

Public Expectations of CSR Communication: What and How to Communicate CSR

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ABSTRACT

This study examined what consumer-publics expect from companies' CSR communications through surveying a representative sample of the general public. Our findings suggested that publics wanted to know "who is benefiting" from the companies' CSR more than any other CSR information. CSR beneficiaries were identified as the most preferred communication sources, whereas CEOs and public relations spokespersons were listed as the least preferred sources. In general, non-corporate sources were preferred significantly more than corporate sources. However, the company itself was also preferred as a communication source significantly more than activists, other stakeholders, employees, CEOs, and PR spokespersons. Finally, as CSR communication channels, consumer publics tended to prefer company-controlled media such as companies' local stores, websites, and promotion events to uncontrolled media such as news media, experts' blogs and microblogs.

Keywords: CSR communication, CSR communication sources, CSR communication media channels.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to provide practitioners and educators "what and how to communicate" for effective corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. Through surveying a representative sample of the American general public, this study examines what publics expect from companies' CSR communications. In other words, by exploring stakeholders' perspectives on effective CSR communication, this study provides practitioners guidelines for effective CSR communication.

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Academic research has addressed a growing focus on CSR over the past twenty years. However, much of the previous research has emphasized the general consequences of CSR activities on either the financial performance of an organization (Page & Fearn, 2005) or consumer responses such as general attitudes toward the organization and consumer perceptions of corporate reputation (David, Kline, & Dai, 2005; Kim, 2011) without much consideration on CSR communication aspects. For example, previous research has identified consumers' perceived motives regarding an organization's CSR (Bae & Cameron, 2006; Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006) and a fit concept between a business' expertise and its supported CSR issues (Lafferty, 2007; Trimble & Rifon, 2006) as factors that affect consumer responses toward the organization. However, these factors cannot be used to evaluate effective CSR communication, although they can be used to predict the effectiveness of an organization's CSR performance.

While one can argue that the success of CSR communication about an organization's CSR performance can also be assumed if the consequence of CSR performance is found to be effective, we argue that measuring effective CSR communication should be distinguished from the measurement of effective CSR activities. Without distinguishing "what to communicate" and "how to communicate" about CSR from the CSR activity itself, we cannot accurately measure the relative success of the communication process itself; particularly since, to date, there has been little framework development for 'what makes CSR communication effective' from the stakeholders' perspectives. Thus, as a preliminary step to develop possible measures for effective CSR communication, this study examines publics' expectations for CSR communication. By providing what kinds of communication publics want from companies' CSR communication, the findings of this study provide educators and practitioners with practical insights for what should be evaluated for effective communication about CSR.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What and How to Communicate for CSR

For what and how to communicate companies' CSR activities, previous research has suggested the importance of informativeness (Morsing & Schultz, 2006), credible communication sources (Maignan & Ferrell, 2001; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), third-party endorsements (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008), stakeholder involvement, media or communication channels (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing et al., 2008; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), consistency (Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009), and employee commitment (Morsing et al., 2008).

With regard to what should be communicated for companies' CSR, researchers have suggested that stakeholders would be interested in information related to what social causes companies support such as environmental, public education, or health-related causes, and depending on which social causes a company supports, stakeholders' involvement to the company's CSR will vary (Dawkins, 2004; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Given that stakeholder involvement is an important factor to determine positive CSR outcomes (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), communicating the types of supported social causes with stakeholders is fundamental. In addition, some previous research suggested that a company's expertise and its relevance to CSR activities tend to determine publics' perceived CSR motives. It is hypothesized that highly relevant expertise and high perceived fit between a company and its supported CSR cause are more likely to generate positive outcomes of CSR (Nan & Heo, 2007; Trimble & Rifon, 2006). Thus, communicating a company's expertise or fit to support a specific social cause is also important in affecting publics' acceptance of the sincerity of the company's CSR motives. In addition, providing information related to why the company supports a certain CSR cause (i.e., intentions or motives) should be secured in CSR communications.

Previous research has also emphasized the importance of third-party endorsements (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing, et al., 2008). Whether companies have partnerships with or endorsements from other credible third-party organizations was identified as an important key to reduce consumer skepticism in CSR communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). For instance, information related to 1) Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)' independent ethics audit reports, 2) ethics-related awards received from non-profit organizations or government agencies, and 3) certificates issued by NGOs should add credibility to companies' CSR messages (Crane, 2001; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). In addition, stakeholder relevance should be secured in CSR communication by providing content with specific examples and events to which stakeholders can relate (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Spickett-Jones, Kitchen, & Reast, 2003).

Independent communication sources such as media or experts are considered more trustworthy than company-controlled communication due to third-party credibility (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). For instance, Pomeroy and Dolnicar (2009) found that independent sources such as independent experts and news media were trusted the most by the Australian public for CSR communication and that about one-third of the respondents thought news media were most trustworthy. Previous research also suggested that company-generated sources are less credible than media coverage (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005) and that communicating CSR via third-party experts or an endorsed CSR communication process is one way to reduce public skepticism (Morsing et al., 2008). It seems there has been general agreement that directly communicating CSR to the general public is not effective; rather companies should target experts, non-profit organizations, or media for CSR communication for better outcomes (Morsing et al., 2008).

In terms of CSR communication channels, there are various options including company-controlled and uncontrolled media channels. Company-controlled media channels include advertising, brochures, company's website or social media outlets, newsletters, annual reports, etc., while uncontrolled media include news media, experts' blogs or non-company social media. Most of previous studies have suggested that extensive usage of advertising is not effective because it intensifies stakeholder skepticism and lowers credibility of CSR messages (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Webb & Mohr,

1998). However, due to different stakeholder interests, preferred CSR communication channels can also vary. For instance, based on secondary data research from national reputation surveys conducted in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in 2005, Morsing and Schultz (2006) suggested that Northern Europeans tended to have mixed perceptions on CSR communication channels. About 50% of people preferred minimal CSR communication through annual reports and websites, while a little over 40% of people thought that companies should publicize their good deeds through corporate advertising and press releases. Also only a small portion of people answered that companies should not publicize their own CSR activities, indicating strong stakeholder demand for CSR communication. However, based on the analysis of reputation surveys from 2002 to 2005, the authors concluded that public preference toward advertising and press releases as communication channels decreased over time, whereas preference for minimal releases through annual reports and websites increased. Given that these findings are Europeans' preferences for CSR communication channels, Americans' preferences need to be investigated.

