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Corporate social responsibility and public relations: Do Any Clear Distinctions Remain? An Examination of 50 Companies in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Both Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and public relations suffer from definitional difficulties and, therefore, are often cynically perceived by academicians and the public alike. This study sought to examine the nature of CSR activities within 50 companies rewarded for outstanding performance regarding CSR in order to determine the extent to which these companies incorporated public relations within their CSR activities. It found that most of the activities indicated as CSR were actually philanthropic in nature and not focused on providing restitution or assistance for the negative impacts or negative consequences brought about by the firm in creating its product or service. Corporate philanthropy, which historically fell within the management of public relations, was shifted within the purview of CSR.

Keywords: *Business ethics, corporate social responsibility, philanthropy, public relations, Thailand*

INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs are now common in businesses around the world. KPMG, an international auditing firm, conducts an annual global survey to track CSR programs reported to them by corporations. According to KPMG (2017), an international auditing firm that conducts global surveys regarding corporate CSR, of the top 100 companies (by revenue), in forty-nine countries researched, 75% performed CSR reporting with over half of the reporting companies including CSR information in their annual financial reports. (Though KPMG collects the information for its annual CSR survey, it does not audit that information for purposes of verification.) A 2004 online survey of corporate executives and institutional investors (136 executives and 65 investors)found that 85% of those surveyed indicated that corporate social responsibility was now "a central or important" consideration in making investment decisions (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005). That number was "almost double the 44% who said that corporate social responsibility was "central" or "important" only five years before. (Hernandez-Murillo &Martinek, 2009). The field of public relations has a longer history than CSR, with a narrower focus on creating, preserving, and defending a well-structured corporate image.Both CSR and public relations have suffered definitional difficulties as well as degrees of public skepticism or outright cynicism.The decade of the 1970s saw the ascendency of CSR, an area that was gradually developed by public relations specialists who incorporated many of their activities, such as philanthropic endeavors, into the realm of CSR. A view of the development of CSR against a backdrop of public relations provides the portrait of their merger where their characters become difficult to separate.

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of CSR activities within companies rewarded for outstanding performance regarding their CSR work. This examination required an extensive examination of what CSR is and to the extent in which it incorporates public relations in theory and in practice.

Literature review: Public relations

The body of research on public relations is extensive and the subject is contextually rich (Clark, 2000; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2006; Health, 2005, 2006; Van Ruler &Vercic, 2005). In general, there appear to be three streams within the body of research that emphasize public relations as either management function, communication management, or as relationship management (Clark, 2000; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Grunig, 1992, 2001). However, throughout this body (consisting of both academic and professional literature) an awry of definitions developed which did not allow the subject matter to be anchored in a truly coherent fashion (Hallahan, 1999; Heath, 2005).

The professional literature has been more aggressive in providing a more concrete description,although there is no one authoritative body to do so within a professionl acking any universal

standardofaccreditation orlicensingamongprofessionalpublicrelationspractitioners(Abdullah & Threadgold, 2006; Hutton, 1999). However, the British Institute of Public Relations defines public relations as "the deliberatelyplannedandsustainedefforttoestablishandmaintainmutual understanding between an organization and its publics" and the Public Relations Society of America arrived at a similar description in stating that "public relations are concerned with or devoted to creating mutual understanding among groups and institutions" (Uyo, 2006).

The definitions stated above clearly emphasize the relational aspect of the profession wherein individuals utilize "a variety of social media channels" in order to "connect and build relationships with stakeholders through new technologies" (Breakenridge, 2012). The effectiveness of public relations is, therefore, generally measured by the strength of the network established among stakeholders (Hon & Grunig, 1999).However, it is generally conceded that a lack of standardized measurements still exists to facilitate public relations measurement and evaluation and that there persists an "uneven overall quality" as per the research that has been conducted to establish such standardization (Michaelson & Stacks, 2011).

A stakeholder is simply defined as a person who is "impacted by the actions of an organization" (Hallahan, 2000). This word can encompass customers, company executives, employees, investors, activists, community and religious groups, government regulators, and the media. Grunig and Repper (1992) articulate a comprehensive description: An organization has a relationship with stakeholders when the behavior of theorganization or of the stake holder has consequences on the other. Public relations should do formative research to scan the environment and the behavior of the organization to identify their consequences. Ongoing communication with these stake holders helps to build a stable, long-term relationship that manages conflict that may occur in the relationship.

