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Corporate social responsibility, media source preference, trust, and public engagement: The informed public's perspective

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing US, German and Chinese data from the 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer[®], the purposes of this study were: (1) to explore the impact of media preference on the perception of CSR, (2) to examine the role of CSR in building trust, and the effect of perceived trust in a business entity on public engagement with that entity, and (3) to test whether the above relationship between CSR and trust in business is moderated by media preference. The results show that China had the highest trust in business while Germany had the lowest. There were no consistent media usage patterns of the informed public that would link to positive CSR evaluation across the three countries. CSR dimensions (social, economic, and environmental) had various effects on predicting trust in business in these three markets, and there was a positive correlation between trust in business and behavioral engagement with trusted companies in informed publics in the US and Germany. Theoretical implications and future research directions are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has, over the last decade, become a salient issue for the corporate sector. [Bansal \(2002\)](#) argued that CSR (or sustainability) has three important principles: the environment principle (i.e., to protect and responsibly use environmental resources), the social-equity principle (i.e., to treat everyone fairly), and the economic principle (i.e., to generate profits which then sustain corporate environmental and social initiatives for the betterment of society). Various positive outcomes of CSR practice have been identified in the literature, such as gaining a license to operate, improving financial performance, securing competitive advantage, enhancing corporate reputation, and cultivating stakeholder relationships by meeting their demands ([Brønn & Vidaver-Cohen, 2009](#)). Effective communication of CSR initiatives and purposes via traditional and social media is essential in getting stakeholders' support for the practice ([Kesavan, Bernacchi, & Mascarenhas, 2013](#); [Morsing & Schultz, 2006](#)). Since trust in an organization derives from its integrity, dependability, and competence ([Hon & Grunig, 1999](#)), we hypothesized that CSR communication via effective communication channels and media enhances public trust in corporations, which in turn fosters public engagement with them. Furthermore, given

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that individuals' perception of CSR can be influenced by publicity utilizing various media types, the impact of media use on perceived CSR should be examined.

While much previous research has focused on the general public's response to CSR initiatives, this study looked at informed (i.e., elite) respondents in the United States (US), China, and Germany. The three countries were selected for two reasons. First, they represent the largest markets in, respectively, North America, the Asia-Pacific region and the European Union. Second and more importantly, corporations in Germany face high demand for corporate sustainability as regulated by guidelines or official recommendations, such as the GRI Guidelines (Global Reporting Initiative, 2002) and the EC recommendations for the integration of sustainability issues in corporate annual reports (European Commission, 2003). China is at the far end of the continuum because listed corporations in the nation are not required to adopt any standards or guidelines, and the US is somewhere in-between.

With the analyses of data from the selected countries, this study aimed to: (1) explore the impact of media preference on individuals' CSR perception, (2) examine the role of CSR in building trust in business and the trust effect on public engagement with the business, and (3) test whether the above relationship between CSR and trust in business is moderated by media preference.

2. Literature review

2.1. CSR

Definitions of CSR have long been debated, evolving from an ecological focus (e.g. Shrivastava, 1995) to a focus on sustainability (Sharma & Henriques, 2005). The most-cited CSR definition is Carroll's (1979): "the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (p. 500). Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory significantly shaped the concept of CSR in relation to "being socially responsible." Later, Elkington (2004) interpreted CSR as a corporation's obligation to maximize its beneficial impact on society by seeking a balanced three-bottom line: economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, and social sustainability. Bansal (2005) further argued that the three dimensions are interrelated because social and environmental initiatives can only be sustained when there is long-term economic growth.

Dyllick and Hockerts (2002) regarded *economic sustainability* as a corporation's sufficient liquidity at any time "while producing a persistent above average return to its stakeholders" (p. 133). To achieve this, the corporation must manage various capital assets, including financial capital (i.e., equity, debt), tangible capital (i.e., land, stocks, machinery), and intangible capital (i.e., innovation, know-how, organizational governance). The European Commission (2003) posited that this dimension requires corporations to anticipate issues such as product quality and safety and supply chain management arising from their interactions with suppliers, customers, and other stakeholders in the market place. The expectations on corporations fulfilling their responsibilities in this regard have been that corporations go beyond the mindset of short-term profit-seeking and aim for long-term economic performance, such as development of good quality and safe products and improvement of production efficiency (Bansal, 2005; Torugsa, O'Donohue, & Hecker, 2013).

