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Investing in Local Communities: Examining the Community Relations Practices of Louisiana’s Chemical Industry

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INVESTING IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES: EXAMINING THE COMMUNITY RELATIONS PRACTICES OF LOUISIANA’S CHEMICAL INDUSTRY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Mass Communication

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by

Jillian Washington
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2010
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ii

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. v

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................................. 4
   Defining Corporate Social Responsibility ............................................................................. 4
   History and Evolution of CSR ............................................................................................. 5
   Community Members as Stakeholders ................................................................................. 7
   Situational Theory of Publics ............................................................................................... 9
   CSR as Reputation Management ......................................................................................... 11
   Air Pollution ......................................................................................................................... 12
   Environmental Justice ......................................................................................................... 14
   Cancer Alley ......................................................................................................................... 15

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS ......................................................................................... 21

CHAPTER 4. METHODS ............................................................................................................... 23
   Qualitative Research: Interviews ......................................................................................... 23
   Participant Selection ............................................................................................................. 24
   Institutional Review Board Approval .................................................................................... 26
   Interview Process ............................................................................................................... 26
   Data Collection and Analysis ............................................................................................... 27

CHAPTER 5. RESULTS .................................................................................................................. 30

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION .......................................................................................................... 42
   Relationship of Current Study to Prior Research ................................................................. 42
   Theoretical Implications of the Study .................................................................................. 46
   Practical Application (Best Practices) .................................................................................. 48

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS .................................................................................. 54

APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM ....................................................................... 57

APPENDIX C. ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST ............................................. 58

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................ 59

VITA ........................................................................................................................................... 70
ABSTRACT

In today’s society, businesses are tasked with fulfilling their corporate objectives while acting responsibly on behalf of the communities where they operate. This is often achieved through the implementation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, which includes community relations. This qualitative study examines the extent that the chemical industry in south Louisiana executes community relations among the residents living in the shadows of its facilities. Perspectives from area residents of the chemical industry and its community relations practices are also analyzed to provide insight from the stakeholder view. Specific focus is given to companies found within Louisiana’s industrial corridor, also colloquially referred to as Cancer Alley.

This study uses social responsibility and stakeholder theories, as well as the situational theory of publics as a framework to analyze research findings. Data suggests that companies’ community relations practices, which range from philanthropic endeavors to employee volunteerism, are not universally accepted by local community stakeholders. Specifically, the perceived health and environmental impacts of plant emissions have fostered negative attitudes and opinions of the chemical industry’s practices. Based on these findings, the study culminates with a list of recommendations for PR practitioners to engage in effective community relations that support stakeholders’ needs.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Businesses and corporations play an integral role in modern civilization. As generators of economic growth and employment opportunity, they serve interests that benefit them as well as society. While businesses function independently of each other, they are intrinsically tied to the communities within which they operate (Clark, 2000). As a result, they are challenged with striking the balance between acting responsibly on behalf of society while upholding and fulfilling their business objectives. One common strategy they employ is to engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices. Kotler and Lee (2015) define CSR as “a commitment to improve community well-being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources” (p. 3). Generally speaking, CSR asserts that companies, through their business practices, should consider how their decisions impact members of society (Sarkar, 2005; Moon, 2014).

Louisiana’s corporate landscape is largely dominated by the chemical industry, which is a prominent driver of economic growth (Economic Impact Report, n.d.). The state ranks second in the nation for crude oil production and petroleum refining, and is the fourth largest producer of natural gas in the U.S. (Scott, 2018). Collectively, these industries supported $72.8 billion in sales, more than $19.2 billion in household earnings and more than 262,000 state jobs in 2015 (Scott, 2018). They also paid the state $688.7 million in taxes and fees during the 2017 fiscal year (Scott, 2018). A large concentration of these facilities are located in Louisiana’s industrial corridor, which consists of seven parishes: Ascension, East Baton Rouge, West Baton Rouge, Iberville, St. James, St. Charles and St. John the Baptist (Billings, 2005).

Louisiana is home to 18 petroleum refineries that handle more than 3 million barrels of crude oil daily (Scott, 2018). These include the Marathon Refinery in Garyville, La., and the
ExxonMobil Refinery in Baton Rouge, the third and fourth-largest refineries in the U.S., respectively (Scott, 2018). Despite the economic benefits provided to the region, chemical plant emissions can have significant environmental impacts. “Cancer Alley,” an 85-mile stretch of land along the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, is home to more than 150 industrial plants and refineries and is notorious for having “an environment heavy with pollution” (Keehan, 2018, p. 345). The label emerged during the late 1980s when residents of St. Gabriel, La., noticed that 15 of their neighbors on Jacobs Drive had developed cancer (Cancer Alley, 2020). Subsequent media reports detailed the region’s alleged toxic climate and rising cancer rates, with journalists attributing these effects to the chemical industry (Billings, 2005). Since the late 1990s, the area has experienced massive toxic releases that have spilled more than 140 million pounds of chemicals into the environment (Colton, 2006, as cited in James, Jia, & Kedia, 2012, p. 4376). Arguably, the communities most affected by these emissions consist of many low-income, African American residents (James, Jia, & Kedia, 2012). Community members represent a key stakeholder group for corporations, and as such, organizations have a direct moral obligation to them (Phillips, 2003, as cited in Govender & Abratt, 2016). This moral obligation is a defining element of traditional CSR and demonstrates consideration for the wellbeing of society.

Observing through the lens of CSR and related corporate activities, this study examines how south Louisiana’s chemical industry executes CSR in local communities through community relations. It will analyze how companies define CSR, whether they consider their community interactions as “CSR” or “community relations” and whether they identify such work as a moral obligation to society or a strategic practice that improves reputation. Specific focus will be given to companies located in Louisiana’s industrial corridor, namely Ascension and St.
Charles parishes. Perspectives from community members in St. James Parish on corporations’ community involvement are also analyzed to provide context from the stakeholder view. This study also incorporates the social responsibility theory, stakeholder theory and the situational theory of publics as a framework to analyze research findings and culminates with applicable recommendations for how companies can effectively engage in CSR through community relations practices.

The significance of this study lies in the ability of its findings to reveal valuable insights to companies engaging in community relations by identifying local stakeholder perspectives of their efforts. It will also assess how Louisiana’s chemical industry conceptualizes and executes CSR through community relations, adding to the existing literature on corporate community relations practices by examining the dynamics of Louisiana’s industrial environment.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Corporate Social Responsibility

Despite being a well-established area of study in scholarly literature, CSR remains an ambiguous and arguably vague concept, especially among corporate entities (Sexty, 2004, 2008, as cited in Werna et al., 2009). Moon (2014) expounded on the difficulty in establishing a universal definition for CSR, as it is “simultaneously an idea or set of societal expectations; and a set of business practices” (p. 4). It also “overlaps with a number of other concepts, such as ethics, sustainability, and citizenship” (p. 4-5). CSR represents businesses taking on a broader role in society (Banerjee, 2007). Davis (1973) defines CSR as “the firm’s consideration of, and response to, issues beyond the narrow economic, technical, and legal requirements of the firm” (as cited in Moon, 2014, p. 4). The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) offered a comprehensive definition of CSR in the late 1990s, identifying it as the “continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as of the local community and society at large” (as cited in Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009, p. 11).

Carroll (1991) developed one of the most highly recognized models of CSR. His pyramid identifies four key dimensions of corporate responsibility: (1) economic responsibilities of the firm (which serve as the foundation), (2) legal responsibilities, (3) ethical responsibilities, which concern doing what is right and (4) philanthropic responsibilities, which involve being “a good corporate citizen” and “[improving] the quality of life for the society” (Sheldon & Park, 2011, p. 393). Though Carroll’s pyramid has been accepted among some business leaders, others argue against the idea of a universal CSR model, suggesting that the concept itself defies universality (Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009).
Moon (2014) acknowledges that CSR has expanded from being a business concern to “an issue with which society is more aware and engaged” (p. 15). As a result, he adds that business activities are now “increasingly conducted in the ‘social gaze’” (p. 15).

Many organizations implement CSR through activities that include community relations, philanthropy and other corporate social initiatives (Kotler & Lee, 2005). These initiatives often support causes that contribute to community health, education, employment, the environment, community and economic development; and other basic human needs and desires, such as hunger and homelessness (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Hall (2006) insists that companies engage in community relations activities for reasons ranging from self-interest to altruism. Ultimately, CSR and all its iterations concern the ways in which organizations manage their relations with society (Moon, 2014).

**History and Evolution of CSR**

Countless scholars have documented the historical emergence and evolution of CSR. Conroy (2007) suggests that the history of CSR dates back at least 5,000 years. Moon (2014)
identifies “ethical antecedents to CSR [within] ancient Persian, Jewish, Hindu, Christian, Confucian, and Islamic texts and social conventions which point to particular obligations of individuals who are endowed” (p. 8). Among these obligations were “treating others fairly, supporting the needy, and being good stewards of the resources with which one had been blessed” (p. 8). Moon (2014) further contends that these principles have been “drawn upon, adopted and adapted in modern manifestations of business responsibility” (p. 8).

Modern CSR gained recognition as a distinct area of academic study in the 1950s (Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009). Howard Bowen helped shape early CSR philosophy through his writings in *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*, where he noted that CSR represents the “obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of society” (Bowen, 1953, as cited in Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009). The concept of social responsibility maintains that social institutions, regardless of size, must be “responsible for the behavior of its members and may be held accountable for [its] misdeeds” (Wright, 1976, p. 25). Proponents of social responsibility place moral and ethical restrictions upon society’s institutions and organizations (Wright, 1976). Conrad (2013) insists that “corporate social responsibility…appeals to a more fundamental idea of right and wrong in the context of corporate behavior” (p. 752).

Murphy & Ng’ombe (2009) suggest that the modern CSR movement originated in the 19th century when industrial philanthropists with “enlightened self-interest” began investing in various causes, such as improving the living standards of their employees (p. 8). Barrett (1997) notes that these individuals “understood the relationship between long-term profitability and the health and welfare of the local communities where their businesses were located” (as cited in Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009, p. 8). This focus on philanthropy continued into the 20th century with
wealthy business owners such as Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford routinely making donations to support various societal needs (Clark, 2000). However, steady population growth and the aftermath of World War I made it difficult for individuals to shoulder the responsibility themselves, leading businesses to take up the mantle of charitable contributions (Clark, 2000, p. 366). By the late 1960s, though, CSR underwent another shift toward the social and environmental accountability of the company (Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009). It has since evolved further with the general public playing an increasingly important role as a stakeholder (Clark, 2000).

