How prior Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) record influence the effectiveness of one single CSR initiative: Mediating role of motive attribution

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Abstract

The public does not take every corporate social responsibility (CSR) behavior as good, and reward the corporation. Instead, people make attribution of motive for the seemingly social responsible action and respond accordingly. Based on attribution theory and using experimental research method, this study tested how prior CSR record influenced the public’s attribution of altruistic motive for a corporation’s single CSR initiative, which further influenced the effectiveness of the CSR initiative in terms of attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, word of mouth (WOM) communication, and purchase intention. Results showed that the public in general had a high level of suspicion about the corporate motive for launching a CSR initiative. However, in comparison to the corporations with negative prior CSR record, corporations with positive record were more likely to be attributed of altruistic motive, which tends to generate positive reaction from the public. Motive attribution was demonstrated as a robust mediator in the relationship between prior CSR record and the public’s reaction. Interestingly, it was found that the public’s reaction can be significantly improved by one single CSR initiative for corporations with negative prior CSR record, but not for those with positive record. More discussion on the implications of the findings was conducted.

Keywords: prior CSR record, attribution of motive, attitude toward the corporation, reputation, WOM communication, purchase intention
Introduction

While CSR initiatives help some corporations successfully create positive consumer perception and reaction, more and more cases show that CSR may fail to achieve expected favorable results and in some cases may even backfire (Bae & Park, 2011, Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). A growing contingent of scholars have begun to realize that the public does not necessarily perceive every CSR initiative as good nor is it a given that they will reward the corporation in response.

As consumers become more familiar with various marketing strategies, they will become skeptical and begin to question the corporations’ motive underlying the CSR action and respond accordingly (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006; Rifon, Choi, Trimble, & Li, 2004; Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). Scholars who noticed the importance of attribution of motive have explored the factors possibly influencing the public’s attribution of motive for the CSR initiatives, such as sponsor-cause congruence (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Rifon et al., 2004), benefit salience of the cause, and the ratio of CSR contributions and CSR-related advertising (Yoon et al, 2006). These studies contributed greatly to explicating the various effects of CSR from a social psychological perspective; however, their assumption that the public’s reaction is solely a function of the CSR initiative per se may be problematic and begs further examination. Attribution theory suggests that individuals make attributions based on what the actors do before the observed behavior (Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1985). Therefore, in order to decode the effectiveness of a single CSR initiative, the focus of study should not be confined to the initiative itself.

The main purposes of this study—inspired by attribution theory—are to introduce the concept of prior CSR record, which reflects the temporal dimension of a corporation’s CSR efforts into the study of CSR effectiveness, and to explore the power of prior CSR record in the effectiveness of a single CSR initiative. Furthermore, our study aims to test the possible mediating role of motive attribution in the effect of prior CSR record on the public’s reaction, and for corporations with different prior CSR record, the effect of a single CSR initiative on the public’s reaction change in terms of attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, word of mouth (WOM), and purchase intention.

Literature Review

Suspicion of CSR Motive

The relationship between CSR and the expected positive reaction by the public is established on the assumption that people tend to take the activity at face value and attribute corresponding disposition to the actor, i.e., a person that performs a certain behavior is predisposed to do so, for example, people do good things simply because they are good people (Yoon et al., 2006). The bulk of research on attribution (e.g., Gilbert & Jones, 1986; Gilbert & Malone, 1995; Ross, 1977) demonstrated that people rarely refrain from making correspondent dispositional inferences even if there are other situations that can provide explanations for the action they observed. The only exception is when people are in a state of suspicion, “a state in which perceivers actively entertain multiple, plausibly rival hypotheses about the motives or genuineness of a person's behavior” (Fein, Hilton and Miller, 1990, p. 168). Suspicious perceivers are reluctant to draw inferences that correspond to the behavior, at least until their suspicions have been resolved, because suspicion allows them to accept multiple competing explanations concerning the meaning of the observed behavior (Hilton, Fein & Miller, 1993).
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According to Forehand and Grier's (2003) classification, there are two types of consumer suspicion: predispositional suspicion (i.e., “a general tendency to suspect marketers' motives”) and situational suspicion (i.e., “a temporary state to doubt a certain marketer’s motive”). Through efforts, corporations are more likely to reduce consumers’ situational suspicion. However, when a practice such as CSR becomes widespread rather than innovative, members of the public are likely to become skeptical, as they can readily recognize the corporation’s intent (Kim & Lee, 2009). Then, the aroused suspicion will refrain them from attributing the CSR behavior they are exposed to at its face value (i.e., the corporation takes CSR activities because it is dispositionally altruistic and socially responsible), and more complex attributional processing that adjusts the usually observed correspondent dispositional inference will be activated (Fein & Hilton, 1994; Fein, Hilton, & Miller, 1990; Hilton, Fein, & Miller, 1993).