The *environmental sustainability* dimension of CSR includes eco-friendliness, pollution prevention, and environmental leadership (Torugsa et al., 2013). For corporations to minimize environmental impact while maximizing profits, they should adopt the regulations of international environmental management and monitor any environmental damage and negative societal impact in the product manufacturing processes (Buyse & Verbeke, 2003). Sharma and Vredenburg (1998) suggested that corporations improve their capabilities in the various value chains in the operation processes so as to enhance environmental awareness among management and employees inside corporations.

The workplace and the community are the main foci of *social sustainability* (Torugsa et al., 2013). Proactively, a corporation can fulfill its social sustainability by maintaining "the health, safety and general well-being of employees," motivating the workforce "by offering training and development opportunities," and acting "as good citizens in the local community" (European Commission, 2003, p. 5). Furthermore, organizations should engage in formal dialogues with different stakeholders and involve them in the decision-making process on social and ethical issues relevant to stakeholders (Bansal, 2005).

2.2. CSR communication channels, audience media preference, and their CSR perceptions

Organizations (especially corporations) employ different communication channels for different types of target stakeholders according to their media preference. These channels range from internal communication platforms, product packaging, traditional print publications (e.g., newsletter, annual reports, magazines, and newspapers), TV, radio and face-to-face communication, to Web 2.0 tools such as websites, blogs, and social networking sites (Birth, Illia, Lurati, & Zamparini, 2008; Crescenzo, 2011; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). Coombs and Holladay (2002) divided these channels into controlled (i.e., the message's delivery can be controlled by the organization) and uncontrolled media (i.e., the organization cannot control how the message is communicated). They argued that Web 2.0 provides an effective platform for reaching the target stakeholders and enhancing information credibility. Other scholars (Men, 2014; Sheer, 2011) considered face-to-face communication as an efficient channel for conveying complex information since immediate feedback is facilitated.

Even though there is abundant research on CSR communication effectiveness, little of this research has examined the effect from the public's perspective, by looking at the influence of preferred media source for CSR information on CSR perception. Previous research has suggested that publics' perception (i.e., trust) of organizations vary by their media preference for corporate messages and the preference is significantly affected by media credibility (VanderMolen, Cacciatore, Meng, & Reber, 2015; Jo, 2005). Fritch and Cromwell (2001) contended that expertise and trustworthiness are the most salient predictors for perceived credibility of Internet resources while objectivity, fairness, and absence of bias are the determinants of perceived credibility of the conventional media. Hong and Rim (2010) examined the role of organizations' websites, confirming that the consumers' use of such websites contributed to their positive CSR perceptions and trust in the organizations. Echoing Coombs and Holladay's (2002) argument, Kesavan et al. (2013) found that social media is perceived as a more trustworthy source of CSR information than traditional media tools (e.g., TV and advertising). However, Kim and Ferguson (2014) reported that US audiences prefer to receive CSR information via controlled media (e.g., corporate websites, and promotion events) over uncontrolled media (e.g., news media, blogs, and social networking sites). Furthermore, the audiences most preferred the communicator of CSR messages to be CSR beneficiaries, while CEOs and public relations spokespersons were the least preferred. Also, when seeking CSR information, they turn to channels they trust. In addition to media types, Cho, Phillips, Hageman, & Patten (2009) revealed that information richness of social and environmental sustainability messages on corporate websites increased the website users' intention to trust in the messages but did not affect their actual level of trust in the messages nor the perceived social and environmental responsibility of the corporation.

2.3. Importance of trust

Trust, as one of the most valuable assets of organizations in all sectors, has been empirically demonstrated as an important factor in cultivating long-term, positive relationships between an organization and its strategic stakeholders (Ki & Hon, 2007), improving corporate reputation (Walsh, Mitchell, Jackson, & Beatty, 2009), enhancing customer loyalty (Sirdeshmukh, Singh, & Sabol, 2002), gaining positive word-of-mouth recommendations (Ranaweera and Prabhu, 2003), increasing purchase intention (Walsh et al., 2009), achieving positive crisis management outcomes (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) and as the key factor in persuasive storytelling and organization communication engagement (Flynn, 2015). In spite of this, studies on the relationship between trust and CSR have been scarce in the agenda of research on CSR in public relations (Park, Lee, & Kim, 2014).