**Community Members as Stakeholders**

Nineteenth century German scholar Ferdinand Tonnie conceptualized the world into two separate parts: *Gemeinschaft*, or community, and *Gesellschaft*, which represent business (Choudhury, 2014). He contends that businesses that fail to address issues facing the community are “seemingly unable or unwilling to view corporations and communities as complements” (Choudhury, 2014, p. 260). This inability to acknowledge the value of the community harms businesses in the long run, as scholars have noted the “mutual benefits” that corporate consideration of the local community brings to both entities (p. 260).

At its core, CSR concerns the way that businesses align their values and behaviors with stakeholders’ needs and expectations (Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009). More specifically, it reflects “the company's commitment to build a better quality of life with relevant stakeholders, especially those around where the company is located” (Magdalena, Suharsono & Roekhudin, 2019, p. 357). This definition highlights local residents as key community stakeholders. However, Deigh, Farquhar, Palazzo and Siano (2016) suggest that there is “limited understanding” of how corporations engage with this audience (p. 228).
Stakeholder theory lies within the framework of CSR and posits that organizations should act in the best interest of those affected by or those who can affect the organization (Moir, 2001, as cited by Kochhar, 2014). It also contends that businesses should properly manage relationships with stakeholders with the goal of improving their overall performance” (Freeman, 1984; Frooman, 1999, as cited by López-Navarro, Tortosa-Edo, & Castán-Broto, 2018, p. 23). Stakeholder theory also asserts that businesses “should be run to benefit all those that have a stake in them (Govender & Abratt, 2016, p. 238). Business leaders use stakeholder theory to analyze those groups to whom the organization has a responsibility, which can include shareholders, employees, consumers, as well as society at large (Moir, 2001, as cited in Kochhar, 2014). The stakeholder perspective has increasingly become part of the conversation on contemporary CSR and is “an inescapable phenomenon that defines business and society relations.” (Muruviwa, Nekhwevha, & Akpan, 2018, p. 2).

Similar to CSR, corporate-community relations ideology also recognizes the importance of stakeholders and supports the integration of stakeholders’ interests with those of the organization (Idemudia & Ite, 2006). Despite this, not all stakeholder groups are given the same priority. In fact, researchers have noted that “local communities located near firms' facilities… have traditionally been given less attention than other stakeholders (Calvano, 2008, as cited in López-Navarro, Tortosa-Edo, & Castán-Broto, 2018, p. 22). Additionally, scholars contend that local communities should be viewed as key stakeholders particularly by industries “whose operations generate considerable negative externalities” that affect them directly (p. 22).

Idemudia (2014) asserts that the size of a firm may determine its level of involvement with the community as larger firms, such as multinational corporations (MNCs), are “often socio-culturally detached from the communities they operate in, and rely on preconceived
notions of engagement, which lack sufficient appreciation of the local context and stakeholder expectations” (as cited in Amaeshi et al., 2016, p. 396). This suggests that larger corporations could benefit from taking a more hands-on approach in engaging and connecting with local community members, as these relationships can help them to better understand the concerns and needs of local stakeholders.

**Situational Theory of Publics**

Within the context of public relations, local stakeholders are also identified as a key public. Ehling (1975) defines publics as “a grouping which arises within a community around a controversial issue” (as cited in Grunig, 1978, p. 109). Grunig (1983) expanded this definition, referring to publics as “groups of diffused people who communicate similarly about a set of related issues actively, passively, or not at all” (p. 604). A fundamental contribution to public relations, J. E. Grunig’s situational theory of publics offers a framework for identifying and measuring publics and their opinion (Grunig, 1997). It allows PR practitioners to segment audiences into distinct groups based on their responsiveness to issues and activities involving the organization (Grunig, 1997). The theory posits that publics engage in either active or passive communication behavior (i.e. actively seeking information or processing it passively) as a function of three situational variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement (Illia, Lurati, & Casalaz, 2013). Problem recognition occurs when people have awareness about a problem or situation and consider ways to solve it; constraint recognition involves the perception of obstacles as limiting one’s ability to address a situation; and level of involvement is the extent that one connects oneself to a situation (Grunig, 1997). Ultimately, a public’s level of involvement determines whether it is identified as active or passive (Illia, Lurati, & Casalaz, 2013).
As a result, the theory outlines three stages in the evolution of publics: (1) latent publics, who do not recognize situations as being problematic; (2) aware publics, who do recognize the problem, but have not taken action; and (3) active publics, who discuss the problem and actively seek solutions (Grunig, 1979). A fourth categorization, known as nonpublics, are those who choose not to face the problem (D’Urso, 2018). Illia, Lurati, and Casalaz (2013) credit this model as an effective tool in helping companies better interpret the nature and specific behaviors of their publics.

Grunig’s theory demonstrates why it is important for organizations to understand the different characteristics of various publics, as no two function the same. Active publics, for example, are more likely than passive publics to “hold cognitions and attitudes and to engage in behaviors” (Grunig, 1997, p. 24). While passive publics may hold some kind of attitude, they are usually “weakly held and supported only by disorganized cognitions” (p. 24). Grunig (1979) notes that publics arise in “specific issue-oriented situations,” therefore it is common for organizations to have “different publics for different issues” (Grunig, 1979, p. 741). Even prior to issues arising, organizations should make efforts to communicate with all publics, including latent publics. In fact, D’Urso (2018) insists that there are “benefits to engaging a latent public as a key stakeholder” (p. 305). His research found that latent publics can evolve into aware publics and potentially active publics through directed strategic communications activities. These types of proactive approaches allows organizations to “facilitate understanding and perhaps accommodation” without the presence of conflict (Grunig, 1979, p. 741). This is critical because if a latent public becomes aware during a crisis, any negative attitudes and perceptions they hold will be primed for crystallization.
CSR as Reputation Management

A central benefit of engaging in CSR is the potential to improve an organization’s reputation. Reputation is the result of interactions between stakeholders and organizations over time (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004, as cited by Govender & Abratt, 2016). An organization’s reputation is not singular; it can have any number of reputations at any given time, depending on the stakeholders concerned (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Gotsi and Wilson (2001) posit that stakeholders evaluate companies based on their direct experiences, their exposure to any forms of communication that highlight the firm’s actions and/or by drawing comparisons with corporate rivals. Because corporate activities can directly influence stakeholders’ perceptions of the firm, organizations must act diligently to support a positive reputation in society.

Hess, Rogovsky, and Dunfee (2002) emphasize the importance of cultivating a strong reputation among stakeholders, calling it “necessary for the long-term success of the firm” (p. 113). Several scholars have highlighted how CSR can serve as an effective strategy to manage reputation. According to Chernev and Blair (2015), “socially responsible programs have been viewed almost exclusively as a tool for enhancing reputations and engendering good-will among customers” (p. 1412). Kotler and Lee (2005) cite research by nonprofit organization Business for Social Responsibility, which found that companies practicing CSR have experienced “a range of bottom-line benefits,” including increased sales and market share, strengthened brand positioning and enhanced corporate image (p. 10-11). Additionally, community involvement initiatives may improve an organization’s image more than traditional philanthropy efforts (Hess et al., 2002). During the 1990s, many companies transitioned from “fulfilling societal obligations through philanthropy to a more strategic level that attempted to tie corporate social initiatives to corporate objectives” (Banerjee, 2007, p. 6). This indicates that, over time, the practice of CSR
has become increasingly valued in the corporate world and more integrated into overall business strategy (Murphy & Ng’ombe, 2009).

While all corporations should theoretically concern themselves with their public reputation, some are at a greater risk of generating negative perceptions than others. Specifically, as noted by Collins and Lapsley (2008), “industries whose products can be seen as having a detrimental impact on society or negatively affecting the consumer’s health and wellbeing must…be concerned about their reputation” (as cited in Govender & Abratt, 2016, p. 237). Among these are “companies that produce alcohol-related products, tobacco products, nuclear energy, weapons, and heavy pollution” (p. 237).

Air Pollution

The chemical industry has often come under fire for its generation of emissions, which arguably have detrimental effects on the environment (Baurick, Younes, & Meiners, 2019; Gibson, 2020a; Harris, 2019; Murillo-Alvarado et al., 2012; Russell, G., 2019b; Schleifstein, 2019b). Industrial facilities are often concentrated in the same geographical area, leading to “significant negative externalities in terms of pollution” (Bowen et al., 2009; Kyriakopoulou and Xepapadeas, 2013, as cited in López-Navarro, Tortosa-Edo, & Castán-Broto, 2018, p. 22). Bahadori (2013) defines air pollution as “the contamination of the air by noxious gases and minute particles of solid and liquid matter…in concentrations that endanger health” (p. 1). Air pollution consists of liquid, gas and solid substances capable of generating environmental damage under certain conditions (Bahadori, 2013). The World Health Organization identifies vehicles, power generation, agriculture/waste incineration and industry among the primary sources of outdoor pollution (Air Pollution, n.d.). Emissions can adversely affect soil and crops and can have “harmful [effects] on the health of [the] community” (Bahadori, 2013, p. 1). The
threat to human health has drawn attention from federal regulatory agencies that have studied the cancer risks posed by inhaling low doses of toxic air mixtures (James, Jia, & Kedia, 2012). Federal involvement in environmental matters can be traced to 1970 when President Richard Nixon, in light of increasing public concern over air and water quality in metropolitan areas, presented Congress with a plan to address these issues and formed a council to assess how to streamline federal pollution programs (The Origins of EPA, n.d.). This led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which, among other things, strives to ensure that “federal laws protecting human health and the environment are administered and enforced fairly” (Our Mission, n.d.).

Despite the continued expansion of industrial activity in the U.S., pollution has reportedly declined in the last 40 years, specifically among “ambient levels of criteria air pollutants” (Currie & Walker, 2019, p. 3). The EPA frequently monitors criteria air pollutants due to their known harmfulness to humans (Currie & Walker, 2019). These include “sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, lead, particulates, and ozone” (p. 5). Scholars note that amendments to the Clean Air Act in 1977 and 1990, as well as the creation of the EPA, both contributed to the pollution decline. The Clean Air Act allows the EPA to set limitations on certain air pollutants and emissions from facilities including chemical plants and steel mills (Regulatory Information, n.d.). While these regulations have made notable improvements to our environment, air pollution remains a serious issue when considering potential health impacts. Higher cancer rates, heart disease and asthma have all been associated with air pollution (Nunez, 2019). Additionally, the American Lung Association estimates that more than 40 percent of the U.S. population is at risk of disease and premature death from air pollution (Nunez, 2019). Further, the Trump administration has sparked new environmental quality concerns with its rollbacks and relaxation
of EPA regulations designed to monitor and limit chemical emissions (Popovich, Albeck-Ripka, & Pierre-Louis, 2019). However, the administration insists that it has continued to protect the environment while eliminating some restrictions and has expanded economic opportunity for industry (Vazquez, 2020).