Determinant of Attribution for CSR Motive: Prior CSR Record

Attribution theory is a family of theories about attribution. Among the most well-known and widely recognized attribution theories are Heider’s (1958) attribution theory, Kelley’s (1967) covariation model, and Weiner’s (1986) attributional theory of motivation and emotion. In line with Heider’s (1958) seminal work about attribution, Kelley (1967) and Weiner (1986) believed that average people explain human behavior through internal attribution (i.e., assigning the cause of behavior to dispositional/internal factors) and/or external attribution (i.e., assigning the cause of behavior to situational factors outside a person’s control). Further, they explored the factors based on which internal dispositional attribution and situational attribution were made. According to Kelley (1967), one type of information that influenced individuals’ attribution is consistency, which refers to the extent to which the person behaves in a certain way every time. For example, if Kevin is generous all the time, high consistency is demonstrated. If Kevin is rarely generous or is generous only at special times, low consistency is demonstrated. High consistent behavior is more likely to be attributed to the person’s internal disposition (e.g., Kevin is a generous person), while low consistent behavior is attributed less likely to disposition and more likely to the circumstances (the special times induce Kevin’s generous behavior). Similarly, Weiner (1986) held that one critical dimension of attribution is stability across time. It concerns whether there is “changing from moment to moment or period to period” (Weiner, 1985, p. 551). The more stable the behavior is or more frequently the behavior reoccurs, the more likely the behavior will be attributed to the disposition (Park & Len-Rios, 2012).

Both the “consistency” in Kelley’s (1967) covariation model and the “stability” in Weiner’s (1986) attributional theory of motivation and emotion point to the consideration of what the actors do before the observed behavior. When the public examine and make attribution of a corporation’s CSR behavior, the most salient information about what the corporation did before the current CSR behavior is the corporation’s prior CSR record. In this study, we conceptualized prior CSR record as a corporation’s long-term CSR performance prior to the current observed CSR initiative, including CSR participation, involvement and contribution. If a CSR initiative is a consistent and stable behavior for a corporation with a positive prior CSR record, the public tend to attribute it to the altruistic disposition of the organization. In other words, the motive attribution for the CSR initiative tends to be internally altruistic, rather than driven by outside situational factors. In contrast, a CSR initiative undertaken by a corporation with negative CSR record is an inconsistent and unstable behavior in comparison with its long-term past performance; therefore, the public are less likely to believe that the CSR initiative is motivated by internal altruistic disposition. Based on the previously-mentioned literature and discussion, it is hypothesized that:
H1: The public tends to attribute the motive for a single CSR initiative launched by a corporation with a positive prior CSR record as more altruistic than that launched by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record.

In reality, the public may find that the information about a company’s prior CSR record may be lacking or insufficient when they want to refer to it. Without the necessary prior information, the public tend to take the behavior at face value and make corresponding dispositional attribution. However, as dispositional attribution is more pronounced for negative than for positive behavior (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989 cited in Yoon et al., 2006), and CSR initiatives, as widely used marketing strategy, are often subject to suspicion, the public is supposed to make moderate dispositional attribution (i.e., altruistic motive attribution). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H2: When a corporation’s prior CSR record is unknown to the public, the attribution of the motive for a single CSR initiative launched by the corporation tends to be less altruistic than for a CSR initiative launched by a corporation with a positive prior CSR record, but more altruistic than that launched by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record.

