CONSCIOUS CONSUMERISM IN THE SOFTWARE TECH INDUSTRY: THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN DEFINING CORPORATE SUSTAINABILITY

by

GRACE HASHIGUCHI

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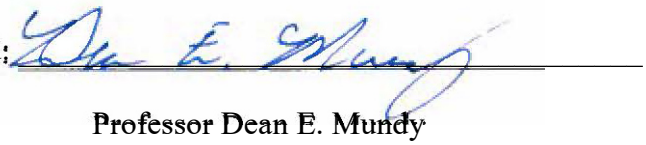
Approved: 

Professor Dean E. Mundy

This study explores the intersection of public relations and corporate social responsibility as it plays out in the social software technology industry. With rising consumer demand for corporate accountability, I argue that PR practitioners play a unique role in positioning the responsibility of social software tech companies in a time of heightened industry distrust. Specifically, this study argues that CSR communication represents the practical evolution of theoretical communication theories such as relationship management. Using 11 in-depth interviews with industry professionals specializing in technology, CSR, in-house and agency public relations, this study examines the ways in which technology companies have grown to incorporate CSR practices and how communications professionals work to make CSR strategy a reality. Three focus groups with consumers aged 18-22 provided insight to the level of awareness around current CSR efforts of the tech industry and expectations for future initiatives.

Participant discourses suggested that in the tech space defined by innovation and evolving social tools, modern strategic communicators assume a more integrated role than before in coordinating the implementation of successful CSR through internal and external stakeholder engagement. Moving forward, output-oriented messaging may be ushered out by long-term, constitutive communication strategies that emphasize dialogue and collaborative CSR outcomes.

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Introduction

The technology industry has a problem. This once exalted sector associated with economic opportunity and progressive, startup culture has entered a free fall into public scrutiny. According to Edelman's 2018 Trust Barometer study, "More than ⅗ of Bay Area residents believe tech companies are making large profits while draining social resources and need to contribute more to solving local problems." On March 18, 2018 the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* broke news of Facebook's most recent data breach scandal, connecting the company with political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica and the personal data from an estimated 87 million user profiles that were compromised by third-party applications. In this poignant example of mounting distrust, social media giant Facebook continues to face unprecedented drops in market value and CEO Mark Zuckerberg was called to testify in front of Congress to address issues of data security. Even in these hearings, however, the public became alerted to the unique lack of expertise from governing bodies on issues of deep tech's true social impact, leaving many questions about the future of regulation. This comes after a year in which Uber's CEO Travis Kalanick was pushed out due to sexual harassment allegations and the emergent app company MoviePass openly touted its economic model based on haphazard data mining. In short, these are not isolated occurrences.

Particularly following Facebook's most recent data breach, media have contributed to creating a more negative narrative around the changing tech landscape. At the close of 2017, *Wired* published a piece titled "The Other Tech Bubble," which outlined the fall of the once revered Silicon Valley tech elite. Tech writer Laurent Hrybyk wrote that while some do not expect any swift improvements from within the

industry, the cultural movement around these corporations is becoming more difficult to ignore: “The big tech companies are too big to fail, too complicated to be parsed or regulated, and too integral to business, the economy, and day-to-day life… But even if things stay the same inside the Silicon Valley bubble, change is coming from the outside.” This perception shift comes at a time when many corporations have begun to engage more than ever with society through social and political activism. In many instances, large tech firms led the way in these corporate social responsibility (CSR) pursuits. Clearly a disconnect remains between the efforts of these companies and the needs of consumers.

Perhaps the turning point we are now experiencing was inevitable. Just in the past decade, we have seen an immense growth in scale and access to technological innovation, from social media platforms to software that empowers businesses of all sizes to better understand consumers and deliver products tailored to them. Perhaps the innovation itself has outgrown the public’s understanding, and thus the societal structures for appropriate regulation. How well does the average person understand the algorithms that dictate her media intake or the data storage that tracks his every online move? How then will they be able to make decisions about how to behave as responsible consumers of software tech platforms? Larger questions of dual use, data security and global tech ethics also remain to be parsed out. As a *New York Times* piece reported:

> Five or 10 years from now, we will come to regard 2017 as a turning point. Why? Because this year, for the first time, tech giants began to grudgingly accept that they have some responsibility to the offline world. The scope of that responsibility, though, is another matter entirely (Manjoo, 2017).

With this awakened sense of societal impact, how will these companies reevaluate the way they negotiate the needs of stakeholders and engage with CSR moving forward?

Polarized sociopolitical discourse and widespread access to digital communication platforms make this evolution toward corporate activism even more apparent. According to a 2017 report conducted by global communications firm FleishmanHillard, "In the U.S. alone, almost 70% of our survey respondents believe companies should take the lead in the exchange of ideas or culture when the government sets policies that support isolationism" (Pendry, 2017). This surge in consumers' expectations around corporate responsibility coincides starkly with qualms about the operations of tech companies such as Facebook that may have the power to contribute to societal good yet still face challenges in defining the boundaries of their own organizational social responsibilities.

Public relations has remained an understated yet critical aspect of this rise in both CSR's expansion and its implementation in the tech industry. PR, a title for the messenger between an organization and its publics, has long been a function of businesses to hone internal and external messages and define brand narratives. This study will argue that today, in line with scholars of communication theory such as John Ledingham, this function continues to become integrated into the operational side of businesses as the feedback loop with the public quickens. Some will argue that PR and CSR should be definitively separate functions to ensure the "pure" intentionality of initiatives. Others posit that PR is a tool to publicize a brand's sustainability messages to inspire and inform consumers. This study will consider the circumstance, specifically within the tech industry, in which PR works synergistically to create fully integrated

CSR that unites all key stakeholders and affects the ongoing sustainability of an organization.

This research emerges at a time not only when CSR as a concept has matured in the public consciousness, but more importantly when one of the world's youngest sectors, tech, faces unprecedented pushback around its level of social engagement and responsibility. The bounds of social software tech are still being uncovered, and thus questions of social responsibility are at an all-time high. By examining the connection between strategic communicators and sustainability practitioners and comparing their work with the perceptions and beliefs of consumers, this study will ultimately provide insight to what elements of CSR work for tech clients and where there are opportunities to authentically leverage the communicative tools inherent to social software brands.

Literature Review

An introduction to PR

The field of public relations exists at a complex intersection of theory and practice. From a theoretical perspective, the importance of PR lies in its function to synthesize information across industries, organizations and individuals and transmit these messages to target audiences. Communications scholar Kirk Hallahan (1999) explained, "As a foundation, it is important to recognize that public relations work fundamentally involves the construction of social reality." Shared reality within a society emerges from the inherent characteristics of the world and the ways in which we perceive them. Furthermore, how we perceive the world comes in part from how we are able to develop codes through language and relay information to one another. Communicating the core values of a given organization or promoting dialogue between parties presents an opportunity to facilitate this shared understanding.

The Public Relations Society of America (2012) captures this process in its definition, which characterizes PR as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." In practice, then, the most fundamental work in PR involves the development and delivery of strategic messages between groups or individuals and the resulting construction of relationships. In his book, Public Relations and the History of Ideas Simon Moore wrote of public relations, "The current name is highly unlikely to exist forever, the activity itself will continue to exist, generating new specialisms and tactics as organizations, societies and communication tools change" (Moore, 2014, 1). We use the term public

relations because it best captures this broad set of skills and goals at this point in time, yet as the research shows, the reality of the job continues to change alongside the needs of clients and audiences.

This form of strategic communication can be conducted in a variety of settings to support the development of nonprofit organizations, political campaigns, public diplomacy or any other sector that involves correspondence with target audiences. Much of the research in PR has focused on for-profit businesses, however, which have a particular mandate to understand the needs and expectations of their publics to thrive in the modern consumer market. The transmission of information through PR practitioners thus remains a key tool for navigating the needs of the public within a capitalistic society. Accordingly, this study will investigate characteristics of corporate PR and its role in defining organizational sustainability of tech companies through words and through action.

From the academic perspective, PR has been defined through evolving models of communication theory. More specifically, modern PR communication styles have transitioned from propaganda to more ethical two-way strategies that more readily consider the interests of the consumer (Grunig & Hunt, 1994). In the early days, when figures such as Edward Bernays began to define the field, PR was seen as manipulation with a purpose to engineer cohesive public opinion in favor of an organization's messaging. In his 1923 book *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, Bernays laid out this preliminary notion of PR theory, suggesting the role of the practitioner was to transmit organizational messages to the masses tailored to their psychological state in order to alter perception and behavior. Even within two-way models, the organization or

company has traditionally maintained influence over developing and delivering messages to the public. In recent years, however, more consumer-driven PR communication models emerged and redefined the role of the field itself. The result of this shift has been characterized as a relationship management approach, which emphasizes the importance of the organization-public relationship (Ledingham 2003). This evolution of communication models matters to this study because the field of PR is defined by the extent to which it transmits meaning between people and by the strategies practitioners use to do so. Placing more emphasis on the voices of consumers through PR tactics suggests an opportunity to equilibrate conventional corporate values with the needs of a changing society, a core pillar of authentic CSR.

The influence of PR: American consumerism in the 20th century

Just as the exact definition of PR can be difficult to capture, the cultural influence of public relations can be even more challenging to identify. Effective PR achieves the goals of a client by elevating its visibility and integrating messaging throughout public discourse. The effects of a powerful campaign manifest in shifts of public values, attitudes, knowledge and perception. With this in mind, we can better understand our current consumerist society – and even trace it back to very intentional, if not short-sighted strategic communication initiatives through history. In his *BBC* documentary "Century of the Self," director Adam Curtis argues that PR practitioners such as Bernays helped establish the culture of consumerism through the use of messaging based on research and psychological manipulation.

One-way consumer PR campaigns in the past century have engineered bacon and eggs as the American breakfast, defined the value of diamonds, and normalized the use of cigarettes. In one analysis of the rise of the cigarette industry, Allan (1996) explains the way in which PR tactics harnessed a cultural movement to reposition the meaning of the product:

> Cigarette advertisers and public relations experts recognized the significance of women's changing roles and the rising culture of consumption, and worked to create specific meanings for the cigarette to make it appeal to women. The cigarette was a flexible symbol, with a remarkably elastic set of meanings; for women, it represented rebellious independence, glamour, seduction, and sexual allure, and served as a symbol for both feminists and flappers.