**Environmental Justice**

The study of environmental justice concerns whether “economically and politically disadvantaged communities…bear a disproportionate burden of environmental hazards” (Perlin, Wong, & Sexton, 2001, p. 407). Experts in the field have long debated whether industrial plant sites have a greater likelihood of being placed in disadvantaged areas (Perlin, Wong, & Sexton, 2001). Bullard (2000) insists that race plays a key role in determining the spatial layouts of communities, including “housing patterns, street and highway configurations…and industrial facility siting” (p. 5). Further, some researchers have identified race as a strong predictor of one’s likelihood to be exposed to environmental hazards (Benz, 2019). The chemical industry has a history of developing facilities in minority communities, particularly in the South (Arp & Boeckelman, 1994). During the early 1900s, Louisiana’s agriculturally-driven economy began to shift in favor of the oil industry (Bullard, 2000). The Mississippi River served as a major incentive for petrochemical companies looking to relocate to Louisiana due to its barge-carrying capacity and its “access to disposal of chemical waste” (Bullard, 2000, p. 103). Historically, many of the communities located nearest the river have largely consisted of African Americans.

Despite federal regulations, a disproportionate number of pollution-generating plants often make their way into poor, African American residential areas (Arp & Boeckelman, 1994). The irony of this reality is that, oftentimes, working-class people from these communities are economically dependent upon the same industries responsible for polluting their neighborhoods.
Some experts have described this phenomenon as environmental racism, or the “processes that [result] in minority and low-income communities facing disproportionate environmental harms and limited environmental benefits” (Taylor, 2014, as cited in Benz, 2019, p. 50).

In 1993, the EPA released a report on the Lower Mississippi River industrial corridor, the 85-mile stretch between Baton Rouge and New Orleans (Bullard, 2000). It found that several facilities emitting large quantities of toxic release inventory, or TRI, were “located in areas with predominately minority populations” (Bullard, 2000, p. 104). The report also noted that refineries often bought out rural African American communities surrounding the plant as “plant buffers” (p. 104). Black and Lee (2015) cite previous studies which have shown that lower-income African Americans in Louisiana are “more likely to live near industrial plants and are exposed to toxic pollutants at a rate much higher than more affluent whites.” They also assert that 80 percent of the state’s African American population “[reside] within three miles of a hazardous industrial zoned facility” (Black & Lee, 2015). Despite these statistics, industry representatives have firmly denied the notion that race plays a role in their siting decisions, insisting that other factors such as local zoning laws, proximity to raw materials, tax incentives and tax rates were “major considerations” (Arp & Boeckelman, 1994). Moreover, prior research on minority residential proximity to emission sources has generated mixed results, with some finding positive correlations and others finding no evidence of an association (Perlin, Wong, & Sexton, 2001).

Cancer Alley

Over the past 30 years, Louisiana’s industrial corridor has been controversially branded as Cancer Alley due to its high concentration of petrochemical facilities (Baum, 2019;
Baurick, Younes, & Meiners, 2019; Gibson, 2020a; Juhasz, 2019; Russell, P.R., 2019). While the area has remained a hotbed for industrial growth, some locals have begun advocating against the further expansion of chemical plants in their backyards (Baurick, Younes, & Meiners, 2019). Chemical facilities along the Mississippi River corridor have spawned much controversy over the years because of the health and environmental impacts their emissions have allegedly had on area residents (Colten, 2012). In Ascension Parish, toxic emissions reportedly increased by 109 percent over the last decade (Meiners, 2019). According to the EPA, residents in the town of Reserve, located in St. John the Baptist Parish, are 50 times more likely to develop cancer than the average American (Harris, 2019; Pasley, 2020; Shamlian, 2019). The agency’s 2015 air pollution report also noted that parish residents in St. John the Baptist have an 800 times higher lifetime risk of cancer compared to the national average (Pasley, 2020). In addition to multiple cancer diagnoses, residents report experiencing breathing issues, skin rashes and nose bleeds (Russell, P.R., 2019).

The detrimental health effects that plague many people in this region, most of whom are African American, have also been the reality for countless black residents in Port Arthur, TX (Bach, 2020). Similar to Cancer Alley, Port Arthur also boasts a booming petroleum industry and is known for its “elevated cancer levels” and toxic emissions that rank among the worst in the nation (Bach, 2020). Further, studies on area residents have shown that African Americans in Port Arthur are disproportionately affected by cancer, with rates reported as 15 percent higher than the average Texas resident (Bach, 2020). The Port Arthur case illustrates how the racial disparity claims regarding pollution exposure are not unique to Louisiana, but perhaps reflect a more prevalent issue associated with industrial air pollution (Zou et al., 2014).
Although Louisiana has reduced its air pollution levels since it began reporting to the EPA 31 years ago (Baurick, Younes, & Meiners, 2019), recent data reveals that the state has seen a 17 percent increase in toxic chemical releases since 2009 (Schleifstein, 2019a; Sneath, 2019b). Despite these concerns, companies continue to pursue expansion in this region. The planned Formosa complex in St. James Parish has become one of the region’s most hotly contested projects, according to reports in “The Guardian” and “The New Orleans Advocate” (Baurick, Younes, & Meiners, 2019; Laughland, 2020; Younes, 2019). The $9.4 billion plastics facility, expected to break ground later this year (Barnes, 2020), will consist of 10 separate plants covering some 2,400 acres and will be the largest plastics producer in the country (Russell, P.R., 2019). Formosa will be developed in two phases over the next 10 years (Karlin & Boone, 2018). It will also bring 1,200 permanent new jobs to St. James Parish with an average annual salary of $84,000 (The Sunshine Project, n.d.). However, these incentives offer little solace to residents who feel that their health is being further jeopardized for the sake of economic growth (Gibson, 2020b; Laughland, 2019).

Some parish residents have fiercely opposed the plant’s expansion into their community due to concerns over the potentially harmful emissions it would bring (Corbett, 2020). According to reports, Formosa would be allowed to release 15,400 pounds of ethylene oxide and 73,160 pounds of benzene per year, among other known carcinogens (Mitchell, 2019; Russell, P.R., 2019). Exposure to ethylene oxide has been associated with lymphoma, leukemia, stomach and breast cancer (Ethylene Oxide, 2018), while benzene exposure has been linked to leukemia and other blood-related cancers (Benzene and Cancer Risk, 2016). Formosa representatives have asserted, however, that based on the company’s air dispersion modeling, the plant’s ethylene oxide emissions would pose minimal health risks (Mitchell, 2019).
In January 2020, Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality approved 16 air permits for Formosa, essentially green lighting the project for construction (“Air permits,” 2020; Corbett, 2020; Mitchell, 2020a). However, according to reports, residents are not backing down and have partnered with other local, state and national environmental activists to file a lawsuit to appeal the approved permits (Corbett, 2020; McCrory, 2020; Mitchell, 2020b; “New lawsuit,” 2020). In addition to health concerns, local activists have recently expressed frustration over the revelation that the Formosa site contains a slave cemetery that previously rested on the grounds of the Buena Vista Plantation (Ravits, 2019). The company has since fenced off the area, but that has softened residents’ opposition or their efforts to halt construction (Jones, 2019).

Another controversial plant, Denka Performance Elastomer in St. John the Baptist Parish, is the only one in the U.S that emits the cancer-causing agent chloroprene (Hasselle, 2018; Roberts, 2018; Russell, G., 2019b). Previous studies have linked occupational chloroprene exposure to increased risks of developing liver and lung cancer, as well as leukemia (National Toxicology Program, 2016). The EPA has estimated that concentrations of harmful chemicals emitted by Denka are “among the highest in the country” (Baurick, Younes, & Meiners, 2019). In 2015, the agency’s National Air Toxics Assessment (NATA) found that the five census tracts with the highest estimated cancer risk in the country were located near Denka (Hersher, 2018; Sneath, 2019a).

In the town of Reserve, La., where Denka is located, residents have spoken out against the detrimental effects they believe the plant has had on their health (Jackman, 2019). Over the years, they have experienced a range of health issues, including headaches, dizziness, lung and liver cancer (Shamlian, 2019). In 2019, CBS News covered the story of one Reserve resident, Robert Taylor, who has lost several immediate family members to cancer (Lartey & Laughland,
He traveled to Tokyo last year in an unsuccessful attempt to meet with Denka executives to express the community’s concerns (Shamlian, 2019). Taylor founded and leads the Concerned Citizens of St. John, a local activist group that advocates for the health and environmental safety of area residents (Hersher, 2018; Russell, G., 2019a).

Last year, the Louisiana Department of Health announced plans to survey residents living within 1.5 miles of the Denka plant to determine “exactly how many people in the neighborhood have developed cancer” (Russell, G., 2019b). Though the agency is launching this cancer assessment study, state health officials have previously “[downplayed] the risks,” saying that they “have found no evidence of high cancer rates in the vicinity of the plant” (Russell, G., 2019b). Further, while many activists have been vocal about the illnesses plaguing area residents, no causal link between industry emissions and health effects has been found (Pasley, 2020). Specifically, a 2019 report by the Louisiana Tumor Registry containing cancer statistics from 2005 to 2015 found mixed results that failed to establish a clear link between cancer rates among Cancer Alley residents and local industry practices (Sneath, 2019a).

The challenges facing residents of Cancer Alley underscore the significant impact that businesses can have on society and specifically on those within their area of operation. Given this effect, it is important to understand and identify the ways that companies mitigate their impacts on society and how they manage relationships with community stakeholders.