Though it is noted that spending money on CSR does not guarantee enhancement of the public’s reaction to the corporation in all conditions (Dean, 2003; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001), it is widely accepted that CSR actions affect consumers’ overall evaluation of the company and their response in a positive way (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Studies found that consumer attitudes are more favorable toward companies and brands that partner with social causes (Nan & Heo, 2007; Ross, Larry, & Stuttset, 1992; Webb & Mohr, 1998). Also, studies (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006; Godfrey, 2005) showed that CSR initiatives help build and improve reputation assets for corporations. The public’s desirable reaction generated by CSR behavior is not confined to the attitudinal level. CSR provides a competitive advantage to many businesses “as it plays a huge role in inducing positive WOM” (Tong & Wong, 2014, p. 1674). In addition, CSR demonstrates its positive impact on the consumers’ purchase intention. Murray and Vogel’s study (1996) found that CSR actions can predict purchase intention. Cone/Roper Cause Related Trends Report stated that consumers reported, with all other things being equal, they would be willing to switch to firms that support social causes (Cone, 2008). As defined above, prior CSR record reflects a corporation’s long-term performance pertaining to CSR. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that:

H3: The public’s reaction (i.e., attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention) to a single CSR initiative launched by a corporation with a positive prior CSR record will be more positive than for that launched by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record.

H4: When a corporation’s prior CSR record is unknown to the public, their reaction (i.e., attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention) to a single CSR initiative launched by the corporation tends to be less positive than that toward a CSR initiative launched by a corporation with a positive prior CSR record, but more positive than that launched by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record.

Effect of Attribution for CSR Motive

Attribution provides the foundation for subsequent attitude and behavior (Heider, 1958). A couple of studies (Barone, Miyazaki, & Taylor, 2000; Ellen, Mohr, & Webb, 2000) have reported that the effect of CSR efforts varies with the perceived motivation of the CSR initiatives. It was further found that attribution of intrinsic altruistic motives, in comparison with other motives, such as extrinsic motive and self-serving motive etc., tends to generate more
favorable attitudes and behaviors (Forehand & Grier, 2003; Yoon, Gurhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006). To sum up, an altruistic motive attribution could provide the foundation for a subsequent positive evaluation of the corporation and consequent supportive behavior (Barone et al., 2000; Brown and Dacin, 1997; Rifon et al., 2004). Based on the literature reviewed above, the last hypothesis is put forth as below:

**H5**: The public’s attribution of motive for a CSR initiative will mediate the relationship between prior CSR record and its reaction to the initiative (i.e., attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention).

To summarize the hypotheses mentioned above, we illustrate the relationships among the variables to be tested in this study by the conceptual model (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Conceptual Model**

![Conceptual Model Diagram](image)

This study also addresses the question as to whether the effect of a single CSR initiative on the public's reaction varies for corporations with different CSR records. In other words, for a corporation participating in CSR activities for a long time, will one additional CSR initiative still reward it well in terms of the public's attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention? Conversely, does one single CSR initiative help significantly improve the public's reaction to a corporation that has a negative CSR record? What is the effect of one single CSR initiative for a company about which the public has no CSR-related information? Summarizing these inquiries, we pose the following research question:

**RQ1**: What is the effect of one single CSR initiative on the public's reaction to corporations with different CSR records, including attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM communication, and purchase intention?

**Boundary of the Study**

CSR initiatives take many forms, but they can generally be classified into two categories: unconditional CSR, such as philanthropy, and conditional CSR like cause-related marketing (Dean, 2003). The present study focuses on unconditional donation, based on the following consideration. First, donation is a widely adopted CSR behavior. Second, given the main purpose of the study is to test the effect of prior CSR record on the public’s attribution of altruistic motive for CSR initiatives, it is better to rule out conditional CSR, which usually by itself can easily generate suspicion from the public (Dean, 2003).
Method

Design

This study examined the effect of prior CSR record on subjects’ attribution of motive and outcome variables (i.e., attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention) using a between-subject design. Participants were randomly assigned to three groups categorized in accordance with prior CSR record. Specifically, the prior CSR record factor had three levels (1 = positive prior CSR record group, 2 = negative prior CSR record group, and 3 = control group [no prior CSR record information]). To eliminate any preexisting attitudes toward the company, the name of the company was removed and replaced with “Company A.” To make the scenario more realistic, we took several efforts as discussed below. First, statements describing a company’s positive prior CSR record were created based on real news stories. Second, the negative scenarios highlighted the company’s lack of support of CSR (contrasted with overall industry CSR support) rather than its active opposition to CSR issues, which is less likely in the real world. To ensure the quality and efficiency of the questionnaire, we repeated the following preparation three times: paraphrasing the English questions from existing scales with high reliability and validity to Chinese and then doing a pilot study with 75 college student subjects to further refine the question items and scales in order to fit the specific context of this study.

