



Constructing Care-Based Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparison of Fortune 500 Companies in China and the United States

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzes new opportunities for CSR development, and companies in both China and the US, the two largest economies severely impacted by the pandemic, are seeking innovative ways to engage with publics on social media through CSR communication. This study draws on the care ethics theory to examine different manifestations of care values in corporations' CSR messages and their relationships with publics' behavioral and emotional engagement on social media. A quantitative content analysis of Weibo and Twitter posts from Fortune 500 companies in China ($n=30$) and the United States ($n=30$), respectively, revealed that companies in both countries employ multifaceted care-based CSR messages, but in distinct ways and with varying types and levels of public engagement on social media. We interpreted the differences from institutional, cultural, and relational perspectives. The results of this research add to theorizing CSR communication from a feminist ethical viewpoint and with contextualized interpretations. Our findings also guide post-pandemic CSR communication development, particularly relevant to public relations practitioners in the Chinese and US markets.

Keywords Ethics of care · Corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication · Social media · Public engagement · China · United States

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been sweeping the world since 2020, posing unprecedented challenges to all aspects of society and serving as a potential catalyst to rethink “newly emerging and still amorphous responsibilities” of business in society (Uysal, 2022, p. 209). Companies are dancing in shackles as a driving force of social change during the pandemic. In particular, companies face changing assumptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in terms of stakeholder expectations, increased societal risk and uncertainty, and the refined political role of private enterprises in social governance (Crane & Matten, 2020). Research examining CSR during the pandemic is desperately needed to broaden the conceptualization of CSR and shed light on the new possibilities that companies can make meaningful impacts on stakeholders and society (Crane & Matten, 2020; He & Harris, 2020).

Communication scholars argue that the existence, value, and meaning of firms' CSR rely on whether it is effectively communicated to satisfy stakeholders' needs and expectations for ethical businesses (Elving et al., 2015; Shumate

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& O'Connor, 2010). While CSR researchers continually emphasize ethics as a prerequisite for CSR and a determinant of stakeholder inclusion (Oruc & Sarikaya, 2011; Sila, 2022), ethics has rarely been explicitly studied and conceptualized in CSR communication literature (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Admittedly, CSR and CSR communication can benefit from various ethical frameworks, such as deontological ethics and virtue ethics (Chakrabarty & Erin Bass, 2015; Shim et al., 2017; Schultz & Seele, 2020; Wen & Song, 2017). This study defines CSR communication as “a public relations function that privileges relationship building” within the framework of care ethics (Formentin & Bortree, 2019, p.3) to emphasize the particular setting of a worldwide pandemic in which caring relationships are encouraged (Branicki, 2020).

Care ethics, also known as the ethics of care, refers to a feminist moral philosophy emphasizing relationship building, interconnectedness, mutuality, protection of vulnerability, and situational consideration in ethical deliberation (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1998). A care-based CSR communication suggests that human flourishing, mutuality, and trust are essential in stakeholder relationship building through CSR activities (Formentin & Bortree, 2019; Harrison, 2021; Ihlen & Heath, 2019). Care-based communication is also important during crises to express corporate empathy, compassion, and humanity, which stakeholders appreciate and can improve stakeholder engagement (e.g., Branicki, 2020; Kong & Belkin, 2021). This care-based concern resonates with the pandemic when society is emotionally drained and expects more genuine and authentic interactions with companies to build long-term relationships (He & Harris, 2020). Additionally, the multifaceted nature of CSR is widely recognized (Dahlsrud, 2008). However, how care is manifested in CSR messages remains largely unexplored empirically. In order to progress toward a more contextualized conceptualization of CSR, it is meaningful to investigate how CSR is communicated in different societies with distinctive political and cultural characteristics (Aguinis, 2011; Van Marrewijk, 2003). Nevertheless, the contextualized understanding of CSR communication during the COVID-19 pandemic is still limited.

To answer the call for more exploration of the changing dynamics of CSR under the impact of COVID-19 (He & Harris, 2020), we use the ethics of care as a theoretical framework to guide the search for changing assumptions about CSR through a communication lens and from a cross-national comparative view. Specifically, we examined whether and how companies in China and the US, two culturally distinct large economies severely impacted by the pandemic, demonstrate care ethics in their CSR messages on social media. Additionally, we examined the relationships of various care-based CSR messages on public engagement on social media. In particular, we focused on both behavioral and emotional engagement as indicators of publics'

different reactions to care-based CSR messages. Furthermore, we investigated how publics in China and US engage differently with care-based CSR messages.

This study advances ethical CSR communication scholarship in three unique ways. First, this study advances CSR communication research by proposing care ethics as a promising theoretical framework. Care ethics can lead the search for more humanistic CSR communication practices that correspond with the evolving public expectations for businesses due to the pandemic. Second, the findings of this study justify the critical role of social media in care delivery and offer an analytical tool for CSR through computer-mediated communication by empirically testing the relationships between the different manifestations of care in CSR messages and both behavioral and emotional public engagement on social media. Third, this research compares and contrasts the manifestations and the relationships between caring manifestations and public engagement on social media in China and the US, offering contextualized and nuanced insights regarding business communication efforts embracing ethical and social responsibility values. Practically, these findings provide a path ahead for post-pandemic CSR development and aid practitioners in being context-aware when integrating care into public engagement via strategic CSR and social media communication in a global market.

Literature Review

Care Ethics from A Communicative Perspective

A variety of theories of ethics have been studied in CSR and CSR communication research, such as utilitarian ethics, virtue ethics, and deontological ethics (Chakrabarty & Erin Bass, 2015; Wen & Song, 2017). These ethical theories provide different angles to evaluate corporations' moral behaviors. Utilitarian ethics emphasizes the impacts and consequences of CSR activities relevant to the company. Arvidsson (2010) surveyed and interviewed management teams of large listed corporations and found that investor relations managers are driven by utilitarianism or consequentialism to engage in CSR activities because CSR disclosure responds to stakeholders' needs and serves as a preventive measure against potential adverse consequences such as public skepticism, boycotts, and other unfavorable behaviors. However, such moral deliberation in CSR communication is warranted as a “somewhat deceptive balancing act” (Arvidsson, 2010, p. 350) as it does not show corporations' genuine intentions of CSR in its pursuit of social betterment. Virtue ethics, derived from Aristotle's moral philosophy, suggests that CSR communication is driven by the moral characters of an organization or individuals within the organization (Chakrabarty & Erin Bass, 2015; Schultz & Seele, 2020).

CSR communication is viewed as virtuous when it is aligned with corporate characters and identities. Virtue Ethics, being centered around character, frequently faces criticism for its idealistic nature and potential individual biases in acting virtually (Schultz & Seele, 2020). In addition, the virtual identity of a firm is difficult to access because corporate identity is heterogenous and complicated, involving diverse values, attributes, and characteristics of leaders and employees (Van de Ven, 2008). Deontological ethics, which originates from Kantian moral philosophy, gives precedence to ethical actions that align with rules, regulations, laws, and norms (Chakrabarty & Erin Bass, 2015). It supports the altruistic intentions of CSR and ensures the consistency of CSR communication (Bowen et al., 2017; Shim & Kim, 2021). Nevertheless, due to the complex nature of CSR and its implementation across diverse social, cultural, and institutional contexts, achieving such ethical absolutism can be impractical (Schultz & Seele, 2020).

In recent years, the ethics of care has emerged as an alternative moral guideline for corporate communication. The ethics of care, also known as care ethics, was officially established by Carol Gilligan in her work *In a Different Voice* (1982), which differentiated females' moral reasoning process from males. Ethics of care propose a feminist approach to a normative moral theory originally dominated by male voices (Branicki, 2020; Held, 2006; Steiner, 2009). The theory posits that care is the foundation of moral judgment and behavior, emphasizing connections, interdependence, mutuality, responsiveness, and vulnerability concerns in ethical deliberations. Unlike rule-based and universal morality, the ethics of care prioritizes the situational needs for care and emphasizes compassion, empathy, and emotion in moral decisions (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). The ethics of care is analogized to mother–child affinities, showing a robust relational ontology in defining moral agents (Pettersen, 2011). Despite its feminist roots, care ethics should not be limited to gendered ethics but should be applied to various broader societal circumstances. According to Tronto (1993), everyone may benefit from a caring approach since care ethics analyzes the real-world environment that determines relationships. Robinson (1999) suggests that care is associated with environment and social connections, which should not be narrowed to individuals' psychological disposition. Furthermore, previous research indicated that care values are less gender-specific but more culture-specific, indicating the need to explore variant care ethics in globalization (Vikan et al., 2005).

The ethics of care has gauged interdisciplinary research interests from fields such as healthcare and medical service (Hem et al., 2018), education (Owens & Ennis, 2005), social work (Dybicz, 2012), management (Sila, 2022), and public affairs (Sevenhuijsen, 2003). Although these studies show vast and diversified connotations of care, a consensus is that

the caring process cannot be completed without proper and efficient communication with the intended audience (Dong & Morehouse, 2022). Communication is an integral part of care ethics delivery as it bridges the caregivers and care receivers and facilitates the transfer of caring values and practices between them (Held, 2006). While the ethics of care has rarely been explicitly conceptualized in communication theories, communication scholars have incorporated care values and practices into various contexts where organizations are perceived as primary caregivers and caring communicators.

It is important to note that CSR communication can be conveyed through various forms and channels, including but not limited to CSR reports, annual reports, corporate-owned websites and social media platforms, news releases, and campaigns. Many of these CSR communication activities are managed by public relations practices (Bartlett, 2011). In public relations literature, care is emphasized as an important ethical consideration that informs dialogue, two-way communication, and organization-public relationship management. The dialogic approach indicates caring and human flourishing as it facilitates a negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions (Kent & Taylor, 1998) and “ethical give-and-take” between organizations and publics (Lee et al., 2014, p. 157). Many studies found that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter offer various interactive tools that can enhance dialogues with stakeholders and humanize organizations by building relationships with organizations at a personal level (Lee et al., 2014; Men & Tsai, 2012; Wang & Yang, 2020). Dong and Morehouse (2022) interviewed local government communicators and proposed a care-based relationship cultivation model that explicitly theorizes care as a moral significance for organization-public relationships (Browning & Yang, 2022).

