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Giving power to corporate social responsibility: A case study of the organization-public relationship between a public utility and its community stakeholders

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A Thesis submitted to the
Reed College of Media
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Giving power to corporate social responsibility: A case study of the organization-public relationship between a public utility and its community stakeholders

Rhyanna C. Wiethe

The purpose of this research is to examine how, if at all, relationships between public utility companies and their stakeholders changes following a corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative, and based on the results, how can companies restructure their initiatives to better serve their publics in order to build stronger, more positive relationships. A multi-method case study using in-depth interviews and two content analyses (a social media analysis and a news coverage analysis) was used to explore the relationship between a public utility company and a community affected by the implementation of a CSR initiative. The findings suggest that the relationship quality between stakeholders and the utility was improved and community pride was increased, although the community may not remember that the utility was involved with the CSR initiative. Results also show that the public utility did not promote its involvement with the initiative on social media or in news coverage, which could have led to the community being aware of the utility as the funder. The information gathered in this research will help expand research of public utilities and its CSR activities and how these activities can be improved to create better relationships with its stakeholders.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is an instrumental activity that corporations devote time and resources to, and in recent years, many executives believe it is almost essential for their business's survival (Kim, 2011). CSR is based on the idea that corporations and organizations are responsible for doing good in the communities they directly impact and the rest of society (Pfau et al., 2008). Most existing literature covers how CSR is implemented by Fortune 500 companies or corporations that produce nonessential consumer goods or services like insurance (e.g., Kim, 2014; Sen & Bahattacharya, 2006; Fraustino & Connolly, 2015; Kim, 2011; Overton et al., 2021). For example, in their online experiment of U.S. residents, Overton and colleagues (2021) examined whether company CSR messaging changes the public's attitude toward that company. The specific messages were from Olay and Girls Who Code, both in the desirable goods and services category. They found that CSR messaging increased a participant's attitude towards a company if the CSR messaging is seen as being value-driven (meaning the CSR messaging is seen as stakeholder-serving) (Overton et al., 2021). However, this study focused on companies that provide consumer goods and services that are nonessential. It is important to consider CSR initiatives undertaken by companies that provide services and products that are essential to the public's everyday life, such as public utilities, since most current scholarship focuses on nonessential consumer goods or services. Consumers rely on public utilities, like electricity, water, and gas companies, for functioning in daily life. With this in mind, how are these essential public utility companies and their corresponding charitable foundations giving back to the communities that depend on them for their everyday needs? Does it matter?

An international electricity and gas provider, Iberdrola, noted that CSR is necessary for public utilities like electricity, water, and sanitation. A World Finance report associated with Iberdrola clearly stated that "businesses must demonstrate at length that they're more than mere moneymaking enterprises, but responsible corporate citizens" (Iberdrola, 2014, para. 2). Being a good corporate citizen is a must for these utilities because many people do not have a choice about their service provider (Zummo, 2018; Ingham & Havard, 2017). To illustrate, in 2018, only 17 states in the U.S. had deregulated electricity (Zummo, 2018). This means that citizens in the other 33 states do not have the option to choose an electricity provider. These consumers are known as stakeholders, meaning they are directly affected by the decisions and actions of utility companies. That said, it is expected that these service providers assume the responsibility of helping to improve the communities in their service areas. Specifically for utility companies, previous research has categorized CSR into three main areas dealing with the issues that the initiatives are striving to solve: economic issues, environmental issues, and social issues (Stjepcevic & Siknelyte, 2017; Zhao, 2015). Each is briefly covered in the paragraphs that follow to provide a clearer picture of CSR initiatives in the essential services realm.

One example of a public utility focusing on environmental and social issues is the American States Water Company (ASWC). ASWC is a public utility that serves communities in California, Kansas, Florida, and other states as well as being contracted by military bases across the country. In 2019, the utility produced an in-depth CSR report that detailed its different environmental, educational, and veteran-based initiatives. These initiatives include mandatory community service hours for salaried employees, implementation of environmental conservation and sustainability at schools, employee presence in various

service organizations and leadership roles, and financial support for events related to veterans ("Serving Our Communities," 2019). In the report, ASWC (2019) identifies the importance of the company's role in participating in community CSR initiatives:

> A utility plays a unique role in a community. We're tied to residents' daily lives, and to the overall strength of the places we serve, in a way many businesses aren't. Beyond providing service that our customers can depend on, community engagement remains a priority across all of our businesses." (p. 22)

As evidenced from the previous example, most CSR initiatives are funded by the public utility corporation, but are implemented by a designated mediary (e.g., donating money to the United Way to continue programming). For example, companies may donate money to a community-based organization (e.g., local education or social-service program) or a nonprofit fundraising network (e.g., the United Way) to implement CSR initiatives and programming that benefits the people and communities in which they serve. Thus, local organizations act as designated, trusted mediaries—the groups that use the corporate funding to implement the agreed-upon programs in their respective communities. There are other examples that support this such as when The Kansas City Board of Utilities was honored for efforts to give back to the community through fundraising and donating money to projects and organizations that support local children, like an annual summer camp, and employee volunteering ("BPU's Corporate," 2015). Other utility companies also partake in CSR initiatives like these examples (e.g., "AEP Foundation," n.d.; "Charitable Giving," n.d.).

As mentioned, while most existing literature regarding CSR covers how it is implemented by Fortune 500 companies or corporations that produce nonessential consumer goods or services, few studies have examined how CSR initiatives implemented by public utilities in the U.S. have impacted their relationships with the communities they

serve. Further, no known research has closely explored the role of the mediary that implemented the CSR initiative on behalf of the essential organization.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how, if at all, relationships between public utility companies and their constituents changes following a CSR initiative, and based on the results, how can companies restructure their initiatives to better serve their publics in order to build stronger, more positive relationships. Through CSR initiatives like ASWC implemented, the relationship between the company and the affected populations are often changed (Bhattacharya et al., 2009). The quality of these relationships can be measured using organization-public relationship (OPR) theory. By better understanding how organizations create and maintain meaningful relationships with the public, stakeholder theory can be used to determine how dedicated a public utility is to the people it serves. Stakeholder theory is the idea that corporations need to consider all stakeholders when making decisions (Freeman, 1984).

Using OPR and stakeholder theory as guides, this research will provide an in-depth case-study exploration of a utility company's CSR initiative, which was supported by an educational grant from its charitable foundation, that used a public university as a mediary to implement the initiative within an Appalachian community. Relationship building between a public utility corporation and its publics/stakeholders is important for the corporation to improve its communication with its publics and improve the quality of life of people in its service area. This study will aid in understanding how communication, the basis and central issue of CSR (Schultz et al., 2013), can be improved to create better relationships between the corporation and the people. A discussion of CSR and the

theoretical lenses through which this study is viewed is provided in the literature review that follows as well as a detailed account of the case under study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

CSR has been defined and redefined a multitude of times by researchers (e.g., Bowen, 1953; Carroll, 1979; Frederick, 1960; Wood, 1991). One theme, however, is evident––CSR is used by businesses to show that it is involved and giving back to the community it serves. Although researchers may argue about the intentions and effectiveness of such endeavors (e.g., whether the CSR initiative is a means to an end for the corporation or whether it is intended to truly benefit stakeholders), the purpose of this programming has been universally agreed upon. Studying how the relationships between stakeholders and public utilities are maintained is only possible by examining the context and intentions behind CSR, the quality of the relationship between the public and the corporation, and the effectiveness of the specific CSR program.

This literature review will first discuss the many definitions of CSR and how it has been used and studied in a public relations context in order to understand the importance of CSR in building relationships with the public. Next, stakeholder theory will be discussed in order to show the different ways that CSR can and should be done in order to form these relationships. OPR theory and its framework will then be explained to show the relationship between CSR, public utility companies, and their stakeholders. Finally, the case under study will be described.

Corporate Social Responsibility

CSR is an irreplaceable activity that businesses engage in to be good corporate citizens (Kim, 2011; Pfau et al., 2008). The concept of CSR was first discussed by Howard Bowen because he recognized that large corporations that were influential in decision-making needed to consider its stakeholders (Carroll, 2009). Bowen's (1953) seminal work

established what societal responsibilities businessmen were obligated to assume through the lens of business and ethics. In terms of what these social responsibilities entails, Bowen (1953) stated "it refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which [sic] are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society" (p. 6). In other words, CSR initiatives should reflect the concerns, values, and needs of stakeholders and work to address these issues.

Other researchers since have defined CSR similarly based on the idea that CSR is created by stakeholder and societal expectations of the corporation (e.g., Carroll, 1979; Frederick, 1960; Sethi, 1975). However, stakeholder expectations that the corporations should be “doing good” has been viewed differently by other researchers. Particularly, some argue that CSR is more concerned with the well-being of stakeholders since the goal of CSR is for a corporation to be seen as community member that cares for its community (e.g., Kotler and Lee, 2005; McWilliams and Siegel, 2001; Wood, 1991). CSR has been developed and studied in a public relations context including communication of CSR through social media (e.g., Fraustino & Connolly, 2015; Sreejesh et al., 2020; Wang & Huang, 2018) and opinions and attitudes toward CSR (e.g., Kim, 2011; Kim, 2014; Overton et al., 2021; Pfau et al., 2008; Sen et al., 2006).

Stakeholder Theory

Central to CSR activities are the stakeholders who are directly affected by these programs and endeavors. To that end, stakeholder theory, first conceived by R. Edward Freeman (1984), helps to explain the value and focus of these activities. Freeman pioneered modern stakeholder theory by explaining that businesses would become more successful by considering all stakeholders when making decisions––not just shareholders,

or people that own a share in a company (Freeman, 1984). Since then, many scholars have further developed this theory and have studied different contexts into which stakeholder theory fits. Stakeholder theory started primarily in a business management context (e.g., Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Agle et al., 2008) and has made its way into communications, marketing, public relations, and other related fields (e.g., Laczniak & Murphy, 2012; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the current study, stakeholder theory is specifically analyzed through a public relations, marketing, and CSR lens.

Marketing researchers have explored the effects of stakeholder theory through aligning marketing goals with the beneficence of stakeholders. Laczniak and Murphy (2012) point out that keeping stakeholders' expectations and needs top-of-mind when creating marketing messaging is the key to long-term success for corporations. To exemplify the importance of thinking about long-term success and meeting stakeholders' needs, the authors gave examples showing the pitfall of short-term thinking. "For example, tobacco marketing, the selling of 'pay-day' loans, and the promotion of sugared soft drinks all produce some initially satisfied consumers, along with troubling and exploitive secondary effects for the rest of society" (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012, p. 285). To create and maintain successful relationships with stakeholders, these companies need to keep their stakeholders' best interests in mind––not just the corporations' financial well-being. There are two important forms of stakeholder management that have emerged in the marketing and public relations fields based on previous research: soft-form stakeholder management and hard-form stakeholder management.

Soft-form Stakeholder Management

Soft-form stakeholder management is described as company-centric, meaning that stakeholders' needs are second to the economic performance of a company (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012). Rowley (1997) shows this as the company being in the center of a wheel and the stakeholders as the spokes leading back to the company. When profit is the highest priority for a corporation, marketing goals may tend to fall flat or perform poorly, unlike when CSR is implemented as the highest priority for the corporation (Hoeffler et al., 2010).

Hard-form Stakeholder Management

It is important to note that the primary difference between hard-form and soft-form is the level of care the company has for its stakeholders. Hard-form stakeholder management prioritizes the stakeholders, even if the needs of the public are not inducive to increased profits. Laczniak and Murphy (2012) describe hard-form stakeholder management in the context of the 2009 Toyota vehicle recall. Toyota resisted recalling vehicles even though there were obvious safety issues. The authors speculated that if Toyota would have implemented hard-form stakeholder management and immediately recalled all vehicles, the company would have avoided millions of dollars in lost profit. The most important aspect to understand about hard-form stakeholder management is that profits will occur if companies do a good job in caring for stakeholders (Handy, 2002). For this research study, stakeholder theory will be conceptualized through the two different aforementioned management forms: soft-form and hard-form. Since public utilities' profits are not driven by increasing sales, their CSR initiatives can be conceived as hard-form management if done correctly. Furthermore, stakeholder theory will also be used to interpret and discuss the results of this study to show the bigger picture of CSR and how it can be improved in the future to foster better, more positive relationships with the public.

Organization-Public Relationship (OPR)

An important part of determining if CSR efforts are being perceived by stakeholders as hard-form stakeholder management (i.e., prioritizing stakeholders over profits), is the evaluation of these important publics' perceptions of their relationship with the corporation. Extant public relations literature indicates that one such way to evaluate relationship quality is the organization-public relationship or OPR. This theory was pioneered by Mary Ann Ferguson (1984), when she called for the development of theories specific to public relations, rather than relying on those from sociology and other social sciences. She specifically focused on one area that she believed to be the most important to the progression of the public relations field: public relationships. She advocated for a relational perspective that would progress public relations theory building. Ferguson (1984) went on to propose variables that could be used to measure and analyze relationships between the publics and organizations such as the levels of dynamicity, satisfaction, public control, and openness.

Since then, other scholars have further developed this theory and studied it in a variety of contexts such as nonprofit relationship management (e.g., Lee & Rim, 2016; Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016; Waters, 2009), relationship management on social media (e.g., Men & Muralidharan, 2017; Namisango & Kang, 2019; Saffer & Sommerfeldt, 2013; Sutherland & Freberg, 2020), dialogue as a relationship management tool (e.g., Bruning et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2019; Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2020), among others. In Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) qualitative study in which they conducted in-depth discussions and focus groups with public relations personnel of a telecommunications company and key community stakeholders, they found that trust, openness, and involvement were the

critical factors in "creating, developing, and maintaining" an OPR (p. 59). The researchers defined OPR as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). Building on this definition, Huang (1999) posited that the OPR is "the degree that the organization and its publics trust one another, agree that one has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another" (p. 12). Beyond solely theoretical thought, OPR, often referred to as relationship management theory, has been extensively explicated as a framework for measuring relationships (e.g., Broom et al., 1997; Grunig, 1993; Grunig et al., 1992; Grunig, 2002; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) and been classified by different relationship types (e.g., Hung, 2005; Hung & Chen, 2009; Hon & Grunig, 1999).