Stimuli

The stimulus of this study was a news report about Company A’s donation of four million RMB (approximately 643,600 US dollars) to Hope Project, a social cause depending on donations to help children in poverty-stricken rural areas of China to complete elementary school education and to improve educational facilities and teaching quality in poorer regions. The content of the news report was based on a real news report and displayed in a news template. It is described in detail in the appendix.

Participants

A total of 142 participants were recruited on a voluntary basis from people in the reading area of Hong Kong Central Library, the largest public library in Hong Kong, China, which is open to every citizen and people from all age groups and walks of life, and has the highest attendance in the public libraries system (Hong Kong Central Library, 2016). All the participants were Chinese and able to read Chinese. Slightly more than a half (52%) of them were female, and 48% of them were males. The mean age of the participants was 25.75 years old (SD = 9.46 years), ranging from 17 to 63 years old. Among the participants, 82% had a college or higher education. Their occupation covers professionals, white collars, blue collars, housewives, students, the retired and the unemployed etc.

Procedure

Research assistants approached the potential participants in the reading area, briefly explained the aim of the study that was to learn more about the public’s reaction to CSR behaviour, and asked whether they would like to spend five to eight minutes participating in the experiment to contribute to the insight into this topic. If the individual consented to participate, he/she was then randomly assigned to one of the three groups. Participants in the experimental groups were first provided with a brief statement about the corporation’s past CSR performance, taken from the Report of CSR Assessment. After reading the statement, they were asked to answer a series of questionnaire scale items measuring the dependent
variables, including attitude, reputation, WOM, and purchase intention. One item for manipulation check and one item asking about the participants’ general attitude toward the Hope Project were included. Next, they read the news report about Company A’s donation to the Hope Project (i.e., the stimuli), judge the corporate motive for the donation, and then answer the same questions measuring attitude, reputation, WOM, and purchase intention based on the information provided to them. Participants in the control group were provided no information about the corporation’s past CSR performance. They were only exposed to the news coverage about Company A’s donation and then answered the question items measuring attribution of altruistic motive and the four dependent variables.

**Dependent Variables**

All dependent variables were measured on five-point Liked Scales anchored by one (strongly disagree) and five (strongly agree).

*Altruistic Motive.* With regard to the items measuring altruistic motivation (Dabas, 2011), altruism (Bae & Cameron, 2006; Rifon et al., 2004), public-serving motive (Lee et al., 2009), and sincere motives (Yoon et al., 2006), a five-item scale was developed to measure altruistic motive, including items such as “Company A has a genuine concern for education in poverty-stricken areas of China”. The Cronbach alpha of this scale was .87.

*Attitude toward the corporation.* Based on the measurement of attitudes in the research conducted by Bae and Cameron (2006), Dean’s (2003), Rifon et al. (2004), and Nan and Heo (2007), this study developed a five-item scale to measure attitudes toward corporations that makes donations. These items include “Company A is good” and “I like Company A”. The reliability of the scale of attitudes toward corporations was .88.

*Reputation evaluation.* Based on Fombrun, Gardberg and Sever’s (2000) Reputation Quotient, which is widely used by scholars (Hong & Yang, 2009; Huang, 2012; Kiousis, Popescu, & Mitrook, 2007; Sung & Yang, 2008), seven items relevant to the focus of the present study were selected and developed into a scale. Participants were asked to respond to questions such as “I have a good feeling about the company”, “Company A has excellent leadership”, and similar statements. The reliability of the scale reputation evaluation was .84.

*WOM.* Referring to the measurement of WOM in previous studies conducted by Brown, Barry, Dacin, and Gunst (2005), Harrison-Walker (2001), and Hong and Yang (2011), and considering the context of the current study, this study used a five-item instrument to measure WOM, including statements such as “I may speak positively of Company A” and “I may recommend Company A to others.” The reliability of the WOM scale was .88.

*Purchase intention.* In reference to the measurement of purchase intention adopted by Bae and Cameron (2006), Lee et al. (2009), and Sen and Bhattacharya (2001), this study used three items to measure purchase intention. They are as follows: “I am likely to buy Company A’s products”, “If the price and quality of two products are the same, I would like to buy Company A’s products”, and “I would buy a product made by Company A, even if the product is a little more expensive than one made by other companies”. The reliability of the purchase intention scale was .77.