Or consider the creation of value through strategic communication around the diamond:

> The diamond invention is far more than a monopoly for fixing diamond prices; it is a mechanism for converting tiny crystals of carbon into universally recognized tokens of wealth, power, and romance...Both women and men had to be made to perceive diamonds not as marketable precious stones but as an inseparable part of courtship and married life...The illusion had to be created that diamonds were forever -- "forever" in the sense that they should never be resold (Epstein 1982).

These campaigns and many others represent the power of PR to assign values to products and services, thus constructing social meaning around the choices of consumers. Moreover, PR has been instrumental in developing America's consumer culture and the way in which individuals have come to view the influence of consumer goods in society. More specifically, this development occurred through asymmetric communication models favoring corporate incentives. The effects of this corporate-driven model surfaced most forcefully at a time, post-World War II, when American society hurdled into an age of postmodernism and industrialization (Curtis 2002). This specific transitional period, which some have called the Golden Age of Capitalism

(Marglin 1992), presented an opportunity for the nation to realign its identity with renewed values of economic expansion and individualism. We can see now that many of those values came to be prescribed by corporate messaging. Today, American society faces the downsides to the consumerist, closed loop production systems that now dominate the economy, including wealth inequality and environmental damage. The evolution of PR communication models outlined here helps demonstrate a shift to a more public-driven value system, which could over time guide more sustainable corporate behavior.

Evolution of PR communication models

The history of PR does not follow a linear trajectory. Scholars Margot Lamme and Karen Russell (2010) wrote, "Public relations is notoriously difficult to define, which makes it hard to pinpoint its origins." They argue that the study of PR requires an understanding of the long-term view of the development of strategic communication. PR, in the form of persuasive communication to masses, has been traced to events throughout history including ancient Greek theatrics and Plato's *Republic*, to Martin Luther's *Theses* and events like the Boston Tea Party, which catalyzed the American Revolution (Cutlip 1994). Organizing PR history into categories of communication models is a helpful tool to synthesize the prominent phases of the profession. Analyzing the development of communication models also reveals the shifting roles of both organizations and publics as they move into a globalized and technologically connected world.

For this study, PR history will be outlined as a progression through four stages first defined by Todd Hunt and James Grunig (1984): press agentry and publicity, public information, two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric communication models. Press agentry and publicity models have roots in the 19th century and rely heavily on spinning facts and exaggerating information, with the only intention to sell goods or ideas to audiences. Key figures from this era include Phineas T. Barnum, an entertainer who used deception as a means to draw audiences to his circus shows. He understood the power of third-party validation in the form of media coverage, even if the story content was sensationalized or even false. In most cases, this form of manipulation simply fosters distrust and ill will in publics over time. However, press agentry can become particularly harmful in the realm of politics and economics, in which the consequences of deceit and manipulation can cause detriment to masses. This rudimentary form of strategic communication only serves the interests of the organization, with no regard for the feedback or wellbeing of the public. Press agentry represents a strictly one-way communication model.

The public information model emerged in the early 20th century and is characterized by more truthful, one-way communication. Ivy Lee, a pioneer of the PR field, championed efforts to truthfully represent organizations and offer the public information necessary to become informed consumers. Lee is often quoted as saying, "Tell the truth, because sooner or later the public will find out anyway. And if the public doesn't like what you're doing, change your policies and bring them into line with what people want." In 1900, George Michaelis, a former journalist, founded the Publicity Bureau in Boston where he gathered factual information from clients to

distribute to newspapers and garner media coverage (Lamme & Russell, 2010). The era of public information provides an important foundation for the ethical codes of PR that guide practitioners to this day. This phase featured primarily static content such as news releases and fact sheets, tools with little consideration for the psychological profile of the target audience. While this one-way model delivered more accurate information about a given organization, it still lacked the dynamic component to effectively process and respond to feedback.

Soon after the implementation of the public information model, the two-way asymmetric model came into popularity as a mode to conduct public relations. This model entails strategic research and understanding of audiences to craft persuasive messages. It is asymmetric because the desires of the company or organization still greatly outweigh the considerations of the public. World War I helped usher in this model as leaders around the world began to understand the power of creating cohesive national narratives in wartime, and they began to establish propaganda agencies. After World War II, practitioners such as Edward Bernays heavily influenced the development of this model using insights about psychoanalysis from his uncle, Sigmund Freud (Curtis, 2002). Bernays was one of the first to transition principles of wartime propaganda to capitalistic campaigns.

The two-way symmetric model denotes one of the most progressive communication models to be widely defined and used in PR's recent history. In the 1980s, Grunig described this model as part of his Excellence Theory. The two-way symmetric model is characterized by a dialogue between an organization and its publics in an attempt to resolve conflict and achieve mutual understanding and improvement. It

implies change both in the organization and in its public (L'Etang, 1994) (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This model marks a departure from the deceitful connotations of past practices and places the PR practitioner in the role of a mediator more than a persuader.

Relationship management theory and evolving models

The evolution of these communication models helps to demonstrate the establishment of PR as a profession and legitimized field of study. As PR campaigns become more intertwined with the lives of the public, especially through digital platforms such as social media, this relationship must be studied and better understood in order to produce valuable and responsible content. In his exploration of ethical strategic communication, Carl Botan (1997) wrote, "A campaign intended to influence suggests a relationship, or a desired relationship, between the parties, and the ethicality of such campaigns is determined primarily by the values and relationships expressed in them, including how the target publics are treated." This multidirectional approach raises opportunities to elevate the needs of individuals while minimizing a company's harm to society.

Ledingham and Bruning pioneered the defined theory of relationship management at the turn of the millennium. In contrast to the four previous communication models used to describe what PR does, these scholars argue, "The notion of relationship management is an attempt to define the field in terms of what it is" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). This model presents the idea that public relations integrates managerial responsibility, and thus practitioners must be proficient in the process of analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. Not only should PR tout

the positive attributes for a client, it should inform the improvement of the organization from within. In the study Ledingham and Bruning used to demonstrate the importance of relationships, researchers analyzed interviews and focus groups to gather information about customers of a telephone service provider. Using their results, they operationalized five key dimensions of organization-public relationships: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. These results may come across as somewhat intuitive today, but this study helped solidify in the minds of companies and PR professionals that relational-oriented communication can be a determining factor in the company's overall success.

Beyond relationship management theory, there are many related concepts that help characterize the shift in PR communication to more symmetric and dialogic processes. For example, this study will consider the implications of stakeholder theory, a concept originally housed in organizational management and articulated by Ian Mitroff and Edward Freeman in the early 1980s. Stakeholder theory defines a shift from Milton Friedman's shareholder theory, which suggested that an organization's success is based solely off its commitment to producing returns for its shareholders. By contrast, stakeholder theory suggests that an organization is beholden not only to shareholders but all stakeholders, including employees, suppliers and consumers (Freeman, 1984, 6). This is just another key example in a cascade of evolving management and communication ideals which contributed to current understanding of CSR and CSR communication. In 1994, researcher Laurie Wilson touched on the similar notion of "coalition-building" in public relations as a vehicle for promoting corporate responsibility specifically. The importance of this theoretical framework arises from an

emerging emphasis on the partnership between organization and its publics. In 2000, Broom et al. also outlined a model for understanding in depth the significance of fostering this dynamic relationship and the desired effects. Their study concludes that significance of organization–public relationships come from "the outputs that have the effects of changing the environment and of achieving, maintaining or changing goal states both inside and outside of the organization." Within relationship management theory, the public gains heightened autonomy to develop expectations and provide input about the performance of a company. Finally, this history of communication models gives helpful context to the evolution of CSR, which relies on this process of exchange with stakeholders.

The rise of CSR

The concept of corporate social responsibility is more pervasive than ever. The 19th Annual Global CEO Survey from pwc found that in 2016, 64 percent of CEOs planned to increase their investments in CSR (pwc, 2016). Today, the concept is often taught through the model of the triple bottom line: a business framework that suggests prosperity requires a commitment to upholding social, environmental and economic resources. The idea of a business having social responsibility to its community can be traced back centuries. However, CSR scholar Archie Carroll (1999) dates the modern age of literature on the concept to the 1950s when Howard Bowen published the landmark book, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. Bowen's work (1953) was one of the first to articulate the idea that "businesses were vital centers of power and decision making and that the actions of these firms touched the lives of citizens at many points." He initiated an important debate about the social function of companies in an

increasingly consumerist society. Carroll goes on to explain, “The decade of the 1960s marked a significant growth in attempts to formalize or, more accurately, state what CSR means.” At this point in American history, the public began to rally behind a variety of social movements and question the rise of corporate power. Keith Davis, a CSR thought leader in the 1960s and beyond, touted the power of CSR initiatives to bring sustainable, long-term economic growth. Davis (1971) also authored the “Iron Law of Responsibility,” a concept that proposes: "Social responsibilities of businessmen need to be commensurate with their social power." Moving forward in the development of CSR principles, Joseph McGuire introduced the idea of employee happiness as a part of CSR development and championed concepts of business ethics and corporate citizenship.

In 1971, the Committee for Economic Development (CED) helped develop the concept of CSR through the publication of Social Responsibilities of Business Corporations (Carroll 1999). This publication helped to standardize the idea that "Business functions by public consent and its basic purpose is to serve constructively the needs of society– to the satisfaction of society." The 1970s presented a proliferation of CSR definitions and increased acknowledgement from both publics and organizations. A content analysis of CSR research in PR carried out by Taeho Lee (2017) demonstrated a significant increase in published literature since 1980. More specifically, Lee noted, “The gradual increase in effect studies and proposals of conceptual frameworks indicates a gradual growth of sophistication in the field.” More and more, CSR theory factors into the norms of business practices.

This history has helped shape a more nuanced contemporary notion outlined by Falck & Heblich (2007), which defines CSR as a "voluntary corporate commitment to exceed the explicit and implicit obligations imposed on a company by society's expectations of conventional corporate behavior." Moving forward in the evolution of CSR, perhaps a key transition will come forth as informed and empowered consumers help redefine the fundamental social "obligations" of a company through communication channels.