Moreover, some scholars pointed out that there are cultural differences in public expectations for CSR communication, suggesting North American CSR approach is more explicit with a stronger tradition of CSR expectations from stakeholders than European approaches (Maignan & Ralston, 2002; Matten & Moon, 2004). Also, North Americans tend to welcome more explicit and conspicuous CSR communication, whereas Europeans tend to have traditions with more implicit and less conspicuous CSR approaches (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

With regard to CSR promotion cost, previous research suggested that companies that spend too much money on promoting CSR tend to be perceived as hypocritical (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Stoll, 2002). This public perception is highly related to publics' attributions of self-serving CSR motives to the companies (Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004; Du et al., 2010). That is, when publics notice that a company spends a great deal of money on promoting its CSR activities, they are more likely to attribute self-serving motives to the company for its CSR activities and suspicious of the company's true intentions to support CSR causes. For instance, according to British opinion research (Dawkins, 2004), a majority of the British public (69%) think that companies should not spend significant amounts to promote CSR although they should make an effort to inform the public about CSR.

CSR promotion cost could also be highly related to the frequency of CSR communication. Frequent CSR communication could result in a rise in promotion cost. Too frequent CSR communication may also increase publics' suspicions toward the company's CSR motives. Inconsistency of CSR communication can also increase publics' skepticism. Thus, frequency and consistency of CSR communication should be considered for how to communicate CSR. Transparency in CSR communication also has been identified as an important key to establish the credibility of companies' CSR communication (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). For instance, Coombs and Holladay (2011) argued that companies should build "a track record of disclosing a range of CSR

information” (p. 113) for transparency in CSR communication through providing information about both successes and failures of their CSR processes.

In addition, a message tone that is low-key through honest presentation of facts (Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005) could be an important factor that affects positive public perceptions of a company’s CSR motives. If a CSR communication message tone is too self-congratulatory or promotional, publics may attribute self-serving motives to the company’s intentions for its CSR.

Based on the above, this study raised the following research questions regarding publics’ expectations for what and how to communicate CSR:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1 - What do consumer publics expect from companies doing CSR activities for “what to communicate” about their CSR?

RQ2 - What do consumer publics expect from companies doing CSR activities for “how to communicate” about their CSR?

METHOD

This study employed an online survey methodology to examine public expectations for organizations’ CSR communication. The study used a representative sample of general U.S. consumers. Detailed explanations about the survey method will follow.

Survey Instrument

Survey instrument items were developed based on previous CSR communication studies (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2011; Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing et al., 2008; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). A total of 46 items were included to measure the consumer-public’s general expectations for CSR communication related to basic CSR-information sharing, personal relevance, third party endorsement presence, cost-related information sharing, message tone, consistency and frequency, transparency, and increasing promotion cost (see Table 1 for measurement items). To measure consumer publics preference for CSR communication media channels and sources, 22 media channels (14 controlled media and eight uncontrolled media channels) and nine communication sources were included. (See Table 2.) Ten demographic questions were also included: age, gender, Hispanic/Latino origin, ethnicity/race, education, household annual income, employment status, marital status, political affiliation, and religion.

Table 1. Measured items for effective CSR communication

| Label | Measures | <i>M(SD)</i> |
|---------|---|--------------|
| | I WANT TO KNOW... | |
| Info1 | what a company is doing for communities such as how much donation | 5.19(1.41) |
| Info2 | a specific social cause that a company supports (e.g., environmental, public education) | 5.21(1.35) |
| Info3 | a company's expertise to support a specific CSR initiative. | 4.84(1.36) |
| Info4 | what kinds of things a company has achieved from its previous CSR activities | 5.15(1.34) |
| Info5 | potential results of a company's current CSR activities | 5.00(1.33) |
| Info6 | Why society needs a company's CSR initiative | 4.72(1.44) |
| Info7 | why a company is doing good for society | 4.88(1.47) |
| Info8 | a company's motives or intentions for doing CSR activities | 5.01(1.53) |
| Info9 | what the company wants to achieve by doing CSR activities | 5.17(1.41) |
| Info10 | who is benefiting from a company's CSR activities | 5.49(1.43) |
| Info11* | if a company has continuously been doing CSR activities. | |
| Info12* | how long a company has been supporting its CSR initiatives. | |
| Info13* | the consistency of the company's commitment to its CSR initiatives. | |
| | I WANT TO KNOW... | |
| E&P1 | how I can participate in a company's CSR activities | 4.67(1.42) |
| E&P2 | how my participation will affect the results of a company's CSR activities | 4.82(1.42) |
| E&P3 | if I can be confident in supporting the company's CSR | 5.06(1.41) |
| E&P4 | if any other organizations or public figures endorse the company's CSR initiatives | 4.99(1.34) |
| E&P5 | if non-profit organizations are partners of the company's CSR activities | 5.19(1.34) |
| E&P6 | if non-governmental organizations are partners of the company's CSR activities | 5.19(1.33) |
| E&P7 | if the company has received CSR-related certifications such as "Fair Trade" certification or "Forestry Stewardship Council" certificate if there's any. | 5.12(1.35) |
| E&P8* | I want to be confident doing my role in helping the company's CSR. | |
| E&P9* | It's important to me that the company has strong partnership with third parties such as activist groups (e.g., Greenpeace). | |
| Tone1 | CSR communication messages from a company should be based on facts | 5.86(1.35) |
| Tone2 | I like CSR messages from a company that are promotional (R) | 5.15(1.36) |
| Tone3 | I like CSR messages from a company that are self-congratulatory (R) | 5.25(1.39) |
| Tone4 | I like low-key CSR messages from a company | 5.22(1.31) |
| Tone5 | I like a company's CSR messages to focus on facts | 5.76(1.33) |
| C&F1 | What the company is communicating about its CSR activities should be consistent | 5.21(1.31) |
| C&F2 | Consistency in CSR communication of the company is important to me | 5.07(1.33) |
| C&F3 | A lack of consistency in the company's CSR communication is problematic | 5.08(1.39) |
| C&F4 | I like CSR messages (communication) from a company appearing often | 4.53(1.35) |
| C&F5 | I like to see CSR messages from a company as frequently as possible | 4.29(1.47) |
| C&F6 | I want to receive messages about how a company's doing good as often as possible | 4.29(1.49) |
| Rel1 | I want to know if a company's CSR activities are relevant to me | 4.91(1.41) |
| Rel2 | I want to know how a company's CSR initiatives are personally relevant (to me). | 4.81(1.39) |
| Rel3 | I want to know how a company's CSR activities affect my personal life. | 5.04(1.39) |
| Tran1 | I want to know information about the company's CSR failures, not just successes. | 4.94(1.44) |
| Tran2 | I want to be informed if the company's CSR initiative fails | 4.95(1.40) |
| Tran3 | I want to know both good and bad information about the company's CSR activities | 5.20(1.39) |
| Tran4 | I want to know the progress of the company's CSR activities | 5.27(1.33) |
| Cost1 | How much money a company spends on CSR communication is important to me | 4.71(1.51) |
| Cost2 | I want to know how much money a company spends to promote its CSR activities | 4.73(1.43) |
| Cost3 | I'd like to know how much money a company spends on communicating about its CSR | 4.67(1.51) |

| | | |
|-------|---|------------|
| Prom1 | I don't like a company spending money on promoting its CSR activities (R) | 4.32(1.43) |
| Prom2 | It is okay to spend more money on promoting a company's CSR activities | 4.52(1.32) |
| Prom3 | I think companies should spend more money on CSR communication | 4.08(1.40) |

* Five items were eliminated based on EFA. **Info=basic CSR info, E&P= third party endorsement & consumer participation, Tone= message tone, C&F=consistency and frequency, Rel=personal relevance, Tran= transparency, Cost=CSR communication cost, Prom= approval of increasing promotion cost.