**Manipulation Check**

A manipulation check was performed to ensure the effectiveness of the intended manipulation of the corporation's prior CSR record. Participants were asked to answer the question “Did Company A perform well in CSR in the past?” on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from
one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). A one-way ANOVA test showed that perception of the corporation’s prior CSR record was significantly different among the three groups, $F(2, 139) = 158.61, p < .001$. Post-hoc Scheffe tests showed that positive prior CSR record condition and negative prior CSR record condition differed significantly, $M_{positive} = 4.00$ ($SD = .62$) and $M_{negative} = 1.72$ ($SD = .70$), $p < .001$; positive prior CSR record condition and control condition differed significantly, $M_{positive} = 4.00$ ($SD = .62$) and $M_{control} = 3.20$ ($SD = .53$), $p < .001$; and negative prior CSR record condition and control condition differed significantly, $M_{negative} = 1.72$ ($SD = .70$) and $M_{control} = 3.20$ ($SD = .53$), $p < .001$. It indicated that the manipulation of the corporation’s prior CSR record was successful.

Check of Confounding Variables

The respondents were asked to answer the question “Hope Project should be supported” on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree). A one-way ANOVA test showed that there was no significant difference among the three groups, $F(2, 139) = 2.53, n.s.$ In addition, consistent with the intention of the experiment, subjects hold a relatively positive attitude toward supporting the Hope Project, $M = 3.92$ ($SD = .73$).

Results

Effect of Prior CSR Record on Motive Attribution

To test H1 and H2, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted. Results showed that the value of altruistic motive attribution was significantly different among the three groups, $F(2, 139) = 3.38, p < .05$, with $M_{positive} = 3.45$ ($SD = .61$), $M_{negative} = 3.11$ ($SD = .59$), and $M_{control} = 3.21$ ($SD = .75$). Further, post-hoc Scheffe tests showed that participants in the positive prior CSR record group and the negative prior CSR record group differed significantly in altruistic motive attribution, $M_{positive} = 3.45$ ($SD = .61$) and $M_{negative} = 3.11$ ($SD = .59$), $p < .05$; however, there was no significant group difference in altruistic motive attribution either between positive prior CSR record group and control group, or between negative prior CSR record group and control group.

H1 and H2 were supported. The public tends to attribute the motive for a single CSR initiative launched by a corporation with a positive prior CSR record as more altruistic than that launched by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record, and when a corporation’s prior CSR record is unknown to the public, the attribution of the motive for a single CSR initiative launched by the corporation tends to be less altruistic than for a CSR initiative launched by a corporation with a positive prior CSR record, but more altruistic than that launched by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record.

Effect of Prior CSR Record on the Public’s Reaction

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted to test H3 and H4, which predicted reaction by the public in the positive prior CSR record group was more positive than in the negative group, and the means of the reaction in the control group were lower than those in the positive group but higher than those in the negative group, respectively. The Results indicated that there was significant difference among the three groups. For attitude toward corporation, $M_{positive} = 3.68$ ($SD = .42$), $M_{control} = 3.39$ ($SD = .62$), $M_{negative} = 2.95$ ($SD = .70$), $F(2, 139) = 17.61, p < .001$; for reputation evaluation, $M_{positive} = 3.48$ ($SD = .47$), $M_{control} = 3.23$ ($SD = .52$), $M_{negative} = 2.92$ ($SD = .56$), $F(2, 139) = 13.25, p < .001$; for WOM, $M_{positive} = 3.33$ ($SD = .62$), $M_{control} = 2.93$
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(\(SD = .77\), M\(_{negative}\) = 2.77 (SD = .65), F(2, 138) = 8.13, \(p < .001\); and for purchase intention, M\(_{positive}\) = 3.35 (SD = .72), M\(_{control}\) = 3.22 (SD = .72), M\(_{negative}\) = 2.85 (SD = .77), F(2, 139) = 5.83, \(p < .01\). Thus, H3 and H4 were supported.