One of the most recognized scales developed to measure public relationships was first conceptualized by Hon and Grunig (1999). The scale consisted of four elements: trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. This scale was created to be used in quantitative research by creating a questionnaire that would use a 9-point Likert scale to measure agreement. After the development of this scale, other researchers expanded upon and developed other components that can be used to measure OPR (e.g., Heath, 2013; Huang, 2001; Ki & Hong, 2007; Kim, 2007). For instance, Huang (2001) conceived a cross-cultural multiple item scale named the Organization-Public Relationship Assessment (OPRA) which expanded upon Hon and Grunig's work by adding a fifth cultural dimension to reflect values in Chinese society. OPR research has been conducted to study the *quality and type* of relationships (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2021; Stanley et al., 2020; Vlahović et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Seltzer & Lee, 2018; Shen, 2017) in quantitative contexts.

In 2002, J. E. Grunig realized that although OPR had been studied extensively through quantitative studies (e.g., surveys), there needed to be a defined instrument and outline for qualitative measurement of OPR. Therefore, Grunig (2002) defined two relationship types and four relationship characteristics that can be used to measure the quality of OPR and gave a framework for conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups. Each are discussed in the sections that follows. For the purposes of this study, the characteristics explicated by Grunig will be used.

Qualitative Measurement of OPR

Relationship Types

The two relationships that Grunig described that can be used to assess OPR are exchange relationship and communal relationship. The exchange relationship is when "one party gives benefits to the other only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do so in the future" (p. 1). Typically, this relationship is not satisfactory for a public in the long-run and can be perceived as soft-form stakeholder management. For example, in one study conducted by Kim & Sung (2015) university students in South Korea were given a survey to determine if exchange relationships led to increased recognition of the problems of their university––in this context, tuition increase. It was found that students that felt that they had an exchange relationship with the university were more likely to acknowledge the university's issues and be motivated to take action. On the other hand, a communal relationship is when "parties are willing to provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other––even when they believe they might not get anything in return" (Grunig, 2002, p. 1). In the same study above by Kim & Sung (2015), it was found that if students had a perceived communal relationship with the

university, they were less likely to recognize the university's problems and be less motivated to do anything about it. This is why communal relationships can be perceived as hard-form stakeholder management under the scope of stakeholder theory.

Measurable Relationship Characteristics

Grunig (2002) also defined four relationship characteristics to be used to measure relationship quality: control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

Control Mutuality. Grunig defines control mutuality as "the degree to which parties in a relationship are satisfied with the amount of control they have over the relationship" (p. 2). Grunig explains that there is never a complete balance in organization-public relationships, but the best relationships of this type are when each has some degree of control over the other. Other researchers corroborate this definition (e.g., Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Ferguson, 1984; Hon & Grunig, 1990); however, Stafford and Canary (1991) add that it refers to the level of agreement partners have about which partner should decide relationship goals and behavioral routines. Huang (2001) posits that control mutuality can be achieved through two-way symmetrical communication and is a crucial variable in resolving conflict in an OPR.

Trust. Trust is defined by Grunig (2002) as "the level of confidence that both parties have in each other and their willingness to open themselves to the other party" (p. 2). He identified three dimensions that make up trust: integrity, dependability, and competence. According to Grunig (2002), integrity is the *belief* an organization is fair and just, dependability is the *reliability* of the organization to do what it promises, and competence is when the public believes an organization is *able* to do what it promises. Trust is an important factor in measuring OPR and is included in most studies describing it (e.g.,

Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Grunig et al., 1992; Huang, 1999; Stanley et al., 2020; Vlahović et al., 2020). Trust is also the second most critical variable behind control mutuality in resolving conflict in an OPR (Grunig, 2002; Huang, 2001).

Commitment. The third characteristic Grunig (2002) posited is commitment, which is defined as "the extent to which both parties believe and feel that the relationship is worth spending energy on to maintain and promote" (p. 2). Bruning and Ledingham (1999) found that commitment may change behavior and influence publics. For example, in a survey study conducted by O'Neil (2009), commitment was used as an OPR measure to determine if communications from a nonprofit organization impact donor satisfaction, commitment, and trust. Communications that emphasize a nonprofit's commitment, trust, and satisfaction greatly impacts a donor's overall relationship with the nonprofit (O'Neil, 2009).

Satisfaction. Lastly, Grunig (2002) described satisfaction as "the extent to which both parties feel favorably about each other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced" (p. 2). When the public and the organization both engage in steps to continue a positive relationship, satisfaction is created. Satisfaction is different from other characteristics because it affects emotions (Huang, 2001). This definition, and conceptualization, has been used and supported by other researchers (e.g., Hecht, 1978; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001). Johnson and Acquavella (2012) administered questionnaires to young adults to assess their relationship with their current cell phone service provider. Since cell phone users have an emotional attachment to their devices, satisfaction is a key relational outcome in determining the OPR between a cell phone service provider and consumers (Johnson & Acquavella, 2012). The study found that

perceived customer satisfaction is strongly correlated with relationship factors like commitment (Johnson & Acquavella, 2012). Satisfaction is important in the context of public utilities because, like cell phone service providers, public utilities are essential to everyday life. Stakeholders need to be satisfied with the service provided by public utilities in order to have a strong, positive relationship with the utility company.

Grunig's (2002) expansion of OPR measures into qualitative research has opened the door for researchers to explore OPR in the qualitative sphere. For this study, control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction can be studied more deeply and provide meaningful insights into the public's relationships with public utility companies. Specifically, Grunig recommended studying OPR qualitatively because "relationships cannot always be reduced to a few mixed-response items on a questionnaire" (Grunig, 2002, p. 2-3).

The literature above has demonstrated the need for research about CSR initiatives funded by public utility companies to establish whether hard-form stakeholder management is present which will determine the OPR between the utility and its key stakeholders. Using Grunig's (2002) OPR framework, this study will take an in-depth approach at examining how CSR and stakeholder management affects OPR in the context of essential public utilities.

The CSR Initiative Case Study: AEP Foundation and BrandJRNY Community Branding Initiative

As discussed, many public utility companies utilize mediaries, or other organizations, to carry out and implement CSR initiatives; many are nonprofits or non-governmental organizations (e.g., "Serving Our Communities," 2019; "BPU's Corporate,"

2015; “AEP Foundation,” n.d.; “Charitable Giving,” n.d.). According to Baur & Schmitz (2012), corporations and nonprofits mutually benefit each other because corporations gain a responsible and caring reputation while nonprofits receive financial or other support to continue its mission. However, there has been no known prior research about public utilities using public universities as mediaries to implement CSR initiatives in the U.S. This study takes an in-depth look into how AEP used its charitable foundation, the AEP Foundation, to supply an educational grant to a West Virginia University project in order to implement CSR in one of its subsidiaries (Appalachian Power) service areas.

Although the CSR case under study investigates a more-recent community project, the program implementing the project, BrandJRNY, began years prior. Thus, an overview of its background is necessary to understand the scope of the overall program. At the beginning of 2015, West Virginia University’s Reed College of Media received a grant from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, a foundation that exists to serve West Virginia and southwestern Pennsylvania through “education, economic development, health and human services, and community development” (“Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation,” n.d., para. 1). This grant was used to “launch a project aimed at revitalizing West Virginia communities through integrated branding efforts and creative strategy” (“Introducing the BrandJRNY,” n.d., para. 1). The project was named BrandJRNY and was comprised of Reed College faculty and students working together to use “integrated branding efforts and creative strategy” to create campaigns aimed at “increasing tourism promotion, improving economic development, and boosting community pride” (“Introducing the BrandJRNY,” n.d., para. 1). With this grant, BrandJRNY

worked with three West Virginia communities, which were considered smaller pilot projects to build a meaningful program initiative.

In January 2018, the AEP Foundation granted BrandJRNY a $250,000 educational grant to continue and expand its work, but this time working with communities within the Appalachian Power service area, or, more specifically, those communities receiving electricity services from Appalachian Power ("Introducing the BrandJRNY," n.d., para. 2). With this grant, BrandJRNY worked in two West Virginia communities, Pineville in rural Wyoming County and Point Pleasant in Mason County. For the purposes of current research, Point Pleasant is the focus of this in-depth case study because it was the most-recent community project. According to the BrandJRNY website, Point Pleasant is the home of different historical sites, folklore (i.e., Mothman), and other outdoor and tourist opportunities ("#BrandPointPleasant," n.d.). Point Pleasant's committed stakeholders, its current community efforts to promote its tourist attractions, and commitment to increase tourism and economic development and community engagement were main factors BrandJRNY chose to work with the town (Lindsay, 2019). BrandJRNY worked to create a cohesive brand, backed by extensive research, to be used in all communications and platforms. After extensive collaboration with the community and multi-method research with the community and identified target audiences, BrandJRNY created and implemented a fully integrated community branding campaign plan with both short-and long-term objectives that would position the community for success for years to come. Some aspects of the campaign included new branding imaging (e.g., logo, color scheme) and messaging (i.e., tagline and key messages); newly branded, tourism-focused website with rich images and audience-focused content and messaging; multiplatform storytelling pieces telling the

stories of place and people; traditional, digital and out-of-home advertising (e.g., billboards in targeted travel locations, print ads, video spots); owned and environmental media (e.g., promotional rack cards at travel centers, branded street flags on Main Street, branded signage); branded and on-message social media accounts; business-focused promotions; community events; and more. The new brand was officially launched at a community brand-launch event in early March 2020. Shortly thereafter, the world started shutting down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the challenges of launching a new community brand with a tourism focus in a town that you could (temporarily) no longer visit due to pandemic-related travel restrictions, the BrandJRNY team successfully shifted gears with online messaging, storytelling, and communications and changed some implementation strategies to better support struggling local businesses and community members in this unprecedented time of need. A primary community contact noted that these changes gave the town hope when many businesses and people were down (Colistra, 2022).

The BrandJRNY community branding initiative was successful in both outcomes and in short- and longer-term campaign objectives and community outcomes. For example, the initiative garnered media attention through news coverage. From the announcement of the Point Pleasant project on August 24, 2019, until the submission of the final grant report on December 17, 2020, the campaign earned nearly 1.2 million media impressions, which is considered large considering the size of the market area (Colistra & Stocksdale, 2020). There was also an 89% increase in community event attendance from the start of the campaign (pre-pandemic), and a marked increase in community engagement and collaboration("#BrandPointPleasant Community," 2020; Colistra, 2022). Further, the new

branding and messaging earned favorable ratings from community members, both at the brand launch and online, and social and digital analytics showed increases in engagement and impressions. More importantly, tourism and the number of visitors increased, despite the challenges of the pandemic. The reliance on day-trip visitors, which was once viewed as a weakness, ended up being a strength, as new tourists began to discover Point Pleasant when they began to venture out once travel restrictions began to lift (Colistra, 2022). The new website and shifted storytelling and messaging helped outsiders discover Point Pleasant online before they made the physical visit. With regard to longer-term outcomes, a key community contact reported that at least 16 new tourism-supported businesses have opened, and have remained open, since the start of the Point Pleasant project. It's also not uncommon to see license plates from several states on cars parked along Main Street. Since the initiative, the city also has reported a new challenge, which it embraces—a shortage of parking in the downtown area (Colistra, 2022). Overall, this initiative has been successful at not only increasing tourism and laying the foundation for economic development, but also increasing community engagement through cohesive and sustainable branding and strategic communications efforts.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the reviewed literature gaps in previous research, an in-depth case study will be beneficial to help further illuminate the OPR between public utility companies and their community stakeholders. Specifically, this research will help to explore how CSR affects the quality of relationships between public utility companies and their community stakeholders. A case study is a unique approach to examining these relationships because it relies on multiple data-collection methods that triangulate to form meaningful insights (Yin, 2003). No known case studies have been conducted to study public utilities and their relationships with community stakeholders, which further shows the importance of this study.

In this research, the OPR quality between the AEP Foundation and its subsidiaries and Point Pleasant community stakeholders will be measured using Grunig's (2002) qualitative measures. While measuring the relationship quality, the community's perception of the AEP Foundation and its subsidiaries will be gauged. In the case of the AEP Foundation and BrandJRNY, the researcher will determine whether the community affiliates the CSR initiative with the AEP Foundation or solely with BrandJRNY since it was the implementing mediary. To follow this, the researcher will find out how news about the initiative and the funding organization, the AEP Foundation, was shared with the public. Based on prior literature about different stakeholder management, the researcher will analyze how, if at all, the AEP Foundation cultivated either a hard-form or soft-form relationship with its community stakeholders *through* the BrandJRNY project (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012). For the remainder of the study, any mention of the "public utility company" or "public utility" refers to AEP and its subsidiary Appalachian Power, any mention of the

"public utility foundation," "charitable foundation," or "sponsoring/funding organization" refers to the AEP Foundation, and any mention of the "implementing mediary" or "mediary" refers to BrandJRNY.

Thus, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What is the relationship quality between the public utility/its charitable foundation and its community stakeholders after the CSR initiative was implemented?

The OPR quality will be measured using measures explicated by Grunig (2002): control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. These measures are redefined in the Methodology chapter that follows.

RQ2: How, if at all, did the CSR initiative affect community perceptions of the public utility/its charitable foundation?

RQ3: With whom do the community stakeholders associate the CSR initiative? (e.g., AEP/AEP Foundation or solely with BrandJRNY)

RQ4: How was news about the CSR initiative and the sponsoring/funding organization shared with the public?

