

Internal stakeholder contribution to CSR in Kuwaiti organizations: The role of PR practitioners, employee inclusion, and dialogic communication

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Abstract:

Most public relations (PR) research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) focuses on the significance of external stakeholders, mainly investigating consumer perceptions and societal pressures. This study examines the CSR contribution of internal stakeholders in Kuwaiti banks and telecommunications companies in terms of their inclusion in decision-making, expressing opinions, and providing feedback. Employing stakeholder theory and based on 12 in-depth interviews with PR managers, the findings suggest that many of the practitioners are well-informed and passionate about CSR but believe that their contribution is being limited by top management. The findings also revealed that the C-Suite is the most contributing internal stakeholder while employees, owners, shareholders, and board members are greatly absent in their input. Intervention from top management, the absence of internal guidelines and routines, the personal role of PR managers, the lack of dialogic communication and employee contribution are the most apparent barriers to better management of CSR. The findings provide implications for both CSR theory and practice in discussing the significance of dialogic communication, the inclusion of employee voice, and the ability of PR to independently lead CSR. Suggestions for PR practitioners are presented in the context of the findings.

Keywords: Corporate social responsibility, internal communication, stakeholder theory, public relations, Kuwait

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Introduction

A growing academic attention has been given to corporate social responsibility (CSR) in the last two to three decades (Bortree 2014; S. Kim and Ferguson 2018; Song and Tao 2022; A. Vercic, D. Vercic and Sriramesh 2012). CSR is an opportunity for businesses to address social problems and maintain their legitimate existence in society. Public demands for CSR have been increasing (Feldner and Berg 2014; Kirat 2015), and companies are expected to positively contribute to the environment and society at large (Bortree et al. 2013).

CSR has been widely acknowledged not only as a corporate function of public relations (PR), but also as an opportunity for companies to generate positive organizational outcomes for various stakeholders (D. Lee 2017). Stakeholders can be external such as consumers, non-governmental organizations, local communities, and society at large, or internal such as employees at all levels. Internal stakeholders contribute to the creation, support and participation of CSR programs which consequently add to the programs' authenticity and sustainability (Chen and Hung-Baesecke 2014; Y. Lee and Tao 2020). The contribution of internal stakeholders is indispensable to strategic CSR communication and management (Duthler and Dhanesh, 2018).

Few scholarly efforts have been devoted to the involvement of internal stakeholders in CSR management and the dynamics of how they contribute to CSR through creation, participation, and support or lack thereof (Dhanesh 2012; Duthler and Dhanesh 2018; Y. Lee and Tao 2020; Lewin, Warren, and AlSuwaidi 2020). Several studies have found that involving employees in CSR leads to better employee loyalty, morale, commitment, productivity, creativity, organizational

identification, and citizenship as well as better relationships between employees and their employers (Mamantov 2009; Dhanesh 2012; Dhanesh 2014; Hur, Kim and Jang 2016; Tao et al. 2018; Song and Tao 2022).

However, most existing CSR research has been dominated by an external focus (Y. Lee and Tao 2020), investigating mainly consumer perceptions (Chen and Hung-Baesecke 2014; K. Kim and Park 2009; M. Lee and Jackson 2010). The dominant perspective in the CSR literature disregards the role of internal publics in shaping CSR discourses (Goebel, Marshall, and Locander 2003; Chen and Hung-Baesecke 2014; Tao et al. 2018). The studies that have investigated internal stakeholders have predominantly focused on employees (Cardwell, Williams, and Pyle 2017; Duthler and Dhanesh 2018; Song and Tao 2022; Tao et al. 2018). Employees are one of the most strategic and important stakeholder groups of an organization (Y. Lee and Tao 2020). Thus, successfully involving them in CSR can yield a myriad of reputational, relational, and behavioral benefits for an organization (Jiang 2017).

This study goes beyond employees to include internal stakeholders who are active behind the scenes. Internal publics are defined as groups of individuals who are members of an organization (Muchemi 2015). These groups include employees, top executives, and board members (Cornelissen and Lock 2000). Owners and shareholders are internal stakeholders because of the nature of their relationship with organizations, in which they are represented by the board of directors. Utilizing stakeholder theory and in-depth interviews with PR practitioners, this study attempts to uncover how these internal stakeholders (employees, C-Suite, board members, shareholders, and owners) contribute to the CSR practice of Kuwaiti organizations. The overarching research question of this study is: to what extent do internal stakeholders in Kuwaiti organizations contribute to the CSR discourses and endeavours?

There are several advantages and practical implications of investigating the role of internal stakeholders in CSR in the context of Kuwaiti

organizations. The chosen Kuwaiti companies in this study are among the largest in the country and region. These companies have traversed borders in their corporate practices and operate in several countries across continents. For example, one of the three telecommunications companies operates in 12 countries, and one of the 10 banks operates in nine countries. All employ many people and have a constant and strong media presence and societal involvement and participation. CSR is increasingly becoming part of Kuwait's corporate discourse (Bashir 2019; Gaither and Al-Kandari 2014; White and Alkandari 2019) which has surpassed the traditional practices of philanthropy to include efforts toward sustainability and community involvement (Shu et al. 2021). Due to the cultural similarities between Kuwait and its neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar, the results of this study can be relatively similar and can provide a glimpse into the nature of CSR in the region.

