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Responsible stakeholder engagement marketing

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A R T I C L E I N F O

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A B S T R A C T

By strategically cultivating customers' engagement, Customer Engagement Marketing (CEM) boosts the firm's relationships with its customers. However, CEM's isolated *customer* focus overlooks the importance of cultivating other firm stakeholders' (e.g., employees' or suppliers') engagement with the firm, exposing a pertinent gap in the literature. Addressing this gap, we conceptualize *Responsible Stakeholder Engagement Marketing* (RSEM) as a theoretical sub-set of the broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) concept. We define RSEM as *a firm's deliberate strategic effort to stimulate and empower its stakeholders to make responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment*. We also develop a framework and an associated set of propositions that are informed by stakeholder theory, which suggest that a firm's internal (vs. specific external) stakeholders' need for the firm's social responsibility differentially affects its instrumental, compliant and moral RSEM strategy, thereby uniquely impacting (a) its stakeholders' contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, and (b) the firm's triple bottom-line performance. We conclude by discussing key implications that arise from our analyses.

1. Introduction

Customer engagement (CE), a customer's resource contribution to the firm (Pansari & Kumar, 2017), has been shown to boost firm metrics, including sales, revenue, and profitability (Lim et al., 2022; Brodie et al., 2013). Given its acclaimed benefits, a goldrush of CE research has addressed issues, including CE's conceptualization, measurement, and nomological network (Kumar et al., 2019; Hollebeek et al., 2019).

Acknowledging these benefits, Harmeling et al. (2017, p. 312) conceptualize *Customer Engagement Marketing* (CEM) as "a firm's deliberate [strategic] effort to motivate, empower, and measure" CE. Since its inception, CEM has seen growing adoption (e.g., Palmatier et al., 2017; Fujita et al., 2020), revealing its rising star. For example, while Alvarez-Milán et al. (2018) provide a strategic CEM decision-making framework, Harmeling et al. (2018) outline key CEM implementation principles. Prior CEM research also corroborates CE's effect on customer metrics, including brand commitment, trust, satisfaction, loyalty, and share-of-wallet (Pansari & Kumar, 2018), substantiating its practical relevance.

However, CEM's limited *customer* focus overlooks the firm's opportunity to strategically shape or leverage the engagement of its *other* stakeholders (e.g., that of its employees or suppliers; Hillebrand et al., 2015), calling for a paradigmatic shift by broadening CEM to a more systemic, *omni*-stakeholder scope, as informed by stakeholder theory in this article (Freeman et al., 2010). Given stakeholder theory's aim of

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fostering responsible, ethical stakeholder relationships (Freeman, 1984), this perspective offers a suitable lens to inform our analyses that center on the company's cultivation of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, to others, and to the environment, in turn boosting the firm's triple bottom-line performance (Mish & Scammon 2010). Our analyses focus chiefly on normative and instrumental stakeholder theory. Specifically, we not only suggest that firms should adopt RSEM (i.e., reflecting normative stakeholder theory) but also outline the benefits of doing so (i.e., reflecting instrumental stakeholder theory), as detailed below. We conceptualize *Responsible Stakeholder Engagement Marketing* (RSEM) as *a firm's deliberate strategic effort to stimulate and empower its stakeholders to make responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment*, thus improving the firm's relationships with its stakeholders.

While CEM focuses on the firm's stimulation of its customers' contributions to the company (Harmeling et al., 2017), RSEM extends CEM by addressing the firm's cultivation of its stakeholders' *responsible* contributions to the corporation, other stakeholders, and the environment (Tate & Bals, 2018; Hillebrand et al., 2015), in line with instrumental and normative stakeholder theory. However, to the extent that a customer's contributions to the firm (as per CEM) are not *responsible* in nature, they fall outside RSEM's conceptual ambit. RSEM is also a theoretical sub-set of the broader *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) concept, the extent to which a firm strives to advance or protect specific social and/or environmental interests (Abbas, 2024; Alhumud et al., 2025; Anser et al., 2020).

However, prior CSR research has focused on the firm's *own* ethical behavior (e.g., Ghanbarpour et al., 2024; Bhattacharya, 2016), *rather than* its capacity to shape *its stakeholders'* responsible contributions (as captured by RSEM), thus overlooking an important opportunity for CSR-implementing firms. Specifically, by extending its responsible contributions *beyond* its own actions, the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions is expected to multiply its ethical footprint. Therefore, the development of RSEM brings additional nuance to CSR research. RSEM, which comprises instrumental, compliant, and moral aspects (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011; Windsor, 2006), reflects a firm's *strategic* stakeholder engagement activities, leading us to interchangeably use the terms *RSEM* and *RSEM strategy* in this article.

