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DEFINING PUBLICS THROUGH CSR COMMUNICATION: TESTING AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL MODEL FOR EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF COMPANIES’ ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY MESSAGING STRATEGIES ON ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORAL INTENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to apply the situational theory of publics and framing theory to corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication research. Specifically, the purpose of the study is to apply and test the theories in this realm to answer the recurring questions that are often investigated in CSR research: what and how companies should communicate CSR efforts to publics. A key focus of the study is to determine how different environmental issues and the manner in which information about each issue impacts publics’ behaviors and, ultimately, their perceptions of a Fortune 500 company and of a given environmental issue. Using a 3 (message frame: diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational) x 2 (environmental issue: general vs. specific) plus control between subjects experimental design, the study examines the attitudes, cognitions, and behavioral intentions different publics may form about different environmental responsibility issues. Furthermore, the study aims to examine how different types of message frames (diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational) and topics may impact how a company can move a public toward information seeking behaviors. Based on theoretical considerations, structural equation modeling was used to examine significant paths between variables, thus creating a proposed new theoretical model that can be applied to CSR literature. The present study adds to existing CSR communication research by applying a new theory to CSR literature and offering an integrated model that can assist companies with addressing questions that could enable organizations to enhance their CSR communication efforts, which can assist public relations practitioners with determining when, why, and how people seek information; their responsiveness to issues; and how communication impacts attitudes and behaviors.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has emerged as a key business practice for companies across the globe. No longer deemed an optional initiative, CSR has become an expectation among organizational leaders and stakeholders. Companies are utilizing a variety of channels to communicate about their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts, including everything from direct mail to blog posts, Facebook posts to Snapchat and more. CSR has been at the heart of both public relations scholarship and practice and conversations about companies’ CSR efforts have become more prominent. CSR has become more widely embraced as a key business strategy and as an important research area warranting investigation. Furthermore, scholars and practitioners continue to seek best practices for effective CSR messaging, whether that includes a strategic approach or an “anything goes” approach to program and communication efforts (Bortree, 2014).

CSR is broadly defined as the voluntary actions a company implements to pursue goals (Chandler & Werther, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Building on Carroll’s (1979) definition that focuses on the legal, ethical, and discretionary aspects of socially responsible behaviors, modern definitions emphasize the “triple bottom line,” which includes a concern for people, profit and the environment (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) and a focus on ethics, philanthropy, diversity, and environmental sustainability (Chandler & Werther, 2014; Kotler & Lee, 2005).

Scholars have examined CSR, and specifically CSR communication, in a variety of contexts and settings. It is important to note, though, that public relations literature has just begun to examine the impact of CSR communication. Therefore, it can be argued that despite the
importance of building effective CSR programs and communication strategies, information on effective CSR initiatives or best practices is limited. As Bortree (2014) noted, both scholars and practitioners are still seeking strategies to determine what information publics want to know about CSR initiatives, what their expectations are about company performance in this realm, and how to effectively reach audiences with CSR information. Furthermore, scholars continue to search for ways to measure the impact of CSR communication by defining, measuring, and testing CSR strategy using a variety of different methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and instruments.

Several theories have been applied to CSR communication, including relationship management (Etter, 2014), stakeholder theory (Plessis & Grobler, 2014), social identity theory (Atakan-Duman & Ozdora-Aksak, 2014), dialogic communication principles (Hong, Yang, & Rim, 2010), Benoit’s (1995) image restoration theory (Haigh & Dardis, 2012), theory of planned behavior (Dodd & Supa, 2014), theory of reasoned action (Dodd & Supa, 2011), and attribution theory (S. Kim & Lee, 2012; Tao & Ferguson, 2015). Arguments about organization-public relationships (OPR), and Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) public relations theory have also been applied (Dhanesh, 2012; Haigh & Dardis, 2012; Plessis & Grobler, 2014; Trapp, 2014).

However, as scholars have just begun to examine the impact of CSR communication, CSR scholarship is still developing, especially in reference to the theoretical applications.

One widely applied theory in public relations research is the situational theory of publics, which suggests that “communication behaviors of publics can be best understood by measuring how members of publics perceive situations in which they are affected by organizational consequences” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 148). Therefore, as scholars continue to search for best
practices and strategies for communicating CSR activities and engaging publics, the conceptual elements of this theory can be applied in CSR research.

The current study aims to fill the gap in our understanding of CSR communication by comparing how CSR messaging about environmental responsibility is perceived by the public. Specifically, this study tests how publics evaluate the CSR messages from a company with consideration to variables that have not been measured together in CSR literature, including problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. Furthermore, this study examines how different message frames may impact how people process and perceive information about different environmental issues and ultimately, how these factors impact attitude and behavior-related outcomes. Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to contribute to theory development in CSR research and to provide insight for public relations practitioners and companies who continue to search for best practices to effectively communicate about social and environmental responsibility with key publics.

Given these goals, this study should offer unique contributions to the existing literature, particularly in terms of its approach to studying a specific area of CSR through the application of two theories that have not been tested in CSR research. The present study offers the following scholarly contributions. First, the study examines environmental issues in a CSR context, and individuals’ assessment of these presentations are considered. Second, the situational theory of publics theory and framing theory are presented and used to form hypotheses and research questions regarding the impact of CSR communication on individuals’ attitudes and behavioral intentions. Third, the relationship between message frames, information seeking and processing, and several outcome variables are examined, including measures for assessing these variables. Fourth, a proposed integrated theoretical model is introduced and examined to assess what types
of publics the integrated model can predict. Fifth, the role of CSR message frames in impacting attitudes and behavioral intentions about different types of environmental issues is examined to discern the influence of these variables on companies’ abilities to engage publics with their CSR activities and efforts. The subsequent method, results, and discussion sections determine the viability of these predictions and theoretical connections for future research.

**Chapter Guideline**

This chapter outlines the goals of this body of research and an overview of the theoretical contributions to CSR literature. In Chapter 2, a literature review organizes the principles guiding this research. The chapter begins by exploring current CSR definitions and existing CSR communication research. Next, environmental responsibility is discussed to provide context regarding this study’s focus, including a review of existing literature about environmental topics. Finally, a discussion about theory building and application in CSR research is provided, along with an evaluation of the situational theory of publics and framing theory as a framework for examining CSR strategies and relationships. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the gaps that remain in these bodies of literature and a presentation of how these gaps will be addressed by this investigation.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the experimental method used in this study, including details about the procedure and measures used in the study. Results are presented in Chapter 4, and the details of a proposed integrated theoretical model are discussed. Finally, in Chapter 5, a discussion reviews the results, offers implications for public relations theory and practice, acknowledges study limitations, and presents suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

CSR Defined

Scholars argue that CSR is a “central relationship-building activity within organizations” (S. Kim & Reber, 2008, p. 341). CSR has been described as “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” (European Commission, 2014). Carroll (1979) argues that “the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time” (p. 500). Kotler and Lee (2005) define CSR as a “commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributes of corporate resources” (p. 3). This can be related to Coombs & Holladay’s (2012) “triple bottom line” focused definition of CSR. Scholars have further defined CSR into several categories such as ethics, diversity, environmental sustainability, and philanthropy (Chandler & Werther, 2014).

Most scholars agree that CSR involves voluntary action above and beyond what is required by law, as several modern definitions focus on many of the pro-social, discretionary elements suggested by Chandler and Werther (2014), including caring for the environment and community, diversity, and benefitting society in a manner that is ethically responsible and that complements a company or organization’s mission, stakeholder goals and expectations, and culture (Beauchamp & O’Connor, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Thus, the focus of CSR research has shifted from examining only the moral dimensions of CSR to including the discretionary aspects of CSR, which reflect a company or organization’s voluntary efforts to improve society (David, Kline, & Dai, 2005).
CSR is now seen as strategic. Scholars argue that CSR requires “long-term thinking that is compatible with protecting the environment and building healthy societies that last” ("Issues for Debate," 2010, p 16). Scholars argue that there has been a shift in organizational perspectives, values, and CSR practices that complement a company or organization’s mission, stakeholder goals and expectations, and culture through stewardship and strategic communication with stakeholders and publics (Beauchamp & O’Connor, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

**CSR Communication Research**

Developing an effective CSR communication strategy is critical for a company or organization’s CSR effort. It has long been known that CSR communication is a vital part of the CSR process (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Maignan, Ferrell, & Hult, 1999; Manheim & Pratt, 1986). Furthermore, knowing what and how to communicate to meet publics’ expectations is a challenge that companies continue to face as they develop their CSR communications strategy (S. Kim & Ferguson, 2014).

Previous research has suggested that some of the benefits of effective CSR communication include enhanced company reputation (Jo, 2011; S. Kim & Lee, 2012), greater legitimacy and admiration of the organization (Bortree, 2009), stronger relationships with publics (Hall, 2006), more positive behavioral intentions among consumers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004, David, et al., 2005; Lee & Shin, 2010), positive impact on the bottom line (Joyner & Payne, 2002), an increased level of stakeholder loyalty (Gomez & Chalmeta, 2011), and greater levels of trust and positive word-of-mouth communication (Hong, Yang, & Rim, 2010).

Furthermore, scholars have examined several aspects of CSR communication, including what and how to communicate (S. Kim & Ferguson, 2014; Morsing & Schultz, 2006), message
strategies (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008; Waters & Ott, 2014), and message channels (S. Kim & Ferguson, 2014; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005), the role of internal and external stakeholders in the communication process (Chong, 2009; Korschun, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2009; You, Huang, Wang, Liu, Lin, & Tseng, 2013), the role of third-party endorsers (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Morsing et al., 2008; Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009), and CSR promotion cost (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005).

Companies developing CSR communication practices today strive to develop a strategic framework for disseminating information to audiences. Scholars argue that both internal and external stakeholders and publics should be considered in all CSR communication processes and that companies and organizations should use both informal and formal media channels for message dissemination (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008). With specific regard to message content and channels, previous research has examined various options of company-controlled media channels (e.g., advertising, company website, or social media) and uncontrolled media channels, such as news coverage or expert blogs (Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005) and CSR messaging strategies (Waters & Ott, 2014).

Tonello (2011) proposed a framework of CSR communication in regard to message content (e.g., commitment to the cause, impact, or fit), message channel (formal and informal channels), and contingency factors (e.g., stakeholder characteristics and company characteristics) that impact desired CSR communication outcomes. In support of previous research, Tonello (2011) highlighted the positive outcomes that CSR communication had on audiences when the proposed framework was followed effectively. With regard to CSR message channels, Morsing and Schultz (2006) found support for implicit forms of CSR communication over explicit forms of communication. That is, indirect CSR communication was seen as “more plausible” or more
believable (Morsing & Schultz, 2006, p. 332) than the presentation of more formal, objective data. The researchers acknowledge, though, that these findings are based on a European sample and that more explicit CSR communication is often preferred by North Americans (Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

In terms of what type of CSR information publics prefer or expect to receive from a company or organization, a recent study by S. Kim and Ferguson (2014) found that companies’ local stores, company websites, promotion events, company CSR designated websites, and annual reports were among the top five preferred media channels for CSR communication. Uncontrolled media, such as blogs, were among the lower forms of CSR communication publics preferred. The study questioned future CSR communication research that suggested that more controlled communication channels have lower credibility ratings among publics (Schlegelmilch & Pollach, 2005). S. Kim and Ferguson (2014) suggest that “uncontrolled media channels may increase CSR communication’s credibility, but publics may prefer more direct and interpersonal company-controlled communication channels” (p. 16). That said, scholarship continues to investigate preferred forums for communicating CSR activities, and much remains unknown about which best practices and effective communication strategies are most effective with different publics. Therefore, with many questions unanswered, scholars continue to address the following question: What do publics expect companies to communicate about their CSR efforts?

With that question in mind, scholarship has demonstrated that communication about CSR can influence people’s attitudes and behaviors. Therefore, scholars are increasingly focusing on measuring the impact of CSR communication, especially with regard to people’s responses to a company’s CSR communication efforts. For example, Y.S. Kim and Choi (2012) found that factors such as perceived motive can be a determining factor in the formation of attitudes and
behavioral intentions. That is, people develop attitudes about a company based on how they perceive companies’ motivations for engaging in CSR efforts. Rim and Song (2013) found that a company’s prior reputation has a strong effect on the public’s attitudes toward a company and intentions to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication. Tao and Ferguson (2015) found that a company’s prior reputation, CSR fit, and information source interact to impact outcomes such as people’s trustworthiness, likability, and favorability of a company. Other behavior-related outcomes have been examined in the context of CSR communication, including purchase intention (Dodd & Supa, 2011, 2014; Lee & Shin, 2010) and likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (Hong & Rim, 2010). However, future research investigations about the impact of CSR communication on attitudes and behaviors are necessary to advance the body of literature in this area.

**Environmental Responsibility**

Public relations researchers have called for increased scholarly attention to the area of sustainability communication (Signitzer and Prexel, 2008) across the globe. Furthermore, in an assessment of the state of CSR communication literature, Bortree (2014) emphasized that a popular trend in CSR communication will likely include environmental sustainability as a key business strategy, which may have implications for CSR communication programs in practice. That is, a focus on environmental responsibility practices of companies and organizations has become a larger part of the conversation among companies and organizations that are increasingly recognizing the benefits of “going green.” Furthermore, scholars are starting to examine environmental issues in CSR research.

Bortree (2011) surveyed the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) membership in an effort to further understand their perceptions of their organization’s sustainability
communication efforts. Results from the study indicate that the amount of environmental communication has increased over the past four decades but that the focus of communication efforts was largely internal. The researcher suggests that future studies should further examine the relationship between knowledge, attitude, and communication among communicators, and that additional studies should further explore environmental transparency to solidify the explication of this concept. The study was the first published investigation of environmental sustainability communication as part of CSR communication, which may be indicative of a new area of focus in this body of literature.

A study by Craig and Allen (2013) sought to determine how employees in Fortune 100 organizations are learning about sustainability. An online survey measured employees’ knowledge and perceptions about sustainability, information sources from which they have learned about sustainability, perceived company involvement in sustainability, and perceived impact of sustainability. Results indicate that employees learned about sustainability from external sources such as professional or industry associations, faith-based institutions, and supply-chain partners, and from internal sources such as supervisors, company meetings, and sustainability reports. In many ways, this study examines similar concepts as Bortree’s (2011) study and further illustrates how sustainability communication is a key part of CSR communication.

Bortree, Ahern, Nutter Smith, and Dou (2013) examined how organizations have framed corporate environmental responsibility in corporate sustainability advertising over the past 30 years (loss frames vs. gain frames). Results from a content analysis indicate that communication about corporate environmental responsibility has increased and that organizations tend to use
gain frames in their communication. That is, the messages that corporations have created tend to focus on promoting good feelings about the organization and its environmental efforts.

Ki and Shin (2014) compared how sustainability communication content was displayed on company websites in the United States and South Korea. Specifically, the authors examined how and to what extent companies are communicating sustainability information on websites and how there may be similarities and differences in content reporting in two different countries. Notable outcomes from the study include the role of cultural aspects for sustainability communication and the authors’ proposed term, organization sustainability communication (OSC), to be used in place of corporate sustainability communication. Several terms have been used to refer to sustainability or environmental communication, including social responsibility (CSR), green communication, environmental sustainability, global responsibility communication, social responsibility communication, and corporate sustainability communication. Ki and Shin (2014) argue that OSC is a more inclusive term than corporate sustainability communication, emphasizing that the term “organization” is “more inclusive and suitable” (Ki & Shin, 2014, p. 4) and not just limited to communication efforts in the corporate sector. Outcomes from this study contributed to a growing area of research where both companies and organizations’ social and environmental responsibility communication efforts continue to be examined.

Further developments in this area of research include Ott, Wang, and Bortree’s (2015) analysis of sustainability sections on websites of top corporations, nonprofits, and colleges or universities for the type of sustainability content presented. The authors acknowledged Ki and Shin’s (2014) OSC definition, but aimed to further investigate how companies, organizations, and institutions are most commonly defining environmental sustainability on websites and what
they are communicating to publics about their environmental sustainability initiatives. The study results suggest that colleges and universities are engaging with stakeholders, including employees, more than corporations, and that nonprofit organizations either do not have the resources or interest to communicate about the sustainability that they engage in, or they are not currently focusing on sustainability efforts. Furthermore, study results indicate that a clear definition for sustainability is not yet apparent across various sectors. The researchers suggest that organizations that want to build their legitimacy and create greater support for their sustainability programs should strengthen their effort to dialog with employees, customers, and other stakeholder groups.