This study is also an attempt to de-Westernize the subject and add Kuwait, a country that is pre-dominantly Muslim, Arab and Middle Eastern, to the relevant literature. The majority of CSR studies employ North American, European and Australian contexts (Darrag and E-Bassiouny 2013; Hofman, Woon, and Wu 2017), and prior research has overlooked CSR in developing countries and the growing Middle Eastern markets (Nurunnabi, Alfakhri, and Alfakhri 2019; Peinado-Vara 2006). This study provides much needed empirical support to establish theoretical connections between CSR, internal publics, stakeholder theory, and the field of PR at large.

Literature review

CSR, PR and internal stakeholders

CSR is the notion that corporations should take social and environmental responsibility for their business operations (Carroll 1999). The practices and policies of corporations should reflect business responsibility for the wider societal good (Matten and Moon 2008). Kotler and Lee (2005, 3) define CSR as “a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business

practices and contributions of corporate resources.” According to Barnett (2007), CSR refers to discretionary corporate actions that aim at improving social welfare while enhancing corporations’ relationships with their stakeholders. CSR includes concepts such as corporate philanthropy, citizenship, sustainability, diplomacy, and social performance (Freeman and Hasnaoui 2011; Garcia and Greenwood 2015). The various definitions of CSR revolve around the expectation that corporations should integrate social, environmental, and economic concerns into their values, culture, strategy, and operations in a transparent and accountable manner that extends beyond financial profits (Kirat, 2015).

CSR has been widely acknowledged as a corporate function of PR, also coined as corporate communications (Benn, Todd, and Pendleton 2010; D. Lee 2017; Muchemi 2015). Before a CSR practice or campaign is implemented in the public domain, PR is supposed to have held internal discussions about CSR ideation, implementation and decision-making based on stakeholders’ concerns and expectations. The task of PR is to manage this type of communication and create constant flows of information and exchange of ideas between all cadres of employees and for all matters of corporate concern. Internal stakeholders should be involved in CSR not only for its actual implementation but also for the inclusion of their concerns and expectations. This contribution is not limited to employees and the C-Suite, but should extend to board members, owners, and shareholders.

Therefore, as previously mentioned, this study extends the definition of internal stakeholders to include owners and shareholders; that is, while the C-Suite, employees and board members are internal in nature due to their tasks and responsibilities, owners and shareholders can also be considered internal stakeholders. Owners can be directly involved by holding corporate positions and indirectly involved through board members. Shareholders are individuals who are represented by board members and involve in corporate matters via these members (J. Kim and Rhee 2011).

Several studies have shown that internal stakeholders' contribution to CSR has substantial effects on an organization such as megaphoning, positive consumers' perceptions and behaviors in terms of purchase, image, and reputation (Van Hoye and Lieyens 2009; S. Lee and Suh 2020), increasing loyalty and internally decreasing the turnover rate (E. Lee, Park, and H. Lee 2013). CSR practices are also highly related with organizations' internal reputation as assessed by employees (Y. Lee 2020). In some situations, external CSR efforts have a high impact on employees' perceived external prestige of their company (Y. Lee 2020). In others, employees' favorable messages about their company's CSR activities positively influenced external attitudes toward the company and purchase intentions (Y. Lee and Tao 2020). These findings demonstrate the significance of employees as internal stakeholders and their impact on consumers' attitudes and behaviors, negatively or positively. Lee (2022) have found that employees have far more impact on consumers on corporate issues relating to CSR and crisis management.

Some studies have demonstrated that internal involvement with a company's CSR has reciprocal advantages. Two-way, dialogic, and open internal communication about CSR leads to positive perceptions of CSR from employees (Duthler and Dhanesh 2018). Internal stakeholder involvement in CSR emphasizes a shared understanding of CSR across all employee levels of an organization via open dialogic communication (Morsing and Schultz 2006). Such two-way symmetrical patterns of communication are more likely to generate ideal situations for PR (Pompper 2004; Grunig and Dozier 2003). Duthler and Dhanesh (2014) demonstrated that dialogic-based internal communication is more effective in promoting employee CSR engagement. In the context of this study, it is worth investigating how and if dialogic communication in CSR takes place within Kuwaiti organizations and how their PR departments handle it.

As previously indicated, CSR research has primarily investigated external stakeholders (K. Kim and Park 2009; M. Lee and Jackson 2010; Wang and Qian 2011; Whitehouse 2006; Wigley 2008). The literature focuses on CSR outcomes rather than processes and external

rather than internal publics, which makes CSR a formality that is externally demanded rather than a virtue that is internally rooted (Chen and Hung-Baesecke, 2014). Most studies in the literature that have investigated internal CSR tend to focus on employees. Thus, to involve the entire internal publics of companies, this study extends beyond employees to include the C-Suite, owners, shareholders and board members.

CSR in Kuwait

According to Jamali and Safadi (2019), CSR in Kuwait remains underdeveloped and requires more efforts from the government and large companies to drive the practice forward. Despite being an established corporate practice in many Kuwaiti organizations in the last decade, the state of CSR in Kuwait remains ambiguous and requires a strategic management to elevate its status, more governmental regulations to guide it, and more scholarly efforts to investigate it (Bashir 2019; Bashir and Alrifai, forthcoming). CSR in Kuwait is predominantly practiced through philanthropy (Gaither and Al-Kandari 2014; White and Alkandari 2019). As Jamali and Safadi (2019) have indicated, while the Islamic practice of *Zakat* in Kuwait has been transformed into philanthropic tax, other CSR practices are fragmented and implemented on an ad-hoc basis, such as marathons and awareness campaigns about health and wellbeing.

