

Conceptualising the Role of Opinion Leaders as Moderator to Local Communities Commitment in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Communication

AMMAR REDZA AHMAD RIZAL
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

DAYANG AIZZA MAISHA ABANG AHMAD
HUMAIRA RASLIE
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

ABSTRACT

Corporations are subjected to high criticism due to the misuse of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication to shelter their wrongdoing in running business activities. Obtaining trust from the local communities will increase corporations' chances to earn Social Licence to Operate (SLO). Although communication is typically a two-way process, in communication research, getting a response from the targeted personnel is much more valuable. However, extant studies provide insufficient understanding related to communicative framework in engaging with local communities. Current research trends in CSR communication are skewed towards the effects of CSR communication, legitimacy of CSR communication, as well as the challenges in carrying out CSR communication. In this study, the current model of communication which is based on the mechanistic perspective of communication is discussed and expanded. Three important communication elements are analysed, and their relationship is proposed to form a new conceptual framework that includes a fourth element: opinion leader. The suggested framework primarily describes and provides arguments for the extent of communication willingness in affecting communication commitment. The crux of this framework is communication quality; transpiring in three formative factors namely bi-directional communication, symmetrical information and transparency. This framework believes that investigating the role of opinion leader in moderating the success of CSR communication adds empirical insights in the emerging literature of CSR communication. The discussed framework could be implemented in understanding dialogue between corporations and local communities.

Keywords: *CSR communication, opinion leader, dialogue, communication quality, local community.*

INTRODUCTION

The role of communication in communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) between corporations and stakeholders has become extremely important and critical (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Crane & Glozer, 2016). This includes marketing and promotion of products (Troise & Camilleri, 2021), as well as stakeholder engagement initiatives (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). The increasing importance of CSR communication from convincing stakeholders (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004) to fulfilling stakeholders' expectations on corporations' commitment to the society (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011) has attracted more researchers to embark on various disciplinary studies in CSR communication.

There are three major areas that have been identified as CSR communication study, namely functionalist, normative and constitutive role of communication. In brief, functionalist views communication as the tool for transmitting information from one party to the other; normative advocates ethical ways which primarily include the participation of various

stakeholders in the communication process while constitutive views communication as a process instead of tools in constructing personal or/and organisational attributes (Crane & Glozer, 2016).

Although recently, scholars have increased their discussion on the constitutive role of communication towards organisation in CSR communication disciplines, but the attention on the instrumental/functionalist role of CSR should not be decreased. As explained by Crane and Glozer (2016), there is a “missing link” in finding the best approach to conduct CSR communication. This is particularly due to the high level of scepticism that the external stakeholders (e.g. community and government) have towards the corporation (Dawkins, 2004; Crane & Glozer, 2016). On this consequential ground, the communication related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly important to corporations around the world. Further, the increasing numbers of corporations observing and engaging in CSR activities have resulted in the imperative demand for strategic CSR Communication. Organisations and corporations believe that it is important for information and messages related to their CSR activities being disseminated effectively, as effective communication strategies, will ultimately garner positive outcomes for the company. The outcomes include enhancement of the corporation image, acquisition of legitimate and social license to operate and an increase in the stakeholders’ support towards the corporation (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Tata & Prasad, 2015).

However, communicating CSR is a complex and rather difficult process (Dawkins, 2004). Corporations commonly face scepticism from the public in relation to their CSR communication programmes. To the public, CSR communication is a form of hypocrisy; using advertising or public relation (PR) campaign (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2008) to camouflage and cover corporations’ wrongdoings. Several new terms have been coined in relation to CSR efforts, such as “green-washing”, “blue-washing”, “pink-washing” and “window dressing” (Elving & Vuuren, 2011), thus amplifying the scepticism and overall negative perception of CSR communication. In addition, the public’s low awareness on corporations’ CSR activities also contributes to the misunderstanding towards the organising corporations. The aforementioned factors are the significant hurdles faced by corporations when promoting good, well-intended CSR activities (Elving et al., 2015). Despite the unfavourable opinions of the public, researchers strongly emphasise on the need for corporations to have good CSR communication strategies that could create public awareness, and conducted in ethical manners (Ziek, 2009).

Extant studies on CSR communication are divided into several distinctive disciplines and areas. A majority of the studies in CSR communication focused on the question of how stakeholders should be involved in the CSR communication (i.e. their expectations on the CSR) (Golob et al., 2013). Some research discussed the communication models that corroborate with the characteristics of CSR tools and channels (68.3%). Less than 20% of the studies related to CSR communication looked into the communication strategies (Golob et al., 2013); and out of the 20%, half of the research concentrated on the advertising aspects of CSR – particularly choosing digital or conservative channel vis-à-vis general public outreach (Golob et al., 2013). The spotlight on CSR communication work in relation to the public is expected because as potential consumers, the public is an important stakeholder to corporations. It is however equally important for corporations to also essentialise the local communities where the operation process takes place. This is because any disputes with the local community could affect the corporation’s production and corporate image (Jeanneret & Hall, 2015). For

instance, in Australia, improper communication strategies related to Social License to Operate have resulted in a social conflict between the local community in Hepburn and a wind farm's corporation (Hall, Ashworth & Devine-Wright, 2013). In this light, it is proven that good communication strategies are needed for corporations to obtain Social License to Operate (SLO) from the communities. Other than to enable corporations obtain SLO, practicing good and quality communication with the community also provides input to improve other operation areas in the region. It must however be highlighted that the corporations which will be highly affected by the local communities are the controversial corporations. Controversial corporations are viewed as "sinful" by the society or communities on the basis of their product, service or operational practice. The societal view is based on the community's social norms, the addictive nature of the product or service, the potential of the product, service or/and operation in creating undesirable social consequences, or the environmental destruction resulting from the usage of product or service (Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001; Cai, Jo, & Pan, 2012). Examples of controversial corporations are those in the mining, oil and gas, tobacco, gaming, and alcohol industry (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006; Cai, Jo, & Pan, 2012). In fact, corporations belonging to the mining or/and oil & gas industry typically would report facing social conflicts with the local communities (Du & Vieira, 2012).