Overall, an increasing number of studies are beginning to examine the environmental responsibility practices of companies and organizations. Specifically, implications for what and how to communicate environmental responsibility are investigated and addressed in the literature. Scholars have noted that environmental sustainability has become “commonplace in organizations” (Craig & Allen, 2013) and recognized as a “dominant issue across the globe” (Ki & Shin, 2014), so it can be argued that CSR research will continue to see a focus on the environment as a key component of CSR activities and practices.

**Theory Building and Application in CSR Research**

Scholars argue that it has long been known that CSR communication is a vital part of the CSR process (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Maignan, Ferrell, & Hult, 1999; Manheim & Pratt, 1986). Furthermore, as engaging in CSR activities has become an expectation among organizational leaders and stakeholders, scholars and practitioners have examined CSR, and specifically CSR communication, in a variety of contexts and settings (as illustrated in the previous section). However, public relations literature has just begun to examine the impact of
CSR communication. Therefore, it can be argued that despite the importance of building effective CSR programs and communication strategies, information on effective CSR initiatives or best practices is limited, or at least still under investigation. Furthermore, scholars continue to search for ways to measure the impact of CSR communication by defining, measuring, and testing CSR strategy using a variety of methodologies, theoretical frameworks, and instruments.

As mentioned, CSR communication scholarship has drawn on arguments from many theories in public relations and mass communications. However, is important to note that several theories that have been applied to CSR communication are arguably focused on symmetric communication and are intended to inform company strategy and relationships with publics, not to explain effects on people’s attitudes, behaviors, or cognitions. Furthermore, scholars have described the theoretical framework that informs CSR communication literature as a varied path that has been “controversial, complex, and unclear” (Spangler and Pompper, 2011) and maintain that there has been “little theoretical framework” in this area of inquiry (S. Kim, 2011, p. 237). There is not one clearly defined “CSR theory” that is used to inform scholarship and practical application in industry. A logical explanation for the varied path in CSR literature is that there are simply too many components to examine using one particular theory. Therefore, it can be argued that CSR scholarship is still developing, especially in reference to the theoretical applications, but that theory has informed, and will continue to inform, both CSR scholarship and practice.

In the case of CSR communication, scholarship has focused on organizational practices, policies, and strategies in an effort to provide practitioners with tools and best practices that maximize efforts to build strong relationships with publics. Theories such as social identity theory, stakeholder theory, relationship management theory, image restoration theory, OPR, and
Kent and Taylor’s (1998) dialogic loop theory provide strong direction in this capacity. When considering theories that have been applied to CSR communication and its persuasive effects on people’s attitudes, CSR literature in public relations journals have applied theoretical elements from theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behavior, and attribution theory to measure outcome variables such as trust, reputation, consumer attitudes toward a company, purchase intention, behavioral intention, and perceived company-cause fit. That is, there has been a gradual increase in the number of studies that attempt to examine factors that impact attitudes and behaviors among publics.

For example, a study by Lee and Shin (2010) explored consumer behavior, specifically the relationship between consumer awareness of CSR activities and consumers’ purchase intention. Results indicate that consumers’ level of awareness of CSR activities was positively associated with their purchase intention. That is, when people were more aware about activities, their purchase intentions increased. This was an overall trend, but the authors note that “corporate environmental contributions are less recognized by consumers” (Lee & Shin, 2010, p. 194). Thus, such contributions did not impact purchase intentions in this study. This finding is notable for CSR researchers and practitioners seeking to refine communication strategy about environmental responsibility. A notable limitation about the study, however, is that the research did not investigate a potential link between purchase intention and behavior. Therefore, future studies might consider measuring the impact of awareness on additional behavior-related outcomes.

Another notable factor to consider in CSR communication is the concept of perceived relevancy or ego involvement. Drawing from theoretical arguments from dual-processing models, perceived relevancy or ego involvement refers to the degree to which a consumer feels
an issue is personally relevant to him/her. Some may also refer to this as level of involvement. Scholars have suggested that “as the personal relevance of a message increases, individuals are more likely to decide to think about the message on their own” (Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, & Priester, 2005, p. 92). According to Perloff (2013), “people are ego-involved when they perceive that the issue touches on their self-concepts or core values” (p. 99). Therefore, someone who is very involved or deeply concerned with an issue may be more likely to engage in particular behaviors in support of the issue, for example, notwithstanding the impact of message effects in general. Therefore, this variable may play a role in how people process information and, practically speaking, how companies can tailor or personalize CSR messages to appeal to different audiences.

Although the ego-involvement/personal relevancy concept has not been commonly measured as a key variable in CSR research, it could add insight into why and how consumers form attitudes, especially in regard to involvement, identification, and prior reputation of a company. That is, a person might be very passionate about a particular CSR effort while feeling very neutral or uninvolved/uninterested in a different CSR effort. This could impact the persuasion process; what people think about a CSR issue, or a company in general; or even what motivates people to act or behave in a certain way.

A study by S. Kim and Ferguson (2014) addressed several questions that scholars continue to ask, including what and how to communicate CSR. Among the many variables examined using a survey methodology, the authors examined public expectations for CSR communication, preferred CSR communication media channels and communication sources, and what CSR communication practices will help companies overcome CSR communication challenges. S. Kim and Ferguson (2014) included a “personal relevance” measure, which
included three items that directly relate to ego involvement or level of involvement. While the authors found that people were most concerned about how a CSR initiative would affect their lives, the researchers did not find any significant difference in the personal relevance factor on any of the outcomes. Therefore, the role of involvement as a factor in CSR research is still questioned and should be further examined in future research studies.

In addition to the personal relevance measures, the authors included measures that relate to the idea of consumer empowerment. That is, some items measured people’s interest in knowing how their role or participation in a company’s CSR activities could or would make an impact. For example, items such as “I want to know how my participation will affect the results of a company’s CSR activities” (S. Kim & Ferguson, 2014, p. 6) were included. S. Kim and Ferguson (2014) included these measures along with other items that dealt with third-party endorsements. They labeled this variable “third party endorsements and consumer participation.” While only a few of the nine items included in this measure apply to the consumer participation concept, it can be argued that the applicable items provide information that may help companies identify what people think about a CSR issue (or the company in general) and what motivates them to engage in particular behaviors around a CSR issue. Therefore, future investigations should further define and explore this variable by measuring people’s perceived empowerment or constraint recognition around an issue.

In sum, while a variety of methods have been used to test these theories, several scholars have noted that further investigations that test theory are needed to provide stronger support for the theory’s precepts and the practical implications that can be offered. Therefore, a shortcoming of the theoretical framework is that theories need to be further tested using different methods in different settings. It appears that scholars are taking the step to contribute in this regard by
examining CSR communication using more experimental and mixed-method designs and by adding new variables to models. However, further incorporations of variables such as involvement, awareness, and consumer empowerment could add more depth to the existing body of research by providing insights as to how and why people develop attitudes and behaviors. As noted, public relations literature has just begun to examine the impact of CSR communication. A logical next step toward theory building in this realm is to test new theories and measure new variables not previously examined in CSR literature.

The Situational Theory of Publics

A widely known theory in public relations research is the situational theory of publics, which examines the role of three predictor variables (problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement) on information seeking and information processing behaviors. Developed by Grunig (1997), the theory purports that publics arise based on issues that affect them. Based on Dewey’s (1927) definition of publics, Grunig (1997) further elaborates on the concept of a public by noting that “publics begin as disconnected systems of individuals experiencing common problems, but they can evolve into organized and powerful activist groups” (p. 9). According to Grunig (1997), the theory has been designed to predict and detect differential responses among publics, which can assist public relations practitioners with determining when, why, and how people seek information; their responsiveness to issues; and how communication impacts cognitions, attitudes, and behavior.

Early iterations of the theory were developed in Grunig’s (1983) monograph. Grunig (1983) argues that theories of attitude and behavior have become more situational in nature, thus creating a need for a situational theory that further explains when and how and when communication occurs and how it impacts different publics’ attitudes, behaviors, and cognitions.
However, while Grunig’s (1983) monograph provides a construction of a situational theory to replace an attitudinal theory, Grunig’s (1997) work elaborates on the exploratory iteration of his earlier work by further discussing publics, removing the referent criterion that was used in the Grunig (1983) monograph, and providing an extension of the theory to new outcomes of communication. Therefore, while arguments from Grunig’s (1983) study and Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) investigation are applied throughout this study, Grunig’s (1997) work is most commonly referenced as the most recognized and developed iteration of the situational theory of publics.

**Independent and Dependent Variables**

The situational theory consists of two dependent variables—information seeking and information processing—and three independent variables—problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement—that influence active communication behaviors. The theory was originally conceptualized by Grunig (1968) while examining the relationship between communication and economic decision making. Grunig (1997) used Dewey’s (1938) concept of a problematic situation to predict how people would seek information based on whether they recognize a problem. That is, Grunig theorized that people would seek information actively when they recognize a problem and that they would seek reinforcing information and act habitually when they do not recognize a problem. Specifically, the following independent and dependent variables are further defined as follows:

**Problem recognition.** Grunig (1997) defines problem recognition, or the first independent variable in the theory, as “people detect that something should be done about a situation and stop and think about what to do” (p. 10). In addition, it can be argued that problem recognition is the extent to which individuals perceive that there are consequences as a result of a given situation.
**Constraint recognition.** The second independent variable is defined as “people perceive that there are obstacles in a situation that limit their ability to do anything about the situation” (Grunig, 1997, p. 10). Grunig (1969) developed the second independent variable based on his observations of landowners and peasants (Grunig, 1971) in Columbia. Here, Grunig purports that people are discouraged from information seeking when they are in situations where constraints limit their ability to make choices. That is, people do not have as much of a need to communicate when situations limit their options.

**Level of involvement.** This variable, based on Krugman’s (1965) concept, was added as the third independent variable in the theory. Grunig (1997) defines level of involvement as “the extent to which people connect themselves with a situation” (p. 10). According to the theory, people are more likely to engage in active communication behaviors when they have a personal connection, or involvement, with a given situation. That is, when involvement is high, people search for information actively, whereas they do not search for information actively when involvement is low.

**Information seeking.** Grunig (1997) identifies information seeking as a dependent variable in the theory. Information seeking is characterized as an active communication behavior, or a planned scanning of the environment for information about a given issue or topic (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

**Information processing.** This dependent variable in Grunig’s (1997) conceptualization is when publics discover or recognize a message but do not necessarily act on it (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). That is, publics process information but may not be inclined to engage in action (e.g., searching for information about a given message).
Relationship among variables. According to Grunig (1997), high problem recognition and low constraint recognition lead to active information seeking and information processing, respectively. The third predictor variable, level of involvement, “increases information seeking, but it has less effect on information processing” (Grunig, 1997, p. 10). Ultimately, Grunig (1997) argues that communication effects are produced more with information seeking behaviors than information processing behaviors. That is, Grunig (1997) argues that “people communicating actively develop more organized cognitions, are more likely to have attitudes about a situation and more often engage in a behaviour to do something about the situation” (p. 10). Therefore, the relationship among the variables in the theory may explain how people develop attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors, and, practically speaking, how companies can tailor or personalize CSR messages to appeal to different audiences.

Types of Publics

According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), there are four general types of publics. The first, nonpublics, do not have a relationship with a company or an organization and are not impacted or involved with a problem or issue at hand. A second public, latent publics, have low problem recognition and high constraint recognition. A third type of public, aware publics, have high problem recognition but also have high constraint recognition. Finally, active publics have high problem recognition and low constraint recognition. These publics actively seek information and exhibit active communication behaviors such as searching for information about a topic or even taking action by getting involved with a particular CSR initiative.

Furthermore, Grunig (1997) defines four kinds of publics that emerge in situations. He defines all-issue publics as publics who are considered active on all problems or issues. By contrast, apathetic publics are not active on any problems or issue. These publics are inattentive.
Single-issue publics are defined as “publics active on one or a small subset of the problems that concerns only a small part of the population” (p. 13). Finally, Grunig (1997) identifies hot-issue publics as publics active only on a single, particular problem or issue. Specifically, the problem at hand must be one that has received extensive media coverage and one that involves or impacts an entire population.

By identifying different types of publics, scholars and practitioners can work with the segmented profile of publics that communicate actively or passively to more effectively develop communication strategies for particular types of publics.

**Theoretical Applications in Public Relations Research**

The situational theory of publics has been applied in various contexts of public relations research. In the early phases of the theory’s development, Grunig has used the theory to identify different publics for various entities, including educational systems (Grunig, 1985); scientific organizations (Grunig, 1977); consumer publics (Grunig, 1974); social issues, such as AIDS (Grunig & Childers, 1988) and campaigns on drunk driving (Grunig & Ipes, 1983); and environmental publics (Grunig, 1983; Grunig & Disbrow, 1977). The theory has been further tested by several additional public relations scholars over the decades. Some notable examples of scholarship are provided below, specifically in regard to topics investigated, the method(s) employed to examine the independent and dependent variables of the theory, and key findings that contributed to this body of literature.

It should be noted that applications of the situational theory of publics in public relations research have been varied and unique. That is, a variety of topics have been examined, including evaluating memory performance (Cameron, 1992), communication activity about an election (Hamilton, 1992), to examine messaging strategies on attributes of publics (Werder, 2006),
education (Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2008), in relation to cultural identity (Sha, 2006), risk communication (Aldoory, J-N. Kim, & Tindall, 2010), to examine hot-issue publics (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012), and to examine environmental issues (Grunig, 1983; Major, 1993). Furthermore, a variety of methods (surveys, experiments, and in-depth interviews) have been used to measure the impact of the variables included in the theory, and varying levels of support for the theory have been found over the decades. In addition, several studies also introduced new variables such as goal compatibility, cultural identity, the role of the media, and perceived shared experience, and examined interaction effects and the impact of these variables.

For example, Hamilton (1992), Sha (2006), and Kruger-Ross and Waters (2008) tested the situational theory using a survey method. In their examination, Kruger-Ross and Waters (2008) measured student-reported attitudes and behaviors toward online learning environments. Specifically, the study aimed to determine whether the situational theory of publics could predict success in an online learning environment. Situational theory of publics variables were measured using adapted scales from various disciplines, as the authors note that “since there are no established scales for measuring the situational theory of publics, arriving at reliable, valid scales to measure awareness, involvement, and constraint recognition proved to be problematic” (Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2008, p. 182). The authors grouped students into three public types (latent, aware, and active). The authors found that active publics had higher mean scores than aware publics for all variables. Aware publics also had higher mean scores than latent publics, and results supported the theory’s arguments. Notable findings from the study support arguments that the theory can not only predict student success but also outcomes. That is, data from the study found that the three public groupings not only described awareness, constraint recognition,
and involvement, but also that the theory was accurate in predicting student performance, which was measured by test scores.

Hamilton (1992) applied the situational theory of publics by conducting a public opinion survey during an election to segment publics with specific regard to media use. Specifically, the study aimed to test the theory’s ability to predict different communication behaviors and outcomes among publics. The independent variables were measured to segment publics into groups based on active level of communication. Results supported the argument that the theory can predict communication behavior, as high-information seeking individuals displayed higher levels of media use and other action-oriented behaviors (e.g., likelihood to vote) than information processors. From a methodological standpoint, a notable contribution Hamilton’s (1992) study makes is the identification of moderating variables such as age, education, and income that impact communication levels. Therefore, an argument is made to include both situational variables and demographics in segmentation procedures.