CSR in Kuwait has been investigated from various academic and theoretical perspectives but remains an under-researched field. Relevant to this study, Alrifai (2013) discovered that the religious influence of Islam in Kuwaiti banks is salient in their CSR; and its impact involves all aspects including motivations, justifications, and issues. Alrifai (2013) also found limited influence from stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations and shareholders on the banks' CSR. Gaither and Al-Kandari (2014) found that CSR in Kuwaiti banks is deeply rooted in the country's dominant religion of Islam, where it is based on Islamic value orientations such as respect for religious authority, attachment to eternal life, and idealism.

Employing institutional theory, Bashir and Alrifai (forthcoming) found no influential institutional factors on CSR in Kuwait, with the exception of the environment and Islam yet with minimal effect. Analyzing the websites and CSR reports of Kuwaiti companies, Bashir (2019) found that of Kuwait's 100 largest companies, only 39 have a stand-alone CSR menu and 10 have CSR reports. Bashir (2019) also found few mentions of CSR issues such as community involvement and health as well as few mentions of CSR beneficiaries such as society and the environment. Both CSR issues and beneficiaries were found to be generic, implying a failure to accommodate the expectations of different stakeholders and a need for more transparency about CSR from Kuwaiti companies (Bashir 2019). These studies demonstrate the dire need for more CSR research in Kuwait. To the best of the authors' knowledge, no research has investigated the contribution of internal stakeholders toward CSR in Kuwaiti organizations. Employing stakeholder theory in the context of PR and CSR, this study attempts to delve into this understudied area in Kuwait and the literature.

Stakeholder theory

According to stakeholder theory, organizations should effectively relate to stakeholders based on universal ethical values to realize company objectives (Freeman 1984). A stakeholder of an organization is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives (Freeman 1984). A company's stakeholders are not limited to investors, creditors, employees, and shareholders, but also include customers, media outlets, non-profit organizations, and the environment (Richter and Dow 2017). The theory asserts that companies have a social responsibility to consider the views, needs, and interests of all parties affected by their actions (Freeman 1998), involving both internal and external parties (Y. Lee 2019; Muchemi 2015). In terms of their strategic decisions, corporations should be keen to accommodate stakeholders' needs to continue to exist (Coombs and Holladay 2012; Freeman 1984; Richter and Dow 2017). In this case, executive managers are primarily and predominantly responsible to shareholders

and other stakeholders for their business decisions (Dmytriyeu et al., 2021).

CSR has its roots in stakeholder theory (Carroll 1991) because it functions as a means for corporations to manage stakeholders' expectations about corporate behavior (Feldner and Berg 2014). The theory posits that the long-term value of a company rests as much on the knowledge, abilities, and commitment of its employees as it does on its relationships with investors, customers, and other stakeholders (Wheeler and Sillanpaa 1997; as cited in E. Lee, Park and H. Lee 2013).

As this study attempts to achieve, the application of a stakeholder perspective to CSR and the inclusion of a particular set of internal stakeholders provides a promising venue for research. Dmytriyeu et al. (2021) have argued that applying stakeholder theory in the context of CSR provides an instrumental side for further theoretical development. Given the rationale, the theory suggests that through dialogue an organization should include external and internal stakeholders' contribution because they affect and are affected by their organizations. Examining internal stakeholders' contribution to CSR reveals detailed dynamics of how CSR is managed behind the scenes and offers a potential framework for operationalizing internal CSR contribution. The theory provides a way for PR practitioners and communicators to understand their obligations and responsibilities for various stakeholders, regardless of whether they are external or internal. The knowledge of how they contribute, or lack thereof, can be utilized as a roadmap to enhance CSR and internal communication. With their inclusion and contribution, CSR can be a step closer toward a strategic implementation that professionally reflects corporate efforts to improve social welfare (Duthler and Dhanesh 2018).

Research questions

This study aims to uncover the contribution of internal stakeholders to the CSR of Kuwaiti companies. The first research question investigates the practitioners' definition and understanding of CSR,

and the motivations of their companies for implementing CSR. The second research question addresses the contribution of each internal stakeholder to CSR.

RQ1: As PR practitioners of your organizations, how do you define and understand CSR?

RQ 2: How do the following internal stakeholders contribute to the companies' CSR, if at all?

- Employees
- C-Suite
- Board members
- Shareholders
- Owners

Methodology

This study uses in-depth interviews with PR practitioners to examine the contribution of internal stakeholders. A total of 12 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with practitioners from Kuwait's three telecommunications companies and nine of 10 banks (Table 1). Only one bank rejected the authors' request for an interview. Compared to other companies, these companies were chosen because of their strong and consistent media presence throughout the year and during occasions, in addition to being the most active companies in public life, particularly in terms of CSR (Gaither and Al-Kandari 2014; White and Alkandari 2019). Their events and advertisements dominate public life in Kuwait in both traditional and new media platforms. These companies sponsor events, organize marathons, and promote health awareness campaigns in addition to their commercial and advertising efforts. All participants were in-house PR practitioners who spanned a range of experiences

and ranks with different job titles such as corporate communications director, corporate public relations officer and/or manager, senior communications specialist, and corporate communications and relations manager. Their responsibilities included media relations, campaigns, internal communications, social media management, and CSR. The authors required that the participants meet two criteria: working in public relations or corporate communications departments and having at least three years of work experience in these departments. Following these criteria ensured that the participants would be well versed in CSR and, thus, would have had sufficient experience to provide insightful responses to the research questions. Ten of the participants were the managers of their departments while two were senior assistant managers.