This literature review demonstrates the interconnectedness and co-dependency of businesses and society. The soundness of an organization’s relationships with its key publics is a critical determinant of its overall success. CSR practices help facilitate interactions with community stakeholders, which, if executed properly, can improve a company’s reputation.
The following study will examine this phenomenon by assessing the nature of community relations practices as a form of CSR within Louisiana’s chemical industry.
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

CSR is a complex discipline executed in numerous industries. It has evolved over time from its focus on philanthropy to being concerned with how businesses address and fulfill their social obligations. While scholars acknowledge the integral role of stakeholders in the corporate framework, it is important to analyze the specific ways in which businesses engage with community stakeholders, particularly those who occupy the immediate areas most impacted by their practices. Although CSR as an area of interest has been extensively studied, the specific case surrounding Louisiana’s chemical industry presents a unique opportunity to enhance existing literature on current business strategies and practices involving stakeholder relations, particularly among local communities. The goal is to assess how and why companies employ community relations strategies and whether their relationships with key community stakeholders reflect those efforts.

The literature indicates that CSR remains an ambiguous concept among corporate entities and lacks a universal definition. Given this, along with the various ways CSR is executed, including via community relations, the first research question poses the following query:

**RQ1**: How do local chemical companies identify and engage in community relations as a form of CSR?

Previous research has shown that a company’s underlying motivation for executing CSR can range from self-interest to social benevolence. To gauge these motivations at the local level, the second research question asks:

**RQ2**: To what extent do chemical companies engage in CSR as a moral obligation to society or as a strategic business practice to manage reputation and mitigate crises?
Over time, more corporations have come to acknowledge local community members as a key stakeholder group. Thus, many of their initiatives are designed to impact this audience directly. To provide insight into this outreach strategy, the third research question poses the following:

RQ3. To what extent do chemical companies support members of the community where they operate, and what is the nature of that support?

It is important for businesses to assess the effectiveness of their community relations efforts. This can be determined, in part, by how well these activities are received among audiences. However, program effectiveness could be mitigated by external factors, particularly when considering a highly disputed industry. Therefore, research question four asks:

RQ4: What are the attitudes and perceptions of local community members of the chemical plants in their area and their community relations efforts?
CHAPTER 4. METHODS

For this study, the researcher collected data using qualitative methodology in the form of in-depth interviews. A total of seven interviews were conducted with community relations practitioners representing three chemical plants located within Louisiana’s industrial corridor, as well as three community members who reside in areas near the facilities and an industry representative from the state chemical association. To protect participants’ identities, the researcher assigned each of them a pseudonym (see Table 1).

Table 1. List of Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Location (By Parish)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Chemical industry representative</td>
<td>Statewide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>PR representative</td>
<td>St. Charles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhonda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Community member/Activist</td>
<td>St. James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public servant/Councilmember</td>
<td>St. James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Community member/Activist</td>
<td>St. James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>PR representative</td>
<td>East Baton Rouge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>PR representative</td>
<td>Ascension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative Research: Interviews

Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative methods are designed to achieve depth of understanding (Patton, 2002, as cited in Palinkas et al., 2013). Qualitative research involves the collection of detailed information from a smaller number of people (Harding, 2013), and allows for the exploration of new ideas outside of the rigid framework of quantitative studies (Jervis & Drake, 2014). Qualitative data place emphasis on people’s “lived experience,” and are beneficial in “locating the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). This aspect is especially important within the context of this study in assessing community members’ thoughts and feelings regarding the chemical industry’s practices in their area.
One of the most common forms of data collection in qualitative research is the interview (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Interviews seek to “explore the views, experiences, beliefs and/or motivations of individuals on specific matters” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 292). Interviews are an appropriate method to use when little information is known about the study phenomenon or when detailed insights from individual participants are necessary (Gill et al., 2008). Specifically, Hennink et al. (2011) note that the strength of in-depth interviews lies in their ability to “capture people’s individual voices and stories” (as cited in Harding, 2013, p. 22).

Semi-structured interviews are a form of in-depth interview that involve respondents answering preset open-ended questions (Jamshed, 2014). These questions help “define the areas to be explored, but also [allow] the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (Britten, 1999, as cited in Gill et al., 2008, p. 291). For this study, the interview questions were designed to provide insight and understanding into corporate perspectives on community relations, their relationship with local stakeholders, as well as community members’ perceptions of their community relations efforts.

**Participant Selection**

To conduct this study, the researcher employed a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select “information-rich cases” for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002, as cited in Palinkas et al., 2013, p. 534). Purposive sampling allows researchers to deliberately choose participants who will “best fit the purpose of the research” (Harding, 2013, p. 17). This includes recruiting individuals who are “especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest” (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011, as cited in Palinkas et al., 2013, p. 534).
Prior to determining the participant pool, the researcher conducted an online search of chemical plants in south Louisiana, specifically those between the metropolitan cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Special consideration was initially given to facilities located in rural areas south of Baton Rouge along River Road, in the region colloquially deemed “Cancer Alley.” Upon drafting a preliminary list of facilities, the researcher began searching online for the names and contact information of PR representatives at each location. This was accomplished by browsing company websites as well as through search engine inquiries using key words and phrases such as “[plant name, location] PR spokesperson” and “[plant name, location] PR contact.” The researcher also tracked down contact information for national corporate PR representatives in cases where a company’s local PR contact could not be found. Additionally, the researcher obtained secondary contact information for four potential participants from a former philanthropy employee who worked within the chemical industry.

Secondary research of recent news articles discussing the health and environmental concerns voiced by Cancer Alley residents allowed the researcher to identify potential community contacts for interviewing. These included two community activists groups in St. James and St. John the Baptist parishes, as well as a councilmember from St. James Parish. Contact information for community representatives was gathered from organizational social media pages and from the parish government’s website.

The researcher made first attempts at contact via email requests to 20 corporate and community representatives from the following parishes: Ascension, East Baton Rouge, Iberville, Orleans, St. Charles, St. James and St. John the Baptist. Seventeen follow-up emails were distributed to non-responsive contacts, in addition to 16 follow-up phone calls and 11 voice messages. Although the researcher originally sought to focus on chemical facilities in the
predominantly African American areas of Cancer Alley, she experienced difficulties with getting replies from company representatives in this region and thus broadened the scope of her research to include facilities in neighboring parishes, such as St. Charles and Ascension.

**Institutional Review Board Approval**

All studies involving the use of human subjects must first receive approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). This regulatory body ensures the protection and safety of all human research subjects and typically requires their informed consent as a condition of study participation. In addition, the IRB requires prospective researchers to complete online training on protecting human research participants. To fulfill these requirements, the researcher submitted her training certificate along with her application to the IRB. Upon receiving approval, the researcher began contacting potential subjects for interviewing. Before starting each interview, the researcher presented participants with an IRB-approved informed consent form and explained the nature of the document. Any participants who declined to sign the form were excluded from the study. Ultimately, the researcher removed one potential participant who refused to consent, but voluntarily provided information on background and supplemental materials detailing their facility’s community relations efforts.

**Interview Process**

Seven in-person interviews were conducted and audio recorded with the participant’s permission. The recordings were later transcribed and served as the basis for data analysis. The researcher traveled to eight different locations, including four in East Baton Rouge Parish, three in Ascension Parish and one in St. Charles Parish. Interviews ranged in duration from 15-45 minutes and consisted of a list of questions that varied depending on the subject’s categorization as a professional or member of the public (See Appendix A). The researcher also posed
exploratory follow-up questions during interviews to allow participants to expound or provide clarity on statements they made while answering the researcher’s initial question. Industry professionals were primarily asked about their philosophy and approach to executing community relations locally, while community members were asked about their experiences with and perceptions of the local chemical industry, as well as their views on its community relations efforts.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Qualitative data collection allows researchers to gather information from multiple sources with the goal of understanding the meaning of problems through the respondents (Akinyode & Khan, 2018). Data for this study was generated from seven in-person interviews conducted during a five-week period among chemical industry communications professionals and rural community members. Determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research is a topic rarely discussed in the literature (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005, as cited in Boddy, 2016). Because qualitative research “does not involve the making of statistical generalizations,” Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) assert that many researchers disregard qualitative sample size as an issue (as cited in Boddy, 2016, p. 427). Dworkin (2012) contends that sample sizes in qualitative research are often smaller than those of quantitative research due to its focus on providing in-depth understanding and meaning of phenomenon. The literature is ambiguous at assigning a preferred minimum of interviews, however, Dworkin (2012) notes that a number of articles and books “suggest anywhere from 5 to 50 participants as adequate” (p. 1319). Further, Boddy (2016) cites examples from medical and management research, which demonstrate that even a sample size of one individual case can be “highly informative and meaningful” (p. 426).
For this study, the researcher used a thematic analysis technique to examine the data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method used to identify, analyze and report patterns, or themes, within a body of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Scharp & Sanders, 2019). It is described as a flexible and useful research tool that offers a “rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Additionally, thematic analysis “works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of ‘reality’” (p. 81). Gibson and Brown (2009) note that researchers who use thematic analysis have three main objectives: to examine commonalities, differences and relationships (as cited in Harding, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases of thematic analysis. These include researchers familiarizing themselves with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the final report (p. 87).

Thematic analysis is centered on the identification of themes, which Braun and Clarke (2006) define as ideas that “[capture] something important about the data in relation to the research question, and [represent] some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). Conceptual themes are often drawn from different sections of the transcripts, and may not be referred to directly by respondents, but are implied by or underlie their statements (Harding, 2013). Themes are not only commonalities among the data, but also “explanatory [tools] that can help the researcher to understand relationships between other themes and issues” (Harding, 2013, p. 109).

According to Attride-Stirling (2001), qualitative analysis can be broken into three stages: the reduction of the text; the exploration of the text; and the integration of the exploration. After transcribing each audio-recorded interview via word processing software, the researcher read through each transcript and manually highlighted key passages and phrases that offered insight
and/or directly addressed the research questions. Following this process, the researcher reread each interview transcript and the highlighted sections prior to analysis. These activities represent the first phase of thematic analysis, as identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). Not only does this enhance the study’s validity, but it also increases the likelihood that the findings will “accurately reflect the original data” (Harding, 2013, p. 57).