Sha’s (2006) investigation further contributed to the public relations literature by examining intercultural public relations, or specifically, how the influence of culture may impact the variables posed by the situational theory of publics. Sha examined the role of cultural identity on each of the independent variables through a mail survey administered to undergraduate students at a university. Sha (2006) found support for the argument that cultural identity affected two of the three independent variables and called for future investigations and development of the theory with consideration to cultural identity as a factor. The exception in this study was constraint recognition, which Sha (2006) notes is counterintuitive. This study was instrumental in advancing the situational theory of publics by supporting a fourth independent variable (cultural identity) into the model.
Other methods used to test the situational theory of publics include experimental designs, as used by Cameron (1992), Werder (2006) and Aldoory, J-N. Kim, and Tindall (2010). Cameron (1992) tested the cognitive effects of the situational theory of publics in the context of investor relations to test publics’ memory recall and recognition as a function of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. The study design tested the three independent variables using a between-subjects factorial experiment. The dependent variables were tested using recognition memory and cued recall memory testing. The researcher found some evidence to support the theoretical arguments posed by the situational theory of publics. That is, constraint recognition worked as predicted for both memory recall and recognition while involvement worked for memory but not recall. Problem recognition, on the other hand, did not have any impact on any of the dependent variables. Cameron (1992) notes that “the findings lead to the supposition that the situational variables may align differently as a function of the dependent measure” (p. 57), suggesting that future experimental designs be implemented to further examine how the variables interact.

Much like Sha’s (2006) contribution of examining the cultural identity variable in relation to other predictor variables, Aldoory, J-N. Kim, and Tindall’s (2010) examination of the role of perceived shared experience in formulating communication behaviors introduces perceived shared risk as a key variable. Specifically, it is noted that the study “moves beyond this simplistic notion of similarity by exploring the impact of perceived shared experience with a media portrayal” (p. 135). The authors extend the situational theory of publics into the domain of risk communication by conducting an experiment that included risk similarity as an independent variable and problem recognition, level of involvement, and information gaining as dependent
variables. Much like other investigations, hypotheses predicted that the role of perceived shared experience would increase problem recognition, level of involvement, and information gaining. The study found a positive correlation between perceived shared experience and problem recognition and information gaining, but no significant results were found in regard to a relationship between level of involvement and perceived shared experience. Conclusions from the study provide suggestions for future investigations on the influence of shared experience as an antecedent factor.

Finally, Werder (2006) used an experimental method to examine the influence of different messaging strategies on attributes of publics. According to Werder (2006), “a review of literature indicates that minimal attention has been devoted to the message variable in the public relations process” (p. 335). As such, Werder’s (2006) study aimed to determine the influence of several message strategies (e.g., informative, persuasive, facilitative, etc.) on problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, and a new variable, goal compatibility, toward an organization. That is, Grunig’s three independent variables, along with goal compatibility, were measured variables in this study. Werder (2006) defined goal compatibility as “the extent to which the goals or objectives of one party are similar to and coincide with the goals and objectives of another party” (p. 338).

Consistent with previous studies, hypotheses predicted that problem recognition, level of involvement, and constraint recognition would predict information seeking behaviors. Werder (2006) also predicted that goal compatibility would impact information seeking behavior and that different public relations strategies would impact the independent variables in the study. The first hypothesis, which actually tested the situational theory of publics, was partially supported. Specifically, the study found that level of involvement and goal compatibility were the strongest
predictors of information seeking behavior. Overall, key findings indicated that different messaging strategies impacted the attributes of problem recognition and involvement. Furthermore, Werder (2006) found that the goal compatibility variable could predict strategy effectiveness and that level of involvement and goal compatibility were strong predictors of active communication, or information seeking behavior.

The situational theory of publics has also been applied to examine hot-issue publics (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012). According to Aldoory and Grunig (2012), “a hot-issue public typically formed around a single issue, and members of that public generally had little interest in related issues” (p. 94). For example, Grunig (1983) found hot-issue publics when studying problems such as energy shortage and air pollution. This study examined hot-issue publics through various stages of media coverage. Specifically, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with individuals about several hot issues to examine communication behaviors of hot-issue publics compared to other publics. Variables examined included media use and problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors affected.

This study made a clear distinction between internal and external dimensions of the situational theory of publics. For example, Aldoory and Grunig (2012) argue that “for problem recognition, the internal-external distinction lies in the fact that problems recognized could be in a person’s environment or strictly in his or her mind” (p. 97). The researchers argue that variables could be more internal than external for hot-issue publics, which could explain why these publics “dissipate quickly when media attention to a problem goes away” (p. 98). The researchers did not include hypotheses in the study; rather, several research questions were posed to examine hot-issue publics. Findings showed that most participants started as nonpublics or
latent publics whose problem recognition levels increased as a result of media coverage about an issue. Constraint recognition was also reduced as a result of media coverage. The authors noted that findings supported expectations based on prior research investigations.

Environmental studies. The situational theory of publics has also been applied in studies of environmental publics. Grunig (1983) offers a strong justification for applying the situational theory of publics in environmental studies. According to Grunig (1983), “the results of research on environmental communication and attitudes seem to require a situational explanation” (p. 4). That is, people are likely to engage in communication behaviors about environmental issues differently depending on the situation. Therefore, Grunig (1983) conducted two major studies of environmental publics that each included eight environmental issues.

The issues in one (urban) study included air pollution, the extinction of whales, the energy shortage, strip mining, superhighways in urban areas, disposable cans and bottles, water pollution, and oil spills. The second (rural) study included the issues of air pollution, the extinction of whales, the energy shortage, strip mining, dams and flood control projects, effect of pesticides on wildlife, fertilizer run-off in lakes and streams (water pollution), and nuclear power plants (Grunig, 1997). The environmental studies used the theory to identify different types of publics (all-issue, special-issue, single-issue, hot-issue, or apathetic publics). Grunig (1983) then identified one set of general environmental issues and three special-interest issues in each study. For the urban study, general environmental issues included disposable cans and bottles, strip mining, oil spills, water pollution, and extinction of whales. Special-interest issues, according to Grunig (1983) included air pollution, superhighways, and the energy shortage. For the rural study, general environmental issues included strip mining, the dam and flood control, pesticides, water pollution, and nuclear power plant issues while special-interest issues included air
pollution, energy, and whales. Specific details as to how Grunig selected and defined the included issues is not provided.

Grunig’s predictions included hypotheses and research questions about four situational variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, level of involvement, and a referent criterion, which has generally been omitted in recent studies. Consistent with other studies, Grunig (1983) predicted that problem recognition and level of involvement will correlate positively with information seeking. He predicted that there would be a negative correlation between constraint recognition and presence of a referent criterion with information seeking. Furthermore, he predicted a positive correlation between problem recognition and information processing, a negative correlation between constraint recognition and a referent criterion with information processing, and no correlation between information processing and level of involvement. He also included another hypothesis and research questions to further examine the nature of environmental publics.

Measured independent variables included problem recognition, constraint recognition, level of involvement, and the referent criterion. The dependent variables included information seeking, information processing, and knowledge of actual environmental news appearing in the mass media (Grunig, 1983). Information seeking was measured by asking participants to indicate how likely they would call for information about an issue. Information processing was measured by asking participants to indicate how likely they would pay attention to an issue if information was presented to them. Among the many findings of the environmental studies, Grunig (1983) found that people become hot-issue publics when environmental issues (e.g., energy shortage or air pollution) impacted them directly. Furthermore, special-issue and single-issue publics were formed around other issues. This study provides a strong foundation for future investigations
about different types of environmental issues and the application of the situational theory of publics.

Also contributing to research in this area, Major (1993) provided a framework for studying responses of risk messages in the context of the situational theory of publics. Through an examination of how environmental concern impacts differentiating situational publics, the researcher found that for a landfill issue, constrained publics and problem-facing publics were more likely to engage in active communication behaviors (information-seeking behaviors) regardless of how involved they were with an issue. That is, while a person’s environmental concern or level of involvement with an issue provided attitudinal measures, they did not impact one’s active communication behaviors. Major (1993) notes that “there may be a distinction between what a person perceives to be personally involving and perceives to be involving for the community” (p. 265). Furthermore, based on study results, the author suggests that public relations objectives that are focused on increasing awareness or knowledge of an environmental issue may be more effective than attitude-driven objectives. Major’s (1993) recommendations for theory and practice provide insight for future investigations about environmental communication.

**Situational theory of problem solving.** Among the many investigations and applications of the situational theory of publics includes a recent introduction to the situational theory of problem solving, as posed by J-N. Kim and Grunig (2011). The theory, according to the authors, is “an extended and generalized version of the situational theory of publics” (p. 120). Grunig (1997) notes that the situational theory of publics has continuously evolved, thus increasing its theoretical power and practical utility. Thus, J-N. Kim and Grunig (2011) further enhance the theory’s utility by expanding the dependent variables, information seeking and attending, to an
arguably more generalized variable, communicative action in problem solving, which includes information acquiring, sharing, and selecting. J-N. Kim and Grunig (2011) note that “our proposal for a situational theory of problem solving does not replace the situational theory of publics” (p. 140). Therefore, it can be argued that future investigations of the situational theory of publics are still necessary, specifically in areas of public relations research where the theory has not been (widely) tested.

**Theoretical Applications in CSR Research**

While the situational theory of publics has been tested in public relations research, there have been no research investigations specifically in CSR communication literature. While Grunig (1983) and Major (1993) conducted studies of environmental issues and publics, their examinations were not conducted in a CSR context. Furthermore, future investigations about environmental responsibility, or environmental communication, have not followed in recent years. As a review of literature has demonstrated, a variety of methods have been used to test public relations theories in the realm of CSR, but a shortcoming of the theoretical framework is that theories need to be further tested using different methods in different settings and new theories need to be applied.

As the literature illustrates, results and implications for theory and practice have varied, as scholars have often tested components of the situational theory of publics model rather than all five variables of the model itself. For example, Grunig’s (1997) investigation posed arguments that high problem recognition and low constraint recognition lead to both information seeking and information processing. The role of level of involvement, per study findings, impacts information seeking more than information processing. Sha’s (2006) study found that cultural identity impacted problem recognition and level of involvement but not constraint
recognition. Werder (2006) tested the impact of message strategies on problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition, and a new variable, goal compatibility, toward an organization. Werder (2006) measured information seeking (but not information processing) as an outcome variable. Other scholars measured the three independent variables but chose different outcome variables to replace information seeking and information processing (Cameron, 1992). Furthermore, scholars have extended the situational theory of publics into other domains, such as risk communication, by measuring risk similarity as an independent variable and two of the three situational theory of publics independent variables (problem recognition and level of involvement) along with information gaining as dependent variables (Aldoory, J-N. Kim, & Tindall, 2010). Thus, it is clear that theoretical investigations that apply the situational theory of publics have been varied.

Furthermore, one specific area that requires attention is the manner in which situational theory of publics variables are measured. Scholars have argued that the lack of established scales for measuring the situational theory of publics poses challenges for measuring the variables in the model (Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2008). While Grunig (1997) used multi-item scales to measure problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement, measurement for information seeking and information processing relied on single-item scales in the Grunig (1983) study. Grunig’s (1983) conceptualization of the information processing variable is different from more commonly used measures for this variable. According to Grunig (1983), information processing is seen as passive behavior, or behavior that occurs randomly. He argues that “a person does not look for and generally does not need information that he processes” (p. 11). It is noted that information processing can still take place if a person has a low level of involvement if problem recognition is high and constraint recognition is low.
The current study attempts to clarify and improve the operationalization and measurement of the situational theory of publics variables, specifically for information processing. While Grunig’s (1983) arguments about the relationship among the situational theory of publics independent variables and information processing as a dependent variable are tested in the present investigation, the original conceptualization of information processing as a variable is modified in this study. While information processing has been measured as one variable in previous investigations (Grunig, 1997), it is important to acknowledge that information processing includes two styles of processing (Kahlor et al., 2006). Therefore, this study aims to examine systematic and heuristic processing measures, as Eagly and Chaiken’s (1993) Heuristic-Systematic Model of Information Processing (HSM) suggests. This model emphasizes two processes by which persuasion occurs: systematic and heuristic processing. According to Perloff (2013), “systematic professing entails comprehensive consideration of issue-relevant arguments” and heuristic processing “involves the use of cognitive shortcuts” (p. 217). Systematic processing occurs when the information is of high personal relevance, while heuristic information processing is associated with low personal involvement (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Kahlor et al., 2006; Liberman & Chaiken, 1996). However, the systematic and heuristic processes are not mutually exclusive; that is, the HSM argues that individuals may rely on heuristics and systematically process a message (Perloff, 2013). Therefore, the present investigation of information processing will acknowledge the two types of processing that can occur.

Overall, with regard to CSR communication research, a review of literature has revealed that scholars and practitioners still seek to determine what and how to communicate CSR to key publics, whether in the corporate or nonprofit realm. Scholars have begun to examine message
factors (Waters & Ott, 2015; Werder, 2006), but future research investigations are necessary to determine whether and how CSR messaging actually results in tangible benefits to the organizations, such as increased sales, donations, or greater engagement on social media platforms, and intangible benefits, such as reputation and evaluations of the relationship with the organization. Therefore, applying and clarifying arguments from the situational theory of publics can clarify this picture for companies and organizations alike.

**Framing Theory**

An applicable theory to consider when examining CSR messaging is Goffman’s (1974) framing theory, which is “conceptually connected to the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information, to make judgments, and to draw inferences about the world around them” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 206). Scholars have defined framing theory from a variety of perspectives. However, framing can commonly be defined as “activities of the mass media as they select, emphasize, and present some aspects of ‘reality’ to audiences, while ignoring others” (Stone, Singletary, & Richmond, 1999, p. 277).

Similarly, Robert Entman (1993) interprets framing as a description of the power of a communicating text. According to Entman (1993), “analysis of frames illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer or communication of information from one location—such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel—to that consciousness” (p. 51-52). Entman also notes that frames are also defined not only by what they include, but also by what information they omit. That is, information that is not present is equally as important (and in some cases, more important) as the information that is presented. Entman (1993) also expands on his concept of framing by suggesting that frames have four locations in the communication process: the communicator, who, guided by frames, determines what to
communicate; the text, which contains frames; the receiver, who interprets and draws conclusions about the material presented; the culture, which includes a set of common frames that is accepted by a social group.

Goffman, who is credited for advancing the development of frame analysis in his archetypal book, *Frame Analysis*, in 1974, offers a broader analysis of the framing process. According to Goffman (1974), framing is the organization of experience. Goffman understood frames to be present in daily life, noting his belief that frames are implicit and underlie all types of social activity. Essentially, Goffman acknowledged that everyone has a unique frame of reference, and that all observers project these frames of references onto the world around them. Furthermore, Druckman (2001) discusses the emphasis framing effect, which indicates that message receivers will tend to focus on specific emphasized components or attributes that a speaker may emphasize when communicating about it.

**Theoretical Applications in Public Relations Research**

Scholars have applied arguments from framing theory in a variety of contexts across several disciplines. With regard to public relations, Hallahan (1999) argues that “framing is conceptually connected to the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information to make judgements, and to draw inferences about the world around them” (p. 206). Therefore, framing theory can be useful for examining phenomena in a public relations context. However, while Hallahan (1999) argues that framing plays an integral role in public relations, he notes that “although a theoretically rich and useful concept, framing suffers from a lack of coherent definition” (p. 209). This echoes Entman’s (1993) argument that framing is a fractured paradigm that lacks clear conceptual direction. With regard to public relations research, Hallahan (1999) proposes that there are seven models of framing that could potentially be applied to this
area of research. Broadly stated, Hallahan’s (1999) typology of seven models of framing applicable to public relations includes examining situations, attributes, choices, actions, responsibility, news, and issues.

According to Hallahan (1999), framing of situations can be applied to examine social constructions of reality or interactions among people. Situational framing is built on Goffman’s (1974) work and Bateson’s (1972) operationalization of psychological frames. These types of frames have been investigated in the context of organizational behavior and negotiation (Culbert & McDonough, 1990; Hirsch, 1986), which is relevant to public relations. Framing of attributes involves characterizing objects, events, or people. For public relations, this could include examining what types of attributes are most effective, or persuasive, for message senders to use. Some initial studies that applied attribute framing include McCombs and Ghanem’s (1998) examination of how attributes create knowledge about political candidates, Smith and Wortzel’s (1997) application in marketing communications, and Levin’s (1987) study that suggests that positive framing of attributes can lead to more favorable evaluations of objects than negative framing.