SAMPLE

The sampling frame was constructed from the list of consumer panels managed by Researchnow, a U.S. marketing research firm specializing in consumer surveys. Email invitations were deployed based on 2010 census representatives for gender, age, Hispanic/Latino ethnicity, and race categories. Data collection was completed in 10 days in October, 2013. A total of 663 consumer panel members participated in the online survey. About 51% were female ($n=340$), and 15.8% identified themselves as of Hispanic or Latino origin ($n=105$). A majority of the sample were Caucasian/white (71.3%), followed by black or African American (14%), other race (9%), Asian (4.5%), and American Indian/Native Hawaiian (1.1%). Age groups of 45-54 ($n=138$), 55-64 ($n=98$), and over 65 ($n=117$) consisted of 43.2% of the sample, and the remainder were from the other age groups: 18-24 ($n=79$), 25-34 ($n=116$) and 35-44 ($n=115$). About 66.5% were employed full time ($n=349$) or part time ($n=91$), and 43.5% were unemployed ($n=102$) or retired ($n=120$). A majority (69.3%, $n=453$) were college graduates or had some graduate work (master's or doctoral degree). About 35.6% ($n=236$) identified the Democratic Party as their political affiliation, while 20% ($n=133$) identified the Republican Party. Participants with no affiliations were 39.7% ($n=262$). A majority identified Christian and Catholic as their religion (55.4%) and made less than \$100,000 annually (73.7%, $n=489$).

RESULTS

What to Communicate for CSR Activities

The study identified four factors related to "what to communicate" about CSR¹: communication about 1) basic CSR information ($\alpha=.96$), 2) third-party endorsement and consumer participation ($\alpha=.94$), 3) personal relevance ($\alpha=.95$), and 4) disclosure of CSR communication cost ($\alpha=.94$). To explore what consumer publics expect from companies regarding "what to communicate" about their CSR (RQ1), all items related to "what to communicate" about CSR were examined. Among basic CSR information items, on a 1 to 7 scale, consumer publics wanted to know "who is benefiting" from a company's CSR the most ($M=5.49$), followed by information about specific social causes that a company supports ($M=5.21$), specific commitments ($M=5.19$), a company's CSR goal ($M=5.17$), and previous CSR achievement or results of the company ($M=5.15$). Publics wanted to know information about CSR beneficiaries (who's benefiting) significantly more than any of the other information ($p<.0001$). However,

¹ An exploratory factor analysis was performed to identify CSR communication factors; however, factor analysis results are not included in this paper to focus more on practical aspects of our findings. Detailed results of factor analysis can be found in authors' other publication related to this project.

there were no significant mean differences among supported social causes, a company's CSR goal, and previous CSR results-related information. And, while the means were still substantially about the midpoint of the scale, publics were least interested in the information about why society needs a company's CSR initiative ($M=4.72$), why a company's doing CSR ($M=4.88$), and the company's expertise ($M=4.84$) for its CSR. (See Table 1 for means and standard deviations.) Publics wanted to know these three information items significantly less than the other CSR information ($P_s < .0001$).

Among information items about the third party endorsement and consumer participation factor, information about whether non-profit organizations ($M=5.19$) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) ($M=5.19$) are partners of the company's CSR initiative was considered the most important by consumer publics. In addition, consumer publics wanted to know how a company's CSR activities will affect their life most highly ($M=5.04$) among the personal relevance factor.

Among the four what to communicate factors, the basic CSR information factor ($M=5.07$) was considered significantly more important than the third party endorsement/consumer participation ($M=5.00$, $t=2.03$, $p < .05$), personal relevance ($M=4.92$, $t=2.98$, $p < .004$), and CSR communication cost ($M=4.70$, $t=7.42$, $p < .0001$) factors. The third party endorsement/consumer participation factor was also considered more important than the CSR communication cost factor ($t=6.09$, $p < .0001$), but no significant mean difference was found between the third party endorsement and personal relevance factors ($t=1.83$, $p > .05$). In addition, publics were significantly less interested in the CSR communication cost factor than the other three communication factors ($P_s < .0001$).

There were significant gender differences in all four what to communicate factors. Female participants were more interested than male participants in CSR communication about basic CSR information ($F(1, 661) = 18.18$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, $M_F=5.26$, $M_M=4.86$), third-party endorsement & consumer participation ($F = 22.10$, $p < .0001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, $M_F=5.21$, $M_M=4.78$), personal relevance ($F = 4.80$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, $M_F=5.02$, $M_M=4.80$), and cost factors ($F = 4.32$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, $M_F=4.81$, $M_M=4.58$).

Age differences were also found in the basic CSR information ($F(5, 657) = 3.81$, $p < .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$) and CSR cost factors ($F(5, 657) = 4.24$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .033$), while no differences were found among different age groups for the third-party endorsement and personal relevance factors ($p > .05$). The youngest (18-24) and oldest (over 65) age groups tended to reveal high interests in knowing basic CSR information, while age groups of 25-34 and 35-44 showed lower interests. (See Figure 1 for age mean scores.) Especially, age groups of 25-34 (Tukey HSD $p < .05$) and 35-44 (Tukey HSD $p < .05$) revealed significantly lower interests in knowing basic CSR information than age group of 18-24. Age group of 35-44 also revealed significantly lower interests in knowing companies' basic CSR information than the age group of over 65 (Tukey HSD $p < .05$). For the CSR cost factor, the age group of 55-64 was most interested in a company's CSR communication cost, while age groups of 35-44 revealed the lowest interest in it.

Again, age groups of 25-34 (Tukey HSD $p < .007$) and 35-44 (Tukey HDD $p < .002$) revealed significantly lower interests in the CSR cost factor than the age group of 55-64 (See Figure 1).