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In the field of CSR communication, engagement related to local communities are commonly associated with dialogue. Several studies which are based on the Stakeholder Theory have stated that corporations need to engage in extensive dialogue with the local communities (Jeanneret & Hall, 2015). This method of communication contributes to a corporation's social disclosure, disseminates the company information about a desired socially responsible identity and image, and promotes relations with stakeholder audiences. Such communication also nurtures mutual understanding and reduces the probability of social conflict (Jeanneret & Hall, 2015). Although some studies discussed the types of dialogue (e.g. networking, briefing, involvement, negotiation dialogue) that should be held between corporation and local communities (Johansen et al., 2011; Dobele et al., 2014), there are still limited number of studies that focus on the communication aspect of the dialogue. A study by Tata and Prasad (2015) on impression management perspective proposed a structure to CSR communication (e.g. assertive-protective CSR communication, direct-indirect CSR communication). The structure of CSR communication is a good guidance for planning CSR communication strategies as it supplies corporations with the understanding on their current positioning or future proposition of their image. The structure however does not provide sufficient understanding on the communication process which has proven to be an important element in any engagement between corporation and local communities. Corporations need to have a comprehensive thought on the communities for them to receive trust, and finally gain social license to operate (SOL). This article discusses the essentiality of communication process and proposes a conceptual framework for communication engagement with local communities. The communication process is theoretically founded on the Integrated Theory developed by Mohr and Nevin (1990). This theory incorporates the mechanistic perspective of communication by Krone et al. (1987) and the well-known Organisational Theory by Max Weber (1946). This study extends the existing communication process model by using a model proposed by Redza et al. (2014), which includes opinion leaders as the moderating factor.

Purpose of Study

This conceptual study will serve several purposes in the CSR communication. First, this framework reduces the knowledge gap in CSR communication theory by providing a deeper understanding on the local communities' communication process. By understanding the process, corporations will be able to discriminate aspects that need to be prioritised from those that should not. It will enhance the dialogue structure between them and the local communities which were limitedly emphasised by the previous studies. Finally, it explores the new elements which are seldom found in CSR communication literature.

Opinion leaders are not uncommon in the innovation diffusion literature. Rogers (1995) highlighted the fact that opinion leaders play an important role in disseminating information in a social structure. Local communities throughout the world possess their own unique social structure (Lazega et al., 2012). Therefore, identifying the role of opinion leaders in the communication process will provide corporations with the local knowledge, which in turn will prompt contextualised information dissemination, and promote engagement between corporations and local communities. Opinion leaders will also provide needs-based insights on the dialogical and other important aspects of the communication process. The localised and contextualised information will aid corporations in evaluating their past CSR communication strategies, understand the conditions under which the communication was more or less successful and provide strategies for future engagement.

The Proposed Conceptual Framework

This model or framework was first constructed to examine the mediating effect of communication behaviour and communication quality on the relationship between communication willingness towards communication commitment. The issues on voluntary communication in the inter-organisational communication were discussed in the several studies previously (Peng, 2011; Redza et al., 2014). It is found that having a voluntary base (willingness) is an important factor in the communication process between corporation and other organisation (Tata & Prasad, 2015). However, the stakeholders in this case the local communities might volunteer to communicate, but do not want to put their commitment in the communication process. The existence of this phenomenon identified as "false contribution" has been proven in past studies (Redza et al., 2014). Identifying the role of and relationship between communication behaviour and communication quality as mediator is important as the input is pivotal in increasing stakeholder's communicative commitment. This conceptual model also explores the moderating role of opinions leaders in strengthening the relationship between the communication process variables involved as shown in Figure 1.