Framing of choices, or how willing people are to take risks, involves posing alternative decisions in either positive terms, known as gain frames, or negative terms, known as loss frames. Arguments derive from Kahneman and Tversky’s (1979) development of prospect theory that argues that “people tend to avoid risks when a choice is stated in terms of gains but will take greater risks when choices are stated in terms of losses” (p. 214). Bortree, Ahern, Nutter Smith, and Dou’s (2013) study is an example of applying gain and loss frames to public relations research. Implications from this type of framing are important for public relations, as it impacts companies’ ability to motivate people to make decisions. A similar type of framing analysis is
framing of actions, which focuses on how to frame actions to achieve compliance with a goal. Scholars have examined factors that impact the effect of framing on persuasion, including the role of an individual’s self-efficacy (Block & Keller, 1995), consumer expertise (Smith, 1996), and the role of different social interactions (Woodside & Singer, 1994). These examinations can be helpful for public relations practitioners who seek to refine business strategies that can maximize behavioral intentions among publics.

Framing of responsibility, or attribution of cause or blame, is referenced in Iyengar’s (1991) work. Iyengar (1991) performed studies using episodic and thematic framing to examine how different poverty frames in new stories were evaluated by audiences. Specifically, the intent was to determine who is responsible for a given issue. Iyengar (1991) found that participants presented with a thematic frame were more likely to attribute the issue of poverty to society at large rather than to the impoverished individual. Episodic framing of an individual who was impoverished resulted in participants attributing responsibility to the impoverished individual rather than to society at large. Thus, different types of framing impacted how audiences assessed attribution of blame. This type of framing is useful in understanding how and why people attribute causes to different outlets in society. For public relations professionals, this type of framing may be useful when considering how organizations should negotiate accepting responsibility for mistakes, or for a given issue. That is, the manner in which they navigate this process could impact reputation and public assessment of the organization overall.

Framing of news, or how stories are portrayed by various media outlets, can be used to examine a variety of social issues. From a public relations perspective, news framing should be considered when proposing a story to a reporter or editor, for example. As briefly described above, Entman’s (1993) concept of how framing works is primarily in the context of examining
news media. Through this conceptualization, he illustrates how the media gather, process, and then deliver “news”; however, ultimately, the “news” that is delivered is a pseudo reality or perception of reality that is created by the media and passed on through that medium’s frames with that medium’s perspectives, biases, values, morals, or judgments. Ultimately, news frames have an impact on news interpretation. These “framing effects,” according to Chong & Druckman (2007), occur when “often small changes in the presentation of an issue or an event produce (sometimes large) changes of opinion” (p. 104). Chong & Druckman (2007) note that framing can work on three levels: making new beliefs available about an issue, making certain available beliefs accessible, or making beliefs applicable or strong in people’s evaluations (p. 111). Therefore, according to the researchers, opinions are drawn from a set of available beliefs that are stored in one’s memory.

Finally, the last type of frame Hallahan (1999) proposes for public relations research is framing of issues, which can be used to determine how and why decisions are made at the organizational level. Dardis (2007) suggests that with issue-framing, there is a “purposive interpretation of some sociopolitical issue by a particular entity that wishes to mobilize support by conveying this interpretation to other entities” (p. 249). Therefore, when considering how to convey an issue with strategic messages, he asks the poignant question of what messages should include, and accordingly exclude, to impact interpretations about the issue.

Snow and Benford (1988) first introduced three core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing. The first, diagnostic framing, includes the identification of an event or aspect of social life as problematic or in need of alteration. Prognostic framing proposes a solution to the diagnosed problem by identifying specific tactics, or tasks to be employed. The third, motivational framing, represents a call to action as well as the
rationale for engaging in corrective action. Moral inducements or appeals may be included in this framing task (Dardis, 2007; Snow & Benford, 1988). Hallahan (1999) emphasizes the importance of message framing in this capacity, noting that framing of issues ultimately shapes what people should think about an issue.

Much like the situational theory of publics, the application of specific types of frames has not been widely examined in CSR research. Hallahan (1999) argues that framing theory is “conceptually connected to the underlying psychological processes that people use to examine information, to make judgments, and to draw inferences about the world around them” (p. 206). Therefore, as scholars have investigated what and how to communicate CSR efforts to key publics (S. Kim & Ferguson, 2014), it is important to consider the manner in which the information itself is presented. However, when applying framing theory arguments to public relations research, or CSR literature specifically, it is important to consider the appropriate conceptualization of framing theory arguments.

Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2015) argue that framing has emerged as a very popular area of communication research but that “framing is arguably less clear now than at any point in its history” (p. 2). The authors note the lack of consistency with definitions and scholarly applications of the concept. Furthermore, they note that among the various framing studies that are produced each year, few accurately apply framing arguments that are consistent with original conceptualizations of the theory itself. Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar (2015) argue that media effects research should “abandon the general term ‘framing’ as a catch-all phrase for a number of distinct media effects models and replace it with the more precise terminological distinction between equivalence and emphasis framing” (p. 14).
When considering an appropriate approach to applying framing theory arguments to CSR research, it is worth noting that among the proposed applications Hallahan (1999) offers, many of the models are traditionally examined from a journalistic perspective. Among the many definitions that scholars have proposed for framing theory, some scholars offer definitions more tied to journalism, arguing that framing is defined as how a “story is written or produced” (Capella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 39). Therefore, framing of news, framing of responsibility, and applications for examining framing of issues, for example, have all conceptualized arguments from the perspective of how media outlets impact outcomes (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991). Thus, examining CSR communication message strategies using arguments from framing theory would be useful for addressing the questions of what and how to communicate CSR to publics if the appropriate approach is applied for a particular investigation.

**Theory Integration**

As previously noted, in an assessment of the state of CSR communication literature, Bortree (2014) emphasized that a popular trend in CSR communication will likely include environmental sustainability as a key business strategy, which may have implications for CSR communication research and practice. Furthermore, a review of literature suggests that CSR literature has focused mainly on general or overall company CSR efforts rather than specific key areas of CSR. Therefore, as environmental efforts have emerged as a key area of CSR for many companies and organizations, with environmental sustainability being recognized as a “dominant issue across the globe” (Ki & Shin, 2014), it is important for research investigations to focus on the environment as a key component of CSR activities and practices.

The purpose of the current study is to apply and test the situational theory of publics in this realm to answer the (recurring) questions that are often investigated in CSR research: what
and how to communicate CSR efforts to publics. Per the theory’s model, a key focus of the study is to determine how different issues and the manner in which information about each issue impacts publics’ behaviors and, ultimately, their attitudes and behavioral intentions in response to the issue. As noted, scholars are just beginning to examine the impact of CSR communication. As scholars have already demonstrated that communication about CSR can impact attitudes and behaviors (Dodd & Supa, 2011, 2014; Y.S. Kim & Choi, 2012; Lee & Shin, 2010), this study aims to further contribute to the literature by examining the potential impact of multiple variables on attitude and behavior-related outcomes.

As such, the independent variables of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement, in the situational theory of publics model are measured to see how they impact information seeking and information processing behaviors, which are examined as mediating variables in the model that ultimately will impact the outcome variables (e.g., word-of-mouth intention, perceived altruism, and perceived company reputation) in the model. In addition, this study will draw on arguments from framing theory to examine how manipulated message frames may impact the independent variables in the situational theory of publics model (problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement). This study examines framing of environmental issues and applies Snow & Benford’s (1988) three core framing tasks—diagnostic frames, prognostic frames, and motivational frames. These core framing tasks have not been applied in CSR literature. Therefore, this study aims to examine how information about a company’s CSR communication efforts about an environmental issue may be moderated by the three core framing tasks identified above. Furthermore, this study adds to the original situational theory of publics model by further examining outcome variables commonly measured in CSR research as dependent variables in the study.
Finally, different environmental issues are selected for participants in different conditions in an effort to determine whether the model holds up for any or all of the different issue types. As Grunig (1983) demonstrated, several different publics (e.g., hot-issue publics or latent publics) form around different issues. Since the situational theory of publics aims to provide insight for what and how to communicate to different publics, it is important for this study to examine more than one environmental issue. Since there have been few environmental studies that have tested the situational theory of publics since Grunig (1983) and Major (1993), and none specifically in the context of CSR communication, this study includes a general environmental issue, or one that is considered applicable to society in general, and a specific environmental issue, or one that is specific to a company, as described in Grunig’s (1993) research.

This study employs an experimental design—a method that a review of literature has revealed has not been as widely employed as surveys, for example, in CSR research. The experimental method affords the opportunity to examine the interaction between key variables, specifically by testing the effect of manipulated message frames (diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational) and whether these effects are moderated by different environmental topics throughout the model. In sum, this study examines environmental responsibility issues in a CSR context through the application of two theories—framing theory and situational theory of publics—that have not been widely examined in CSR research. As outlined in Figure 1, this study offers a proposed theoretical model to be tested in the context of CSR communication. Specifically, this model combines arguments from the situational theory of publics and framing theory to ultimately measure attitudes and behavioral intentions that are commonly measured in CSR research, thus proposing an integrated model to be tested in a CSR context. Based on theoretical arguments by Grunig (1997), Snow and Benford (1988), and Eagly and Chaiken
(1993), the following hypotheses are proposed with regard to the relationship among all the variables from the three theories.

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed tested theoretical model, as outlined in hypotheses H1-H6 and RQ1.

Figure 1. Proposed tested theoretical model.
Research Questions and Hypotheses

To explore the relationships of interest and meet the proposed theoretical goals, six hypotheses and one research question will guide this study. Each hypothesis and research question is presented with a short explanation of the insights this research will attempt to explore.

Diagnostic frames focus on the identification of an event or aspect of social life as problematic or in need of alteration. Therefore, diagnostic frames are intended to raise awareness about an issue. While there is not existing research about the impact of diagnostic frames on situational theory of publics variables, it is logical to suggest that people will only think about a situation of it is problematic to them, as Grunig (1983) suggests in his definition and conceptualization of the theoretical model. However, a lack of previous research in this realm makes it difficult to predict that the same effect will be present with constraint recognition and level of involvement. Because diagnostic messages are solely problem focused, not solution focused, it is unlikely that they will lower perceptions of constraints or make individuals feel more involved with the issue itself. Therefore, the first hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Diagnostic message frames will positively predict problem recognition (H1a) and constraint recognition (H1b) and negatively predict level of involvement (H1c).

Drawing on similar arguments presented for Hypothesis 1, it is logical to predict that prognostic frames, which focus on proposing a solution to the diagnosed problem by identifying specific tactics, or tasks to be employed, would still raise awareness about the existence of a problem or issue. However, given that the solution-focused information that is presented is in reference to what a company should do to address an issue, not what an individual should do, it is
unlikely that prognostic message frames would reduce perceptions of constraint or heighten feelings of involvement with the issue. Therefore, the second hypothesis is as follows:

**Hypothesis 2:** Prognostic message frames will positively predict problem recognition (H2a) and constraint recognition (H2b) and negatively predict level of involvement (H2c).

Motivational frames include a call to action. According to Dardis (2007), moral inducements or appeals may be applied in this framing task. Therefore, regardless of the approach, these message frames intend to involve an audience. Based on Grunig’s (1983) conceptualization of problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement, the third hypothesis suggests the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** Motivational message frames will positively predict problem recognition (H3a), negatively predict constraint recognition (H3b), and positively predict level of involvement (H3c).

As discussed, Grunig (1997) argued that problem recognition and low constraint recognition lead to both information seeking and information processing. He also argued that the level of involvement variable increases information seeking (Grunig, 1983), which has been supported through other investigations (Werder, 2006). Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is constructed based on the original arguments offered about the situational theory of publics model.

**Hypothesis 4:** Problem recognition (H4a) and level of involvement (H4b) will positively predict information seeking while constraint recognition (H4c) will negatively predict information seeking.

The arguments presented for H4 can also be applied to the fifth hypothesis. Furthermore, Grunig (1983) argues that a person with a low level of involvement will process information if
he or she has high problem recognition and low constraint recognition. Therefore, H5 offers a similar argument as H4 proposes but in reference to information processing.

**Hypothesis 5:** Problem recognition (H5a) and level of involvement (H5b) will positively predict information processing while constraint recognition (H5c) will negatively predict information processing.

The final piece of the model examines how information seeking and information processing may ultimately impact attitudes and behaviors. This hypothesis has been constructed based on the arguments of the situational theory of publics. While the outcome variables included in this study have not been tested using the situational theory of publics in a CSR context, results from previous CSR studies that have suggested that communication about CSR research can influence attitudes and behaviors (Dodd & Supa, 2011, 2014; Y.S. Kim & Choi, 2012; Lee & Shin, 2010) provide support for the prediction that information seekers are likely to develop more favorable attitudes and behaviors toward the company and the issue. Likewise, people who are less likely to emerge as information seekers are less likely to develop favorable attitudes and behaviors about the company or the environmental issue. That is, if people don’t have an interest in engaging in active behaviors, they are unlikely to go out of their way to share information about the issue or to feel positively toward the company.

Of course, it can be argued that information seekers have the potential to develop stronger negative attitudes toward a company than information processors, depending on the situation and their reactions to the information they seek. However, this study will examine each outcome variable with the expectation that information seeking behaviors will lead to more positive outcomes. Furthermore, H6 predicts a difference in valence between the impact of information seeking on outcome variables and the impact of information processing on outcome variables.
However, there is not enough evidence to predict that information processors would necessarily evaluate outcomes negatively. Rather, H6 is intended to compare the differences between information seeking and information processing.

**Hypothesis 6:** Information seeking behaviors will predict more favorable attitudes about the company (H6a), a higher intention to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (H6b), more positive perceptions of the company’s altruistic intentions (H6c), and higher evaluations of company reputation (H6d) than information processing behaviors.

As mentioned, the purpose of this study is to test arguments from framing theory and the situational theory of publics in a CSR context. Grunig’s (1983) two environmental studies examined several different environmental issues and results indicated that different types of publics formed based on issue type. Therefore, it is important that future investigations consider the potentially moderating effect that environmental issue type may have on the various components of the model. However, because research has not investigated the interaction between these variables before, a research question (rather than a hypothesis) is posed to examine the role of environmental issue type in this study.

**RQ1:** How does the environmental issue type (general vs. specific issue) impact information seeking behaviors and outcomes?
Chapter 3

Method

Overview

To test the proposed hypotheses, this study employed a 3 (message frame: diagnostic, prognostic, motivational) x 2 (general environmental issue vs. specific environmental issue) plus two control groups between subjects factorial online experimental design with environmental issue type and the manipulated message frame as the between-subjects factors. In addition to the two variables described above, measured independent variables included problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. Information seeking and information processing (systematic and heuristic) were measured as mediating variables. Measured dependent variables included attitude toward the company, perceived company reputation, perceived altruism, and likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication.

Participants

Participants included a general population Qualtrics sample. Each participant was given an implied consent form, which had been approved by the university’s institutional review board. A power analysis was conducted to determine the appropriate sample size for the study using G*power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009), indicating that 109 participants were needed to achieve power of .80 (Cohen, 1992). Four hundred twenty four participants successfully completed study, and each participant indicated implied consent before participating. After checking the total time spent completing the online experiment and questionnaire, responses from 16 participants who consistently answered attention check questionnaire items incorrectly
were removed from the dataset. The final sample included 252 females (64.2%), with the average age of 50.61 ($SD = 14.92, N = 408$).

**Environmental Topics Pretest**

A pretest was conducted to inform the construction of stimuli. Specifically, the pretest was conducted to identify the two environmental topics used in the study: a general topic and a specific topic. The environmental topics pretest was conducted using a convenience sample of 58 graduate and undergraduate students in a mass communications program at an accredited university in South Central Pennsylvania. Participants from the pretest sample were not included in the final sample.

In a Qualtrics survey, the 16 environmental topics listed on nrdc.org’s “issue areas” page were presented to participants for testing the degree to which they felt each issue was a general issue or a specific issue. Participants were first presented with general information about General Mills, the *Fortune* 500 company that was randomly selected for the study. Next, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they felt each environmental issue was a general issue or a specific issue using a 7-point semantic-differential scale with anchors of “general” and “specific.” Participants were instructed to evaluate general issues as those that are common societal issues and specific issues as those that are directly related to the company’s operation.

