



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## Public Relations Review



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

Tae Ho Lee

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Media and Journalism, 387 Carroll Hall, Campus Box 3365, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received 28 December 2015  
Received in revised form 28 June 2016  
Accepted 5 October 2016  
Available online xxx

*Keywords:*

Corporate social responsibility  
Trend studies  
Content analysis

### 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.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

## 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 & Hebllich, 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.

*E-mail address:* [taeholee@live.unc.edu](mailto:taeholee@live.unc.edu)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.001>  
0363-8111/© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article in press as: Ho Lee, T. The status of corporate social responsibility research in public relations: A content analysis of published articles in eleven scholarly journals from 1980 to 2015. *Public Relations Review* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.001>

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.

This line of macro-level overviews of public relations scholarship has also revealed significant trends in terms of research topics, methods, and theoretical frameworks. Specifically, the research topics have diversified to include new technologies and crisis communication, simultaneously accompanying a significant amount of scholarly attention to public relations professionalism that involves professional standards, public relations principles in society, education, and ethics, beyond somewhat technical topics such as publicity, media relations, graphic design, and line art (e.g., Morton & Lin, 1995; Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010; Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999; Pasadeos & Renfro, 1992). In terms of methodology, the increase of quantitative research as well as diverse approaches in recent years (Morton & Lin, 1995) suggests a growing tendency toward sophistication in the field. However, the lack of theory development in public relations research (e.g., Botan & Taylor, 2004; Ferguson, 1984; Pasadeos et al., 2010) still presents a challenge in the discipline.

The second type of public relations trend study of specific research areas has developed mainly from a move away from discussing relationship management and crisis communication to more recent discussions of technology-driven issues such as social media research in public relations. With respect to relationship management, Ki and Shin (2006) found that while research in this area has increased, the concept of organization-public relations (OPR) remains somewhat unclear (Ki & Shin, 2006). In terms of crisis communication, scholars discovered a general increase in quantitative studies and mixed-method approaches, but with a lack of theoretical framework (e.g., An & Cheng, 2007; Ha & Boynton, 2014). Moreover, the most invoked theories and the move toward interdisciplinary analysis involving communication and business scholarships have only been developed in recent years (e.g., Ha & Boynton, 2014; Ha & Riffe, 2015). With the expansion of public relations literature, trend studies of specific research areas have also increased significantly, accompanying an increase in the scope of covered topics and investigated journals. Although the general overview type of trend studies focus mainly on journals that specifically address only public relations, such as *Public Relations Review* and *Journal of Public Relations Research*, trend studies of specific topics increasingly have included a wide variety of journals. However, in contrast to the increase in the public relations trend studies, a review of CSR research has received little attention. Therefore, this study, building on the tradition of trend studies in public relations, aims to investigate the wide range of scholarly journals that include CSR research from the public relations standpoint.

### 2.3. Trend studies of corporate social responsibility

Trend studies on the area of CSR have been provided mainly in the business literature in terms of major topics, methodologies, geographic regions, and data sources. These studies in recent years commonly indicate that while attention to CSR in academia has increased substantially over the last several decades, CSR still remains an unclear concept, both in theory and application (e.g., De Bakker et al., 2005). According to these studies, research subjects involving the environment, ethics, stakeholders, and social issues (e.g., Egri & Ralston, 2008; Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006) have received constant attention. An increase in quantitative research is evident (Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006; Taneja, Taneja, & Gupta, 2011), specifically in terms of survey methods and case studies (Egri & Ralston, 2008). Theoretical development beyond normative approaches (Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006)—as studies have increasingly looked at “hows” and “whys” rather than “oughts” and “shoulds”—has also been pointed out as a meaningful trend.

This line of recent trend studies in the business discipline has increasingly encompassed the research from a variety of other disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology, and philosophy (e.g., Lockett, Moon, & Visser, 2006), and journals representing diverse geographic regions beyond the United States (e.g., Egri & Ralston, 2008), based on the recognition that understanding the variance across disciplines as well as cultural and institutional contexts is crucial. However, public relations research has scarcely been touched in these analyses.