The scope and level of nuance around the definition of CSR have developed greatly throughout the past decade, reaching new heights within the last year. In August, 2017 CEOs across the United States condemned the violence and bigotry shown at white supremacist rallies in Charlottesville, Virginia. Spokespeople from companies including Goldman Sachs, General Electric, Under Armour, Intel, Unilever and Merck released comments that either directly denounced these tragic events or announced company values that made their opposition clear. Just months later in September, corporate leaders took a stand against the U.S. government's threat to end Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Notably Apple CEO Tim Cook released a memo that outlined his commitment to protecting DACA beneficiaries and fighting for the reversal of this political action. During that same time, the country faced three devastating hurricanes– Irma, Harvey and Maria. These events, too sparked an overwhelming outpouring of corporate commentary and action from companies across industries. In his piece "The Moral Voice of Corporate America" David Gelles writes of the increased engagement of private organizations on the public stage. "These and other actions are part of a broad recasting of the voice of business in the nation's political and

social dialogue, a transformation that has gained momentum in recent years as the country has engaged in fraught debates over everything from climate change to health care" (Gelles, 2017). These are just representative examples of sociopolitical events that have garnered the attention of the private sector and consequently blurred the lines of CSR and an iteration of corporate activism. CSR, once grounded in comparatively simple philanthropy, is also undoubtedly evolving. Here emerges a key question that this thesis will begin to address: Where, within the organizational ecosystem, should CSR be housed? Furthermore, given shifts in its strategic evolution, how will PR practitioners and managerial leaders negotiate the boundaries of CSR strategy and implementation? Insights from interviews with PR and CSR professionals give a sense of how companies operate and carry out their practice now, but their experience also leaves room for the reimagining of CSR professionals' roles as programs continue to specialize.

A key dimension of this evolution emerges from the increasingly dynamic communication strategies surrounding CSR initiatives. CSR communication affects not only the cohesion of strategy with overall organizational goals, but also the success of stakeholder engagement and transparency in execution (Bortree, 2014). For example, companies can engage in either reactive or proactive CSR efforts, meaning they act in response to the demands and interests of publics or they establish initiatives to anticipate the interests of publics and potential consumers. Although their work predated the relationship management theory in PR, scholars Wartick and Cochran (1985) pioneered a relevant corporate social performance model that defined four measures of corporate social responsiveness of an organization to its public: reactive,

defensive, accommodative and proactive. This stance reflects the previously defined stakeholder theory, which concludes "conducting business with stakeholders on the basis of trust and corporation have an incentive to demonstrate a sincere commitment to ethical behavior (Jones, 1995). The way in which an organization interacts with the public determines the kind of CSR campaign it should implement, and potentially its success.

Today, companies must take into consideration the interests of all key stakeholders, including potential stakeholders, to develop the most effective messaging and outreach. Historically, there has been an underlying distinction in the function of CSR and CSR communication, and yet the increased integration and consumer-focused strategy of CSR in many ways mirrors the evolution of balanced strategic communication modelling. In a 2014 article outlining the state of CSR, researcher Denise Bortree explained: "Later, communication research examined how CSR can make an important contribution to corporate reputation (Lewis, 2003), and the focus slowly evolved from one-way communication that framed messages and primed audiences to two-way communication that engaged with them." Today's CSR takes increasingly diverse forms, from employee engagement initiatives to CEO activism and investor relations. Another common form of CSR emerges from nonprofit and corporate partnerships. If the spectrum of modern CSR is not already broadened enough, many companies also incorporate sustainability teams and initiatives as part of CSR. These definitions vary between each organization depending on its internal and external language.

Stigmas of CSR

Similar to PR, CSR efforts often carry a stigma, as they call into question the ethicality of a company engaging with social issues driven by an underlying goal to increase profit. Critiques of CSR have come from different sides of the ideological spectrum. Economist Milton Friedman opposed the concept because he believed "(t)he capitalist utilitarian conception of the common good is of an individualist society where freedom is maximised through the independent accumulation of individual satisfaction and government is minimized" (L'Etang, 1994). On the other end, critics pose that commodifying social issues runs a risk of ensuing further damage and corporate hypocrisy, which is a potential reality for misguided CSR efforts. In one detailed philosophical critique of CSR, Subhabrata Banerjee argues, "Discourses of corporate citizenship, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability as ideological movements that are intended to legitimize and consolidate the power of large corporations" (Banjeree, 2008). This study, however, posits that the cultural legitimization of corporate power is a nearly globalized reality and CSR should thus be harnessed as a productive force within this economic and ideological model.

Ineffective CSR, often referred to as "greenwashing," occurs when the strategic communication predates or overstates the actual integration of sustainable business practices. While irresponsible engagement still surely exists, outdated perceptions of CSR hinder its maturation and increased efficiency. There is a tradition in American culture to falsely glorify the puritan values of nonprofits as selfless entities that address social ills, while corporations remain solely profit-driven (Pallotta, 2013). A study from the Harvard Review surmised:

> This old stereotype of noble nonprofits and malevolent businesses inevitably casts corporations in a defensive role. Companies often view CSR as a vulnerability – an external risk to be managed with the least possible investment – rather than an opportunity for valuable social impact or competitive differentiation (Kramer, 2008).

This dichotomous view has limited the potential for nonprofit growth and cast a stigma upon the socially responsible potential of for-profit entities.

Changing this perception perhaps ironically begins with better communicating the integrity of CSR from within a company and among external stakeholders. If the CSR communication function assumes a more integral part of the business's operations, perhaps authentic action and transparency can become realized. CSR communication represents a potential approach to achieve progress on social issues using resources from within this framework of capitalistic culture (Last, 2013). While some companies may continue to engage in exploitive practices, supporting a trend toward more socially responsible standards and normalizing these expectations from consumers would still be a productive shift. In other words, companies will continue to capitalize on CSR strategies regardless of public concerns; thus, it is the responsibility of strategic communicators to play their part in making these efforts as impactful as possible.

PR + CSR: theory and practice

In summary, the general definition of CSR denotes a business approach that delivers social, economic and environmental benefits to a wide range of stakeholders, while promoting sustainable development. The way a company positions its CSR initiatives to engage its publics can be thought of as CSR communication. This process has increasingly become a function of PR because of the industry's inherent role in both gauging and shaping public opinion. Effective CSR, however, goes deeper than

strategic reputation management, which solely deals with the external image of an organization. The core ideas and practices of CSR reflect public relations' modern ordinance to not only respond to consumer expectations, but broader societal expectations as well. The necessity to demonstrate tangible initiatives makes it increasingly important for the PR model to integrate managerial responsibilities (Ledingham, 2001), those which deal with a company's internal operations. Furthermore, while this connection between communication and action remains a critical dynamic to balance, there are elements of CSR housed uniquely in the communications realm. Elving (2015) explained, "The role of communication is to align diverse stakeholders in a manner that allows organizations to reap the strategic business benefits of CSR." Communication in and of itself serves as a form of action that brings about the impact of corporate CSR strategy.

Scholar Archie Carroll explains that CSR "captures the most important concerns of the public regarding business and society relationships" (Carroll 1999). CSR represents a significant intersection of consumers' values and the interests of a company, which can be leveraged to enact sustainable changes on the organizational side. Because of the interdependent relationships inherent to this concept, I argue CSR communication is an effective vehicle to understanding the development of public relations theory.

At the frontlines of evolving PR communication models, corporate social responsibility communication emerges as a touchstone component to investigate both the purpose and the potential for PR at large. Scholar Oliver Falck writes, "Effective CSR is usually a long-term proposition. The practice of CSR is an investment in the

company's future; as such, it must be planned specifically, supervised carefully, and evaluated regularly." This long term process makes CSR a logical function of the PR, in particular the reconceptualized role of PR as a managerial process (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998), rather than a standalone internal function (Falck and Heblich, 2007).

Put simply, "Corporate social responsibility has become important to public relations because such programmes offer the opportunity to build good will by promoting the benefits of the company to its stakeholders" (L'Etang, 1994). However, the benefits of CSR initiatives transcend the baseline goal of reputation management, and instead promote a model of information exchange between organizations and publics that draws more heavily on the interests of publics than ever before. CSR tactics rely on the accurate perception of consumers' needs and involves strategic research and continuous feedback. In summary, the goals of CSR are tied to the strategic reputation management of an organization and demand a level of internal and external relationship management as well.

To give further context to the theoretical underpinnings of CSR and its connection to PR, this study draws from the theory of communicative action established by Jurgen Habermas in 1981 through his book by the same name. His theory explicates the concept that language and communication presuppose the mutual understanding between individuals that creates action. This theory becomes important to understanding the integration of CSR and PR as it reframes the purpose of communication as a form of generative action. Not only does communication facilitate the mutual understanding necessary to diagnose stakeholder concerns and solutions, but performative or aspirational CSR communication can serve to move organizational

expectations toward more responsible business practices (Crane et al., 2016). Another key theory behind CSR communication that relates to the idea of communicative action is the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO). In 1995, Karl Weik published *Sensemaking in Organizations,* which paved the way for an understanding of how communication serves as the defining tool in the dynamic process of maintaining a cohesive organization. These ideas can be understood under the constitutive model of communication (Craig, 1999), a paradigm that orients communication as "a social process focusing upon the production and reproduction of shared meaning born out of a 'communicational' perspective on social reality" (Crane et al., 2016).

In a 2016 piece on the meaning of modern CSR shared by the B Corporation organization, communications professional Adam Garfunkel reflected on the current associations of the word. In response to the contentious question "Is it about doing good or talking about it?" He answered, "Well the short answer is: both." Beyond the actual initiatives around mitigating environmental footprint or conducting business ethically, he explained, "It's also about telling a story, connecting with people and building a company culture. So marketers have a crucial role to play in all this, both in listening to stakeholders and in finding creative ways to tell the story" (Garfunkel, 2014). There are many practical dimensions to the communicators' contribution to "doing good."

A question that underlies the purpose of this study deals with deepening understanding of the intersection of PR, CSR communication and the implementation of CSR initiatives and their business outcomes. In his 2015 journal article on CSR, international corporate communication specialist Wim Elving articulates a related inquiry:

> As scholars concerned with communicative aspects of CSR we are therefore challenged with the following question: what could be the role of communication in fostering the strategic and transformational role of sustainability/CSR in the markets and societies where businesses operate? (Elving, 2015).