RQ5: Did the public utility company/its charitable foundation implement hard-form or soft-form stakeholder management when implementing the CSR initiative?

Soft-form and hard-form stakeholder management was previously discussed in the literature review and are also defined in the following Methodology chapter.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

This study used a case study method with multiple data-collection points, consisting of in-depth interviews and two content analyses to answer the research questions. Yin (2003) states that a case study is "most important to *explain* the causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies" (p. 15). Yin, however, cautions against associating case studies solely with qualitative research, as a case study can be made up of qualitative and quantitative methods. A case study was chosen for this research because "'how' and 'why' questions [are] being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control" (Yin, 2003, p. 9). The contemporary set of events in this case are relevant in the context of a CSR initiative implemented in one community. Lemon (2019) stresses the importance of context in a case study arguing that "conducting a case study in a specific context would be the ideal method because the case would set boundaries that allow the researcher to uncover a deeper understanding" (p. 4). Other researchers have successfully used the case study approach to study a particular context or phenomenon like employee engagement (Lemon, 2019), magazine advertising (Cunningham & Haley, 2000), internal and external relationship management (Cardwell, Williams, & Pyle, 2017), and food safety (Merkelsen, 2013). Further, the research questions under study are explanatory in nature, which makes a case study the best fit "because such questions deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence" (Yin, 2003, p. 6).

Another strength of using the case study method is that there are multiple sources of information that need to be used together to answer the research questions. Yin (2003) argues that a case study "copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will

be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion" (p. 13). Yin (2003) also notes that theory acts as a *guide* to collecting and analyzing data. This means that the case study allows for a less rigid theoretical approach to data gathering and for flexible, but rigorous, data analysis which was needed to answer the research questions in this study.

Therefore, semi-structured individual interviews were used for an in-depth exploration of the relationships between the public utility foundation and its subsidiaries and Point Pleasant community stakeholders. Furthermore, a content analysis was used to determine if any communications promoting the CSR initiative exist on the public utility's social media channels. Another content analysis was conducted to determine the amount of news coverage about the CSR initiative mentioning the foundation or its subsidiaries. The methods used in this case study will be explained in more detail in the sections that follow.

In-Depth Interviews

To address all five research questions in the study, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted among two stakeholder groups: (1) representatives from the public utility and its charitable foundation that were involved or are familiar with the CSR initiative, and (2) key community stakeholders in Point Pleasant. In-depth interviews were necessary in order to glean meaningful insights about OPR. Grunig (2002) recommends in-depth interviews as a method for gathering qualitative data about OPR because they "help public relations professionals grasp what motivates people and explain what people think and do in their own terms" (p. 3). Because these interviews were semi-structured, it

allowed the researcher to probe the interviewee for more detailed responses and ask for clarification when needed (see Appendix A for Interview Script).

Interviews Sample

Because the case study focuses on the relationship between community stakeholders and the public utility, the sample was comprised of key community stakeholders as well as representatives from the public utility/its charitable foundation. The public utility/foundation representatives were selected for interviews using a combination of judgment and snowball sampling. First, a database of contacts was made to identify potential participants based on their knowledge and involvement with the CSR initiative as well as their knowledge about the public utility and the mediary. Contact information for the representatives were obtained from the implementing mediary's director (the database of contacts will not be included in this report to protect the identity of participants). Second, at the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if there is anyone else that would add insight to the study that should be interviewed. For the community stakeholder group, judgment sampling was primarily used, but will be supplemented by snowball sampling as needed. First, contact information for the six Point Pleasant Community Branding Committee (CBC) members was obtained from the mediary's director and added to the database of contacts. These Committee members served as key contacts for the CSR initiative and are the most knowledgeable about the initiative, community perceptions, involvement, and outcomes. After interviewing these stakeholders, the interviewees were asked to suggest any other key community members who were heavily involved in the CSR initiative. Doing so ensured that important additional community perspectives are included.

Interviews Procedure

Each prospective participant from the database of contacts was contacted via email and invited to participate (see Appendix B for Recruitment Email). The recruitment email described the purpose of the study, why the participant was chosen for the study, and if the individual consented, requested that the participant fill out a short demographic survey as to not take valuable time away from the interview to ask these questions (see Appendix E for Demographic Questionnaire). The survey was conducted via Qualitrics where the information was safely stored and will be destroyed according to IRB guidelines. Potential participants that did not respond to the invitation email within 72 hours were sent a follow up email (see Appendix C for Follow-Up Email). The researcher followed up with a phone call to two participants (see Appendix D for Recruitment Phone Call Script). The interviews were conducted via Zoom. The Zoom platform enabled the researcher to use Zoom Pro recording and AI transcription services. The interviews lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to one hour. After each interview, if the interviewee recommended another participant, a recruitment email was immediately sent to that individual. The same procedure was in place for the follow-up emails and subsequent interview. All interviews were conducted over the course of one month (March 3, 2023, to March 29, 2023) and all transcriptions were finalized by the end of the week of the last interview (March 31, 2023).

A total of 10 interviews were conducted which was the target number of interviews. Because this study was aimed at gaining deeper knowledge about a certain context, research has shown that five (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021) to eight interviews (McCracken, 1988) are sometimes enough to reach a study's goals. In a book about qualitative in-depth interviews, McCracken (1988) argues that "it is important to remember that this group is

not chosen to represent some part of the larger world. It offers, instead, an opportunity to glimpse the complicated character, organization, and logic of culture" (p. 17). The 10 interviews were sufficient to reach saturation, or the point when the collection of new data confirms existing themes already collected (Dainton & Lannutti, 2021).

Interview Participants

As mentioned, interviewees were identified using a combination of judgment snowball sampling. Out of the six Point Pleasant CBC members that were contacted, five agreed to an interview. From those interviews, snowball sampling gleaned one additional interviewee. The stakeholders ranged in age from 33-70 years old and have lived in Point Pleasant for 10 or more years. Five out of the six participants have some role in local government.

For the public utility representatives, key representatives were chosen that had knowledge of or worked with the project. The researcher initially reached out to six individuals, and four agreed to an interview. Through snowball sampling, one additional person was recommended but did not respond to requests for an interview. Due to data entry errors resulting in two participants not filling out the demographic survey, some information is unknown to the researcher. However, some of the data was able to be gathered from the interview transcripts and independent searches. The representatives' work experience at Appalachian Power ranged in between 9-26 years, and only two had direct experience with the Point Pleasant community branding initiative.

Interview Guide

The interview guide, or interview script, was used step-by-step to conduct the interviews (see Appendix A for Interview Script). The participants were asked to verbally

consent before answering any interview questions. The interview questions were open-ended in nature to allow interviewees to expand on answers and be detailed in their responses if they chose. Prompts and probes were also included in the research instrument to further guide discussion and to obtain more in-depth responses.

The interview questions began with what Grunig (2002) refers to as grand tour questions to help the participant open up to talking about a relationship. These questions also helped assess the interviewee's basic knowledge and involvement level with the CSR initiative. Further, subsequent questions addressed key variables in measuring the OPR (RQ1), community stakeholders' perception of the relationship after the CSR initiative (RQ2), with which organization (AEP Foundation or BrandJRNY) stakeholders most closely associate the CSR initiative (RQ3), how news coverage of the initiative was shared with the public (RQ4), and soft-form and hard-form stakeholder management throughout the CSR initiative (RQ5). The interview concluded by asking the participant if there was anyone else the researcher should interview and if so, requesting that individual's contact information.

All interviews were recorded, stored, and transcribed via Zoom and cleaned up by the researcher following each interview. A backup recording was stored on the Apple Voice Memo application. These interview transcripts are included in the appendices of this write-up. After the duration of the study, the audio recordings will be properly destroyed, according to IRB guidelines.

Operationalization of Variables

Relationship Quality and Characteristics. Relationship quality is made up of the relationship characteristics of an OPR (control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment) (Hon & Grunig, 1999). As defined in the literature review chapter, the

relationship characteristics are defined as follows: *control mutuality* is the degree that parties have control over a relationship, *trust* is when parties are confident and willingly open with one another, *satisfaction* is when parties feel positively about their relationship, and *commitment* is when parties are compelled to maintain their relationships (Grunig, 2002). These concepts are essential to guiding measurement and understanding of the OPR between the public utility and its community stakeholders. Grunig's (2002) definitions were used for guidance when creating the in-depth interview questions pertaining to relationship quality.

Soft-form and Hard-form Stakeholder Management. Based on definitions defined in the literature review chapter, soft-form stakeholder management is when stakeholders' needs are second to the economic performance of a company, whereas hard-form stakeholder management is characterized by putting stakeholders' needs before the company's needs, even if it means financial loss for the company (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012). This concept is important to the current study because if the public utility's audience does not perceive that the company cares about its needs, it suggests that the utility does not have a positive OPR with its audience.

Interviews Analysis

The researcher performed a qualitative thematic analysis of the interview data that was organized by way of source-order organization (i.e., public utility affiliated interviews or community stakeholder interviewees) (Dainton & Lannutti, 2021). A separate document was created in Microsoft Excel for the researcher to upload each individual transcript for evaluation and interpretation. Following each interview, the researcher transcribed and began analyzing immediately. This allowed the researcher to adjust the interview script if

necessary for the other interviews. Each transcript was analyzed for units of analysis that helped answer the research questions. The researcher then used manual inductive and deductive coding to identify potential units of analysis and recognize patterns within the data. In order to measure OPR (RQ1), deductive coding was used because there are already established variables that needed to be measured (see Grunig, 2002). For the other questions (RQ2, 3, and 5), inductive coding was used, as it allowed for themes to emerge naturally from the transcripts (Dainton & Lannutti, 2021). Themes were identified using a constant comparison process of all data collected. The constant comparison process occurs when the researcher examines every code to identify if it belongs in a theme with other codes (Dainton & Lannutti, 2021). After relevant themes were revealed in the data, exemplars were selected and illustrated in a way that best represented the identified themes.

Field notes were also taken during each interview in order to fill any potential gaps in responses by documenting mannerisms and other characteristics, thoughts, and interpretations at the time of the responses, and reflective thoughts about what was observed in the interview immediately following the interview (Dainton & Lannutti, 2021). These field notes provided a systematic approach that ensured that each participant was interpreted correctly and that bias was avoided by documenting what was observed.

Reflexivity occurred throughout the entire research process to "offer…[a] transparent account of the research" (Finlay, 2002, p. 210). The researcher acknowledges that as a part of the research, prior knowledge of the CSR initiative and bias could influence the research process. The researcher has prior knowledge of the CSR initiative, and the committee chair of this study is also the implementing mediary's director, which inherently

concedes bias. The researcher has also previously interned with Appalachian Power, so there is potential for bias based on prior experiences and knowledge. To avoid undue influence on the data interpretation, the researcher relied on the expertise of expert committee members that are not directly affiliated with the CSR initiative under study.

The research questions were answered through the responses gleaned from the interviews in conjunction with the content analyses described in the sections that follow. The content analyses helped to answer any research questions unanswered by the interviews and strengthen the evidence found. For example, if the interviewees said that the public utility company was not associated with the CSR initiative and the social media content analysis shows that there are very few posts from the public utility promoting the initiative, these two methods confirmed and strengthened the findings. The various methods helped triangulate the data and strengthen the outcomes of the research.

Content Analyses

To answer research question 4, content analyses of manifest variables were conducted on two different samples to determine how news and information about the CSR initiative was shared by both the public utility and the implementing mediary. The content analyses were conducted prior to the interviews in order to allow the researcher to modify the semi-structured interview script to best answer the research questions. A content analysis is the best fit for this study because the question is simply determining the amount and organizational source of coverage and/or information and whether funder information is present or absent in the content. First, a content analysis searching for presence or absence of posts mentioning the CSR initiative on the public utility's social accounts was conducted. Second, an additional content analysis that searches for presence or absence of

news coverage of the CSR initiative that mentions the public utility/foundation was conducted. The sampling process of the content analyses and the separate procedures of each are covered in the following sections followed by how both were analyzed.

Content Analyses Samples

Social Posts. The social media posts for the social media content analysis were a census of posts from the public utility's social media accounts mentioning the CSR initiative in Point Pleasant from the launch of the project to the completion of the project and submission of the final grant report (August 28, 2019, to December 17, 2020). Four different platforms were used to find these posts: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram. As a note, the public utility foundation does not have its own social media channels, but it operates through the public utility company's pages when posts are necessary. The profiles searched were AEP's Instagram, @aepnews, Appalachian Power's Instagram, @appalachianpowerco, AEP's Twitter, @AEPnews, Appalachian Power's Twitter, @AppalachianPowe, AEP's Facebook, American Electric Power – AEP, Appalachian Power's Facebook, Appalachian Power, AEP's LinkedIn, American Electric Power, and Appalachian Power's LinkedIn, Appalachian Power. There was only 1 post (N=1) identified, and it was found on Appalachian Power's Facebook posted on August 30, 2019.

Although the implementing mediary, BrandJRNY, used three primary social media platforms to discuss its projects, it was not included for this study because all of its content is related to the CSR initiative and consistently shared information about the funding organization. In other words, the CSR initiatives are why these social media accounts exist; therefore, the analysis would have been skewed by including these posts.

News Coverage. For the news coverage content analysis, a census of news coverage

about the CSR initiative that was published during the time frame (August 28, 2019, to December 17, 2020) was included. The coverage about the CSR initiative in Point Pleasant included media coverage resulting from public relations pieces from the mediary as well as from additional news searches. In total, thirteen (N=13) news pieces were identified.