From the standpoint of corporate communication, Golob et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative systematic review of 90 articles, thereby identifying three major research themes involving disclosure, process, and outcomes/consequences. They identified two journals as the most significant venues for CSR communication research: *Journal of Business Ethics* and *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*. This most recent trend analysis of CSR communication, however, only marginally covered public relations journals. Goodwin and Bartlett (2008) provided the first systematic overview of CSR research in public relations by investigating 40 articles that were published in three public relations journals—*Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Journal of Communication Management*—between 1998 and 2007. They identified three major research themes involving management function (ethics, public relations professionalism, and history), communication management (CSR reporting, new communication technologies, and CSR marketing), and relationship management (reputation building, trust generation, and relationship management).

Whereas the business literature has consistently provided insights into the status of CSR research, the public relations literature, by contrast, has only rarely provided a systematic overview of CSR research (e.g., Goodwin & Bartlett, 2008). To fill this gap in the literature, this study investigates trends of CSR research in public relations scholarship. This study thus presents the following research question:

### 2.4. Research question

What are the (a) primary scholars and institutions, (b) research topics, (c) theoretical frameworks, (d) methodological trends and data samples, as featured in CSR public relations articles published in peer-reviewed journals?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample

This study analyzed the content of all the CSR research articles in eleven scholarly journals that have relevance to public relations scholarship. The first group of journals consists of *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, and *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. These American journals have been recognized as major journals in the field of public relations, especially in the context of similar academic trend studies (e.g., Ye & Ki, 2012). The second group of journals consists of *Journal of Communication Management*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, and *International Journal of Strategic Communication*. These European journals have been increasingly recognized as significant venues for public relations scholarship on CSR (Bartlett, 2011). In addition, a third group consisting of *Public Relations Journal*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *PRism*, *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, and *Journal of Business Ethics* was added to the list of reviewed journals because of these journals' increasing significance to public relations scholarship in general, or their relevance to public relations research on CSR.

Data were gathered from each journal's homepage by using the keyword *corporate social responsibility*. For the *Journal of Business Ethics*; the result was narrowed by simultaneously using the search terms *corporate social responsibility* and *public relations* because of this journal's wide coverage of non-public relations research. Among the initially screened articles, only full scholarly reviewed articles that substantially addressed CSR were chosen for further analysis by reviewing the title and abstract of each article. The final search identified a total of 133 articles with publication years ranging from 1980 to 2015.

#### 3.2. Measures

Drawing from similar categories used in previous trend studies in the field of public relations (e.g., Ha & Boynton, 2014; Ha & Riffe, 2015; Ye & Ki, 2012), this study coded each article based on four categories: (a) authorship and institutional affiliation, (b) research topic, (c) theoretical framework, and (d) research method and type of sample. Each of these four categories is described briefly, as follows.

##### 3.2.1. Authorship and institutional affiliation

The first author's name and institutional affiliation were coded.

##### 3.2.2. Research topic

Six coding categories of research topics were developed inductively, as follows:

1. Description of CSR practices of a specific nation, industry, or company
2. Description of CSR communication (e.g., message frames, web interactivity, engagement)
3. Effects of CSR (e.g., effects of framing, priming, congruence, reputation, responsiveness, consistent behavior, type of CSR)
4. Conceptual framework
5. Role of public relations
6. Stakeholders perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs toward CSR

##### 3.2.3. Theoretical framework

Any theory that was referenced expressly in an article was coded.

##### 3.2.4. Research method and type of sample

The research method was coded into three categories: (1) quantitative research methods, such as experiments, surveys, content analysis, and descriptive studies; (2) qualitative research methods, such as discourse analysis, context analysis, focus groups, and in-depth interviews; and (3) triangulation research methods that use mixed approaches. The type of sample was coded into traditional media content, case information, literature, websites, social media, general public, students, public relations practitioners, corporate managers, corporate executives, employees, journalists, or mixed samples.

