How does the corporate sector perceive non-profit organizations? Evidence from South Korea

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Abstract

Purpose – While non-profit organization (NPO)-corporate alliances have proliferated in recent years, study has yet to examine on the perception of corporations toward NPOs. The purpose of this paper is to explore the factors that shape corporate perceptions of NPOs. What does the corporation consider when evaluating the activities of an NPO? Which factors are accorded the most importance when the corporate sector observes the NPO sector?

Design/methodology/approach – Corporate respondents generally held negative attitudes toward NPOs in terms of general activism functions. In contrast, they held neutral perceptions on trustworthiness. In factor analysis, the four factors that directed how corporate executives perceived activist groups were "positive functions of activists," "negative aspects of organizational culture," "trustworthy characteristics," and "expected ethical management practices."

Findings – While the participating corporate executives expressed positive attitudes toward activists and the role that they play in society, they showed negative attitudes toward their management style and their organizational culture. In particular, they expressed negative perceptions of the activists' perceived elitism in their management style and internally oriented approach to the decision-making process.

Originality/value – Empirical evidence gathered in this study could shed light on how public relations professionals at NPOs build and maintain relationships with corporate sector, which has resources to support organization financially as well as emotionally.

Keywords Communication corporate image, Public relations

Paper type Research paper

The power of agenda building held by activist groups has become increasingly critical to corporate organizations. A number of powerful voices elicited from non-profit organizations (NPOs), calling for the correction of unethical corporate behavior, have been influential news sources for the media. From the perspective of business organizations and government agencies, these NPOs can impede their operations and sometimes harm their corporate reputations. In recent years, a variety of social media driven by digital communication technology have allowed the messages of NPOs to be heard by a global public (Jacques, 2006; Seo *et al.*, 2009).

The primary purpose of NPO is to influence public policy, organizational action, and social norms and values (Schwartz and Pforr, 2011; Werder, 2006). Activists of NPOs often express concerns or dissatisfaction, encourage corrective business practices by demanding stricter government regulation, boycott products or services, demonstrate in protest, or release negative stories or information to the press. Corporations, as a

result, are often faced with claims of social irresponsibility, environmental carelessness, consumerism, product defectiveness, and unethical management. As the public demands higher levels of transparency and accountability in corporate management in the marketplace, more NPOs tend to monitor corporate behavior to see if they violate any ethical standards (Bowen, 2008). Accordingly, unless corporate public relations officials communicate with activist groups (and the public at large) about their concerns, media coverage might affect the organization's bottom line (i.e. sales and profit). Likewise, in the corporate sector, NPOs constitute a powerful public who are able to influence organizational operations.

It has been suggested that NPOs enjoy a certain level of credibility from the public since they are more likely engaged in public interest rather than private sector which pursues profit. Yet, the public appears to be becoming more skeptical due to unethical incidents or crisis (Schwartz and Pforr, 2011).

The biggest challenge for public relations professionals at NPOs is overcoming the weakness of the public relations resources and financial resources (Gibelman, 2004). For the NPOs, whose primary purpose is to increase the membership and donor support from general public and corporate donations. Furthermore growing portion of funding for NPOs comes from corporations. For NPOs, therefore it is crucial to understand how corporate sector perceive the NPO in terms of factors of non-profit organizational reputation. By understanding the accurate factors that shape the NPOs, they can increase their abilities to level up communication skills and public relations activities, which are likely to result in donor support and membership growth.

Most studies of public relations and NPOs are content analyses of activist group's web sites or in-depth interviews of public relations practitioners at NPOs (Kensicki *et al.*, 2003; Knox and Gruar, 2006). In contrast, little is known about how corporate perceive NPOs. Whereas public relations has emphasized a proactive approach in communicating with the public at large, the analysis of perceptions held by corporate sector has been neglected. Accordingly, the current study aims to explore the factors that shape corporate perceptions of NPOs. What factors does corporate consider in evaluating the behavior of NPO? Which factors are the most important for NPOs when the corporate observe the non-profit sector? Empirical evidence gathered in this study could shed light on how public relations professionals at NPOs build and maintain relationships with corporate sector, which has resources to support organization financially as well as emotionally.

Review of literature
Resource dependence theory provides a major theoretical framework to understand the sustainability of NPO. The theory explains that the nature of NPO depends on charitable donation, private grants, or government funds. The effective NPO searches for an important balance between the goals of the organization and the hopes and aspirations of its members by communicating their social causes to the public. From the perspective of corporate, mutually beneficial relationship with NPO can increase the corporate social responsibility (CSR) that fulfills the role of corporate citizen by financial support or volunteering. To establish credibility of corporation, scholars proposed that the corporate sectors need collaboration with NPOs.