Focusing on the highlighted sections, the researcher formulated summaries in the form of bulleted lists for each interview transcript. Harding (2013) insists that narrowing down an interview into key points allows researchers to “see through the mass of detail and repetition to the points that are most relevant to the research questions,” while helping to identify similarities and differences among the data (p. 56). The researcher used the summaries to develop codes, which “identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). While there is no right or wrong way to code data, Harding (2013) suggests a four-step process that involves identifying initial categories based on the transcripts; writing codes along transcripts; reviewing the code list and deciding which code should appear in which category; and searching for themes and findings in each category (p. 83). In this study, the researcher assigned codes such as “charitable contributions” and “employee involvement” among corporate entities and “overabundance of industry” and “unfriendliness” among community entities. After identifying codes, the researcher placed them into general themes that emerged from the data. The following section details the researcher’s findings based on the thematic analysis of her interviews.
CHAPTER 5. RESULTS

The objectives of this study are threefold: to assess the extent that chemical companies in south Louisiana engage in CSR via community relations and why; to analyze the nature of their interactions and involvement with community members; and to understand the attitudes of local residents toward the chemical industry and its community relations practices. To examine these phenomena, the researcher developed the following four research questions that served as the foundation for data analysis.

RQ1: How do local chemical companies identify and engage in community relations as a form of CSR?

The companies represented in this study did not use a universal definition of CSR or community relations. Regarding whether they consider CSR and community relations to be synonymous, all participants indicated that they make distinctions between the two, despite their interrelatedness. Participant Paul manages the community relations for Shell in Ascension Parish and said matter-of-factly that his company views CSR and community relations as being “intimately and inextricably related” (Landry, 2020). Participant Angela, who works for Valero in St. Charles Parish, insists that CSR and community relations go hand-in-hand. However, during her time with the company, she has witnessed a shift at the corporate level from a focus on community relations to corporate engagement. This involves approaching community relations from a strategic perspective. Participant Richard leads a communications firm based in Baton Rouge that has numerous chemical facilities as clients, including BASF in Ascension Parish. He believes that “community relations is part of their overall social responsibility, and social responsibility is an overall part of their sustainability.”

Each company’s approach to community relations possessed similar characteristics. Angela said her company has a strong focus on community relations and considers it an
important aspect of their business practices. Valero’s community relations efforts focus on four main areas: education, health care, civic and basic needs. Valero makes charitable contributions to area nonprofits through its corporate foundation. The company hosts a golf tournament annually and allocates a portion of the proceeds to local children’s charities. Angela leads a team of employees that determines which charities will receive the funds. Valero also has a volunteer council of employees that meets monthly to decide ways to donate their time to the community.

Angela: “We’ll go to non-profit organizations and make improvements to the paint in their building and landscaping. We’ve volunteered at a homeless shelter in New Orleans where we feed the homeless. We also do veterans projects with local veteran’s homes. So that’s another way to get our employees engaged and involved in what we’re doing.”

Employee volunteerism and involvement emerged as a common theme among the facilities included in this study. Each of them makes employee participation in community projects a priority. Paul said that his company’s employees actively participate in the community projects the company hosts, as well as the events they sponsor. These include the American Cancer Society Relay for Life and the Ascension Fund, which supports public education in the parish. Through a partnership with the River Road African American Museum in Donaldsonville, Shell employees participate in the MLK Day of Service, where they provide landscaping and cleaning services to the museum.

Richard said BASF encourages volunteerism among its employees. They actively engage with the community by volunteering in schools and coaching local sports teams. BASF is also one of many facilities that contribute significantly to Capital Area United Way, donating more than $330,000 to the organization in 2019 (BASF, 2019). Additionally, the company financially supports workforce training programs, the Louisiana Community and Technical College System and provides scholarships to students. Richard also noted that while many chemical companies execute community relations locally, their works are rarely recognized publicly.
Richard: “It has just always been rewarding for me to see the level that these plants go to in trying to give back to their communities. And unfortunately, because they don’t like to toot their own horns about it, it often goes unnoticed, except by the people that they’re actually working with. The general public doesn’t see it always.”

RQ2: To what extent do chemical companies engage in CSR as a moral obligation to society or as a strategic business practice to manage reputation and mitigate crises?

Each of the representatives from Valero, BASF and Shell expressed that their companies engage in CSR practices via community relations to fulfill their duty to society as well as to support their own business goals. Angela stressed the importance of keeping the local community in mind when it comes to operational decision-making.

Angela: “Obviously as a company, we’re going to have strategic plans for community relations and areas where we want to focus. But at the same time, I think day-in and day-out, we have to make moral decisions about what we’re doing at the plant. We never want to take a shortcut just to get the work done. We never want to do something unsafe because of a timeline, because that could affect us, our people and the community.”

She also emphasized a critical element of Valero’s community relations strategy that speaks to both motivating factors of CSR engagement: transparency. “We strive to be as transparent as we can. We really tell our community everything. If there’s something they want to know, they ask questions and we give them really transparent answers,” Angela said.

Paul openly admitted that as a corporation, Shell is very much concerned about its bottom line; however, the company’s obligation to society is not lost on anyone.

Paul: “I’m not going to insult your intelligence and tell you that we’re not interested in staying in business and making money for our shareholders. Obviously, that’s our reason to exist. But, most of our employees are hunters and fisherman and that kind of thing – so that’s important to them. We understand how important environmental preservation and sustainability are. So it’s a no brainer. We can’t operate any other way.”

Richard offered similar feedback, acknowledging that while chemical plants recognize their position in the community as economic drivers and that CSR is part of their sustainability, they willingly engage in community relations practices because it’s the right thing to do.
Richard: “There are no laws that say in Louisiana you must be giving back to your community at “X” level, you must be doing adopt-a-school programs. Nobody’s making them do it. They believe they have a responsibility, a societal responsibility to do it, and that’s why they engage in it.”

Another commonality among the plants represented in this study was their adherence to a philosophy known as “license to operate.” Within the chemical industry, companies subscribe to the belief that the communities where they reside give them an implied license to operate in that community. This concept stems from the corporate environment and the idea of a “social license,” or the constraint of meeting societal expectations and avoiding activities that they would deem unacceptable (Gunningham, Kagan, & Thornton, 2004). Social licenses are theoretically governed by “neighborhoods, environmental groups, community members and other elements of the surrounding civil society” (p. 308).

The license to operate philosophy is a driving force behind chemical companies’ community relations work. Angela noted that support from the community is vital to the overall success of the company. Both Paul and Richard echoed this sentiment.

Paul: “We subscribe to the principle that we as a petrochemical manufacturing site operate at the pleasure of the community that we live in. We call that our implied “license to operate.” And so, we approach community relations and community service sort of as a – it’s just sort of an expectation. It’s a way of doing business. It’s the right thing to do.”

Richard: “I think that every plant leader, industrial facility leader you talk to will tell you this: We get the license to operate that we have from the community, and if the community doesn’t feel like we are an engaged partner, they can, in theory, take that license to operate from us.”

The researcher asked participants about what they considered to be the benefits of practicing community relations from a business perspective. Paul said good community relations helps foster community approval, which can contribute to a company’s longevity.

Paul: “If the community doesn’t approve of what we’re doing, then it doesn’t take long before you’ve found yourself where you’re not welcome anymore. People are opposing you at every turn. So obviously we understand that we need to make sure that the
community is convinced that when we decide to do anything out here – whether it’s expand or how we run our business – that it’s something that they would approve of.”

Angela expressed that Valero’s community relations work has been recognized throughout St. Charles Parish at every level, “from the parish president on down to the local neighbor that lives on the fence line.” She said community members often approach her in public and thank her for the work her company does locally. She also asserted that Valero’s community work has assisted in shifting the perception of the chemical industry locally and has positively impacted the company’s reputation.

Angela: “We’ve come a long way because before Valero owned this site, it was owned by a company called [name redacted] and then [name redacted] before that and they did not run a good business. We had people, not picketing, but against the refinery and calling the news media and they had accidents all the time and fires. Valero took this site, bought it and turned it completely around, where some of those same people that were complaining about the refinery now say they love us.”

RQ3. To what extent do chemical companies support members of the community where they operate, and what is the nature of that support?

Data from this study revealed that community relations practices take various forms within Louisiana’s industrial corridor. Dennis, an administrator with one of the state’s industry associations, said, “I think all of them have outstanding programs and it varies from company to company. It also varies depending on their communities and where they operate.” Each of the company representatives mentioned philanthropic endeavors benefitting schools and community organizations as a common means of giving back. For example, BASF, in conjunction with River Parishes Community College, sponsors a free tech academy for high school students that teaches them about available jobs, how to qualify for them and provides training to build their skills. The company also adopts local schools and provides equipment to local fire departments.

Paul highlighted Shell’s social investment initiatives, which involve “financial investments in organizations that serve the community and improve the quality of life in the
community.” These organizations consist of school systems, educational organizations and workforce development programs. He also noted that his company “[contributes] to efforts to maintain the environmental integrity of the community” and supports local organizations that are not associated with education or the environment, known as the “bucket community”.

Angela suggested that Valero has a strong focus on philanthropy, as the company donated more than $2 million last year to area charities that benefit children, including Special Olympics Louisiana, CASA Jefferson, the Louisiana Pediatric Cardiology Foundation and the Sunshine Kids Foundation. Valero champions veterans and donates to nonprofits and agencies that support service members and their families, such as Soldiers Angels, USO and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. Valero also supports local STEM programs and volunteers at the Second Harvest Food Bank in New Orleans.

In addition to philanthropy, Richard noted that chemical companies also support communities through their economic impact, specifically through the property taxes they pay. “Even though these facilities get criticized because they get tax breaks to incentivize them investing more, they are still among the largest taxpayers in their state,” he said. Richard also explained that companies support local economies by creating a multiplier effect.

Richard: “Economists that say, for every permanent job in a petrochemical plant or refinery in Louisiana, the spinoff effect economically – the multiplier, they call it – is somewhere between four and eight. This means that for every job working inside one of these plants, there are four to eight additional jobs that are created outside the facility. It might be the auto parts shop. It might be the parts distributor. It might be the contractor who does the maintenance and the construction. But every single job creates another eight in the economy in the region.”

Another strategy employed by area chemical companies to support and engage with local communities is their participation in Community Advisory Panels (CAPs). Richard’s communications firm manages and facilitates these panels for 70-plus chemical facilities.
throughout the Gulf Coast. BASF is part of the Ascension CAP that consists of 15 facilities. Richard said the panels are designed to allow residents to hear directly from plant managers and allow for “open dialogue about specific issues.” Attendees hear presentations from industry representatives on topics ranging from environmental performance and emergency response to health, safety and employment opportunities.

Richard: “After seeing the presentation, we engage in dialogue: “What are your thoughts,” “What is the community’s perspective,” “How does this make you feel,” “What are the things that the industry ought to be paying more attention to,” “What concerns you about what you just saw?” And we provide that advice and feedback to these plant leaders so that they have a more clear understanding of what the community is concerned about and what their opinions and perspectives are.”