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Intercoder reliability

With a sample of 133 articles, two coders analyzed 13 randomly selected articles, about 10 percent of the total articles, for the intercoder reliability test. The intercoder reliability coefficient was calculated using Scott's *pi* formula as follows: 1.0 for journal name, publication year, author, and institution, 0.85 for research topic, 0.91 for theoretical framework, 0.93 for research method, 0.95 for data source, and 0.93 for sampling method.

**Table 1**  
Research topics in public relations CSR articles: 1980–2015.

Topic	1980–2000		2001–2005		2006–2010		2011–2015		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Description of CSR practices	1	14.3	2	66.7	6	12.0	18	24.7	27	20.3
Description of CSR communication	0	0	0	0	11	22.0	14	19.2	25	18.8
Effects of CSR	1	14.3	1	33.3	10	20.0	20	27.4	32	24.1
Conceptual framework	4	57.1	0	0	6	12.0	11	15.1	21	15.8
Role of public relations	1	14.3	0	0	10	20.0	5	6.8	16	12.0
Stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs	0	0	0	0	7	14.0	5	6.8	12	9.0
Total	7	100	3	100	50	100	73	100	133	100

#### 4.2. Trend of published article

A total of 133 articles were drawn from eleven journals addressing CSR from the public relations viewpoint, with 44 articles (33.1%) published in *Public Relations Review*, 34 articles (25.6%) in *Corporate Communication*, 12 articles (9.0%) in *Journal of Communication Management*, 11 articles (8.3%) in *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, eight articles in *Journal of Business Ethics*, seven articles (5.3%) in *Public Relations Journal*, six articles (4.5%) in *Journal of Public Relations Research*, four articles (3.0%) in *PRism*, three articles (2.3%) in *Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal*, two articles (1.5%) in *Journal of Mass Communication Quarterly*, and two articles (1.5%) in *Public Relations Inquiry*. CSR-related public relations research has increased over time. Over 50 percent of the articles were published in the last five years (2011 to 2015), with the following breakdown by year: 2011 (seven articles), 2012 (13 articles), 2013 (16 articles), 2014 (22 articles), and 2015 (15 articles). Moreover, more than 90 percent of all articles were published since 2006. To understand the trend of CSR research in public relations better, analyses were conducted concerning authorship, institution, research topic, theoretical framework, research method, and type of sample in terms of four periods: 1980–2000, 2001–2005, 2006–2010, and 2011–2015.

#### 4.3. Authorship, topics, theoretical framework, and methodological trends

##### 4.3.1. Authorship and institution

To investigate the productivity of individual authors and institutions, this study coded the first author's name and institutional affiliation for each article. The most frequently published first author in the selected journals was Sora Kim (six articles), followed by Gangha Dhanesh (four articles), Soo-Yeon Kim (four articles), Timothy Coombs (three articles), and Ursa Golob (three articles). The affiliated institution with the most publications was the University of Florida (USA) (13 articles), followed by Aarhus University (Denmark) (seven articles), the University of Ljubijana (Slovenia) (four articles), National University of Singapore (Singapore) (four articles), Queensland University of Technology (Australia) (four articles), Copenhagen Business School (Denmark) (three articles), Pennsylvania State University (USA) (three articles), and the University of Central Florida (USA) (three articles).