A repeated measures ANOVA employing a multivariate approach revealed significant differences in rating an issue as general or specific, Wilks $\lambda = .37, F(15, 33) = 3.75, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .63$. Sustainable food/agricultural issues ($M = 5.68, SD = 1.80$) was rated as the most specific issue to the company and ocean issues ($M = 2.90, SD = 1.76$) was rated as the most general, societal issue using Bonferroni post-hoc procedure. Thus, as the study aimed to include a specific and general issue for an environmental topic, ocean issues as a topic was included as
the general environmental issue for the study while sustainable food/agricultural issues was the specific environmental issue for the study.

**Stimulus Material**

Stimulus material included exposure to a manipulated message presented in the form of a blog post from General Mills, the randomly selected *Fortune* 500 company, about one of the two environmental issues that were selected based on the environmental topics pretest results. The message about the environmental issue was presented using a diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational frame, while participants in the both control groups were not exposed to a manipulated message at all. Therefore, based on the experimental design, six versions of stimuli [3 (message frame: diagnostic, prognostic, motivational) x 2 (environmental issue: general vs. specific)] were constructed for the study.

Before viewing a version of the manipulated message, participants in all six groups were exposed to standard information that included general content about the company (mission, products, etc.), which was the same across all conditions. After viewing information about the company, participants in each group viewed a manipulated blog post that included a description of the environmental issue, presented in accordance with the message frame type. After participants were exposed to the message, they were directed to the posttest questionnaire. The two control groups viewed the same general message about the company but did not subsequently view manipulated content. Rather, participants in the control groups were immediately directed to the posttest questionnaire.

Therefore, participants were assigned to a group that viewed a diagnostic message about ocean issues (N=57), a prognostic message about ocean issues (N=52), a motivational message about ocean issues (N=52), a diagnostic message about sustainable food/agricultural issues
(\(N=49\)), a prognostic message about sustainable food/agricultural issues (\(N=51\)), a motivational message about sustainable food/agricultural issues (\(N=51\)), a control message that directed to posttest questionnaire items that asked about ocean issues (\(N=50\)), and a control message that directed to posttest questionnaire items that asked about sustainable food/agricultural issues (\(N=46\)). To maintain control over the effects of the stimulus, the word count in every blog post was similar (i.e., within a few words) across conditions. (See Appendix A for stimuli examples.)

**Independent Variables**

**Manipulation of message frame.** Message frame was operationalized on the basis of three levels: diagnostic message frame, prognostic message frame, and motivational message frame. As previously mentioned, messages were manipulated and presented as a message from the company in the form of a standard blog post.

**Problem recognition.** Five items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Grunig (1997) and Werder (2006) were used to measure problem recognition. Items like “To what extent do you believe this issue is a serious national issue” and “How often do you stop to think about people who are affected by this issue” were included. Specific item wording was customized to each environmental issue. For example, participants who viewed information about ocean issues saw items worded accordingly (e.g., “To what extent do you believe ocean issues are a serious national issue?”). Because the items were reliable, an index was created by averaging the items (Cronbach’s \(M = 4.96, SD = 1.34\)).

**Constraint recognition.** Four items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Grunig (1997) were used to measure constraint recognition. Items like “To what extent do you believe this issue is a problem that you can do
something about (reverse coded)" and “To what extent would you say that this issue is more
difficult for you to understand than other problems?" were included. Specific item wording was
customized to each environmental issue. The items were averaged and combined to form a single
index (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.78$, $SD = 1.17$).

**Level of involvement.** This variable was measured by adapting four of Grunig’s (1997)
measures for level of involvement. Items like “In your mind, how much of a connection do you
see between yourself and this issue?” and “How much do you believe this issue affects or could
affect you personally?” were included. Specific item wording was customized to each
environmental issue. The items were combined to form a single index by averaging the items
(Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.73$, $SD = 1.50$).

**Moderating Variables**

**Manipulation of environmental issue.** Environmental issue was operationalized as a
general, societal environmental issue or an issue specific to General Mills, per pretest procedures
and results. For this study, ocean issues emerged as the most general environmental issue and
sustainable food/agricultural issues emerged as the most specific issue to General Mills.
Information about each issue was constructed as a message from the company (as previously
described) in different formats (message frames). Issue type was examined as a moderating
variable to determine potential differences in participants’ responses to different types of issues.

**Previous company knowledge.** Participants’ company/brand knowledge was measured
using three items on a 7-point semantic differential scale adapted from Tao and Ferguson (2015).
Participants rated their level of familiarity/knowledge about General Mills by answering whether
they are “unfamiliar-familiar” with the company, whether they “did not recognize-recognize” the
company, and whether they “have not heard of” or “heard of” the company. The items were
combined to form a single index by averaging the items (Cronbach’s $M = 6.57$, $SD = .65$).

**Perceived reputation (pre-study).** Perceived reputation was measured using three items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Tao and Ferguson (2015). Participants were asked to rate their perceptions of the company by answering questions including “I think this company is ethical,” “I think this company is socially responsible,” and “I think this company is a good member of society.” Because the items were reliable, they were combined to form a single index by averaging the items (Cronbach’s $M = 5.54$, $SD = 105$). This measure was also used to assess participants’ perceptions of General Mills’ reputation after being exposed to stimulus material.

**Dependent Variables**

**Attitude toward company.** Three items on a 7-point semantic differential scale adapted from Rim and Song (2013) were used to measure attitude toward the company. Participants indicated whether they feel the company is “bad-good,” “unfavorable-favorable,” and “unpleasant-pleasant.” Because the items were reliable, they were averaged and combined to form a single index (Cronbach’s $M = 6.24$, $SD = .99$).

**Word-of-mouth intention.** This variable was measured using adapted measures from Rim and Song (2013). Three items were measured on 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”). Items included “I would mention the company’s environmental responsibility efforts to people,” “I would say positive things about the company’s environmental responsibility efforts to other people,” and “I would recommend the company’s product or service.” Because the items were reliable, they were combined to form a single index by averaging the items (Cronbach’s $M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.18$).
Perceived altruism. Eight items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Rifon, Choi, Trimble, and Li (2004) were used to measure perceived altruism of the company. Participants were asked to answer items such as “The company engaged in this environmentally responsible initiative because it ultimately cares about the initiative” and “The company implemented this environmentally responsible initiative because it creates a positive corporate image (reverse coded).” Items were combined to form a single index by averaging the items (Cronbach’s $M = 4.12$, $SD = .69$).

Perceived reputation. Perceived reputation was measured using three items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Tao and Ferguson (2015). Participants were asked to rate their perceptions of the company by answering questions including “I think this company is ethical,” “I think this company is socially responsible,” and “I think this company is a good member of society.” Because the items were reliable, they were combined to form a single index by averaging the items (Cronbach’s $M = 5.76$, $SD = .98$). This is the same measure that was used to evaluate participants’ pre-study perceptions of General Mills’ reputation.

Mediating Variables

Information seeking. This variable was measured using five items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Yang and Kaylor (2012). Items like “I plan to seek information about this issue in the near future” and “I intend to find more information about this issue in the near future” were used. Specific item wording was customized to each environmental issue. The items were reliable, so they were averaged and combined to form a single index (Cronbach’s $M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.73$). In addition, participants’ information seeking was measured by including an option for participants to
indicate that they would like more information about the issue to which they are exposed. The item read as follows: “If you’re interested in learning more about General Mills, check the box below. More information will be provided at the end of the survey.” This was a separate measure included to serve as a means of comparison between the information seeking scale measure and participants’ response to this question.

**Systematic information processing.** Four items measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Kahlor, Dunwoody, Griffin, and Neuwirth (2006) were used to measure systematic information processing. Items like “After I encounter information about this issue, I am likely to stop and think about it” and “After thinking about this issue, I have a broader understanding” were used to measure systematic information processing. Specific item wording was customized to each environmental issue. The four items measuring systematic information processing were combined to form a single index by averaging the items (Cronbach’s \( M = 5.09, SD = 1.24 \)).

**Heuristic information processing.** Four items measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = “strongly disagree”; 7 = “strongly agree”) adapted from Kahlor, Dunwoody, Griffin, and Neuwirth (2006) were used to measure heuristic information processing. Items like “There is far more information on this topic than I personally need” were used to measure heuristic information processing. Specific item wording was customized to each environmental issue. The four items measuring heuristic information processing were combined to form a single index by averaging the items (Cronbach’s \( M = 3.82, SD = 1.23 \)).

**Manipulation Check Items**

For the message topic manipulation, one single-item measure was used to check if participants were able to identify the environmental issue they read about during the study. The
item asked participants to answer the following question: “The message I just read was primarily about the following issue?” Participants were given a choice of three answers: ocean issues, sustainable food/agricultural issues, or none of the above.

For the message frame manipulation, one single-item measure was used to check if the different message frames were apparent to participants. The item asked participants to answer the following question: “The message I just read included information that primarily focused on…” Participants were given a choice of four answers: The impact of ocean issues and sources of/reasons for the issue, Information about how the company should develop solutions to ocean issues, a call to action for customers to work together with the company to address ocean issues, or none of the above. See Appendix B for a list of measures and all item wordings.

**Procedure**

The study took the form of an online experiment and was conducted over the period of one week. After the two environmental topics were selected, a separate pretest was conducted to further define conditions and to test the overall flow and effectiveness of stimuli construction. The pretest was conducted using a general population Qualtrics sample (N=80). Participants from the pretest sample were not included in the final sample. Based on pretest results, the wording of manipulation check items were strengthened for clarity. Also, attention check items were randomly inserted into the survey for quality control.

The online experiment was also conducted using a Qualtrics sample. The 408 participants were randomly assigned to a condition so as to ensure an equal number of respondents for each condition. The first page of the pre-questionnaire was the online implied consent form for the study. After reading the consent form, users were asked to click “proceed” and to answer two questions to measure their prior knowledge of the company used in the study and to measure
their perceptions of the company’s reputation. They were then directed to a page and asked to read information about the company. Participants in each condition viewed the same information about the company. Next, each participant was randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions and viewed a version of the blog post about an environmental issue (general or specific) before being directed to a post-test questionnaire.

As described, in the diagnostic frame condition, participants viewed a blog post that focused mainly on the environmental issue itself. That is, the information provided was issue-focused and written to inform participants about the impact of the issue itself. In the prognostic condition, participants viewed a blog post that was solution-focused. Information about the environmental issue was provided but mostly with regard to how the company should develop specific solutions to address the issue. In the motivational condition, participants viewed a blog post that focused on encouraging customers to become involved with solutions. That is, the message was focused on providing customers with reasons to involve themselves with the issue. Participants in the two control conditions were not exposed to a message about an environmental issue. Rather, they just viewed the standard message about the company and were then directed to the post-test questionnaire. The questionnaire included the following measures: manipulation check for environmental issue, manipulation check for message frame, problem recognition, constraint recognition, level of involvement, information seeking, information processing (systematic and heuristic), word-of-mouth intention, perceived company reputation, and basic demographic information (e.g., gender, age, race, and educational level, political affiliation, etc.)

**Data Analysis**

The proposed model was assessed using Structural Equation Modeling. This modeling technique enables researchers to investigate the theoretical relationships among multiple
variables while accounting for the overall model fit (Kline, 2011). As recommended by Bentler (2007), an appropriate sample size for SEM should yield a ratio of $N$ (total sample size) versus $q$ (the number of free parameter estimates) between 5:1 and 10:1; that is, 5 to 10 cases for every parameter to be estimated. The current sample size ($N = 408$), therefore, is sufficient to test the proposed model with 39 distinct parameter estimates (covariates included) utilizing single variables as indicators for latent variables, which prevents the overkill for extracting error variances of latent variables (Stephenson & Holbert, 2003).

Due to the dearth in existing literature regarding the relationships among the key variables in this study within the overall framework of CSR, the purpose of the analysis is to find the most parsimonious theoretical model with the best model fit to fill this gap in the CSR literature. Thus, the analyses that follow start with the proposed model and subsequently eliminate non-significant parameters (Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009).
Chapter 4

Results

Manipulation Checks

Environmental issue. Among the final set of questions, two questions assessed the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations. First, participants were asked to identify the environmental topic they read about during the study. They were given three answer options: ocean issues, sustainable food/agricultural issues, or none of the above. A crosstabs analysis indicated significant differences in how participants identified the environmental issue they read about, $\chi^2(14, N=408) = 413.05$, $V^* = .71$, $p < .001$.

Message frames. Next, to test the efficacy of the manipulation of message frames, participants were asked to answer the following question: “The message I just read included information that primarily focused on…” Participants were given four response options—each option representing diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational framing—and a “none of the above” option for the control groups that were not exposed to a manipulated message (see Appendix B for exact item wording). For participants who answered questions about a specific issue (sustainable food/agriculture issues), a crosstabs analysis indicated significant differences in how participants identified the message frame to which they were exposed, $\chi^2(9, N=197) = 120.89$, $V^* = .45$, $p < .001$.

Structural Equation Modeling

In order to examine the mediation paths and the multiple steps through which the independent variables influence outcome variables such as reputation, as theorized in Figure 1, a
structural equation model was tested in Amos. Driven by the theoretical frameworks that inform this investigation, a structural model was tested in order to understand the effects of message frames and the three key independent variables (problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement) and the two mediating mechanisms, information seeking and information processing, on outcome variables, including perceived altruism, perceived reputation, and word-of-mouth intention. The attitude toward the company variable was eliminated from structural equation analyses, which will be further discussed a later section.

**Measurement Model.** The full measurement model with nine latent variables was first assessed using a standard confirmatory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation procedure. The factor analysis revealed a moderate fit ($\chi^2 = 2377.38$, DF = 704, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .076, CFI = .878, 90% CI: .073-.080). Table 1 reports the bivariate correlations between all variables of the research interest. As suggested by Kline (2011), the Chi-square test is usually sensitive to the number of parameter estimates. The current full measurement model including entire scale items for each latent variable yields over a hundred parameters to be estimated. Therefore, the chi-square goodness-of-fit test might be too conservative in this case. Based on the cutoff criteria recommended by Hu and Bentler (1999) and Holbert & Stephenson (2002), the root mean square error of approximation estimate (RMSEA) index and the comparative fit index (CFI) both indicate an acceptable measurement model for further analyses.

**Structural Model.** The structural model was then tested and modified based on theoretical considerations. Furthermore, modification indices from the output confirmed such theoretical justifications and further suggested several indirect effects among these variables for model revision. First, although the situational theory of publics initially introduced the three psychological factors–problem recognition, constraint recognition and level of involvement–as
parallel to each other (Grunig, 1997), the three might not take place at the same time, such that individuals wouldn’t necessarily personally identify with and feel involved with any CSR issue unless they recognized the existence of a problem in the first place. Although previous research has not specifically examined causal order among the three independent variables, findings from this investigation suggest that a high level of problem recognition decreases the level of constraint one acknowledges. Similarly, although publics’ perceived reputation of company, attitude toward company, and the word-of-mouth intention are all valued goals corporations have been striving for, the extent to which individuals hold favorable attitudes toward a corporation hinges upon the perceived reputation of the corporation as a result of more information sought (Rim & Song, 2013). Also, per the model, the level of perceived altruism impacts perceptions of company reputation, which ultimately impacts likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication.

Therefore, based on the aforementioned theoretical justifications and the principle of model parsimony suggested by Kline (2011), the final model with bootstrapping of 5000 samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals was proposed (see Figure 3), indicating a good model fit, $x^2 = 45.819$, $DF = 39$, $p = .210$; $CFI = 0.997$; $RMSEA = .021$, 90% CI LO/HI = 0.00/0.42. All paths in this structural equation model were statistically significant at the level of $p < 0.01$. 
Table 1. Correlations among the latent variables tested in the model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Problem Recognition</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Constraint Recognition</td>
<td>-.43**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Level of Involvement</td>
<td>.82***</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Information Seeking</td>
<td>.77***</td>
<td>-.40**</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Systematic Processing</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>-.39**</td>
<td>.71**</td>
<td>.77**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Heuristic Processing</td>
<td>-.12*</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>-.13**</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Word-of-Mouth Int.</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>-.25**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Perceived Altruism</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.13**</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.30**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Perceived Reputation</td>
<td>.19**</td>
<td>-.10*</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.68**</td>
<td>.44**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Figure 2. Measurement model including latent variables to be examined. Standardized results are shown. $\chi^2 = 2377.38$, DF = 704, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .076, CFI = .878, 90% CI: .073-.080.
Framing effects. H1, which predicted that diagnostic message frames would positively predict problem recognition (H1a) and constraint recognition (H1b) and negatively predict level of involvement (H1c), was examined using the structural equation model. Diagnostic framing positively predicted problem recognition ($\beta = .33, p < .001$), thus supporting H1a. As H1c predicted, diagnostic framing negatively predicted level of involvement ($\beta = -13, p < .001$). However, diagnostic framing did not positively predict constraint recognition ($\beta = -.03, p = .68$). Thus, H1b was not supported, indicating that diagnostic message frames did not lead to higher levels of perceived constraints among participants. The insignificant path was therefore removed from the final model.
Figure 3. Final tested structural equation model.