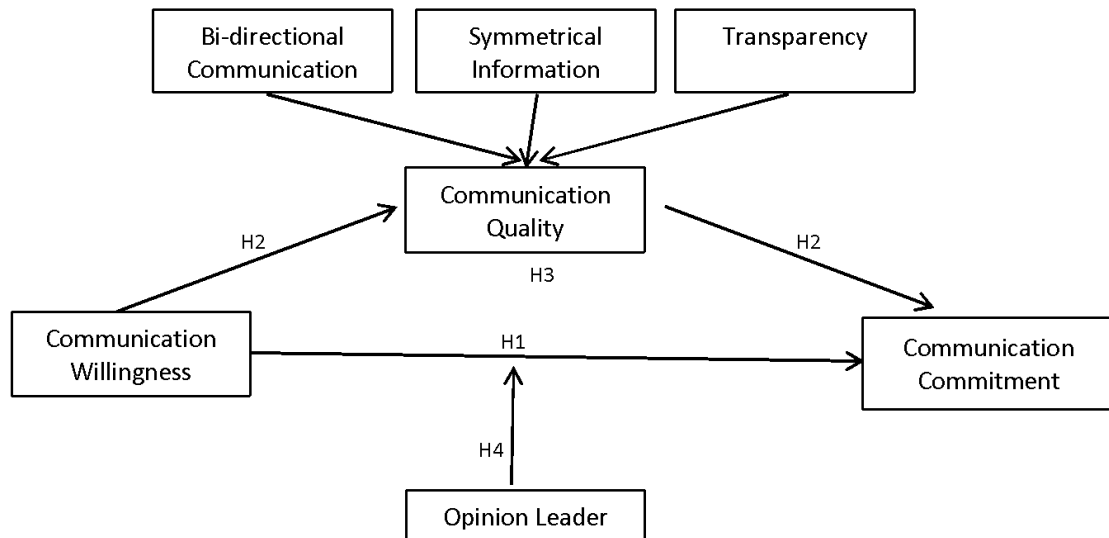


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

To ensure parsimony, we delineated certain boundaries. First, although the communication process commonly occurs as a two-way process, but in communication research, getting response from the targeted personnel is much more valuable. Second, this study is geared towards investigating in detail the communication process; from the corporation to the local communities. As such, the Mechanistic perspective and Organisational Theory are employed as these two theories could facilitate the measurement of communication effectiveness of a particular communication process (Mohr & Nevin, 1990). Third, this study perceives that communication has already occurred between the two parties. The type of communication could be in the form of announcement, dialogue, roundtable meetings or joint-action programme. This framework is flexible as it is able to cater to the communication process that has already taken place, thus providing a more in-depth and improved understanding on the stakeholders in subsidised industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Willingness

Communication willingness in this context can be defined as the capability and corporations' willing to openly and honestly communicate relevant information to the local community (Fawcett et al., 2007, p. 360). However, the attitude of the members of a community in sharing information with the other parties might differ. Some might face difficulties in sharing their perception towards business activities, resulting in the unwillingness to communicate. However, this circumstance could be avoided or minimised normally by means of laws and norms (Peng, 2011). On the corporation's end, some of them might not be willing to disseminate information to local communities in fear of information abuse; thus placing their organisations at a competitive disadvantage (Peng, 2011). In other cases, some corporations expect some value in return for any information shared (Peng, 2011). They expect not only approval but also social validation from other parties in order to allow them to proceed with business activities without hindrance (Golob & Elving, 2013). Besides, according to the Organisational Theory, company culture also influences the willingness of the staff to share

information with others (Constant, Kiesler, & Sproull, 1994; McKinnon et al., 2003). Not all organisations condone the culture of communication between their employees and the stakeholders (Al-Tameem, 2004). Even among the corporations that encourage external communication, the policy might differ in terms of perspectives; hence affecting their approach in executing communication willingness especially when it involves different background including culture, regions and religious belief (Leonard, 2009).

Mohr and Sohi (1995) identified a positive relationship between the norms of information exchange and specific communication flows. It is found that the communication members' willingness to initiate communication is highly due to communication norm (Mohr & Sohi, 1995). Literature and past studies have also discovered that communication willingness will highly determine the level of communication between organisations and other parties (Mohr & Nevin, 1990; Mohr & Sohi, 1995; Fawcett, Ellram & Ogden, 2007). The unwillingness to share relevant information in the context of the corporation and local communities can disrupt corporation-community relationship and reduce the legitimacy of the corporation within the operation area (García-Marzá, 2005; Johansen et al., 2011), thus manifesting communication willingness as an important facet in our study.

In this study, communication willingness is regarded as an independent variable and integral facet in a mechanistic-type of communication. Although from a mechanistic view, communication could potentially occur without willingness, but forced by regulation or norms (Mohr, Fisher & Nevin, 1996), this study believes that the willingness to communicate provides a strong platform for engagement or information transfer to work within the parties involved, superseding the communication impetus. However, considering the point by the mechanistic view, this research also emphasises on the fact that both willingness and commitment should be measured in terms of effectiveness (Mohr, Fisher & Nevin, 1996).

Commitment in this study is adapted from the Organisational Theory (Tipu & Ryan, 2011). There is significant number of studies that measure the impact of communication towards the organisational commitment (Allen, 1992; van den Hoof et al., 2004; Tipu & Ryan, 2011). However, the studies only discussed on the impact of the whole communication process on organisational commitment, namely 1) superior-subordinate commitment (Allen, 1992), 2) employees' evaluations towards their organisations (Tipu & Ryan, 2011; Dhanesh, 2012), and 3) perceived hypocrisy among customers towards businesses based on past social performance (Smith & Rhiney, 2020). These studies however provide insufficient understanding on the mechanistic perspectives of the communication occurring between corporation and local communities. For instance, Tipu and Ryan (2011) found that communication from the management committees have an impact on employees' trust towards the organisation. However, the level of impact decreased when the relationship between communication and commitment is tested (Tipu & Ryan, 2011).

This provides a strong justification for this study to further explore the dynamic role of causal relationship between communication willingness and communication commitment. It is reported that a strong tendency to communicate (which represents willingness) could be disrupted by several factors (noise, culture, etc.) (Redza et al., 2014). At the end, the communication would be disrupted as these factors become a hindrance for the communication process to occur. By investigating this causal relationship, we would be able to produce an empirical measurement on the mechanistic view of the communication process. In this vein, the first hypothesis for this study is

H1: In CSR Communication, communication willingness has a causal effect on the communication commitment of local communities towards the communicating firm.