##### 4.3.2. Research topic

The topics most often researched were effects of CSR ( $n=32$ , 24.1%), followed by description of the CSR practices of a specific nation, industry, or company ( $n=27$ , 20.3%), description of CSR communication ( $n=25$ , 18.8%), conceptual framework ( $n=21$ , 15.8%), role of public relations ( $n=16$ , 12.0%), and stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs toward CSR ( $n=12$ , 9.0%) (see Table 1). The focus of CSR topics in public relations changed over time. From 1980 to 2000, conceptual framework was researched most often ( $n=4$ , 57.1%). During the second time period, from 2001 to 2005, the description of CSR practices ( $n=2$ , 66.7%) and effects of CSR ( $n=1$ , 33.3%) started to receive more attention. During the third time period, from 2006 to 2010, descriptions of CSR communication ( $n=11$ , 22.0%) were the most researched topics, followed by effects of CSR ( $n=10$ , 20.0%), role of public relations ( $n=10$ , 20.0%), and stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs ( $n=7$ , 14.0%). During the fourth time period, from 2011 to 2015, effects of CSR ( $n=20$ , 27.4%) were the most researched topics, followed by descriptions of CSR practices ( $n=18$ , 24.7%), descriptions of CSR communication ( $n=14$ , 19.2%), and conceptual framework ( $n=11$ , 15.1%). The proportion of research involving the role of public relations, together with stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs has decreased in recent years. The result of the Chi-square test, however, did not indicate that the difference in the frequency of research topics used over the four time periods was statistically different ( $\chi^2=24.41$ ,  $df=15$ ,  $p=0.058$ ).

##### 4.3.3. Theoretical framework

Of the 133 articles reviewed, 48.1 percent applied a theoretical framework. The most frequently used theory was clearly the stakeholder theory ( $n=21$ , 15.8%), followed by legitimacy theory ( $n=6$ , 4.5%), attribution theory ( $n=4$ , 3.0%), and institutional theory ( $n=4$ , 3.0%). Other theories applied include social identity, reasoned action, framing, and institutional theory, and nine articles (6.8%) mentioned multiple theories. The theories used varied during different times. From 2006 to 2010, stakeholder theory was used most often ( $n=13$ , 26.0%), followed by legitimacy theory ( $n=3$ , 6.0%) and institutional theory ( $n=3$ , 6.0%). Since 2011, although stakeholder theory still has been used most often ( $n=8$ , 11.0%), its proportion has

**Table 2**  
 Research method used in public relations CSR articles: 1980–2015.

Method	1980–2000		2001–2005		2006–2010		2011–2015		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Quantitative</i>										
Content analysis	1	14.3	0	0	11	22.0	15	20.5	27	20.3
Survey	1	14.3	0	0	11	22.0	7	9.6	19	14.3
Experiment	1	14.3	1	33.3	5	10.0	15	20.5	22	16.5
Sub-total	3	42.9	1	33.3	27	54.0	37	50.6	68	51.1
<i>Qualitative</i>										
Case study	0	0	2	66.7	8	16.0	6	8.2	16	12.0
Interview	0	0	0	0	1	2.0	9	12.3	10	7.5
Focus group	0	0	0	0	2	4.0	0	0	2	1.5
Conceptual analysis	2	28.6	0	0	1	2.0	2	2.7	5	3.8
Literature review	2	28.6	0	0	7	14.0	9	12.3	18	13.5
Discourse analysis	0	0	0	0	2	4.0	3	4.1	5	3.8
Sub-total	4	57.2	2	66.7	21	42.0	29	39.6	56	42.1
Multiple	0	0	0	0	2	4.0	7	9.6	9	6.8
Total	7	100	3	100	50	100	73	100	133	100

decreased significantly from the previous period, accompanied by a diversification of applied theories that includes attribution theory (n=4, 5.5%), social identity (n=3, 4.1%), legitimacy (n=3, 4.1%), framing (n=2, 2.7%), and reasoned action (n=2, 2.7%). The proportion of theoretically grounded research among the total number of articles decreased from 2011 to 2015 (n=32, 43.8%) when compared to the period from 2006 to 2010 (n=31, 62.0%). The result of the Chi-square test indicated that the difference in the frequency of theoretical frameworks used over the four time periods was statistically different ( $\chi^2 = 77.75, df = 54, p = 0.019$ ), although this result should be interpreted with caution because the assumption of at least five expected cases per cell necessary for an accurate Chi-square test of independence was violated.