Further, post-hoc Scheffe tests were conducted, showing that in all four measures of the public's reaction, there were significant difference between the positive prior CSR record group and the negative group. In attitude toward the corporation, there was also significant difference between the positive/negative prior CSR record group and the control group; in reputation evaluation and purchase intention, significant difference was revealed between the negative prior CSR record group and the control group; and in WOM, significant difference was revealed between the positive prior CSR record group and the control group. The descriptive data for three groups in four variables measuring the public's reaction are summarized in Table 1.

### Table 1. Means and Standard Deviation of Attitude toward the Corporation, Reputation Evaluation, WOM, and Purchase Intention for the Three Prior CSR Record Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Positive Record</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Negative Record</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. attitude toward the corporation</td>
<td>3.68a, .42</td>
<td>3.39b, .62</td>
<td>2.95a, .70</td>
<td>17.61***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. reputation evaluation</td>
<td>3.48a, .47</td>
<td>3.23b, .52</td>
<td>2.92a, .56</td>
<td>13.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. WOM</td>
<td>3.33b, .62</td>
<td>2.93b, .77</td>
<td>2.77a, .65</td>
<td>8.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. purchase intention</td>
<td>3.35a, .72</td>
<td>3.22b, .72</td>
<td>2.85a, .77</td>
<td>5.83**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a, b, significant group difference between two prior CSR record groups *\(p < .05\); **\(p < .01\); ***\(p < .001\)

### Mediating Effect of Attribution of Altruistic Motive

H5 predicted that the public's attribution of altruistic motive for a CSR initiative will mediate the relationship between prior CSR record and its reaction to the initiative (i.e., attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention). Baron and Kenny's (1986) procedures of testing mediation were taken by this study to test the mediating effect of altruistic motive attribution on the relationship between prior CSR record and the outcome variables.

To test the mediating effect of attribution of altruistic motive on the relationship between prior CSR record and attitude towards corporation, first in Equation 1, attribution of altruistic motive was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record, prior CSR record \(\beta = .30, p < .001\), R\(^2\) = .09; then in Equation 2, attitude was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record, prior CSR record \(\beta = .50, p < .001\), R\(^2\) = .25; and finally, attitude was regressed on evaluation of prior CSR record and attribution of altruistic motive in Equation 3, prior CSR record \(\beta = .36, p < .001\); attribution of altruistic motive \(\beta = .47, p < .001\), R\(^2\) = .45. The results (see Figure 2) indicated that the valuation of prior CSR record served as a significant predictor of the public's attitude. Further, Sobel's test revealed that Z = 4.68, \(p < .001\), which means when attribution of altruistic motive was added to the equation, the relationship between prior CSR record
How prior Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) record influence the effectiveness of one single CSR initiative (the independent variable) and the public’s attitude toward the corporation (the dependent variable) was significantly reduced, indicating the existence of mediating effect (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Figure 2. Mediation of Attribution of Altruistic Motive in the Relationship between Prior CSR Record and Attitude

The same procedure was repeated when testing the mediating effect of attribution of altruistic motive on the relationship between prior CSR record and other outcome variables. Equation 1 was the same in all of the four outcome variables. For reputation evaluation, reputation evaluation was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record in Equation 2, prior CSR record β = .44, \( p < .001 \), \( R^2 = .20 \); in Equation 3, reputation evaluation was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record and attribution of altruistic motive, prior CSR record β = .31, \( p < .001 \); attribution of altruistic motive β = .45, \( p < .001 \), \( R^2 = .38 \). Sobel’s test revealed that \( Z = 4.77, p < .001 \). Results indicated attribution of altruistic motive mediated the effect of prior CSR record on the public’s reputation evaluation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Mediation of Attribution of Altruistic Motive in the Relationship between Prior CSR Record and Reputation Evaluation

For WOM, WOM was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record in Equation 2, prior CSR record β = .38, \( p < .001 \), \( R^2 = .14 \); in Equation 3, WOM was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record and altruistic motive attribution, prior CSR record β = .22, \( p < .01 \), \( R^2 = .09 \); attribution of altruistic motive β = .52, \( p < .001 \), \( R^2 = .39 \). Sobel’s test revealed that \( Z = 4.57, p < .001 \). Results indicated that attribution of altruistic motive mediated the effect of prior CSR record on WOM (see Figure 4).
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Figure 4. Mediation of Attribution of Altruistic Motive in the Relationship between Prior CSR Record and WOM

For purchase intention, purchase intention was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record in Equation 2, prior CSR record $\beta = .30$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .09$; in Equation 3, purchase intention was regressed on valuation of prior CSR record and altruistic motive attribution, prior CSR record $\beta = .18$, $p < .05$, $R^2 = .09$; attribution of altruistic motive $\beta = .42$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .25$. Sobel’s test revealed that $Z = 3.77$, $p < .001$. The results indicated that attribution of motive mediated the effect of prior CSR record on purchase intention (see Figure 5). Thus, H5 was supported. The public’s attribution of motive for a CSR initiative will mediate the relationship between prior CSR record and its reaction to the initiative (i.e., attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention).