Communication Quality

Communication quality has several definitions that are context-bound. The contexts are partnership, politics, relationship management, employee engagement, group negotiation and organisational study (Prahinski & Fan, 2007; Redza et al., 2014, Gill, 2015). These definitions are associated with different dimensions and cover a broad range of items for respective purposes. Three pertinent paradigms pivotal in defining communication quality are socio-relationship, interactive and pragmatic perspectives (Schoop, Köhne & Ostertag, 2010). For the purpose of this research, it is vital to investigate these three paradigms further. This is because the communication between stakeholders and corporations is extensive and complex; hence establishing a holistic, comprehensive and context-appropriate definition of communication quality is dependent on the extensive examination of the fundamental paradigms. For instance, Duck (1988) defined quality in socio-relationship communication as one with high level of intimacy, positiveness and supportive. While Golob and Barlett (2007) suggested that quality in CSR communication can be achieved by increasing quality of information reported and quantity of information usage among the stakeholders. Transparency and information have also been named as among the criteria required in quality communication of CSR. For corporations, these definitions highlight the need of a communicator whose function is to express, translate and interpret the arguments and demands between the corporations and stakeholders. Conversely, the current definitions might not be suitable for the context of business study where quality is evaluated on the basis of its economic outcome for the corporation (Schoop, Köhne & Ostertag, 2010). However, while the financial outcome is important factor in short-term market-based interactions, the nature of the relationship in between corporations and local communities is typically long-term. Hence it is crucial for corporations or other interested parties to understand and embed the principles that fund the quality of communication in the communication process to gain long term communication commitment from the local communities.

From the mechanistic perspective of communication, the quality of communication relies on the relational understanding between sender and the recipients (Prahinski & Fan, 2007). If noise and uncertainty in information transfer are minimal or reduced, there will be an increase in the probabilities for commitment by the recipients. It is essential to note that communication quality should account for the relational aspect of corporations and local communities. However, inducing the relational aspect between two parties; especially when one is a business entity is not easy. Schoop and colleagues (2010) stated it is not uncommon for a business-related relationship to begin with information asymmetries and lack intimacy. In consideration of this, the parties involved should engage in a bi-directional communication. This will allow intimacy to be built and information to be clarified (Duck et al., 1988; Mohr & Sohi, 1995; Schoop, Köhne & Ostertag, 2010). By focusing on relationship-building and more dialogic communication, firms especially those with high-trust level will experience increase in positive attitudes towards the company and its perceived CSR among stakeholders (Park & Kang, 2020). As a result, communication commitment could be expected from the parties or organisations involved. Henceforward, bi-directional communication is an important component in building communication quality. Thus, the second hypothesis is

H2: In CSR communication, communication quality will causally effect communication commitment of local communities towards the communicating firm.

Mediating the Role of Communication Quality

Several constructs have garnered strong theoretical justifications in order to form communication quality variables. It is important to differentiate their role with the other variables in this model and to understand that, it is vital to explore the statistical definition of mediating factor. The primary and initial source for determining mediating factor of a variable is contributed by Baron and Kenny (1986, p. 1176) when they stated that:

A variable functions as a mediator when it meets the following conditions: (a) variations in levels of the independent variable significantly account for variations in the presumed mediator (i.e., Path a), (b) variations in the mediator significantly account for variations in the dependent variable (i.e., Path b), and (c) when Paths a and b are controlled, a previously significant relation between the independent and dependent variables is no longer significant, with the strongest demonstration of mediation occurring when Path c is zero

The Baron and Kenny concept basically explained that the mediator shall have significant effect on both dependent and independent variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). They further asserted that the evidence for mediation is the strongest when there is an indirect effect but no direct effect, which they termed as “full mediation.” When there are both indirect and direct effects, they called it “partial mediation.” (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Zhao, Lynch & Chen, 2010). However, the justifications by Baron and Kenny in determining mediation are challenged by Zhao and his colleagues. They argued that the classifications are somewhat coarse and misleading (Zhao, Lynch & Chen, 2010). They further suggested on a new five-steps approach to determine the mediating factor of the studied variable. This study adopts the definition by Zhao et al. (2010) as they provided a strong justification on the theoretical and technical definition of a mediator.

As explained, both communication behaviour and quality have proven to be a determinant factor for satisfaction or commitment in various impact studies (Mohr & Sohi, 1995; Takeishi, 1998; Schoop, Köhne & Ostertag, 2010; Redza et al., 2014). On this ground, it is theoretically possible for these two factors (i.e. communication behaviour and quality) to become a factor (mediator) in explaining the relationship between communication willingness and communication commitment. In a hypothetical circumstance, it is predicted that the local communities might be ready and willing to give commitment due to the corporation’s transparency in communication with them. It is therefore important to investigate and prove the concepts in the proposed conceptual framework as well as test the statistical ability of the variables. The third hypothesis for this study is:

H3: In CSR communication, Communication quality mediates the relationship between communication willingness and communication commitment of the local communities towards the communicating firm.