4.3.4. Research method and type of sample

As shown in Table 2, qualitative (n=56, 42.1%) and quantitative (n=68, 51.1%) research methods were balanced in general. The proportion of quantitative and qualitative research in recent years has decreased, accompanied by an increase in mixed-methods research. With regard to research methods, content analysis was used most often (n=27, 20.3%), followed by experiment (n=22, 16.5%), survey (n=19, 14.3%), literature review (n=18, 13.5%), case study (n=16, 12.0%), interview (n=10, 7.5%), mixed methods (n=9, 6.8%), discourse analysis (n=5, 3.8%), conceptual analysis (n=5, 3.8%), and focus group (n=2, 1.5%). Since 2006, the proportion of experiments and mixed-methods research has increased significantly. For sample types, case information was used most often (n=20, 15.0%), followed by literature (n=19, 14.3%), students (n=17, 12.8%), traditional media content (n=16, 12.0%), publics (n=16, 12.0%), websites (n=11, 8.3%), public relations practitioners (n=10, 7.5%), mixed samples (n=6, 4.5%), corporate managers (n=6, 4.5%), corporate executives (n=5, 3.8%), employees (n=3, 2.3%), social media (n=2, 1.5%), and journalists (n=2, 1.5%). Although the sample of case information was used most from 2006 to 2010, traditional media content and students were the most often used samples from 2011 to 2015. The result of the Chi-square test indicated that the difference in the frequency of research methods used over the four time periods was statistically different ( $\chi^2 = 40.52, df = 27, p = 0.046$ ), although this result should be interpreted with caution because the assumption of at least five expected cases per cell necessary for an accurate Chi-square test of independence was violated.

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1. Implications

This study examined trends in CSR-related public relations research by analyzing 133 articles published between 1980 and 2015. Specifically, this study focused on the research topics, theoretical frameworks, methodological aspects, and authorship information of the examined articles. First of all, the substantial increase in the number of public relations studies on CSR since 2006 seems to suggest that CSR research has recently become established as a significant research area. Moreover, while a significant portion of studies still focus on descriptions of CSR practices or communication, the gradual increase in effect studies and proposals of conceptual frameworks indicates a gradual growth of sophistication in the field. With respect to the theories, the increase in the number of theories used and the adoption of more mixed-theory research in recent years also suggests the growing sophistication of the field.

Second, the analysis of research topics as well as methodologies suggest that the public relations research of CSR has grown distinct in comparison to the approaches used in the business literature. While the business literature on CSR has focused on topics involving environmental concerns and ethics (e.g., Lockett et al., 2006), the results of this study show that the most researched CSR topics addressed by public relations scholarship are distinctive, as they focus far more on descriptions of CSR practices, CSR communication, and the effects of CSR. In addition, the significant attention paid to topics

Please cite this article in press as: Ho Lee, T. The status of corporate social responsibility research in public relations: A content analysis of published articles in eleven scholarly journals from 1980 to 2015. *Public Relations Review* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.001>

relating to the role of public relations and stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs also suggests that the subject of CSR has become increasingly approached through the perspectives of public relations. In terms of methodologies, the comparative balance between quantitative and qualitative approaches in the public relations scholarship shows a clear distinction from the business literature, where the quantitative approaches have been found dominant (e.g., Lockett et al., 2006).

Third, the trend of public relations research into CSR in recent years suggests some challenges that future research may wish to address. In particular, the recent decrease in the number of studies focusing on the role of public relations and stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs seems to be problematic because these topics have been suggested as crucial research topics from the public relations standpoint (e.g., Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Clark, 2000). To continue to make contributions to the understanding of CSR, future public relations research will need more focus on these research topics. Moreover, the decrease in the proportion of theoretically driven studies also suggests a challenge for public relations scholarship to address in the future.