Through this study, I find that CSR and CSR communication are not as separate as they might seem. Particularly in the realm of social software technology, in which the product is the communication platform, communication becomes an even more integral part of the company's handbook of societal responsibilities.

Tech CSR

Addressing the technology industry as such may come off as a blanket statement, an oversimplified label for an inherently complex and evolving set of markets. For the purpose of delineating the tech industry to report on stock prices, multinational mass media and information firm Thomson Reuters has defined the categories within tech as the following: computer hardware, IT services and consulting, software, semiconductors, communications equipment, semiconductor equipment and testing, and office equipment.

For many years, tech has been thought of as one of America's "darling" industries, a beacon of hope in a world reeling from the financial crisis of the mid 2000s. Working in tech and in the Silicon Valley became associated with wealth, progressivism, cutting-edge trends. In light of recent events around Facebook, Uber and others, however, many would agree that that time of unbridled awe is over. The *New York Times* reported, "In the past year, social networks and search engines have been blamed for undermining the news media, fostering echo chambers, and spreading misinformation, hate, misogyny and other general social unpleasantness" (Manjoo,

2017). And it seems this wave of mistrust and outright criticism toward big tech will only continue to crystalize until these corporations built on big data and user profiling develop strategies to communicate effectively about their efforts to not only ensure profit, but minimize societal harm.

For many startup tech companies founded amidst this age of heightened corporate citizenship, CSR is somewhat embedded into the values and functions of many companies. And yet, as challenges and risks of these tech companies grow, they require new renderings of CSR action. Twitter, Salesforce, Google and others may already have robust programs around social responsibility and environmental sustainability, for example, but there is more work to be done with the advent of new services as society further adapts to the use of their platforms.

The tech industry is poised to implement CSR in ways that have yet to be seen. With growing power through big data collection, increased presence in the daily lives of users, some may argue that the tech industry faces a level of social responsibility unique to its sector. An article from the 2014 Stanford Social Innovation Review states, "The industry faces mounting calls to make greater societal contributions beyond those of profit. The technology field is uniquely positioned to give back to society in ways that distinguish it from other industries" (Morfit, 2014). And as more recent studies show, this call for action only grows louder. A 2017 piece from *Techcrunch* reads:

> First and foremost, we need to recognize that stakes are getting higher and higher with our innovations. We have gone from building software companies that provided efficiency for workers in every industry to completely rethinking how to provide better healthcare, education, financial services, transportation, and even work itself (Taneja, 2017).

With such widespread influence in the functioning of society, social software technology companies in particular must think about their ability to contribute in different ways than companies driven by one-time purchases, for example. CSR may be evolving, but other more matured industries such as energy, transportation or manufacturing have simply had more time to develop a blueprint for thinking about societal tolls on environmental and social resources. Tech has less of that legacy, less of an understanding of expectations for how to engage with society in a way that goes beyond profit increases and addresses unique, tech-related issues. Specifically social media platforms, many of which are based on external missions of free communication and networking, now deal with questions of how facilitating communication comes with dilemmas of bias, security, echo chambers and more – all of which have major implication for people's ability to make decisions.

Unbounded by the blueprint of material good industries, the social software tech sector presents an especially vast opportunity for communicators to expand the reach and definition of CSR. The social software tech industry in particular, the segment of tech that deals with social networking platforms, presents a unique area to explore the potential for public relations professionals shape the future of big data responsibility, cross-cultural discourse and equal information access. As this research will explore, individuals working in some capacity with CSR communications operate in this space of opportunity, with a particular insight to the issues which may drive organizational solutions.

Research Questions

In this thesis I propose the following questions to guide the qualitative research process:

- To what extent does CSR PR represent the emergence of relationship management theory and iterative communication models in practice?
- Based on current trends in the tech industry and consumer expectations for CSR, how will the PR function likely transition in scope of work and organizational integration?
    - How does the public relations function serve to establish CSR initiatives and create cohesive positioning for emerging tech companies?

Methods

To address the research questions of this study, I conducted IRB-approved human subject research to ascertain qualitative data on the current state of corporate social responsibility in the tech industry. I held three focus groups and completed 11 in-depth interviews with communications professionals with a focus on tech and CSR to gather and compare information about consumer perceptions of corporate social responsibility and professionals' insights about current and emerging strategies around corporate sustainability initiatives.

A snowball sample was used in scheduling interviews with PR professionals. After reaching out to initial contacts based on an existing network, interviewees suggested other individuals to speak with in the realm of CSR communications. For the purpose of this project I identified professionals who worked in various positions within the CSR communication field, including a chief sustainability officer, account supervisors and vice presidents in brand responsibility work. Due to the sampling process, most of the interviewees worked out of offices on the West Coast with the exception of one practitioner from the East Coast.

The interviews took place over the phone after establishing verbal consent and spanned approximately 45 minutes. Each followed a similar framework of introductory questions about the interviewee's background, current position, projects relating to CSR and perceptions of culture shifts in their company and the industry as a whole. I did not use company or individual names to maintain the anonymity of the participants.

The three focus groups were comprised of four to six participants of 18-22 years in age with similar levels of familiarity around CSR. A digital survey was used to gather

this information. Focus group participants totaled 15 individuals in all. Participants were chosen for their interest and level of preliminary knowledge on CSR and then by snowball sampling. This audience, which lies at the cusp of Millennial and Gen Z groups, also have relevant contributions to this study because of individuals' experience as digital natives. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour and followed an open-ended question guide that addressed the participants' level of awareness around CSR, its purpose and their personal expectations for its presence in the technology sector moving forward.

The methods for this study borrow principles from grounded theory as it is explicated by Corbin and Strauss (1990). Accordingly, the process of data collection marked the beginning of analysis. To formally synthesize and analyze the qualitative data, I practiced a series of open, axial and selective coding processes. While I conducted interviews and focus groups with a list of open-ended questions, I also used the organic conversations with participants to produce important themes and more specified inquiries. Through open coding methods I identified and labeled overarching concepts to inform more in-depth exploration. As Corbin and Strauss (1990) explained: "Open coding stimulates generative and comparative questions to guide the researcher upon return to the field." Some of these initial concepts included professional trajectory, CSR team organization and perceptions of internal versus external CSR motivators.

Open coding was followed by axial coding and the process of organizing conceptual categories and subcategories then beginning to synthesize the relationships between them. In this phase of analysis, I began to highlight the connections between

common themes to better reconstruct the key meaning behind participant insights. To analyze this information, I transcribed each interview and focus group to identify key themes and trends in participant responses. In order to code these themes, I highlighted statements and ideas that were frequently repeated across interviews or aligned with pre-existing theories around CSR and PR interaction. After collecting an extensive list of sub-themes, I grouped these concepts and ideas into overarching categories. From the interview data, I synthesized three general themes including the meaning of CSR integration, the role of CSR communication gatekeepers and unique opportunities of tech. From the focus group data, I selected three general themes including the increasingly holistic understanding of CSR, skepticism toward social software companies and calls for transparency and accountability. I pulled direct quotes to support these themes but did not include participant names to ensure privacy.

Results

Interviews

Transcribing and coding the 11 interviews with CSR and PR professionals in the technology industry provided a broad spectrum of knowledge on the past, present and future of CSR. These diverse subjects also allowed an exploration of how both in-house and agency communications professionals and sustainability-focused professionals operate to create effective CSR in the tech industry. From these interviews I ascertained that each company and PR agency has a slightly different internal ecosystem to support CSR efforts. Furthermore, each organization holds its own norms for talking about CSR, sustainability, social purpose and many more related terms. Participant responses ultimately provided insight on how communication potentially enhances the integration of authentic CSR and how this trend may continue to occur in the future.

Participant	Age	Organization type	Title	Location
A	50-55	Global software company	Digital PR specialist	Portland
B	25-30	E-commerce and cloud computing company	Sustainability PR lead	Seattle
C	40-45	Global communications firm	VP of technology	Seattle
D	40-45	Global software company	Head of CSR for North America	San Francisco
E	30-35	Global communications firm	Senior Account Supervisor of Sustainability	Seattle

F	50-55	Global communications firm	Senior Vice President, business and social purpose	Seattle
G	25-30	Social media platform	Communications professional	San Francisco
H	25-30	Global communications firm	Senior Account Executive of CSR practice	San Francisco
I	25-30	Cloud computing company	Product PR Manager	San Francisco
J	50-55	Global IT company	SVP & Chief Sustainability Officer	New England
K	30-35	Social media platform	Former PR specialist	Bay Area

Table 1. Interview participant demographic information

The integration of CSR and long-term PR strategy

Just as the literature suggests, CSR has undergone many transformations in practice and reputation throughout the past several decades. What began as corporate risk mitigation and internal conversations about the meaning of responsibility has increasingly become a dialogue with external stakeholders and an opportunity for proactive industry leadership. For many companies, CSR once meant philanthropy or donating to causes outside of the corporation. This began to transform into a more holistic effort of community relations. From the global agency perspective, one interviewee reflected on her experience with CSR early in her career, as the concept just began to enter the public conscience. After working for both nonprofits and PR agencies, she began a role with a consumer brand in the early 2000s working specifically on CSR: “They asked me if would be willing to start up a function that

helped them develop better relationships with their local communities and stakeholders like NGOs and other organizations advocating for various issues." She explained the strategies of this formative work:

> It wasn't media focused at all; it was very much about the putting out the information on a regular basis. They were trying to be more transparent and to build better relationships with those stakeholders and they thought that having ongoing and deeper communication would help neutralize some of the tensions around some of their key issues.

One of the earlier stages of CSR referenced by interviewees was characterized by this realization from clients that talking about key issues would be better than saying nothing. An agency VP reflected that in the beginning, "companies were reluctant to make too big of a play on these issues. They didn't want open themselves up to other criticisms." This changed, however, as companies began to understand the opportunity of building relationships through listening to consumer concerns and addressing them openly. Since the beginning, CSR has taken hold in different parts of the corporate structure, from legal professionals to environmental health and safety (EHS) experts. Corporate communications professionals have long been involved in communicating social responsibility initiatives as well, but based on interviewee insights, their role has become increasingly more grounded in strategic planning and execution instead of serving as mouthpieces for previously determined campaigns.

