

A Proposed Framework of Corporate Social Responsibility Dimensions and Employees' Unethical Pro-organizational Behaviour: Evidence from Chinese SMEs

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Abstract

Employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviour is an organizational behaviour that is gradually being noticed. Such behaviour, although for the benefit of the organization, may have potential and long-term costs to the organization. Corporate social responsibility has been identified as an important influence on unethical pro-organizational behaviour, but there is a lack of exploration of the dimensional level. This conceptual paper proposes a study which aims to investigate the influence of corporate social responsibility stakeholder dimensions on employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviours in the context of Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises, these stakeholder dimensions include the environment, community, customer, shareholder, supplier and employee. Judgmental sampling is recommended to select target enterprises and respondents from multiple industries. This study is the first to explore the relationship between corporate social responsibility dimensions and unethical pro-organizational behaviour, adding to the research literature on the consequences of corporate social responsibility and the antecedents of unethical pro-organizational behaviour, and has important implications for organizations to engage in corporate social responsibility practices.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Unethical Pro-Organizational Behaviour, China, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, Social Exchange Theory

Introduction

A particular kind of unethical behaviour in organizational phenomena has recently attracted attention. For example, corporate employees deceive the public to commit illegal acts "for the interest of the organization", such as the Sanlu milk powder incident in China (Xiang, et al., 2022); Another example is the unethical behaviours such as cheating and subsidy seeking

through political connection by the management of Chinese new energy vehicle companies for company development (Xiong et al., 2023).

The particular unethical behaviour described above, known as unethical pro-organizational behaviour (UPB), refers to Employee's behaviour that attempts to benefit the organization but violate society's ethical standards (Xiang, et al., 2022; Umphress et al., 2010). UPB is a common phenomenon in organizational behaviour (Luan et al., 2022), which seeks to benefit the organization (Tacke et al., 2023) but may ultimately cause long-term harm to the organization (Tang et al., 2022).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an important influence on UPB, referring to the behaviour to promote social interests in addition to the consideration of corporate interests and legal requirements (Xiang, et al., 2022). Research on CSR, external CSR, and internal CSR (i.e., employee-oriented CSR dimension) as a single independent variable affecting the dependent variable UPB, respectively, has appeared, yet there is no research on the impact of CSR dimensions or a single dimension (other than employee-oriented dimension) on UPB. Research on the effect of CSR dimension variables on other unethical behaviours of employees has appeared (e.g., Luan et al., 2022), and studies on the effect of CSR dimensions such as environment and society on UPB have also been recommended recently (Choi, et al., 2022).

How are CSR dimensions classified in SMEs and what is the relationship between CSR dimensions and employees' UPB? In order to answer these research questions, based on the social exchange theory, this study attempts to explore the effect of the independent variables of CSR dimensions on employees' UPB in the context of Chinese SMEs. In order to achieve the research objectives, judgmental sampling method will be used, and a survey will be conducted among 210 employees from various industries in Chinese SMEs to verify the relationship between each CSR dimension and employees' unethical pro-organizational behaviour.

This study has strong theoretical and practical significance: first, it innovates the antecedent study of UPB and the consequence study of CSR, and the impact of CSR dimensions on UPB is the first time it has been studied; second, it deepens the understanding of corporate social responsibility. CSR has a double-edged sword effect (Nejati & Shafaei, 2023), and companies should comprehensively understand the consequences of engaging in CSR practices. Finally, it promotes companies to focus on and reduce employees' UPB. UPB is a pro-organizational behaviour, but it can negatively affect the long-term interests of the company.

Literature Review

In 2010, Umphress et al (2010) found a special kind of unethical behaviour when studying the influencing factors of unethical behaviour, which is obviously different from the above behaviours and has two unique characteristics. First, it is an unethical behaviour violating the moral rules of the society; second, it is a pro-organizational behaviour with the motivation to benefit the organization, Umphress calls this unethical pro-organizational behaviour (UPB) (Umphress et al., 2010).

The research on unethical pro-organization in the workplace focuses on its antecedents (Mo et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2022). Researchers hope to reduce UPB in enterprises and to reduce the potential long-term costs associated with UPB by studying the factors influencing or forming mechanisms of UPB (Griep et al., 2023; Liao et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). According to the literature review, the antecedents of UPB mainly focus on personal factors, leadership factors and organizational factors.

