



Research Article

# Embedding CSR into Public Relations: A Study from Polish PR Agencies

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## Abstract

This study investigates the implementation and perception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within the public relations (PR) industry in Poland, with a focus on PR agency employees. Using a survey distributed among 192 PR professionals, this research evaluates the role of CSR in enhancing corporate reputation and engaging stakeholders, as well as its incorporation into PR strategies. The results indicate a significant alignment between CSR and PR practices, underscoring their combined effectiveness in fostering a positive corporate image. However, the findings also reveal a gap in the widespread understanding and integration of the CSR principles within PR efforts. The study advocates for further research on effective strategies that merge CSR and PR, with the aim of increasing both the societal and economic recognition of responsible business practices.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, public relations, PR agencies, stakeholder engagement.

## Introduction

In a world where social attitudes are rapidly changing, the competitive landscape for businesses has been profoundly reshaped. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has transitioned from a mere trend to a crucial business imperative. This evolution involves significant investments in human resources,

environmental protection, and enhanced relationships within the company's community. Effective communication of these efforts is crucial, as it not only enhances the competitive edge of a company but also fosters sustainable social and economic development. CSR enables organisations to acknowledge and manage their impacts on the economy, society, and

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environment, thus strengthening their reputation and strengthening stakeholder relationships. These practices, often in parallel with research and development and advertising, play a critical role in enhancing social connections and improving perceptions among local stakeholders (Gardberg & Fombrun, 2006). Although a strong reputation represents a valuable asset that can be enhanced through strategic CSR activities (Durand et al., 2019), the challenges of communicating CSR initiatives remain complex (Peloza & Shang, 2011). Unlike direct advertising, which is a well-established communication medium (Sharpe & Hanson, 2020), CSR requires nuanced strategies to engage audiences effectively. Companies typically influence their stakeholders through direct messaging that appeals to emotions and promotes purchasing behaviour, addressing the intricacies of decision making and intense market competition (Pomering, 2017; Guo et al., 2019).

Consequently, the role of CSR in achieving social approval has become increasingly significant. These activities yield intangible benefits that distinguish companies as responsible entities contributing to the collective well-being of stakeholders and society at large. As organisations engage in CSR practices, they foster a positive perception of their brand, which translates into enhanced corporate reputation, legitimacy, and renown among key stakeholders (Turner, 2022). The growing societal pressure on corporations to demonstrate responsible business practices has intensified the focus on how companies communicate their CSR endeavours (Arvidsson, 2010). Companies must not only engage in CSR to build image or promotional advantages, but also integrate these practices into their core strategic planning. This strategic integration ensures that CSR activities are not only aligned with, but also improve the company's primary business objectives, delivering maximum social and economic value (Chandler & Werther, 2014).

Given the strategic importance of CSR, it is crucial that public relations professionals are well equipped to implement these practices effectively within their organisations, serving as a vital link between the company and its diverse audiences. Recognising the importance of this

dynamic, our study conducts diagnostic research to understand the scale and scope of CSR activities carried out by Polish public relations specialists. The findings of this research, which focus on perceptions and implementations of CSR among PR agencies, provide valuable information on how CSR is currently integrated within public relations strategies and the areas where further integration and education are necessary.

### **Methodological Context**

In this research, CSR is conceptualised as the obligation of organisations to address the impacts of their decisions and actions on society and the environment, underpinned by transparent and ethical behaviour. This comprehensive definition guided the survey, which was conducted with public relations specialists in September and October 2021. The study was orchestrated by the Department of Social Communication and Public Relations of the University of Warsaw, in conjunction with the Exacto Research Team and the Association of Public Relations Agencies. It involved 421 PR professionals, mainly participants from the PR Professionals Congress, a crucial national event for Poland's PR community. Data collection was achieved through auditor surveys, resulting in 192 effective interviews. Furthermore, the computer-assisted web interview method (CAWI) facilitated the extension of the survey throughout Poland through a national research panel, resulting in 118 completed online questionnaires. The sample also included 111 CAWI interviews with employees from agencies associated with the Public Relations Agencies Association. Using various data collection methods, the researchers ensured a comprehensive sample size, allowing robust conclusions relevant to the Polish PR landscape.