Note: All reported regression weights are standardized. All insignificant paths were removed from the final model. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. ^ insignificant coefficient due to suppression.
H2, which predicted that prognostic message frames would positively predict problem recognition (H2a) and constraint recognition (H2b) and negatively predict level of involvement (H2c), was also partially supported. Prognostic framing positively predicted problem recognition ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), thus supporting H2a. Also, prognostic framing negatively predicted level of involvement ($\beta = -.13, p < .001$), thus supporting H2c. However, prognostic message frames did not positively predict constraint recognition, as H2b predicted ($\beta = -.077, p = .30$). Consequently, the path between prognostic framing and constraint recognition was eliminated from the final model.

H3 predicted that motivational message frames would positively predict problem recognition (H3a), negatively predict constraint recognition (H3b), and positively predict level of involvement (H3c). This hypothesis was supported. According to the structural equation model, motivational framing did positively predict problem recognition ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), thus supporting H3a. Also, H3b was supported, as the model illustrated that motivational message frames negatively predicted constraint recognition ($\beta = -.16, p < .01$). H3c was also supported since constraint recognition worked as a suppressor variable. That is, teasing out the mediation of constraint recognition changed the direction of valence of the relationship between motivational message frames and level of involvement (for reviews on suppression see Conger, 1974; Friedman & Wall, 2005) from a significantly negative association ($\beta = -.15, p < .001$) to an insignificant positive association. This suppression effect suggests that motivational framing positively predicts level of involvement through constraint recognition as a suppressor variable. If the constraint recognition variable is removed, the direct relationship between motivational
message frames and level of involvement becomes negative. That is, individuals who perceive lower levels of constraint recognition will then feel more involved with an issue.

**Predicting information seeking and processing.** H4 predicted that problem recognition and level of involvement would positively predict information seeking (H4a and H4b, respectively) while constraint recognition would negatively predict information seeking (H4c). H4a was supported, as problem recognition positively predicted information seeking ($\beta = .39, p < .001$). That is, individuals who were more acknowledging of the existence of the environmental issue were more likely to engage in information seeking behaviors. H4b was also supported, as individuals who felt more involved with an environmental issue were more likely to engage in information seeking behaviors ($\beta = .20, p < .05$). There was not a significant path from constraint recognition to information seeking, however, ($\beta = .037, p = .48$), thus indicating that H4c was not supported. This indicates that perceptions of constraint about an environmental issue do not necessarily inhibit information seeking behaviors. The path was therefore removed from the model. Also, while the information seeking scale was used in the structural equation model, participants’ information seeking was also measured during the study using a dichotomous question to identify the number of people who indicated they were interested in learning more about the environmental issue to which they were exposed. Table 2 illustrates the percentage of participants who were exposed to information about sustainable food issues who indicated they would like more information about the environmental issue. Table 3 illustrates the percentage of participants who were exposed to information about ocean issues who indicated they would like more information about the environmental issue.
Table 2

Participants’ Information Seeking by Condition for Sustainable Food Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percent indicating information seeking intentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diagnostic ((N = 49))   Prognostic ((N = 51))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you’re interested in learning more about safe, sustainable food issues, please check the box below. More information will be provided at the end of the survey.</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Participants’ Information Seeking by Condition for Ocean Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Percent indicating information seeking intentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diagnostic ((N = 57))   Prognostic ((N = 52))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you’re interested in learning more about ocean issues please check the box below. More information will be provided at the end of the survey.</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

H5 predicted effects on information processing. Specifically, H5a predicted that problem recognition would positively predict information processing while H5b predicted that level of involvement would positively predict information processing. H5c predicted that constraint recognition would negatively predict information processing. The structural equation model illustrates that problem recognition, did, indeed, positively predict systematic information processing (\(\beta = .37, p < .01\)). However, problem recognition did not positively predict heuristic information processing (\(\beta = .095, p = .31\)), thus providing partial support for H5a. Ultimately,
although the arguments from Eagly and Chaiken’s (1993) HSM model indicate that both systematic and heuristic processing can occur simultaneously, this finding suggests that an elevated level of problem recognition leads to systematic processing, not heuristic processing. The insignificant path from problem recognition to heuristic information processing was removed from the final model. Level of involvement positively predicted systematic processing ($\beta = .42$, $p < .001$), but there was not a significant path from level of involvement to heuristic processing ($\beta = -.049$, $p = .95$), thus providing partial support for H5b. Therefore, much like the role of problem recognition in the model, this finding suggests that individuals who felt more involved with an environmental issue processed information systematically, not heuristically. There was a significant path from constraint recognition to heuristic information processing ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), which does not support H5c’s predictions that constraint recognition would negatively predict information processing. There was not a significant path from constraint recognition to systematic information processing ($\beta = .000$, $p = .997$), and thus the path was removed. Although H5c was not supported, this finding ultimately suggests that individuals who perceive more constraints about an environmental issue are more likely to process information heuristically rather than systematically.

**Predicting attitudes and behavioral intentions.** H6 made predictions about the impact of information seeking and information processing on outcome variables such as attitude toward the company (H6a), intention to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (H6b), perceptions of a company’s altruistic intentions (H6c), and evaluations of company reputation (H6d). To answer H6a, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between information seeking and individuals’ attitudes toward the company. Results indicate a weak positive correlation between the two variables, $r(406) = .18$, $p$
<.001. Also, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between systematic information processing and individuals’ attitudes toward the company. Results indicate a weak positive correlation between the two variables, \( r(406) = .12, p < .01 \). Finally, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between heuristic information processing and individuals’ attitudes toward the company. Results indicate that the two variables are not correlated, \( r(406) = -.045, p = .37 \). Therefore, H6a predictions were not supported. Information seeking positively predicted likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (\( \beta = .46, p < .001 \)). There were not significant paths from either systematic information processing (\( \beta = .006, p = .91 \)) or heuristic information processing (\( \beta = -.006, p = .89 \)) to word-of-mouth communication, thus providing support for H6b. That is, results indicate that individuals who engage in information seeking behaviors are more likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication. It also suggests that people who process information only (whether heuristically or systematically) are not necessarily likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication directly (i.e., without a mediating variable). Information seeking led to positive evaluations of General Mills’ altruistic intentions (\( \beta = .33, p < .001 \)). Systematic information processing negatively predicted individuals’ assessment of General Mills’ altruistic intentions (\( \beta = -.24, p < .01 \)), as did heuristic information processing (\( \beta = -.46, p < .001 \)), indicating that only individuals who engaged in information seeking behaviors positively assessed the company with regard to perceptions of altruistic intentions with its CSR efforts. Therefore, H6c was supported. Finally, H6d was not supported, as there was not a significant path directly from information seeking to company reputation (\( \beta = .03, p = .73 \)). However, both systematic (\( \beta = .26, p < .001 \) and heuristic information processing (\( \beta = .45, p < .001 \) positively predicted individuals’ perceptions of
company reputation.

**Role of environmental issue type.** RQ1 asked how the two environmental issue types (general vs. specific) impacted information seeking behaviors and outcomes. That is, RQ1 aimed to determine whether the structural equation model is applicable for both ocean issues and sustainable food/agricultural issues. In order to examine RQ1, model comparisons based on environmental issue type were utilized. Constrained regression weights were used to assess invariance between all paths in the model (Marcoulides, Emrich, & Marcoulides, 2008) and a model with bootstrapping of 5000 samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals was examined, $\chi^2 = 121.328$, DF = 102, $p = .093$, RMSEA = .022, CFI = .991, 90% CI: .000-.035. A chi-square difference test revealed that the test for differences between environmental issue types $\chi^2$ difference = 33.953, DF = 24, $p < .05$ indicated that the regression weights within the model were not invariant for environmental issue type. That is, environmental issue type does not moderate the impact on information seeking behaviors and outcomes. Thus, the final structural equation model that was proposed holds or both environmental issues.

**Summary of Results**

The structural equation model presents a structural model that further showed the causal relationships among the variables and also provides a proposed integrated theoretical model that can be applied in CSR research. In addition to the significant hypothesized paths between variables, the following paths were included in the final model: a significant negative path between problem recognition and constraint recognition ($\beta = -.59$, $p < .001$), a significant negative path from constraint recognition to level of involvement ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .001$), and a significant positive path from problem recognition to level of involvement ($\beta = 84$, $p < .001$), thus suggesting a potential causal order among the three situational theory of publics.
independent variables. Furthermore, a significant positive path was added from systematic information processing to information seeking ($\beta = 34 \ p < .001$). Finally, significant positive paths were added from perceived altruism to reputation ($\beta = 82, \ p < .001$) and from reputation to word-of-mouth communication ($\beta = 64, \ p < .001$), also revealing a relationship between the various outcome variables. The next chapter will interpret these results in light of theoretical mechanisms tested. Both theoretical and practical implications will be discussed.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to apply and test the situational theory of publics and arguments from framing theory in a CSR context to answer questions that are often investigated in CSR research: what and how to communicate CSR efforts to publics. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to theory development in CSR research and to provide insight for public relations practitioners and companies who continue to search for best practices to effectively communicate about social and environmental responsibility with key publics.

One of the primary contributions of this study is its examination of theoretical arguments in a new context to provide a proposed integrated theoretical model that can be further tested and developed in CSR literature. As noted, CSR scholars have examined concepts such as the role of perceived relevancy (S. Kim & Ferguson, 2014) and other factors on consumer behavior (Lee & Shin, 2010), purchase intention (Dodd & Supa, 2011), and likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (Rim & Song, 2013), among others. Furthermore, scholars have widely applied the situational theory of publics in public relations research but not specifically to examine environmental issues in a CSR context. A logical next step toward theory building in this realm is to test new theories and measure new variables not previously examined in CSR literature, which this study aimed to do. This chapter will discuss the main findings and key contributions of this study.

In sum, findings from the study support several of the proposed hypotheses and provide additional insight about the theoretical arguments from Grunig’s (1997) situational theory of publics. Measuring both systematic and heuristic information processing was useful, as the
structural equation model illustrates how systematic information processing leads to information seeking while heuristic information processing does not, for example. In addition, the structural equation model positions word-of-mouth communication as the ultimate outcome variable in this study. A more detailed discussion of these and other results follows.

**Motivational Frames Predict Situational Theory of Publics Arguments**

H1, H2, and H3 tested framing effects. Specifically, the structural equation model indicates that both diagnostic and prognostic frames positively predict problem recognition and negatively predict level of involvement. Neither frame positively predicted constraint recognition, though. Rather, paths were negative but not significant from both diagnostic frames to constraint recognition ($\beta = -.03, p = .68$) and from prognostic frames to constraint recognition ($\beta = -.077, p = .30$). Therefore, results suggest that messages that focus on the core of an issue itself and messages that focus on a company’s effort to develop solutions for an issue have similar effects on the degree to which publics recognize that a problem exists and the degree to which they feel personally involved with the issue. A useful finding about diagnostic and prognostic frames is that study results suggest that these message strategies may be an effective way to heighten awareness about different types of environmental issues. However, as both diagnostic and prognostic message frames negatively predict level of involvement, these message strategies may not be the most useful when attempting to move publics to action about a given environmental issue.

On the other hand, results indicate that motivational message frames—those that include a call to action for publics to be part of the effort to work toward a solution about a given environmental issue—do, indeed, predict situational theory of publics arguments. Grunig’s (1997) original model suggests that high problem recognition and low constraint recognition lead to
active information seeking and information processing, respectively. He also argues that the third predictor variable, level of involvement, increases information seeking. Therefore, as H3 was fully supported, results suggest not only how framing effects impact the three predictor variables in Grunig’s (1997) situational theory of publics model, but also that motivational frames specifically heighten awareness about a problem, reduce perceptions of constraint toward working to overcome the problem, and increase feelings of level of involvement. This suggests that using a motivational message strategy may be most effective in moving publics to action.

**Causal Order Among Situational Theory of Publics Predictor Variables**

Study results provide insight about Grunig’s (1997) situational theory of publics predictor variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. This study aimed to test the model in a CSR context for the first time. As such, hypotheses were developed with the intent to examine how message frames impact problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement among participants. However, the structural equation model includes paths among the three variables that were not hypothesized in this study. As noted, the model includes a significant negative path between problem recognition and constraint recognition (β = -.59, p < .001), a significant negative path from constraint recognition to level of involvement (β = -.19, p < .001), and a significant positive path from problem recognition to level of involvement (β = .84, p < .001), thus suggesting a potential causal order among the three situational theory of publics independent variables. This finding provides a unique contribution to the theoretical arguments and application of the situational theory of publics in CSR literature.

This finding is useful for companies developing message strategies, as it suggests that the problem recognition variable can directly impact both constraint recognition and level of involvement. This adds support to the argument for the effectiveness of using diagnostic or
prognostic frames with regard to how they can heighten awareness about an issue. Therefore, while motivational frames clearly provide potential benefits for companies seeking to move publics to action, it appears that any of the three frames are effective in creating awareness about an issue in general. Interestingly, though, while problem recognition can lead directly to constraint recognition or level of involvement, level of involvement does not appear to impact constraint recognition. That is, while the degree to which one feels involved with an issue effects several parts of the model, involvement cannot reduce feelings of constraint about an issue. This suggests that motivational frames that focus on a call to action for publics should also include information to lower perceptions of constraint among publics.

**Problem Recognition and Level of Involvement Predict Information Seeking**

Following Grunig’s (1997) arguments, H4 predicted that problem recognition and level of involvement would positively predict information seeking while constraint recognition would negatively predict information seeking. With findings suggesting that recognition of the existence of an issue and feeling involved with the issue will lead to seeking information about the issue, it is difficult to draw statistically supported conclusions about the role of constraint recognition. This study applied a new information seeking scale adapted from Yang and Kaylor (2012). In addition, the study measured information seeking by asking participants to actually indicate if they would like more information about the environmental issue they read about during the study. Findings do not provide a clear indication of which message frame is most effective for predicting information seeking, as the percentage of participants who indicated information seeking intentions in the motivational frame for both environmental issues is not substantially higher than individuals who indicated information seeking intentions in diagnostic and prognostic frames. Findings from this study would suggest that a motivational frame should
be most effective in predicting information seeking (as H4a and H4b were supported), but the percentages do not necessarily reflect these arguments. A notable distinction is that the scale adapted from Yang and Kaylor (2012), which is what is used in the structural equation model, asks participants about hypothetical information seeking intentions (e.g., “I will try to seek information about (environmental issue) in the near future”) whereas participants were faced with a “real” decision to indicate if they would like to learn more about the environmental issue in the second measure. Therefore, these findings could suggest that there is a difference between information seeking intentions and actual information seeking and that more attention needs to be devoted to measuring information seeking in CSR studies.

**Information Processing Identifies Different Types of Publics**

This study measured both systematic and heuristic information processing using measures adapted from Kahlor, Dunwoody, Griffin, and Neuwirth (2006). Grunig (1997) predicted that the third predictor variable, level of involvement, “increases information seeking, but it has less effect on information processing” (p. 10). This study provides partial support for Grunig’s arguments because of the differences in how problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement impact systematic information processing and heuristic information processing. Results suggest that problem recognition and level of involvement positively predict systematic information processing. However, it appears that there is a stronger path from level of involvement to systematic information seeking than from level of involvement to information seeking, which does not support Grunig’s (1997) arguments. Again, there is no significant path from constraint recognition to systematic information processing.