Opinion Leader Communication

Role of opinion leader on catalysing collective action remains overlooked yet necessary steps in persuasive communication (Weimann, 1991). Scholars have been testing the role of opinion leader as vital go-between and information brokers on matters such as climate change, innovation diffusion, political agenda, and community engagement. Investigation on the role of opinion leader have been conducted half a decade ago in 1950s by scholars such as Lazarsfeld, Katz, Berelson and McPhee (Weimann, 1991). It was stated that the idea on opinion leader is an expansion of John Stuart Mill's study on personal influence in his great work, *On Liberty* (Weimann, 1991). Since then, the study on ability of a person to become a central influencer for his colleagues, friend or community's members have been increasing (Weimann, 1991). The expansion of communication and information technology has resulted on lower amount of study focusing on opinion leader. A glimpse in the communication and mass communication theories will show that several new theories such as cultivation, agenda setting, framing, and social learning overcome the two-step flow theory (Miller, 2002). It resulted in minimal expansion in study related to opinion leaders. However, the role of opinion leader was later emphasized by Rogers in his innovation diffusion study (Rogers, 2003). Through that, opinion leader's role in informally shaping attitudes, opinions and overt behaviour of others was highlighted.

Opinion leaders in definition are people who influence the opinions, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of others (Burt, 1999; Feder & Savastano, 2006). This simple definition, however, masks a rather extensive literature on defining leaders and leadership. The roles and activities of leaders and leadership span numerous political, social, economic, and public health issues (Valente & Pumpuang, 2007). Opinion leaders have been used in public health to gain support, as well as implement community health programmes. The use of opinion leaders and discussion on the techniques carried out to identify them is likely to increase as health promotion programmes become more community-oriented. The role of opinion leaders among communities are also evident in development projects especially in decision making process.

Opinion leaders have several functions and responsibilities critical for the implementation of successful community-based health promotion efforts. First, they provide entrée and legitimation to external change agents. Second, they provide communication from their communities back to agencies that implement programmes. Third, they can act as role models for behaviour change within the community. Fourth, they can be the conveyors of health messages. Finally, they may act as the "capital" left after the agency has withdrawn from the community, thus institutionalising programme goals. Although many theoretical frameworks support the use of opinion leaders for health promotion. Opinion leaders influence others' behaviour by giving advice and direction (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996; Yudarwati, 2019). Compared to other consumers, opinion leaders tend to be centrally located in their social networks, more cosmopolitan and socially active, more conscious about their appearance, more involved with mass media and, of course, more likely to share information with others (Venkatraman et al., 1989; Chan & Misra, 1990; Weimann, 1991; Rogers, 2003). Understanding who opinion leaders are and what motivates them may improve the means through which policy makers, marketers, activists, health professionals and others change people's behaviour.

Moderating Attributes for Opinion Leader Communication

Opinion leader communication is one of the limited areas discussed in community engagement or CSR communication study. The role of opinion leader was introduced as a main element in the prominent two-step theory communication in the 1980s and 1990s (Miller, 2002; Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009). However, the study on the role of opinion leader is limited in innovation diffusion study (Rogers, 2003) and also mass communication study (Miller, 2002). The involvement of opinion leader in academic research is somewhat diffused in the corpus of knowledge when scholars in mass communication focus more on framing, priming and agenda-setting theory. Furthermore, the inception of world wide web and mass media as a medium for communicating information also contributes to the lack of research on opinion leaders. Opinion leader is however a very important and crucial element in the rural community. In actuality, most of the issues related to corporation and local communities transpired in rural communities (Hill & Fee, 2002; Fast, 2013, Yudarwati, 2019).

Osman (1989) in his book discusses the structure and organisation of a Malay community which is one of the example of rural community social structures. The Malays will normally adhere and have a high respect of the local leaders such as “*Ketua Kampung*” (Villagers Head), ‘*Imam*’ (Religion Head) and “*Yang Berhormat*” (Member of Parliament or State) (Osman, 1989). The statement is supported by the findings by Gullick (1992) in which he pointed out that the Malay communities not only will follow what the “Sultan” (Kings/Royals) say, but also the instructions by the community head. The social structure of the Malay communities in Malaysia are almost as similar with the social structure of the communities in other developing nations. Primarily, these communities will always be headed by a leader and abide strongly to the local customs. The leader on the other hand, would have the upper hand in shaping how the community would behave (Rogers, 2003). The capabilities of opinion leader to influence people or communities support towards an issue or cause is extensively useful especially in political communication study and innovation diffusion study.

The role of opinion leaders in rural communities were also evident among the *Dusun* in Indonesia (Yudarwati, 2019). Due to their collective culture, the communities tend to appoint key actors. As key actors, these leaders would often dominate conversations with firms and also government, particularly on development projects such as micro-hydro plant (Yudarwati, 2019). Organisations’ community engagement may share some common features, but each experience would likely differ from one community to another due to their different contextual characteristics and domains. As community engagements continue to evolve and be shaped by different contexts, the function of opinion leaders would then become critically important in the organisation’s attempt to achieving community understanding through an interactive and dynamic communication process (Johnston, 2018).

Thus, it is important to highlight opinion leaders and investigate their role and presence in CSR communication. Currently, the existing CSR communication studies have been focusing on effect of CSR communication, legitimacy of CSR communication and challenges in carrying out CSR communication. Investigating the role of opinion leader in moderating the success of CSR communication add a rich, social-cultural input to the emerging literature on CSR communication. Hence the fourth and final hypothesis is:

H4: In CSR communication, opinion leader communication is the moderator between communication willingness and communication commitment of the local communities.