News coverage about the CSR initiative was obtained through two different steps. First, an existing list of news coverage recorded by the mediary was consulted. Specifically, many of the articles during a portion of the time frame under study can be found in the mediary's unpublished campaign book and final grant report (n=11). The campaign book was shared with the Point Pleasant CBC, and the final grant report was submitted to the public utility foundation. The final grant report contains an initial list of news coverage, media impressions, public relations pieces, and corresponding media coverage of the CSR initiative in Point Pleasant until March 4, 2020. However, further news coverage may not have been picked up by the mediary. Therefore, a second search stage was necessary. A Google search was conducted to locate additional news coverage about the CSR initiative for the time frame under study using the following key words/phrases: "Point Pleasant AND BrandJRNY," "Point Pleasant AND AEP Foundation," "BrandJRNY AND AEP Foundation AND Point Pleasant," "BrandJRNY AND Appalachian Power AND Point Pleasant," "Point Pleasant AND 'community branding initiative,'" "Point Pleasant AND 'community branding' initiative," and "'Brand Journey' AND Point Pleasant." After the additional searches, a couple more news articles (n=2) were identified (See Appendix J for News Coverage Table).

Operationalization of Variables

In both content analyses, the manifest variables are organizational source and presence or absence of posts or news coverage mentioning the funding organization. The

amount of coverage, media hits, is simply determined by counting the number of news articles or posts uncovered in the information-gathering process. All variables and terms operationalized here are also outlined in the codebooks (see Appendix F and G).

The Terms CSR Initiative and Funder. The CSR initiative was defined for the analysis as any mention of the "community branding project," "community branding initiative," or "community branding effort" that was implemented by BrandJRNY. These terms used to describe the CSR initiative were used following an initial scan of the media coverage since this was how the initiative was referred to in the titles of news coverage (Colistra & Stocksdale, 2020). The funder was defined as the AEP Foundation and/or its subsidiaries (AEP or Appalachian Power).

Organizational Source. For the purposes of this study, an organizational source was defined as the source from which the information about the CSR initiative originated. Coding options for this study were the *mediary* (i.e., BrandJRNY), the *public utility foundation/its subsidiaries* (i.e., AEP Foundation, Appalachian Power, American Electric Power), or *other/unknown*. News coverage and information was coded as *mediary* if it was evident that the news piece was from this organizational source. This information was determined by consulting the public relations pieces and initial list of news coverage and media impressions in the mediary's internal documents (i.e., the campaign book and final grant report), which was previously discussed in this chapter. The organizational source of news coverage and information was coded as *public utility foundation/its subsidiaries* if it is a news item not identified as coming from the mediary, which was evident from the additional searches and comparison to the mediary's internal documents. Organizational

source was coded as *other/unknown* if the origin or source of information is unknown, unclear, or is not evident.

Presence or Absence of Funder Information. This variable was coded as Present if the news item mentions the funding organization (i.e., AEP Foundation or its subsidiaries) somewhere within the story. Conversely, this variable was coded as Absent if the story does not mention the funding organization.

Intercoder Reliability

Two graduate students coded the posts and news coverage. Before coding, the researcher met with the second coder for a training session to discuss the codebook and definitions. During this session, the graduate-student coder practiced coding unrelated articles and social media posts that were not a part of the current study to ensure that the codebook instructions were clear. After the training session was complete, both the researcher and graduate-student coder coded all articles (N=13) and posts (N=1) in the two data set because the data sets for both content analyses were small. Because both content analyses assessed only manifest variables, simple agreement between coders was calculated to determine if intercoder reliability was at an acceptable level. The acceptable agreement level for this study was 0.8 or 80%, which is considered a good rule of thumb (Dainton & Lannutti, 2021). Scott's Pi was also used to assess intercoder reliability because it is appropriate for nominal-level measures, and it considers and accounts for agreement that may occur by chance (Cho, 2008). This research aimed for an acceptable Scott's Pi value of at least .81 (Wombacher, 2017). The current study achieved 100% agreement and a Scott's Pi value of 1.0, thus exceeding the targeted thresholds.

Content Analyses Procedure and Analysis

For the social media content analysis as well as the news coverage content analysis, the procedure for finding and documenting the social media posts and news pieces was clear-cut since the goal was just to determine whether these communications existed via the aforementioned information–gathering process (i.e., amount of coverage/media hits), the organizational source (i.e., AEP Foundation/subsidiaries or BrandJRNY), and the presence or absence of posts or news coverage mentioning the funding organization (i.e., AEP Foundation) (see Appendices F-I for corresponding Codebooks and Codesheets). It took no longer than two weeks to gather and document in two Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for coding, one for social media posts and one for news coverage.

In the social media content analysis spreadsheet, the posts were placed in a spreadsheet under the profile name and platform where the post was found (e.g., Facebook – Appalachian Power), date of the post, and the presence or absence of whether the funding organization was mentioned as a part of the CSR initiative.

For the news coverage content analysis spreadsheet, columns were provided for the following for the coding process: coder initials, news outlet name, date of publication, news story headline, organizational source, and presence/absence of funder information.

To analyze both the social media post content analysis and the news coverage content analysis, simple univariate statistics consisting of frequency percentages and counts were determined using Excel.

Refer to Table 1 for a recap of the multiple data-collection methods used in this study to answer the research questions and the analysis plans for each.

Table 1

Recap of Research Questions, Data Collection Methods, and Method of analysis

Research Questions	Data Collection Method	Method of Analysis
RQ1: What is the relationship quality between the public utility/its charitable foundation and its community stakeholders after the CSR initiative was implemented?	In-depth Interviews with field notes *Questions: 1-9*	Thematic analysis using inductive and deductive coding
RQ2: How, if at all, did the CSR initiative affect community perceptions of the public utility/its charitable foundation?	In-depth Interviews with field notes *Questions: 10*	Thematic analysis using inductive coding
RQ3: With whom do the community stakeholders associate the CSR initiative? (e.g., AEP/AEP Foundation or solely with BrandJRNY)	In-depth Interviews with field notes *Questions: 11-12*	Thematic analysis using inductive coding
RQ4: How was news about the CSR initiative and sponsoring/funding organization shared with the public?	Content Analysis *Variables: Presence/Absence, Organizational Source* In-depth Interviews with field notes *Questions: 13-14*	Univariate descriptive statistics Thematic analysis with inductive coding
RQ5: Did the public utility/its charitable foundation implement hard-form or soft-form stakeholder management when implementing the CSR initiative?	In-depth Interviews with field notes *Questions: 15-16*	Thematic analysis using inductive coding

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine how CSR initiatives funded by public utility companies impact the relationships with communities it serves in order to find ways that utility companies can improve their initiatives to foster better relationships. A multi-method case study approach utilizing in-depth interviews and content analyses was chosen in order to best explain the phenomenon under study and give it proper context (Yin, 2003). The research questions were addressed by analyzing the information gathered through the multiple data-collection methods (Yin, 2003). The data-gathering process as well as the findings for each research question are reported in the sections that follow.

RQ1: What is the relationship quality between the public utility/its charitable foundation and its community stakeholders after the CSR initiative was implemented?

This research question is attempting to uncover what the relationship quality is like between Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries and the community of Point Pleasant following the BrandJRNY project. Data for assessing this question were obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with Point Pleasant community stakeholders and current and retired Appalachian Power employees, accompanied by field notes. The interview protocol included questions pulled from Grunig's (2002) qualitative OPR framework and modified to best fit this study. Inductive coding guided by Grunig's (2002) framework used four themes: control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

Control Mutuality

Control mutuality is the level of control each party feels they have in a relationship (Grunig, 2002). When asking Point Pleasant stakeholders whether they feel they have any control in Appalachian Power's decision-making, participants mostly said that they didn't

feel that they individually had *control* per se but felt that Appalachian Power tries to be considerate of the communities it serves. A Community Branding Committee (CBC) member in Point Pleasant said, "I don't think that I have much control…I don't know that a lot of the decisions are made here locally…So I have good confidence in the company, but I don't think that I can influence or change their decision." Another member of the CBC said,

> I will say we don't have control, but I'm glad that they include us in their communication to let us know as county leaders. I think it's very good on their part…they're very transparent, and they're very upfront about what they're gonna do.

From the AEP Foundation/Appalachian Power perspective, for the most part, the employees feel that they can use their knowledge, influence, and position to help resolve issues or help communities. A communications employee for Appalachian Power explained that she felt that she had control in decision-making through her knowledge from her job.

> I understand what's going on behind the scenes as an employee…so I'm able to effectively advocate and explain what's happening. But it is not that they are forcing me to. It's just that I understand it, so I always want people to understand.

Another Appalachian Power representative stated,

> ...that's partly what my job is to…resolve issues before they become problems for the power company or the community. So in that sense, if a mayor, a county commissioner,…public leader brings me an issue, and either wants our involvement in it or…needs help in resolving an issue, then I try to intercede to the best of my ability to influence positive change.

The Appalachian Power representatives also commonly expressed that the best they can do is listen to the community and try to be as attentive as possible. Another representative noted,

> It's actually hearing what they're saying, if they're not happy with, say, like a rate increase or they're not happy with the level of service, so they're not happy with potential power outages. To ignore that that would be turning a deaf ear, and that's not what we do.

A former communications employee explicitly explained how things are handled by the company in order to obtain feedback from stakeholders, "Appalachian Power is very attentive to what the community says. When we have major projects we have a community meeting in advance to get input, we'll have what we call an open house, where people can walk around and learn more about––say, we have a new transmission line that's going in, or something."

On the community side, stakeholders in Point Pleasant mentioned that Appalachian Power is receptive to community complaints and are available when needed. For example, a CBC member told a story about how Appalachian Power handled a situation where some water samples caused concern in the community.

> …it could have raised some red flags, and they just really came to the forefront with that information and got it out there, so that…[if] people did come across the study that they did they could already address some of those questions and eliminate some of the fear that it may have instilled in folks. So yes, I think they've been very proactive in addressing concerns, and I can't think of any instance where they have just totally not.

It was also mentioned that Appalachian Power not only reacts in a time of crisis, but they also use their money and resources to support communities. Another CBC member said,

> …anytime we have a community need they are always able to provide some type of hand in anything…whether it be a sponsorship or "hey, we're looking to do this. Do you have any insight, or do you have any volunteers that might be able to help us out with the project that we're looking at?" I mean…me being a city member here,…if we need anything like that they've always been there if we needed them.

Overall, Point Pleasant community stakeholders and Appalachian Power representatives feel that the company is as attentive as it can be to the communities it serves with the knowledge that there will always be an imbalance in control mutuality between a corporation and a public (Grunig, 2002). There appears to be a mutual

understanding that the community feels that their feedback is sought, while the company does its best to listen and create solutions within its bandwidth.

Trust

Trust is when two parties have confidence in each other and are willing to be open to the other (Grunig, 2002). When asking Point Pleasant stakeholders if they trusted Appalachian Power, the participants all expressed that they trusted Appalachian Power or AEP to some degree. A member of the CBC explained,

> As long as you are honest with me and tell me things that I need to hear and don't try to hide anything, that puts their trust right up front with me…But you try to hide something, and you're gonna lag that respect from them, and you're gonna lose it. But I've never lost any respect in AEP.

Another CBC member supported this opinion: "I think they do a good job of being very transparent in our community, being very active in our community. They give back to our community, and in in my opinion, we're very fortunate to have them here." When asked if the community branding initiative improved their trust in Appalachian Power or AEP, a community stakeholder involved in the project said, "A little bit. It showed that they can get up and do things for the community. They really can if they had the right push and the right people behind them." A CBC member also explained that the community branding initiative helped improve trust in the company because "it…gave more of a personalized relationship, whereas…before…you [just] know company names or whatever. But…putting a face with an individual who was here actually pay attention, it did make a difference."

The Point Pleasant participants also believe that Appalachian Power is dependable and competent to some degree. A member of the CBC commented on Appalachian Power's follow-through on projects,

> [I]f they said 'I'm gonna…pledge X amount of dollars' we ultimately get the check. If they say…'we're going to show up, and we're going to do this' they show up and they do it. So I have no reason to doubt anything that they say.

When asked if the branding initiative improved the relationship between Appalachian Power and Point Pleasant, an Appalachian Power representative said, "It increased probably the relationship between community and say, local government contacts. It reinforced just that there was a willingness, or there is a partnership." On the AEP Foundation side, a former Appalachian Power communications employee discussed how the Foundation instills trust by taking a hands-off approach with the Foundation-funded projects,

> As the funder, we did not try, and we generally do not try to unduly influence the project. It's not our project. We choose projects or programs that fit our mission for the Foundation, but we don't try to change those projects.

By allowing communities to tell their own stories, the AEP Foundation and Appalachian Power try to be a genuine, good steward. An Appalachian Power communications employee told an anecdote about how a friend of hers that was affected by the community branding initiative was sending her articles and posts about the project. It is an example of how the Foundation was able to create trust within communities through its funded projects.

> …just as a citizen in that community is sending it [post about the community branding initiative] to somebody, to an employee who works for Appalachian Power, and says, 'this is so exciting. Did you see this?' And I think that's a perfect example because that is [genuine], that's from the heart.

Based on the findings, the Point Pleasant community stakeholders and Appalachian Power employees feel that they can trust each other to some degree. Specifically, most

interviewees mentioned that the community branding initiative did improve trust between the community of Point Pleasant and Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries.

Commitment

Commitment is the level at which two parties feel that a relationship is worth effort to sustain (Grunig, 2002). When Point Pleasant stakeholders were asked if they feel like Appalachian Power is committed to fostering a positive relationship with the community, most interviewees said that the community branding initiative showed commitment from the corporation. A CBC member believes Appalachian Power must be committed to sustaining a positive relationship with the community because "[o]therwise, I don't think they would invest in an initiative like BrandJRNY… So I guess my feelings are mostly just on good faith." Another CBC member commented on how involved Appalachian Power is within the community as showing commitment, noting that their actions show commitment through "…their continued support of,…like our local chamber, the Economic Development Authority, continuing to be very active participants in those boards, being very transparent."