In this article, the emphasis is specifically on the employees of public relations agencies, represented by a sample size of 192. This figure corresponds to the number of professionals in this sector who were included in the broader survey of specialists. Consequently, all subsequent analyses are confined to the perspectives and opinions of individuals employed within these organisations.

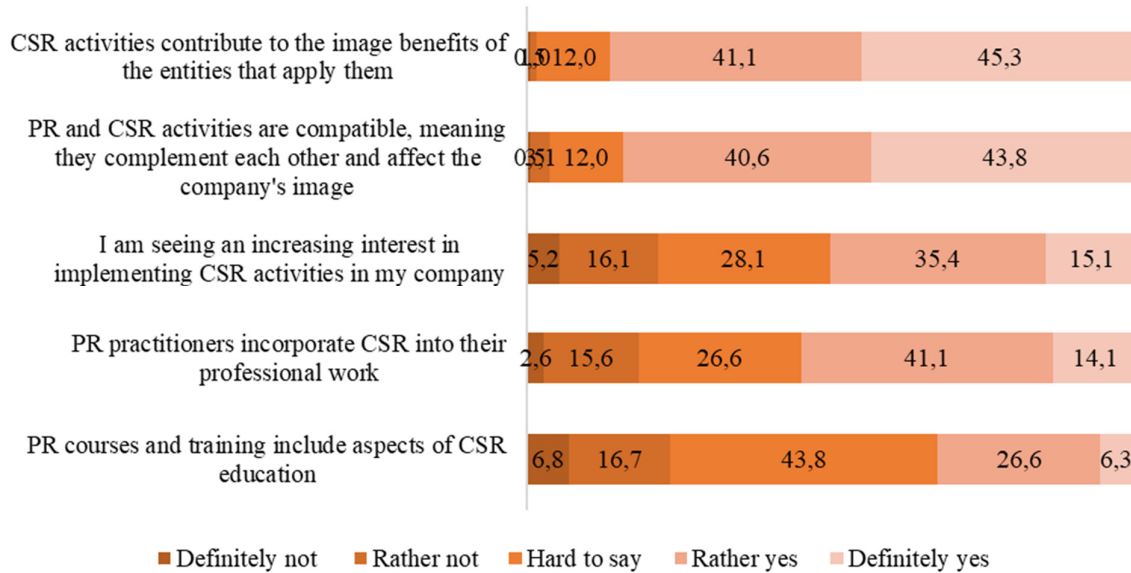
**Table 1. Profile of respondents from PR agencies (n = 192). Sporadic data gaps may occur in frequency distributions due to the research methodology.**

		N	%
<b>Sex</b>	Female	126	65,6
	Male	66	34,4
<b>Education</b>	Secondary or below	19	9,9
	Higher	164	85,4
	PhD or above	9	4,7
<b>Graduated in PR, certified courses, and trainings</b>	Yes	106	55,2
	No	79	41,1
	Don't know	7	3,6
<b>Seniority in the PR industry</b>	1-3 years	52	27,2
	4-10 years	55	28,8
	More than 10 years	84	44,0
<b>Position</b>	Executive	63	33,5
	Executive-Management	73	38,8
	Management	52	27,7
<b>Place of employment</b>	PR agency	162	84,4
	Freelancer/sole proprietorship	30	15,6
<b>Size of the Organisation</b>	0-9 employees	87	45,3
	10-49 employees	90	46,9
	50-249 employees	11	5,7
	250 employees and more	4	2,1
<b>Crisis situation in the company in the last 12 months</b>	Yes	39	20,3
	No	132	68,8
	Don't know	21	10,9
<b>CSR activities carried out in the company</b>	Yes	130	67,7
	No	47	24,5
	Don't know	15	7,8
<b>Total</b>		192	100,0

When looking at the profile of respondents employed in PR agencies, it appears that they were dominated by women (66%), people with higher education (85%), with education, certified courses, or training in PR (55%), with more than 10 years of experience in the PR industry (44%), employed in executive/management positions (39%), working in companies with 10-49 employees (47%), not having experienced a crisis in their organisation in the last 12 months (69%) and conducting CSR activities in their company (68%).