Trust is defined differently across disciplines. An often-cited definition in management was given by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), who defined trust as:

“the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (p. 712).

The three dimensions of trust—integrity, expertise, and social benevolence—proposed by Mayer et al. (1995) could also be applied to interpersonal, intergroup or inter-organizational levels of trust (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). In public relations, trust is an important outcome of organization–public relationships and is often defined as “one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party” (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 3). After reviewing theories from various disciplines, three dimensions of trust—integrity, dependability, and competence—were identified (Hon & Grunig, 1999) and have been widely adopted in public relations research.

2.4. CSR and trust

It is important to explore the role of CSR in establishing trust because trust's antecedents are of relevance in the CSR context. For example, Saat and Selamat (2014) revealed that rich CSR information increased the consumer's trust perception toward the organization by significantly affecting perceived organizational competence and integrity (but not the perceived benevolence). The limited existing research has demonstrated a link between CSR and perception of trust (of the consumers in most research) and proposed a few explanations as to the mechanism. Martinez and Rodriguez del Bosque (2013) examined CSR among hospitality companies and identified the significant influence of CSR on customer loyalty, with trust as the mediating factor. In discussing the function of CSR in shaping trust, Brown and Dacin (1997) found that a corporation's CSR performance shows its characters and values. CSR performance could instil trust in the corporation among people who share the same characters or values (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Hosmer (1994) claimed that incorporating ethical and responsible principles into the corporate strategic decision-making process would help improve trust among all the stakeholders. When publics perceive an organization as ethical and responsible, they will establish a relationship with the organization in which trust serves as a foundation, with the belief that behaviors of each party in the relationship are reliable beyond any legal limit (Martinez & Rodriguez del Bosque, 2013).

2.5. Consumer engagement as a result of trust in business

Engagement has become an important concept in the business context. In branding, consumer engagement refers to “the nature of participants' specific interactions and/or interactive experiences” (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013). Its other

definitions, as Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, and Ilic (2011) argued, involve the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions as drawing from the organizational psychology perspective. Hollebeek (2011) defines the term as “the level of a customer’s motivational, brand-related, and context-dependent state of mind characterized by specific levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity in brand interactions” (p. 6). According to Macey and Schneider (2008), cognitive engagement provides a perspective in understanding the world, which is reflected in the psychological state (emotional) engagement and then leads to behavioral engagement. We hypothesized that individuals who receive corporate CSR information and form a cognitive perception of the corporation as being socially responsible and thus trustworthy would generate a positive emotion toward the corporation that further triggers their behavioral interactions [e.g., product purchase (Neff, 2007) and word-of-mouth (Doorn et al., 2010)] with the corporation. In the context of online content marketing, trust is an identified antecedent of consumer engagement (word-of-mouth) (Ahuja & Medury, 2010; de Matos & Rossi, 2008).

We proposed the following research questions based on the reviewed literature:

RQ1: How does media source preference affect the public’s evaluation of business CSR performance in general in these three countries?

RQ2: To what extent does CSR contribute to trust in business in the US, Germany, and China (RQ2a)? Is the influence of CSR on trust in business affected by media preference in the investigated countries (RQ2b)?

RQ3: How does individuals’ level of trust in the business lead to their engagement with business in the three countries?

3. Methods

3.1. Data

This study utilized the data of the 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer[®] that randomly surveyed 1200 “informed” respondents from the US (n = 500), Germany (n = 200), and China (n = 500) online. *Informed publics* were aged 25–64, college-educated, in the top 25% of household income per age group, and heavy media users when it comes to consuming and engaging with business news. In other words, informed publics were the elites of each age cohorts in the society.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Media preference

Media preference was assessed by a single item asking “On a typical day, what is the first source that you go to for general information about business?” The participants were given eight response options: social networking sites, microblogging sites, blogs, online search engines, newspapers (print or online), television or television news (broadcast or online), radio or radio news (broadcast or online), and magazines or business magazines (print or online). For the study’s purpose, this variable was recoded to a dichotomous variable with “social media” (i.e., the first four options) coded as “1” and traditional media (i.e., the latter three options) coded as “0.”