CONCLUSION

Studies on CSR communication are present in several disciplines and areas; such as the advertising aspects of CSR communication (Vargo, 2011; Troise & Camilleri, 2021) and understanding the impact of CSR communication on the agencies and linguistic aspect of the CSR reports (Morsing & Schultz, 2006, Bachmann & Inghoff, 2016; Park & Kang, 2020). A majority of the studies in these areas focused on CSR tools and channels (Golob, Verk & Podnar, 2015). Evidently, not many research has paid attention to the aspect of the targeted CSR audience, which is the community, although it has been proven empirically that communities could, and have significantly impacted corporations. For example, cultural or daily life-related disputes or arguments involving a corporation and the local communities would lead to conflicts, thus affecting the image of the corporation. Consequently, this predicament will problematise and trigger complications in production or outputs. The implication is more critical to high-risk industries operating on site such as mining and oil & gas production. Therefore, it is of extreme importance that the companies establish and maintain a good relationship with the local communities, and all those involved in the operation. One of the strategies is to conduct CSR programmes, but it is also crucial to note that a CSR effort on its own is insufficient; for it to be successful, an “intimate” or close relationship with the communities is required. The intention and message of the CSR effort and the corporation need to be communicated to the local communities. Several studies have suggested strategies to ensure the success rate of CSR by means of engaging in dialogues with the local communities (Johansen et al., 2011; Choi & Park, 2014; Park & Kang, 2020), but minimal empirical investigation taps on the correct approach and strategies for the dialogue. While some scholars have discussed the best approach for CSR communication strategies (Du, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2010), the discussion was mainly skewed towards customers’ perception on the company, not on the local communities.

This research filled the lacuna in CSR communication by focusing on the local communities, particularly the role of opinion leaders in mediating the perception, opinion and henceforth, the action of community members vis-à-vis CSR activities conducted by corporations. On this basis, a conceptual framework that discusses the relationship between communication willingness and communication commitment is proposed. As an important element of communication, willingness has been proven in several cross-discipline research to have impacted the commitment of a targeted person (Peng, 2011; Redza et al., 2014). It is however mediated by another communication variable which is communication quality (Redza et al., 2014). In this framework, willingness and communication quality are underpinned by a symbiotic and complementary correlation in the sense that if communication quality is established and maintained, the rate of willingness will be higher. Opinion leader is added as a factor because it is instrumental in establishing and moderating good communication strategies with the local communities. Opinion leader will provide substantial input to administer quality communication, which will in turn increase the success rate of eliciting the willingness to engage among the community members. From a network perspective, communication in local communities involves a complicated chain and more condensed nodes (Castelló, Morsing & Schultz, 2013). The process of including opinion leader in this study was derived from the two-step flow theory (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 2000). Although the usage of two-step flow theory was considered outdated with the introduction of more recent media theory such as Framing and Priming Theory, the Two-Step Flow Theory is effective in capture the communication process occurring at the community level.

This article has discussed extensively on the importance of communication elements (i.e. willingness, quality, behaviour, commitment, and opinion leader). The possible relationship of the mentioned elements was also discussed in this article and several avenues of future research have been identified. One, to explore the moderating factor of homophily (similarity of demographic background) and proximity (physical distance among the communities) on their effectiveness in enhancing the relationship between communication willingness and communication commitment. Research on network relationship have shown that the two elements play a great role on the connection between nodes in the network (Monge & Contractor, 2003). Second, future research can explore the role of power in enhancing the opinion leader moderating ability. Such research can deepen the understanding of CSR communication in the local communities. Finally, research to understand the CSR communication among the local communities could also be conducted. Each community has their own unique set of characteristics in communication, hence communication approach in the western region of the world would be completely different with the eastern region. Although the same framework is being used, understanding the elements defining the communicative preferences and activities of each community such as culture is expected to elicit different outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This publication is part of the study funded by research grant SK-2022-010, Faculty Social Science and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

BIODATA

Ammar Redza Ahmad Rizal is a senior lecturer at Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Email: araredza@ukm.edu.my

Dayang Aizza Maisha Abang Ahmad is a senior lecturer at Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Email: aadamaisha@unimas.my

Humaira Raslie is a senior lecturer at Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Email: rhumaira@unimas.my

REFERENCES

- Al-Tameem, A. A. (2004). An inhibiting context hampering role of information technology as an enabler in organisational learning. *The Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 44(4), 34–40.
- Allen, M. W. (1992). Communication and organisational commitment: Perceived organisational support as a mediating factor. *Communication Quarterly*, 40(4), 357-367.
- Bachmann, P., & Ingenhoff, D. (2016). Legitimacy through CSR disclosures? The advantage outweighs the disadvantages. *Public Relations Review*, 42(3), 386-394.
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator–mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(6), 1173-1182.
- Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2004). Doing better at doing good: When, why, and how consumers respond to corporate social initiatives. *California Management Review*, 47(1), 9–24.
- Burt, R. S. (1999). The social capital of opinion leaders. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 566(1), 37-54.
- Cai, Y., Jo, H., & Pan, C. (2012). Doing well while doing bad? CSR in controversial industry sectors. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 108(4), 467-480.
- Castelló, I., Morsing, M., & Schultz, F. (2013). Communicative dynamics and the polyphony of corporate social responsibility in the network society. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 118(4), 683-694.
- Chan, K. K., & Misra, S. (1990). Characteristics of the opinion leader: A new dimension. *Journal of Advertising*, 19(3), 53-60.
- Choi, J., & Park, B. (2014). Environmentally responsible management of MNE subsidiaries: Stakeholder perspective. *Multinational Business Review*, 22(1), 59-77.
- Constant, D., Kiesler, S., & Sproull, L. (1994). What's mine is ours, or is it? A study of attitudes about information sharing. *Information Systems Research*, 5(4), 400-421.
- Crane, A., & Glozer, S. (2016). Researching corporate social responsibility communication: Themes, opportunities and challenges. *Journal of Management Studies*, 53(7), 1223-1252.
- Dawkins, J. (2004). Corporate responsibility: The communication challenge. *Journal of Communication Management*, 9, 108-119.
- Dhanesh, G. S. (2012). The view from within: Internal publics and CSR. *Journal of Communication Management*, 16(1), 39-58.
- Dobele, A. R., Westberg, K., Steel, M., & Flowers, K. (2014). An examination of corporate social responsibility implementation and stakeholder engagement: A case study in the Australian mining industry. *Business Strategy and the Environment*, 23(3), 145–159.
- Duck, S. E., Hay, D. F., Hobfoll, S. E., Ickes, W. E., & Montgomery, B. M. (1988). *Handbook of personal relationships: Theory, research and interventions*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Du, S., Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2010). Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility (CSR): The role of CSR communication. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 12(1), 8-19.
- Du, S., & Vieira, E. T. (2012). Striving for legitimacy through corporate social responsibility: Insights from oil companies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 110(4), 413–427.