## Results

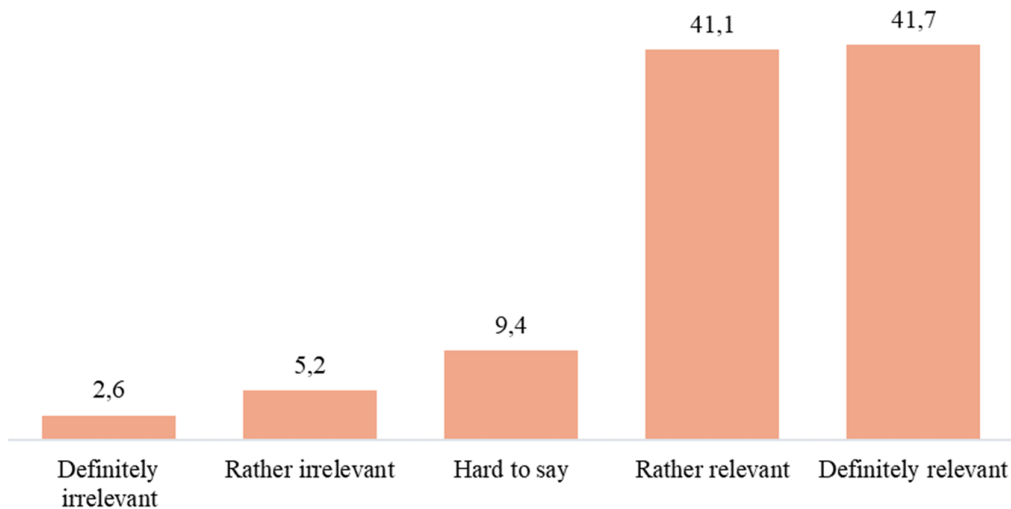
The survey introduced a definition of corporate social responsibility (CSR) as an organisation's responsibility for the impact of its decisions and actions on society and the environment, ensured by transparent and ethical behaviour. Subsequently, respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements regarding the professional work of PR specialists in relation to CSR topics, using a classic Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"). The results presented are intriguing in terms of overwhelming approval for general statements and more moderate views on issues directly related to PR practice (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Opinion on the following aspects related to CSR, n = 192, data in %**

The chart depicted the opinions of the respondents on various aspects of CSR, showing a high level of agreement that CSR activities contribute to the image benefits of the entities that apply them (86% agreement) and that PR and CSR activities are compatible,

complementing each other and affecting the company's image (84% agreement). However, only a third of the respondents employed in PR agencies acknowledged that PR courses and training include aspects of CSR education (33% agreement).



**Figure 2. Please complete the sentence: Information through on-line channels about CSR activities is for me..., n = 192, data in %**

This analysis (Figure 2) showed nearly identical percentages of respondents stating that informing through online channels about CSR

activities is "quite important" or "very important" to them (41,1% and 41,7%, respectively), while a small percentage (7,8%) did not value such activities highly. Furthermore, 9,4% of the respondents were undecided.

**Table 2. Correlation analysis within CSR issues.**

The importance of communicating through online channels about CSR activities		Aspect 1	Aspect 2	Aspect 3	Aspect 4	Aspect 5
Spearman's rho	Correlation coefficient	0,214**	0,256**	0,574**	0,505**	0,178*
	n	192	192	192	192	192

\*\* Significant correlation at the 0.01 level (two sides) or \* Significant correlation at the 0.05 level (two sides)

Aspect 1: PR practitioners incorporate CSR (understood as an organisation's responsibility for the impact of its decisions and actions on society and the environment, ensured by transparent and ethical conduct) into their professional work.

Aspect 2: I see increasing interest in implementing CSR activities in my company.