In contemporary markets characterized by rising demands for the equitable treatment of stakeholders and the environment (Lenz et al., 2017), managers cannot ignore the need for RSEM. Extending CEM, which – extending CEM – aims to cultivate firm stakeholders' responsible contributions to the company, other stakeholders, and the environment (Hillebrand et al., 2015; Alvarez-Milán et al., 2018). By integrating CEM with the stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984; Mahajan et al., 2023), responsible marketing (e.g., Laczniak & Shultz, 2021), and CSR literature (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2016), we propose RSEM as the next, natural evolution of CEM and an important theoretical sub-set of CSR that is expected to raise stakeholder trust and boost the firm's stakeholder relationships (De Ruyter et al., 2022).

Second, prior research has primarily focused on CEM's economic or financial value, revealing its emphasis on bottom-line firm performance (Palmatier et al., 2017). Therefore, CEM's (and thus, RSEM's) *triple bottom-line* (i.e., financial, social, *and* environmental) performance outcomes, as also recognized in the widely adopted ESG (*Environmental*, *Social*, and *Governance*) metric, remain tenuous (Haenlein et al., 2022), warranting further investigation. Overall, we recommend managers to adopt RSEM as part of their CSR strategy to raise the firm's triple bottom-line performance, extending scholarly acumen of CEM and CSR alike.

This conceptual article makes the following contributions to the engagement (marketing), responsible marketing, and CSR literatures. First, we extend Harmeling et al.'s (2017) CEM to RSEM, which – in line with stakeholder theory – can be applied to simultaneously benefit *multiple* firm stakeholders, bolstering their trust in and relationship with the firm. For example, supplier or investor engagement can be leveraged to foster green innovation, social sustainability, or sustainable development, benefiting stakeholders, including customers, employees, and the public, in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2024). RSEM also allows firms to optimize their interactions with and offers to their different stakeholders, boosting stakeholder trust (Misch & Scammon, 2010).

Though stakeholder theory incorporates *stakeholder engagement* (SE), "a stakeholder's …resource [contributions to their] role-related interactions, activities, and/or relationships" (Hollebeek et al., 2022a, p. 328), its analyses typically do not extend to responsible SE *marketing*, as therefore explored further in this article. Extending Harmeling et al.'s (2017) CEM and the CSR literature (e.g., Abbas, 2024; Salnikova et al., 2022), RSEM captures the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the company, other stakeholders, and the environment (Freeman et al., 2018), which – while pertinent – remains tenuous to date. Overall, we integrate CEM, stakeholder engagement, responsible marketing, and CSR to derive novel insight into RSEM, in line with MacInnis' (2011) *integrating* purpose of conceptual research.

Second, we explore RSEM in its broader stakeholder theory-informed nomological network, which identifies a differential effect of internal (vs. specific external) stakeholders' need for the firm's social responsibility on its instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy (Stojanović-Aleksić & Bošković, 2017). In turn, these RSEM facets are predicted to uniquely impact (a) stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, impacting the firm's stakeholder relationships, and (b) the firm's triple bottom-line performance (Gupta et al., 2020).

2. Literature review and conceptual development

2.1. Customer engagement marketing

After its introduction by Harmeling et al. (2017), CEM has seen rapid uptake in the literature (Alvarez-Milán et al., 2018; Vivek et al., 2019). Defined as "a firm's deliberate effort to motivate, empower, and measure customer contributions to [its] marketing functions" (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 312), CEM nurtures customers' (resource) contributions to the organization, revealing its strategic nature. Thus, CEM comprises those firm-initiated, strategic activities that are designed to nurture customer engagement (CE), as several related concepts also recognize (see Table 1). For example, Kumar and Pansari's (2016) *engagement orientation*, Gill et al.'s (2017) and Meire et al.'s (2019) *engagement initiatives*, and Beckers et al.'s (2018) *firm-initiated customer engagement* all reflect the firm's efforts to raise CE. However, Table 1 shows that while prior authors have advocated firms to strategically cultivate their *customers*' engagement, acumen of the development of *other* firm stakeholders' engagement remains limited in the marketing literature, exposing an important gap.