NPO can heighten corporate awareness of social forces and shifts in consumer demands, give access to new and important networks, minimize risk of confrontations with other NPOs, and assist in influencing legislators. Additional benefit of collaboration

with NPO is strengthening corporate social legitimacy because public is more likely to expect more CSR from business sector.

One of the most recent and increasingly prevalent forms of corporate communication focusses on NPO-corporate alliances. The symbiotic sustainability model (SSM) explains the functions of corporate-NPO alliance. (Shumate and O'Conner, 2010). SSM defines the relationship between corporations and NPOs as symbiotic. Symbiotic relationships are characterized by mutual dependence among organizations in more than population, usually operationalized as an industry. According to SSM, the communication of the alliance allows NPO to obtain capital that may otherwise be unavailable. When organizational attributes are communicated to stakeholders, messages are evaluated within the context of what is already known about the organization and based upon the source credibility (Smith *et al.*, 2012). Thus, the NPO needs to establish the mutual relationship with corporations to sustain its social causes and gain legitimate financial support.

Scholars have labeled NPOs differently depending on their disciplines. Smith used the term "social movement group," and Susskind and Field (1996) called them an "angry public." Most studies have used the general word activism. Grunig *et al.* defined activists as "two or more individuals who organize to influence an organization through action." Activist groups use education, compromise, persuasion, pressure, or coercion to influence to the greater public. Grunig (1992) found that most organizations take a closed stand, rather than an open one, toward activists. She emphasized that public relations professionals should embrace dialogic communication, negotiation, and issue management skills to nurture relationships with activists. Hallahan (2000) contended that activists tend to pay more attention to issues, perceive problems, share meaningful dialogue with others, and take action if necessary. The primary purpose of activism is to influence public policy, organizational action, and social norms and values.

Jackson (1982) identified five types of communication tactics employed by activist groups: first, informational activities such as interviews and media relations; second, symbolic activities such as boycotts; third, organizing activities such as distributing leaflets, networking, and hosting media events; fourth, legal activities such as petitioning, filing lawsuits, lobbying for legislation, testifying at hearings, and pressuring regulatory and administrative agencies; and finally, civil disobedience activities such as sit-ins, blocking traffic, and trespassing (p. 215).

Werder (2006) identified goal compatibility as a significant factor in dealing with activist groups. She contended that organizations should seek to establish goal compatibility with activists in order to facilitate communication with them. Holtzhausen (2007) drew attention to the weakness of the Excellence study when communicating with the activists. She criticized the normative two-way method of communication for neglecting the power inequality between organizations and activists. She contends that financial resources and access to the media grant organizations more power than activists. Holtzhausen (2007) also challenged conventional public relations studies by focussing on how organizations benefit from advocating their own standpoint. She underscored the role of public relations professionals based on post-modern values: "In this role, practitioners will be change agents, serve as the conscience of the organization, and give voice to those without power in the relationship." Thus, Holtzhausen (2007) argued that public relations professionals need to understand the tenets of activism so that they act as internal activists and contribute to the democratic values to their organization.

Overall, little is known about the ways that corporate sectors perceive NPOs. Accordingly, the present study posits the following two research questions:

RQ1. How do corporate executives perceive the activist group and their relationship with activist groups?

RQ2. What are the factors that corporate executives use when evaluating non-profit sector?

Method

This study administered the survey method to examine how the corporate sector perceives corporate operations and reputation in South Korea. South Korea has become one of the fastest growing countries that ranks 15th in the world in nominal GDP and is a member of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. South Korea has adapted an export-oriented economic strategy driven by large conglomerates such as Samsung Electronics, Hyundai Motors, and LG Electronics. Thus the growth of the national economy sector has resulted in large conglomerates and many employees. One of the characteristics of Korean conglomerates is family-controlled firms, called *Chaebol*. A *Chaebol* refers to a number of enterprises under one conglomerate, typically controlled by a chairman who possesses ownership power. The top 20 *Chaebol*s account for more than 80 percent of the Korean GDP as of September 2013 (Murillo and Sung, 2013). With the growth of the Korean economy, the non-profit sectors also increased their presence to voice human rights, environmental issues, and transparent management against large conglomerates (OECD, 2014).