Business ethics research has applied the ethics of care to improving internal communication and employee engagement (Cludts, 1999; Kong & Belkin, 2021; Lemon & Boman, 2022; Paillé et al., 2016). Nicholson & Kurucz (2019) incorporated the ethics of care in relational leadership development, suggesting that leaders play the role of “a meaning enabler, change agent, coach, and architect” (p. 31) through co-created dialogues and conversations with employees. Jammaers (2022) used the ethics of care to guide ethical HR practices for disability inclusion. Focusing on corporations' ethical discourses, Hoover and Pepper (2015) investigated the ethical statements of the “100 Best Companies to Work For” and found that language stressing different points of view, emotional appeals, relationships, and the human condition represented care ethics.

COVID-19 provides a unique context that can amplify the value of care-based, relational communication (Uysal, 2022). Many studies have shown the value of care in dealing with sensitive and emotionally charged issues, such as aging

(Lloyd, 2010), disease (Evans & Thomas, 2009), and family violence (Held, 2010). COVID-19 is one of the deadliest public health outbreaks in history, which has a long-lasting impact on people's mental health due to multiple stressor factors, such as loneliness, isolation, fear of infection, and grief. Statistics show that global anxiety and depression surged by 25% in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2022), suggesting a greater societal need for care and support.

As Branicki (2020) suggested, traditional crisis management may not apply to COVID-19 due to the long-run crisis impact and complexity in the crisis context. In contrast, feminist ethics has more practical advantages to managing socially disruptive extremes because it highlights the web of interpersonal connections, diversified and customized needs, and ongoing attention to relationships (Branicki, 2020). Relationships, humanity, and human flourishing are particularly relevant to crisis management (Simola, 2003). Many empirical studies have demonstrated that during the pandemic, showing care, empathy, and compassion in internal communication is vital to satisfying employees' psychological needs and improving engagement (Kong & Belkin, 2021; Men et al., 2022; Tao et al., 2022).

Taken together, the existing communication literature emphasizing care ethics or a caring approach offers three key insights into communicative care ethics: (1) care ethics is communicable and can be inferred from an organization's messages and relational strategies; (2) social media can be a promising channel to deliver organizations' care-expressing communication, and (3) care is of practical importance to crisis communication.

CSR Communication

CSR can be understood as the ethical use of corporate resources to benefit communities, the environment, and society (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014). From a stakeholder theory perspective, CSR concerns businesses' quality relationships with diverse stakeholders, such as employees, customers, investors, and local communities, implying that corporations have a fundamental moral obligation to be caregivers (Engster, 2011). André (2016) suggests that care ethics is an important prerequisite for stakeholder inclusion and influences CSR perceptions. Freeman and Liedtka (1991) also argued that CSR needs to be reconceptualized through the care lens as it allows companies to become places where individuals can engage in caring activities to receive mutual support and achieve personal accomplishment. Emerging studies have begun to examine CSR through the feminist view, suggesting care ethics offer a normative perspective to assess CSR values and practices (Formentin & Bortree, 2019; Harrison, 2021; Lantos, 2002). Lantos (2002) argued that care is an essential indicator of altruistic CSR, showing

that companies are genuinely concerned about a wide range of stakeholders' benefits. Despite the inherent connection between CSR and care ethics (Freeman & Liedtka, 1991), care ethics has received inadequate scholarly attention in CSR communication research.

CSR communication generally refers to any communication effort designed and distributed by a company about its CSR endeavors (Morsing, 2006). While companies engage in various CSR activities, they consistently struggle with delivering the CSR efforts to the intended audience and justifying their legitimacy, making effective communication the key to CSR success (Du et al., 2010). Current CSR communication scholarship can be generally categorized into either an instrumental approach or a constitutive (Crane & Glozer, 2016; Golob et al., 2013; Schoeneborn & Trittin, 2013). The instrumental approach is grounded in marketing and management literature, treating CSR communication as a strategic tool to help achieve organizational goals or benefits, such as reputation management, employee engagement, or consumers' purchase intention (e.g., Du et al., 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2006). The constitutive approach argues that CSR communication should be a dialogic, negotiated, sensemaking, and relationship-building process where both organizations and stakeholders co-create the meaning of CSR rather than using CSR communication to achieve managerial control, consistency, and consensus (Schultz et al., 2013).

Although the two approaches reflect opposing epistemological perspectives, they are not mutually incompatible. In the realm of public relations, their lines are becoming more blurred. CSR communication scholarship is fruitful and heterogeneous, given its interdisciplinary nature. Public relations, along with marketing, advertising, management, and others, is one of the fields that contribute to the knowledge of CSR communication (Ihlen et al., 2011; Golob et al., 2013; Ji et al., 2021). In contrast to business scholars, public relations scholarship emphasizes the interaction between businesses and publics and highlights public engagement as a positive consequence of CSR communication rather than economic-oriented outcomes, such as financial returns (Bartlett, 2011).

As CSR continues to grow as an institutional norm, it demands companies to meet stakeholder pressures and create shared-social values. Kim (2022) describes the convergence of instrumental and normative CSR approaches as "the hybrid instrumental approach," which is natural and perhaps inevitable in the practice of public relations (p. 15). The hybrid instrumental approach focuses on relationship-based and stakeholder-focused variables as the optimal outcomes of CSR communication, such as stakeholder feedback and dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2016), public engagement (Hung-Baesecke et al., 2016), and organization-public relationship quality (Lee et al., 2019; Lim & Jiang, 2021). These outcomes show both organization-centric and public-centric

perspectives in defining the strategic value of CSR communication. The integration of instrumental and constitutive approaches is increasingly evidenced in public relations scholarship. For example, based on the expectancy violation theory, Kim (2019) proposed and empirically tested the CSR communication process model, which explicates the impacts of different CSR communication strategies (i.e., transparency, informativeness, consistency, personal relevance, and message tone) on corporate reputation. This model represents the hybrid instrumental approach because while it treats corporate reputation as the optimal outcome, a great emphasis was placed on the importance of public pressure and expectation in constructing strategic and ethical CSR communication strategies.

Conceptualizing Care-Based CSR Communication

Guided by the hybrid instrumental approach (Kim, 2022), we argue that the ethics of care provides a valuable normative framework to challenge companies to perform strategic CSR communication more ethically. CSR communication is not an arbitrary decision but represents organizations' deliberate efforts in building relationships and engaging with stakeholders (Kim, 2019; O'Riordan & Fairbrass, 2014; Yang & Ji, 2019). Care ethics and CSR share common ground in stakeholder relationship management, serving as a conduit for building responsible and meaningful relationships between businesses and communities (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Thus, CSR communication can be understood as a function of ethical relationship-building with stakeholders (Formentin & Bortree, 2019). Admittedly, due to information asymmetry, publics and stakeholders may be unable to discern corporate motives solely based on the CSR messages disclosed. However, they can assess whether and how care ethics are expressed in CSR messages and use this information to infer corporate intentions, form corporate-related perceptions, and engage with CSR communication. Thus, identifying the manifestations of care in CSR messages is an essential first step to developing care-based CSR communication.

The current CSR communication scholarship offers limited knowledge of the typology of care. Focusing on CSR partnership management, Formentin and Bortree (2019) found that care values and practices manifested as trust, mutual concerns, human flourishing, and responsiveness are privileged by nonprofits when building relationships with sports organization partners. Harrison (2021) studied how corporations disclose charitable partnerships on websites and found that firms failed to balance charities' interests by giving them deserved visibility and credibility. These studies have offered meaningful interpretations of care in the context of CSR communication. However, the manifestations of care have not been clearly identified at the message

level. More empirical evidence is still necessary to further explore the demonstration of care and the impacts of care-based CSR messages through social media communication. As Petterson (2011) suggested, the interplay of context and value contributes to the development of care ethics, which helps overcome empirical challenges and balance the merits of contextualized and universal perspectives. Thus, it is critical to investigate care ethics within a particular context to establish a connection between philosophical assumptions about care values and practical and effective caring activities (Branicki, 2020). While insufficient attention has been given to ethics and its role in CSR communication, we seek to synthesize scholarship on the classic theory of care ethics, CSR, and public relations, with a focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, to assist in theorizing care-based CSR communication.

Attentiveness

Attentiveness is defined as the act of placing oneself in the shoes of another, implying that caring for someone requires an understanding of the whole person via listening in order to adequately meet their needs (Bozalek et al., 2014; Tronto, 1993). Tronto (1993, 1998) characterized attentiveness as care about, the first phase in the caring process, demonstrating that a caregiver perceives the need for care exists. Attentiveness mirrors the stakeholder approach of CSR, which emphasizes that businesses should go beyond their own interests to address the needs of stakeholders (Jamali, 2008). It also reflects organizations' sensitivity to the external environment and the ability to effectively internalize the observation to make ethical and socially responsible decisions (Dawson, 2018). As stakeholders adapt to a new way of life and work during the pandemic, attentiveness is a critical sign of firms' care, as it can be executed through communication by actively detecting stakeholders' situational demands in order to create novel CSR activities.

Responsibility

Responsibility is what Tronto (1993) referred to as "caring for" (p. 34), suggesting that a qualified caregiver should acknowledge their moral duties in addressing the identified needs. Responsibility shows an organization's commitment to providing caring practices, but it allows flexibility in negotiating activities necessary to satisfy specified requirements, showing situational variances (Bozalek et al., 2014). The responsibility principle pushes companies to acknowledge their CSR plans publicly. Past research found that companies show responsibility via CSR communication by disclosing their inputs and results from CSR initiatives, eliciting more positive responses from the public on social media (Ju et al.,

2021). COVID-19 was unexpected and disruptive, and both the general public and companies were unprepared for the outbreak (Branicki, 2020). As a result, it is essential to establish caring manifestations of organizations by conveying the information about which social responsibilities are recognized and assigned personnel to help stakeholders navigate through the uncertain environment.