The latter part of Harmeling et al.'s (2017) CEM definition, "*customer contributions*" aligns with Pansari and Kumar's (2017, p. 295) view of CE as "the mechanics of a customer's value addition to the firm, either through *direct or/and indirect contribution*[*s*]" (emphasis added). While *direct contributions* comprise customers' purchase of a firm's offerings, *indirect contributions* include "incentivized [customer] referrals …, the customer's social media conversations about the brand, [and customer] …feedback/suggestions… to the firm" (Pansari & Kumar, 2017, p. 295). CEM-adopting firms are generally advised to cultivate both these customer contributions to boost firm performance (Kumar & Pansari, 2016).

When companies purposefully motivate, empower, and measure their customers' contributions to the firm, they are said to adopt a CEM strategy (Harmeling et al., 2018). CEM's effectiveness therefore relies on the firm's ability to stimulate its customers to contribute specific resources to their interactions with it (Hollebeek et al., 2019). By inviting customers to contribute their personal resources to their firm

Table 1
Customer engagement marketing (CEM) and related concepts.

Author(s)	Concepts	Definition
Kumar & Pansari (2016, p. 511)	Engagement Orientation	"The process of embedding engagement in the organization as a policy decision and ensuring that all strategies of the organization focus on engaging the customers and the employees, along with value maximization for all stakeholders."
Harmeling et al. (2017, p. 312)	Customer Engagement Marketing	"A firm's deliberate effort to motivate, empower, and measure customer contributions to [its] marketing functions."
Gill et al. (2017, p. 45)	Engagement Initiatives	"Organizational initiatives that facilitate firm–customer interactions or interactions among customers, with the primary goal of fostering an emotional and psychological bond between customers and the firm."
Beckers et al. (2018, 368)	Firm-initiated Customer Engagement	"When firms adopt explicit strategies to stimulate customer engagement (e.g., by asking customers to share a viral marketing campaign, to like the brand on Facebook, or to engage in a firm-sponsored online community)."
Harmeling et al. (2018)	Customer Engagement Marketing	"Where a firm attempts to motivate [and] empower" its customers.
Alvarez-Milan et al. (2018, p. 62)	"Firm-initiated CE (i.e., customer engagement marketing)"	"CE [customer engagement is] a firm-initiated construct," … a process guided by reciprocity and cost-benefit analysis over time … from the company's point of view."
Meire et al. (2019, p. 21)	Customer Engagement Initiatives	"Organizational initiatives that facilitate firm–customer interactions to foster emotional or psychological bonds between customers and firms"
Streukens et al. (2019)	Customer Engagement Marketing	A firm's strategic efforts (i.e., CEM initiatives) to influence CE and subsequent business performance."

interactions, CEM aims to develop customers' value-laden interactions and relationships with, and trust in, the firm. Next, we further motivate the need for a paradigmatic shift from CEM to RSEM.

2.2. Transitioning from CEM to responsible stakeholder engagement marketing (RSEM)

CEM adopts the customer as its central stakeholder, thus largely overlooking the role of *other* firm stakeholders' engagement and leading us to propose the broadened concept of RSEM. As a theoretical sub-set of the firm's CSR strategy, RSEM helps firms to responsibly design their engagement marketing activities to cultivate their stakeholders' (more) responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, which however remains more tacit in CEM. Here, *stakeholders* are "group[s] or individual[s], who can affect or [are] affected by the firm" (e.g., employees, customers, or suppliers; Freeman, 1984, p. 46). For example, Coca-Cola's 2015 Super Bowl ad campaign tackled rising cyberbullying, thus improving stakeholder-to-stakeholder interactions (Brodie et al., 2016) and making an important social contribution.