The main survey questionnaire addressed perceptions of the core functions of NPOs, the level of trustworthiness, the level of power compared to corporate and their overall relationship with the corporate sector. To measure corporate perception toward NPOs, a five-point Likert scale was used to identify their level of agreement with each statement. Because this study was exploratory, the researchers conducted preliminary focus group with 12 corporate executives before finalizing the questionnaires. The 12 corporate executives are five public relations professionals, three marketing executives, two financial officers, and two CSR officers. The participants were asked to state their candid attitudes toward NPOs. They were asked to express their candid opinions when they think of activist group which come to their minds first. From the focus group, three dimensions of corporate people's perceptions were extracted to measure their attitudes toward the non-profit sector. The preliminary focus group yielded the following three dimensions as shown in the Table I.

Results

The survey collected 260 responses from corporate executives in South Korea in the fall 2012. Of these, 187 were male and 73 female. The mean age was 41. The corporate people represented a wide spectrum of corporate sectors. The respondents were consisted a number of industry sectors. Of those 52 (20 percent) corporate people represent for telecommunication, 46 (17.5 percent) respondents for financial industry, 41 (15.7 percent) respondents for food and retailing industry, 29 (11.3 percent) people for electronics, 73 (28.1 percent) people for general manufacturing and 19 (7.3 percent) are others.

RQ1 addressed how corporate people perceive corporate operations and their relationship with corporate organizations. As shown in Table II, the various members

Dimension	Measure
General function of activists (5)	The activists provide beneficial information to society
	The activists pursue the interest of general public
	The activists are watch dogs of corporate activities
	The activists show alternatives of social issues
	The activists attempts to resolve social conflict
Positive Attitudes toward activists (10)	The activists are trustworthy
	The activists are respectful in society
	The activists are dependable
	The activists have expertise in their operation
	The activists value the equality
	The activists are transparent in their management
	The activists are truthful
	The activists are innovative
	The activists are ethical in their business
	The activists are autonomous
Negative attitude toward activists (5)	The activists are elite-centric management
	The activists value top-down decision making
	The activists are closed management style
	The activists are hypocritical
	The activists are internal-oriented systems

Table I.
Survey instrument to measure corporate perceptions of activist group

Corporate executives' perception of activists	M
Attitude toward activist group	2.64
Level of trust	3.03
Level of power in agenda building	3.56
The extent of goal sharing	2.11
The extent of mutual relationship	2.53

Table II.
Corporate executives' perception of the activists

of corporate people held negative attitude toward the activist group regarding the dimension of general activism function ($M = 2.64$). In contrast, the corporate people had neutral perception of trustworthiness ($M = 3.03$). Corporate sector perceived that activists had more power than they had when building media agenda ($M = 3.56$). In addition, the corporate people did not perceive that the activists group shared their goals ($M = 2.11$). However, the corporate people had lower perception with regard to the mutual relationship ($M = 2.53$).

These results indicate that the corporate executives do not trust activist group as much as the activist group expect. The results suggest that corporate section have trouble cultivating mutual beneficial relationships with activist groups.

RQ2 addressed the attitude factors that influence the way corporate sector evaluate the activist group. To identify the factors that corporate executives use when evaluating activist group, this study used factor analysis to derive 20 items of attitude from explorative focus group consisted of corporate executives. In the preliminary focus group, the researchers culled the most frequently mentioned statements about the activist group that would measure overall attitude toward the activist group.

Through principal component analysis with varimax rotation, factor analysis extracted four factors, as shown in the Table III. The four factors accounted for 66 percent of the total variance; factor one explained 19 percent of the variance, followed

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
The activists provide beneficial information to society	*0.866*	0.084	0.180	0.030
The activists pursue the interest of general public	*0.838*	0.017	0.135	0.011
The activists are watch dogs of corporate activities	*0.715*	0.098	0.143	0.203
The activists attempts to resolve social conflict	*0.709*	0.122	0.094	0.290
The activists show alternatives of social issues	*0.689*	0.127	0.361	0.104
The activists are hypocritical	0.026	*0.792*	0.062	0.059
The activists are closed management style	0.197	*0.756*	0.003	0.017
The activists are elite-centric management	0.059	*0.701*	0.230	0.122
The activists value top-down decision making	0.112	*0.676*	0.095	0.058
The activists are internal-oriented systems	0.027	*0.597*	0.121	0.367
The activists are trustworthy	0.266	0.023	*0.850*	0.058
The activists are respectful in society	0.042	0.039	*0.803*	0.209
The activists are dependable	0.164	0.102	*0.742*	0.231
The activists have expertise in their operation	0.427	0.038	*0.701*	0.076
The activists are transparent in their management	0.130	0.135	0.158	*0.820*
The activists are ethical in their business	0.253	0.085	0.497	*0.659*
The activists are truthful	0.252	0.008	0.483	*0.646*
Eigenvalue	3.42	3.25	3.21	1.92
Variance (%)	19.0	18.0	17.8	10.7