Table 1. Kuwait’s telecommunications companies and banks

Sample and Nature of Organizations		
Commercial Banks		Telecommunication Companies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Bank of Kuwait (NBK) • Gulf Bank • Commercial Bank of Kuwait • Burgan Bank • Ahli Bank of Kuwait 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boubyan Bank • Warba Bank • Al-Ahli United Bank • Kuwait International Bank (Al-Dawli) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zain • stc • Ooredoo

All interviews were conducted via Zoom with the exception of one interview, which was conducted in person. The interviews were recorded, and ranged from 38 to 121 minutes. The data collection was concluded after reaching data saturation where responses started to repeat. The answers of the interviews were in both English and Arabic, which the authors of this study are fluent in both languages. The interviews were transcribed in *Word* document and then coded using Straus’s (1987) open and axial coding approaches. The former is based on open coding categories to extract themes that refer and correspond to each internal stakeholder. That is, the coding was based on the corresponding answers to each internal stakeholder. The latter approach was applied to unexpected themes that emerge from the data as overarching observations. This was done through careful

examination where the authors read, re-read, and annotated the transcripts and searched for repeating and prevalent clusters of words, patterns, passages, and statements according to each stakeholder's relation to CSR.

To reach an intersubjective validation between the two authors, we followed similar approaches recommended by Bae (2017). First, based on the scholarly literature, we conceptually defined and agreed on the concepts of the study prior to the data collection. Second, we engaged in the data collection by conducting all interviews together. Third, we both verified the data analysis by comparing each other's interpretations of the findings. We found minor conflicts in our interpretations of the findings, which were resolved mutually.

Internal stakeholder contribution is measured by the extent of feedback that an internal stakeholder provides about CSR views, concerns, and experiences. The authors do not aim to determine whether these stakeholders physically participate in CSR efforts; rather, they aim to learn more about the stakeholders' contribution to CSR in terms of making decisions, expressing opinions, and providing feedback. The focus is to learn more about the organizational level, at which ideas and opinions of CSR programs are discussed than about the activity level. As indicated, this study considers owners and shareholders in addition to the C-Suite, employees and board members as internal stakeholders. They are significant publics because of their internal role in encouraging or inhibiting organizational efforts.

Findings

Generally, all practitioners, with the exception of one, indicated that their PR departments are responsible for the management of CSR. The exception indicated their CSR team is a corporate-level committee that consists of representatives from each department but remains headed by PR. This finding is positive and promising because it means that PR departments are the designated units to head CSR in their organizations.

CSR definitions, understandings and motivations

Most of the respondents' definitions of CSR revolved around the responsibility of corporations to positively contribute to society without any intended commercial gains. To the respondents, CSR is "social actions beyond commercial interests," which represents the ethical side of corporations "to create change" and "sustain development." They consider CSR to be a corporate "obligation," "inseparable," and a "must involvement" where it is "no longer voluntary" but "mandatory" and "part of a national, ethical, and humanitarian duty [of corporations] toward society." They strongly believe CSR has gone "beyond corporate compliance with laws and ethical practices" to "an expected non-business-oriented effort toward social good." To the respondents, CSR encompasses the responsibilities companies have to the society and communities within which they exist and operate.

In terms of motivations, most respondents repeatedly indicated that CSR is "a genuine belief" of their corporations in "giving back" to the community and "meeting the wants and needs" of various stakeholders. Through CSR, their companies aim to "helping" society in "solving" its problems, and in socially "benefiting" and creating "a positive impact." Several respondents indicated that the growing global awareness and demand toward sustainability were additional reasons for their corporations to do CSR. They strive to follow international standards and criteria in CSR such as the environment, social and governance (ESG) goals as well as the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.

Internal stakeholders' contribution to CSR

This second research question explores the extent of contribution of internal stakeholders to CSR. Due to similar, and even identical, findings among board members, shareholders, and owners, they are organized under one category. In contrast, findings about employees and the C-Suite are in separate categories.

Employees

While employees were expected to be major contributors to their organizations' CSR, the responses showed contradictory results. Regardless of whether the respondents were from telecommunications companies or banks, employees did not seem to contribute to CSR in the manner reflected and explained in the literature. Approximately five of the 12 respondents indicated a total lack of employee contribution to CSR, with direct answers such as “no, it is rare,” “no influence or contribution whatsoever,” and “not really.”

The lack of employee contribution was mainly based on the justification that PR departments are solely responsible for managing CSR and that employee contribution is “a peripheral matter.” To the respondents, CSR is a matter between PR and top management. Issues about CSR ideas, budgets, implementation, and evaluation are discussed with top executives and never reach employees for their input. According to one respondent from a telecommunications company, “The [PR] department manages and thoroughly discusses CSR without going through employee feedback or concerns...we then present and report our ideas and plans...directly to top executives.”