Angela’s company also participates in a community advisory panel, which she describes as “a liaison between the refinery and the fence line community.” Valero’s CAP consists of about 20 individuals from “different cross-sections of the community.” The panel has quarterly meetings that include a tour of the St. Charles refinery.

Angela: “We bring them onsite. We want to be as transparent as we can be. During daylight savings time we get a bus and we take them around the refinery and they can ask questions about what they see and what they hear and what we’re doing as far as expansions. So we want them to understand what’s happening right over their fence line.”

Valero strives to have open channels of communication with its CAP members. Through relationship building, Angela said that the members have become familiar with her and can contact her directly if they ever have questions about plant operations, such as flaring or odors in the air.

While CAP meetings seek to foster relationships among residents living in the proximity of chemical facilities, Richard expressed that they are not open to the public and are by invitation only. CAP members generally serve a two-year term, but have the option to renew their
membership on an annual basis. Because of this structure, Richard insisted that open public meetings would not be feasible.

Richard: “If we just opened it up every meeting to anybody who wanted to come, it’d be just a free for all and then we wouldn’t be productive. These are facilitated meetings. They are structured meetings, and they are productive meetings. And we believe that if we have done a good job in ensuring that a diverse cross-section of the community is represented, then we kind of get – it sort of acts as an open meeting, because if we’ve done a good job with the membership, we’ve kind of got the perspective of the whole community.”

RQ4: What are the attitudes and perceptions of local community members of the chemical plants in their area and their community relations efforts?

To provide insight into this query, the researcher interviewed three local residents from the community of St. James, located in St. James Parish. Each of these participants is a lifetime resident and has witnessed first-hand the proliferation of industry over the years. Among the three participants interviewed, all had negative perceptions of the chemical industry and the plants in their community. Rhonda said she believes that St. James has been overrun by chemical facilities, particularly in the fifth district, which consists primarily of African American residents.

Rhonda: “When it comes to my area, I’m going to try not to get too emotional because we have been fighting the plants for a very long time, the industries in our area. In the beginning, there were just a few industries. Now, it’s coming to a point where we’re having too many. We have about 15 industries along the River Road marbled in with homes there.”

Rhonda began learning about the environmental effects of industry two decades ago. Since then, her concerns over the impact of emissions on residents’ health have only grown. Like Rhonda, Evelyn also holds negative attitudes towards the chemical industry and firmly believes it is to blame for many of the illnesses plaguing residents.

Evelyn: “I think they should all be shut down. I think that if they are causing our illnesses, they should be shut down. I was told that all chemical plants are not bad, but I
haven’t found a good one yet, not in St. James. The ones that I know, they’re emitting these emissions in the air and we are getting sick.”

Michael serves on the parish council and contends that the chemical companies in his district fail to properly invest in local residents through workforce training. He believes that, given their vast resources and the consequences residents face from their presence in the community, these companies inherently have an obligation provide more economic opportunities for residents by equipping them with the skills necessary to qualify for plant jobs. “I think they need to put more to the table to come up with re-educational plans and tools to employ those individuals because they’re the ones that are being directly impacted by the emissions…from the industries,” said Michael.

When questioned specifically about their opinions of chemical companies’ community relations practices, participants implied that companies don’t do enough to engage directly with local residents, outside of their academic partnerships. Although participants were aware of the facilities’ community relations work in area schools and the toy and food giveaways they conduct during the holidays, they said they believed these actions are a diversion tactic to pacify residents, rather than an expression of pure altruism.

Rhonda: “The only thing they would do as far as helping would be in the school system. They have school partners and partner industries that partner with schools and they would give supplies out. Whenever there’s a trip, they would supply goods for the kids to go on that trip. They would also purchase and pay for the trips as well. But I believe that it is a quid pro quo that’s going on, one hand washes the other. Meaning, if they want to come into the parish, to me, they’re trying to buy their way in by purchasing items, gifts and tokens. Yes, they want to come in to do the right thing, but it’s a way of trying to buy the people. So to me, there’s a hidden agenda behind them coming in and purchasing those items, because they want something in return.”

Michael also contends that while many companies have a strong presence within the local school system, they have not made efforts to cultivate relationships with the general community.
Michael: “There’s not a whole lot of stuff done as far as the recreation part of the community, except maybe a couple of them. But most of them do participate with things in the school system. They provide different resources, even sometimes pay for training of some of the teachers to educate the kids. But I’m looking for a more direct impact from those industries, which is to improve the economic [wellbeing] of the residents that live in close vicinity to them.”

Rhonda recalled that when most facilities first move into St. James, representatives never take the time to meet with the locals, which has contributed to her negative opinions of them.

Rhonda: “The sad thing about it is that when they came into our area, no one knows us by first name. They did not introduce themselves to us, and when they came in, they weren’t friendly. The reason why I say they weren’t friendly is because you don’t have that many people who are working in the industries there, and in the meantime we are inhaling whatever they are putting out.”

Rhonda has attended council meetings where company representatives have been present and said the companies are made aware of the community’s concerns, but often avoid having an open dialogue with them. Arguably, this suggests that companies may view this active public as an adversary, making them less inclined to engage with them directly.

Conversations with community residents revealed a general distrust of the chemical industry and the perception of a lack of accountability. Participants expressed that they doubt the facilities in their area are complying with state and federal regulations on emissions and do not believe companies are doing their best to mitigate environmental impacts.

Evelyn: “I don’t think the state is monitoring these plants closely enough. That’s why they do whatever they want. So if they were to stay here, we don’t want any more plants to be built, but the ones that are here, make them accountable. If they can’t follow the rules, shut them down.”

Rhonda: “My opinion is that they are not tackling the issue as well, as far as I’m concerned. They are not looking at what they’re exposing in the atmosphere. And my reason for saying that is that many times I have called DEQ to complain about emissions that are being dispersed late at night. Also, calling whenever there’s a foul odor. And the sad thing about it is that when you call the EPA and DEQ, they will tell you that the scent is not there, and of course it wouldn’t be there if we called the day before and they come the next day.”

39
Victimization was also a common theme among participants. Residents of St. James feel that the industry is preying on them and that neither the companies nor civic leaders are doing enough to address their concerns regarding health impacts. The issue of race also presented itself during each interview with the residential participants, who expressed feelings of being unfairly and disproportionately targeted by the chemical industry. Michael is a representative of the fifth district of St. James, which is predominantly African American.

Michael: “Most of the people in the community are still leery of them being located there. And the reason why is because the fifth district already consists of around 15 to 17 petrochemical companies in that one district, and the rest of them are pretty much in the fourth district, which is another predominantly African American community. So my concern is to make sure, because it looks like [the government] is practicing environmental racism, because [it is] allowing industries to only locate in impoverished black areas or majority black areas, so [public servants] need to make sure [the government] is not making those types of decisions.”

Evelyn: “They’re giving us a slow death. We could live to be 100 if they weren’t killing us and poisoning us. My neighbor on one side died of cancer; one on the other side died of cancer. So many of them down on King View are sick and dying of cancer. And no one does the research to find out why so many people are dying of cancer. They don’t care, they don’t care.”

Despite her strong opinions of the plants operating in her area, Rhonda insists that she is not anti-industry but fervently disagrees with facilities being constructed and housed within residential areas.

Rhonda: “I don’t have any problems if they’re outside the vicinity of human lives. No problem. But too may is just too many. And a decision like that should not be made with dignitaries. It should be made with the people who live in the community who’s going to be inhaling it and coming back home to it.”

When questioned about the ways that companies could improve relationships with the local community, participants offered mixed responses. Evelyn asserted that the industry should offer financial support to the individuals and the families of those whose health has been
compromised due to emission exposure, while Michael reiterated the need for more job opportunities.

Evelyn: “Pay the doctor bills. Pay the families [whose loved ones] died because of their emissions. Be accountable for whatever they do. Stop the emissions, and the state should give them guidelines to follow. They shouldn’t do what they want to do and they shouldn’t emit emissions in the air that will harm us over a period of time.”

Michael: “I understand supporting the community by giving vouchers or helping out in different areas. Some of them go around giving things for Thanksgiving holiday or Christmas holiday, toy drives, but to me, that’s minimal. These are multimillion-dollar facilities; some of them are billion-dollar facilities. They should be able to provide more job opportunities for the people, that way you don’t have to give them anything. They can earn it by having a decent job to buy their own toys and their own Thanksgiving baskets.”

Rhonda expressed the bleakest outlook, saying that, unfortunately for her, the damage has already been done.

Rhonda: “There isn’t anything that they can do for me, at all, to get my approval of them. There’s no money, there isn’t anything that they can say to me. And I hate saying that because I’ve always had an open door policy. But if they were so concerned about the area, the first thing they should have done is come to meet the people. And not only that, they should have said, “Hey, let’s have an open door policy where you can come in and share your personal thoughts about us.” That did not happen. All we knew is that it was coming and there wasn’t anything we could have done or could have said because it had a stamp of approval from the governor.”

When asked about whether the industry could improve its community relations efforts, administrator Dennis offered the following response: “Well I think there’s always room for improvement in any endeavor that you have. So I think that companies are constantly reevaluating, reviewing what they’re doing and making changes to that because they want to get better.”
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

Community relations as a form of CSR is a common strategy employed by corporate entities throughout the business world. Previous research has identified the benefits of practicing CSR, which range from corporate image enhancement to improvements to their bottom line (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Due to the ambiguity with which CSR is defined, this study examines how south Louisiana’s chemical industry executes CSR locally through community relations practices. By conducting seven in-depth interviews with both local residents and industry professionals, the researcher assessed companies’ motives for engaging in community relations, the nature of their community relations practices and how these actions affect local residents’ perceptions of chemical facilities.

Relationship of Current Study to Prior Research

Companies are motivated to engage in CSR initiatives via community relations for myriad reasons, including improved financial performance, employee retention and appeasing stakeholder groups (Šontaitė-Petkevičienė, 2015). Business managers have described CSR practices as “activities targeted to the community for a positive impact” (Deigh et al., 2016, p. 235). Of the companies represented in this study, their engagement in community relations is driven by the moral obligation they feel to support the communities where they operate, while being mindful of the corporate benefits it brings to their businesses.