Nearly every interviewee touched on this sense of CSR growth, and specifically its shift toward integration into all aspects of a company. A senior account executive in San Francisco who works with corporate brands at a global agency said:

> I think there really is a shift happening in the CSR world and really in the way that we are, as consumers, looking at brands. We don't want a company that just has a CSR program and throws money at a cause —

> we don’t want the foundations of the world the same way that we used to.

This sentiment rung clearly through reflections of in-house and sustainability specialists as well. One interviewee and director of sustainability for a software corporation said, “I don’t think there’s going to be the same expectations for executives to be on boards giving massive donations. I think everything is going to shift and become more integrated into companies. And then I hope the divide between the nonprofit sector and the corporate sector becomes less and less.” Another agency specialist added: “Just because you’re philanthropic doesn't take away from the other issues.” As CSR becomes more of a participatory aspect of companies, the expectation to develop dynamic initiatives and engage a broader spectrum of stakeholders becomes key.

According to participant responses, one important factor in the integration and expectation for increased depth of CSR strategy emerged from the changing demographics of the workforce — both in PR and in tech firms. Just as previous research shows, employees play a significant role in changing corporate culture by bringing their own social causes to the forefront of their work. Participants supported claims about a more socially conscience workforce through their own professional intentions and goals. One in-house PR professional has been at her company for 17 years and reflected on the uptick of CSR efforts: “I think a lot has to do with the shifting workforce.” More junior respondents confirmed this trend through their experiences and personal value systems. “I knew early that that this is the realm I wanted to go into. For me it’s always been important to hold companies accountable and to create change,” said one senior account executive. This interviewee also has experience working with internal communications and talent acquisition — both roles that require

communicating and shaping the focus of company values to engage Millennial and Gen Z employees who, she explained, expect social responsibility as a core tenet of their employer. This sense of personal alignment with work appeared in participants' dedication to working with the technology industry as well. The product PR manager from a cloud computing firm said, "I knew I wanted to work on something I had a personal interest in, and that kind of inevitably falls to tech because so much of what we use to run our lives is based in an app or something along those lines." In summary, the perception of mission-driven employees changing the face of company culture appears to play a role in the function of corporate communications as well.

Beyond the onus of an evolving workforce, participants characterized their experiences with an increase in CSR needs from internal and external pressures. As a member of a global agency's CSR team said: "[Our] team continues to grow, and we continue to see our standard PR clients and accounts come to their account leads and say 'We actually would like some support on the sustainability perspective, too.'" This team and those at other agencies are increasingly pulled into counselling clients across practice areas in CSR and sustainability strategy and initiatives. From the in-house communications perspective, participants also expressed their perceptions of expanding CSR initiatives and messaging. A lead in PR for an e-commerce tech sustainability team explained that as the company has grown and become a leader of its industry, more and more individual influencers and media come to them to ask for their opinions. This expectation for thought leadership came with the demand for cohesive external storytelling around CSR. Another PR manager working with a global software firm recounted that in the early days of the company's CSR, a major customer made a call

for more employee volunteerism, and that effort was followed by more targeted community engagement.

Each participant reflected on his or her role in creating or interacting with CSR communication strategy. The agency-based professionals helped outline the process to meet the needs of clients to create impactful strategy, and each explained the importance of understanding the specific landscape of the industry. An SAS of a global agency's CSR team explained:

> Let's use a new tech company for instance: We would do a materiality assessment or a benchmarking exercise where we interview people within the organization and outside of the organization. Then we'll also get all their competitors to find out what topics are material to their business.

Her team also sees many clients who understand the issues they want to address, and they use the agency to develop strategies to reach their CSR goals. She elaborated:

> Maybe they need a diversity and inclusion program, if they're a tech company that's been having issues with that, or maybe it's a community impact-type program where they want to make sure that all of their employees are feeling engaged and are feeling part of the community in which they operate.

Each participant emphasized the need to assess each client uniquely and in some cases motivate them by different means.

A digital PR specialist for a software firm explained her connection to the CSR team within her company, referencing a specific instance of collaboration on a local business campaign: "We're all doing our own thing and then we think, how can we tap into the CSR side. I thought if we tie into a CSR initiative it's going to be a win-win, for them and for us, and it really did drive some extra engagement and traffic on our social channels." In some cases, the strategy to incorporate the CSR team happens

spontaneously, but overall participants emphasized that CSR continues to become more formalized as an integrated function. One CSR lead for a global software firm who reports to the global communications team executive explained her unique role in carrying out initiatives. The CSR specialist said:

> I work closely with each one of [the integrated communication leads] to make sure their regions are doing volunteer activities – their executives are the spokespeople, for example, if we have a local initiative that we're doing a press release about - and then they also support press and hyperlocal communication strategies for programs and campaigns that may be more regionalized.

Her role demonstrates a company model in which communications and CSR overlap at the leadership level and shows the asset of communication functions to integrating CSR practices across the network and over time. She elaborated on her role and its purpose, asking:

> So how do we support and sustain programs like that, while there's sort of this larger picture feeling of CSR linked to massive PR campaigns?...It's sort of this balance of deep impact, which is not sexy in a lot of ways, or it's sexy like once, and then five years later it's sexy but it's pretty messy and sloppy in between because these are the real problems of our culture.

This sentiment of rethinking CSR positioning emerged in the conversation with the e-commerce sustainability PR professional who posited: "How do we bring our customers along with us on this journey, versus what I think is more comfortable, being done with something." She explained that a lot of the sustainability team's projects take many years to complete, so she must navigate talking about what they are aspiring to versus what is done. She explained the challenge of talking about long-term goals and initiatives when the traditional company strategy has been communicating hard facts

and tangible business achievements. “The sustainability business is really stretching our PR strategy,” she added.

Gatekeepers of CSR: internal and external communications

Most consumers and companies have come to understand the success of CSR initiatives requires a healthy balance of action, tangible community engagement and the communication that brings awareness to the initiative. The unique role of communicators in carrying out CSR work has inevitably changed with increased demand for communication strategy rooted in results. An in-house PR professional for an e-commerce company explained her role to bridge communication and action: “Our job is not only to keep our internal stakeholders honest as to what the external world is feeling but also making sure there is follow through and that we can substantiate claims and really keep it authentic.” This idea of PR as the front lines of consumer concerns and liaison to business practices and internal activation emerged in nearly all conversations. Whether they work in-house or at an agency, participants touched on their role in managing external feedback and translating that insight to the rest of the company. “We are the first – the front - of that feedback. Then we go to the business and say, ‘How can we address this,’” said one PR sustainability specialist at a tech firm.

A PR product manager at a cloud computing firm also responded:

> As a function, PR and communications straddles the line between internal and external, and we have a really close pulse on not only what the media perception of a company is, but also the public – what customers think, the external conversations. I think it’s really helpful to

> be able to relay that inside, and oftentimes we are at the ground level for when social responsibility issues arise.

She also provided an anecdote of when the communications team brought attention to a social issue affecting the company, which led the company to mobilize, influence other companies to take action, and ultimately create political change. Beginning with an internal employee message board, the communications team identified the unsavory situation and created a campaign for company-wide movement. This notion of empowerment through internal and external channel influence resonated with sustainability leaders and agency professionals as well. All interviewees understood the need to carry out work in a way that focused on delivering messaging that directly responded to consumer feedback, which at times serves as a guide for implementing sustainability strategies. The participant from the in-house, e-commerce role also said, "Because we're relatively new, we're still defining who we are, and I think that's really great. How we define who we are and what we do is customer centric – they tell us what they care about and then we go and invest."

Another facet to the PR practitioner's role in navigating CSR needs comes from tracking and assessing shareholder reports and shareholder resolutions, which encompass demands for strengthened privacy policies and gender pay gap solutions. "The more that we can keep our finger on the pulse of what those sustainability investors are raising, the more we can help companies address those issues and in theory be more responsible at the end of the day," said one agency-based interviewee. In summary, CSR communicators not only push out client messaging, but engage in facilitating dialogue and even inform CSR strategy and action.

Interviewees also repeatedly mentioned how internal communications highlight the importance of communication to effective CSR. In addition to synthesizing consumer issues and determining which issues align with overall company strategy, PR professionals also often have a stake in bringing suggestions for action by engaging different teams within a company. An agency VP of technology shared that his clients often come with a sense of their key issues or goals, then seek council on how to bring action to those ideas and support from within a company. "They come to us to figure out how to bring those efforts together, how to we talk about and communicate them." Connecting the efforts and interests of the C-suite and employees, for example, or helping employees actually engage with CSR opportunities requires an internal communication infrastructure built out by strategic communication professionals who see the bigger picture. A lead of CSR for a global software firm also expressed her insight on the connection of CSR and PR and how these functions actually interact within the company:

> Communications is really central to my role, and the communications team provides a massive amount of support for my initiatives. They're sort of role base. For example, the internal communications person really takes care of a lot of our email campaigns and email language and all our campaigns...there's full integration there; I consider her an extended member of the CSR team.

Another interviewee from a PR agency explained her take on the importance of PR to CSR work, discussing its role in internal corporate culture storytelling: "When it comes to CSR, whether it's changing the way you're producing a product or changing your company's focus to be a little more forward thinking, it's all about shaping and driving your company's values – and that's where PR really comes into play." Her insight

echoed that of other PR professionals who see the impact of their work come through the guiding the cohesion of brand narratives. One of the agency CSR specialists explained her perspective on PR's role in fostering lasting action:

> If you're working with a client to push them to be more transparent and connect with stakeholder, to actually answer the questions that they are asking for, that's definitely a way that we're pushing clients to be more ethical and to be more responsible, to operate in way that maybe they haven't before. It's a way of instilling real change in the way that they potentially operate.

A software company CSR lead also talked about how communication, particularly asking questions and challenging value narratives throughout the company, lends itself to more authentic, integrated CSR. In her role, she mitigates the requests of both external and internal stakeholders, and she reflected specifically on the skills required to address employee input:

> You really have to be able to say no to people in a way that's graceful but also collaborative...and what goes hand in hand with that is strong communication: the ability to truly listen to people the ability to hear a problem and not take it at face value — to dig deeper and deeper and say you have this problem, but that actually isn't the problem — it's like three steps deeper. So how do we address that deeper problem? That's when partnerships start getting really exciting and start to have big impacts.