The remaining practitioners believe employees contribute to CSR but their actual contribution is minimal. The respondents clearly expressed the belief that employees should be given the opportunity to be part of the CSR process. As PR practitioners, they try to include employee voice; however, a closer look at their responses shows the opposite. While they theoretically believe in incorporating employee voice, they practically do not strive to do so. For example, several respondents stated that, “employees suggest CSR ideas and initiatives,” “suggestions do come from employees,” “across different levels and departments of the company,” and employees “provide great [CSR] ideas and initiatives that we [PR] haven't thought of.” The respondents also affirm “listening to their [employees'] ideas and taking them into account.” However, it was not clear how employee contribution was taken into account or how it would be reflected in the companies' CSR. The respondents did not provide any organizational-

level routines to include employee voice. Two deductively extracted findings elaborate on the lack of employee contribution in the axial finding section.

C-Suite

The C-Suite displayed a tangible contribution of a different nature to the CSR of the Kuwaiti companies. The responses presented two differing viewpoints. The first view is that the C-Suite is the decision maker in every aspect of CSR, with limited opportunities for PR to provide input. Almost every step in the CSR process needs first to be discussed with and cleared by the C-Suite. For the second view, the C-Suite is cooperative and understanding but remains the final decision maker. The C-Suite authorizes PR to manage CSR but has the final say in the process of CSR development and implementation. These two viewpoints were not equally shared among the 12 organizations, with the latter being more evident than the former.

In the former, the C-Suite contributes by deciding every aspect of CSR from ideation to implementation. The responsibility of PR is mere execution. Several respondents indicated that the C-Suite solely chooses CSR issues relating to sports, education, financial literacy, or health without considering opinions from PR. In these organizations, CSR decisions are made by top executives such as chief executive officers (CEOs), chief financial officers (CFOs), and vice presidents, with most decisions being made by CEOs. According to several respondents, "...the ones influencing CSR the most is the CEO," "Top managers are the ones deciding on CSR. They don't contribute, they decide," and "They are the decision makers for our CSR...particularly the CEO."

One respondent from a bank indicated that, "The CEO is a big fan of sports and believes that the youth need all kinds of support. His personal belief has been part of [the organization's] CSR...and most of our CSR initiatives are geared toward sports." Another respondent stated, "The CEO tells us to sponsor some initiatives and we cannot reject his request. The initiatives might not be 100% aligned with our

CSR philosophy but you still have to do them.” The respondents expressed their disagreement with, and even resentment, toward the way the C-Suite intervenes. However, as one respondent noted, “they are the ones on top of the hierarchy.”

In the latter perspective, the C-Suite is “cooperative,” “understanding,” and “encouraging,” but remains most of the time the ultimate decision maker regarding CSR. Infrequently, the C-Suite gives total autonomy to PR to manage and execute CSR. According to a respondent from a bank, “the CEO and vice chairman [contribute] by listening to us. They suggest and exchange ideas with us...they accept our ideas.” According to another respondent from a bank,

Top management has given us the power to come up with [CSR] ideas and execute them in a manner that we [PR] see fit...They have given us the power to execute initiatives that we believe in, not in what they believe in...it demonstrates their support to us...but top executives sometimes make final decisions that we wish we could make.

Within this perspective, several respondents somewhat confirmed the full autonomy of PR in the management of CSR. According to them, this autonomy is not attributed to the C-Suite’s lack of understanding of CSR, but to their belief that PR as a department is the entity responsible for managing CSR. Several respondents mentioned that members of the C-Suite are strong believers in CSR and highly encourage PR to excel at what they do. According to several respondents, “Some of the executives are encouraging us to do more CSR,” “meet the UN sustainability goals,” and “embed the ESG framework into our CSR,” and more importantly, they are “authorizing us to carry on such responsibilities.”

Therefore, the C-Suite as an internal stakeholder is a significant contributor to the CSR discourse in these Kuwaiti organizations. The C-Suite is a positive contributor at times in authorizing PR to manage CSR but a negative contributor at other times in dictating how and what to do in CSR.

Owners, board members and shareholders

Three stakeholders – owners, board members, and shareholders – are combined under one category due to similar and even identical responses from the interviewees. In general, the majority of respondents indicated that these stakeholders do not contribute to CSR, and, at times, “are totally absent from the CSR scene.” Their “rare” input was exhibited mainly in the form of “encouragement,” “utter support,” and “genuine belief” in CSR, as well as their “belief and trust” in PR to oversee CSR. The respondents provided brief answers regarding the involvement of these stakeholders, with direct answers such as “not really,” “not at all,” “rarely,” and “absolutely no involvement of any sort.” The following responses briefly describe the contribution of owners, shareholders and board members:

“Not a single time have I ever heard the owners tell us to do anything related to CSR.”

“I haven’t been in a single situation where I was pressured by our shareholders to do CSR.”

“Rarely, to the extent I don’t remember any situation in which I was asked to do a CSR initiative demanded by our board members and shareholders.”

“I didn’t experience any situation in which the owners of the bank intervened in CSR.”

“Our shareholders are asking for more social responsibility efforts...without any kind of intervention from them.”

Of the few respondents who indicated some contribution, they confirmed that it remained minimal, citing that “They only suggest ideas,” “infrequently,” and “it’s a rarity.” Therefore, it can be concluded that owners, shareholders and board members do not significantly contribute to the CSR discourse of these Kuwaiti organizations.

Axial findings

Within the responses, the authors extracted two recurring themes. These themes pertain to the personal role of PR managers in CSR, and to the absence of agreed-upon regulative guidelines and routines in administering CSR.