However, there were not significant paths from either problem recognition or level of involvement to heuristic information processing, suggesting that the predictor variables impact
different types of processing in different ways. Furthermore, there was a significant path from constraint recognition to heuristic information processing, suggesting that individuals who perceive high levels of constraint about an environmental issue are likely to process information heuristically. The differences between the types of information processing provide clear direction for developing message strategies for different types of publics. It appears that the manner in which individuals process information can be crucial in determining the most effective strategy and predicting outcomes and behaviors. That is, while the structural equation model aims to offer the most effective paths for raising awareness about an issue, lowering constraint, and making people feel involved in an issue, it is equally as important to find strategies for latent publics, or publics that Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined as having low problem recognition and high constraint recognition. Therefore, companies can consider developing strategies that rely on heuristics to appeal to publics who have high constraint recognition.

While examining the relationship between information seeking and information processing was not a key focus of this study, a significant positive path from systematic information processing to information seeking was included in the final model. This provides more insight for how different types of processing may or may not lead to information seeking behaviors.

**Seeking vs. Processing Impacts Attitudes and Behavioral Intentions**

While neither information seeking nor either type of information processing were correlated with the development of attitudes toward the company, information seeking positively predicted likelihood to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication. Information seeking also led to positive perceptions of the company’s altruistic intentions but did not impact perceptions of company reputation. Information processing also did not impact attitude toward
the company or word-of-mouth communication intention. However, both systematic and heuristic information processing negatively predicted perceptions of altruistic intentions and both positively predicted perceptions of company reputation. Here, both systematic and heuristic information processing variables are behaving similarly, while outcomes were very different with regard to how both types of information processing were impacted by problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement.

The findings here clearly illustrate how individuals who actually seek for information are impacted differently than those who simply process information that may be presented to them. Processors are likely to have positive evaluations of company reputation but are unlikely to take the step to spread the word about a company’s reputation. They are also skeptical about the true intentions of a company’s effort, likely because they are simply processing information instead of searching for information that could inform and educate them about a company’s environmental responsibility efforts, for example. Seekers, however, appear to have more faith in a company’s genuine intentions to help the environment, for example, and are likely to spread the word about these perceptions. These findings are useful for pointing out differences in behavioral intention among different types of publics and also for creating strategies that are most effective for information seekers vs. information processors.

Also, significant positive paths were added from perceived altruism to reputation and from reputation to word-of-mouth-communication. This also suggests a causal order among the outcome variables and positions word-of-mouth communication intention as the ultimate outcome variable in the structural equation model. Again, it is important to note that information seekers can directly engage in positive word-of-mouth communication (per the model), but for information processors, perceptions of altruism and/or reputation impact word-of-mouth communication.
communication. Therefore, while information processors may not be as inclined to engage in word-of-mouth communication as information seekers, it is important for companies to acknowledge that a processor’s likelihood to spread the word about a company’s environmental responsibility efforts will be dependent upon how reputable and/or altruistic the company presents itself in communication that may reach the processor. That is, it is important to be clear in communication strategies, especially with the processors who will not take action to search for more information before developing attitudes and behavioral intentions toward a company and its environmental responsibility efforts.

**Environmental Issue Type Does Not Moderate Effects**

This study examined how a company’s communication about environmental issues may impact attitudes and behavioral intentions among publics. Based on a pretest, two environmental issue types were identified and included in the study—a specific issue and a general issue. Because Grunig (1997) noted that different types of publics can emerge in situations, it was important to include more than one environmental issue in the study so as to avoid potential confounding effects of single-issue or hot-issue publics, for example. Furthermore, based on Grunig’s (1997) arguments about the role of the media in forming publics about issues, this study intentionally chose not to use a negative or response-oriented issue or situation. Rather, this exploratory study aimed to examine how different message strategies about a company’s environmental communication efforts impact attitudes and behavioral intentions. With that in mind, the structural equation models revealed that the regression weights were not invariant for the environmental issue type, suggesting that the proposed integrated theoretical model (see Figure 3) can be applied to both issue types in this study.
Theoretical Implications

This study is rich with implications for public relations theory and practice. First, this investigation tests arguments from the situational theory of publics, which has not been examined in a CSR context. Another contribution is the application and measurement of both systematic and heuristic information processing in CSR research. Because of the varied nature of CSR literature and the fact that investigations of the impact of CSR communication have just begun, it can be argued that most CSR research has not focused on different types of information processing. Findings from this study linked information processing (systematic and heuristic) and the situational theory of publics variables (problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement) and revealed how effectiveness of CSR messages can be improved from the whole process of message framing to getting publics to be more actively engaged with environmental issues as information seekers and potentially even word-of-mouth communicators about the company and about the issue. Unlike previous literature, which examines only part of the situational theory of publics model, or measures information seeking and/or processing as dependent variables, this study measured information seeking and systematic and heuristic information processing variables as mediating variables in a model that also included CSR outcome variables as dependent variables. Furthermore, as scholars have problematized the lack of established scales for measuring the situational theory of publics variables (Kruger-Ross & Waters, 2008), the study attempted to disentangle the relationships between the situational theory of publics variables. Part of that process included examining and modifying measures for many of the variables used in this study.

For the situational theory of publics variables, Grunig’s (1997) measures for problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement were adapted for this study.
However, a fifth item adapted from Werder (2006) was added to the problem recognition measure, and it appears this could be included as part of that scale moving forward (Cronbach’s 86). Another contribution to the literature is the application of HSM arguments and measures in the study. As the literature suggests, the measure for information seeking has been varied and often based on a one-item measure (Grunig, 1997; Werder, 2006). This study used Yang and Kaylor’s (2012) five-item scale, which arguably was more reflective of information seeking intention than a one-item scale. However, as noted, this study also measured information seeking by asking participants to indicate if they would like more information about the environmental topic they read about during the study. While the most effective way to measure information seeking in a CSR context is still unclear, this study opens a conversation for potential options for future investigations.

On a related note, this study measured both systematic information processing and heuristic information processing, which provides more insight about how publics process information and how these differences have implications for a company’s CSR communication strategy. Grunig’s (1983) study asked participants to rate on a scale of 1-100 how likely they would be to pay attention to an issue topic, while many studies applying the situational theory of publics did not measure information processing at all. Adapting Kahlor, Dunwoody, Griffin, and Neuwirth’s (2006) measures allowed for a more comprehensive, insightful investigation of information processing as a variable. Results illustrate key differences in how systematic information processors and heuristic information processors develop attitudes and behavioral intentions, which further supports an argument for stronger measurement of information processing in CSR literature.

Finally, the proposed integrated theoretical model addresses gaps in the varied CSR
theoretical framework and provides a foundation for future investigations about the impact of CSR communication and developing effective message strategies. The proposed model also illustrates how different types of message frames impact how people identify and recognize issues, the degree to which they can make a difference in resolving issues, and how involved they feel with an issue. Applying Snow and Benford’s (1988) three core framing tasks—diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing—adds to the model by further examining the many processes that people use to examine information and to form attitudes and behavioral intentions. An important contribution the situational theory of publics offers is the idea that there are various different types of publics that can emerge and evolve at any given time. Therefore, as the integrated model illustrates, there are several theoretical arguments that can be further tested with regard to how to effectively communicate about environmental responsibility to different types of publics.

**Practical Implications**

This study also provides insight for public relations practice. As CSR has become an expectation of companies across the globe and environmental sustainability has emerged as a key business strategy (Bortree, 2014), this study provides direction for companies seeking to develop and/or improve strategies for communicating about environmental issues. Grunig and Hunt (1984) identify four types of publics: nonpublics, latent publics with low problem recognition and high constraint recognition, aware publics with high problem recognition and high constraint recognition, and active publics that have high problem recognition and low constraint recognition. The proposed integrated theoretical model provides insight for developing strategies for each type of public. Missing from Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) early identification of the four types of publics is specific information about the role of level of involvement. Findings from this
study suggest that level of involvement plays a critical role in impacting information seeking and information processing behaviors. An unexpected finding, however, is the lack of significant paths from constraint recognition to several key variables.

Based on study findings, companies are advised to develop message strategies that raise individuals’ acknowledgement of an issue, regardless of what type of public is being targeted. Motivational frames also emerged as the “best practice” for moving publics to action. It is clear that motivational frames can be effective when trying to reduce constraint recognition. Therefore, companies looking to develop message strategies for active publics are advised developing message strategies that encourage action directly from publics rather than distributing problem-focused messages (diagnostic frame) or messages that simply focus on what the company itself is doing to address an issue (prognostic framing).

It is also useful to consider the role of the public relations practitioner in the process, especially when developing message strategies. While framing arguments can help companies craft message strategies, another notable implication for practice is for companies to be cognizant of the role of perceived altruism and perceived reputation and how different publics make different types of evaluations based solely on messages to which they are exposed. This study suggests that information seekers and information processors make different evaluations of companies’ altruistic intentions and how reputable they perceive the company to be, which is important for companies to acknowledge when communicating about environmental responsibility initiatives. Simply stated, results from the study provide suggestions for how companies should attempt to engage with different publics, depending on their level of interest in a particular environmental issue and the manner in which they think about information. Companies are advised to develop messages that call out to publics who are seemingly more
interested in issues and likely to take action with regard to the issues, whereas publics who are not interested or involved in issues would be more likely to develop positive attitudes and behavioral intentions if companies place emphasis on raising awareness about a given issue. These suggestions can provide guidance for companies to consider when developing content for blog posts, social media posts, and various other platforms such as a company newsletter for internal and/or external publics and more.

Limitations

Although this study revealed many interesting findings related to the impact of different environmental message strategies on how people process information and ultimately develop attitudes and behavioral intentions, there are a number of limitations that should be noted. This being a cross-sectional experiment, a major limitation is that it cannot examine long-term effects of message strategies on participants’ attitudes and behavioral intentions. Participants in this study were exposed to a message about an environmental issue, but realistically it is likely that participants would develop long-term opinions about a company’s communication about environmental responsibility. Also, the between-subjects experimental design assigned each group to view one environmental issue. It would be interesting to expose the same group to more than one issue and/or more than one message to observe if repeated exposes about various environmental issues can modify participants’ attitudes and behavioral intentions. Ideally, a longitudinal analysis in which participants are repeatedly exposed to content about a company’s environmental responsibility communication could reveal a more ecologically valid effect of message strategies on how participants process information and develop attitudes and behavioral intentions about environmental issues.

Also, this study used a general population Qualtrics sample, which arguably provides
insights from a more demographically diverse sample than a lab experiment would afford. However, the use of a Qualtrics sample requires a researcher to conduct an experiment online with each participant completing the study in his or her own preferred environment, thus adding noise to the data. While Qualtrics samples can be useful for experimental designs, such as the one used in this study, it is important to note that this sampling method may have had some unique influences on the results and potential selectivity issues with regard to the demographics included in the sample.

There were issues with measurement that could have impacted study findings, as well. The alpha values for constraint recognition (Cronbach’s ρ = .57) and perceived altruism (Cronbach’s ρ = .56) were low. Both measures were adapted from existing scales. The constraint recognition scale was adapted from Grunig (1997) while the altruism scale was adapted from Rifon, Choi, Trimble, and Li (2004). Both scales yielded acceptable alpha values during the pretest, which also used a Qualtrics sample (N = 80). Specifically, the alpha value for constraint recognition was .82, while the alpha value for perceived altruism was .77. Furthermore, a reliability analysis of the final sample data did not reveal benefits to deleting specific items, so the full scales were included when building the structural equation model. Another issue in this study was the attitude toward company measure, which did not load properly in the structural equation model. That is, there were no significant paths to or from this variable, which suggests possible issues with measurement or even that the variable was too similar to the perceived reputation measure, for example. This reinforces the argument that there is a need to further develop and strengthen measurement variables in CSR research.

It is also important to note the challenges that accompany attempts to measure information seeking and information processing. As the limitations of self-reported information
processing are known, it is difficult to measure and distinguish between information seekers and information processors, especially since scholars have argued that people can be both seekers and processors (Grunig, 1983). As noted in the results section, study findings could suggest that there is a difference between information seeking intentions and actual information seeking and that more attention needs to be devoted to measuring information seeking in CSR studies. While this study only measured information processing intentions, future research should examine actual information processing to further explore the relationship between the concepts and to provide more direction for how to effectively measure these variables in CSR research.

Another limitation includes the manipulation check measures. While the manipulations were successful in that they were statistically significant, the wording of the manipulation check measures could be strengthened for a future study. Participants in control conditions in this study were asked to answer manipulation check items, which was not necessary because they were not exposed to any manipulated stimuli. However, given this approach, it is worth noting that participants in the control group struggled to identify that they were not exposed to an environmental issue. Rather, many control group participants incorrectly answered that they were exposed to messages about sustainable food/agriculture issues. A possible explanation for this is that participants in all conditions, including the control groups, were first exposed to a standard message about General Mills, which is a food company. Participants in control conditions may have assumed that they were, in fact, exposed to information about sustainable food/agriculture issues, prompting them to select that answer option. A simple solution for future investigations is to not require control groups to answer a manipulation question. However, simply rewording the manipulation check item could provide more clarity for participants. A similar issue arose with the manipulation check for message frame in that some participants
across all conditions did not properly identify the frame to which they were exposed. Item wording could be strengthened for future investigations. However, another possible explanation is that although the manipulation itself is successful, participants may not know it and/or be able to identify it. Therefore, perhaps a manipulation check for this item is an ineffective measure altogether.

It is also important to consider that this study used a randomly selected *Fortune* 500 company (General Mills). While the questionnaire did measure participants’ previous knowledge and evaluations of General Mills’ reputation, findings suggest that participants in this study had strong knowledge about the company ($M = 6.47$, $SD = .65$) and favorable perceptions of General Mills’ reputation ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.05$), which could account for their generally positive assessments of the company in this study. While using a real company was useful for ecological validity, limitations about the generalizability of the findings for other *Fortune* 500 companies should be considered. Furthermore, it would have been useful to measure participants’ pre-involvement with the environmental issues used in the study.

Also, with regard to the environmental issues used in the study, it is worth noting that there could be potential issues of fit with the two environmental issues selected. Specifically, this study used a general issue (ocean issues) and a specific issue (sustainable food/agriculture issues) to examine participants’ attitudes. While results indicated that there were not significant differences between perceptions of the two issues, the study did not consider potential issues of fit. Therefore, future studies should examine fit as a dimension of CSR research.

Finally, this study tested a new theoretical model in a CSR context for the first time. Conclusions about the relationships among variables are drawn from correlational data, and hypotheses were developed to examine how frames impact the situational theory of publics
variables and then ultimately CSR outcome variables. This study did not include hypotheses for how framing directly impacts outcome variables such as word-of-mouth communication, for example. A future analysis can more deeply explore direct and indirect effects among all the variables, regardless of where the fall within the structural equation model.

**Directions for Future Research**

The exploratory nature of this research prompted the researcher to examine environmental issues in a neutral context. That is, the aim of the study was not to determine who is to blame for the environmental issues or how the media impact perceptions about environmental issues, for example. However, numerous approaches can be taken to elaborate the findings from the study. This model can be tested in a variety of contexts, including crisis communication, ethics in CSR, and across various sectors of industry, to name a few. Also, arguments from framing theory can be further tested and applied depending on the context of a given study. As Hallahan (1999) suggests, a study could take arguments from this investigation and further examine how willing different publics are willing to take risks with regard to acting on environmental issues. Iyengar’s (1991) thematic and episodic framing investigations could be applied to attribute responsibility to environmental issues and how that impacts public perception. As mentioned, the impact of various media outlets could also be a consideration in a future study, as could the impact of framing of issues such as those outlined in Dardis’ (2007) study.

With regard to the situational theory of publics, this study provides a foundation for further applying the model to CSR research. Furthermore, while the approach taken in this investigation was an appropriate test of the situational theory of publics, future studies may find it more useful to apply J-N. Kim and Grunig’s (2011) situational theory of problem solving
model. More insight can be gained by testing both models depending on the context of the investigation and the frames used in a given model.

Future research should also examine more and different types of environmental issues other than the two that were used in this study. Studies could also segment publics prior to an investigation and survey or conduct experimental research on these niche groups. As noted, environmental sustainability is becoming a core business strategy, which creates a need for more dialogue in CSR research and practice about companies’ environmental responsibility communication efforts. More issues should be examined, as should other considerations such as the source and channel through which environmental messages are disseminated to publics. This study did not examine source factors or which message channel(s) would be most effective for creating message strategies using diagnostic, prognostic, or motivational frames. Therefore, a future study might consider testing messages being distributed via social media, websites, newsletters, email, etc., rather than just from a standard blog post from a company.