Fourth, the analysis of the authorship and institutional affiliation of the investigated articles indicates a wide variety of individual and institutional contributors, thereby suggesting a wide range of participation in terms of research into CSR in public relations scholarship. The most productive authors found by this study, namely Sora Kim, Gangha Dhanesh, Soo-Yeon Kim, Timothy Coombs, and Ursa Golob, appear on the lists of most published authors in public relations research for the first time except for Timothy Coombs (e.g., Pasadeos & Renfro, 1992; Pasadeos et al., 2010, 1999), and they are mostly located outside the United States. In addition, most of the highly productive institutions identified by this study are also rarely listed among the most productive institutions in public relations research except for the University of Florida (e.g., Pasadeos & Renfro, 1992; Pasadeos et al., 2010, 1999). Further, five of the most productive institutions, Aarhus University, the University of Ljubljana, the National University of Singapore, Queensland University of Technology, and Copenhagen Business School are located outside the United States. The findings of the most productive authors and institutions together suggest that the increase in CSR research in public relations has been driven by a group of rather new scholars and institutions in the public relations field, located not only in the United States but also in Europe and Asia.

## 5.2. Limitations

Like all research, this study has limitations. First, only CSR articles published in major venues for public relations research into CSR were selected via a keyword search and analyzed. Analysis involving more journals, regardless of their explicit focus on public relations, would encompass more studies that are potentially relevant to public relations scholarship. Second, the authorship and institutional affiliations were coded using only the first author's information. A weighted consideration of all authors might provide a more detailed picture of the current status of contributing scholarship. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the understanding of the current status of public relations research into CSR, showing the growing importance of CSR research in public relations, and suggesting areas for improvement in future research, such as the role of public relations and stakeholders' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs.

## References

- An, S. K., & Cheng, I. H. (2007). Crisis communication research in public relations literature in 1975–2006. In *Annual meeting of the national communication association*.
- Bartlett, J., Tywoniak, S., & Hatcher, C. (2007). Public relations professional practice and the institutionalisation of CSR. *Journal of Communication Management*, 11(4), 281–299. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/13632540710843904>
- Bartlett, J. L. (2011). Public relations and corporate social responsibility. In O. Ihlen, J. L. Bartlett, & S. May (Eds.), *The handbook of communication and corporate social responsibility* (pp. 67–86). Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
- Bortree, D. S. (2014). The state of CSR communication research: A summary and future direction. *Public Relations Journal*, 8(3), 1–8.
- Botan, C., & Hazleton, V. (2006). Public relations in a new age. In C. Botan, & V. Hazleton (Eds.), *Public relations theory II* (pp. 1–17). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Botan, C. H., & Taylor, M. (2004). Public relations: State of the field. *Journal of Communication*, 54(4), 645–661. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/joc/54.4.645>
- Boynton, L. (2002). Professionalism and social responsibility: Foundations of public relations ethics. *Communication Yearbook*, 26, 230–265.
- Breen, M. (2007). Business, society and impact on indigenous peoples. In S. May, G. Cheney, & J. Roper (Eds.), *The debate over corporate social responsibility* (pp. 292–304). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Capriotti, P., & Moreno, Á. (2007). Corporate citizenship and public relations: The importance and interactivity of social responsibility issues on corporate websites. *Public Relations Review*, 33(1), 84–91. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.11.012>
- Clark, C. E. (2000). Differences between public relations and corporate social responsibility: An analysis. *Public Relations Review*, 26(3), 363–380. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(00\)00053-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(00)00053-9)
- Cochran, P. L., & Wood, R. A. (1984). Corporate social responsibility and financial performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 27(1), 42–56. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/255956>
- Cone Communications. (2015). 2015 Cone Communications Millennial CSR Study. Retrieved from <http://www.conecomm.com/2015-cone-communications-millennial-csr-study-1>.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2009). Corporate social responsibility: Missed opportunity for institutionalizing communication practice? *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 3(2), 93–101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15531180902805445>
- David, P., Kline, S., & Dai, Y. (2005). Corporate social responsibility practices, corporate identity, and purchase intention: A dual-process model. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(3), 291–313. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1703\\_4](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1703_4)
- David, P. (2004). Extending symmetry: Toward a convergence of professionalism, practice, and pragmatics in public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 16(2), 185–211.
- Egri, C. P., & Ralston, D. A. (2008). Corporate responsibility: A review of international management research from 1998 to 2007. *Journal of International Management*, 14(4), 319–339. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.intman.2007.09.003>
- Ferguson, M. A. (1984). Building theory in public relations: Interorganizational relationships as a public relations paradigm. In *Public relations division, association for education in journalism and mass communication annual convention*.