Personal role of PR managers

Several studies have found that PR practitioners and communications managers have played a major role in deciding, shaping and influencing CSR (Cardwell, Williams, and Pyle 2017; Eiro-Gomes and Raposo 2020; Reeves 2016), and Kuwait is not an exception as this study discovered. This finding applies exclusively to organizations and respondents whose top management allowed them to manage CSR. Approximately seven PR managers were personally influential in their organizations' CSR, such as in deciding the issues and initiatives, as well as the motivations for implementing CSR. The following responses illustrate this point.

I don't like this trend where all companies jump on the bandwagon as you can see during [Kuwait's] National and Liberation days or giving free coffees... My philosophy is aligning the bank's efforts with what the community really needs and lacks....

...I would do CSR initiatives that are different from anyone else and would carry on for years...and I would coordinate with other organizations to increase the impact....

I have my own CSR directions. I don't compete with anyone. I have a target in CSR that I want to see implemented...I want to expand our CSR to create impact in society.

I always suggest that something has to be done toward people with special needs...I don't look at what competitors do...I take my own path in deciding our [name of bank] CSR although my employees at the department tell me that we should imitate what competitors are doing.

I always assign my team CSR tasks in terms of what we should do, why, when and what's in it for us. I have my own direction in [which] the bank should be headed. Fitting CSR to the bank is not my concern here. My concern is societal impact.

...I tell top executives this is what needs to be done [in terms of CSR]...

For me, the purpose of CSR is its impact...I'm a fan of the medical community in Kuwait. And I always sponsor their initiatives...because what they do is so humanitarian and important for society and I respect that.

My main concern is to benefit society...I want to benefit students. I want to benefit children...My aim in CSR exceeds the bank's aim.

The context within which these respondents were talking during the interviews did not implicate speaking on behalf of their organizations. Rather, they were expressing their own personal philosophy and understanding of CSR and how they want to personally accomplish CSR under the name of their organizations. They frequently referred to themselves as the orchestrators of their companies' CSR. Many examples further confirm this finding with the following language, "I try to include...", "My belief...", "I don't like this trend...", "I tell my team...", "...I tell top executives...", "I pressure...", "I specify...", "My philosophy...", "My strategy...", "I try to align...", "I always assign my team...", "I try to embed...", and "I want to focus on..." These examples demonstrate the personal role of the practitioners in influencing their organizations' CSR.

Absence of regulative guidelines and routines for CSR

Another extracted finding is the absence of internal regulative guidelines and routines in the management of CSR. The respondents did not provide any guidelines describing the tasks and responsibilities of their departments and employees or explaining how CSR is administered in their daily routines. During the interviews, the respondents stated having "corporate procedures that govern how CSR

is managed.”When they were asked to further elaborate about these procedures, none of the respondents provided substantial feedback.

For example,one respondent from a bank mentioned the practice of, “sending out emails to employees about any CSR ideas they have.” However, this respondent confirmed that this practice is “random,” “infrequent,”and “not based on a list of tasks I need to follow.”The respondent did not provide any information regarding whether employee voice would be considered even if employees respond to the email. When asked if such an email would be an organizational-level tool to include employee voice, the respondent stated, “Kind of...in away, yes.”According to another respondent from a bank, the department “asks for employee feedback and suggestions” before and after implementing a CSR event. However, they did not explain how these questions are being asked or how the suggestions and feedback are being collected. Another respondent from a bank indicated having developed guidelines for managing CSR;but when asked about these guidelines, the respondent replied, “we send emails, and we talk to them.” These answers do not illustrate organizational-level routines.

Only one practitioner from a bank indicated havingprocedures in place to obtain ideas and feedback from their employees. According to this respondent, “we achieve it [CSR] through email and internal social media accounts and we organize meetings from time to time that are solely dedicated to CSR matters, especially when we want to launch a campaign.” However, these procedures were also “infrequent...informal...and are not based on a list of things I have to do.”

Discussion

In terms of the conceptual definition of CSR by these PR practitioners which pertains to the first research question, the responses were relatively similar to how CSR is defined and understood. The definitions and motivations of CSR were described similarly among the respondents, varying from classical definitions as the “voluntary integration of corporate social practices into business activities” to the

responsibility of corporations to “positively contribute” to society “without the intention of any commercial gain.” According to the respondents, CSR is “a genuine belief” motivated by “giving back” to the community, “elevating societal problems,” “creating change,” “sustaining development,” and meeting “the wants and needs” of stakeholders. These responses suggest that many of these practitioners are well-informed and passionate about CSR.

While the respondents demonstrated a strong theoretical understanding of CSR as a phenomenon, their responses in relation to the second research question showed a lack of contribution from almost all internal stakeholders. Among employees, the C-Suite, shareholders, owners, and board members, the C-Suite was the only contributing entity toward CSR and the remaining stakeholders had minimal to no contribution. However, the contribution of the C-Suite exhibited a different nature. In some organizations, the C-Suite dictates the CSR direction and is the ultimate decision maker in all aspects of the CSR process. In other organizations, the C-Suite allows PR to practice their CSR role but remains the final authority in accepting or rejecting their proposals, among other matters.