Competence

While responsibility focuses on acknowledging moral duties, competence emphasizes that the actual care practice is properly done and needs for care are met (Tronto, 1993). Good intentions drive caregiving, but they are not enough for the care tasks to be successfully accomplished. In fact, as Tronto (1998) argued, “competence is the moral dimension of caregiving. Incompetent care is not only a technical problem, but a moral one” (p. 17). Several CSR communication studies (Kim, 2014a, 2014b; Kim & Rader, 2010) treated corporate ability and CSR as two distinctive corporate associations, showing different focuses in corporate communication strategies. Corporate ability is corporate-centric and is usually associated with a company’s capacity and expertise relevant to its products and services. Whereas, CSR communication focuses on noncommercial, society-oriented contributions. Recent research, however, argues that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the tension between the complex nature of stakeholders’ needs and the limited resources and energy that businesses have to address these needs efficiently. Thus, it is critical for businesses to develop “strategic agility” and “dynamic capability” when committing to social responsibilities (Zhao, 2021, p. 8). From the stakeholders’ perspective, communicating about competence signifies the scope of companies’ CSR in terms of the actual investment or performance related to the CSR claims. Such proof matching companies’ talk and walk is critical to set realistic stakeholder expectations for CSR and building trust relationships between companies and stakeholders (Zhou & Dong, 2021).

Responsiveness

Responsiveness is labeled as the last stage of Tronto’s caring process, requiring the caregiver to pay attention to the responses from care receivers after a care practice is complete (Tronto, 1993). Thus, responsiveness leads to a new circle of care, starting with attentiveness. Responsiveness can be a complex moral burden because situations change as care is provided, which might breed new issues and demands for care (Tronto, 1998). The responsiveness criteria of care ethics align with the relational perspective of CSR. Care ethics involves developing relationships, dialogue, and stakeholder involvement (Verk et al., 2021). As Morsing and

Schultz (2006) noted, incorporating stakeholders in CSR discussions demonstrates a high level of strategic thinking. Previous research also found that inviting stakeholders to join dialogue leads to positive CSR perceptions (Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018). From a communicative perspective, CSR scholars believe that an ethical organization would facilitate the co-creation of CSR by inviting perspectives from diverse publics, even when the public interests conflict with those of the company (Schultz et al., 2013).

Emotional Connection

Care theorists stress that establishing emotional connections with care recipients is crucial for creating caring behaviors (Held, 2006). Care ethics encourages interdependence, which is established largely through emotional ties (Held, 2006). Ethical decisions should include both “the thoughts and emotions of those individuals interacting communicatively with one another” (Gilstrap & Minchow-Proffitt, 2017). Strategic communication allows organizations to build emotional connections with publics by expressing concerns, well-wishes, or memorials to keep publics emotionally gratified (Houston et al., 2015). In the business setting, Oruc and Sarikaya (2011) suggested that emotions are legitimate concerns in care-based stakeholder relationship building. Many CSR studies have found that empathetic, emotion-attached, supportive, and motivational communication takes care of employees’ psychological wellbeing and improve employee engagement (Lemon & Boman, 2022; Men et al., 2022; Tao et al., 2022). As COVID-19 continues to flare public need for emotional support (Huang et al., 2022), a socially responsible organization should acknowledge the importance of interpersonal connections (Held, 2006; Tao & Kim, 2017). Caring communication should involve ongoing, open, and authentic communication to respond to situational needs and keep sensitive to others’ feelings (Simola, 2003).

Human Voice

Previous study has emphasized the necessity of interacting with the public on social media in a human and personalized way during times of crisis (e.g., Crijns et al., 2017; Park & Cameron, 2014; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Some scholars view the human voice as a substitute for genuine interaction between organizations and publics (e.g., Avidar, 2013; Dhanesh, 2017; Kent & Li, 2020). Human voice was about “the pure sound of the human voice, not the elevated, empty speech of the corporate hierarchy” (Searls & Weinberger, 1999, p. 7). Companies used to adopt an “organizational voice” in mass-mediated communication with consistent, formal, and persuasive messages (Javornik et al., 2020). However, the advent of social media has allowed the use of human voice, including features that reflect social media

affordances, welcome conversational communication, and provide prompt feedback. It also has qualities that reveal an organization's care for publics and commitment to relationships, including treating others as human, admitting mistakes, being open to dialog, and communicating with a sense of humor (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). As such, both the organization and publics are viewed as real human beings instead of faceless communicators (Javornik et al., 2020). According to Liebrecht et al., (2021), personal greeting (i.e., hi, hello, dear) and personal addressing (i.e., I, we, you, yours) were most often adopted as the operationalization of the human voice.

Public Engagement on Social Media

Organizations disclose their CSR efforts through carefully crafted communicative practices (Du et al., 2010; Zhou & Dong, 2021), and the rise of social media has largely facilitated these communicative practices given their interactive, communal, and relational features (Ji et al., 2021). Organizations can communicate CSR content directly with the public on social media and obtain real-time feedback, forming high-quality interactions that facilitate public engagement with the organizations (Zhao & Chen, 2022), which in turn fosters positive relational outcomes like Word-of-mouth (Chu et al., 2020; Fatma et al., 2020) and organization-public relationships (Men & Tsai, 2015). Thus, social media is considered one of the most important channels of CSR communication and has demonstrated great value in facilitating public engagement (Johnston, 2014; Ju et al., 2021).

This study focuses on public engagement as the key outcome of CSR communication on social media. Our focus on public engagement aligns with the hybrid instrumental approach suggested by Kim (2022), reflecting on a relational ontology in defining the optimal CSR outcome. Public engagement is important to both companies and publics. To companies, public engagement is a straightforward indicator of CSR messaging effectiveness, showing publics' evaluative reactions to corporate messages (Ju et al., 2021; Ngai & Singh, 2021). Companies can serve the diverse needs of multiple publics, recognize the value of others, maintain transparency, and build trust through social-mediated public engagement (Kent & Taylor, 2016). To publics, engagement represents an ethical communication process because it reflects personalized interactions on an individual basis offered by organizations (Yang et al., 2022). Through engagement, publics are treated as active conversation participants rather than passive "audiences" and "receivers" of messages. Thus, public engagement transcends the organization-centered perspective by highlighting publics' sense-making in the CSR communication process (Devin & Lane, 2014; Johnston, 2014).

Public engagement has been defined inconsistently across disciplines and a universal definition has not yet been achieved (Morehouse & Saffer, 2019). Many communication scholars take a social-psychological perspective defining public engagement as a multidimensional relational concept that includes both psychological and behavioral attributes of connection between individuals and organizations (Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018; Jiang & Shen, 2020; Johnston, 2018). This study focuses on two types of public engagement on social media, namely, behavioral engagement and emotional engagement, to indicate public-centered discourses and interpretations of CSR messages (Heath, 2014). Behavioral engagement with CSR messages on social media is often measured by metrics such as liking, sharing, and commenting (Ju et al., 2021; Saxton et al., 2019). For example, Men et al. (2018) considered public engagement a behavioral construct gauged by the number of likes, reactions, shares, and comments on Facebook. Li and Feng (2021) categorized social-mediated public engagement into popularity, virality, and commitment, represented by the number of likes, shares, and comments.

However, behavioral engagement does not fully capture publics' proactive content generation concerning the organization on social media (Ji et al., 2017; Men & Tsai, 2014). There are multiple layers of a social media user's attitudes or emotions related to the organization through real-time natural replies (Huang et al., 2021). In expressing emotions, the publics of an organization are affectively committed to the organization. Such affective commitment motivates publics to build or maintain a relationship with an organization (Vivek, 2009). Thus, emotional public engagement, as shown by the public's favorable or negative responses to organizational messaging, is also an important facet of public engagement.

Statistics reveal that both China and the US increased social media usage during COVID-19 (Dixon, 2022; Luo et al., 2021). Thus, behavioral engagement on social media could be used to gauge how well a company's CSR message resonates with the public during a pandemic. Emotional public engagement is also essential during COVID-19 because large-scale crises usually contain colossal waves of strong emotions that can diffuse among social media users (Chen et al., 2020; Mak & Ao, 2019). Through emotional engagement, care-expressing messages may help publics relieve negative emotions like fear, anxiety, and sadness, fostering trust and positive relationships (Lee et al., 2013; Liu & Kim, 2011).

Comparing China and the US Contexts

This study focuses on care-based CSR communication in China and the US during the COVID-19 pandemic time. The two countries' distinctive institutional, economic, social, and

political environments shape their CSR communication. The two countries also have their own social norms and cultural roots related to the ethics of care, but in different ways. Under the pressure of a global pandemic, it is necessary to analyze how care ethics is conveyed via CSR messages from a cross-country comparative view to contribute to a pluralistic view of CSR and a contextualized knowledge of care ethics.

China and the US are the two largest economies with distinctive institutional, political, and cultural environments, which might breed distinctive CSR values, expectations, and communication practices. Institutionally, the US has had a long history of CSR since the 1950s (Carroll, 2008) and developed a well-established institutional environment to regulate and evaluate CSR performances. Previous research found that large corporations in the US are more adaptive to formal CSR reporting with a strong focus on stakeholder involvement (Rim et al., 2019). Since China actively participates in globalization, modern CSR was brought to China in the early 2000s. However, environmental sustainability and worker welfare concerns have remained tough for Chinese firms (Tang, 2012; Zhang & Dong, 2021).

Economically, joint ventures, private-owned, and state-owned companies construct a complicated business system in China (Giacobbe-Miller et al., 2003). Unlike in the US, where government or public administrative authority has less power over CSR, in China, government and policies have strong impacts on CSR (Zhang & Dong, 2021). Compared to private companies, China's state-owned enterprises are more "government-oriented" (Liu & Zhang, 2018, p.129), "pro-policy" (Khan et al., 2020, p.4), and are expected to carry more social responsibilities than making profits, due to their vital role in the Chinese economy (Lin et al., 2020) and deep political connections with the government.