Almost all of the Appalachian Power participants expressed that the company is committed to fostering a positive relationship because most of the people who work for the company work in the same area they live. Because most employees are local and want what is best for their communities, this shows commitment. An employee said,

> I think through our grants and contributions, our employee involvement and everything from [L]ittle [L]eagues to schools to volunteerism to food banks. You know, all these things that the company does, that our employees do, members of the community makes them a better place to work and live.

A communications employee stated that sustaining a positive relationship with communities is

> [A]t the heart of what they do, and you saw it during the pandemic. You know a lot of our Foundation gifts turned from your traditional to more of a focus on food banks and trying to make sure people had the basics. And that whether that was with food or even supplies like hand sanitizer and masks, all of those things that were necessary to survival.

In summary, based on the interviews, Point Pleasant community stakeholders believe that Appalachian Power is committed to fostering a positive relationship. Appalachian Power representatives feel that a positive relationship can be maintained by listening to the needs of the public and providing the funding to the projects that are most needed in a community.

Satisfaction

Satisfaction is how positively each party feels about one another when positive expectations are met (Grunig, 2002). When Point Pleasant stakeholders were asked if they were satisfied with the relationship that Appalachian Power has with their community, most said that they were satisfied to some extent. A CBC member explained that

> I don't hear a whole lot of complaints. I really don't, and I'm out grocery stores, I'm at restaurants and I'm at ball games and different things, and you know, people are going to complain because something goes up. But I think that people understand how reliable AEP has been in our community as far as anything that needs to be done...

Another CBC member gave an example illustrating satisfaction with the community's relationship with Appalachian Power.

> ...I don't know that we can really ask for a better community partner. They've always stepped up. I'll just add in there that a few years ago we have an award that we give away every year, and we have for the last…50 plus years, it's called our Community Service award, and it's the highest recognition that we do within the county and the

> AEP Mountaineer Plant won that a few years ago. So…they're nominated, it's voted on by committee, and usually we have several nominations for that award. So I think that kind of speaks volumes to just how important they are and active within our community.

When asked how Appalachian Power can improve this relationship, many of the community stakeholders referred to continuing communication as a way to continue a satisfying relationship. To improve communication, a member of the CBC said that "…maybe occasionally reaching out to different entities whether it be…county commission or other small local governments just to…check in on them."

Appalachian Power representatives echo similar sentiments as the community stakeholders when it comes to improving relationships with communities. An Appalachian Power representative offers the suggestion that the key to helping maintain a satisfactory relationship is by "continuing the communication…it's just continuing to have the conversations, it's continuing to be involved in the community." A communications employee suggested that

> [i]t comes down to a lot of times the staff…[W]e don't have as many external affairs managers as I think we need. But it's a balance you have to strike because the Foundation and the work that we do in the communities is so important to the company.

Overall, both Point Pleasant community stakeholders and Appalachian Power representatives feel satisfied in some way about this relationship; however, they noted some areas for improvement (e.g., communication) in the relationship.

RQ2: How, if at all, did the CSR initiative affect community perceptions of the public utility/its charitable foundation?

This research question was answered using in-depth interviews with Point Pleasant community stakeholders and supported by accompanying field notes. The interview

protocol addresses this question by asking community members how their community *as a whole* feels about Appalachian Power following the initiative to determine overall community perceptions of the funder. The transcripts were analyzed using a deductive approach, and from the data, three main themes emerged about community perceptions: indifferent, positive, and increased community pride. As illustrated in the sections that follow, community stakeholders had different opinions regarding how the initiative affected community perceptions of the funder.

Indifferent Community Relationship

When asked if the community as a whole has a better relationship with Appalachian Power after the initiative, many weren't sure if the initiative had any impact on the overall relationship. A member of the CBC said,

> …I think that…[she] [director of BrandJRNY] made it a…point to make sure that she highlighted AEP's involvement from the beginning, and so I think…it's one of the only times within the community of which AEP's been forefronted as the donor...So I think it raised some awareness of the community partnership, but I don't know that it deepened the relationships.

Another member of the CBC also pointed out,

> To be honest with you, I kind of wonder if the community really knows how big their [the funder] involvement was with it. Because…most every conversation [I] had…we spoke of BrandJRNY Committee and the involvement of it being WVU and the students. I'm not sure if they were kind of put out there maybe in the manner that they could have been.

When asked if the community remembers that the AEP Foundation was the funder of the project, a CBC member said,

> You know, time has gone by…I'd say there are those who still remember when this all began, and the working [on the initiative] that was done, and the names put out in the media who was involved. And it's kind of like if we go out and ask some folks that question, probably a lot of them people wouldn't have any idea or knowledge [of the identity of the funder].

Due to the passage of time and the community's general lack of awareness of the AEP Foundation as the funder of the project, some of the community stakeholders feel that the relationship between Appalachian Power and their community has not been impacted by the CSR initiative.

Positive Community Relationship

Although some community stakeholders did not feel that the relationship was affected as a result of the initiative, others believe that the initiative has had a positive impact on the community's overall relationship with Appalachian Power. A CBC member explained that people in the community were grateful for the funding from the project and that this helped improve Appalachian Power's image.

> [W]e all told people that the AEP was fully supporting this and behind all this, and I'm real sure the people I talked to at the time, and at the…different meetings that I tend to that they were very appreciative of AEP being a partner and promoting the city of Point Pleasant.

Another community stakeholder said when asked if this relationship is better, "I hope so. I do. I can only speak for myself, and yes, I was very much positive for AEP... That was a big event for AEP to our community." The same stakeholder continued that the project created a positive association with the company name, "It made you smile, the AEP, instead of when you usually pay the bill you're frowning."

Increased Community Pride

Another theme that emerged from the data is that the initiative increased pride in the community. This increased pride is something that the community is appreciative of, according to a CBC member.

> I think more people get involved now than what has in the past. We've been a very caring community in many ways, but I think people have realized that…what we

> have done has brought more people to Point Pleasant––not only for the Mothman statue here and that part of the mystery of Point Pleasant but also for the history. We put a lot into making sure that people realize that the history of Point Pleasant... We're very proud of all that. I think that's what the [BrandJRNY] program did was to let other people know that it's not just coming…here for Mothman. It's coming here to learn the history of Point Pleasant which was part of the history of the United States.

A CBC member shared that the community felt the effects of the project on their relationship with Appalachian Power when they saw the successful results of the project.

> You know, they showed up, they helped us build a brand, and people started showing up, and businesses started opening, and they were sustainable. And I think it just took that community pride, and…it just exploded. And we continue to see that. And we continue to get people involved in some of the things we're doing. So, I absolutely think that it continues to deepen relationships here.

Another CBC member also expressed that the initiative impacted how the community viewed Point Pleasant, so it changed how community members talked about Point Pleasant to people outside of the area.

> I think it may be because…when you live here you don't always see what we have, whereas when BrandJRNY members from there at WVU would come in they would see things we didn't, so I would say it opened the eyes to some of our locals, so that when they did travel somewhere else, they…did promote…traveling back to our community.

From the findings, this increased community pride encouraged positivity within the community and an appreciation for funding from the public utility; however, whether this strengthened the relationship in the long term is disputed among interviewees. Some Point Pleasant participants could not be sure, and others feel that this relationship is better than it was before.

RQ3: With whom do the community stakeholders associate the CSR initiative? (e.g., AEP/AEP Foundation or solely with BrandJRNY)

Information used to answer this research question was gathered via in-depth interviews with Point Pleasant community stakeholders and supplemental field notes. The

interview protocol included questions for stakeholders about which organization or project came to mind when they think about the CSR initiative. Two main themes emerged from the data: remembering BrandJRNY and misremembering the funder.

Remembers BrandJRNY

When asked which organization or program is top of mind in relation to the CSR initiative, most community stakeholders mentioned BrandJRNY or West Virginia University (WVU) as their first thought, although a few of the community stakeholders mentioned the City of Point Pleasant as their first thought since the project revolved around the city. One common thread among interviewees is that Appalachian Power or AEP is an afterthought for the community. A CBC member noted, "I…would probably put BrandJRNY at the top and then WVU, AEP. Because without BrandJRNY the project wouldn't have happened at all." A community stakeholder also stated, "My first thing, I don't think AEP, I always think WVU." Similarly, a CBC member's first thought was, "I would definitely say BrandJRNY. I know that that was the main group, but they also refer to AEP in every BrandJRNY meeting we had."

Community Misremembering Funder

With the knowledge that Appalachian Power or AEP is not top of mind when community members think about the initiative, it is not surprising that some of the community interviewees aren't sure if the community as a whole remembers that the public utility is the funder. Some implied that this could be due to the passage of time and the differing levels of involvement of community members in the initiative. A CBC member speculated that the people heavily involved in the initiative remember the funder "but those outside of that, maybe 30% do." Another CBC member explained that "three years later, I'm not sure the community as a whole [remembers]. Those involved with it, yes. But

the community as a whole, I'm not sure that they would recall." This response is corroborated by other respondents. A member of the CBC mentions, "I think many aren't aware of how everything actually fell into place for it [the initiative] to occur."

All in all, the community interviewees mainly associate the CSR initiative with the implementing mediary, BrandJRNY. The interviewees believe, to their knowledge, that the community at large also likely associates the project with BrandJRNY or WVU, while the AEP Foundation is an afterthought or not thought of at all.

RQ4: How was news about the CSR initiative and the sponsoring/funding organization shared with the public?

The data collected to answer this research question was gleaned from in-depth interviews with Appalachian Power representatives and Point Pleasant community stakeholders, field notes, and content analyses. Interviewees were asked to remember how news about the initiative was shared and to name the organizations, outlets, and accounts where coverage was found. Two content analyses were conducted, one on social media postings about the initiative from the public utility and one on news coverage of the initiative that mentions the branding initiative. The findings from the interviews and content analyses together informed the answer to the research question and are discussed in the sections that follow. The overall themes that emerged from the data were *word of mouth, Facebook, traditional media,* and *hands-off approach*.

Word of Mouth

Word of mouth was a prominent theme for Point Pleasant community stakeholders. When asked how news about the initiative was shared with the public, most participants mentioned the community events as well as environmental marketing tactics like large banners that were hung and flyers that were distributed throughout the city. Members of

the CBC also acknowledged the role that they played in creating "excitement" surrounding the project. A CBC member relayed the excitement and curiosity that the community felt surrounding the project.

> One of the things that was done in the very beginning at our launch was the BrandJRNY team brought this huge banner. And…basically it said "Community Launch"…they [the banners] had the BrandJRNY branding on them, but also have the AEP stuff on there. So when people drove by the library they're like, "oh, my gosh! What's this big banner?" Right? And so it created some inquiries and questions for those who may not have already heard about it.

Another CBC member also commented about how

> ...we had to go out to be our own salespeople to explain to those, say it's like elected officials, banking, industry, clerks at the store, you know, people that we knew to try to get some excitement building, you know. "What's the stuff I'm hearing? What is this BrandJRNY? What does this mean for me for me? What does this mean for the city?"

Facebook

A theme that emerged for both community stakeholders and Appalachian Power representatives was the use of Facebook and social media. Another platform that was used to spread news about the initiative was social media, particularly Facebook. In fact, almost all participants on both community and public utility sides, mentioned that Facebook was a major way to communicate information about the project. One CBC member went as far as to say with a laugh that,

> [I]f you want to get something on about what's going on in your community, in your county, whatever, Facebook was a major way. Everybody didn't get the paper. Everyone doesn't listen to the radio, but Facebook, oh, if it's on Facebook, it's true.

The Facebook pages that were instrumental in sharing information was the City of Point Pleasant, Get To The Point WV (a page dedicated to sharing news about the

happenings in Point Pleasant), Historical Point Pleasant, and community leader's individual Facebook profiles.

To further investigate how information about the initiative was shared with the public, the first content analysis examined social media posts posted by the public utility concerning the community branding initiative. As mentioned in the Method chapter, posts from the mediary's accounts will not be used since the purpose of these accounts is solely to post information about the initiative. It is also important to reiterate that the content analyses were conducted before the interview so that the interview protocol could be adjusted to adequately answer the research questions. Almost all of the social media coverage were the result of Point Pleasant residents' and group's pages as well as BrandJRNY's social pages. After conducting a social media content analysis to determine how the public utility promoted the initiative on social media, there was only one post (N=1) found about the community branding initiative posted by Appalachian Power and any of its subsidiaries social media pages. With this evidence, it can be said that the public utility did not share much news about the initiative itself on social media.

The interviews provided additional depth to social media findings. To ensure that additional social media coverage wasn't missed, such as temporary elements of social media (e.g., Instagram or Facebook stories), a former communications employee for Appalachian Power was asked whether these temporary elements were used. This employee stated that although these temporary elements of social media would "occasionally" have been used, a permanent post would exist on some platform with the same information. Therefore, it can be determined through the content analysis and

interviews that almost all of the news shared on social media about the initiative was executed through BrandJRNY and community efforts.

Traditional Media

Alongside social media, traditional media (e.g., newspapers) was still a crucial way to connect with the community. A CBC member remembered, "…it first came in a press release, and then we shared it. We tried to build up a little bit of momentum to that press release, you know. 'Exciting news coming for Point Pleasant, stay tuned' things like that." Interviewees reported that the daily newspaper at the time, The Point Pleasant Register, and the local country radio station, WBYG, were used to spread news about the project.

To further examine how information about the initiative was shared, a second content analysis of traditional news media was conducted. As noted in the Method chapter, news coverage was identified by using the BrandJRNY internal documents and keywords searches within the defined time period, and news pieces were coded for the *organizational source* from which the news piece originated (e.g., BrandJRNY, AEP/Appalachian Power, other) and *presence or absence of funder information* (See Appendix J). There were 13 news pieces (N=13) published that mentioned the community branding initiative. Out of those 13 articles, 53.8% (n=7) were published in The Point Pleasant Register and 46.2% (n=6) of the other articles were published on other outlets like WVU Today and WVNews.com. In determining whether the AEP Foundation or its subsidiaries was mentioned as the funder of the project in media coverage, it was found that 62.5% (n=10) of the articles mentioned the funder as well as the branding initiative. This means that there was more news coverage mentioning the AEP Foundation as the funder of the project than there was not.