In an ideal situation, PR would consider the CSR concerns of the C-Suite and incorporate them into the overall company discourse of CSR. Rather, in some organizations in Kuwait the C-Suite enforces its own CSR views and uses PR as a tool for implementation. In other organizations, the C-Suite is the final authority for CSR even if it allows PR to lead CSR. This finding is not surprising given the considerable evidence that the CEO and other top executives play a pivotal role in formulating a company’s CSR strategies (Benn, Todd, and Pendleton 2010; Cardwell, Williams, and Pyle 2017; Chen and Hung-Baesecke 2014; Craig 2007; S.-Y. Kim and Reber 2008; Reeves 2016; Song and Tao, 2022).

Most of the respondents believe that the lack of CSR contribution from shareholders, board members, and owners is attributed to these stakeholders’ belief in PR’ responsibility to manage CSR. Given the nature of their role, these stakeholders avoid interfering with corporate

operations and let executives and managers lead the way. Such a belief demonstrates the delegation of specific tasks and responsibilities to specific departments. However, strategic management of CSR requires at least the inclusion of these stakeholders' opinions and concerns in CSR. Their inclusion is important because they both affect and are affected by corporate practices.

It was unfortunate to witness an immense lack of employee contribution in CSR in all organizations. Some respondents clearly mentioned the total absence of any employee contribution while others mentioned that employees are given the opportunity to voice their opinion. However, as the findings show, PR and the C-Suite still have the most authority in CSR development and implementation. Additionally, of the respondents who claim that they consider employee voice, the necessary tools to do so are ambiguous.

Several studies have found that involving employees in CSR is indispensable to ensuring the successful implementation of CSR initiatives (Duthler and Dhanesh 2018; Y. Lee 2021; Song and Tao 2022). Employee perceptions of CSR increase employee attachment to their company and corporate performance (E. Lee, Park, and H. Lee 2013). CSR is a good internal relationship maintenance strategy between employees and their employers (Dhanesh 2014). Employees' word-of-mouth communication about their companies' CSR influences external stakeholders' attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the company (Y. Lee and Tao 2020). These advantageous effects would not be possible without the inclusion of employees in the CSR process. As this study has shown, PR has made few attempts to provide opportunities for employees to contribute to their companies' CSR. Top management and PR need to cultivate employee-organization relationships.

Other factors to “factor in” CSR

The personal role of PR managers and the absence of regulative management routines and guidelines were two observations that

emerged from the responses. These two findings further describe and explain the internal state of CSR in these Kuwaiti organizations. For the former, which applies to approximately seven of the 12 organizations, the personal understandings, beliefs, and views of CSR by PR managers have an immense impact on their organizations' CSR. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the participating PR managers played a significant role in setting the tone and direction of their companies' CSR through their own beliefs about what constitutes CSR and what initiatives they should focus on. Notably, the personal role of the managers is influential in the early stages of the CSR process. Once their input reaches higher levels, they are subjected to the judgement of the C-Suite to accept or reject them.

Regarding the latter, there was a distinct absence of routines and guidelines for PR to regulate their day-to-day management of CSR. The responses toward how CSR is managed do not indicate exemplary organizational-level procedures by which employees abide. Throughout the interviews, no clear and practical routines were mentioned to illustrate how PR listen to and act upon CSR ideas and feedback from internal stakeholders, particularly employees. The respondents indicated having an open-door policy but none of them, with the exception of one, mentioned having practical measures in place. The process seemed to reflect short conversations in the hallway or elevator which does not qualify as listening to employees.

State of CSR, PR, and internal stakeholders

The findings of this study are simultaneously promising and problematic. On a positive note, the PR departments in some of these Kuwaiti organizations lead the CSR scene with considerable independence. The PR managers are well-informed and passionate about CSR. CSR is embedded in the corporate practice of these organizations. However, the findings also show some barriers to better management of CSR. There is clearly a lack of coordination between PR and internal stakeholders, and the former should be responsible for upholding the task of relationship-building with the latter, especially with employees. There is an absence of guidelines and routines for PR

to follow in the management of CSR. The personal role of PR managers is highly evident in influencing CSR tone and direction. Last, the C-Suite's intervention in PR contributes to the overall situation, making the role of PR instrumental. These obstacles are inter-related and over-lapping. We provide the following recommendations considering the current state of CSR in Kuwait.

PR managers are recommended to accomplish three important tasks. The first task is to communicate value to top management and convince them about the leadership role of PR in managing CSR. Top executives need to understand that the survival of an organization depends on the support of its stakeholders, and a principal function of a company's management is to handle their needs and expectations (Herold 2018). It is logical for PR to handle such a function because representing stakeholders' expectations to management is their central role (Benn, Todd, and Pendleton 2010). PR involves establishing mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their stakeholders (White and Mazur 1995). Thus, CSR inevitably provides the opportunity for PR to engage in relationship-building, within the organization and the community (Reeves 2016). Logically and strategically, PR should have considerable authority to independently manage CSR. Top executives should facilitate and support PR in its role in managing CSR and strive to remove any obstacles facing the department.

The second task is for PR to implement a two-way dialogic style of communication with all stakeholders, internal and external, and in any issue of corporate concern. Dialogic communication is "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions denoting communicative give and take" (Kent and Taylor 1998, 325), "which values sharing and mutual understanding and focuses on genuine and meaningful interactions (Song and Tao 2022, 2). Dialogic communication enables and allows PR to create an interactive internal climate for mutual communication and facilitates the exchange of ideas among communicators and stakeholders (De Bussy, Ewing, and Pitt 2003). Thus, dialogic communication provides a shared understanding, interpretation, and implementation of a company's CSR philosophy

and vision. This alignment would give internal stakeholders a sense of collaboration that their contribution is taken into account, ultimately increasing their proximity to their companies' CSR (Dhanesh 2014).