Figure 5. Mediation of Attribution of Altruistic Motive in the Relationship between Prior CSR Record and Purchase Intention

Summarizing the data shown in Figure 2, 3, 4, and 5, which showed the mediating role of altruistic motive attribution in the relationship between prior CSR record and the public’s reaction, including attitude toward the corporate, reputation evaluation, WOM, and purchase intention, we diagram the four mediations in Figure 6.
Effect of One Single CSR Initiative on the Public’s Reaction

A series of paired-sample T-tests were performed to examine the possible difference in the public’s reaction before and after one single CSR behavior in the positive prior CSR record group and the negative prior CSR record group. The results showed that there was no significant difference in the four measures of public’s reaction, except attitude, before and after the single CSR behavior in the positive prior CSR record group. As shown in table 2, for attitude, $M_{pre} = 3.87$ (SD = .48) and $M_{post} = 3.68$ (SD = .42), $t(47) = 3.34$, $p < .01$; for reputation, $M_{pre} = 3.57$ (SD = .47) and $M_{post} = 3.47$ (SD = .47), $t(46) = 1.78$, n.s.; for WOM, $M_{pre} = 3.29$ (SD = .65) and $M_{post} = 3.33$ (SD = .62), $t(47) = -.60$, n.s.; and for purchase intention, $M_{pre} = 3.47$ (SD = .77) and $M_{post} = 3.35$ (SD = .72), $t(47) = 1.66$, n.s.. However, there was significant difference in the public’s reaction before and after the single CSR behavior in the negative prior CSR record group in terms of attitude, reputation and WOM. As shown in table 3, for attitude, $M_{pre} = 2.25$ (SD = .52) and $M_{post} = 2.95$ (SD = .70), $t(24) = -6.09$, $p < .001$; for reputation, $M_{pre} = 2.35$ (SD = .50) and $M_{post} = 2.92$ (SD = .56), $t(24) = -4.90$, $p < .001$; and for WOM, $M_{pre} = 2.55$ (SD = .59) and $M_{post} = 2.77$ (SD = .65), $t(24) = -2.44$, $p < .05$. Only for purchase intention, there was no significant difference between the pre-CSR measure and the post-CSR measure, with $M_{pre} = 2.64$ (SD = .72) and $M_{post} = 2.85$ (SD = .77), $t(24) = -1.64$, n.s.. The descriptive data are presented in Table 2.
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Table 2. Means and Standard Deviation of Attitude toward the Corporation, Reputation Evaluation, WOM, and Purchase Intention for Negative Prior CSR Record Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Before CSR</th>
<th></th>
<th>After CSR</th>
<th></th>
<th>t</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. attitude toward the corporation</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>-6.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. reputation evaluation</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>-4.90***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. WOM</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>-2.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. purchase intention</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>-1.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p < .05; **p < .05; ***p < .001

Thus, the RQ1 is answered. Although the public’s reaction in the positive prior CSR record group is more favorable than that in the negative prior CSR record group both before and after one single CSR behavior, after the CSR behavior, the public’s reaction to the corporation with a negative prior CSR record, including the public’s attitude toward the corporation, reputation evaluation, and WOM, was significantly improved, while its reaction to the corporation with a positive prior CSR records was not, but decreased to various extent.

Conclusion and Discussion

The results of the experiment are in line with all hypotheses. As expected, the public tends to attribute the motive for a CSR initiative launched by a corporation with a positive prior CSR record as more altruistic than that by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record. For the corporation about which no prior CSR performance information was provided, the public tends to attribute the motive for one single CSR behavior as more altruistic than that undertaken by a corporation with a negative prior CSR record, but less altruistic than that by a corporation possessing a positive prior CSR record. However, what should be noticed is that even for the corporation with a positive prior CSR record, the public’s motive attribution for its CSR behavior is moderately altruistic (M=3.45). This finding demonstrated the prevalent existence of predispositional skepticism, a general tendency to suspect CSR behavior (Forehand & Grier, 2003). Even though the corporation has a long commitment to social causes, the suspicion is difficult to eliminate.