In recent studies on UPB, personal factors as antecedents are mostly related to personal work, such as embeddedness (Landry et al., 2023) quantitative and qualitative job insecurity (Xu et al., 2022), language proficiency (Shen et al., 2022) and so on. There is a growing body of research on leadership factors, the influence relationship between UPB and servant leadership, empowering leadership, transformational-transactional leadership, ethical leadership, charismatic leadership have all been studied. For example, Honglei Wang discussed team-level empowering leadership that produces organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) when perceived obligation is high, while producing UPB when perceived obligation is low, which proves the existence of empowering leadership's dark side (Wang et al., 2023). A large number of studies on organizational factors emerged, such as Abusive supervision (Yan et al., 2023), high-performance work systems (Jabari et al., 2023), high-commitment human resource management (Song & Christian, 2023), power distance orientation (Li et al., 2023), performance-approach goal orientation (Mo et al., 2022) and so on.

Corporate social practice (CSR) is considered to be an important organizational factor affecting UPB. In recent years, micro-CSR has begun to attract scholarly interest and is emerging (Latif et al., 2022). Unlike macro-CSR, micro-CSR focuses on the effect on employees' attitudes and behaviours (Zonghua et al., 2022). In most cases, CSR is considered to promote beneficial behaviours such as prosocial behaviour (Alfirević et al., 2023) and pro-environmental behaviour (Deng et al., 2022; Latif et al., 2022). CSR is also believed to inhibit unethical behaviour, such as cheating behaviour (Luan et al., 2022) and opportunistic behaviour (Chen et al., 2023).

Unethical pro-organizational behaviour is also affected by CSR. Xu Wang et al (2022) and Dadaboyev et al (2022) investigated the effect of external CSR on UPB in Chinese SMEs and on the MTurk online platform, respectively (Dadaboyev, Choi, et al., 2022; X. Wang, Xiang, et al., 2022). Yin et al (2021) explored the impact of internal CSR on UPB in the context of Chinese manufacturing industry (Yin et al., 2021). Zonghua et al (2022), on the other hand, explored the relationship between CSR and UPB in an industry-wide context (Zonghua et al., 2022). The findings on the impact of CSR on UPB are also not unanimous, with the first three studies demonstrating an indirect positive effect of CSR on UPB, whereas the fourth study demonstrated a direct negative effect of CSR on UPB. The results of previous studies on the relationship between CSR and UPB are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

The Results of Previous Studies on the Relationship between CSR and UPB

Author/Year	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	CSR & UPB	Industrial Context
(Zonghua et al., 2022)	Perceived SCR	UPB	Directly negative	New ventures in China
(C. Yin et al., 2021)	Perceived Internal CSR	UPB	Indirectly Positive	Manufacturing in China
(Dadaboyev et al., 2022)	Perceived External CSR	UPB	Indirectly Positive	Various occupation on MTurk
(X. Wang, Xiang, et al., 2022)	Perceived External CSR	UPB	Indirectly Positive, Directly Insignificant	SME in China

Given the inconclusive findings, research on the relationship between CSR and UPB continues to be of great value. Some scholars have suggested studying the effect of CSR dimensions on UPB (Dadaboyev et al., 2022), yet no research has been found on the effect of CSR dimensions or a single dimension (other than employee orientation dimension) on UPB, although there have been studies on the relationship between CSR dimensions and other employee unethical behaviours (e.g., Luan et al., 2022).

This study focuses on the division of the dimensions of employees' perceived CSR in the SME context. Collating recent research on employees' perceived CSR on employees' attitudes or behaviours in SME or industry-wide contexts, it is found that the division of CSR dimensions is different. For example, Andreas Kallmuenzer (2023) studied the effect of CSR on employees' identification and commitment in Austria and indicated that CSR could be classified into three categories: employees, community and environment (Kallmuenzer et al., 2023). Luan (2022) investigated the relationship between CSR and cheating behaviour in China and classified CSR into four categories: employee, environment, community, and consumer (Luan et al., 2022).