RSEM therefore addresses "how more value is created if stakeholder relationships are governed by ethical principles, including integrity, respect, fairness, generosity, and inclusiveness" (Harrison & Wicks, 2021, p. 405), which we, in turn, expect to boost the firm's stakeholder relationships (Bhattacharya, 2010). Though many firms are already soliciting specific stakeholders' responsible contributions, they typically lack a comprehensive RSEM strategy, as therefore developed further in this article. RSEM thus reflects that part of the firm's CSR strategy that stimulates and empowers its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, exposing RSEM's *CSR multiplying* capacity (Pathak & Tewari, 2020). RSEM also differs from stakeholder engagement, or stakeholders' resource contributions to their role-related interactions (Hollebeek et al., 2022b), which (unlike RSEM) are not responsible *per se*. Extending Harmeling et al.'s (2017) CEM and the CSR literature (e.g., Baskentli et al., 2019), we define RSEM as:

> *A firm's deliberate strategic effort to stimulate and empower its stakeholders to make responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment.*

2.3. RSEM facets

Drawing on the CSR literature (e.g., Stojanović-Aleksić & Bošković, 2017; Windsor, 2006; Ferrell et al., 2019), firms may adopt *instrumental*, *compliant*, and/or *moral* motivations for implementing RSEM strategy (see Table 2), which are observed to differing degrees across organizations and contexts (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2012). Table 2 also compares and contrasts RSEM and its facets with closely related concepts.

First, *instrumental RSEM* reflects a firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to further its own financial objectives and performance (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011; Windsor, 2006; see Table 2). For example, by encouraging its customers to return their used goods for recycling, H&M not only encourages its buyers' responsible contribution, but also receives raw materials at low cost, benefiting its financial performance. To consistently meet specific stakeholders' evolving socio-cultural norms, needs, and/or tastes (e.g., their rising requirements for diversity, equity, and inclusion; Park et al., 2023) at a profit, contemporary firms face increasing pressure to adopt RSEM. The firm's financial returns, if positive, can be re-invested to further shape its stakeholders' responsible behavior (Castro-Lopez et al., 2023).

Second, *compliant RSEM* refers to a firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to foster or facilitate its own compliance with relevant rules (e.g., legislation, regulation, contractual obligations, and/or quality standards; Kashyap & Murtha, 2017; see Table 2). Compliant RSEM thus cultivates stakeholders' responsible contributions to help the firm adhere to formal rules, minimizing issues including rework (e.g., by having to re-do non-compliant tasks) and preventable non-compliance costs (e.g., of legal proceedings associated with non-compliance; Lehman et al., 2020). For example, Google's former tagline *Don't Be Evil* nurtures its employees' adherence to the company's professional etiquette (Ghaffary & Kantrowitz, 2021), minimizing issues like internal fraud or harassment and helping the company comply with relevant regulation. Compliant RSEM thus suggests that promoting specific stakeholders' ethical behavior will advance the firm's compliance with relevant rules.

Third, *moral RSEM* reflects a firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to advance its own responsible contributions (e.g., to save the planet; Haenlein et al., 2022; see Table 2), reflecting its proactive, long-term aim to serve a higher purpose (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2012). For example, by harvesting wind and solar energy and by transitioning to low-impact refrigerants for cooling, Walmart reinforces sustainable values in its stakeholders' value systems, boosting their responsible contributions (e.g., by conserving resources, including by consistently keeping fridge doors closed), in turn allowing the firm to augment its own responsible contributions (e.g., by investing its attained cost savings in further social/environmental initiatives). While compliant RSEM reflects the firm's adoption of RSEM to help it adhere to relevant rules, moral RSEM represents the firm's proactive aim to shape its stakeholders' responsible contributions, allowing it to *also* expand its own responsible contributions.

Finally, while instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy are conceptually distinct, they may, to an extent, interrelate or overlap. For example, firms may engage in compliant RSEM to support their

Table 2
RSEM, its facets, and closely related concepts.