Finally, this investigation incorporated arguments from HSM to measure information seeking and both systematic and heuristic information processing. While the situational theory of publics model was supported in this investigation, future studies may further examine how people search for and process information by offering arguments that underscore the necessity of examining how people think about messages as an antecedent for CSR effectiveness and how message framing could make a difference in such processes. That is, a future study may reposition these variables in the model by examining information seeking and processing as independent variables that impact problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement.
Conclusions

This study investigates public relations theory in a new context. It proposes a new theoretical model that fills the theoretical gap in our understanding of CSR communication by examining how publics process information and how they develop attitudes, beliefs, and actions with regard to CSR issues. Key insights about measuring variables such as information seeking and information processing provide direction for future research investigations that will strengthen arguments in public relations theory. To do this, public relations scholars can use this research as a stepping stone for conceptualizing more impactful ways of practicing CSR, especially when communicating about environmental responsibility. By further testing the proposed model, companies can develop and refine communication strategies for effectively and efficiently engaging key publics. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research inspires public relations scholars and practitioners to ethically conceptualize CSR best practices for communicating about environmentally responsible efforts.
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Appendix A

Stimuli Examples

Cover Story (All Conditions)

General Mills is an American multinational manufacturer and marketer of branded consumer foods sold through retail stores. General Mills is a company that has food products used by millions of people all over the world. The company markets many well-known North American brands, such as Betty Crocker, Yoplait, Colombo, Totino's, Pillsbury, Green Giant, Old El Paso, Häagen-Dazs, Cheerios, Trix, Cocoa Puffs and Lucky Charms. Its brand portfolio includes more than 89 other leading U.S. brands and numerous category leaders around the world. The company's mission is to nourish lives, communities, and the future. General Mills' mission statement is “To make lives healthier, easier and richer. General Mills is Nourishing Lives.”

- General Mills makes life healthier by helping people manage their weight through products contributing to a heart healthy diet, appropriate whole gain intake and giving the important nutrients.

- General Mills makes lives easier with on-the-go products with convenient packaging and meals.

General Mills makes lives richer with products that help create special moments with family and friends. We continue to work toward our fiscal 2015 goals of achieving significant, measurable improvements in our company’s efforts.
A POST FROM GENERAL MILLS

Our company recognizes that there are many threats to our oceans, and that the world’s fisheries are in crisis. This is a serious problem for companies and consumers alike. Years of chronic overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction have stripped our seas of much of their vitality and productivity. Without swift action, ocean ecosystems will continue to deteriorate, as will the sustenance, jobs, and recreational pleasures they provide. We know that consumers are concerned about what companies are doing in response to these issues and want reassurance that destructive practices can be minimized. Responsible practices are our highest priority, but we acknowledge that these issues raise questions among consumers nonetheless.

Ultimately, these problems are a result of a lack of sustainable fishing practices. For example, catch limits are too often based on politics and industry preferences instead of science. Many of the most popular fish are overfished and more than half of global fish populations are fully exploited while about one-third are overexploited or collapsed. These problems emerge from a lack of responsible practices and constant depletion of many of the most popular fish, such as cod, snapper, and tuna. Fish populations are exploited.

We at General Mills acknowledge that these are serious issues with widespread effects that have emerged from socially irresponsible fishing practices across the United States. Consumers have the right to expect their oceans to be clean. It is clear that these problems pose a widespread threat to our oceans.
A POST FROM GENERAL MILLS

Our company recognizes that there are many threats to our oceans, and that the world’s fisheries are in crisis. This is a serious problem for companies and consumers alike. Years of chronic overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction have stripped our seas of much of their vitality and productivity. Without swift action, ocean ecosystems will continue to deteriorate, as will the sustenance, jobs, and recreational pleasures they provide. We know that consumers are concerned about what companies are doing in response to these issues and want reassurance that destructive practices can be minimized. Responsible practices are our highest priority, but we acknowledge that these issues raise questions among consumers nonetheless.

We at General Mills acknowledge that these are serious issues that need to be addressed with effective and efficient solutions. Consumers have the right to expect their oceans to be clean. Much can be done to solve these problems. We are committed to being part of the solution. We have outlined steps that General Mills plans to take to address these issues effectively:

- We need to continue following our strict guidelines for responsible food practices and continue reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing food waste, and providing a secure, healthy future for food producers.
- We need to continue launching our Food Safety and Public Science Education Academy in various locations across the globe.
- We need to provide consumers with more transparent information about our processes for responsible food sourcing.

Therefore, through careful implementation, we propose solutions to develop and promote the enforcement of responsible fishing practices.
General Issue/Motivational Frame

A POST FROM GENERAL MILLS

Our company recognizes that there are many threats to our oceans, and that the world’s fisheries are in crisis. This is a serious problem for companies and consumers alike. Years of chronic overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction have stripped our seas of much of their vitality and productivity. Without swift action, ocean ecosystems will continue to deteriorate, as will the sustenance, jobs, and recreational pleasures they provide. We know that consumers are concerned about what companies are doing in response to these issues and want reassurance that destructive practices can be minimized. Responsible practices are our highest priority, but we acknowledge that these issues raise questions among consumers nonetheless.

We at General Mills acknowledge that these are serious issues that need to be addressed with effective and efficient solutions. Consumers have the right to expect their oceans to be clean. We are committed to being part of the solution and we call on you, our consumers, to join us in these efforts. As humans, you are the only species that can do something to improve the situation. It is your obligation to protect the environment for yourself and for future generations. You can make a difference through everyday choices and actions. It is up to you to create a brighter future.

Together as partners and concerned citizens, we all can more effectively develop and promote the enforcement of responsible fishing practices. You can all support sustainable fishing by wisely choosing which fish to eat, spreading the word to friends and family, and contacting your lawmakers to make sure they support responsible policies.
A POST FROM GENERAL MILLS

Our company recognizes that there are many threats to our health and environment, such as toxic pesticides on crops, excessive antibiotics in animal agriculture, and contaminants from food packaging. This is a serious problem for companies and consumers alike. We know that consumers are concerned with the increasingly large and frequent outbreaks of foodborne illness across the United States and want reassurance that the food they eat is safe and healthy. The safety of our foods is our highest priority, but we acknowledge that these issues raise questions among consumers nonetheless.

Ultimately, these problems are a result of a lack of sustainable food production, which requires companies to measure and improve use of water, energy, fertilizer, soil, and pesticides. Furthermore, this problem has raised the issue of “food loss”—the astonishing rate of food waste that occurs from farm to fork, resulting in massive losses of natural resources and increased costs. These problems emerge from a dependence of chemical pesticides and fertilizer and a lack of focus on promoting water efficiency, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing food waste, and providing a secure, healthy future for food producers.

We at General Mills acknowledge that these are serious issues with widespread effects that have emerged from socially irresponsible practices across food production companies across the United States. Consumers have the right to expect their food to be safe. It is clear that these problems pose a widespread threat to sustainable food production across the globe.
A POST FROM GENERAL MILLS

Our company recognizes that there are many threats to our health and environment, such as toxic pesticides on crops, excessive antibiotics in animal agriculture, and contaminants from food packaging. This is a serious problem for companies and consumers alike. We know that consumers are concerned with the increasingly large and frequent outbreaks of foodborne illness across the United States and want reassurance that the food they eat is safe and healthy. The safety of our foods is our highest priority, but we acknowledge that these issues raise questions among consumers nonetheless.

We at General Mills acknowledge that these are serious issues that need to be addressed with effective and efficient solutions. Consumers have the right to expect their food to be safe. Much can be done to solve these problems. We are committed to being part of the solution. We have outlined steps that General Mills plans to take to address these issues effectively:

• We need to continue measuring and improving our use of water, energy, fertilizer, soil, and pesticides and continue reducing greenhouse gas emissions, food waste, and providing a secure, healthy future for food producers.
• We need to continue launching our Food Safety and Public Science Education Academy in various locations across the globe.
• We need to provide consumers with more transparent information about our processes for ensuring food safety.

Therefore, through careful implementation, we propose solutions to develop and promote more sustainable food production that will ultimately lead to a better food system for everyone.
Specific Issue/Motivational Frame

A POST FROM GENERAL MILLS

Our company recognizes that there are many threats to our health and environment, such as toxic pesticides on crops, excessive antibiotics in animal agriculture, and contaminants from food packaging. This is a serious problem for companies and consumers alike. We know that consumers are concerned with the increasingly large and frequent outbreaks of foodborne illness across the United States and want reassurance that the food they eat is safe and healthy. The safety of our foods is our highest priority, but we acknowledge that these issues raise questions among consumers nonetheless.

We at General Mills acknowledge that these are serious issues that need to be addressed with effective and efficient solutions. Consumers have the right to expect their food to be safe. We are committed to being part of the solution, and we call on you, our consumers, to join us in these efforts. As humans, you are the only species that can do something to improve the situation. It is your obligation to protect the environment for yourself and for future generations. You can make a difference through everyday choices and actions. It is up to you to create a brighter future.

Together as partners and concerned citizens, we all can hold regulators accountable for protecting public health to promote more sustainable food production. You can help develop and promote more sustainable food production by making healthy, sustainable food choices and lending your voice to the increasing number of us calling for a better food system for everyone.
Appendix B

Measures

*Note: two versions of the questionnaire were developed with language modified for/specific to each environmental issue (ocean issues and sustainable food/agriculture issues). The items below do not reflect the customized language.

Please rate the General Mills company on the following items: (company/brand knowledge)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>4</th>
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<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Unfamiliar</td>
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<td>b. Did not recognize</td>
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<td>c. Have not heard of</td>
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Please rate the General Mills company on the following items (1=Strongly Disagree; 7=Strongly Agree): (perceived reputation)

I think this company is…

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<th>4</th>
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<th>6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Ethical</td>
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<td>b. Socially responsible</td>
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<tr>
<td>e. A good member of society</td>
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The message I just read was primarily about the following issue: (Manipulation check – environmental topic)

a. Oceans
b. Sustainable food/agriculture
c. None of the above

The message I just read included information that primarily focused on: (Manipulation check – frames)

a. IDENTIFYING AN ISSUE. It discussed the IMPACT of the issue and sources of/reasons for the issue.
b. IDENTIFYING COMPANY SOLUTIONS FOR AN ISSUE. Information about how General Mills should develop solutions to the issue.
c. A CALL TO ACTION FOR CUSTOMERS to work together with General Mills to address the issue. The emphasis is on customer participation.
d. None of the above. The message I read did not discuss ____ (environmental issue).

(Problem Recognition)

Based on what I read, I believe there is a problem with ______ (specific issue listed here).

Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly Agree

Please indicate how much you would like to understand the environmental issue better.

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

To what extent would you say you are curious about this problem?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

To what extent do you believe this issue is a serious national problem?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

How often do you stop to think about people who are affected by this problem?

Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Frequently

(Constraint Recognition)

To what extent do you believe this issue is a problem that you can do something about?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

To what extent do you believe that you could affect the way this problem is eventually solve if you wanted to?

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

To what extent do you think this problem is too complicated for you to do anything about? (RC)

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

To what extent would you say that this problem is more difficult for you to understand than other problems? (RC)

Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot
(Level of Involvement)

How strong would you say your opinions are about this problem?
Not strong at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very strong

In your mind, how much of a connection do you see between yourself and this problem?
Not strong at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Very strong

To what extent do you believe this problem could involve you or someone close to you at some point?
Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

How much do you believe this problem affects or could affect you personally?
Not at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 A lot

Please rate the following statements (1=Strongly disagree; 7=Strongly agree). (information seeking)
- I plan to seek information about (environmental issue) in the near future.
- I will try to seek information about (environmental issue) in the near future.
- I intend to find more information about (environmental issue) soon.
- I intend to look for information about (environmental issue) in the near future.
- I will look for information related to (environmental issue) in the near future.

Please rate the following statements (1=Strongly disagree; 7=Strongly agree). (Systematic information processing)
- After I encounter information about this topic, I am likely to stop and think about it.
- If I need to act on this matter, the more viewpoints I get, the better.
- When I encounter information about this topic, I read or listen to most of it, even though I may not agree with its perspective.
- After thinking about this topic, I have a broader understanding.

Please rate the following statements (1=Strongly disagree; 7=Strongly agree). (Heuristic information processing)
- When I see or hear information about this topic, I rarely spend much time thinking about it.
- There is far more information on this topic than I personally need.
- When I encounter information about this topic, I focus only on a few key points.
- If I need to act on this matter, the advice of one expert is enough for me.
Indicate your evaluation of General Mills Inc. by circling the appropriate number on each line:
(Attitude toward company)

a. Bad
b. Unfavorable
c. Unpleasant

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements (1=Strongly Disagree; 7=Strongly Agree): (WOM intention)

a. I would mention General Mills’ environmental responsibility efforts to people.
b. I would say positive things about the company’s environmental responsibility efforts to other people.
c. I would recommend the company’s product or service.

Please rate the General Mills company on the following items (1=Strongly Disagree; 7=Strongly Agree): (perceived altruism)

a. The company engaged in this environmentally responsible initiative because it ultimately cares about the initiative.
b. The company name does not have a genuine concern for the welfare of consumers. (RC)
c. The company really cares about the initiative.
d. The company implemented this environmentally responsible initiative to persuade me to buy its products. (RC)
e. The company implemented the environmentally responsible initiative because it really cares about making a profit. (RC)
f. The company implemented this environmentally responsible initiative because it creates a positive corporate image. (RC)
g. Ultimately, the company benefits by engaging the initiative. (RC)
h. The company implemented this environmentally responsible initiative because it was morally the right thing to do.

Please rate the General Mills company on the following items (1=Strongly Disagree; 7=Strongly Agree): (perceived reputation)

I think this company is…

a. Ethical
b. Socially responsible
e. A good member of society
(Demographics)

What is your age? __________

What is your gender? a. Female   b. Male

What is your highest level of education **completed**? If currently enrolled, choose the highest degree received.
   a. No schooling completed
   b. High school graduate (diploma or GED)
   c. Associate’s degree (AA, AS)
   d. Bachelor’s degree (BA, AB, BS)
   e. Master’s degree (MA, MS, MSW, MBA, M.Ed., etc.)
   f. Professional degree (MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)
   g. Doctorate degree (Ph.D., Ed.D.)

What is your political affiliation?
   a. Democrat
   b. Republican
   c. Independent

My political views are primarily…

Very conservative  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  Very Liberal

Which of the following best describes the area in which you live?
   a. Urban
   b. Suburban
   c. Rural

What is your race?
   a. Asian/Pacific Islander
   b. Black/African American
   c. Hispanic /Latino
   d. White
   e. Other
Holly Ott: Summarized Vita

Education
Doctor of Philosophy, Mass Communication, The Pennsylvania State University, May 2016
Master of Science in Communication Studies, Shippensburg University, May 2008
Bachelor of Arts in Communication/Journalism, Shippensburg University, May 2006

Academic Appointments
Assistant Professor of Public Relations, School of Journalism and Mass Communications
University of South Carolina (Beginning Fall 2016)
Assistant Professor of Public Relations, Department of Communication Journalism
Shippensburg University (2015-Present)
Instructor, Department of Communication Journalism
Shippensburg University (2012-2015)

Select Publications and Book Chapters

Courses Taught
- COM 112: Media Writing
- COM 355: Practicum
- COM 410: Women & the Media
- COM 432: Public Relations Research & Campaigns
- COM 395, 396, 609 & 610: Professional Internships
- COM 491: Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility
- COM 506: Public Relations Strategies
- COM 520: Applied Mass Communications Research

Select Awards
- Top Student Paper in Media Communication, Eastern Communication Association, 2016
- Top (First Place) Paper/Betsy Plank Student Research Award, Public Relations Society of America, Educators Academy Division, 2015
- Top (Third Place) Faculty Research Paper Award, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Small Programs Interest Group, 2015
- Top (First Place) Student Research Paper Award/Betsy Plank Center Award, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Public Relations Division, 2014
- Arthur W. Page Center Legacy Scholar Grant Recipient, 2015