Culturally, according to Hofstede et al. (2005), Chinese society is dominated by a collectivist culture, whereas US society is characterized by individualism. Other scholars suggested that Chinese culture can also be considered relationalism, given its strong reliance on interpersonal relationships in problem-solving (e.g., Brewer & Chen, 2007; Huang et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2014). Previous studies suggested that the values of care ethic are shaped by culture and societal norms, showing differences between collectivist and individualistic societies (Vikan et al., 2005).

Although care is urgently needed in crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, different traditions and social values of care may be inferred from Eastern and Western cultures and social norms. In the West, the feminist view of ethics has developed over the past four decades (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006), but its implementation by social institutions is still limited (Nodding, 2015). Western societies with a strongly individualistic culture, like the US, view persons as autonomous, independent, and rational beings driven by self-interest and society

as contractual entities (Held, 2006; Li, 1994). Whereas, in Eastern societies like China, the ethics of care shares overlaps with Confucianism (Li, 1994) and aligns with the principles of Ren ("仁," French & Weis, 2000), meaning "benevolence" or "love for others" (Pang-White, 2011). Also, care is widely acknowledged as a virtue and social norm, closely tied to non-contractual familial relationships (Li, 1994). Love and care are initially bestowed upon family and friends and then extended to all human beings (French & Weis, 2000).

Finally, the two countries' different pandemic responses also account for contextual differences regarding companies' CSR communication during COVID-19. China takes a centralized approach to suppress the pandemic, mobilizing practically all social entities, including citizens, companies, nonprofits, and media (He & Harris, 2020). In contrast, the United States embraced a decentralized strategy (Altman, 2020), delegating more policymaking authority to states, resulting in fragmented reactions to COVID-19 hampered by divergent perspectives (Cornwall et al., 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, publics in both China and the US are likely in greater need of care. China was the first country hit by the pandemic outbreak when little was known about the virus, and the healthcare system was overburdened by escalating service demands (Liu et al., 2020). The US reported the largest number of COVID-19 infections and deaths as of November 2022 (Worldometer, 2022). People in both countries suffered significant health risks and demanded better care. The ethics of care relates to moral and cultural values in both societies. Given that CSR and care ethics are socially constructed and context-dependent, we highlight the specific settings of CSR in China and the US and propose the following research questions to develop a contextualized knowledge of care-based CSR communication.

RQ1: What CSR topics did companies in China and the US communicate on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did companies in China and the US use ethics of care in their CSR communication on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ3: What are the relationships between care-based CSR communication (*manifested as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, emotional connection, and human voice*) during the pandemic and publics' behavioral engagement (i.e., likes, comments, shares) on social media in China and the US, respectively?

RQ4: What are the relationships between the care-based CSR communication (*manifested as attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, emotional connection, and human voice*) during the pandemic and publics' emotional engagement on social media in China and the US, respectively?

Method

We conducted a content analysis on social media messages posted by 60 Fortune 500 companies ($N_{\text{China}} = 30$, $N_{\text{US}} = 30$) with active social media accounts. Weibo and Twitter were selected because both platforms were among the most popular social media sites in China and the US, respectively (Statista, 2020), with similar technological affordances, including interfaces and major functions.

Sampling and Data Collection

Chinese companies were randomly sampled from a list of the largest “Fortune China 500” corporations (Fortune China, 2019). Twelve companies were replaced as they did not maintain active Weibo accounts (Gao, 2016; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Inactive accounts were replaced with other active accounts randomly selected from the pool following an iterative process until 30 active accounts were retrieved. Following the same procedure, 30 US companies’ Twitter accounts were sampled from the “Fortune 500” list (Fortune, 2020).

Twitter Data Collection

The time frame for data collection covered the initial pandemic adjustment phase in China and US, respectively. Specifically, the data collection period for US companies’ Twitter posts was set from March 19th, 2020, when the US COVID-19 cases surpassed 10,000 (Feuer, 2020), to November 7th, 2020, when the data was collected. Using an open-source Twitter crawler (Ajctrl, 2020), 33,687 tweets posted during the data collection period were retrieved from US companies. Among them, 645 tweets that contained COVID-19-related keywords (e.g., COVID-19, coronavirus, see Lamsal, 2021) were selected for further analyses, with 2481 user comments included.

Weibo Data Collection

An open-source Weibo scraping tool (Dataabc, 2020) was adopted for data collection of the Chinese companies’ accounts. Weibo posts from Chinese companies were collected from January 20th, 2020, when WHO confirmed human-to-human transmission of SARS-CoV-2 (World Health Organization Western Pacific, 2020), until April 10th, 2020, which was three days after China lifted its initial lockdown in Wuhan (Gan, 2020). In total, 9671 Weibo posts were collected from companies and then screened

based on COVID-19-related keywords (e.g., “新冠¹”, “疫情²”, etc., Huang et al., 2021), generating 5041 posts. User comments to each post were also retrieved ($n = 126,197$). To obtain comparable datasets between the two countries, we randomly sampled 15% of the Weibo posts, generating 756 posts, which could be comparable with the number of Tweets ($n = 645$). User comments on the Weibo posts were also sampled, yielding 14,152 comments.

Coding Procedures

This study used DivoMiner, an online data acquisition and analysis platform that can identify Chinese and English content to facilitate coding. A codebook was developed in English to ensure measurement reliability during the coding process (Riffe et al., 2019). Examples selected from both Weibo posts (Chinese) and Tweets (English) were provided for each indicator. Two graduate student coders who were both native Chinese and were proficient in English (both received their highest degree in English-speaking regions) were hired as the authors’ research assistants and completed the coding tasks.

The coding process included two stages. First, the coders screened Weibo posts and tweets and decided whether they were CSR-related. Inter-coder reliability was tested using 15% subsets of the samples (113 Weibo posts and 97 tweets, respectively). Krippendorff’s Alpha reliability was 0.87, indicating a satisfying agreement between the coders (Perreault & Leigh, 1989). The coders then worked independently to code the remaining posts. According to their coding results, messages that were not CSR-related were eliminated, with 656 Weibo posts (with 10,970 comments) and 611 tweets (with 2332 comments) left for the next round of coding.

In the second stage, the coders coded the remaining Weibo posts and tweets for CSR topics and the manifestations of care-based CSR communication. Inter-coder reliability was tested using 10% subsets of the samples. Krippendorff’s Alpha reliability ranged from 0.74 to 1.0 for Weibo posts and from 0.77 to 1.0 for tweets across most variables, indicating acceptable agreement between the coders (Krippendorff, 2004). The coders then worked independently to code the remaining posts.

¹ “新冠” is a short form of “新型冠状病毒”, which means ‘novel coronavirus’ in Chinese.

² “疫情” means ‘pandemic’ or ‘epidemic’ in Chinese.

Codebook and Measures

CSR Topics

The definition of CSR remains inconclusive in the current literature due to the interdisciplinary nature of the concept (Sheehy, 2015). This research defines CSR-relevant content as posts that are not just focused on the economic advantages of businesses (e.g., product and service marketing) but cover a broad spectrum of stakeholder interests and environmental and social benefits. Specifically, we modified Kim et al.'s (2014) and Ju et al.'s (2021) CSR typologies. We coded the CSR-relevant content into six categories: environmental stewardship, philanthropic contribution, educational commitments, employee involvement, public health commitment (fighting COVID-19), and sponsorship/collaboration/ partnership.

In addition, CSR is socially constructed and context-relevant (O'Connor & Ihlen, 2018). The COVID pandemic presents new problems for businesses, which might foster novel approaches to giving back to society (Crane & Matten, 2020) and communicating about socially responsible actions (Mata et al., 2021). Thus, the CSR topic was also coded inductively. In this process, the two coders labeled the CSR-relevant data that did not fit the existing categories as others. The first and second authors followed Saldana's (2021) approaches of immersing themselves in the data and qualitatively interpreting the emerging key patterns. After discussion, the two researchers identified a new theme labeled "gratitude and inspiration" from the data. This new category includes corporations' recognition and promotion of individuals and organizations' efforts in combating COVID-19, such as nurses and healthcare service providers. Given the overall stressful environment during COVID-19, this category reflects companies' positivity in societal efforts to combat the pandemic, as well as their goal to inspire more people who might have negative emotions with optimism. The coding themes and examples of CSR topics are elaborated on in Table 1.

CARE-BASED CSR Communication Manifestations

Based on the care ethics literature (Hamington & Sander-Staudt, 2011; Tronto, 1998), CSR (Formentin & Bortree, 2019), and communication (Gilstrap & Minchow-Proffitt, 2017; Tao & Kim, 2017) literature, the manifestations of care in CSR communication were coded using six indicators: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, emotional connection, and human voice. Their operationalizations and examples are detailed in Table 2.

Public Engagement

Public engagement was measured by both behavioral engagement and emotional engagement. The level of behavioral engagement was measured by counting the number of likes, shares, and comments for each tweet/Weibo post (Huang et al., 2021). The emotional engagement was measured by the average sentiment polarity scores of publics' comments on each Weibo post/tweet. The researchers adopted two libraries via Python for sentiment analysis of Weibo and Twitter comments, respectively. To be specific, the snowNLP, a Python library for processing Chinese text inspired by TextBlob, was adopted for texts in Weibo comments, and the spaCyTextBlob method using the TextBlob library was adopted for analyzing Twitter comments. Both the snowNLP and TextBlob libraries rely on the Bayesian classification method and comments from online websites as training data to predict the degree of text sentiment. As the initial scale of sentiment score is different in the two libraries, we rescaled the final score to $-1 \sim +1$ after the classification step. For example, a comment that receives 0.5 points in sentiment score shows more positive sentiment than one receiving a -0.1 sentiment score. Our study considers comments with higher positive sentiment scores as showing greater emotional engagement. The sentiment score of all the comments on one post was averaged to obtain each post's emotional engagement level.