Results also indicate that 84.6% (n=11) of the news pieces were organizational sources produced by BrandJRNY. It appears that without BrandJRNY's concerted efforts to promote the funder in all communications and media materials, there may have been little to no coverage of the branding initiative or the AEP Foundation's involvement in the project. The interviews with Point Pleasant stakeholders support the findings in the content analysis since most inferred that members of their community that were not involved with the project would most likely *not* remember who the funder of the project was, especially after years have now passed. This means that the media coverage most likely did not make a difference in people's knowledge of the project and its funder.

Hands-Off Approach

Just as Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries did not do much promotion of the BrandJRNY project on social media, a former communications employee at Appalachian Power that has extensive knowledge of the AEP Foundation explained that the key to the AEP Foundation's publicity is relying on the organizations that receive the grant money to promote their project.

> …we do find that customers react much better to someone else to saying something nice about us than us saying nice things about ourselves. It does not go over well and often when we publicize things the reaction is, "Why are you spending rate payer money?" Which, of course, it's not rate payer money, but people don't really get that.

Another communications employee mentioned that the corporation worked with BrandJRNY to spread the word about the initiative. "[I]t goes back to what our philosophy is which is we don't always like toot our own horn but work with the organization that gets the grant to help to get that information out." Other Appalachian Power employees made inferences as to how the initiative was shared in the news, but neither had worked on those

communications or recalled details. This hands-off approach to publicity for the AEP Foundation may have led to the lack of media coverage originated about the funder.

After analyzing all of the themes, it is evident that news about the CSR initiative was shared in many ways and through different outlets. Word of mouth, social media, and traditional media were the most common and effectively used methods according to Point Pleasant community members. Although the AEP Foundation and Appalachian Power only promoted the project through one Facebook post, they still earned media attention from news pieces created by BrandJRNY that were picked up by media outlets.

RQ5: Did the public utility company/its charitable foundation implement hard-form or soft-form stakeholder management when implementing the CSR initiative?

This research question was answered by collecting data from in-depth interviews with Point Pleasant community stakeholders and Appalachian Power representatives and supplemented with field notes. The goal of the question is to determine whether soft-form and hard-form stakeholder management was implemented by the utility company throughout the project. Soft-form stakeholder management is when stakeholders' needs are second to the economic performance of a company, whereas hard-form stakeholder management is characterized by putting stakeholders' needs before the company's needs, even if it means financial loss for the company (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012). To address the different forms of stakeholder management, interviewees were asked about whether they feel that Appalachian Power prioritizes its communities needs ahead of its own and if the company would do the right thing even if it would cause a financial loss. There were two primary themes that emerged from the data: partnership and bottom-line focused.

Partnership

Throughout the interviews, both Point Pleasant community stakeholders and Appalachian Power representatives referred to the company and the community having a partnership. When asked if Appalachian Power prioritizes community needs above their own, a CBC member said,

> Let me just say that I think they work well with our community. I don't know about putting our needs ahead of theirs. I just think they take care of us. It's a great cooperative effort between AEP and the local citizens because of their transparency.

To the same question, an Appalachian Power employee replied, "I think we try to work in partnerships with the communities that we serve." Another Appalachian Power employee explained that although customers may not feel like they do, Appalachian Power does do its best to serve the communities needs.

> [P]eople's perception is that we don't have a good relationship with communities, or maybe we don't do as much as we should. But it's very key as we go through things as…we develop projects, should we develop, you know, a notification that goes out to the community. It's very key, as we do a project that we want to get our feedback from our customers.

Bottom-Line Focused

While some highlighted the notion of partnership, others believe the utility has more of a bottom-line focus. For example, some community stakeholders believe Appalachian Power and AEP would not act in a community's best interest if it incurred a large financial loss for the corporation. A community stakeholder pointed out that she believes AEP's main goal is profit.

> I don't want to be negative or positive, they run a business. So…like us, you're always good with your community. That's how you run your business, you know. But of course…it's not like AEP is one person, you know. It's got shareholders and everything else it has to deal with. This is stock, that's a stock and trade business.

A member of the CBC felt similarly,

> I think as a company, they have a financial responsibility to their company first. I'm sure if they had an alternate way to make up for it if they were going to have a loss, then I think they would make the adjustment, but I'm not sure they would upfront.

Alongside community stakeholders, Appalachian Power employees also expressed that the bottom-line has to come first. A communications employee explained that "it's a balance" between maintaining a healthy bottom-line and providing services.

> [Y]ou have to make a certain profit because it's a privately held company that's publicly traded. So…you have a budget that you have to meet while being mindful of keeping the lights on. But also trying to do your best to be part of those communities and help the people who need to help the most.

Overall, Point Pleasant stakeholders are split on whether they believe that Appalachian Power would take a financial loss in order to act in the best interests of their community. Appalachian Power employees said that they work in the best interests of communities, but they also understand that making a profit, "it's just what business does," according to an employee. These two themes are not completely independent of one another, as some participants believe that Appalachian Power is a beneficial community partner as well as being bottom-line focused. Many of the community members who believe that Appalachian Power is bottom-line focused do not necessarily feel negatively about the company. Most mention that they understand how businesses function and that it is unavoidable.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

This study used in-depth interviews (N=10), a news coverage content analysis (N=13), and a social media content analysis (N=1) to explain how the relationships between a public utility company and a community it serves was affected following a CSR initiative. The findings from the interviews and analyses indicate that community members that were involved and invested in the implementation of the CSR initiative report an improvement in the relationship between their community and the company. However, some of these community members feel that a large portion of the community that was relatively uninvolved with the initiative would not remember that the utility company was the funder and most likely does not feel that they have a deeper relationship with the company. This section discusses in detail the findings through the scope of each research question in this order: relationship quality, community perceptions, community associations, sharing of news, and hard-form or soft-form stakeholder management. Following the discussion of the listed topics, strengths and limitations of the study along with future research and practical implications are also explored.

Relationship Quality

Using Grunig's (2002) qualitative model for measuring organization-public relationships (OPR), the relationship quality between the community in Point Pleasant and Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries was thought to have been improved according to Point Pleasant community stakeholders. The stakeholders were asked questions about the four major components of OPR, control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction, and the interviewees stated that they felt that they had some degree of control, trust, commitment, and satisfaction in their relationship with the company. It is important to

note that the stakeholders understand that there will always be an imbalance in an OPR and that the utility ultimately has the power to make decisions in the relationship (Grunig, 2002; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999).

This finding aligns with the results of a study about CSR initiatives implemented by a telecommunications corporation by Ledingham and Bruning (1998). In this study, the researchers found that only 8% of participants were aware of the CSR initiatives that the company supported; however, once people were informed of what the company was doing in the community, they decided that they would remain loyal to the company (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). In the current study, all respondents were aware of the CSR initiative and community stakeholders noted that they felt like the relationships that they had with the company were better or were high in quality.

Most of the Appalachian Power employees that were interviewed acknowledged that they did not have much involvement in the initiative except for participating in an event or two or being responsible for communications about the initiative. The employees who did have extensive knowledge of the project mentioned multiple times that the community expressed gratitude, and they hoped that the initiative helped improve this relationship. Still, since the AEP Foundation was the funder and BrandJRNY was the forward-facing implementing mediary, Appalachian Power and the AEP Foundation took a backseat in people's minds. Therefore, the relationship quality was improved following the CSR initiative, but it was improved because of the work and effort on behalf of the mediary that made the initiative a positive experience for community members.

Although some participants believe that the CSR initiative improved the relationship quality, it is important to note that the findings suggest that not all community members

believe that the relationship between the utility and Point Pleasant is positive based on personal knowledge and experience with the utility. Some respondents state that their opinions are based on "good faith" or are shrouded by the thought that they "think" the corporation would do x, y, or z. In order to affirm a positive relationship, Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries should consider how to improve outreach and communication with community members in order to improve the overall relationship quality.

Community Perceptions

The Point Pleasant community stakeholders had varying opinions on what they thought the community *as a whole* believed about the corporation. The majority of the community stakeholders vocalized that they didn't think that the initiative made any strides in "deepening" the relationship between community members and the company. This indifference towards the relationship that the stakeholders report is important when analyzing other CSR initiatives in different industries. Like the Ledingham and Bruning (1998) study, people typically have a different view of the corporation if they are aware of the CSR activities the company is engaging in. This view can be seen in industries varying from consumer goods and services and other nonessential businesses to technology and telecommunications, as described in the first two chapters of this study (e.g., Overton et al., 2021; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Since known literature about CSR initiatives in public utilities is sparse, this study presents an opportunity to analyze how public utilities and their publics interact and react to CSR initiatives and communications.

Most respondents felt like the utility was doing the best it could but that there would always be community members that would complain or misunderstand the company's intentions. This view is supported by existing OPR literature, specifically a

survey by Johnson & Acquavella (2012). Their survey of cell phone users found that services in which customers have an emotional attachment, or services that are essential, lend themselves to a need for high satisfaction. In this case, customers are satisfied to some extent by the effort on behalf of the utility, but the stakeholders that do not feel satisfied will lead to different relationship qualities and perceptions among community members. This impression led to the split between whether the community has a more positive or an indifferent relationship with the utility because it was dependent on the particular participant and who the participant is affiliated with in the community. For stakeholders affiliated with local government, it was more likely that they thought that the community had an *indifferent* perception, while some stakeholders in the community that are not involved in local government would say that there was an *improvement* in community perceptions of the company. However, most can agree on one thing: an increase in community pride.

Whether or not the perception of the utility was changed after the initiative, it was found that community members had a more positive and prideful view of their own community. Interviewees stated that the project brought awareness to the community's assets (e.g., history, folklore, business) and that improvements in the city's overall branding and presence not only helped in showing outsiders that Point Pleasant had potential, but it also reminded local residents of the positive aspects of their community. Although this initiative led to many improvements in the community, it didn't change overall perceptions of the utility because the implementing mediary was in the public's eye more so than the utility.

Community Associations

To the community, Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries were not top of mind when thinking about the initiative. Consistently, interviewees referred to BrandJRNY or West Virginia University (WVU) as their first thought. Some stakeholders also referred to the city of Point Pleasant because all of the BrandJRNY efforts were aimed at revitalizing the city. Since the WVU students and faculty representatives for BrandJRNY were actually in the community doing the project and "kept their business local while they did the project" as one community stakeholder mentioned, they built that rapport with the community in a way that Appalachian Power did not. Community Branding Committee (CBC) members mentioned that the AEP Foundation was mentioned in all of the meetings that took place through the course of the project, yet somehow this information failed to keep the funder top of mind in the community according to their responses. This lack of remembrance could be because Appalachian Power itself was not promoting the initiative on social or traditional media. It is also important to note that many of the Appalachian Power employees interviewed for this study were not well-informed of the initiative at all. A few of the employees were aware through attending one or two of the BrandJRNY kickoff events as an Appalachian Power representative, but one of the participants could not even recall the name of the implementing mediary for the initiative. That said, more participation and involvement from Appalachian Power employees during the CSR initiatives may lead to the community associating the company with these projects. It also may lead to a stronger, more positive OPR because this involvement would show commitment to the community (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; O'Neil 2009).

Sharing of News

Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries only shared one post on social media about the CSR initiative. This lack of messaging around the initiative could have been why the relationship quality was not drastically improved in the entire community, why community perceptions were relatively unaffected, and why community associations were so strongly tied to the BrandJRNY team and the City of Point Pleasant. Through the project's promotion, the funder was mentioned the majority (62.5%) of the time in news coverage; however, this still presents an opportunity to highlight some of the Foundation's positive community efforts. Although representatives of Appalachian Power stated that the Foundation typically does not promote its projects extensively in order to not be seen as ingenuine, it may make the community entirely unaware of the company's CSR activity. Based on previous studies already mentioned by Overton and colleagues (2021) and Ledingham and Bruning (1998), consumers have been shown to view a company more favorably after being exposed to CSR messaging. There are no known studies about particular CSR initiatives funded by a public utility company analyzed in this manner, so this study may be the first insight into how increased CSR messaging may aided in relationship building between public utilities and their stakeholders.

The Point Pleasant community stakeholders said that although traditional media had weight in promoting the initiative, word of mouth was how news spread effectively. Through banners, flyers, and the community members promoting it to everyone they knew, many people in the community became interested and involved in the project. Social media, however, was another primary method used to inform the larger community about what was happening. All Point Pleasant community interviewees mentioned the importance of Facebook in spreading news, especially since community members could easily reshare

posts that BrandJRNY was posting. Because the community was posting on Facebook about the initiative and BrandJRNY was actively posting on many social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, Facebook), Appalachian Power could have used reposting as a way to still reach its audience with news of the initiative without seeming like it was "tooting its own horn" so to speak. Doing so could have helped inform other stakeholders about the company's positive involvement in a community that it serves.