Table III.
Factor analysis
for corporate
attitude toward
the activist group

by 18 percent for factor two, 17 percent for factor three, and 10 percent for factor four. In order to extract the relevant items from 20 candidate measurement items, a few rules were employed. First, item loadings (standardized regression coefficient) had to exceed 0.60 on at least one factor. Second, for those items with factor loadings exceeding 0.60 on more than one factor, a minimum difference of 0.1 between factor loadings was required. These criteria deleted three items in the factor analysis, since the loadings are less than 0.60. These three items are "In general activists value the equality," "The activists are innovative," "The activists are autonomous." Thus, the final factor analysis extracted four factors as shown in Table III from 17 items.

Factor one consisted of five items, including "provide beneficial information" "pursue the interest of general public" "watch dogs" "show alternatives" and "attempts to resolve social conflict." Thus, the first factor was labeled "activists' positive function." The second factor included five negative items toward activist group, such as "hypocritical" "elite-centric management" "top-down decision making" "closed management style" and "internal-oriented system." Thus, the second factor was named "negative organizational culture." The third factor included four items referring to the extent to which the activist groups perform their roles as general public expected. These four items are "trustworthy" "respect" "dependable" and "expertise." The third factor is labeled as "trustworthy characteristics." The third factor describes the positive characteristics that general public hold. Lastly, the fourth factor extracted three items as follows: "transparent management" "ethical" and "truthful." These items commonly refer to the ethical management style which the public expected toward the activist group. Therefore, the fourth factor was labeled "expected ethical management"

In sum, the four factors that directed how the corporate executives perceived the activist group are "activists' positive function" "negative organizational culture," "trustworthy characteristics" and "expected ethical management." The rotated factor analysis showed that the corporate executives used these criteria when they associate with the reputation of activist group.

Factor one indicates that the overall positive function of activist group, held in the minds of corporate executives. The corporate executives perceived the activists are independent watch dog role in the society. The second factor refers to the negative perception of corporate people toward activist group. Given the similar amount of variance compared to the factor one, the negative perception toward activists are deeply rooted in the mindset of corporate executives. The third factor indicates the positive affective perception when the activists are doing their operation, mainly trustworthy characteristics. The third factor is close to the expected image associated with its innate function which is driven by NPO. The fourth factor the overall expected image which the general public may hold toward the activist group. The factor refers to the way of management in their operations.

Discussion and conclusion

The study of NPO has been concentrated on the impact of their influence on the corporate reputation or society level. NPOs occupy different functions in each sector. The purpose of the present study was to examine the perceptions of corporate executives toward NPOs, which are expected to work for public interest in society level. More specifically the study attempts to examine the perceptions of corporate executives to compare the perceptions of activists' perceptions toward corporate, which has been done before. Given the scarcity of activism studies in the public relations field, the purpose of this exploratory study was to describe corporates' perceptions of the activist group. While the participating corporate executives expressed a positive cognition of activists in society, they showed negative attitudes toward their management style and their organizational culture as well.

In particular, the corporate people evaluated negatively the activists in their centric management style- and internal-oriented approach in decision-making process. The incidents of wrongdoings of NPO may affect the negative perception of corporate executives. Given the adverse perception of activist group, activists group would address against the wrongdoings, and need to exhibit high sensitivity in molding public opinion.

By contrast, the corporate executives evaluated the power of activist group highly ($M = 3.56$). Largely the high perception of power derives from the agenda building power in public opinion. However, the corporate people do not perceive that the power of activists as legitimate that leads to correct the corporate behavior, Rather the results indicates that the power of activists as dissenter of corporate operation. In addition, the corporate executives show concerns that the activist group may be dominated by small number of management alienated from public.

They gave a low evaluation of the extent of goal sharing, and mutual exchange relationship. While the corporate executives recognize the function of activist group as watch dog to present alternatives to social problems they still have some reservations on their management or transparency. The results suggest that collaboration or a symmetrical relationship, as the two-way symmetric theory would recommend, might be a challenging assignment for public relations practitioners at activist group. The dependence theory suggests that the activist groups need financial support from corporate sector and government fund. The data suggest that the activist group need to restore trust from corporate people in terms of transparent management and organizational culture.

Similar to the perception of activists toward corporate sector, the most striking perception that corporate executives retained is that activists possess more power in the form of agenda building that can access the media.