The relational emphasis of public relations involves activities such as publicity, promotions, special events, and issues articulation. At its most intense form, it deals with crisis management such as the social, environmental, and health-related episodes that involved Exxon, Nike, Nestle, and Shell. But what remains most important in a profession that is clearly a combination of skill and craft is the development of perception (i.e., the construction and maintenance of a desirable image). This,the"science"orcraftformofpublicrelationis,inessence,"aboutinflaming

perceptions" and generating those "inputs" that facilitate the creation of those perceptions (Dawson, 2006). As for CSR, the body of literature on public relations has embraced the subject, often mergingthe two and even offering the occupational attractiveness of prospective public relation practitioners to CSR (Kim & Park, 2011). Indeed, Edelman (2008), a global public relations firm, indicated that many of its present and prospective employees have a CSR background. Capriotti & More no (2006) openly argues that CSR is a vitala spect of public relations.However, the same cannot be said regarding CSR's body of literature when it comes to public relations. The literature is only willing to concede that CSR's broadly defined character is able to perform tasks that would overlap into the realm of public relations (Bern, Todd, & Pendleton, 2010).

Literature review: Corporate social responsibility

A bibliometric analysis of thirty years of research (De Bakker, Groenewegen& Den Hond, 2005) indicates that corporate social responsibility has "become increasingly important in business at both academic and practical levels" (Goodwin & Bartlett, 2008). Despite this growing phenomenon (one which has grown even more rapidly since the De Bakker et al. study),the term continues to evadea solid definition even while evolving into many names such as"corporate social responsiveness,""corporate social performance,

”“corporate accountability, “corporate responsibility,” “corporate sustainability,” and “global citizenship” (Grafstrom &Windell, 20111; Sheehy, 2015 Sriramesh, Ng, Ting &Wanyin, L. 2007; The Economist Intelligence , 2005.).

An often-cited definition within academic literature describes corporate social responsibility as holding corporations “accountable by explicit or inferred social contract with internal and external stakeholders, obeying the laws and regulations of government and operating in an ethical manner which exceeds statutory requirements” (Bowd, Harris, & Cornelissen, 2003).

A global study by The Economist Intelligence Unit (2005), utilizing a comprehensive scope, concluded that corporate social responsibility was based on a “fundamental principle” that a company was “responsible for providing more benefits than just profits for shareholders.” The study elaborated that this concept by encompassing the following components (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2005):…treating its employees well, preserving the environment, developing a sound corporate governance, supporting philanthropy, fostering human rights, respecting cultural differences, and helping to promote fair trade among others.All are meant to have a positive impact on the communities, cultures, societies, and environments in which companies operate.

Ismail (2009) presents a similar definition by referring to this concept as a bundle of strategies used by corporations to “conduct their business in a way that is ethical and society friendly.” This manifests itself in “a range of activities such as working in partnership with local communities” and developing relationships with stakeholders such as “customers, suppliers, employees, shareholders” and others.

However, Frankental (2001) presents the view of many that corporate social responsibility is, in fact, “a vague and intangible term” that cannot yet be clearly defined as a concept because it is in a state of evolution and, even, conflict.

To distinguish it from public relations, he argues that it should create “a commonly understood definition that is used within and across companies” with “a common set of benchmarks” as well as established processes, “that allows for some sort of standardization” to measure the attainment of established CSR goals. Such standardization would be facilitated with a structure of internal auditing as well as “a system of external verification by accredited bodies” (Frankental, 2001).

A historical perspective is necessary in order to understand the definitional controversy of the CSR concept. The 1950s witnessed businessmen calling for greater involvement in their local communities, mostly by way of philanthropic endeavors and a greater focus on the well-being of employees (Banerjee, 2007; Bowen, 1953; McGuire, 1963.). The unrest and social changes that occurredduringthe1960sand1970splacedpressure oncorporationstobecomemoreresponsive to social welfare and human rights issues. To counter this, Nobel laureate Milton Friedman (1970) argued that the only “social responsibility of business is to increase its profits.” Beyond the maximization of profits for shareholders, managers of public corporations were engaging in activities for which they were ill-equipped and working contrary to the function of a public firm (with owners of private firm being held to their own desires, using their own money.)