An agency senior account executive explained her work with clients and the key to developing CSR communication that has an impact:

> I think the thing that PR practitioners really bring to the table when introducing CSR, whether they were mandated to do so or not, is really understanding the why. I don't really think every other business group understands why we're doing what we're doing and why it actually matters. If you put PR people in the room, they will continually ask "why" and really push for it because that's what's really going to drive home our story; that's what's going to make anything feel authentic.

For some, this goal to communicate holistically about CSR is a shift that is still underway. The chief sustainability officer I spoke with provided insight on the internal ecosystem that makes her company's CSR possible: "The corporate communications professionals are critical in carrying out the work— if they understand the ethos of sustainability and what it's about." She indicated that there is still a learning curve for some in terms of understanding the importance of full disclosure. She emphasized that being completely transparent of when the company does not meet a sustainability goal, for example, is part of creating long term trust even though it may go against short term reputation. Some PR professionals also addressed this learning curve and the ways that CSR work has pushed them to rethink PR strategy.

Unique opportunities of tech CSR

When addressing CSR communication in tech, participants inevitably commented on the change in the society-wide conversation about the industry. A sustainability specialist from a software and IT company said, "We used to love talking about the positive outcomes of social networks up until last year. Now we're talking about the negative – the echo chambers, the issues of cyberbullying...that's part of the tech challenge as well." This acknowledgement of the shift in conversation around tech emerged in the responses of others including a PR practitioner from a cloud computing firm:

> I've been thinking a lot about this shift in the public perception of tech as a whole. Around 2008 onward we were kind of the light at the end of the tunnel in that we were eliciting all of this change and there was so much growth and business was really strong and generally prosperous, and I think we're seeing a bit of a shift now, mostly rooted in a distrust.

A global communications VP expressed that through her experience counselling tech clients, they first identified key business issues which had become CSR issues as they threaten to affect companies' reputations. The top issues she listed were equal pay, data security and privacy and managing energy use and developing renewable energy sources. Another specific issue that a participant introduced was that of dual use. "Products are inherently morally neutral – they can be used for good or bad. There has been quite a movement afoot in recent years to hold companies accountable and not be complicit in the use of their technologies, which is good, but it's also hard to know if your products are being used for good or evil and if you can control this." A digital PR specialist from a software firm touched on the factor of size and prosperity in the company's sense of appropriate CSR measures: "We're such a huge company, so we have to do this; otherwise, we are going to be slammed, and we need to set an example for others that are out there."

Within the theme of tech CSR, interviewees responded with their perspectives on the opportunities for the tech sector to respond to this ever-growing demand for increased social responsibility. Participants spoke in particular about the changing corporate culture at large, which opens up newfound resources for employee and company engagement. The CSR professional from a software firm said, "This notion of the corporate work day doesn't exist for us, so that opens up to a lot more ways that we can engage as people in our communities and that's a big focus for me this year." Building from the conversation around PR CSR strategy, interviewees shared how the need for authentic CSR expands traditional tech PR plays of fast-paced innovation to

include more long-term initiatives and thus long-term brand storytelling. A software chief sustainability officer said:

> Tech is very much an enabler, and that means it has potential to have a substantial impact on damn near anything...The potential is huge on the one hand; on the other hand, it's such a wide open space, it's kind of a challenge of how you identify your most material issue.

Others expressed how the spirit of innovation and improvement in tech companies make them a fertile ground to inspire meaningful changes to CSR strategy. Perhaps as a part of this increased value on the work life balance of the workforce, participants emphasized a trend toward elevating individuals within a company as a force for sustainability. A PR practitioner at a software company explained, "[Our] company has a strong brand and a strong reputation, but we also have incredible people who work for them and I think most companies in tech would say that."

Interviewees described some of the specific tech campaigns they had been a part of creating and implementing to this point. Many cited planning efforts in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education and coding for young women and girls, communicating employee volunteer programs, and contributing resources to other campaigns for digital literacy. But in-house and agency CSR communications professionals alike expressed the necessity of maintaining flexibility in the overarching strategy so that organic issues can be effectively addressed.

The interviews with professionals gave a picture of current trends and personal experiences working with CSR. Now I will explore the results from the focus groups and synthesize the insights of digital native participants reflecting on their interaction with CSR and tech.

Focus groups

The three focus groups yielded a range of insights regarding level of consumer awareness around CSR practices and perceptions of CSR initiatives across industries and in technology specifically. The coding process revealed three core themes to organize the trends of participant responses. The first theme encompasses feedback around the general concept of corporate social responsibility and factors that affect participants's trust in CSR. Within this broad category, focus group participants highlighted their knowledge of the value of CSR and their perception of this function as a duty of modern corporations. The second theme captured participants' current thoughts on social software companies, their mounting uncertainty about their obligations to social responsibility and their changing expectations of tech brands' involvement in social issues. The third broad theme that emerged from each focus group included ideas and insights about the future of tech CSR. Within this theme, the most significant mandates were for increased acknowledgement of accountability and transparency.

Overall, focus group data suggested that even consumers with a good grasp on CSR trends were largely unaware of actions being taken in the tech industry. They expressed a sense of uncertainty around tech brands' current corporate conduct, citing issues of equal pay, data security and sexual harassment. Proposed solutions included an increased effort toward individual organization accountability and managing internal issues while communicating transparently with external stakeholders.

Holistic understanding of CSR

Across focus groups, the majority of participants expressed a belief that companies today do have a responsibility to give back to the communities that support them. One participant reflected on the reasoning for this responsibility:

> Large corporations have a lot of hold in the community in terms of control over wages and their sustainability impact too if they dump stuff. They have duty to make up for that and the negative effects of being a large corporation with a lot of power by doing certain acts that positively impact the community and engage their employees as well.

Participants also acknowledged the need for not only industry-specific efforts, but CSR strategy that aligns with the specific mission of each organization. One participant mentioned, "I think of healthcare or insurance or any business that exists to help people, but is still for profit, I would say that they have a higher responsibility because their business exists to help people so they should be doing that in a way that's not for profit in addition to the core of their business."

Another key element of participants' views of overall CSR came through in their understanding of the need for multi-party value and the give and take of action and promotion. In two of the three sessions, participants mentioned the triple bottom line: a corporate framework that gives value to social, environmental and financial resources. As another participant said, "The peak of corporate social responsibility is when there's a really strong mutual benefit. You can't give away all that you have and not make anything back – it's not sustainable. Sustainability is finding an equilibrium of giving and getting." This notion of financial and social and environmental sustainability and the challenge of communicating that balance was reflected in the responses of many public relations professionals as well.

Another sub theme of participants' overall perceptions of CSR was the acknowledgement that communications can serve as a form of responsible action as well. Multiple participants responded that to some extent CSR communication is necessary to the success of initiatives so that consumers better understand what a company is doing. After discussing the mixed efficiency of official CSR reporting, which provide varying degrees of pertinent information to the consumer, a participant said:

> We want to align ourselves that are positive and are doing good things for the world, but people aren't actually reading the corporate reports. I'd like to think of myself as someone who participates in brands that are positive but I'm not going and doing the nitty gritty work so I need some level of promotion to fulfill that.

One group raised the question in regards to the challenge of balancing communication and ground-level initiatives: "Are you raising awareness of an issue by promoting yourself or are you merely promoting yourself?" Participants cited various examples of companies that received backlash for over-promoting campaigns to the point of exceeding the initial resources used to help constituents. This discussion tied to another notable subtheme that appeared throughout each session: Participants expressed skepticism of "traditional" CSR such as isolated acts of philanthropy.

One participant noted another issue with companies that jump on the bandwagon without an overarching strategy: "I think the problem is with big companies that have been around for a while and all of a sudden they have to incorporate it to save face, and it seems like they're saving face." Nearly all focus group members interested in values that are fully integrated in a company and manifest in campaigns that have a specific

target audience and align with the mission of the company. “It doesn’t matter what company it is, if it’s not integrated into all aspects of the business then it’s fake.” This sentiment was echoed across the three conversations:

> I feel that good CSR is in line with the brand’s values and done over time. And now because it feels like such an obligation for companies to do, you have these disingenuous one-off events or promotion then they brag about it, but when it’s done well it’s consistent across the board, and…it was done out of ethics and values of the brand.

Another respondent articulated her reasoning for this increasing expectation for authenticity:

> Now that we see brands have these strong identities, we want to see them behaving like people. They have this Twitter account and they’re tweeting things; we follow them and we’re interacting with them like people so we want to see them backing up those actions the way our friends would.

One last informative subtheme in the discussion of the CSR concept was the recognition that irresponsible CSR is more detrimental than positive CSR is productive. This awareness is reflective of the literature which found this imbalance across consumers. One participant summarized: “People have stronger feelings about a company’s negative impacts on the community versus their CSR efforts— I’m more likely to not buy something from a brand that is harmful to the community than buy from a brand that is positive toward their community.”

Skepticism toward social software tech companies

The next core theme of the focus group discussions revolves around the topic of the technology industry and social software tech companies. Participants reflected on their impressions of this corporate sector and around its unique areas of social

responsibility. In this first focus group, a participant shared her awareness of the tech industry as a whole: “I have this sense that all the big Silicon Valley tech companies do a lot to give back but I can’t name any specific ways they give back. I don’t know why I have those ideas, but I think as an industry it’s very progressive…” Once this participant continued to reflect on examples of tech CSR, she added, “I can’t think of anything specific, and I tend to think of more of the negative things — like sexual harassment and sexism in the workforce, more of like the workplace culture than the products.” Another participant believes tech companies can no longer work in isolation:

> The perception that I have is of these big tech companies that came out of nowhere, and these really smart people, young hip, they created their own business model that’s anti-business, and now they’ve gotten to a point where their product is so embedded into everything that we do, like media, business, lifestyle and communication and global politics that they have to start working with other industries to make things happen I don’t think they can be separate entities anymore.