3.2.2. CSR dimensions

The *environmental sustainability* dimension of CSR, referring to environmentally-friendly practices, was assessed by a single item asking how well, in general, the business “works to protect and improve the environment.” The *economic sustainability* dimension, defined as long-term profit growth, was assessed by three items asking how well the business “is an innovator of new products, services or ideas,” “offers high quality products or services,” and “delivers consistent financial returns to investors” (Cronbach alpha ranged from 0.867 to 0.882). Seven items were used to assess the *social sustainability* dimension, defined as the corporate commitment to long lasting societal well-being by responding to its stakeholders’ evolving needs. The items asked how effectively the business “has transparent and open business practices,” “has ethical business practices,” “treats employees well,” “creates programs that positively impact the local community in which the company operates,” “partners with NGOs, government and third parties to address societal issues,” “takes responsible actions to address an issue or a crisis,” and “addresses society’s needs in its everyday business” (Cronbach alpha ranged from 0.915 to 0.968). The participants rated all the question items on a 9-point scale where 1 = “performing extremely poorly” and 9 = “performing extremely well.”

3.3. Trust in business and engagement with a trusted company

Trust in business was assessed by a single item asking the participants to rate their level of trust in “business in general in their country to do what is right,” using a 9-point scale (1 = “Do not trust them at all” and 9 = “Trust them a great deal”). *Engagement with a trusted company* was measured by whether, in the preceding 12 months, the participant had performed any of the following actions in relation to the trusted companies, using a dichotomous scale where 1 = yes and 2 = no: product/service purchase, brand recommendation to others, positive online word-of-mouth, stock purchase, and defending the company.

Table 1
 Comparisons of CSR dimensions by media preference.

	CSR dimensions		n	M	SD	t
US	Economic sustainability	Traditional media	312	6.650	1.347	0.323
		Social media	168	5.318	1.635	
	Environmental sustainability	Traditional media	312	6.003	1.980	−0.314
		Social media	168	5.593	2.241	
	Social sustainability	Traditional media	312	6.150	1.697	−0.437
		Social media	168	6.223	1.860	
Germany	Economic sustainability	Traditional media	161	5.844	1.728	−2.415*
		Social media	37	6.584	1.462	
	Environmental sustainability	Traditional media	161	5.627	2.109	−1.983*
		Social media	37	6.380	1.975	
	Social sustainability	Traditional media	161	5.667	1.972	−1.984*
		Social media	37	6.361	1.674	
China	Economic sustainability	Traditional media	165	6.926	1.381	1.611
		Social media	331	6.709	1.433	
	Environmental sustainability	Traditional media	165	6.489	1.822	0.485
		Social media	331	6.400	1.954	
	Social sustainability	Traditional media	165	6.693	1.427	1.193
		Social media	331	6.520	1.565	

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2
 Pairwise comparison results of trust in business between countries.

Country	n	M	SD	M difference		
1. China	499	6.290	1.575	−	0.440*	
2. US	500	5.850	1.906			1.233*
3. Germany	200	5.060	1.863			0.793*

Note: Games-Howell test was performed for the pair-wise comparisons because the datasets did not have equal variances ($F(2, 1196) = 8.886, p < 0.001$).
 * $p < 0.05$.

4. Results

4.1. Effect of media preference on evaluated CSR

Six *t*-tests were performed to test the effect of preferred media sources on evaluated CSR of business in general. The results are summarized in Table 1. *T*-test results were only significant in Germany. The German informed public who used social media as the primary source of business information reported a higher evaluation of the business' CSR performance in all three dimensions than that of those who used traditional media for business information [economic sustainability: $t = -2.415, p < 0.05$; environmental sustainability: $t = -1.983, p < 0.05$; social sustainability: $t = -1.984, p < 0.05$].