Hall (2006) contends that business leaders have not always seen the value in executing community relations or philanthropy. This study demonstrates that corporate attitudes have changed dramatically, with community relations being a top priority among chemical companies in south Louisiana. This is especially important considering the effects that plant emissions can
have on the environment. Such industries should be concerned about their reputations, particularly among those who are impacted by their practices (Collins & Lapsley, 2008).

According to Altman (1998), community relations activities often include “donations and contributions, employee volunteerism, community-based programs, and relationships with civic, professional, and nonprofit organizations” (p. 46). The corporate representatives in this study all indicated that they engage in various forms of these activities, with employee volunteerism, philanthropy and school-based programs among the most common. Scholars have indicated that community relations and corporate philanthropy help build relationships between businesses and their stakeholders (Hall, 2006). Further, community involvement programs can assist companies in positively shaping their reputations (Hess, Rogovsky, & Dunfee, 2002). Both representatives from Valero and Shell specifically acknowledged how their companies’ reputations have either improved or benefitted from their community relations programs. Paul explained, “We enjoy an excellent reputation in Ascension Parish. We’ve been here for 52 years. So for us, it’s the expectation of the community and it’s our expectation. It’s what we believe is part of doing business and doing business correctly.”

However, interviews with St. James residents living in close proximity to chemical plants revealed that community relations does not always alter negative perceptions of industry. While the community members in this study were aware of their local facilities’ community relations practices, it failed to change their opinions of the companies, whom they firmly believe are causing their illnesses by polluting their environment. This perception contradicts the assertion of chemical industry representatives who argue that facilities in Louisiana have significantly reduced their environmental impacts. Dennis insisted that over the past 30 years, while the state’s chemical industry has expanded, it has also reduced emissions by 75 percent statewide, thanks,
in part to improved technology. Richard noted that the message of reduced emissions is being conveyed to members of the community advisory panels (CAPs), which he believes has lessened their concerns over environmental impacts and negates the argument of environmental activists.

Richard: “Every year, every one of these CAPs, we have a very detailed presentation or series of presentations on the environmental performance of these individual facilities. And what these community advisory panel members have seen is the dangerous emissions from these plants have declined. Now that’s a point that’s missed by the environmental community.”

The data from this study clearly indicated that industry and local environmentalists morally disagree, not only on the issue of emissions, but on the notion of Cancer Alley. All three community representatives from St. James used the term to describe the area where they live and attributed growing industry presence to the cancer diagnoses of their neighbors. However, two chemical industry representatives in this study vehemently refuted the Cancer Alley claim, saying the data doesn’t suggest higher cancer rates in that area and suggesting that the moniker was developed by anti-industry individuals with their own agenda. “According to the Tumor Registry and their research…the rate of cancer in that area…the chance of catching cancer is a lot less. So, the statistics don’t bear that out,” Dennis said.

Richard: “You’ve got the environmental community out there banging on [the chemical industry] without a real clear perception of how significantly their performance has improved environmentally. They give them no credit for that. They just say, “You’re killing us,” well that’s not accurate, it’s not. Even detailed studies of cancer rates prove that that’s not true…If these plants are killing people, why aren’t the people who work in there the ones getting sick? And they’re not.”

Existing studies have struggled to find a definitive link between plant emissions and cancer rates among residents in Louisiana’s industrial corridor (Pasley, 2020; Sneath, 2019a). It is possible, then, that locals’ perception of risk may be greater than the actual risk posed by these industrial facilities. Nevertheless, the perception remains among a subset of local residents and has crystallized into a firm belief. Companies may view publics such as these who either
disapprove of their business or community relations practices as adversarial stakeholders. Khan, Skibniewski, & Cable (2017) describe adversarial stakeholders as those who share the common objective of opposing a business or its practices. This disapproval stems from a lack of trust that some community members have for the chemical industry. For example, Rhonda is convinced that plants in St. James engage in surreptitious releases when skies are cloudy to disguise their activity.

Rhonda: “I notice when there’s an overcast in weather, plants around these areas – not just along the River Road – are releasing at the same time when it’s overcast. Who knows if that’s the minimum amount of emission that they’re releasing or pollution? Who knows? Does anyone measure it? Is anyone accountable to make sure that it is the amount that is legal?”

Her comment highlights another theme that emerged from the data – the belief that the chemical industry does not comply with state and federal regulations and acts in its own best interest. However, this is not a perception unique to St. James residents. Oil companies consistently rank among the least trusted corporations, with the public believing that they need more regulation (Corso, 2009, as cited in Spangler & Pompper, 2011). This belief conflicts with the industry’s “license to operate” principle, which motivates facilities to act in the best interest of local communities.

While industry representatives touted the success of their community relations practices, local residents whom participated in this study suggested that these efforts fall short of fostering substantial relationships with the community at large. Gotsi & Wilson (2001) noted that stakeholders often evaluate companies based on their direct experiences. Therefore, local residents who have had negative experiences with chemical companies or have not had an opportunity to directly engage with them may be more inclined to cultivate negative attitudes towards them. Further, residents expressed that facilities need to make more meaningful contributions to the local community, such as providing workforce training, job opportunities
and financial assistance to families impacted by the effects of plant emissions. Although these suggestions may not all be feasible, they represent the opinions of community stakeholders and deserve the acknowledgement, if not consideration, of industry leaders.

**Theoretical Implications of the Study**

While the literature on CSR outlines multiple motivations for businesses’ engagement in the practice, the findings of this study suggest that companies approach CSR via community relations for the dual purpose of fulfilling their societal obligations while also improving their bottom line. Although a company’s community relations practices can help improve its reputation, this effect is not universal and varies based on the nature of the company’s publics. As Grunig (1997) indicated, it is critically important for organizations to identify and understand the various attitudes and opinions of their stakeholder publics, including the ones that may be labeled “adversarial.” After identifying them, companies must find ways to better manage their relationships with adversarial stakeholders. This can include an analysis and assessment of these stakeholders to help organizations understand the underlying reasons for their opposition (Khan, Skibniewski, & Cable, 2017). As stakeholder theory suggests, it is necessary for companies to act in the best interest of all its stakeholders, including those who may oppose its practices.

Given the controversy surrounding chemical plant emissions, some community residents hold negative attitudes toward the industry, including doubts regarding regulation adherence and a lack of accountability. These findings underscore the importance of transparency in community relations practices. According to Peters et al. (1997), chemical companies that disclose environmental information to local communities can increase trust and reduce the perception of risk (as cited in López-Navarro, Tortosa-Edo, & Castán-Broto, 2018). Companies must work to
build and maintain trust among all stakeholders, especially among local residents with negative perceptions of its business practices because they, too, are impacted by its operations.

The concept of social responsibility lies at the center of this research and appeared implicitly and explicitly throughout conversations with both industry and community members. The facilities represented in this study have demonstrated their commitment to acting responsibly on behalf of society while supporting the community’s needs. However, this message has not translated to all local residents in a convincing or meaningful way. There are strong beliefs among residents that the chemical industry disproportionately targets poor, black communities through environmental racism. Though previous research on environmental justice has indicated that low-income black residents in Louisiana have a higher likelihood of exposure to plant emissions, other studies on this phenomenon have been inconclusive. Further, the environmental racism argument is one that the chemical industry categorically denies. Nevertheless, these attitudes of victimization and targeting act as a barrier that prevents companies’ social responsibility efforts from being fully effective.

Conclusion

Companies adopt traditional principles of CSR to develop community relations programs that best suit the needs of the communities where they operate. These most often involve employee volunteerism, philanthropy and school-based initiatives. Despite their efforts and the perceived effectiveness of their activities, some community members doubt their sincerity and believe that facilities have not attempted to build relationships with the general public. They have also demonstrated a distrust of local industry and believe their emissions are responsible for affecting residents’ health.
The insights provided by both industry and community representatives underscore the significance of this study, which outlines the extent of community relations throughout Louisiana’s chemical industry while concurrently identifying dissatisfaction of those practices among key stakeholders. As a result, companies may need to develop additional strategies to address the concerns of local community members, regardless of whether or not they agree with their positions.

**Practical Application (Best Practices)**

The interviews conducted for this study yielded valuable information regarding the nature of community relations practices in Louisiana’s chemical industry. They also provided insight into how those activities are perceived by residents in the communities surrounding these facilities. Although this study was conducted within the context of the chemical industry, it offers key takeaways that are applicable to PR practitioners and corporate entities seeking to enhance their organization-public relationships. Based on the data analysis and the guidance of existing research, the researcher puts forth the following recommendations for businesses seeking to execute effective community relations.

**Be accessible**

Residential participants in this study expressed how they have had little to no opportunity to interact directly with industry representatives to voice their concerns. They also insisted that facilities in their area fail to host events designed to engage with the general community. This inaccessibility has helped to further the divide between both parties. Marken (1988) argues that companies that make themselves inaccessible foster mistrust and give the impression that they have something to hide.
To combat this effect, businesses must make an effort to get to know community members and work to cultivate mutually beneficial relationships with them. Residents desire to have open dialogues with them, but find that companies often keep their distance. Valero’s representative said her company makes itself available to local residents, who can contact her directly with their questions and concerns. This type of accessibility can greatly alter residents’ perception of the company and can help improve its reputation.

**Be transparent**

St. James residents hold the belief that the facilities in their area don’t comply with federal and state regulations on emissions. They also perceive these companies as being dishonest and acting in their own personal interest. While these characterizations may not hold true, the reality of this perception suggests that companies have not been transparent in their dealings with local residents. It appears that this lack of transparency has cultivated strong feelings of distrust. Trust is a defining element in the organization-public relationship and is a determining factor in the quality of that relationship (López-Navarro, Tortosa-Edo, & Castán-Broto, 2018).

Industry representatives in this study indicated a firm commitment to reducing their environmental impacts locally, however, these efforts have not adequately been conveyed to the public. Therefore, companies should incorporate environmental disclosure information into their community relations efforts, which involves “providing all the relevant information on their activities and performance in environmental issues” (López-Navarro, Tortosa-Edo, & Castán-Broto, 2018, p. 24). This can be achieved through the dissemination of brochures or through events such as community meetings and open houses. This type of communication would not
only promote transparency, but can help stakeholders better understand and appreciate company operations (Fombrun & Rindova, 1998).

**Be willing to listen**

Along with increased accessibility and transparency, companies must create opportunities to hear directly from area residents and truly listen to what they have to say. Listening is central to building relationships with stakeholders and requires a level of empathy (Place, 2019). Although there are polarizing issues between residents within Louisiana’s industrial corridor and the facilities that are housed there, companies must be willing to facilitate dialogue with them. As Utting (2005) noted, dialogue between an organization and its stakeholders is a form of CSR. Further, as a form of two-way communication, community relations is designed to “encourage input from stakeholders so that their concerns are considered in organizational decision-making processes” (Forrest & Mays, 1997).

