Employees have more information about the organization in comparison to other stakeholders like consumers and can observe and evaluate more deeply the reason for organizational CSR engagement on the basis of organization's values, beliefs, and history (Story and Neves, 2015).

This research contributes to the literature in five major ways. First, employees who constitute an important stakeholder group have received scarce attention in the CSR literature when compared to external stakeholders (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012). We attempt to reduce this asymmetry and bridge the macro-micro divide in the CSR literature (which is dominated by macro level studies) by focusing on employees as a unit of analysis (Morgeson et al., 2013). Second, with rising evidence in support of positive consequences of CSR, the key question to be addressed now is not "whether to engage in CSR" but "how to implement CSR initiatives" for the optimal returns (Vlachos et al., 2013b). This study is an attempt to find answers to "when" and under "what conditions" CSR practiced by the organizations can contribute to improved organizational outcomes (Donia and Sirsly, 2016). Theoretical arguments in the literature suggest that employees as an internal organization member can act as a social change agent and contribute greatly toward effective implementation of CSR policies (Ramus and Steger, 2000; Aguilera et al., 2007). This study aims to advance the existing CSR literature by exploring how employees can contribute toward CSR strategy implementation in organizations. Third, this study diverges from the mainstream CSR research, which largely highlights the positive effect of employees' CSR perceptions, by proposing differential impact of employees' CSR attributions on their attitudes and behaviors. By delineating the role of CSR induced attributions in the process, we argue that employees' perceptions of CSR may not always elicit favorable response from the employees.

This study by focusing on subjective interpretations of CSR initiatives addresses an important gap in the literature where less attention has been paid to attribution process in determining how employees evaluate, judge and react to CSR practices of the organizations (Gond et al., 2017; Martinko et al., 2011; Vlachos et al., 2013b). Fourth, this research contributes to scarce literature on the effect of CSR on workplace behaviors by exploring the impact of CSR induced attributions on employee creativity. Finally, Aguinis and Glavas (2013) articulated the need to explore the possible processes linking organizational CSR involvement with stakeholder outcomes. This study advances the existing line of inquiry by unfurling the underlying psychological mechanism through which CSR attributions exercise their influence on employees' creative behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. CSR attributions

The literature on CSR attributions has categorized motives behind CSR involvement primarily into CSR driven with a selfish intent of benefiting the organization (self-centered) and CSR motivated by benevolent desire to help others (other-centered). These two motives have been studied by scholars in various disciplines under different nomenclatures such as substantive vs. symbolic (Donia and Sirsly, 2016), intrinsic vs. extrinsic (Story and Neves, 2015), proactive vs. reactive (Groza et al., 2011), internal vs. external (Vlachos et al., 2013a) etc. The extant literature on CSR attributions is summarized in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, most of the studies in the past have come from the West. Additionally, these studies have looked at causal CSR attributions from consumers' perspective (Ellen et al., 2006; Groza et al., 2011). For example, Ellen et al. (2006) in their study on Fortune 500 consumer packaged company having partnership with United Nations organization reported that consumers associate four kinds of motives to CSR engagement of the organizations: egoistic, stakeholder, strategic, and values-driven. Consumers responded positively in terms of higher purchase intentions to values and strategic-driven CSR (other-serving), while negatively to stakeholder and egoistic driven (self-serving) CSR attributions. Groza et al. (2011) reported that in contrast to reactive CSR, proactive engagement in CSR induces attribution of positive motives to CSR initiatives of the organization which results in positive attitude toward the company and higher purchase intentions on the part of consumers. It should be pointed here that very limited effort has been made to understand these attributions from employees' perspective. In particular, information around the effect of CSR attributions on employee attitudes and behaviors is meager. Moreover, existing employee-centric CSR attribution literature has treated CSR attributions mainly as a moderator to understand the association of CSR perceptions on attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, ignoring its main effects.

Different stakeholders can have different perceptions of CSR as individuals make causal explanation of the events based on the information available to them in their environment. Given the asymmetry of information available to different stakeholders, it is important to understand the causal judgments of employees-an important stakeholder group, in addition to consumers who have been the focus of attention in the past CSR attribution literature. The available research on employees' CSR attributions and its outcomes has mostly been conducted by Vlachos and colleagues (Vlachos et al., 2010, 2013b, 2017; Story and Neves, 2015). For instance, Vlachos et al. (2010) evaluated sales persons' attributions about organizational motive behind CSR actions using four dimensional CSR attribution framework proposed by Ellen et al.