Employment status revealed a significant impact on the basic CSR information ($F(3, 658) = 6.29, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$) and CSR cost ($F(3, 658) = 4.22, p < .007, \eta_p^2 = .019$) factors but not on the other two factors. Specifically, retired participants ($M=5.42, SD=1.07$) wanted to know more about basic CSR information than full-time employed ($M=4.92, SD=1.22, \text{Tukey HSD } p < .001$) or unemployed ($M=4.96, SD=1.26, \text{Tukey HSD } p < .007$) participants. For the CSR cost factor, retired participants ($M=5.01, SD=1.51$) were significantly more interested in CSR communication cost-related information than those employed full time ($M=4.52, SD=1.36, \text{Tukey HSD } p < .008$). No difference was found between retired participants and part time employed or unemployed.

To examine if there is any difference by political affiliations among the four what to communicate factors, participants who chose Republican, Democratic Party, and no affiliation were included in analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests ($n = 631$). Participants who chose the option of 'other affiliation' were excluded in the tests due to a small number of selection ($n = 32$). The results suggested that there were significant mean differences by participants' political affiliations in terms of the basic CSR info ($F(2, 628) = 5.17, p < .007, \eta_p^2 = .02$), third party endorsement & consumer participation ($F(2, 628) = 5.98, p < .004, \eta_p^2 = .02$), and CSR cost information ($F(2, 628) = 6.31, p < .003, \eta_p^2 = .02$) factors. However no significant difference was found in the personal relevance factor ($F(2, 628) = 1.59, p > .05$). Further Tukey HSD post-hoc tests revealed that for the basic CSR information factor, those with Democratic Party affiliation wanted to know basic CSR information more than Republicans ($p < .05$) or no affiliations ($p < .01$). Democrats were also more interested in knowing the third party endorsement and consumer participation information factor than Republicans ($p < .005$) or no affiliation ($p < .03$) participants. However, in the CSR cost factor, there was a statistically significant difference only between Democrats and no affiliation participants, suggesting Democrats were more interested in CSR communication cost ($p < .002$). No difference was found between Democrats and Republicans in the CSR cost factor (see Figure 2 for mean scores). Lastly, there were no significant differences in the four "what to communicate" factors by participants' household income, education levels, religion, or ethnicity ($p > .05$).

How to Communicate CSR Activities

First, in terms of CSR communication source, the most preferred communication source was 1) people who benefited from the company's CSR initiative (CSR beneficiaries, $M=5.38$), followed by sources of 2) non-profit organizations, 3) the company itself, 4) participants of the CSR initiative, 5) activist groups (e.g., Greenpeace), 6) the company's employees and other stakeholders respectively, 7) the company's CEO, and 8) the company's public relations spokesperson ($M=4.41$, see Table 2 for all mean scores). The CSR beneficiary source (the highest rank) was preferred significantly more than all other sources (paired t tests $P_s < .001$). There was no significant mean

difference between non-profit organization and company sources ($t=.46, p >.05$), but non-profit organization source was preferred significantly more than the sources of CSR participants, activist, other stakeholders, employees, CEO, and PR spokesperson ($P_s <.01$). The company itself as a communication source was also preferred significantly more than activist, other stakeholders, employees, CEO, and PR spokesperson ($P_s <.0001$).

Table 2. Preferred CSR communication media channels and communication sources.

| Rank | Media Type* | Channels | M | SD | Communication Sources | M | SD |
|-------|-------------|--|------|------|-------------------------------|------|------|
| 1 | C | Local Stores | 5.14 | 1.31 | CSR beneficiaries | 5.38 | 1.34 |
| 2 | C | Company website | 5.07 | 1.37 | Non-profit org | 5.24 | 1.30 |
| 3 | C | Promotion events | 5.04 | 1.36 | Company | 5.22 | 1.35 |
| 4 | C | Company CSR website | 4.99 | 1.43 | CSR Participants | 5.14 | 1.35 |
| 5 | C | Company Annual Reports | 4.83 | 1.46 | Activist groups | 4.98 | 1.42 |
| 6 | U | TV news | 4.78 | 1.35 | Other stakeholders | 4.77 | 1.37 |
| 7 | U | Online news | 4.72 | 1.32 | Company employees | 4.77 | 1.37 |
| 8 | C | Company newsletters | 4.66 | 1.44 | Company CEO | 4.60 | 1.52 |
| 9 | C | Company brochures | 4.61 | 1.39 | Public Relations Spokesperson | 4.41 | 1.45 |
| 10 | U | Radio news | 4.60 | 1.35 | | | |
| 11 | C | Company convention, town-hall meetings | 4.56 | 1.37 | | | |
| 12 | U | Offline newspapers | 4.56 | 1.36 | | | |
| 13 | C | Print Ad | 4.55 | 1.38 | | | |
| 14 | C | TV commercial | 4.50 | 1.43 | | | |
| 15 | C | Company microblogs | 4.41 | 1.55 | | | |
| 16 | C | Company emails | 4.35 | 1.45 | | | |
| 17 | C | Company blog | 4.33 | 1.49 | | | |
| 18 | C | Company direct mails | 4.32 | 1.49 | | | |
| 19 | U | Experts' blogs | 4.22 | 1.51 | | | |
| 20 | U | Experts' microblogs | 4.14 | 1.49 | | | |
| 21 | U | Friends' microblogs | 3.90 | 1.45 | | | |
| 22 | U | Friends' blogs | 3.88 | 1.43 | | | |
| Total | | N=663 | | | N=663 | | |

* C: controlled media channels, U: uncontrolled media channels.

To examine demographic differences for communication source preference, communication sources were divided into corporate sources (i.e., company itself, employee, CEO, and spokesperson) and non-corporate (outside) sources. Non-corporate sources ($M=5.10, SD=1.15$) were preferred significantly more than corporate sources ($M=4.75, SD=1.20: t=11.04, p <.0001$). Female participants revealed significantly higher preferences than males for both corporate ($F(1, 661) = 8.26, p <.005, \eta_p^2 = .01$), and non-corporate sources ($F(1, 661) = 16.10, p <.0001, \eta_p^2 = .03$). There were significant age differences for both corporate ($F(5, 657) = 2.88, p <.02, \eta_p^2 = .02$) and non-corporate sources ($F(5, 657) = 2.46, p <.03, \eta_p^2 = .02$). Older age groups (age over 55) preferred non-corporate sources more than relatively younger age groups (i.e., 25-34 and 35-44), but Tukey post-hoc test revealed no statistical differences among all age groups. However, post-hoc test results revealed the youngest group (18-24) preferred corporate sources most highly and significantly more than the age groups

of 35-44 ($p < .03$) and 45-55 ($p < .02$). Democrats revealed higher preferences for non-corporate sources than Republicans or no affiliations ($F(2, 628) = 8.00, p < .006, \eta_p^2 = .025$). However, no differences were identified for corporate sources among the three political affiliation groups ($p > .30$). Employment status, education level, and household income level did not reveal any impact on communication source preferences ($p > .05$).