Data Analysis

To answer RQ1-2, descriptive statistics, t-tests, and chi-square tests were performed using SPSS 24. To answer RQ3, which investigates the relationships between the manifestations of care in CSR communication and publics' behavioral engagement, we ran three Tobit regressions (Huang et al., 2022; Tobin, 1958) using StataMP 13.1 since the dependent variables were all limited variables with a lower limit of zero. The six manifestations of care, including attentiveness, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, emotional connection, and human voice, were treated as independent variables. For each independent variable, we aggregated the scores they received in the coding process before running the regression (Huang et al., 2022; Ju et al., 2021). For example, responsibility was coded by three indicators, and each indicator was coded as presence (1) or absence (0). When aggregate the values, the score of responsibility ranges from 0 to 3. Linear regressions were conducted to answer RQ4, which examines the relationships between the manifestations of care in CSR communication and publics' emotional engagement using StataMP 13.1. A set of company-level and post-level characteristics were added as control variables in all the regression models, including business industry, numbers of social media followers, and message vividness.

Table 1 CSR Topics Coding Themes and Examples

Code	# of posts	Definition	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Environmental stewardship	2 $N_{China}=0$ $N_{US}=2$	Posts that discuss CSR efforts aiming to protect environmental sustainability	From surpassing our water reduction targets to establishing 15 water neutral sites, @Cummins has already reached many of its 2020 #environmental goals. Learn how we're committed to pushing forward, even during a global pandemic: https://t.co/AlGmmADptQ #Cummins #Sustainability	NA	
Philanthropic contribution	67 $N_{China}=40$ $N_{US}=27$	Posts that discuss corporate philanthropic actions (e.g., donations, volunteering, gift giving, grants)	Today, we announced that we will dedicate \$35 million to support global communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Read more at: https://t.co/PU6i3KQSBt #COVID2019 #FlattenTheCurve https://t.co/jqv6OqHKIE	中石化四川销售公司开发自产消毒液和抑菌纸支援武汉】2月20日16时,3辆满载8000瓶鸥露酒精消毒液和6780箱鸥露抑菌卫生纸的大型货车,驶出四川石化雅诗纸业公司仓库,这是中石化四川销售公司及所属雅诗纸业公司捐赠给武汉疫区的第二批物资。这批次价值260万元物资将定向捐赠给雷神山医院、武汉大学中南医院、亚心总医院、沌口方舱医院和湖北省警察协会。第一批捐赠的30万元消毒湿巾已于2月2日通过四川省红十字会送达武汉。	Following the first batch of donated disinfecting wipes in early February, Sinopec is shipping to Wuhan their second batch of supplies—disinfectant liquid and antibacterial toilet paper valued at 2.6 million CNY – on February 20th
Educational commitment	289 $N_{China}=61$ $N_{US}=228$	Posts that discuss CSR efforts aiming to improve public/stakeholder awareness and knowledge of COVID-related information. Educational commitment here refers mainly to informational education	Why do health officials often recommend 14 days as the standard COVID-19 quarantine period? Why not 5, 10, or 20 days? Learn more in our infographic	#保护客户合法权益,建行伴您一路同行#您有一封疫情期间防骗“六一律”,请注意查收 中国建设银行的微博视频	China Construction Bank posted a video on Weibo to provide anti-fraud education for their customers during the pandemic
Employee participation	41 $N_{China}=30$ $N_{US}=11$	Posts that discuss CSR efforts contributed by employees' involvement and contributions	From Columbus, Ind. to Daventry, UK, @Cummins employees are doing extraordinary things in the face of the #COVID19 pandemic. In Daventry, that includes providing more than 12,000 free meals to schoolchildren and members of the local community. Learn more: https://t.co/dAoypDnS3z https://t.co/40XYPjWRHI	直播还在进行中,来听听武汉一名普通志愿者的故事??原始用户:国资小新转发内容: #抗击疫情 央企行动# 【中核90后的“逆行”之旅】在武汉, @中核集团 数十名志愿者奋战在疫情防控最前线,中核二二郭隆飞就是其中一位。从1月22日开始,这位90后开启了他的“逆行”之旅,每天早出晚归,义务接送医护人员上下班,并承担物资运送、信息扩散等任务。连续53天,他和TA们,成为了战友和朋友。	Dozens of employees from China Nuclear Industry 22nd Construction Co., Ltd. volunteered during the pandemic. One of their volunteer events was being live streamed, featuring Longfei Guo, who had volunteered for 53 consecutive days

Table 1 (continued)

Code	# of posts	Definition	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Public Health Commitment	662 $N_{China} = 384$ $N_{US} = 278$	Posts that discuss CSR efforts that directly address the Covid situation and protect stakeholders	Our company remains focused on protecting the safety of its employees and their families, while assuring that our medicines and vaccines reach the people who need them. Read the 7 ways we're supporting #COVID19 relief efforts: https://t.co/S4S86WNShh https://t.co/84Qk9BAFKM	#美国疫情# 【陆运难、海运难 包钢产品出口迎接考验】#国外疫情# 呈爆发态势,钢铁出口运输面临铁路、海运两难处境,港口装卸效率低,人员紧张,作业时间延长。各国对船舶靠港也采取了禁止靠港或入境、接受检疫、隔离观察、提交健康声明、体温报告等防疫管控措施,船舶非常规性停泊时间延长,流程更为复杂。包钢国贸公司同生产系统加强沟通,强化交付精准率,积极协调物流发货,综合考虑船期、物流成本及港口作业效率等因素,全力做好好货、船、港衔接,打通制约钢材出口“卡脖子”环节,以确保货物顺利出运。...	Despite various COVID-induced logistics challenges, Baotou Steel Group International Economic & Trading Co. Ltd. is doing everything they can to ensure timely delivery of goods
Sponsorship/collaboration/partnership	49 $N_{China} = 24$ $N_{US} = 25$	Posts that discuss collaborative efforts made by businesses and nonprofit/government/media partners to fight COVID-19	To help L.A. county hospitals as they fight the #COVID19 pandemic, we're collaborating with @IMC_Worldwide to deliver mobile hospital modules that provide extra beds for patients under quarantine. https://t.co/6zvaq5FC2J https://t.co/dXupEjvP2h	#抗击疫情 央企行动# 【共见奇迹, 中国联通5G live疫情直播直播平台全网浏览量超5800万】中国联通5G live直播平台携手央视网、新华社搭建开通了雷神山、火神山两座医院的建设现场直播通道,并同步引流斗鱼、虎牙、快手等知名直播平台进行直播。此后,中国联通又陆续开通了郑州第一人民医院传染病医院、黄冈大别山区域医疗医院和北京新发地等多个场景直播通道,截至2月5日,全网浏览量超过5800万,互动量达12万,为全国人民提供了良好的了解实时动态窗口。让您在线“监工”,助力疫情防控,联通在行动。	China Unicom 5G live broadcast platform, together with CCTV Network and Xinhua News Agency, started live streaming channels for the construction of two hospitals. The live streaming was also made accessible on popular live streaming platforms such as Douyu, Huya and Kuaishou
Gratitude and inspiration	150 $N_{China} = 116$ $N_{US} = 34$	Posts showing appreciation of individuals and organizations working at the frontline of fighting COVID-19; distributing inspiring words regarding fighting COVID-19	#LeadingThroughChange is about togetherness. Elevating the voices of those that are successfully navigating the changes needed to survive & thrive in the pandemic, while sharing learnings for those that need it. Join the conversation. https://t.co/sCIMUmeptd	为武汉加油!为战“疫”中的逆行者们打call!无论你在哪个城市,都能感受到有TCL并肩作战的力量(原始用户: TCL电视转发内容:抗击疫情, TCL一直在路上。北京、上海、天津、广州、深圳、成都、青岛, TCL汇聚各方力量,在每个城市的大屏,致敬每一位战“疫”中的逆行者!下图有你所在的城市吗?一起来为武汉加油, 中国加油!	TCL is paying tribute to every hero fighting COVID-19 on the big screens in every city

Table 1 (continued)

Code	# of posts	Definition	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Others	7 $N_{\text{China}} = 1$ $N_{\text{US}} = 6$	Posts showing appreciation, positive thoughts, hopes, and good wishes that may not directly be relevant to COVID-19	We appreciate our lineworkers every day, but especially today, National Lineman Appreciation Day! It takes more than a worldwide pandemic and massive storm destruction to get these folks down. Thanks to all those restoring power after the Easter Sunday storms. #ThankALineman https://t.co/1CCluRow5G	转发理由: #待到疫情结束后#, 你最想做什么呢? 可以说走就走的旅行、影院看一场热泪盈眶的电影、街头吃一碗地道的热干面、教室里认真听一堂老师的课、蹦一场酣畅淋漓的音乐节.....#疫情过后最想做的事#, 来说说看! #武大早樱开了#?? 原始用户: 武汉大学转发内容: #武大早樱开了##武大早樱等我们# 校医院旁的早樱, 开了! 樱花大道的花开, 还会远吗? 愿疫情早日离去? 我们樱花树下见? #治愈春天# (视频: 金鑫) 武汉大学的微博视频?	#What do you want to do when the pandemic ends?# You can go on a trip, watch a movie, eat a bowl of authentic hot dry noodles in the street, attending an in-person class, etc. Tell us please!

Results

RQ1 aimed to identify the corporate social responsibilities emerging from the Chinese and US companies' social media communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, more than half of them ($n = 662$, 52.25%) focused on showing companies' commitment to public health, followed by the commitment to education ($n = 289$, 22.81%), which are the two primary CSR topics communicated by companies in both the US and China (Table 1, Fig. 1). Employee participation, philanthropic contribution, and partnership/collaboration are less discussed CSR topics by companies in both countries. Different patterns were observed in the two countries (Fig. 1). In particular, the US companies focused more on educating stakeholders, such as customers and employees, about COVID-related coping strategies, helpful tips, and recommendations than Chinese companies ($\chi^2 = 141.04$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, Chinese enterprises demonstrated greater organizational commitment to protecting publics' health than US companies by reporting specific procedures and policies addressing COVID-related problems ($\chi^2 = 21.55$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the topic of gratitude and inspiration was prominent in Chinese enterprises' CSR communication ($\chi^2 = 44.51$, $p < 0.001$), which aimed to foster a positive social atmosphere and boost public morale, but this topic was much less frequently presented in the US sample.