Beyond the general sense of technology as an industry ripe for rediscovering the meaning of social responsibility, participants expressed another related sub-theme: social software tech is an emerging industry, meaning consumers can and do expect faults but hope that companies will maintain efforts to achieve true transparency regardless. “With technology growing so fast and the number of users growing so fast, mistakes are going to happen...How [tech companies] mitigate…mistakes and communicate with the audience is important because mistakes are inevitable at this point,” explained one individual. This unprecedented growth also comes with the question of monopolization and the issue for consumers making responsible choices in the face of limited social software options:

> I feel like the reason we're having a discussion about these companies, rather than fair trade food and clothes, is because there are no direct competitors to Facebook and Twitter. They're all social media but they don't directly compete with each other – so there's no socially responsible Facebook. There's no other option, and that plays into the responsibility question because there's nothing to rate it against.

Within the topic of technology CSR, focus group participants also provided responses that highlighted the unique responsibility of social software technology companies because of growing user dependency. "Where do you draw the line of letting technology dictate your life, because it's becoming more of a necessity than something that is used to help us," said one participant. "I don't like that they take advantage of knowing that."

Regarding the implications of this widespread use on CSR engagement, another individual stated, "By nature of how many people use social media, the idea of the people not tapping into the CSR and seeing what they can do for people seems pretty wrong because it brings so many more people in than other industries. So it should be people-focused and have some impact on the community, I would say." In the same vein, participants referenced the responsibility that comes from companies' power to manipulate content consumption, an influence which affects consumer behavior beyond the engagement with an individual platform or software product:

> With Netflix, Facebook and Twitter, their algorithms are changing what we are consuming. They're using our data to control what we're seeing, and I think that comes with a lot of responsibility. When it comes to echo chamber effects, when we're just seeing a bunch of things that we agree with, that can have huge consequences politically or on anything. There are so many consequences for controlling what someone gets exposed to that that's just a crazy amount of responsibility.

Within this discussion of the degree to which tech companies hold responsibility for social impacts, participants demonstrated a sense that regardless of what the responsibility is, it is evolving. “I think you should be able to share and post whatever you want, but also I do think Facebook might have some sort of responsibility because it’s their platform to make sure their users are getting the most accurate information,” said one respondent. Another noted that some platforms have more cultural influence than ever before, which also contributes to this question of responsibility: “Now Donald Trump uses [Twitter], it’s the way the president communicates with citizens. So this app now has this huge responsibility. The president used to communicate through the public broadcast network which was governmentally owned, but now Twitter is a privately owned company.” Multiple focus group members made similar comments and emphasized that as users of these free communications platforms, they expect that the companies will withhold some semblance of unbiasedness –- even though as a private companies, this onus is not a legal one.

Call for accountability and transparency

As three groups moved into discussions about potential solutions or strategies for more successful CSR in tech companies, a common idea was the need for more transparency. “I think they can get away with a lot too. I think Facebook and Twitter... they don’t need to be out there and showing transparency of how they make stuff because they don’t make stuff, so they can get away with not doing as much action.” Consumers have learned to expect transparency initiatives around issues such as labor rights or energy use, but the mandate for responsibility for cultural implications remains to be parsed out. This notion helps highlight one of the underlying questions of this

project: distinguishing the need for CSR in tech companies with primarily digital consumer products versus more familiar material good products. What does transparency mean to consumers engaging with social software companies? One participant said: "It's so easy to bury a bunch of bad things in an agreement that would take hours with a lawyer to actually grasp. It would be nice to have a better understanding of how they are using my data." He went on to explain that he understood the value of targeted advertising to ensure the financial sustainability of the company and then spoke of the "line" in this agreement around how data is used and that that is what needs to be better explained.

Beyond transparency, the focus group members grappled with other components of CSR and repeatedly landed on issues around accountability and consistency. In various instances, participants brought up the power of social software to contribute to society through their power to select and amplify information across society. One participant speculated that social media could be better harnessed as "platforms for underrepresented groups to be heard, like letting groups advertise for free. They are a platform of voices and some groups' messages are not as easily heard." She went on to cite the example of Google's homepage, which features artwork and brings attention to important figures and issues. Another participant reflected on the conundrum of finding appropriate CSR measures in an industry as vast as software tech:

> The CSR that makes sense for those companies like Google and Facebook is social discourse and ideologies and things like that, but I feel like people would not be responsive to that because that veers very close to social control. Ideological CSR...no matter what side of the spectrum it's on, people are going to think it's creepy and invasive.

Two out of the three groups also touched on the topic of external regulation and how that may play a role in the conversation of future technology CSR. One participant brought attention to the fact that as it stands now, many tech companies and consumers remain in a limbo of responsibility and accountability. “The hardest part when it comes to these companies is that we signed up for all of it when we didn’t read the terms of agreement, and when we use Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat, those free apps, they’re not free because we’re literally giving them our information.” Another participant drew a parallel to the industrial revolution and the start of labor unions. She pointed out that in that instance, the government played a part in creating regulations, but today, the complexities of tech’s innerworkings present more nuanced issues of where the private company, the consumer and the government hold jurisdiction.

A key reflection on the conversation of social responsibility versus regulatory needs emerged from another respondent who drew from the group’s initial definition of CSR:

> Again, to be a socially responsible corporation in terms of labor, you’re not just paying minimum wage and abiding by all the government enforced regulations - it’s having ethics that are higher than that and treating people better, so whether there is or isn’t federal regulation, are we going to put value on these corporations protecting us and our privacy a little more?

Clearly the notion of governmental regulation does not solve all issues around tech industry distrust and individuals expect there to be. Perhaps the most unanimous sentiment regarding the expectations for social responsibility in today’s tech companies and tech culture moving forward was the notion of internal responsibility and employee

engagement. In one key response, the participant laid out her principal vision for effective CSR in the tech space:

> I would way rather see big tech companies being internally responsible and being more transparent...than trying to reach more outside the boundaries of their company. Instead of Facebook launching some campaign about some political issue, I'd rather see Facebook internally tackle problems and specifically focus on what they can do to improve Facebook. I think with tech it's this faceless, chaotic yet deeply controlling entity, so what would make me feel more comfortable with it as a consumer would be a sense of responsibility internally from these companies.

This expectation of internal responsibility of course plays into the call for accountability and transparency as well, yet focuses these efforts in a more specific way. Many participants reflected on the fact that given the vast amount of resources (data and financial) and number of employees, the logical form of CSR would address existing corporate challenges around culture, policies, security and more.

Discussion

Between interview responses, focus group data and the comparison of both, this study aimed to highlight the current conversations around CSR and tech from the corporate communicator and consumer perspectives. As explored in the results, CSR communication takes many forms in the tech industry with varying degrees of crossover with direct CSR strategy and implementation. Although it is difficult to determine widespread trends from this sample size, participant experiences suggested that CSR communication has become a much more active function within PR and a more integrated role for technology companies. To answer my initial research questions, I return to the inquiries I laid out at the start of the study:

- To what extent does CSR PR represent the emergence of relationship management theory and iterative communication models in practice?
- Based on current trends in the tech industry and consumer expectations for CSR, how will the PR function likely transition in scope of work and organizational integration?
    - How does the public relations function serve to establish CSR initiatives and create cohesive positioning for emerging tech companies?

Understanding the theoretical evolution of PR

As CSR initiatives become more integrated throughout management functions, so must communication efforts that guide those changes. Furthermore, as deep impact initiatives come to affect the values of an organization, communicators have the

opportunity to engage in the brand storytelling that ignites employees and stakeholders through tangible campaigns. As one interview participant reflected, strategic communicators can provide the "why" behind a given strategy and determine how it will affect and operate throughout business teams. As storytellers, communicators tie together CSR goals and actions into a coherent narrative that resonates with media and target audiences. Beyond this role, PR professionals also reaffirmed the notion that the responsibility of a strategic communicator adds value to overall CSR strategy through his or her positioning on the frontlines of consumer feedback.

In addition to this takeaway, interview participants confirmed the fact that undertaking CSR work equates to engaging with multichannel communication strategies with an overall goal of relationship building, a key finding of previous CSR communication studies. As scholar Vidhi Chaudhri reported from her study of CSR manager perspectives:

> Corporate communication of CSR is reportedly undertaken as a proactive endeavor and there is an assumption that being open and transparent will also yield relational benefits for instance, fostering an organizational culture of CSR, and building trustworthy relationships with stakeholders (Chaudhri, 2014).

To summarize, successful CSR communication demonstrates the modern mandate for symmetric communication as it both acknowledges and incorporates the concerns of unique stakeholders and requires the long term development of collaborative solutions. Moreover, this function of CSR communicators directly reflects the theory of relationship management. Returning to the imperative of relationship management theory, Ledingham (2003) explained, "Effectively managing organizational–public relationships around common interests and shared goals, over time, results in mutual

understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics." More broadly, this relationship management framework for strategic communicators helps demonstrate the foundational concepts of stakeholder theory and the constitutive role of communication in organizations.

This study has also helped explore the practical translation of communications ethics to business ethics, a concept explained by Ron Pearson in a book titled *Public Relations Theory*. He wrote, "Public relations, to the extent it plays the central role in corporate communication, also plays the major role in managing the moral dimension of corporate conduct" (Pearson, 1989, 11). A participant working with CSR at a global agency helped to validate this theoretical perspective when she explained: "If you're working with a client to push them to be more transparent and connect with stakeholders to actually answer the questions that they are asking for, that's definitely a way that we're pushing clients to be more ethical." Here there is a clear access point to the business operations of a company, where change can be brought about through the act of communicative council.

Lastly, by definition of the mandate for long-term positioning that interview participants referenced, they seem to be exploring the dimensions relationship theory in terms of Ledingham's (2001) identification of outputs versus outcomes.

> That research also demonstrates the usefulness of the relational perspective in identifying measurable outcomes that transcend communication production (outputs), and also in providing practitioners with a framework for demonstrating the contribution of public relations initiatives to the economic, cultural, and social well-being of an organization (outcomes) (Ledingham, 2001, 191).

Based on participant experiences, finding this balance of output and outcome oriented work, remains an increasing part of the field as management comes to understand the long-term benefits of communication strategy. For example, professionals working with internal email campaigns around CSR initiatives or an agency practitioner who helps engage employees of a large corporation have a role in creating favorable, sustainable outcomes beyond producing press releases or another one-time outputs.