With regard to media channels that consumer publics preferred for CSR communication, companies' local stores ranked the highest, followed by company websites, promotion events, company CSR designated websites, and annual reports among the 22 media channels provided. These top five preferred media channels were all media controlled by companies, while the bottom four preferred media channels were all uncontrolled media channels such as experts or friends' blogs or microblogs. TV news was most preferred among the uncontrolled media channels but ranked only at the top six among the all 22 media channels (see Table 2). Interestingly, consumer publics tended to prefer controlled media channels (local stores, company website, promotion events, etc.: $M=4.67, SD=1.11$) to uncontrolled media channels (news media, experts' blogs and microblogs, etc.: $M=4.34, SD=1.13$) for companies' CSR communication. The mean difference between controlled and uncontrolled media was statistically significant ($t=10.32, p < .0001$). Among the 14 controlled media channels, TV commercials, company's microblogs such as Twitter and Facebook, company emails, company blogs, and direct mails ranked in the bottom five (i.e., least preferred by consumer publics, $M=4.37, SD=1.21$), while the company's local stores, website, promotion events, CSR devoted website, and annual reports ranked in the top five ($M=5.01, SD=1.17$). The mean difference between the top and bottom five controlled media was statistically significant ($t=19.97, p < .0001$). Among the eight uncontrolled media channels, TV news, online news, radio news, and offline newspapers ranked in the top four ($M=4.66, SD=1.21$), while experts' blogs, microblogs, friends' micro blogs and blogs ranked in the bottom four ($M=4.03, SD=1.35$) (see Table 2). The mean difference between the two was statistically significant ($t=13.54, p < .0001$).

Female participants revealed significantly higher preferences than males for both controlled ($F(1, 661) = 19.93, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .03$), and uncontrolled media channels ($F(1, 661) = 11.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$). There were significant age differences for both controlled ($F(5, 657) = 3.65, p < .004, \eta_p^2 = .027$) and uncontrolled media channels ($F(5, 657) = 4.60, p < .0001, \eta_p^2 = .034$). The youngest age group (18-24) revealed the highest preferences for both controlled and uncontrolled media channels. For controlled media channels, the youngest group revealed significantly higher preferences than the age groups of 35-44 ($p < .002$), 45-54 ($p < .02$), and 65+ ($p < .005$), but no differences with the age groups of 25-34 and 55-64 ($P_s > .05$). In addition, they also revealed significantly higher preferences toward uncontrolled media channels than the age groups of 35-44 ($p < .05$), 45-54 ($p < .002$), 55-65 ($p < .03$), and 65+ ($p < .0001$), but no difference was found compared to the age group of 25-34 ($p > .40$). Democrats revealed higher preferences for both controlled and uncontrolled media channels than Republicans (controlled: $F(2, 628) = 5.49, p < .005, \eta_p^2 = .02$; uncontrolled: $F(2, 628) = 4.63, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$). Employment status, education level, and household income level did not reveal any impact on media channel preferences ($p > .05$).

In addition to the preferred communication sources and media channels, four factors were identified for “how to communicate” about CSR: 1) message tone ($\alpha = .92$), 2) transparency ($\alpha = .95$), 3) consistency and frequency ($\alpha = .95$), and 4) approval of increasing CSR promotion cost ($\alpha = .86$). Consumer publics considered message tone ($M=5.45$, $SD=1.16$) most important, followed by transparency of CSR communication ($M=5.09$, $SD=1.29$), consistency and frequency of CSR communication ($M=4.74$, $SD=1.18$), and public approval of increasing CSR promotion cost factor ($M=4.30$, $SD=1.23$). For the message tone, consumer publics preferred that CSR communication messages should be based on facts and did not like too much self-promotional CSR messages from companies. The message tone was considered significantly more important than the transparency ($t=7.98$, $p < .0001$), consistency and frequency ($t=14.98$, $p < .0001$), and public approval of increasing CSR promotion cost ($t=20.49$, $p < .0001$) factors. For the transparency factor, consumer publics wanted to know the progress of a company’s CSR activities and both good and bad information about the company’s CSR activities. (See Table 1 for means.) The transparency was considered less important than the message tone but significantly more important than the consistency/frequency ($t=8.32$, $p < .0001$) and approval of increasing promotion cost ($t=14.82$, $p < .0001$) factors.

For the consistency and frequency of the CSR communication factor, consumer publics considered the consistency of a company’s CSR activities more important than the frequency of CSR communication. Consumer publics seemed not to prefer too much frequent CSR communication from companies (i.e., frequency items revealed lower mean scores than consistency related items). The consistency and frequency factor was considered less important than the message tone and transparency factors but more important than the approval of increasing promotion cost ($t=10.48$, $p < .0001$) factor. Mean score for the approval of increasing CSR promotion cost factor revealed the lowest, suggesting not many consumer publics approved companies to spend more money on CSR promotion.

There were significant gender differences in the three how to communicate factors (tone, consistency & frequency, and transparency) except the factor of the approval of increasing CSR promotion cost. Female participants ($M_F=5.58$, $SD=1.10$) did not like self-promotional CSR message tone more than male participants did not ($F(1, 661) = 9.51$, $p < .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, $M_M=5.30$, $SD=1.24$). Females ($M=5.19$, $SD=1.29$) considered CSR communication transparency more important than males ($F(1, 661) = 4.66$, $p < .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$, $M_M=4.97$, $SD=1.28$). In addition, females ($M=4.85$, $SD=1.09$) considered consistency and frequency of CSR more important than males ($F(1, 661) = 6.37$, $p < .02$, $M_M=4.62$, $SD=1.26$). However, there were no significant gender differences in terms of the approval of increasing CSR promotion cost although females ($M_F=4.29$, $SD=1.19$) did not like increasing CSR promotion cost more than males did not ($M_M=4.31$, $SD=1.27$).

Age differences were also found in the all four how to communicate factors (tone: ($F(5, 657) = 7.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .053$), transparency ($F(5, 657) = 3.33$, $p < .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$),

consistency & frequency ($F(5, 657) = 2.62, p < .03, \eta_p^2 = .020$), and approval of increasing CSR promotion cost ($F(5, 657) = 3.30, p < .005, \eta_p^2 = .03$). Older age groups (groups of 45-54, 55-64, and over 65) expected CSR communication to be based on facts and did not like promotional message tones significantly more than relatively younger age groups (groups of 18-24, 25-34, and 35-44) (Age differences between 46-54 and 18-24, 25-34, 35-44: Tukey HSD $P_s < .05$; differences between 55-64 and all other age groups under 44: Tukey HSD $P_s < .004$, difference between 65+ and all age group under 44, Tukey HSD $p < .009$) (see Figure 1 for means).