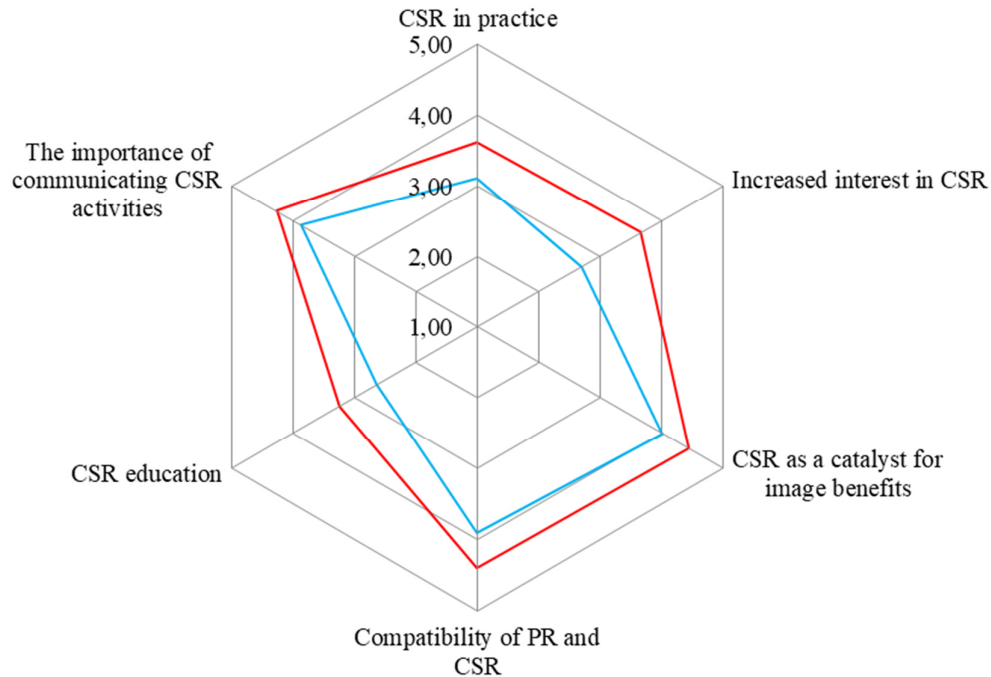
Aspect 3: CSR activities contribute to the image benefits of the entities that apply them (strengthening of recognition, competitive advantage, employee loyalty).

Aspect 4: PR and CSR activities are compatible, which means that they complement each other and affect the company's image.

Aspect 5: PR courses and training include aspects of CSR education.

The importance of communicating through online channels about CSR activities was correlated with several aspects related to CSR, showing statistically significant relationships. The strongest correlation was observed between the belief that CSR activities contribute to the image benefits of the entities that apply them and that PR and CSR activities are mutually compatible (Spearman's rho = 0.574 and 0.505, respectively).

□ CSR activities are implemented in the organization    □ Lack of CSR activities in the organization



**Figure 3. Rating of corporate social responsibility issues in relation to the respondent's exposure to CSR projects at current workplace n = 177, scale 1-5**

When looking at the responses of the respondents employed by PR agencies, it appears that people who carry out CSR activities in their organisation relatively more often emphasised the importance of all the areas analysed, compared to PR specialists who do not carry out such activities.

### Discussion

This article outlines the results of a study investigating the significance and impact of CSR within the PR sector in Poland, with a particular focus on PR agencies. The research delved into their perspectives and experiences concerning CSR, uncovering that CSR initiatives are deemed essential to improve the corporate image. The synergy between PR and CSR practices is perceived as mutually beneficial, substantially improving the company's reputation. CSR is crucial in the socioeconomic development and performance results of companies, which plays a social role within communities. This role encompasses economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities (Carroll, 1999). CSR requires companies to adopt policies, make decisions, and perform activities that align with societal values, norms, and objectives (Bowen et al., 2013). Historically, the concept of social responsibility has been intricately linked to the relationship between business and society. Furthermore, CSR functions as a management process that channels stakeholder concerns regarding responsible and irresponsible behaviours toward environmental, ethical, and social issues, ultimately benefiting the firm (Dahlsrud, 2008). This framework attracts the attention of managers, academics, and policymakers due to its corporate, social, and environmental advantages. Practically, corporate actions influence the environment, society, and stakeholders (Matten & Moon, 2020), thus influencing the global corporate sector's focus on CSR as a crucial element of organisational development (Chen et al., 2020). Additionally, CSR is increasingly regarded as a strategic approach to reduce negative environmental impacts and improve social outcomes for businesses (Islam et al., 2021).