Hard-form or Soft-form Stakeholder Management

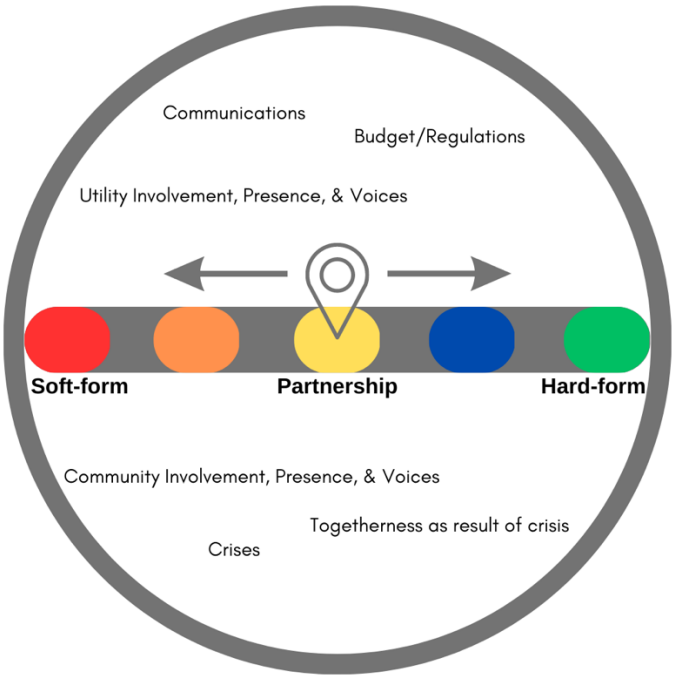
Most community stakeholders and utility company employees mention that they feel like the corporation and the city work as partners to meet each party's goals. Some community stakeholders believe that Appalachian Power would put their community's needs over its own if there was a situation in which that was warranted. However, community members also seemed to understand that the corporation needs to focus on the bottom line in order to sustain a profit. This belief leads stakeholders to believe that the company would not take a financial loss to do something in the best interests of the community. Appalachian Power employees also assert that the company does its best to seek out and consider community feedback when making decisions that will affect the community.

With these findings, there is not a clear-cut answer to whether Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries are seen as implementing hard-form or soft-form stakeholder management. Soft-form stakeholder management is present when a corporation does not put the consumer's needs over its own, while hard-form stakeholder management is present when the corporation shows care for the consumer for doing the right thing even if it has consequences (Laczniak & Murphy, 2012). The data suggest that community

stakeholders at least feel seen, heard, and considered by the utility, even if they do not think that the utility would take a large financial loss for their community. This idea of a partnership between the corporation and its public creates an image of a sliding scale with soft-form on one side and hard-form on another with partnership in the middle, where there is a varying degree of stakeholder management at any given time due to different circumstances and situations that affect the level of stakeholder management.

Figure 1

Depiction of stakeholder management in Point Pleasant implemented by Appalachian Power



Since both hard-form and soft-form stakeholder management is present at different times and in different situations, the figure suggests that stakeholder management is fluid and is not just one rigid measure used to judge how a corporation treats its consumers. In order to increase hard-form stakeholder management, Appalachian Power and its subsidiaries need to show its stakeholders that their feedback would have an impact on the

corporation's decision making. Some examples of how stakeholder management could be changed include crises, togetherness as result of crisis, community voices, utility voices, community involvement, community partnership, transparent communication, regulations, etc. (see Figure 1). Doing so may be difficult since electricity is an essential service, so there are some decisions that cannot be avoided (e.g., rate increases, new infrastructure, regulations from the Public Service Commission); however, continuing to communicate openly, as stated by the community stakeholders, could make a difference in how stakeholders feel they are being treated, therefore improving to hard-form stakeholder management altogether.

Theoretical and Literature Contributions

This study expanded OPR research by utilizing Grunig's (2002) qualitative framework for measuring OPR and by studying OPR in public utility corporations. The current study reinforces the credibility of qualitative research in OPR by showcasing the meaningful insights that can be gleaned through in-depth interviews that cannot be obtained through quantitative methods. The use of a multi-method case study also has not been used before to examine OPR between public utility corporations and their stakeholders, so this study adds new knowledge to current scholarship.

There is also limited literature focusing on CSR initiatives implemented by public utility companies, and there is no known literature focusing on how the implementing mediaries for the public utility corporation's CSR initiatives impact how stakeholders view the corporation. This study fills the gap by opening the door for other researchers to study public utilities' CSR initiatives through multi-method case studies and Grunig's (2002) qualitative OPR framework.

Another contribution of this study is that it expands the study of soft-form and hard-form stakeholder management in a public relations and relationship management context. Specifically, this study differently envisions how stakeholder management is viewed. Based on the researcher's interpretation of Laczniak and Murphy (2012), stakeholder management is a set perception (e.g., a corporation implements either soft-form or hard-form stakeholder management), whereas the results of this study suggest that stakeholder management is more like a fluctuating point on a scale (e.g., soft-form and hard-form stakeholder management can exist at the same time at different levels, depending on circumstance). This idea is supported by the fact that many Point Pleasant respondents did not feel very strongly either way about whether the corporation would or would not put their community's needs ahead of its own and the stakeholder's shared opinion that the corporation would not be able to take a financial loss even if it was the right thing to do for their community. Therefore, if Appalachian Power or AEP made a decision that changed public perception in a negative light (e.g., handled a crisis poorly), the company would most likely be viewed as implementing soft-form stakeholder management, but if the corporation made a decision that changed public perception in a positive way (e.g., handled a crisis very well) the company would most likely be viewed as implementing hard-form stakeholder management. This perception would be changed based on circumstance, thus proving that stakeholder management is a fluid measure and not a set perception.

This research aimed to fill gaps in the literature through utilizing OPR framework and stakeholder management theory in a different light. This was accomplished by studying a CSR initiative funded by a public utility corporation, which has not been studied in-depth, and implemented by a mediary, which has not been studied at all. Through the

course of this study, the relationships between public utilities and their stakeholders have been examined through the lens of both sides, the company and the community, to provide a fresh perspective. There, amidst the data, it is evident that CSR research can be studied in a different, intentional, and meaningful manner by further investigating the new contributions to stakeholder management and OPR asserted in this study.

Strengths & Limitations

As mentioned, the primary strength of this research is that few studies have focused on CSR initiatives funded by public utilities and how these initiatives affect the communities they serve. Moreover, no known research focuses on the mediaries that implement the CSR initiatives. Thus, this research extends the knowledge base by illuminating the relationship between a public utility company and its affected community and providing a foundation for other researchers to examine such relationships in other communities.

Another strength is that a case study provides a unique way to examine CSR initiatives because it uses multiple methods to triangulate and analyze data. Since this case study uses in-depth interviews, the information gleaned provided meaningful insights that could not be obtained through solely quantitative research. Case studies allow for flexibility in conducting qualitative research by allowing theory to act as a guide, not a rulebook. Although the interview protocol was based on a reputable framework, questions were modified and added to ensure that the research questions were answered thoroughly and in a detailed manner.

Potential limitations of this study are the qualitative sampling methods (i.e., judgment and snowball sampling) and its limited sample sizes. Because a non-probability-

based sample was used for the in-depth interviews, the results are not generalizable to a larger population. However, generalization was not the goal. Instead, the insights from this study are more in-depth and detailed because it is focused on only one community, one CSR initiative, and one public utility. Although sample size was limited due to the nature of the method and the specificity of the topic, each individual was interviewed because certain characteristics qualified them as a prime subject for the research, and the news and information in the content analyses were directly related to the topic under study.

As with all qualitative research, although there was protocol in place to guide interpretation of interview question answers, there may be human error in interpretation of answers as well as the misinterpretation of questions on behalf of the interviewee. This limitation, however, is countered by the use of reflexivity for in-depth interviews. The reflexive field notes taken during interviews were used for the researcher to reflect on each interview and write down thoughts. These field notes were crucial in helping to researcher identify any biases, if any. Additionally, the researcher acknowledged any potential biases in the Method chapter of this write-up in order to be transparent. On the quantitative side, intercoder reliability was 100%, so other researchers should not have a difficult time replicating this study.

Future Research

To further grow this scholarship, different CSR cases from public utility companies could be studied alongside their implementing mediaries. Since this study was not generalizable due to the sampling technique, each case may yield different results and only by studying this phenomenon in many different cases will researchers be able to tell if there are any similarities or trends. A different case study could also use a varied

combination of data-collection methods in order to discover different elements of the OPR. For example, a survey could be added as an additional method to get input from a larger number of community members about their relationship with the public utility. A focus group also could be conducted either alongside or in place of in-depth interviews in order to garner community perspective in a more broad and consistent way and to include more community members. An additional strength of a focus group would be that it also allows for self-disclosure effects, meaning that participants feel comfortable to share their thoughts because others are sharing theirs (Dainton & Lannutti, 2021).

Additional future research could also examine how stakeholder management influences how a community views their relationship with a public utility. This research could be executed by creating a framework for measuring stakeholder management using the previously described scale to help corporations gauge where improvements are needed in order to cultivate better, more positive relationships with its stakeholders. For example, in the current study, stakeholder management is in a fairly neutral space since many community members either do not have an opinion or believe that the utility works within its ability to take their community's best interests into account. This idea of a partnership leads to a mutual understanding of how each entity (i.e., the community and the utility) functions and attempting to meet each other's needs. Recognizing this finding, a corporation could then create an action plan to improve their stakeholder management, therefore potentially and positively affecting their OPR.

Practical Implications

With the conclusion of the study, the question is: how does this affect the real world? The answer is that these findings can be used by public utility companies to

improve their CSR initiatives and implementation methods. For example, with the BrandJRNY project, Appalachian Power and the AEP Foundation could have had representatives be more present at meetings and events in order to show communities that they were committed to being involved. More physical presence or involvement also could help public utilities evaluate if their programs are helping meet the needs of their stakeholders, if improvements need to be made to current initiatives, or if new initiatives need to be created in order to better meet community and company goals.

Through the findings in this study, utility companies can reflect on their own CSR initiatives and conduct their own research to find out what is and what is not effective in their current CSR activities to get to know their stakeholders more deeply. CSR initiatives can be a powerful tool for all industries and businesses as noted in the existing literature; however, these activities can only be effective with the proper dedication, communication, and research. There is potential for public utilities to utilize CSR initiatives to truly make a difference in their stakeholders' quality of life by recognizing their relationships with their publics and striving to improve how these relationships are managed.

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Appendix A:
Interview Script

Introduction

Hello, my name is Rhy Wiethe, and I am a graduate student at West Virginia University. I am studying the American Electric Power Foundation-funded community-branding initiative in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, that was implemented by the BrandJRNY program at WVU's Reed College of Media. Before we begin, this interview will take about one hour. Do you have an hour set aside for this? [WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

I want to confirm that you understand that you will NOT be identified in any reports and your name will NOT be linked to any comments you make. [WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

I also want to confirm that you know I am recording this conversation to enable me to transcribe the interview. [WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

You may also ask to skip certain questions or end the interview at any time, just let me know. [WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

Great, are you ready to begin? [WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

[For Point Pleasant Community Stakeholders (PPCS)] **Grand Tour Questions**

First, I want to ask you some general questions about the AEP Foundation and Appalachian Power.

1. Would you begin by telling me the first things that come to your mind when you hear the name AEP Foundation. What else do you know about it?

PROBE: How about Appalachian Power?

2. Would you tell me the first things that come to mind when you hear the name BrandJRNY? What else do you know about it?

3. Do you feel that you have a relationship with the AEP Foundation after the community branding initiative? Why or why not?

PROBE: Do you feel that you have a relationship with BrandJRNY after the community branding initiative? Why?

4. Do you feel like you have a relationship with Appalachian Power?

PROBE: Do you think that the community branding initiative improved, worsened, or had no effect on this relationship?

[For Appalachian Power/AEP Foundation Representatives (APR)] **Grand Tour Questions**

First, I want to ask you some general questions about the community branding initiative in Point Pleasant.

1. Would you begin by telling me your relationship with the community branding initiative that took place in Point Pleasant, WV?

PROMPT: For example, what was your role in the project?

PROBE: Have you worked with the Point Pleasant community before?

2. Would you tell me the first things that come to mind when you hear the name BrandJRNY? What do you know about it?

3. Do you feel that you have a better relationship with the community of Point Pleasant after the community branding initiative? Why or why not?

PROBE: Because the AEP Foundation was the funder of the project, did you feel personally connected to the community?

[RQ1] Relationship Quality (OPR)

Now, I want to talk more in-depth about your relationship with the AEP Foundation and/or Appalachian Power.

[Control Mutuality]

1. Do you believe that Appalachian Power is attentive to what the community says? Why or why not?

PROMPT FOR APR: For example, do you believe that the communities served by the company has any control or say in decision making?

PROBE FOR APR: Do you think being an employee gives you more control in decision making on behalf of communities?

PROMPT FOR PPCS: For example, do you feel like you have the ability to influence any decisions made by the company?

2. (FOR PPCS) Can you provide any examples that show that Appalachian Power actually has taken the community's interests into account in its decisions and behaviors or that show it has failed to take those interests into account?

PROMPT: For example, when there is a crisis or an issue, how are things handled by the company?

3. To what extent do you feel you have any control over what Appalachian Power does that affects you? Why?

PROBE: Do you feel like you have a say in the decisions that the company makes? Why or why not?

[Trust]

4. (FOR PPCS) Do you trust Appalachian Power? Why?

PROBE: Did the community branding initiative change your level of trust in the company?

PROBE: Can you give an example?

5. Do you feel that you/communities can depend on Appalachian Power? *(dependability)*

PROMPT FOR APR: Do you feel like your role in the company impacts the relationship the company has with communities?

PROBE FOR APR: How about your role in the community branding initiative?

PROMPT for PPCS: Other than electricity, do you feel you can depend on Appalachian Power for anything else? For example, community service, charitable work, etc.

PROMPT FOR MEMBERS OF COMMUNITY BRANDING COMMITTEE (CBC): Do you feel like your role in the Community Branding Committee impacts the relationship Appalachian Power has with your community?

6. (FOR PPCS) How confident are you that Appalachian Power has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do?

PROBE: Can you give me examples of why you feel that way? *(competence)*

7. (FOR APR) Can you give me examples of how, if at all, the community branding initiative improved trust between the community and Appalachian Power?

PROMPT: Did the community of Point Pleasant show appreciation for Appalachian Power or the AEP Foundation for funding the project?

PROBE: If so, can you give an example?

[Commitment]

8. Do you feel that Appalachian Power is committed to fostering a positive relationship with the community?

PROBE: Can you give any examples that illustrate this?