In addition, employment status revealed a significant impact on the message tone ($F(3, 658) = 6.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$) and transparency ($F(3, 658) = 3.99, p < .009, \eta_p^2 = .018$) factors but not on the other two factors. Specifically, retired participants ($M=5.82, SD=.97$) thought CSR communication should be based on fact and did not like too much promotional CSR message tone significantly more than full-time employees ($M=5.30, SD=1.22$, Tukey HSD $p < .001$). For the transparency factor, retired participants ($M=5.82, SD=.97$) considered the transparency of CSR communication significantly more important than those employed full time ($M=4.94, SD=1.35$, Tukey HSD $p < .005$). No difference was found among retired participants and part time employed or unemployed.

Political affiliation was a significant factor for the three how to communicate CSR factors: message tone ($F(2, 628) = 3.29, p < .04, \eta_p^2 = .01$), transparency of CSR communication ($F(2, 628) = 4.23, p < .02, \eta_p^2 = .013$), and consistency & frequency ($F(2, 628) = 4.49, p < .02, \eta_p^2 = .014$). However, there was no significant difference in the approval of increasing CSR promotion cost ($p > .05$). Tukey HSD post-hoc tests suggested that Democrats considered the transparency of CSR communication more important than Republicans ($p < .02$). However, people with no affiliation did not reveal significant differences compared to Democrats or Republicans ($p > .05$). In addition, Democrats did not like too much self-promotional CSR message tone compared to people with no affiliation ($p < .05$), but no difference was found between Democrats and Republicans ($p > .05$) (see Figure 2).

Among the four how to communicate factors, only message tone factor revealed differences by participants' household income level ($F(6, 655) = 2.40, p < .03, \eta_p^2 = .022$), suggesting that people with the household annual income range of \$100,000 and \$149,999 thought that CSR communication should be based on facts and not be too much self-promotional significantly more than those with annual income between \$25,000 and \$49,999 ($p < .05$). There were no other differences among other annual income levels. Participants' education level did not make any difference in all four how to communicate factors ($p > .05$).

DISCUSSION

Based on consumer publics' expectations for effective CSR communication, this study addresses what makes CSR communication acceptable to publics to overcome CSR communication challenges. The findings of this study suggest that consumer publics in

our study are not negative to and have high expectations for CSR communication, given that the means of CSR communication-related items were relatively high and all over the midpoint of the scale. In addition, it is important to note that our findings are relevant to North American publics and cultural differences may well prevail. The study's findings yield valuable insights for what makes CSR communication effective in terms of (1) "what and how to communicate" CSR and (2) preferred CSR communication source and media channels. Practical implications and recommendations are also derived.

Consumer publics expected companies to share basic CSR information most highly related to "what to communicate" about CSR, whereas they considered message tone and transparency of CSR communication most important with regard to "how to communicate" CSR. In other words, they revealed high levels of basic CSR information needs and expected CSR communication to be based on factual information and transparent without intentional omission of negative information about companies' CSR. Among basic CSR information items, consumer publics wanted to know "who is benefiting" from the company's CSR and "the specific results of previous CSR activities" the most. The fact that consumer publics considered specific information about a company's CSR beneficiaries and previous CSR results most important is highly related to their suspicions toward companies' CSR (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing et al., 2008). Publics may want to be free from CSR skepticism by having specific information about who actually benefited from the CSR and what actually happened as a result of the company's previous CSR.

Interestingly, societal needs for a company's CSR and the company's expertise to support a specific CSR cause were identified as the least interested basic CSR information by consumer publics. This is somewhat inconsistent with previous research especially regarding a company's expertise. Unlike the low interest level of publics for corporate expertise found in this study, previous research has suggested that a perceived fit between a company's expertise and its supported social cause is an important factor to affect positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Du et al., 2010; Nan & Heo, 2007; Trimble & Rifon, 2006). This particular finding suggests that whether a company has an expertise to support the CSR cause may not be as important as specific outcomes of the company's CSR such as beneficiaries and previous CSR outcomes. That is, consumer publics might automatically assume a company's relevant expertise when they see the company supporting a specific CSR cause. In addition, the importance of CSR information about third-party endorsement from non-profit or non-governmental organizations and personal relevance of CSR activities was confirmed in our study (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing, et al., 2008). Presence of third-party endorsement-related information will help increase the credibility of companies' CSR activities and their messages (Crane, 2001), and publics expect CSR messages to be personally relevant.

As consumer publics in our study most highly expected companies to share "who is benefiting" from the companies' CSR activities for basic CSR information, they identified CSR beneficiaries as the most preferred CSR communication source. This provides important insight to practitioners. Practitioners should actively involve CSR beneficiaries

in the process of CSR communication and actively share information about them with external stakeholders. Interestingly, the company itself was also identified as a relatively preferred CSR communication source, along with non-profit organizations and CSR participants. This is somewhat contradictory with recommendations from previous research (e.g., Dawkins, 2004; Du et al., 2010; Morsing et al., 2008).

For instance, Morsing et al. (2008) argued that there is “general agreement that it is not effective to communicate directly to the public” (p.105). Instead, they recommended an experts-mediated CSR communication process through local authorities, media, and critical interest groups. The logic behind this recommendation is to reduce public skepticism and self-serving CSR motive attributions because non-corporate sources can be seen as more credible and less self-interested, while corporate sources can trigger more skepticism and self-serving CSR motive attributions (Du et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2006). This recommendation is consistent with our findings in that company CEOs, public relations practitioners, and employees (i.e., corporate sources) were identified as the least preferred CSR communication sources. However, it is also inconsistent with our findings in that consumer publics preferred direct communication from the company itself. This contradictory finding might indicate that the process of public attributions of source credibility and self-serving CSR motives are more complicated than previous studies suggested (Du et al., 2010; Yoon et al., 2006).

Consumer publics may not simply make a judgment about CSR communication source based on bipolar perspectives (inside vs. outside communication source or corporate vs. non-corporate source). That is, stakeholders may not automatically consider corporate sources as less credible and more self-interested and non-corporate sources as more credible and less self-interested. Rather, the process of attributing CSR motives related to communication source can be more complex. Stakeholders may want to hear CSR-related news directly from companies doing CSR, accepting the necessity of companies’ CSR promotion, but at the same time, they do not prefer corporate sources such as CEOs and public relation spokespersons since those corporate sources make self-serving CSR motives more salient.