This view was supported by libertarian econom ists of the Austrian School whore in forced the idea that CSR placed businesses in a situation that was not their “proper aim” (Hayek, 1969). However, this point of view has been ideologically challenged throughout academia which became the focal point for many intellectuals to purpose structural changes to the capitalist system in general, and to the business world, in particular.The 1990s, to the present, saw an expansion into areas falling under CSR.

These include environmental care, issues of sustainability, climate change, and greater accountability to and participation with stakeholders (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Hack, Kenyon, & Wood, 2006; Madrakhimova, 2013). In the course of encompassing some many areas and responsibilities, CSR grew to 37 different definitions (Dahlsrud, 2006). With so much controversy over its definition, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich (2008) concluded that CSR was “…as meaningful as cotton candy…the more you try to bit into it the faster it dissolves.” Okoye (2009) added to this definitional controversy by presenting a postmodernist argument that CSR is an “essentially contested concept” that did not require a concrete definition despite all the growth of important and significant demands on this concept. As a starting point for a working definition of CSR, Carroll's (1991) four-part definition bears examination since it has been used "for research purposes for over 25 year" (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). This definition, which has evolved over time (Carroll, 1979, 1991, 1999; Carroll & Brown, 2018), structures CSR in four parts: a firm's fulfillment of its economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities.

Along the same reasoning as Friedman and Hayek, Carroll sees economic responsibility as being primarily accomplished by the firm maximizing profits for its shareholders as it also complies with the "mission to provide goods and service for society" (Carroll & Shabana, 2010).

Legal responsibilities are accomplished by following the existing rule of law. An argument can be made that legal compliance falls within economic responsibilities since a firm is placed in peril and may cease to engage in economic production if it is closed by government.

In order word, a more contextual definition of the economic responsibility of a public firm may be stated as attempting to maximize profits for its shareholders while consciously operating within and adhering to the existing rule of law.

Carroll sees ethical and philanthropic responsibilities as the more essential aspects of CSR. Regarding ethics, there is a huge overlap with legal responsibilities. Intuitively, ethical considerations would apply wherein an action can be a considered unethical while still not violating the local rule of law.

However, Carroll chose to describe ethical responsibilities as "a corporation's voluntary actions to promote and pursue social goals that extend beyond their legal responsibilities" (Carroll & Shabana, 2010), a boundless definition in defiance of any standardization of measurement.

The last component is philanthropy, an activity that, historically, was managed and promoted by public relations departments before and during the evolution of CSR.Philanthropic endeavors were viewed then and now as ameans of enhancing a company's image in order to increase brand loyalty and decrease price sensitivity in exchange for the firm's benevolence (i.e., the "halo effect") (Chernev& Blair, 2015; Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001). Such benevolent behavior also helps firms to polish a tarnished halo during times when the company faces a crisis involving accusations of committing an ethical, environmental, or social infraction. In the everyday world, "responsibility" is operationalized by individuals as per its definition of one being "answerable" or "liable to be called upon to answer for one's acts or decisions" (Merriam-Webster, 2004).

Using this approach, standardization for accountability becomes feasible. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) presented a working definition for CSR, the key component of which allows for meaningful accountability (Hohnen, 2007);

Social responsibility (is the) responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment through transparent and ethical behavior… [my emphasis].

This ISO definition would place primacy on holding a firm accountable for any damage or disruption it may cause in the process of providing a good or service. Within a fundamental understanding of the daily use of the word "responsibility," providing restitution for negative consequences of a firm's production would logically take precedence over philanthropic endeavors that are unrelated to the core business' negative impact but, rather, are activities directed towards enhancing the company's reputation and engendering goodwill for market advantage.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to determine the nature of CSR activities of 50 companies that were rewarded for their outstanding CSR work in 2020 by an international chamber of commerce based in Bangkok, Thailand, from a membership base of 810 company memberships and corporate associates. Each company's CSR activities were analyzed by this researcher by examining chamber material, press releases, reviewing the companies' CSR website pages, and by contacting CSR officers, if necessary, for information or clarification. A 5-point Likert scale was used to rate the degree of CSR versus public relations with the following: 1= Strongly public relations, 2 = Mostly public relations, 3= Mix of public relations and CSR, 4 = Mostly CSR, 5 = Strongly CSR.