Skepticism toward the vestiges of one-way communication in PR emerged in conversations with CSR specialists working with strategic communicators and in the perceptions of consumers. The idea of separation between "communication" and "action" still revealed itself as an issue when consumers reflected on instances of greenwashing. Simultaneously, there was a clear intent from communicators to explain their work in terms of facilitating action and being a part of tangible organizational change. Not only has this shift been brought on by the demands of consumers, but employees and communications professionals themselves seem to have sought out their roles largely for their desire to facilitate meaningful work.

As discussed in the literature review, communicative action theory and the broader constitutive communication paradigm play a role in the current pursuit for CSR solutions in the technology space. One PR sustainability lead in particular highlighted the fact that her role communicating between customers and internal teams involves the creation of new initiatives that serve all parties. Another CSR professional emphasized how, even though turning down ideas for CSR projects is a large part of her role, she has the opportunity in those moments to "truly listen to people…to hear a problem and

not take it at face value— to dig deeper" until she finds the underlying issue that needs addressing.

One study draws from the initial theory of communicative action as it applies to CSR communication, providing theoretical context to the process of understanding and tackling CSR issues through strategic communication:

> The concept of communicative action promotes cooperation. The aim is not to pursue one's own goals per se but rather to seek a common understanding and coordinate actions by way of agreement, meaning that here 'the central concept of interpretation refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus' (Habermas, 1984, p. 86) (Elving, 2016).

To refer back to a study on the communication imperative of CSR (Chaudhri, 2014), this study also found that a transition toward communicative action provides a helpful framework for understanding the intersection of PR and CSR in areas in which strategy is still in progress.

Further addressing how CSR communication interacts and shapes PR functions, participant responses suggest that social responsibility work prompts practitioners to think more about long-term strategy than ever before. In addition, this hybridized role requires communicators to rethink how expressing short term challenges plays into long-term sustainability success and building trust through honesty. Pearson (1989) dissects the meaning of dialogue as it applies to organizations and their pursuit of productive stakeholder relationships. He explains, "Thus, a new approach is born, one in which business sees itself as an active political participant in what is essentially a political process and, as is emphasized here, a communication process." Again this idea comes to life through the efforts of CSR communicators who bring their own sense of

social purpose to the role of mediating organizational-public conflict and creating proactive communication infrastructure to promote internal and external transparency.

In many instances within the focus groups and in conversations with CSR team leads, the function of CSR communication remained distinct from the concept of CSR in practice, and yet one of the most central concerns to consumers was transparency itself. Scholars have identified this paradox, which is that successful CSR should not be overly publicized yet must be visible enough to become linked to the identity of the organization and inspire consumers and competitors (Chaudhri, 2014). As this awareness grows, companies have more opportunity to repurpose CSR communication as a form of authentic education and activism. CSR communication seems to be approaching a more recognized form of action in and of itself.

Redefining sustainability for the technology industry

Participants of focus groups and interviews confirmed that the sociopolitical landscape surrounding the tech industry leaves many questions and an overall mandate for change in corporate culture. While many key issues emerged in discussions around inequality and unclear data security, the overarching concern around this industry was distrust, a finding that reflects previous research (Edelman, 2018). Consumers articulated that they expect mistakes from tech companies that are innovating rapidly, but they want more honest and ongoing dialogue about the risks and rewards of their products and services. The results suggest that tech will benefit from further

implementing this emergent, integrated CSR PR communication model for three primary reasons.

First, consumers and PR practitioners alike emphasized the fact that the best CSR is authentic and clearly aligns with a brand's existing narrative and mission. Just as consumers wanted outdoor brands to be engaged with environmental conservation, they expect tech to address the social issues implicated by their existence as for-profit entities and the resources they draw from society. Of course this idea is not new to those working with this sector. However, in light of more widespread challenges from negative perception, there is an increased need for tech clients to harness narratives of innovation and connectivity to address stakeholder concerns.

Second, as discussed in the results, with more nuanced consumer understanding of CSR motives, tech companies may benefit from deeper investment in internal CSR communication infrastructure. As the Edelman Trust Barometer summarizes: "Beginning with their own employees, then shifting toward the communities in which they work and into society at large, there is both an expectation and opportunity for business to lead" (Edelman, 2018). Focus group participants, too, reiterated that they want to see internal accountability, which comes with an understanding that transparency of security policies and data use among internal stakeholders may translate to the overall improvement of business practices.

The third and final reason for the reimagination of tech CSR communication comes from the recurring response from focus group participants who identified their perception of social software tech companies as overpowering yet anonymous figures. One respondent described her perception of tech as "this faceless, chaotic yet deeply

controlling entity;" another described the trajectory of startup tech companies saying, "Their product is so embedded into everything that we do, like media, business, lifestyle and communication and global politics...I don't think they can be separate entities anymore." The perception of tech as an enabler and an equalizer has inherently diluted the sense of traceable responsibility or accountability. Just as lifestyle and food brands engage with influencer campaigns to humanize and create new access points to a company, tech companies must work with communicators to build out the social narratives that will better connect diverse stakeholders.

While this study may not be able to parse out the exact meaning of tech's current CSR challenges and opportunities, participant responses in accordance with existing explorations help to better understand the nature of current breaches in trust between tech companies and their publics. Simultaneously, as companies take stances on the broader issues of society, they must face their own role in responding to and shaping consumer culture.

Conclusion + Future Research

The U.S. finds itself in uncharted territory regarding the pace of innovation and the state of internal and external regulation of the tech industry. Continuous digital innovation has affected nearly all aspects of society and created knowledge gaps along lines of age and socioeconomic status, which play into the lack of shared expectations for the future. In a time when tech companies, communicators and consumers are negotiating what social responsibilities each party holds, dialogue seems more important than ever.

In a piece from the *New Yorker* on the power of social media to distort American perceptions of reality, Stephen Marche writes:

> Arguably, the social-media distortion affects America more profoundly than other countries because of the very specific, even unique, way that Americans make meaning. This gullibility is a consequence of the country's ancient faith in self-determination as an all-encompassing guiding principle. Self-determination is the source of America's oldest political commitments and its deepest clichés—"Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness," the cowboy, the astronaut, Thoreau at Walden, Emerson on "Self-Reliance." In America, everyone is entitled to his or her own vision of the universe (Marche, 2017).

Part of the challenge at hand, which acutely affects Facebook yet serves as an analogy for broader issues, is that of connection and the responsibility of sharing information. The surge of information and social software technology has highlighted a much deeper conflict of power and access. In a 2107 interview with *Fast Company*, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg said, "When we were getting started with Facebook in 2004, the idea of connecting the world was not really controversial" (Safian, 2014). He continued:

> When you're talking about spreading freedom or trade, or you're talking about fighting terrorism, where a civil war in one country leads to refugee crises across multiple continents, these are not typically

> problems any one country has the tools by itself to go solve. I think we have a responsibility as a technology company at a pretty big scale to see what we can do to push on that.

In light of the security breaches and political interferences that have happened since that interview, we see that Zuckerberg's ideology may require some adjustment to reach the idealistic outcomes that he sees in technology companies such as his. Freely sharing information across cultures and social groups may be an optimistic goal for software tech companies, but we can see now that the reality of this connection requires more strategic implementation to ensure responsible platform use.

Based on conversations within this study, Millennial and Gen Z consumers are largely perceptive to the inevitability of imperfection in brands they engage with, especially in this newly established industry. Part of this is due to the increasing sense of brand personification. In addition, as CSR programs mature, so do the public's perception and acceptance of multifaceted corporate motivations (Ellen et al., 2006). The myths that activism must be purely "altruistic" seem to be replaced by an understanding that true sustainability includes social and economic prosperity. In this consumer culture, telling the whole truth – putting a company's challenges and successes in context – becomes more productive to building a long-term reputation than just sharing highlights.

Another key outcome of this research is the idea that the catch-all term of CSR is becoming an inadequate descriptor for industry-specific initiatives. The overall definition of CSR as a corporation exceeding mandated legal requirements to contribute to social good holds true, yet there remains room to standardize the subsets of initiatives that address unique stakeholder engagements. Moving forward, this area of research

around CSR communication and social software technology could be advanced through specific case studies of companies' CSR programs and their responsivity to social issues.

From the theoretical perspective, this study helps explicate the way relationship management guides PR practitioners in their roles facilitating this exchange of process and progress. As Ledingham and Bruning (1998) suggested:

> The emergence of relationship management...calls into question the essence of public relations—what it is and what it does or should do, its function and value within the organizational structure and the greater society, and the benefits generated not only for sponsoring organizations but also for the publics those organizations serve and the societies in which they exist. (p. xiii)

And not only does relationship management provide a framework for understanding the work of CSR communication professionals, it also helps place their mediation work within the constitutive communication paradigm and reframe the integration of CSR communication in the reality of CSR itself.

The intersection of modern PR and CSR uniquely reflects relationship management theory within the technology industry because of the public mandates facing social media and data-mining companies for the first time. Broader corporate trends bring an expectation for consistent brand activism, and complex issues of data security and information dissemination heighten the need for companies to realize their societal impacts and mitigate them through their core operations. It seems clear now that the way to industry and organization-specific solutions will come from a dialogic approach to problem solving, which can be facilitated by the PR practitioner who operates with a focus on relationship management.

A digital PR specialist from a software firm reflected:

> I'm doing much more than just PR these days, I'm doing internal and external communications. PR itself is a shifting role. A lot of these communications roles are really getting integrated; there's just so much synergy between different areas, across marketing communications, PR, analyst relations, bloggers– it's a changing field.

PR may be a shifting function, yet its defining purpose remains the same. It is the PR practitioner's role to understand society, industry trends and consumer needs. It is up to strategic communication teams to help craft and express the actions and values that help organizations and publics understand one another. In tech, the PR practitioner must learn to adapt to communicating with and about emerging products and concepts, inherently changing the way they create messages. Within CSR communication specifically, the PR professional brings this toolkit into the effort to understand problems at the intersection of organizations and their publics and create shared solutions. In part, this also requires the foundational work of crafting a unified vision of industry challenges in order to address them. Recall the definition of PR proposed by Kirk Hallahan (1999): "It is important to recognize that public relations work fundamentally involves the construction of social reality." With issues such as political polarization, income inequality, and social media echo chambers, it seems this work to create collective understanding is more pertinent than ever.

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