Bayode (2022) focused on the relationship between CSR and turnover intention in Nigerian, arguing that CSR is divided into six dimensions (Bayode & Duarte, 2022), and they are employees, customers, environment, shareholders, community and supplier. Bayode (2022) cited the six dimensions of CSR and their scales developed by El Akremi for the whole industry (El Akremi et al., 2018). This dimensional approach covers a wider range of stakeholders Bayode & Duarte (2022) and will be the one adopted for this study.

Research Methodology

The future research can follow the research paradigm of positivism and quantification, and it is suggested to adopt judgmental sampling to select target enterprises and respondents from multiple industries based on the Chinese government's criteria for identifying small and medium-sized enterprise. As mentioned earlier, the survey instrument for independent variables CSR dimensions can be used the scale of El Akremi et al (2018). The scale covers six dimensions of customer, environment, shareholder, community and supplier, with 35 items, and each of them used a 6-point Likert-type scale (El Akremi et al., 2018). The survey instrument for dependent variable UPB can be used the scale of (Xu et al., 2022). The scale is adapted from Umphress et al (2010), which is more applicable to the Chinese SME context, and consists of 4 items, also used a six-point Likert scale (Xiang, et al., 2022; Umphress et al., 2010).

A Proposed Conceptual Framework

In order to investigate the relationship between CSR dimensions and employee UPB, a proposed conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1.

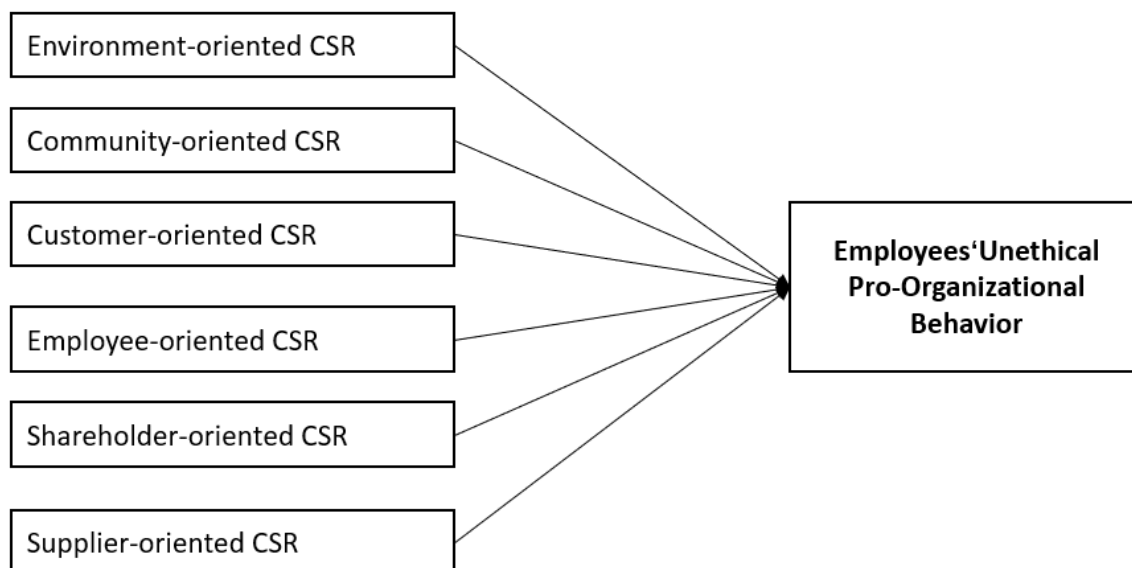


Figure 1. The Proposed Conceptual Framework

CSR affects UPB with inconclusive findings, and the relationship between them can be examined from a more micro perspective. This framework will be of value in examining the impact of segmented CSR perceptions toward each stakeholder on employee UPB (El Akremi et al., 2018). However, the important stakeholders in each organization are not consistent and the CSR dimension segmentation is not unique, which also poses a challenge for research in this area.

Conclusions

Previous studies have called for more research on CSR on employee UPB. In response, this study developed a model to examine the impact of the six dimensions of CSR on employee UPB. It is recommended that organizations should consider the impact on their own corporate employees, especially unethical pro-organizational behaviours, when engaging in CSR practices toward stakeholders such as the environment, community, customers, shareholders, suppliers, and employees.

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