The second research question is to examine the determinant of perceptions toward NPOs from the perspective of corporate sector. Using the items drawn from the focus

group, factor analysis demonstrated that the corporate executives used four sub-dimensions when evaluating activist group: "positive social function," "negative organizational culture," "trustworthy characteristics" "expected ethical management." These mixed perceptions mirror the real perceptions and expected outcome from activist group. The first factor indicates the social function of activist group, who raise voices over the issues to improve the community. Clearly the corporate executives perceived that the positive function of activist group lies in the watch dog and work for the benefit of general public. The second factor suggests that the NPOs need to improve the closed organizational culture, managed by a number of elite members. In other words, the activist groups need to increase the openness and transparency to gain trust from corporate sector. The third factor "trustworthy characteristic" refers to the nature of NPO. The factor is consisted of "respect" "dependable" "expertise" and "trustworthiness." These items are the conventional measurement items of source credibility that the corporate executives expect the activist group to be trustworthy in its operation. The fourth factor consisted of "transparence" "ethical management" and "veracious." The importance of trust for activist group is evidenced in recent studies (Kensicki *et al.*, 2003). Though the fourth factor is similar to third factor, the "ethical management" factor is more closely refers to the importance of transparent management. The extracted factor of ethical management suggests that these transparent and ethical management are perceived as separate characteristic that the corporate executives evaluated non-profit sector.

These four factors suggest that public relations professionals of activist groups need to understand these factors when building relationships with corporate sector. Since NPOs are highly dependent on corporate sector and government financial support and information resources, building perceived beneficial relationship is critical to the side of corporate people.

The factor analysis suggests that public relations professionals at NPOs might refer to these four dimensions when managing their reputation. For instance, public relations professionals could create reputation indices to monitor the respective sub-dimensions of positive social function, organizational culture, and ethical management, especially when communicating corporate sector. The efforts of building relationship of activist group based on four factors can reinforce the funding for NPOs from corporations.

Like a collective whistle blower, activist groups have an influential voice capable of announcing and criticizing unethical corporate practices and corporate mismanagement. Conversely public relations professionals at activist group, therefore, not only need to raise their own voices of social issues but also to build credible reputation between activists' voices and the internal management of their organization. Building relationships with corporate sector-based trustworthy characteristics has become a critical task for public relations professionals to master, given the public emphasis placed on ethical management and source credibility. Clearly, the ethical transparence of management of NPO affect greatly on the perception of outside publics, when evaluating NPOs. The findings echo the Kelly's (1998) argument that NPOs are more likely to experience fundraising success with their donors when maintaining integrity and transparence.

Activism has become increasingly critical to the corporate sector with the expansion of the digital media environment (e.g. social media). The non-profit sector needs financial resources from corporate donors in this economic downturn years. In contrast, the corporate sector needs enhanced image, by gaining legitimate power in from non-profit sector in terms of CSR. While the organizational goal might be different,

the mutual dependent relationship is more likely to be crucial to increase organizational sustainability for both sides.

Contrary to expectations, the corporate executives are critical in their perceptions of activist group in organizational culture and decision-making process. If public relations professionals at NPOs cannot avoid interacting with corporate sector, the results of this study suggest that they need to put more weight on ethical management.

In particular, the post-modern public relations approach might be most appropriate, for it values the disparities between an organization and the public rather than trying to conquering or silence opposing voices. Given the low level of trust and low opinion of relational fitness that the corporate held, traditional fundraising campaign or persuasive paradigms will most likely not work effectively.

Although a clear link does not exist between factors of corporate perceptions and corporate donor intention, the study confirms that the corporate executives use these criteria when building relationship with activist groups. As Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) suggested, the role of public relations practitioners should be to identify the sources of tension between an organization and its public when engaging in a relationship with corporate sectors If we accept the conventional norm that the function of public relations is to defend and maintain a favorable image of an organization, the findings of this study suggest that this function must be extended to address the world outside the NPOs and manage the various political phenomena that surround it.

The data presented here provide empirical evidence for the way corporate executives perceive the non-profit sector. Contrary to conventional normative advice, the survey results provide a stepping stone that activist group might use to approach and respond to activist groups. One limitation should be noted; the corporate executives who participated in this study do not represent the variety of perspectives that exist across different countries and cultures. Perceptions of corporate sector need further examination in numerous different contexts. Future research is also warranted to see how two groups view each other, and comparative research between the two parties could increase our understanding of public relations practice, especially where activism is concerned.

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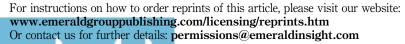
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