4.2. Effects of CSR on trust in business across nations

Participants in the three countries reported various levels of trust in business (see Table 2). ANOVA analysis indicated a significant difference in the trust level among the three countries ($F(2, 1195) = 35.034, p < 0.001$). Pairwise-comparison results were all significant (Games-Howell $P_s < 0.05$), concluding that China ($M = 6.290, SD = 1.575$) had the highest level of trust, followed by the US ($M = 5.850, SD = 1.906$), and Germany ($M = 5.060, SD = 1.863$).

To address RQ2a–b, multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate the association between the perceived CSR dimensions with trust in business depending on the preferred media sources of business information. Results indicated that greater economic sustainability ($t = 1.979, \beta = 0.178, p < 0.005, \eta_p^2 = 0.008$) and greater social sustainability ($t = 2.233, \beta = 0.226, p < 0.005, \eta_p^2 = 0.010$) were both associated with higher trust in business in the US ($F(1, 475) = 30.284, R^2 = 0.203, p < 0.001$). In Germany, only economic sustainability ($t = 4.218, \beta = 0.424, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.084$) had a positive effect on trust in business ($F(1, 193) = 19.289, R^2 = 0.286, p < 0.001$]; while in China, social sustainability ($t = 5.437, \beta = 0.558, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.046$) was the only significant predictor of such trust ($F(1, 614) = 30.284, R^2 = 0.279, p < 0.001$). As Table 3 shows, the interaction between each of the CSR dimensions and media preference was not significant in all three countries, indicating that the preferred media source (social media vs. traditional media) of business information did not moderate the influence of CSR on trust in business among the informed publics in the investigated countries.

Table 3
 Regression results of moderation effect of media preference.

		β	S.E.	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
US	Media preference × economic sustainability	0.143	0.184	0.779	0.436
	Media preference × environmental sustainability	0.205	0.143	1.429	0.154
	Media preference × social sustainability	-0.379	0.209	-1.814	0.070
Germany	Media preference × economic sustainability	0.464	0.312	1.488	0.138
	Media preference × environmental sustainability	-0.132	0.318	-0.415	0.679
	Media preference × social sustainability	-0.104	0.405	-0.256	0.799
China	Media preference × economic sustainability	-0.179	0.185	-0.970	0.333
	Media preference × environmental sustainability	-0.002	0.129	-0.017	0.986
	Media preference × social sustainability	0.119	0.221	0.539	0.590

Note: Social media served as the baseline in multiple regressions.

Table 4
 Correlations between trust in business and engagement with the trusted company.

	Engagement with the trusted company		n (%)	M (SD)	M difference	<i>t</i>
US	Buy products or services	Yes	426 (85.3)	5.934 (1.920)	0.616	2.355 [†]
		No	60 (12.0)	5.318 (1.731)		
	Pay more for products or services	Yes	306 (61.1)	6.003 (1.975)	0.410	2.223 [†]
		No	165 (32.9)	5.593 (1.777)		
	Recommend it to others	Yes	339 (67.8)	5.990 (1.886)	0.397	2.639 ^{**}
		No	139 (27.8)	5.593 (1.777)		
	Share positive corporate opinions or experiences online	Yes	246 (49.3)	6.272 (1.844)	0.881	5.164 ^{***}
		No	236 (47.1)	5.391 (1.899)		
	Buy shares	Yes	163 (32.7)	6.490 (1.861)	0.950	5.297 ^{***}
		No	321 (64.2)	5.540 (1.868)		
	Defend the company to others' negative comments	Yes	204 (40.8)	6.421 (1.828)	0.974	5.598 ^{***}
		No	265 (53.0)	5.447 (1.897)		
Germany	Buy products or services	Yes	154 (76.9)	5.116 (1.830)	0.499	1.455
		No	37 (18.4)	4.617 (2.014)		
	Pay more for products or services	Yes	101 (50.7)	5.193 (1.873)	0.306	1.091
		No	82 (41.1)	4.887 (1.908)		
	Recommend it to others	Yes	113 (56.5)	5.385 (1.730)	0.892	.343 ^{**}
		No	79 (39.3)	4.493 (1.940)		
	Share positive corporate opinions or experiences online	Yes	57 (28.4)	5.908 (1.840)	1.263	4.410 ^{***}
		No	132 (66.0)	4.645 (1.790)		
	Buy shares	Yes	37 (18.4)	5.618 (1.780)	0.725	2.134 [†]
		No	158 (79.1)	4.893 (1.871)		
	Defend the company to others' negative comments	Yes	72 (36.1)	5.408 (1.841)	0.586	2.089 [†]
		No	117 (58.3)	4.822 (1.890)		
China	Buy products or services	Yes	437 (87.4)	6.609 (5.118)	0.716	1.035
		No	55 (11.1)	5.893 (1.634)		
	Pay more for products or services	Yes	367 (73.4)	6.456 (1.577)	-0.415	-0.462
		No	116 (23.2)	6.871 (9.624)		
	Recommend it to others	Yes	413 (82.6)	6.666 (5.249)	0.887	1.493
		No	80 (15.9)	5.779 (1.551)		
	Share positive corporate opinions or experiences online	Yes	348 (69.5)	6.502 (1.574)	-0.156	-0.317
		No	138 (27.7)	6.658 (8.819)		
	Buy shares	Yes	255 (51.1)	6.650 (1.553)	0.311	0.566
		No	239 (47.8)	6.399 (6.785)		
	Defend the company to others' negative comments	Yes	225 (45.1)	6.647 (1.523)	0.193	0.425
		No	249 (49.8)	6.454 (6.664)		