Preferred communication channels found in this study are also inconsistent with previous research to some extent. Consumer publics in our study tend to prefer company-controlled communication channels to uncontrolled communication channels. However, previous research has suggested that the higher controllability a company has over the contents of CSR communication, the lower credibility its CSR communication has (e.g., Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). For instance, news media channels are considered to be more credible than advertising since a company does not have a full control over the contents of news media, different from advertising. As suggested by the previous research, consumer publics in our study preferred news media channels such as TV, radio, and online news (i.e., uncontrolled) more than advertising media channels like TV commercials and print advertisements (i.e., controlled). However, they also preferred a company’s local stores, corporate websites, promotion events, CSR-designated corporate website, and annual reports (i.e., the top five preferred channels) more than all of the news media channels for CSR

communication. All of these top-five preferred channels were company-controlled media channels. Thus, we should be careful not to simply state that uncontrolled media channels are better than controlled media channels due to the increased credibility of CSR messages. Uncontrolled media channels may increase CSR communication's credibility, but publics may prefer more direct and interpersonal company-controlled communication channels, despite the higher company control over the contents of CSR communication.

In addition, although previous research has suggested that advertising is not an effective communication channel for CSR communication due to increased public skepticism and low credibility (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005; Webb & Mohr, 1998), TV commercial and print advertisement ranked higher than blogs and microblogs of experts and friends in our study. Considering blogs and microblogs of experts and friends are all uncontrolled media, controllability over the contents of CSR communication may not be as important as previous research suggested. Rather, accessibility (how easily or how often publics can get CSR-related information) and interactivity (how much interpersonal communication publics can get) may be more important than the company controllability over the CSR contents in selecting effective CSR communication channels.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings provide significant implications for effective CSR communication. First, corporations should treat CSR message tone, transparency and basic CSR information sharing most important related to "what and how to communicate" CSR. Practitioners should make sure their message is 1) low-key and less promotional, based on factual information, contains 2) transparent information without intentional omission of any negative information, and shares 3) specific CSR information such as CSR beneficiaries and previous outcomes of companies' CSR. Second, corporations should actively share the presence of third-party endorsement such as their partnerships with non-profit organizations or NGOs and certificates issued by credible third parties. In addition, practitioners should make their CSR activities personally relevant to external stakeholders, providing specific examples for how companies' CSR can impact on publics' daily life.

Third, CSR practitioners should actively involve CSR beneficiaries into their CSR communication process as they are the most preferred CSR communication source. In addition, non-profit organizations and CSR participants should be incorporated into CSR communication as desired communication sources. Fourth, corporations should avoid corporate sources such as CEOs and spokespersons as such corporate sources may increase public skepticism. However, a company should actively communicate with external stakeholders about its CSR using the company itself as a communication source as publics demand active CSR communication from the company itself. Fifth, CSR practitioners should employ more controlled and interpersonal media channels such as companies' local stores, corporate websites, and face-to-face promotion events. Although uncontrolled media channels can increase the credibility of CSR messages, publics tend to prefer more direct, interpersonal, and easy-to-access types

of media channels. Sixth, practitioners should acknowledge there is a clear gender difference in communicating CSR. Females tend to accept CSR communication more than males. In addition, females are more sensitive to CSR messages with self-promotional tone, message transparency, and consistency of CSR communication than males.

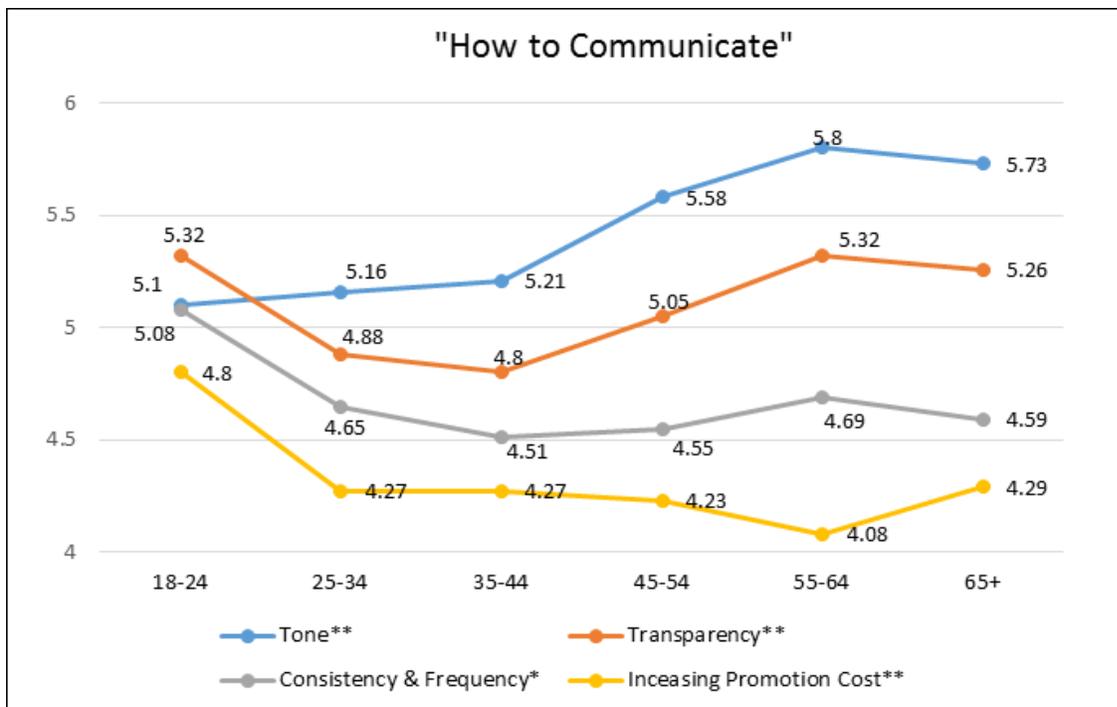
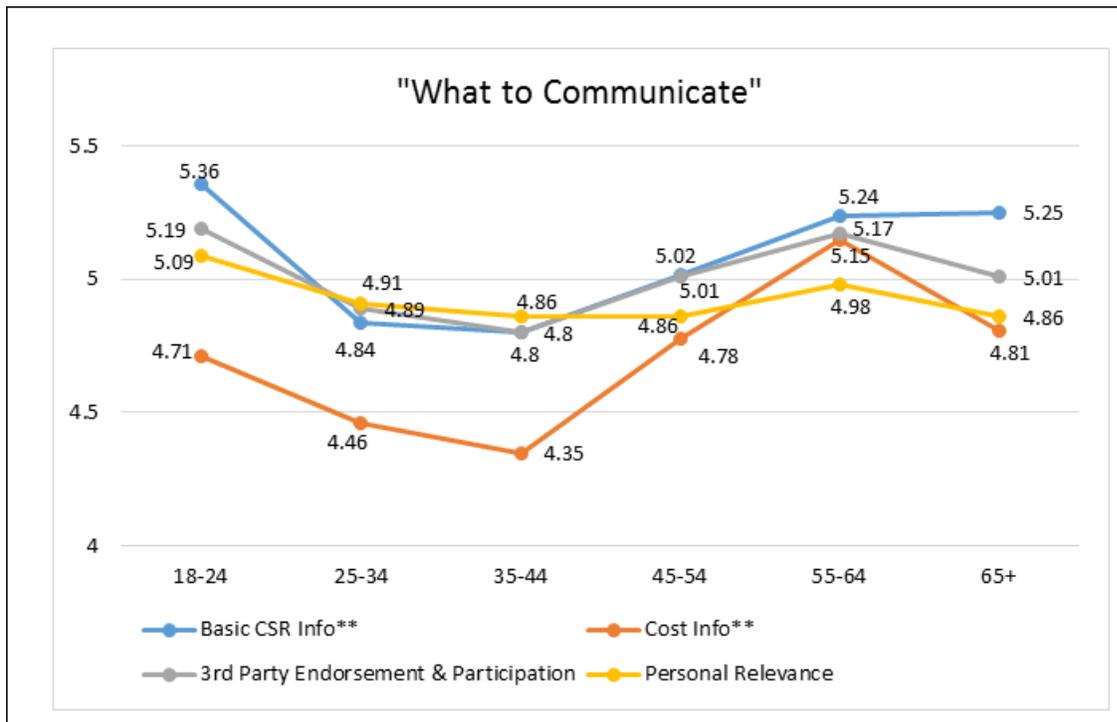
Seventh, age of target audience is another important factor in CSR communication. The youngest (18-24) and oldest (over 65) age groups tend to reveal much higher interest levels in CSR information than the age groups of 25-44. Older age groups (over 45) are more concerned with CSR message tone than relatively younger age groups (18-44). That is, when targeting relatively older age groups, practitioners should make sure their CSR messages are based on facts and less promotional. In addition, practitioners should acknowledge that older age groups tend to prefer non-corporate sources and uncontrolled media channels more, while younger age groups are less sensitive to corporate vs. non-corporate communication sources or controlled vs. uncontrolled media channels. Eighth, retired publics tend to have more interests in CSR communication and more antagonistic to promotional message tone and non-transparent CSR communication than full-time employed. Finally, political affiliations should also be considered in planning CSR communication. Democrats tend to be more interested in basic CSR information and third-party endorsement presence than are Republicans, and they are more concerned with self-promotional CSR message tone and transparency issue than Republicans.