- Golob, U., & Bartlett, J. L. (2007). Communicating about corporate social responsibility: A comparative study of CSR reporting in Australia and Slovenia. *Public Relations Review*, 33, 1–9. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.11.001>
- Goodwin, F., & Bartlett, J. L. (2008). Public relations and corporate social responsibility: A review of the literature. Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/15427/1/15427.pdf> Accessed 24.09.15.
- Grunig, J., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Ha, J. H., & Boynton, L. (2014). Has crisis communication been studied using an interdisciplinary approach? A 20-year content analysis of communication journals. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 8, 29–44. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2013.850694>
- Heath, R. L., & Ryan, M. (1989). Public relations' role in defining corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 4(1), 21–38. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08900528909358330>
- Hooghiemstra, R. (2000). Corporate communication and impression management: New perspectives why companies engage in corporate social reporting. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 27(1(2)), 55–68.
- Ihlen, Ø., Bartlett, J. L., & May, S. (Eds.). (2011). *The handbook of communication and corporate social responsibility*. Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
- Ki, E.-J., & Shin, J.-H. (2006). Status of organization-public relationship research from an analysis of published articles, 1985–2004. *Public Relations Review*, 32(2), 194–195. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.02.019>
- L'Etang, J. (1994). Public relations and corporate social responsibility: Some issues arising. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 13(2), 111–123. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/bf00881580>
- Lantos, G. P. (2001). The boundaries of strategic corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 18(7), 595–632. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/07363760110410281>
- Lewis, S. (2003). Reputation and corporate responsibility. *Journal of Communication Management*, 7(4), 356–366. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/17506200710779521>
- Lockett, A., Moon, J., & Visser, W. (2006). Corporate social responsibility in management research: Focus, nature, salience and sources of influence. *Journal of Management Studies*, 43(1), 115–136.
- Morton, L. P., & Lin, L.-Y. (1995). Content and citation analyses of public relations review. *Public Relations Review*, 21(4), 337–349. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111\(95\)90117-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0363-8111(95)90117-5)
- Pasadeos, Y., & Renfro, B. (1992). A bibliometric analysis of public relations research. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 4(3), 167–187. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0403\\_03](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0403_03)
- Pasadeos, Y., Renfro, R. B., & Hanily, M. L. (1999). Influential authors and works of the public relations scholarly literature: A network of recent research. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 11(1), 29–52. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1101\\_02](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1101_02)
- Pasadeos, Y., Berger, B., & Renfro, R. B. (2010). Public relations as a maturing discipline: An update on research networks. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(2), 136–158. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10627261003601390>
- Taneja, S. S., Taneja, P. K., & Gupta, R. K. (2011). Researches in corporate social responsibility: A review of shifting focus, paradigms, and methodologies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 101(3), 343–364. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0732-6>
- Taylor, M., & Kent, M. L. (2014). Dialogic engagement: Clarifying foundational concepts. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 26(5), 384–398. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1062726x.2014.956106>
- Ye, L., & Ki, E.-J. (2012). The status of online public relations research: An analysis of published articles in 1992–2009. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24(5), 409–434. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2012.723277>