Research conducted with American companies demonstrates that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) either facilitates or acts as a mediator in the relationship between marketing practices and corporate performance (Lan et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies indicate that CSR can increase customer satisfaction and trust, regardless of the presence of mediators (Islam et al., 2021), and establish a positive link between

CSR initiatives and social outcomes (Oeyono et al., 2011). However, the effects of CSR can vary widely depending on the specific corporate environment, the context of the research, the methodologies employed, and its role within the conceptual framework (Kim et al., 2020). Many companies view the adoption of CSR strategies as essential to achieve corporate objectives that improve their public image (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2015a). A growing body of evidence suggests a strong connection between the image of a company and its CSR efforts. Kim et al. highlight that CSR has a significant impact on enhancing a company's reputation (Kim et al., 2020). Additionally, another study identifies both the company's image and green innovations as intermediaries that influence the relationship between CSR activities and social outcomes, with corporate identity playing a moderating role in this dynamic (Fosu, Yi & Asiedu, 2023).

As the dynamics of CSR continue to evolve within the business sector, there is a pressing need for further research into new concepts, contexts, and methodologies. This necessity underscores the purpose of this study, which seeks to explore the interaction between CSR and PR practices. CSR-related activities form a crucial component of research within PR agencies (Tworzydło et al., 2022). Increasing environmental and ecological demands from stakeholders place increased pressure on all types of organisation, forcing the PR industry to engage in CSR to meet environmental, social, and economic responsibilities, and thus enhance the legitimacy of corporate CSR efforts (Molina-Azorin et al., 2015). PR professionals, tasked with crafting CSR communications, should serve as the moral conscience of corporations, promoting CSR initiatives ethically (Lee, 2017). This role is identified in the literature as the theory of professional responsibility in public relations (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001). The ethical mandate of such communications positions CSR as a core ethical concern for PR practitioners, influencing their practical actions. These actions include efforts to protect environmental resources, provide related training, and implement PR strategies that support environmental policies (Choi et al., 2019).

It is crucial that the public relations industry builds responsible relationships with stakeholders, facilitating effective CSR execution. Well-managed public relations lead to productive dialogues with the environment, aligning corporate actions with stakeholder needs. These organisational activities, CSR and PR, are not

isolated strategies, but are intrinsically linked, improving each other's effectiveness. L'Etang (L'Etang, 1994) noted that CSR often supports public relations activities, allowing communication of an organisation's strategies and achievements in social responsibility. Historically, CSR was seen merely as a supplementary aspect of public relations, aimed at building external relationships, and often considered a peripheral activity (Frankental, 2001). However, it is clear that organisations recognise the importance of stakeholder dialogue in meeting both business and social objectives. The use of nonfinancial reports to disclose CSR practices exemplifies this approach, aligning with the public information model described by Hunt and Grunig. Both PR and CSR are distinct, yet increasingly convergent activities, with their integration bolstering overall outcomes. A review of the theoretical literature on PR and CSR shows that both fields aim to enhance the quality of relationships between organisations and their stakeholders, contributing meaningfully to reputable business practices (Clark, 2000). The interaction between CSR and PR is fundamentally strategic, primarily improving the corporate reputation among clients, communities, employees, and the media. Effective CSR practices serve as a vital indicator for potential partners, signaling that a company is ethically sound, socially active, and a worthy collaborator. This not only strengthens a company's ethical standing, but also enhances its attractiveness to investors.

Despite increasing recognition of the concept of CSR among companies, there remains a significant need for further education on and deeper integration of CSR initiatives into public relations (PR) strategies and practices. This study underscores the critical role in shaping societal perceptions and enhancing corporate reputations, as well as its capacity to foster lasting and positive stakeholder relationships. The research particularly highlights the crucial role of online communication channels for PR agency employees, stressing the importance of transparent communication in the realm of social responsibility. In conclusion, the paper accentuates the pivotal role of CSR within PR practices in Poland, as identified by industry specialists. It calls for continued research and the development of integrated strategies that combine CSR with PR activities, which could substantially boost social and economic recognition of the advantages of responsible business conduct.

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