Table1. *Companies Examined by Type of Industry(N=50)**

Typeof Industry	Number/Percentage	
Retail Sales or Services	12	(24.0%)
Hospitality/Tourism	4	(8.0%)
Banking	4	(8.0%)
InformationTechnology	4	(8.0%)
Chemicals	3	(6.0%)
Logistics	3	(6.0%)
Educational Services	3	(6.0%)
Pharmaceutical	3	(6.0%)
Oil/Energy	3	(6.0%)
Electronics	2	(4.0%)
Auto	2	(4.0%)
Agriculture	1	(2.0%)
BusinessConsulting	1	(2.0%)
Construction	1	(2.0%)
Engineering	1	(2.0%)
Healthcare	1	(2.0%)
Manufacturing	1	(2.0%)
RealEstateDevelopment	1	(2.0%)

Findings and discussion

Applying ISO's definition and focusing on the restitution or correction of any negative impact or consequences of the firm in providing its goods or services as the core of CSR, the data found little activity to that effect. The strongest evidence was found from companies in the industrial areas of oil, chemicals, and real estate development where efforts were being made to monitor, prevent, or correct damage to the environment. In retail sales, the data found useful attempts to deal with recyclable materials.

The banks examined provided educational support to develop financial literary to prevent bankruptcy or other credit problems.

Table2. *Score by Industry (N=50) 5= Strongly CSR/1= Strongly PR*

Typeof Industry	Score
RetailSalesor Services	2.6
Hospitality/Tourism	1.5
Banking	2.1
InformationTechnology	1.0
Chemicals	3.8
EducationalServices	1.0
Logistics	1.2
Pharmaceutical	1.3
Auto	2.0
Electronics	1.0
Oil/Energy	3.5
Agriculture	3.0
BusinessConsulting	1.0
Construction	1.0
Engineering	1.0
Healthcare	1.0
Insurance	1.0
Manufacturing	2.0
RealEstateDevelopment	3.2
OverallAverageScore	**1.84**

Most of the companies provided philanthropic contributions that had no direct connection with their core business with 30 of the 50 companies focusing on education in the form of an "adopt-a-school," educational camps, and scholarships. A few companies gave away products in the form of philanthropy in what would more closely be seen as promotional giveaways to targeted markets.

This study is limited in that only one cluster of companies in a one chamber was examined. The fact that these companies joined a chamber may make them different from the larger body of businesses in their area. Also, because many of the companies examined were subsidiaries of multi-national corporations, their behavior may stem from having a more global perspective and greater exposure to the concept of CSR than behavior derived from a more provincial perspective.In any case, it wasnot possible to extract their annual gross income (forThailand) or number of employees (in Thailand) in order to determine differentials beyond the variable oftype of industry.

Conclusion

There is no denying the immense importance of corporate philanthropy and all the companies examined should be lauded for their benevolence regardless of any goodwill or reputational enhancement that it may have been derived as a consequence. The chamber involved should be praised for recognizing and rewarding CSR and should not be held responsible for the lack ofa solid definition for that concept.

Dahlsrud (2006) discovered 37 definitions for CSR and there are probably over 50 at this point with an expectation for more in the future. This plethora is largely the product of ideological challenges in academia by intellectuals with fundamental disagreements regarding capitalism and, therefore, the traditional function of the firm. By hampering the concept of the firm with so many expectations regarding so many social welfare responsibilities under the penumbra of an inflated CSR construct, they may only have hoped to have transferred the firm and its function into another, more suitable, economic system.

If the results of this study are reflective of the larger business community, than it appears that corporations are pouring old wine into new bottles by shifting philanthropic activities that were once handled by public relations into CSR. They are able to do this because CSR's definitional crisis has created a fog of obfuscation and circumvention where standardization and verification are impossible.

Perhaps what is needed is to go back to basics in construction ofaconcept that relies more on the everyday application of a word that is easily definable in a dictionary. Responsibility has to be tied to being accountable for the impact of one's actions. If a factory dumps chemicals into an adjacent river, destroying its ecosystem for miles as a consequence in, say, an unregulated political environment, the public should hold the firm responsible for the impact of its actions. The remedy would not be for the factory to "adopt" a local school and give it free computers. A company that looks the other way as its subcontractors traffic children as laborers to pick cocoa beans, should not be lauded for contributing funds to sponsor a climate change conference or for providing funds to save the endangered white tigers of India. CSR can only have a meaningful function with a reasonable standardization for monitoring if it is tied to a direct causal relationship wherein restitution is provided for the negative impacts of that firm's economic behavior.

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