Several studies have shown that effective internal CSR communication is a prerequisite for PR's success in developing mutually beneficial relationships with key publics (Cardwell, Williams, and Pyle 2017; Chen, Regina, and Hung-Baesecke 2014). When PR managers ensure that their companies' CSR is consistent with stakeholders' concerns, they make a greater commitment to the CSR activities and perceive them in a positive manner (Duthler and Dhanesh, 2018; E. Lee, Park, and H. Lee 2013). This outcome would be achievable with the implementation of dialogic communication. It foregrounds notions of listening, mutual understanding and shared responsibility and has been identified as a strategy for strengthening relationships with stakeholders (Devin and Lane 2014). Although scholars advocate for a dialogic approach of communication, research has shown that there is minimal progress in this regard (Cardwell, Williams, and Pyle 2017; Chen and Hung-Baesecke 2014), which applies to Kuwait as well.

The third task is to have agreed-upon guidelines and routines for managing the CSR process. Through their human resources departments and general managers, organizations specify tasks, responsibilities, and expectations for employees at all levels. Either CSR is not among the job description of the PR departments of these Kuwaiti organizations or the recency of CSR as a phenomenon has not been incorporated into their corporate tasks, leading PR managers and employees to improvise in the CSR process. A collection of coherent and consistent practical and procedural guidelines is needed for a better functioning of CSR. Some practical suggestions are provided below.

Accomplishing these tasks would elevate the current status of CSR in these Kuwaiti organizations. Through dialogic communication, these organizations could avoid sidelining any stakeholder and greatly reduce the personal influence of PR managers. These tasks heavily

depend on top management's facilitation and support. Without them, obstacles to dialogic communication, the personal role of PR managers, interventions from top management, and lack of CSR routines would persist and would consequently make PR an instrumental tool for CSR instead of a managerial tool. Top executives need to recognize the need for their organizations to meaningfully interact with all publics who have a stake in corporate practices.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study provides significant theoretical and practical implications for effective internal stakeholders' contribution to CSR. Theoretically, the study adds to the growing body of literature on internal CSR management, bridging and extending theoretical insights from PR, CSR, and stakeholder theory. As previously mentioned, studies have shown that greater stakeholder involvement in CSR leads to better relationships with their organizations in terms of trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction.

This study also reveals the practical significance of implementing dialogic communication as part of the CSR process. A changing communication environment is needed in Kuwait. PR managers should ensure that there is a constant flow of information about CSR by collaborating with all cadres of internal publics. Through companywide emails, newsletters, face-to-face communication, general assembly meetings, brown bag meetings, internal events, surveys, internal focus groups, and internal social media accounts (including video), PR managers can better understand the CSR expectations of their internal stakeholders and consequently incorporate them into the CSR practices of their organizations.

Conclusion

The findings in Kuwait are not surprising given similar previous research in the field. The respondents are well-informed and passionate about CSR. However, there is a distinct lack of executive support for PR to manage CSR, narrowing their role to one of a

technical nature rather than a strategic or managerial nature. Because of its decision-making ability, top management prevents PR from playing a leadership role in CSR, potentially hindering the implementation of dialogic communication and the persistence of PR managers' personal influence in CSR.

There is also a lack of dialogic communication with internal stakeholders in these organizations. The state of internal CSR communication seems to be a random process, which explains the lack of contribution from any stakeholders, particularly employees. Implementing dialogic communication can ensure the inclusion of stakeholders' voice and can contribute, as Svendsen and Jonsson (2022) have indicated, to the democratization of the workplace. Having CSR guidelines and routines would ensure organizational-level clarity about how CSR is managed from development to implementation. These guidelines would limit the personal influence of PR managers on CSR.

Through a stakeholder framework, this study attempted to broaden the understanding of CSR in Kuwait by investigating the contribution of internal stakeholders to CSR. The study extended stakeholder theory to the context of CSR and internal publics. By examining this relatively understudied area of CSR and the region of the Middle East, it attempted to fill an important missing link in the literature and CSR between the significance of internal stakeholders' contribution to CSR and its relevance to PR in facilitating it. The study also responded to calls for further CSR investigations in Arab countries (Aitken and Watkins 2017; Al-Abdin, Roy, and Nicholson 2018) and to close the gap in pertinent research in Kuwait and the Middle East.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample of respondents was only derived from telecommunications companies and banks. Future researchers should expand the sample to other sectors such as food, retail, real estate, and investment companies. Although these two sectors have immense visibility and activity in Kuwait's public and media domains, expanding the sample might provide additional information about the role of internal stakeholders in the management

of CSR. Second, this study did not delve into any potential details regarding the two business sectors of the respondents. Future researchers could expand on CSR in Kuwait by uncovering differences and/or similarities among business sectors. As shown, the responses were very similar despite coming from managers in different sectors which implies isomorphism; a process in which businesses from different sectors implement similar practices because they are perceived as best practices (Mattenand Moon 2008). Last, the research questions and responses focused on internal stakeholders' contribution in terms of decision-making, providing opinions, and feedback, rather than the operational aspects of actual CSR participation and implementation. In future research, the implementation aspect can be introduced to further confirm whether employees are utilized as instruments of CSR or as the key drivers of it.

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