RQ2 asked how care ethics was adopted by companies in the US and China in their CSR communication on social media during the COVID pandemic. Chi-square tests revealed country-based differences (Table 3). In particular, Chinese enterprises displayed significantly more the responsibility aspect of care ($\chi^2 = 22.22$, $p < 0.001$) in their posts by identifying designated employees responsible for CSR initiatives, demonstrating leadership support for CSR operations, and sharing relevant paperwork confirming the efforts in addressing COVID-related problems. Regarding demonstrating the competence aspect of care in CSR communication, Chinese companies were more proactive in featuring their investment in and performance in combating COVID on social media than the US companies ($\chi^2 = 111.26$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, Chinese companies used emotional connection more frequently than their US counterparts in CSR communication ($\chi^2 = 38.31$, $p < 0.001$). Chinese and US companies did not show significant differences in other manifestations of care, including showing attentiveness, responsiveness, and human voice.

RQ3 explored how Chinese and US companies' care-based CSR messages are associated with the behavioral engagement of social media users during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Table 3, competence was the only manifestation of care that showed positive relationships with

Table 2 The Manifestations of Care

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Attentiveness	Posts indicate that the company pays attention to stakeholders' needs, safety, and wellbeing	1. Asking for questions, opinions and suggestions from publics	@cape chocolate: Support Small Business Bingo. Here are a few ways to support small and local businesses during the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Please feel free to leave additional ideas and comments on how to support local businesses below	#兴业茶座# 【上版留言大放送】疫情结束后，他们想? 【疫情结束后，你最想做的一件事是什么呢? 下面的这些画里有哪一个道出了你的心声? 来跟小兴叨叨呗~ 上版留言大放送! 待疫情结束，他们想? ? [组图共6张]? 原图?	The Industrial Bank posted a question on Weibo asking their followers to choose one out of six pictures that depicts what they would like to do the most when the pandemic ends
		2. Showing care by sending reminders, asking about publics' situations	@Aetna: Staying inside can help you stay safe. But be sure not to lose sight of your health, especially if you've got diabetes, cancer, a heart problem or any serious medical condition. Pandemic or not, it's essential to make #TimeForCare	#兴业福利# 【兴课联播? 爱无间】邀您观看4月6日至4月12日课程表 【古谚语道: “百草回芽，旧病萌发。”春天是疾病多发的季节，疫情还未结束，大家更要注重养生了，兴业银行推出【兴课联播? 爱无间】课程，著名大师在线为你讲解，抓紧报名参加~ 兴课联播·爱无间! 【邀您观看】4月6日至4月12日课程表 [原图]	The Industrial Bank posted about the launch of their live streaming health education class during the pandemic and invited followers to sign up

Table 2 (continued)

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Responsibility	Posts show that the company acknowledges its social responsibility and is clear about who should be responsible for executing CSR activities or how such responsibility be regulated	1. Indicating a designated personnel or department to take charge of the CSR activities	Keeping our communities as safe and healthy as possible is always top of mind, but especially right now during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Meet Susan Pease, Regional Engagement Lead, Southeast Region #WhyIMask #MaskUpGA #CignaGA #CignaAL #WeAreCigna https://t.co/pipHz6nbiW	“说实话心中是有恐惧，但相信我们一定能战胜疫情”——张冰洁昨天上午，中国石化胜利油田中心医院感染性疾病科护师 张冰洁，启程赶赴湖北支援。请一定要平安归来#抗击疫情 央企行动# #武汉加油# #为美好生活加油# 中国石化的微博视频？	Bingjie Zhang, a nurse in the Department of Infectious Diseases of Sinopec Shengli Oilfield Central Hospital, departed for Hubei to help fight the pandemic yesterday morning "To tell the truth, I am afraid, but I believe we will surely overcome the pandemic." Said Zhang
		2. Disclosing whether the authoritative support from high leadership is available (be specific about the leadership title, e.g., CEO)	Our Boise Site Leader and Executive Vice President of Technology & Products spoke with @IBRnews on how Micron has been proactively addressing the novel coronavirus as an example for other businesses. Read the article at: https://t.co/nU3rbzft5	#众志成城·战疫情 保六稳# 【包钢(集团)公司董事长、党委书记魏桂师率队到铁捷物流公司调研疫情防控、生产经营和改革发展工作】物流产业板块对公司战略发展具有重要意义。铁捷物流公司自成立以来，不断扎实工作基础，积极拓展壮大业务并取得成效，公司对此给予充分肯定。铁捷物流公司要继续总结经验，健全完善制度，不断发展壮大。@内蒙古国资 @工人日报 ??原图？	Shuanshi Wei, chairman and party secretary of Baotou Steel (Group) Company, led a team and visited Tiejie Logistics Company to acknowledge the good work
		3. Specifying whether official/fixed documents/ announcements/ protocols are available to ensure the execution of covid-related CSR policies		Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've put important protocols/procedures in place to help keep our employees, families, customers & communities safe. Thank you to all who continue to be diligent & focused on providing critical products & services https://t.co/vRtzdRzs1h https://t.co/a7ps82nwyq	#万众一心抗击新冠肺炎# 包钢发布关于做好节后返程上岗人员疫情防控工作的紧急通知?? http://t.cn/A6Pjk P5M内蒙古国资 @北方稀土 @包钢股份-sh600010 @包钢共青团微博?组图共4张!原图?

Table 2 (continued)

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Competence	Posts demonstrate the company's ability to perform the CSR activities it claims and disclose the company's investments or resources committed to the CSR activities	<p>1. Indicating what resources and investments are committed into COVID crisis management</p> <p>2. Indicating what successful outputs/outcomes were created. The exact outputs/outcomes should be specified, e.g., \$, # of people received help, % of changes made through the CSR activities, or an end product is created to serve more stakeholders</p>	<p>Our CEO, Sanjay Mehrotra shares how Micron is prepared to join the fight against #COVID19. Committing \$35 million to fight this pandemic is step one. https://t.co/DxNgnUngU8 #Micron #FlattenTheCurve #microngives @microngives https://t.co/EkSgDRx7RI</p> <p>From surpassing our water reduction targets to establishing 15 water neutral sites, @Cummins has already reached many of its 2020 #environmental goals. Learn how we're committed to pushing forward, even during a global pandemic: https://t.co/AIGmmADptQ #Cummins #Sustainability</p>	<p>多尽一份力，赢下这一“疫”！安踏集团先后捐赠1000万元资金与价值2000万元物资，以驰援新冠病毒防疫工作。希望在一線抗击新冠肺炎疫情的医护人员早日凯旋归来，武汉加油！中国必胜！加油！?原图?</p> <p>【武汉石油为员工开展快速检测】在武汉逐步复工复产之际，为最大限度阻断感染源，消除员工的健康疑虑，武汉石油紧抓疫情防控，确保加油站员工、客户健康安全。公司主动联系定点医院，邀请医护人员上门，免费为1700余名在岗员工开展血清抗体和核酸快速检测，缩短返岗待复工人员的健康观察时间，积极推进“百日行动攻坚、防疫创效双胜”工作。#百日攻坚创效#为美好生活加油# #抗击疫情 央企行动#</p>	<p>Anta Group has donated 10 million yuan in cash and 20 million yuan worth of materials to support the COVID-19 epidemic prevention work</p> <p>Sinopec Wuhan Petroleum took the initiative and facilitated serum antibody tests and nucleic acid rapid tests for more than 1700 employees free of charge, shortening the health observation time of those who returned to Wuhan for work</p>

Table 2 (continued)

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Responsiveness	Posts show that the company stays open and responsive to publics' comments, requests, and/or questions	1. Responding to publics' comments or other posts	Under the original post: https://twitter.com/FedEx/status/1245129801414979585 , the company replied to a public comment: Replying to @cherylarmstead Hi Cheryl, this is Andre. I'm sorry for your experience with our service. I'd like to help	Under the original post: http://weibo.com/3429300952/lvYlhk43T , the company replied to a public comment: Replying to a user: This (song) is a perfect integration of modern rhythms and classical music; and it embodies both patriotism and compassion	Under the original post: http://weibo.com/3429300952/lvYlhk43T , the company replied to a public comment: Replying to a user: This (song) is a perfect integration of modern rhythms and classical music; and it embodies both patriotism and compassion
Emotional connection	Posts express emotions showing the company's empathy, understanding, respect, support, and appreciation to its stakeholders/publics	2. Addressing a common concern or potential problem shared by publics	Please DM your detailed concerns, tracking number, delivery address, contact number and email address Not sure how you'd handle a pandemic if you're older and living alone? Use these resources to put a plan in place. https://t.co/MBRHKAAkM1 https://t.co/FtBwBWueTW	#抗击新型冠状病毒我们在行动#当前 全国上下一心#抗击新型冠状病毒# 很多家庭都想科学防疫在保障家人安全的同时为战胜疫情出一份力。那么, 怎样居家防疫才最科学? 来! 漫画版的疫情预防指南告诉您! @包头发布 @内蒙古日报疫情如此严峻, 看看这家人..... ?! 组图共6张! ? 原因?	What is the best way to help fight the pandemic while protecting your loved ones at home? Please see below a comic version of the pandemic prevention guide
		3. Responding to criticism and questionings from publics	Despite the COVID-19 pandemic's devastating effects on the healthcare economy, we have kept our colleagues employed and paid. Unfortunately, that was not fully resented in today's The New York Times. Read the full statement we gave the Times: https://t.co/eVs1AjLkX	NA	
		Showing positive emotions like empathy, respect, support for CSR stakeholders	During #COVID19, pharmacists such as colleague Jamal Mourad, play a critical role in patient care and public health. We applaud pharmacists across HCA Healthcare who are helping to educate, mitigate, test, treat, and respond to the pandemic. #CaringDuringCOVID19 @MedCityFrisco https://t.co/slW0nzMYV4	#春节# 这个春节注定不平凡, 走进厂房, 随处可见头戴口罩, 身着工装的忙碌身影, 春节本是很多人阖家团圆的时候, 但新型冠状病毒感染的肺炎疫情爆发, 众多职工毫无怨言依旧坚守在工作岗位上, 保护着自己, 也保护着包钢的平稳运行! #致敬每一个坚守岗位平凡人#? 原因?	While the Spring Festival is supposed to a time for family reunion, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, many employees are still working, protecting their own health and ensuring the smooth operation of Baotou Steel

Table 2 (continued)

Code	Definition	Indicators	Example (Tweet)	Example (Weibo)	Translation
Human voice	Posts showing human voice or interpersonal communication efforts	Adopting personal voice or using daily conversational terms in the organizational Covid-related messages (e.g., hello, good morning, thank you)	@FindAClearTruth Good afternoon. We're providing PTO for associates diagnosed w/ COVID-19, placed under mandatory quarantine & PTO for self-isolation & symptoms as verified by an accredited health care professional. All eligible associates will receive their standard pay for up to two weeks	#抗击疫情 央企行动#共克时艰，凝心聚力。晚安! 原因? epidemic. Have a good night!	Let's work together to overcome the challenges and fight the epidemic. Have a good night!