- Elving, W. J., Golob, U., Podnar, K., Ellerup-Nielsen, A., & Thomson, C. (2015). The bad, the ugly and the good: new challenges for CSR communication. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 20(2), 118–127.
- Elving, W. J. L., & Van Vuuren, H. A. M. (2011). Beyond identity washing: Corporate social responsibility in an age of skepticism. *Akademija MM*, 17, 49–56.
<https://www.dlib.si/details/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-8ABNOZ4S>
- Fast, S. (2013). A Habermasian analysis of local renewable energy deliberations. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 30, 86-98.
- Fawcett, S. E., Ellram, L. M., & Ogden, J. A. (2007). *Supply chain management: From vision to implementation*. Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Fawcett, S. E., Osterhaus, P., Magnan, G. M., Brau, J. C., & McCarter, M. W. (2007). Information sharing and supply chain performance: The role of connectivity and willingness. *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal*, 12(5), 358–368.
- Feder, G., & Savastano, S. (2006). The role of opinion leaders in the diffusion of new knowledge: The case of integrated pest management. *World Development*, 34(7), 1287-1300.
- Flynn, L., Goldsmith, R., & Eastman, J. (1996). Opinion leaders and opinion seekers: Two measurement scales. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 24(2), 137–147.
- García-Marzá, D. (2005). Trust and dialogue: Theoretical approaches to ethics auditing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 57(3), 209–219.
- Garcia, R., & Calantone, R. (2002). A critical look at technological innovation typology and innovativeness: A literature review. *The Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 19(2), 110–132.
- Gill, R. (2015). Why the PR strategy of storytelling improves employee engagement and adds value to CSR: An integrated literature review. *Public Relations Review*, 41(5), 662-674.
- 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), 1-9.
- Golob, U., Podnar, K., Elving, W. J., Ellerup Nielsen, A., Thomsen, C., & Schultz, F. (2013). CSR communication: Quo vadis. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 18(2), 176-192.
- Golob, U., Verk, N., & Podnar, K. (2015, September). *Mapping the CSR communication field in Europe* (Conference paper). Paper presented at CSR Communication Conference 2015.
- Gullick, J. M. (1992). *Rulers and residents: Influence and power in the Malay States, 1870-1920*. Oxford University Press.
- Hall, N., Ashworth, P., & Devine-Wright, P. (2013). Societal acceptance of wind farms: Analysis of four common themes across Australian case studies. *Energy Policy*, 58, 200-208.
- Hill, F., & Fee, F. (2002). Fueling the future: The prospects for Russian oil and gas. *Demokratizatsiya*, 10(4), 462-487.
- Jeanneret, T., & Hall, N. L. (2015). Social licence to operate: An opportunity to enhance CSR for deeper communication and engagement. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 20(2), 213–227.
- Johansen, T. S., Nielsen, A. E., Goodman, M., Johansen, T. S., Susanne Johansen, T., & Ellerup Nielsen, A. (2011). Strategic stakeholder dialogues: A discursive perspective on relationship building. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 16(3), 204–217.