Note: [†]*p* < 0.05, ^{**}*p* < 0.01, ^{***}*p* < 0.001.

4.3. Trust in business and engagement with the trusted company

A series of *t*-tests were conducted to answer RQ3, which investigated the relationship between an individual's perceived trust in business in general, and his/her behavioral and communicative engagement with a trusted company in particular. As the data shows, the informed publics in the three countries preferred to engage with their trusted companies via product/service purchases over other forms (see Table 4). Table 4 also indicates that the US informed participants who in the preceding 12 months (1) purchased products, services, or stocks of a trusted brand (even at a higher price); (2) recommended the trusted brand to their friends or colleagues; (3) shared positive opinions about the brand online; or (4) defended the company to others with negative comments reported a higher level of trust in business in general than those who did not demonstrate such engagement with their trusted brand. In a similar vein, the German participants' trust in business

in general was positively associated with their communication and behaviors (i.e., stock purchase, online and offline recommendations, or defending the brand to others with negative comments) toward the brands they trusted. However, the perceived overall trust in business had no effect on the engagement of the Chinese informed participants with their trusted brands. The results suggest that the US and German informed publics who trusted business in general were more willing to have behavioral or communicative engagement with particular brands they trust. By comparison, the Chinese informed publics' engagement with trusted brands was not dependent on their overall perceived trust in business operating in the nation.

5. Discussion

This cross-national study contributes to the theoretical understanding of CSR as a driver of public trust in business, how the media preferences affect perceived CSR behavior, and the outcomes of such trust (i.e., the positive cognitive-affective-behavior link) among the informed publics in three continents. Some results are further discussed as follows.

5.1. Perceived CSR differences by media P

Our results showed no consistent media usage patterns of the informed public linked to positive CSR evaluation across the three countries. In the US and China, media preference did not affect CSR perception among the informed publics, while in Germany, social media use was positively correlated with such evaluation in all CSR dimensions. This finding implies that effective CSR communication channels are subject to local contexts. The positive effect of social media on CSR evaluation found in Germany supports Kesavan et al.'s (2013) finding. Even though we cannot confirm the reasons why Germans who first turned to social media for business information evaluated corporations in their market contributed more to CSR in all aspects than those who used traditional media for business information seeking, a possible explanation is that informed publics who rely on social media for news feeds are likely to be exposed to CSR information from CSR beneficiaries (i.e., people who have benefited from CSR initiatives) or corporations themselves who are perceived as more preferable sources of CSR communication than news organizations (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). In addition, CSR information shared with others by social media users has the word-of-mouth effect and is persuasive to the receiver (Bruhn, Schoenmueller, & Schafer, 2012).