[Satisfaction]

9. How satisfied are you with the relationship that Appalachian Power has with the community? Please explain why you are satisfied or not satisfied.

PROBE: What could Appalachian Power or its affiliated organizations like the AEP Foundation be doing to make the relationship better?

[RQ2] [For PPCS] **Community Perceptions**

Next, I want to talk about how the community views Appalachian Power following the community branding initiative.

10. Do you believe that the community as a whole has a better relationship with Appalachian Power after the initiative? Why or why not?

PROBE FOR CBC MEMBERS ONLY: In your role as a CBC member, do you feel that you influenced how the community felt about the initiative?

PROBE: Can you give examples of how this relationship has improved post-initiative?

[RQ3] [For PPCS] **Community Associations**

Let's talk about the organization that implemented the community branding initiative.

11. When thinking about the community branding initiative, what is the first program or organization that comes to mind? Explain.

PROBE: Which program or organization do you think that most people in the community associate the community branding initiative with? (e.g., BrandJRNY, Appalachian Power/AEP Foundation, both, something else)

PROBE: Would you say that people remember that BrandJRNY is funded by the AEP Foundation?

PROBE: Do you think BrandJRNY's work made an impact on people's relationship with AEP or Appalachian Power?

[RQ4] **Sharing of News**

Let's discuss how news about the initiative was shared with the public.

12. [For APR] How did the AEP Foundation/Appalachian Power share the news about the initiative with the public?

PROBE ONLY IF CONTENT ANALYSIS IS COMPLETE: I noticed that the Foundation/Appalachian Power didn't put out much about the initiative in the news or on social media. Do you know why?

13. [For PPCS] From your perspective, how was news about the community branding initiative shared with or disseminated to the public?

PROBE: What are the names of the social media accounts, news outlets, or organizations?

[RQ5] **Hard-Form or Soft-Form Stakeholder Management**

Now, let's talk about your feelings about how Appalachian Power treats and relates to its communities.

14. Do you feel like Appalachian Power puts the needs of the communities it serves over its own?

PROBE FOR PPCS: For example, do you feel like Appalachian Power would do the right thing for the best interests of your community even if it meant financial loss for the company?

[CONDITIONAL FOLLOW-UP]: If yes, can you give an example of when this has occurred?

PROBE FOR APR: Do you feel like the finances drive most decisions made by Appalachian Power?

PROBE FOR APR: When faced with a major decision that will affect a community, do you believe that the relationships that Appalachian Power has with the community is truly taken into consideration?

15. Since the implementation of the CSR initiative, has Appalachian Power/AEP Foundation treated the community differently?

PROMPT FOR PPCS: Can you give any examples?

PROBE FOR APR: If so, can you name an example of how this has changed?

Conclusion/Thank You

Is there anything else you would like to add about your relationship with the AEP Foundation/Appalachian Power or your relationship with BrandJRNY?

Do you know of anyone else who was actively involved with the community branding initiative who might be interested in participating in this research? If so, will you please provide me with their name and contact information and/or connect me with them?

Thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy schedule to speak with me today. We would be happy to send our findings your way if you think that would be beneficial for your organization.

Appendix B:
Recruitment Email

Good **(time of day)**,

My name is Rhy Wiethe, and I am a graduate student at West Virginia University in the Reed College of Media. For my thesis, I am conducting interviews in order to explore American Electric Power's relationship with its stakeholders through its corporate social responsibility initiatives funded by the AEP Foundation. I am specifically looking at these relationships by conducting a case study on the AEP Foundation-funded initiative carried out by the Reed College of Media's BrandJRNY project in Point Pleasant, West Virginia.

I chose you for this interview because of your involvement with BrandJRNY and **(insert "knowledge about your community" for community stakeholders or "knowledge about the AEP Foundation" for employees)**. I am hoping to interview you for up to an hour via Zoom by **(insert date)**. This interview will be recorded and transcribed.

If you are interested, please respond to this email with a few times that would work best for you, review the cover letter and take the demographic questionnaire. **Only take the demographic questionnaire after you have thoroughly reviewed the cover letter and are willing to participate in the project.** The link to the demographic questionnaire and the cover letter are attached below. Your involvement in this project will be kept as confidential as legally possible, and your name will not be published or shared outside the researchers. By responding to this email, you ensure your consent to participate in the virtual interview.

Looking forward to working with you,

Rhy Wiethe
Reed College of Media Graduate Student
West Virginia University
(740) 827-2876

Appendix C:
Follow-Up Email

Good **(time of day)**,

My name is Rhy Wiethe, and I am a graduate student at West Virginia University in the Reed College of Media. I emailed you a couple days ago requesting your participation in my thesis research, so I wanted to follow up. All information about the study is in this email so you can make an informed decision.

For my thesis, I am conducting interviews in order to explore American Electric Power's relationship with its stakeholders through its corporate social responsibility initiatives funded by the AEP Foundation. I am specifically looking at these relationships by conducting a case study on the AEP Foundation-funded initiative carried out by the Reed College of Media's BrandJRNY project in Point Pleasant, West Virginia.

I chose you for this interview because of your involvement with BrandJRNY and **(insert "knowledge about your community" for community stakeholders or "knowledge about the AEP Foundation" for employees)**. I am hoping to interview you for up to an hour via Zoom in the next couple of weeks in order to meet my thesis deadline. This interview will be recorded and transcribed.

If you are interested, please respond to this email with a few times that would work best for you, review the cover letter and take the demographic questionnaire. **Only take the demographic questionnaire after you have thoroughly reviewed the cover letter and are willing to participate in the project.** The link to the demographic questionnaire and the cover letter are attached below. Your involvement in this project will be kept as confidential as legally possible, and your name will not be published or shared outside the researchers. By responding to this email, you ensure your consent to participate in the virtual interview.

Looking forward to working with you,

Rhy Wiethe
Reed College of Media Graduate Student
West Virginia University
(740) 827-2876

Appendix D:
Recruitment Phone Call Script

Hello, my name is Rhy Wiethe, and I am a graduate student in the Reed College of Media at West Virginia University. I sent you an email three days ago regarding a study I am conducting about the BrandJRNY community branding initiative in Point Pleasant. Did you receive it? [WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

Is there a date and time this week that you would have about an hour to participate in an interview? [WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

This interview will be conducted via Zoom. Do you need any further instructions or information about the platform?
[WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

Sounds good. I will send a follow-up email with the meeting invitation, the cover letter with detailed information about the study and the demographic questionnaire that must be filled out before the interview if you are willing to participate. Do you have any questions?
[WAIT FOR CONFIRMATION]

Great. See you on **(INSERT DATE AND TIME AND ZOOM FORMAT DISCUSSED)**. Thanks, goodbye.

Appendix E:
Demographic Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this thesis project about the AEP Foundation-funded community branding project implemented by BrandJRNY in Point Pleasant, WV.

We'd like to know a little more information about you. Please fill out this demographic information.

Please input your full name

_____

[For PPCS and CBC only] What is your formal job title?

_____

[For PPCS and CBC only] Are you a resident of Point Pleasant, WV?

_____

[For PPCS and CBC only] If so, how long have you lived in Point Pleasant?

_____

[For CBC only] Why do you think you were asked to be a member of the Community Branding Committee?

_____

[For CBC only] Has your own relationship or view of your community changed since being a part of the initiative? If so, how?

_____

[For APR only] What is/was your formal job title at AEP/AEP Foundation/Appalachian Power?

_____

[For APR only] How long have/did you work for AEP/AEP Foundation/Appalachian Power?

_____

[For APR only] Which BrandJRNY projects (if any) were you involved with and how involved were you?

_____

What is your age, in years?

_____

Which of the following best describes your gender?

- Man
- Woman
- Transman
- Transwoman
- Nonbinary/Gender Nonconforming
- Questioning
- Other/Preferred terminology: _____

Would you like to clarify any answers above, or share anything else at this point? _____

Thank you for your time and effort completing this demographic questionnaire. I look forward to speaking with you soon! Please reach out if you have any questions in the meantime via email at rcw0018@mix.wvu.edu or phone at (740) 827-2876.

Click the button below to submit your responses.

Appendix F:
Codebook for News Coverage Content Analysis

Fill out one form per article. Below, there are definitions and examples to help you select the appropriate category.

Coder:
Initials of coder

Date:
Insert date of article publication using two-digit date/month/year format. Example: 02/10/2000.

Publication:
Write the news organization name in which the story appears.

Headline:
Copy the title of the article exactly as it appears.

Presence or Absence

Please review the following categories before you begin coding. Be sure to refer to these categories throughout the coding process.

1. **Present**. Choose this if the news item mentions the funding organization (i.e., AEP Foundation or its subsidiaries) somewhere within the story.

2. **Absent**. Choose this if the story does not mention the funding organization (i.e., AEP Foundation or its subsidiaries) somewhere within the story.

Organizational Source

An organizational source is defined as the source from which the information about the CSR initiative originated. Please review the following categories before you begin coding. Be sure to refer to these categories throughout the coding process.

1. **Mediary**. The implementing mediary in the study is BrandJRNY. Choose this if it is evident that the news piece was from this organizational source.

2. **Public utility foundation/its subsidiaries**. The public utility foundation in the study is the AEP Foundation and its subsidiaries are Appalachian Power and American Electric Power. Choose this if it is evident that the news piece was from this organizational source.

3. **Other/unknown.** Choose this if the origin or source of information is unknown, unclear, or is not evident.

Instructions for Coding

First: Make sure you are familiar with the above categories. Refer to them frequently when attempting to determine whether the article contains the criteria or not. The sheet should be kept near you throughout the entire coding process.

Second: Read the entire article. Make sure to only use the definitions given.

Third: When finished reading the story, mark on the code sheet whether the news piece does (present) or does not (absent) contain mention of the funding organization (AEP Foundation, AEP, Appalachian Power). Also mark on the code sheet whether the news piece came from the mediary (BrandJRNY) or the public utility foundation/its subsidiaries (AEP Foundation, AEP, Appalachian Power) or other/unknown.

Appendix G:
Codebook for Social Media Content Analysis

Fill out one form per article. Below, there are definitions and examples to help you select the appropriate category.

Coder:
Initials of coder

Date:
Insert date of article publication using two-digit date/month/year format. Example: 02/10/2000.

Social Media Platform and Account:
Write the platform on which the post was found and the account where the post was posted. For example: Twitter - @AppalachianPowe.

The accounts that you will be looking for are:

- AEP's Instagram, @aepnews
- Appalachian Power's Instagram, @appalachianpowerco
- AEP's Twitter, @AEPnews
- Appalachian Power's Twitter, @AppalachianPowe
- AEP's Facebook, American Electric Power – AEP
- Appalachian Power's Facebook, Appalachian Power
- AEP's LinkedIn, American Electric Power
- Appalachian Power's LinkedIn, Appalachian Power.

Presence or Absence

Please review the following categories before you begin coding. Be sure to refer to these categories throughout the coding process.

1. **Present**. Choose this if the post about the BrandJRNY initiative is posted on one of the public utility's (AEP or Appalachian Power) social media accounts by typing '1' in the space allotted.

2. **Absent**. Choose this if the post about the BrandJRNY initiative is not posted on one of the public utility's (AEP or Appalachian Power) social media accounts by typing '2' in the space allotted.

Instructions for Coding

First: Make sure you are familiar with the above categories. Refer to them frequently when attempting to determine whether the article contains the criteria or not. The sheet should be kept near you throughout the entire coding process.

Second: When finished reading the post, mark on the code sheet whether the post is posted (present) on one of the public utility's (AEP or Appalachian Power) social media accounts (see list under Social Media Platform and Account) or if it is not posted (absent) on one of the public utility's social media accounts.

Appendix H:
News Coverage Codesheet

Coder_____

Media Outlet_____ **Date**_____

Headline_____

Present or Absent

1. (Present)_____

2. (Absent)_____

Organizational Source

1. (Mediary)_____
2. (Public utility/its subsidiaries) _____
3. (Other/unknown)_____

Notes_____

_____

Appendix I:
Social Media Codesheet

Coder_____

Date_____

Social Media Platform and Account_____

Present or Absent

1. (Present)_____
2. (Absent)_____

Notes_____

_____

Appendix J:
News Coverage Table

News Outlet	Date of Publication	Headline	P/A of Funder Information	Organizational Source
Point Pleasant Register	02/25/20	Point to launch 'new brand'	No	Mediary
Point Pleasant Register	03/04/20	'Stories begin here' - The branding of Point Pleasant	Yes	Mediary
Reed College of Media eNews	08/28/19	WVU College of Media selects Point Pleasant for community branding	Yes	Mediary
West Virginia Explorer	09/02/19	WVU selects Point Pleasant for community branding	Yes	Mediary
WVNews.com	09/03/19	Point Pleasant, WV, chosen for BrandJRNY project	Yes	Mediary
Point Pleasant Register	09/09/19	Kicking off the 'BrandJRNY' experience - Community event set for this Thursday	Yes	Mediary
WVU Today	09/09/19	Point Pleasant Branding Community kickoff event scheduled this week	Yes	Mediary
The Herald-Dispatch	09/11/19	Point Pleasant residents invited to take part in community branding effort	No	Mediary
WVU Today	09/30/19	BrandJRNY community roundtables to discuss branding plan and Point Pleasant's future	Yes	Mediary
Point Pleasant Register	10/01/19	Community roundtable events set for Oct. 2-3	Yes	Mediary
Point Pleasant Register	10/30/19	'Share Your Story' events set for Nov. 6	Yes	Mediary
Point Pleasant Register	02/11/20	Point Council approves wages increase, discuss properties	Yes	Other/Unknown
Point Pleasant Register	09/04/19	Supporting local festivals - Battle Days, Mothman donations	Yes	Other/Unknown

Appendix K:
Interview Transcripts

Interview transcripts have been redacted to protect the dataset.