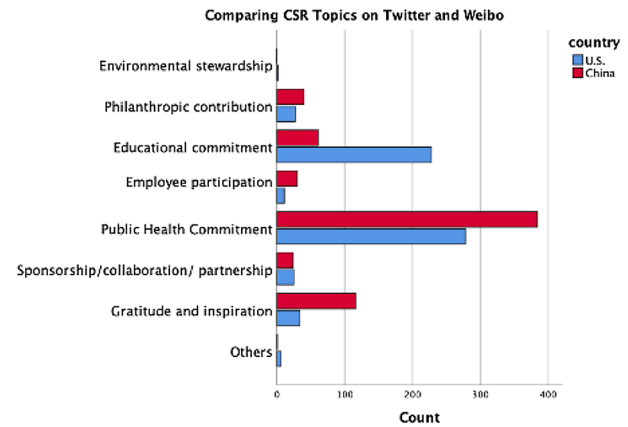


Fig. 1 Descriptive statistics of CSR topics in both China and the US samples

behavioral engagement in both China and the US samples. For Chinese companies, demonstrating competence in CSR messages is positively correlated with the number of likes ($B = 15.71$, $p < 0.05$), shares ($B = 13.49$, $p < 0.05$), and comments ($B = 5.26$, $p < 0.05$) received on Weibo. For the US companies, the competence aspect of care was positively correlated to the number of likes ($B = 163.58$, $p < 0.001$), shares ($B = 54.10$, $p < 0.001$), and comments ($B = 13.76$, $p < 0.01$) received on Twitter.

Apart from competence, in the Chinese sample, responsiveness was also a significant predictor of behavioral engagement, including the number of likes ($B = 79.71$, $p < 0.001$), shares ($B = 57.69$, $p < 0.001$), and comments ($B = 14.64$, $p < 0.01$) to company messages on Weibo. However, in the US sample, responsiveness did not significantly correlate with behavioral engagement on Twitter. Moreover, showing emotional connections in the CSR messages also significantly correlated with the number of likes ($B = 31.57$, $p < 0.05$ only in the Chinese sample). Emotional connection did not significantly associate with behavioral engagement in the US sample (see Table 4).

RQ4 sought to address whether and how companies' care-based CSR messages are associated with publics' emotional engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic in China and the US. Publics' emotional engagement was indicated by the average sentiment scores of public comments following each Weibo post/tweet. As shown in Table 5, in the Chinese sample, compared to CSR messages without showing emotional connections, those demonstrating emotional connections are more likely to elicit positive sentiment in the public's comments ($B = 0.30$, $p < 0.05$). Whereas, in the US sample, attentiveness was the only manifestation of care that positively predicted publics' positive emotional engagement ($B = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$).

Table 3 Descriptive information on companies' CSR-related posts during COVID-19

Variable/measure	China	US	
CSR topics	<i>N</i> = 656	<i>N</i> = 611	χ^2
Environmental stewardship	0	2 (0.33%)	0.14
Philanthropic contribution	40 (6.10%)	27 (4.42%)	0.18
Educational commitment	61 (9.30%)	228 (37.32%)	141.04***
Employee participation	30 (4.57%)	11 (1.80%)	7.77
Public health commitment	384 (58.54%)	278 (45.50%)	21.55***
Sponsorship/collaboration/partnership	24 (3.66%)	25 (4.09%)	0.16
Gratitude and inspiration	116 (17.68%)	34 (5.56%)	44.51***
Other	1 (0.15%)	6 (0.98%)	3.96*
Manifestations of care	<i>N</i> = 656	<i>N</i> = 611	χ^2
Attentiveness	8 (1.22%)	16 (2.61%)	3.33
Responsibility	172 (26.22%)	118 (19.31%)	22.22***
Responsiveness	37 (5.64%)	49 (8.02%)	2.87
Competence	249 (37.96%)	74 (12.11%)	111.26***
Emotional connection	175 (26.68%)	78 (12.77%)	38.31***
Human voice	29 (4.42%)	35 (5.73%)	1.13
Metrics of public engagement	<i>N</i> = 10,970	<i>N</i> = 2332	<i>T</i>
Behavioral engagement_Likes	<i>M</i> = 42.02 <i>SD</i> = 228.30	<i>M</i> = 50.76 <i>SD</i> = 384.21	0.50
Behavioral engagement_Shares	<i>M</i> = 46.53 <i>SD</i> = 113.77	<i>M</i> = 15.59 <i>SD</i> = 110.97	− 4.90***
Behavioral engagement_Comments	<i>M</i> = 16.72 <i>SD</i> = 45.94	<i>M</i> = 3.82 <i>SD</i> = 25.08	− 6.14***
Emotional engagement	<i>M</i> = 0.16 <i>SD</i> = 0.45	<i>M</i> = 0.11 <i>SD</i> = 0.25	1.45

Base group for *t* test: China; the manifestations of care can be overlapping and thus aggregated to more than 100%; the frequency of each at least one tactic present

p* < 0.05, *p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001

Discussion

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact every part of society, businesses globally confront increased and new stakeholder expectations for CSR, implying a growing need for care. Drawing on the theory of care ethics and CSR communication literature, especially from a public relations perspective, this study contributes to the field of business ethics by conceptualizing and operationalizing the concept of care-based CSR messaging and assessing its relationships with public engagement on social media. In doing so, this study provides implications for CSR communication practitioners, especially in the profession of public relations, to construct CSR messages in response to turbulent and uncertain environments with care. Our findings uncovered the CSR topics frequently discussed on corporate social media, identified different manifestations of care that emerged from CSR communication, and investigated the relationships of different care-based CSR messages with public engagement on social media. The key findings and implications are elaborated below, followed by a theoretical and practical implications discussion.

Priorities in CSR Communication

Priorities in CSR messaging show that businesses are accepting new obligations in response to a global health emergency, reflecting different social influences from Chinese and US societies. Corporations in the US were more active in delivering educational materials about COVID-related concerns, implying their role as public educators and information distributors. This new responsibility corresponds to the issue of misinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories concerning COVID on social media (Su, 2021), which might be especially dangerous for people in the US who heavily depend on social media for COVID-related information (Mitchell & Liedke, 2021). As the public increasingly views businesses as more trustworthy information sources than the government and the news media (Edelman, 2021), companies might assume a new educational and informative CSR role in combatting misinformation. In comparison, in China, the government is the primary source of credible information about COVID-19 (Statista, 2022). Chinese enterprises' CSR communication stressed adherence to norms and procedures, as well as the promotion of positive social morale. Consistent with previous research

Table 4 The relationship between care-based CSR messages and behavioral engagement tobit regression results

	Dependent variables: behavioral engagement					
	Likes		Shares		Comments	
	China	US	China	US	China	US
Predictors	B	B	B	B	B	B
Attentiveness	– 38.73	57.10	– 25.02	15.12	1.93	– 10.16
Responsibility	– 4.17	9.07	9.41	5.49	2.48	4.45
Responsiveness	79.71***	– 42.51	57.69***	– 11.17	14.64**	– 3.63
Competence	15.71*	163.58***	13.49*	54.10***	5.26*	13.76**
Emotional connection	31.57**	– 4.21	3.23	– 3.86	2.96	4.08
Human voice	– 22.72	77.87	– 23.11	30.40	– 4.58	1.17
Model fit	$\chi^2 = 10080.19$ $p < 0.001$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.13$	$\chi^2 = 69.05$ $p < 0.001$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 608.38$ $p < 0.001$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.09$	$\chi^2 = 88.64$ $p < 0.001$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.01$	$\chi^2 = 6910.21$ $p < 0.001$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.12$	$\chi^2 = 169.00$ $p < 0.001$ Pseudo $R^2 = 0.06$

Control variables (i.e., number of followers, business industry, and message vividness) are not displayed in the table

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 5 Relationship between care-based CSR messages and emotional engagement OLS regression results

	Dependent variable: emotional public engagement in user comments					
	China			US		
	B	β	t	B	β	t
Predictors						
Attentiveness	– 0.07	– 0.19	– 0.36	0.30*	0.14*	2.06
Responsibility	0.00	0.01	0.10	– 0.00	– 0.01	– 0.16
Responsiveness	– 0.10	– 0.06	– 1.16	– 0.08	– 0.10	– 1.39
Competence	– 0.06	– 0.08	– 1.50	0.03	0.05	0.69
Emotional connection	0.16**	0.16**	2.94	– 0.04	– 0.06	– 0.70
Human voice	0.06	0.03	0.53	0.16	0.15	1.77
Model fit	$F(19, 342) = 2.85$ $R^2 = 0.14$ Adj $R^2 = 0.09$			$F(23, 193) = 1.28$ $R^2 = 0.13$ Adj $R^2 = 0.03$		

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

(Wu & Kong, 2021), our findings indicate that Chinese corporations cooperate with government entities on strategic CSR communication efforts in response to the pandemic. Promoting positive societal morale in CSR communication coincides with the Chinese government's commitment to sustaining societal harmony and stability at a turbulent time (Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

Multifaceted Care-Based CSR Communication

All the manifestations of care in CSR communication—attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, competence, emotional connection, and human voice—appeared in the posts on Twitter and Weibo, suggesting that companies in

both countries were able to incorporate multifaceted care ethics into their CSR communication. The adoption of caring in CSR messages is also context-dependent and matched with the two countries' divergent public expectations for CSR and care. For example, Chinese companies expressed care by addressing emotional connection. As Huang (2000) mentioned, Confucianism dominates Chinese culture, which views interpersonal closeness and relationship building as foundations of societal harmony and important social norms. As COVID has induced enormous stress among the Chinese public (Li et al., 2020), expressing greater emotional attachment in CSR messages indicates Chinese companies' confirmation of Confucian values and efforts to offering relationship-oriented care during a crisis.