- Johnston, K.A. (2018). *The handbook of communication engagement*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Krone, K. J., Jablin, F. M., & Putnam, L. L. (1987). Communication theory and organisational communication: Multiple perspectives. In F. M. Jablin, L. L. Putnam, K. H. Roberts & L. W. Porter (Eds.), *Handbook of organisational communication: An interdisciplinary perspective* (pp. 18-40). Sage.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1948). *Mass communication, popular taste and organized social action* (pp. 95-118). Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, College Division.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., & Merton, R. K. (1948). *Mass communication, popular taste and organized social action*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, College Division.
- Lazega, E., Mounier, L., Snijders, T., & Tubaro, P. (2012). Norms, status and the dynamics of advice networks: A case study. *Social Networks*, 34(3), 323-332.
- Leonard, T. C. (2009). Origins of the myth of social Darwinism: The ambiguous legacy of Richard Hofstadter's Social Darwinism in American Thought. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organisation*, 71(1), 37-51.
- Lim, J. S., & Greenwood, C. A. (2017). Communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR): Stakeholder responsiveness and engagement strategy to achieve CSR goals. *Public Relations Review*, 43(4), 768-776.
- McKinnon, J. L., Harrison, G. L., Chow, C. W., & Wu, A. (2003). Organisational culture: Association with commitment, job satisfaction, propensity to remain, and information sharing in Taiwan. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 11(1), 25-44.
- Miller, K. (2002). *Communication theories perspectives, processes, and contexts*. McGraw Hill.
- Mohr, J. J., Fisher, R. J., & Nevin, J. R. (1996). Collaborative communication in interfirm relationships: Moderating effects of integration and control. *The Journal of Marketing*, 60(3), 103-115.
- Mohr, J. J., & Sohi, R. S. (1995). Communication flows in distribution channels: Impact on assessments of communication quality and satisfaction. *Journal of Retailing*, 71(4), 393-415.
- Mohr, J., & Nevin, J. R. (1990). Communication strategies in marketing channels: A theoretical perspective. *Journal of Marketing*, 54(4), 36-51.
- Monge, P. R., & Contractor, N. S. (2003). *Theories of communication networks*. Oxford University Press.
- Morsing, M., & Schultz, M. (2006). Corporate social responsibility communication: Stakeholder information, response and involvement strategies. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 15(October), 323-338.
- Nisbet, M. C., & Kotcher, J. E. (2009). A two-step flow of influence? Opinion-leader campaigns on climate change. *Science Communication*, 30(3), 328-354.
- Osman, T. (1989) *Masyarakat Melayu: Struktur, organisasi dan manifestasi*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Park, Y. E., & Kang, M. (2020). When crowdsourcing in CSR leads to dialogic communication: The effects of trust and distrust. *Public Relations Review*, 46(1), 1-13.
- Peng, G. (2011). *Inter-organisational information exchange, supply chain compliance and performance*. Wageningen Academic Publishers.
- Prahinski, C., & Fan, Y. (2007). Supplier evaluations: The role of communication quality. *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 43(3), 16-28.

- Redza, A., Nordin, S. M., Saad, S., & Wahab, H. (2014). Inter-organisation communication management between organisations in a subsidized fertilizer market in Malaysia. *UMK Procedia*, 1, 33–41.
- Rogers, E. M. (1995) *Diffusion of Innovations*. Macmillian Publishing Co.
- Rogers, E. M. (2003) *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th ed). New York NY Free Press.
- Scherer, A. G., & Palazzo, G. (2011). The new political role of business in a globalized world: A review of a new perspective on CSR and its implications for the firm, governance, and democracy. *Journal of Management Studies*, 48(4), 899–931.
- Schoeneborn, D., & Trittin, H. (2013). Transcending transmission: Towards a constitutive perspective on CSR communication. *Corporate communications: An International Journal*, 18, 193–211.
- Schoop, M., Köhne, F., & Ostertag, K. (2010). Communication quality in business negotiations. *Group Decision and Negotiation*, 19(2), 193–209.
- Shah, D. V., McLeod, J. M., & Yoon, S. H. (2001). Communication, context, and community: An exploration of print, broadcast, and Internet influences. *Communication Research*, 28(4), 464-506.
- Takeishi, A. (1998) *Bridging inter- and intra-firm boundaries: Management of supplier involvement in automobile product development*. Hitotsubashi University.
- Tata, J., & Prasad, S. (2015). CSR communication: An impression management perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 132(4), 765–778.
- Tipu, S., & Ryan, J. (2011). 2011). Communication, commitment & trust: Exploring the triad. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 6(6), 77-87.
- Troise, C., & Camilleri, M. A. (2021). The use of digital media for marketing, CSR communication and stakeholder engagement. In M. A. Camilleri (Ed.), *Strategic corporate communication in the digital age* (pp. 161-174). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Valente, T. W., & Pumpuang, P. (2007). Identifying opinion leaders to promote behavior change. *Health Education and Behavior*, 34(6), 881–896.
- Vanhamme, J., & Grobben, B. (2008). “Too good to be true!”. The effectiveness of CSR history in countering negative publicity. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 85(S2), 273–283.
- Van den Hooff, B., & Van Weenen, F. D. L. (2004). Knowledge sharing in context: The influence of organisational commitment, communication climate and CMC use on knowledge sharing. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 8(6), 117-30.
- Van Huijstee, M., & Glasbergen, P. (2008). The practice of stakeholder dialogue between multinationals and NGOs. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 15(5), 298–310.
- Vargo, S. L. (2011). Market systems, stakeholders and value propositions. *European Journal of Marketing*, 45(1/2), 217–222.
- Venkatraman, N. (1989). The concept of fit in strategy research: Toward verbal and statistical correspondence. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(3), 423-444.
- Weber, M. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology*. Routledge.
- Weimann, G. (1991). The influentials: back to the concept of opinion leaders?. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 55(2), 267–279.
- Yoon, Y., Gürhan-Canli, Z., & Schwarz, N. (2006). The effect of corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities on companies with bad reputations. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 16(4), 377-390.

- Yudarwati, G. A. (2019). Appreciative inquiry for community engagement in Indonesia rural communities. *Public Relations Review*, 45(4), 1-14.
- Zhao, X., Lynch, J., & Chen, Q. (2010). Reconsidering Baron and Kenny: Myths and truths about mediation analysis. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 37(2), 197-206.
- Ziek, P. (2009). Making sense of CSR communication. *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environmental Management*, 16(3), 137–145.