Two of the companies represented in this study engage in listening through their participation in community advisory panels (CAPs). While the presence of CAPs is helpful, only members are allowed to participate, eliminating the opportunity for other residents’ voices to be heard. Community members in this study, for example, expressed wanting to see companies invest more substantially in their communities by providing locals with direct job opportunities and workforce training. However, industry representatives may be unaware of this opinion due to limited community dialogue. Therefore, companies should host community forums to allow the general public to attend. Such events can help companies field concerns and suggestions from local residents to better assess their needs.

**Invest in workforce training**

In this study, local residents conveyed their dissatisfaction with the extent of community
relations practices in their area, specifically describing company donations as trivial and insincere. As an alternative, one representative insisted that companies make direct investments into area residents by providing them with workforce training. Michael noted, “I don’t think they provide enough economic opportunities for the locals that live [here]. I don’t think they’ve put forth a strong enough effort to retrain the people that are in the area to qualify for jobs in the facilities.” Indeed, the industry representative for BASF divulged that members of the Ascension CAP have expressed a similar sentiment: “The primary issue is: “Can our people get these good jobs?” So that’s been a real focus; how do we get more people in the community trained and prepared and educated to take these jobs?”

Investing in the skill development of nonemployees is commonly practiced in the tech industry and offers short- and long-term benefits for the individuals as well as companies (O’Donnell, 2018). From a corporate perspective, it creates a potential pipeline of future workers while also “cementing corporate social responsibility reputation” (O’Donnell, 2018). Within the context of this study, local workforce training would demonstrate a commitment to support local community members in a substantial, meaningful way while establishing goodwill and building trust among key stakeholders.

**Prioritize reputation management**

One of the corporate benefits of engaging in community relations is the opportunity it provides to enhance a company’s reputation (Chernev & Blair, 2015; Deigh et al, 2016). When developing community relations programs, companies must consider how these activities may affect their reputation, for better or worse. As the findings of this study suggest, not all community relations efforts will be received positively among certain stakeholder groups. These types of negative attitudes and perceptions can sully a company’s reputation.
Reputations are “abstract, subjective personal judgments” as well as something that must be earned (Budd, 1994, p. 11). Carvalho (2004) refers to reputation as “the fruit of an organization’s relationships with its stakeholders,” (p. 2) and contends that the best way to manage one’s reputation is to manage the individual relationships companies have with their stakeholders. Stakeholder relationships should function as a two-way street, with companies not only disseminating information or executing programs locally, but also making the effort to understand their audiences (Fombrun & Rindova, 1998). Community relations programs that target various types of publics while allowing for direct engagement with area residents may be most effective in cultivating a positive reputation among the community at large.

**Study Limitations**

The limitations of this study include the fact that its findings cannot be generalized to the larger population due to its qualitative nature and the limited number of interviews conducted. A lack of responsiveness among potential interview subjects represented another constraint of this study, as multiple phone calls and emails went unanswered. Indeed, additional interviews with community and chemical industry representatives may have provided alternative insights for data analysis. Further, the fourth industry representative who would not speak on the record provided valuable information regarding her company’s community relations activities; however, the researcher did not incorporate her commentary into the data findings or analysis due to her refusal to consent. This reluctance reflects the sensitive and controversial nature of this subject matter and may explain other potential subjects’ hesitation to participate in an interview.

It is important to note that the community members whom participated in this study do not reside in the same parishes as the facilities represented in this study, meaning that their attitudes and opinions are not a reflection of their interactions with these specific companies.
This study also focused specifically on the community relations practices of Louisiana’s chemical industry, which may differ from those of other industries.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research in this field should examine the differences in community relations practices between large corporations and small, locally-owned businesses, as company size may affect one’s approach to executing these activities. Given the unique dynamics at play within Louisiana’s industrial corridor, researchers may want to consider conducting a full-scale case study on the residents of specific towns within Cancer Alley, such as St. James, Reserve or St. Gabriel, and their relationships with the chemical facilities in their area. Finally, researchers may want to conduct a comparative analysis of the chemical industry’s approach to CSR with other industries, such as agriculture or healthcare.

**Summary**

Driven by their moral obligation to society, corporations adopt the principles of CSR and apply them throughout various facets of their business practices. The chemical industry in south Louisiana engages in CSR through a series of community relations strategies that include philanthropic endeavors and employee volunteerism. While companies hold positive views of their community relations efforts, this study revealed that feelings of distrust and victimization among residents of Cancer Alley have tainted their perceptions of these activities. Residents also insist that area facilities fail to provide enough support to those directly impacted by their operations. Given these findings, companies should work to develop more comprehensive community relations strategies that facilitate dialogue with adversarial stakeholder populations, while seeking to understand their concerns and needs. These actions can help to build trust and promote transparency, while cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders.
APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Corporate PR Representative Interview Questions

1. How do you and/or your organization define community relations?

2. What are your thoughts regarding giving back to the community in which you operate?

3. Does your company engage in community relations activities? If so, please describe in detail the ways in which your company executes this locally and nationally (if applicable).

4. How much money has your organization donated to the local community in the past year?

5. What is the process through which you engage with the community? (i.e. do you submit grant applications to generate funding for philanthropic endeavors)?

6. There is a theory in public relations called corporate social responsibility or CSR, which states that organizations and/or its members have a responsibility to act in the best interest of society. Based on my description of CSR, do you consider community relations and CSR to be synonymous? If not, how does your company differentiate the two?

7. Does your organization consider community relations activity to be a moral obligation of business or a necessary aspect of business strategy? Please explain.

8. What do you consider to be the benefits of practicing community relations?

9. How has your company’s reputation been impacted by your community relations practices? Explain.

10. How often does your organization actively engage with the local community (via service projects, presence at town hall meetings, philanthropic endeavors, etc.)?

11. What has your company done to minimize its environmental impacts locally? Does this tie in with community relations and corporate social responsibility?
12. Have local community members who oppose your business practices ever posed a PR/media challenge to your company? If so, how has your company handled/addressed those challenges?

**Community Member Interview Questions**

1. What are your thoughts about chemical companies that operate in your community?

2. Which chemical companies have you actively engaged with in the past?

3. Describe the nature of those interactions. Were they contentious or cordial?

4. Have you ever voiced concerns about environmental or health effects resulting from plant emissions? Please explain.

5. Of the companies you have interacted with, how responsive have they or their representatives been to your concerns?

6. How often do local chemical companies host community events in your area?

7. Do you feel that these companies are doing the best they can to mitigate/lessen environmental impacts in your community? Explain.

8. Which chemical companies would you say have positive versus negative reputations in the community? Explain.

9. What are some ways that you believe these companies can improve their relationships with the local community?

**Industry Association Representative Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a little about how you came to head the LCA and about your role as its president and what that involves.

2. Can you provide a brief history of the Louisiana Chemical Association and its role in our society?
3. How many chemical plants does the LCA represent? Do you have a breakdown by parish? (Specifically, in EBR, WBR, Iberville, Ascension, St. James and St. John the Baptist parishes)

4. How many jobs does the chemical industry currently provide in south Louisiana and how many employees does the industry consist of?

5. What is your organization’s position/opinion regarding the Cancer Alley regional distinction? Do you feel this moniker is justified given the health effects reported by residents in the region and has the association taken steps to combat this perception?

6. In what ways, if any, has the Cancer Alley perception impacted/affected the state’s chemical industry from a business perspective? Has it impeded growth, for example?

7. Can you explain some of the efforts various chemical companies in south Louisiana have made to minimize their environmental impacts locally?

8. What do you consider to be the benefits of practicing community relations (i.e. giving back to the community)?

9. Which area companies do you feel have outstanding community relations efforts/programs, based on your experience/observation of them?

10. Do you feel that the chemical industry could improve its community relations practices/activities among local communities? If so, in what ways?
APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Investing in Local Communities: Examining the Community Relations Practices of Louisiana’s Chemical Industry

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to examine how chemical companies in south Louisiana execute community relations in the areas in which they operate. You will be asked a series of 9-12 open-ended questions regarding your community relations activity, involvement and/or perceptions. The interview will last for approximately 30-60 minutes and will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy of transcription.

Risks: There are no inherent risks associated with this interview. However, every effort will be made to ensure that your confidentiality is maintained. Only Jillian Washington will have access to your personal information (e.g. first and last name, contact information), which will not be published in the study.

Benefits: There are no specific benefits for participating in this interview.

Investigators: The following investigators are available for questions about this study, M-F, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.: Dr. Jinx C. Broussard, 225-578-7603, jinxy@lsu.edu; Jillian Washington, jwash75@lsu.edu

Number of Subjects: TBD by the number of participating interviewees

Subject Inclusion: Communications/marketing representatives from local oil and gas companies, small businesses and/or local community members in and around the Baton Rouge area. All participants must be at least 18 years old. To participate in this study, you must meet the requirements of both the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Right to Refuse: Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.

Privacy: No names or identifying information will be included in the publication of this research. Participant identification will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Signatures: This study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding specifics of the study to the investigators. If I have further questions about participants’ rights or other concerns, I may contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board Chair, 225-578-8692, irb@lsu.edu, or www.lsu.edu/research. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator’s obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

Participant Signature: __________________________________________ Date: ____________________
APPENDIX C. ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

TO: Jillian Washington
    Mass Communication

FROM: Dennis Landin
    Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: January 30, 2020

RE: IRB# E12020

TITLE: Investing in Local Communities: Examining the Community Relations Practices of Louisiana’s Chemical Industry

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: Modification

Brief Modification Description: Revise consent form and study title.

Review date: 1/29/2020

Approved X Disapproved

Approval Date: 1/29/2020 Approval Expiration Date: 1/11/2022

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: Make sure you use bcc when emailing more than one recipient. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb

58
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VITA

Jillian Washington graduated from Louisiana State University in 2010 with a Bachelor of Arts in mass communication and a minor in business administration. After working as an associate news producer, she held marketing/public relations roles in both the public and private sectors. Jillian resolved to continue her education by pursuing advanced training in communications and enrolled in the Manship School of Mass Communication’s master’s degree program in August 2018. Following graduation, she intends to return to the professional world to continue her career in strategic communications.