Moreover, Chinese companies' strong emphasis on the responsibility and competence aspects of care might be

explained by the unique company-government relations in China. As the political influence entrenched itself into every aspect of Chinese society, leaders and managers in large state-owned and state-holding companies are often affiliated with the Communist party (McGregor, 2019). By disclosing the leadership information of COVID-related CSR projects, businesses demonstrate their strong connections with the Party, confidence to be scrutinized by the public, and compliance with the government's policies and principles, all of which aim to relieve societal anxiety and foster social confidence. This tendency was reflected in our data, as over half of the Chinese companies sampled were state-owned or state-holding enterprises. In comparison, the US companies in our sample are in the private sector with less government involvement. As such, US companies most frequently targeted customers, investors, press, employees, and the community but rarely addressed the government as a key public (Jiang & Wei, 2013). Since the US society generally took a *laissez-faire* approach to living with the virus (Huang & Ruwicz, 2021), US companies may not feel obliged to show responsibility and competence aspects of care to their publics as strongly as their Chinese counterparts.

The Relationship Between Care-Based CSR Communications and Public Engagement

The findings indicated that certain manifestations of care in CSR messages show significant relationships with public engagement on social. In particular, the competence aspect of care is associated with both behavioral and emotional engagement with publics in both countries. Demonstrating competence is a way to show companies' CSR commitment, which helps reassure publics and minimize uncertainties in a pandemic situation (Lee et al., 2014). Showing commitment and achievement by demonstrating organizations' competency might also raise public morale and confidence in dealing with COVID. The responsiveness and emotional connection aspects of care positively correlate with publics' behavioral engagement only in China but not in the US. As mentioned before, given the strong values of building social bonds and relationship-oriented culture (Huang et al., 2018), Chinese publics tend to like, share, and comment on CSR messages highlighting the responsiveness and emotional connection aspects of care because they are gestures demonstrating businesses' attempts to establish communicative and emotional relationships. In addition, the emotional connection aspect of care also triggers the Chinese publics' emotional engagement as more positive sentiment is revealed in their comments. In comparison, CSR messages paying attention to public concerns, attitudes, and pandemic experiences elicited a more emotional response from the US publics than from Chinese publics. According to Hofstede et al. (2005), individuals in more individualistic cultures in the United

States are encouraged to express their emotions and personal beliefs. Thus, they would value the attentiveness component of care more significantly since it enables them to be seen, observed, and have their ideas heard.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study contributes to business ethics scholarship in the COVID context in several innovative ways. First, this study is among the early attempts to infuse care ethics into CSR communication (e.g., Formentin & Bortree, 2019). We argue that ethics of care offers a theoretical ground to examine organizations' strategic CSR communication critically. It is particularly relevant to the COVID context, given its emphasis on relationships and situational considerations in ethical decision-making. Our study contributes to the current CSR literature by introducing the concept of care-based CSR communication, comprising six manifestations that reflect essential care values and the relational nature of business communication. By systematically analyzing the manifestations of care ethics in CSR messages, we advance CSR communication scholarship using a hybrid instrumental approach to integrate ethical considerations into strategic communication (Kim, 2022). The hybrid instrumental approach is reflected in our findings that CSR messages during an unexpected, turbulent environment like a public health pandemic use caring language to be attentive and responsive to various stakeholders and publics' needs, to acknowledge new responsibilities that are beyond their normal CSR scopes, to demonstrate organizational ability in addressing the challenging social problem, to build emotional connections to people, and to show a human tone of the organization. This caring aspect of CSR communication indicates that companies have great potential to act as caregivers during challenging crisis times. From an instrumental perspective, certain caring language usages in CSR messages can associate positively with public engagement, behaviorally and emotionally, on social media. Thus, companies may benefit from better public engagement and related support by using caring languages in CSR communication. Taken together, our research supports Kent and Lane's (2021) notion that normative theories are important in advancing practical disciplines like strategic communication.

Second, this study provides empirical evidence on the relationship between care-based CSR messages and public engagement on social media. Our findings strengthen the important role of communication in care delivery, suggesting that care ethics are analytical tools that can be applied through computer-mediated communication. In particular, we advance the understanding of public engagement on social media by explicating emotional engagement as an important indicator capturing the dynamics of organization-public interactions and publics' sentiments in response to

CSR communication. By empirically examining the relationships between different care-based CSR strategies and different public engagement outcomes, we moved beyond a normative understanding of ethics to provide applied tactics of care ethics. Our findings provide an alternative view on the effectiveness of CSR communication, suggesting that in addition to the traditional instrumental and strategic approaches (Golob et al., 2013; Ji et al., 2021), effective CSR communication can also be delivered through the lens of care ethics.

Third, this study provides a cross-national comparison of care-based CSR communication in response to a global health emergency. Our findings contribute to the ethical business communication scholarship (Bowen, 2008, 2016; L'etang, 1994) by stressing context-sensitive care ethics in the context of CSR communication. We argue that the best application of communicative care ethics should take the institutional, political, and cultural impacts on CSR into account in order to meet and strategically address stakeholder expectations and generate meaningful public engagement. In addition, our study builds on previous research (Ngai & Singh, 2021) to further investigate CSR communication in an extreme pandemic time, offering innovative nuances regarding how CSR can be manifested to better address emerging social problems in different societies in an ethical way. The global COVID pandemic allows us to compare the cross-national differences within the same crisis context while identifying nuanced differences in response strategies based on the contextual characteristics of each society. Thus, we contribute to international CSR research by adding country-specific empirical evidence about corporate social media communication during a global pandemic.

Practical Implications

Our results support the notion that the COVID pandemic opens up new CSR possibilities and demands (He & Harris, 2020). First, companies should be aware of new obligations as the social environment and public expectations change. In view of the issues of disinformation, corporations in the US might be expected to provide more credible public information and education. Chinese businesses might serve as cheerleaders, boosting societal morale at an emotionally difficult time of crisis. Second, companies should strategically use the manifestations of care in CSR communication to achieve different types of public engagement goals (i.e., behavioral and emotional). For example, companies in the US can generate more behavioral engagement on social media by addressing competence more in CSR messages. They can also generate more positive emotional engagement by paying more attention to publics' needs in CSR communication on social media. Third, in light of the worldwide pandemic situation and increasing globalization of public relations

practices, we suggest that multinational companies, especially those operating in China and the US, tailor care-based CSR messages on social media to maximize positive public engagement goals. Our findings provide useful guidelines for practitioners to detect the divergence and convergence of care ethics applicable to both countries.

However, although our findings highlight the various ways in which companies can employ caring language to communicate CSR and the potential benefits in terms of public engagement on social media, it is important to note that the adoption of a care-based CSR approach does not guarantee authenticity and may risk becoming purely instrumental. It is crucial for companies to acknowledge the information asymmetry in CSR disclosure and the unequal power dynamics between them and the general public. To genuinely embrace this care-based CSR communication model, a prerequisite is for companies to align their actions with their claims and ensure consistency (Zhou & Dong, 2021). This is particularly significant given the increased skepticism among consumers towards CSR. Additionally, incorporating a public perspective is essential to enhance the authenticity of care-based CSR communication (Pérez, 2019; Song & Dong, 2022). While companies cannot address every societal concern, as socially responsible organizations, they should actively strive to understand the evolving needs for care and tailor their communication accordingly. By doing so, they can effectively address these needs and ensure that their caring language resonates with the public.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations of this study that should be acknowledged. First, the current sample size was constrained by the available COVID-19-related CSR messages, which creates challenges in collecting completely comparable samples in two countries, given that the US companies had fewer relevant posts and public comments compared to Chinese companies during our sampling time frame. Future research could replicate the study by extending the timeframe and collecting data in other countries to test further the explanatory power of the theories utilized in this study. Scholars could further discuss the differences in the number of corporate messages and corresponding public comments between China and the US, exploring the causes and implications of such differences. Also, our sample concentrated on CSR messages, including COVID-19-related keywords. This approach may omit data on the wide range of CSR actions corporations participated in during the pandemic. Future research should consider expanding the search for CSR-related information during the pandemic to offer a complete picture of CSR communication. Second, our findings from content analysis only examined the correlations between care-based CSR messages and public engagement on social

media. Future research could use experiments or longitudinal survey data to explore further the causal relationships between the variables and include contextual variables as moderators. Third, while this study illustrates the manifestations of care in CSR messages, it does not answer whether and how the disclosed CSR efforts are out of companies' genuine motives or just at face value for impression management. The authenticity of CSR communication has received increasing attention in view of the growing CSR skepticism (Pérez, 2019; Song & Dong, 2022). Thus, the findings of this study should be reviewed critically, and more empirical evidence on how different stakeholders assess and evaluate the authenticity of such CSR communication is necessary. Finally, in addition to the behavioral and emotional public engagement on social media, future research can further examine other outcomes, including online and offline public engagement, to demonstrate the broader impacts of care's manifestations in the COVID-19 pandemic context. In addition, to reflect the uniqueness of pandemic CSR communication, future research can examine companies' CSR strategies in the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic phases to indicate the manifestations of care-based CSR communication in different stages of a crisis.

Data availability Data are available on request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest No potential conflict of interest.

Research involving human participants and/or animals (If applicable) NA.

Informed consent (If applicable) NA.

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