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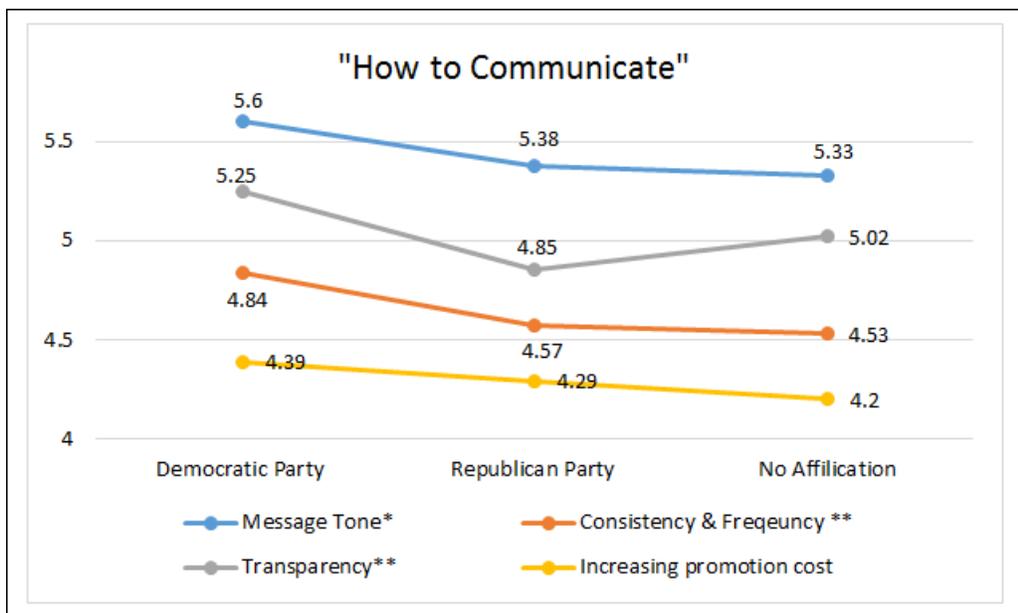
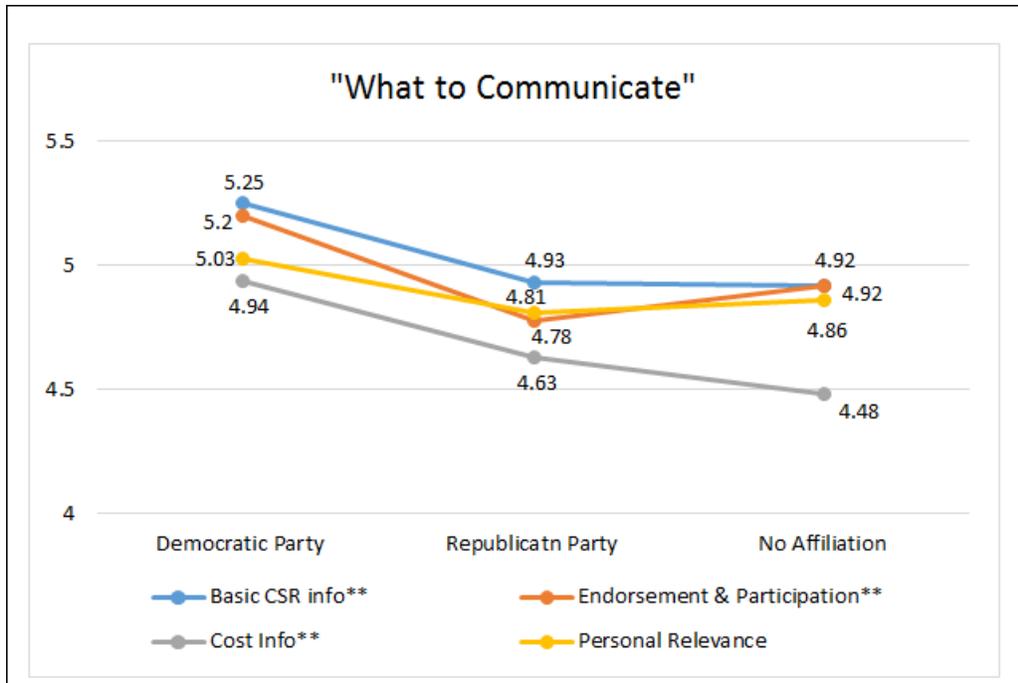
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Figure 1. Age differences for what and how to communicate for CSR



** = p <.01 and * = p <.05

Figure 2. Political affiliation differences for what and how to communicate for CSR



** = p <.01 and * = p <.05

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