5.2. Trust in business differences by countries

The trust level significantly differed across countries. Counter-intuitively, China—with an emerging market yet to be fully regulated—had the highest trust in business while Germany had the lowest. A possible explanation is that the informed public's evaluation of the business' "doing the right things" is not solely assessed by its abiding by the law. The relatively low trust in business in Germany in relation to that globally has been a consistent pattern since 2011 (Edelman, 2013, 2014). Despite the possible cultural influence on giving low rating in surveys, the consistent low trust in business score suggests that German informed publics (i.e., elites) do not easily give their trust to business. However, that trust, once earned by corporate behaviors and strategic communication, can serve as a competitive advantage for corporations operating in Germany.

5.3. Drivers and consequences of trust in business

The results suggest that CSR served as a driver of trust in business, but which CSR dimension significantly predicts trust in business varies across nations. Social and economic sustainability had a positive effect on trust in business among the informed public in the US, while economic sustainability influenced such trust in Germany. To the Chinese informed public, social sustainability served as the only significant predictor of trust in business. The impact of trust in business on communicative and behavioral engagements with particular trusted companies also varied in the three countries. While there was a positive correlation between trust in business in general and public engagement (i.e., buying product/service purchase, purchasing stocks, paying more for products/services, sharing positive opinions online, and defending the company) with trusted companies in the US and Germany, such a correlation was not found in China. This result signifies the importance of cultivating trust in business in general for individual trustworthy companies in the US and Germany to gain tangible and intangible rewards from the informed publics.

5.4. Implications for corporate communication and media relations fostering trust

Our results provide several practical implications for corporate communication for trust building. First, the informed publics in the largest markets of North America, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific care about CSR performance when deciding on how much to trust in business. Corporations in these countries should strategically develop CSR messages about their CSR efforts and impacts as a core part of their corporate communication to earn public trust. Secondly, such communication in the US should aim to effectively convey information about the corporation's performance in both social and economic sustainability while in China, the messages should be centered on social sustainability. Media relations and social communication practices should be utilized to facilitate information dissemination in both regions. Thirdly, corporations in Germany should cultivate the informed public's trust in business by targeting those who rely heavily on traditional media for business

information. In specific, we suggest such corporations to practice effective media relations to strategically publicize all their CSR efforts and impacts with a focus on contribution to the local community's economic sustainability. They can also seed CSR messages to the informed public who actively use social media to consume business news, in order to turn this public (who already perceive them as good citizens) into their advocates to further share corporate CSR information or spread positive word-of-mouth on social media. Lastly, corporations that need to utilize social media for such communication must effectively manage their social media communication with the following guidelines: (1) to disseminate accurate information in a timely manner to maintain transparency and authenticity; (2) to rectify inaccurate information in influential social media platforms (e.g., Google or Wikipedia; DiStaso, 2012) or combat rumors; (3) to respond to the comments of the informed public (especially the young audience) who are interested in the organizations; and (4) to interact with the informed public via dialogues and CSR activities to convert them into advocates.

5.5. Limitations and future directions

Although this study utilized random samples and robust analytical methods, it has two limitations. The primary limitation is the questions asked in the survey, which cannot be changed by us. This resulted in uneven item numbers of the three CSR variables. Also, there were no questions to render information on situational or cultural contexts that might best explain the mechanism by which particular CSR variables engender trust building in each nation. Future research with qualitative methods is needed to provide in-depth data that help interpret results and further generate insights. The other limitation lies in the limited generality of the results because of the fact that each country has its unique political, cultural, and societal contexts. The results are, however, informative, and it is worth conducting longitudinal research in these three countries to validate them. The social media source of business news examined in this study did not separate corporate-owned sites from those of other users. Further research should test the social media effect on CSR perception by separating the two kinds of sources. Lastly, trust has multiple aspects (Barber, 1983; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kingshott, 2006; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007) and the literature has suggested different effects of general and specific trust on people's reaction to a corporation (Kenning, 2008). Since trust was measured by a single-item question in this study, future research can test trust as a multidimensional construct (e.g., Hon & Grunig, 1999; Mayer et al., 1995) to explore the impact(s) of each CSR variable on particular trust aspects across cultural settings. Research results are expected to advance our understanding of the CSR-trust linkage.

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