

## DOCTORAL THESIS

### Exploring Employee Participation in Corporate Volunteering in China: Affecting Factors and Outcomes

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## ABSTRACT

Corporate volunteering has recently attracted increasing attention from scholars and professionals due to its importance as a viable and rewarding channel for companies to carry out activities demonstrating corporate social responsibility. While existing corporate volunteering literature has examined the benefits, challenges, and strategies of corporate volunteering dominantly in the Western context, there is a dearth of research that scrutinizes the types, outcomes, and affecting factors of corporate volunteering programs among Chinese companies in Mainland China (hereinafter China), in which volunteering is encouraged through a top-down approach by the government and the Communist Party of China.

To fill the literature gap, this study first explored types (i.e., program domains, ownership, and development) and characteristics (knowledge, social, and government-mandated) of Chinese corporate volunteering. The study then examined the programs' positive and negative outcomes on employee volunteers resulting from corporate volunteering participation based on self-determination theory, social identity theory, and role identity theory. Next, the study identified the factors that affect employees' participation in corporate volunteering, applying the Integrative Framework for Internal Communication Roles in Driving Corporate Volunteering Motivations that integrates motivation-based and social influence theories and internal communication dimensions. Last, as the literature suggests organizational pride being a key concept associated with corporate volunteering and

positive workplace behaviors, the study explicated the effects of corporate volunteering participation on employee volunteers' organizational pride and workplace behaviors.

Methodologically, the study used content analysis and interviewing. It first analyzed the content of corporate-volunteering-related documents about the 56 companies listed on the 2020 China Corporate Social Responsibility Leading Index to depict the types and characteristics of corporate volunteering in China. Next, in-depth interviews with 28 employee volunteers recruited from eight of the 56 companies were conducted and analyzed thematically to examine three areas: how participation in corporate volunteering influences the employee volunteer in general and specific ways, how corporate volunteering impacts the employee volunteers' organizational pride and workplace behaviors, and factors affecting corporate volunteering participation.

Results indicated variations in preferences for types of corporate volunteering programs among employers and employees. For example, the company-generated documents revealed that anti-COVID-19 services, poverty alleviation initiatives, and serving vulnerable groups were prevalent corporate volunteering types, with companies being the initiators of the programs. On the other hand, the interviews suggested that Chinese employees favored education and pro-environmental corporate volunteering programs with social characteristics (i.e., communication, cooperation, and relationship-building with co-worker volunteers).

Results related to volunteering outcomes suggested that employee volunteers' autonomy level strongly affects positive outcomes of volunteering. In addition, a higher level of autonomy gratification (e.g., being a corporate volunteering organizer) could strengthen employee volunteers' competence gratification as a positive volunteering outcome.

Furthermore, positive co-worker relationships that were cultivated by employee volunteers' participation seemed to further enhance employees' relationships with their companies and their positive workplace behaviors, such as reducing turnover intention. Also, organizational pride that was strengthened through volunteering participation enhanced employees' positive job performance, retention intention, and referral of the company to others.

Results related to the factors affecting employees' corporate volunteering participation showed motivations and identities (i.e., internalization or symbolization) as the key drivers of such participation, combined with different internal communication strategies. In addition, as a unique factor in China, cultural differences between state-owned and private enterprises affected employees' corporate volunteering participation and outcomes in different ways.

This research had theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the research extends the applicability of self-determination theory to corporate volunteering in China and suggests that competence and relatedness are strengthened in the presence of autonomy gratification. The second theoretical implication of the results lies in the identified volunteer

motivations and identities based on the employee volunteer's companies: state-owned or private enterprise. Employee volunteers in the state-owned enterprise were much more driven by organizational rewards, while those in the private enterprise were motivated by the needs of self and others in relation to personal identity. Furthermore, autonomy gained by participating in corporate volunteering served as a solid intrinsic motivation (internalized identity) among employee volunteers in private enterprises but not so much among their counterparts in state-owned enterprises with a high power distance context as the norm. Therefore, the research suggests the organization type (state-owned versus private) and the employee segmentation (internalized versus non-internalized volunteer identity) as crucial factors when examining strategic communication for corporate volunteering.

The research results also provide several practical implications. First, Chinese companies should utilize corporate volunteering to mutually benefit their employees and themselves. State-owned and private enterprises should consider different factors in designing their own corporate volunteering programs that would be desirable and beneficial to their employees. As for internal communication that aims to attract employee corporate volunteering participation, a decentralized communication infrastructure will be particularly practical in enhancing its effectiveness in general. Furthermore, companies should develop specialized communication strategies targeting each employee segment by the employee's characteristics, such as motivations and identity.