This study demonstrated that prior CSR record can significantly predict the public’s attitude toward the corporation, evaluation of corporate reputation, WOM communication and purchase intention, suggesting that long-term CSR engagement contributes greatly to the public’s positive response. Meanwhile, through the mediation analysis, it was found that attribution of motive for the CSR behavior has a strong predictive power on the public’s reaction. Specifically, the more altruistic motive is attributed for the CSR behavior, the more positive the public’s reaction is, which is consistent with one of the principal arguments of attribution theory that asserts attribution greatly influences subsequent attitude and behavior (Heider, 1958; Kelley & Michela, 1980).

More importantly, this study demonstrated that motive attribution of CSR behavior played a mediating role in the relationship between prior CSR record and the public’s reaction, confirming the crucial role of motive attribution in the effectiveness of CSR initiatives. The proved mediating role played by the public’s attribution of CSR motive helps decode the underlying mechanism through which the public interprets the CSR behavior and reacts to it, and sheds light on the reasons why doing good does not necessarily lead to doing well. Moreover, results of this study also implied that, in order to have a more in-depth understanding of how CSR behavior works on the public’s reaction, more endeavor should be
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taken to test how possible factors influence the public’s attribution of the CSR motive.

Another point that deserves attention is that the public’s reaction change induced by one single CSR initiative varies for corporations with different prior CSR records. It was found that though after one single CSR initiative, the public’s reaction to the corporation with a negative prior CSR record is still less favorable than to that with a positive prior CSR record, their attitude toward the corporation, perception of the corporate reputation, and WOM communication have been significantly improved; however, for the corporation possessing a positive prior CSR record, the significant improvement caused by one single CSR behavior does not occur. To some extent, this result confirmed the existence of “contrast effects” (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) in the CSR studies. Specifically, the public’s initial attitude toward the corporation induced by the prior CSR record may serve as a frame to judge its further action. CSR behavior is consistent with the character of the corporation with a positive prior CSR record, and therefore the public’s response to the actor does not change greatly. However, the social responsible behavior contradicts with the character of the corporation that seldom participated in CSR initiatives. CSR initiatives are out of the expectation of the public for the corporation with a negative prior CSR record, thus the contrast effects begin to function and the subsequent correction process is activated. One more interesting finding was that among the four measures of the public’s reaction, purchase intention was the only factor that was not improved by one single CSR behavior for corporations with negative prior CSR record. This phenomenon may be explained by the complexity of purchase intention. As Zeithaml (1988) said, purchase intention is a complicated factor. Consumers seldom make purchase decisions based merely on a firm’s CSR efforts. Instead, when they consider buying, they take many factors into consideration, such as price, promotion, superiority of the product, and utility. This finding also implied that the relationship between CSR efforts and purchase intention is not as direct and deserves more exploration. In general, findings of this study give the hope for corporations with negative prior CSR records. Though the corporation possessing a negative CSR record cannot expect to generate the public’s reaction as favorable as the corporation holding a positive CSR record through one initiative, it is never too late to start to participate in the social causes in order to facilitate the improvement of the public’s response.
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References


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Appendix

When the 11th Enterprises Exposition opened in, Company A proposed the idea of being innovative and responsible in the area of consumer goods. At the same time, Company A donated four million RMB for the development of elementary education in poorer areas of the countryside. The money will be used to build Hope Schools in poor outlying areas of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces.

Hope Schools are significant for the future of elementary education in China’s countryside. In the donation ceremony, Company A announced that making a profit should not be the only target of an enterprise, but that it should make contributions to consumers, the environment, and society as a whole. While working hard to make more profits, an enterprise should also make efforts to promote the development of society. The company expected the Hope Schools to develop into centers of information, education, and culture in the local community, and to play active roles in the construction of China’s new countryside, helping to promote the Hope Project in the long run. Company A also said not only that enterprises should become a platform for education in China’s poor areas, but that all social circles should actively participate in public causes.

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