	Definition	Hallmarks	Examples	Close conceptual associations
Responsible Stakeholder Engagement Marketing (RSEM)	A firm's deliberate strategic effort to stimulate and empower its stakeholders to make responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment.	• RSEM stimulates the development of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment (vs. its own responsible contributions). • RSEM comprises three facets, including: (i) Instrumental RSEM, (ii) Compliant RSEM, and (iii) Moral RSEM.	Please refer below.	*Corporate social responsibility* (*CSR*): • The extent to which a firm strives to advance or protect specific social and/or environmental interests (Abbas, 2024; Anser et al., 2020). • CSR is a higher-order concept of which RSEM forms a theoretical part. While most prior CSR research centers on cultivating the firm's *own* responsible behavior, RSEM focuses on its stimulation and empowerment of *its stakeholders'* responsible contributions to the firm, others, and the environment.
RSEM facets				
Instrumental RSEM	A firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to further its own financial objectives and performance (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011; Windsor, 2006).	• Instrumental RSEM contributes to the firm's public appearance and perception as a good corporate citizen (e.g., by suitably responding to and addressing emerging socio-cultural tastes/needs or norms (e.g., for stakeholders' respectful, inclusive treatment of all others; Park et al., 2023), raising its stakeholders' willingness to continue doing business with the firm. • In turn, the firm's financial performance (e.g., profitability) is expected to improve (Chammas & Hernandez, 2019).	Retailers like H&M or Zara allow customers to deposit their used good for recycling, offering these respective firms raw materials at low cost and boosting their financial performance.	*Instrumental leadership*: • A task- or goal-oriented leadership style in which leaders expect things to get done, while also considering the firm's internal (e.g., strengths/weaknesses) and external factors (e.g., opportunities/threats; Etzioni, 1965; Rowold et al., 2017). • Though instrumental leadership focuses on managers' leadership style to meet their role-related objectives, instrumental RSEM centers on the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, to others, and/or the environment to advance the firm's financial performance.
Compliant RSEM	A firm's stimulation or empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to foster or facilitate its own compliance with relevant rules (e.g., legislation, regulation, or contractual obligations; Kashyap & Murtha, 2017).	• Compliant RSEM stimulates stakeholders' responsible contributions to help the firm adhere to, follow, or comply with relevant formal rules (e.g., regulation or legislation). • Compliant RSEM helps minimize issues like rework and unnecessary (non-compliance) costs (e.g., legal expenses). • While compliance reflects the firm's public adherence or obedience to relevant rules, it may privately disagree with these (Hollebeek et al., 2022).	L'Oréal's focus on fostering its employees' respectful, equitable, and inclusive treatment of others reduces lawsuits and dismissals (i.e., facilitates the firm's compliance, e.g., with hate speech laws), while also reducing staff turnover.	*Firm compliance*: • A firm's obedience of a specific rule (e.g., a law or regulation; Njinyah et al., 2023). • While prior firm compliance research has primarily focused on the firm's *own* adherence to specific rules, compliant RSEM focuses on the firm's stimulation and empowerment of *its stakeholders'* responsible contributions to the firm, to others, and to the environment to help it comply with relevant rules.
Moral RSEM	A firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to advance its own responsible contributions (Haenlein et al., 2022).	• Moral RSEM reflects the firm's aim to nurture its stakeholders' responsible contributions to help it achieve its aim of serving a higher purpose (e.g., protecting the planet). • While instrumental and compliant RSEM tend to be more reactive (e.g., by responding to emerging socio-cultural tastes/needs or norms [instrumental RSEM] or rules [compliant RSEM], respectively), moral RSEM reflects the firm's *proactive* desire to *do good* in the world (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2016).	Companies like Dell or Motorola stimulate their employees to donate to charities, and will match their donations (i.e., also boosting their own responsible behavior).	*Moral leadership*: • A firm's leadership style that is based on morality or doing what is considered moral, just, or right (Solinger et al., 2020). • Though moral leadership focuses on managers' moral, ethical leadership style, moral RSEM centers on the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, to others, and/or the environment to advance its own responsible contributions.

instrumental RSEM strategy (e.g., by encouraging their stakeholders to adhere to relevant rules to optimize the firm's public perception, lifting its financial performance).

3. Conceptual framework

We next develop a stakeholder theory-informed framework of RSEM, which differs from existing responsible marketing and CSR frameworks, as follows. Though stakeholder theory has been previously used to explore ethical marketing issues (e.g., Parmar et al., 2010), extant models, surprisingly, adopt little explicit focus on the firm's role in fostering its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment (Aksoy et al., 2021), as therefore advanced in this article. Put differently, if RSEM-implementing firms nurture their stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm and beyond, they are well-positioned to thrive. For example, The BodyShop has raised funds and developed awareness of issues, including domestic violence and HIV/AIDS since the 1990s (e.g., by supporting shelters for abused women and children or by educating at-risk communities on safe sex; Ryan, 2012). These activities cultivate its stakeholders' (more) responsible engagement, boosting their wellbeing along with the company's reputation (Bhattacharya, 2016).

By encouraging their stakeholders to act responsibly, RSEM-implementing firms nurture their stakeholders' pro-social, ethical contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment (Alvarez-Milán et al., 2018), *multiplying* the firm's responsible actions and illustrating RSEM's exponential value. Thus, while CEM advocates the firm's stimulation of its customers' contributions to the company, RSEM nurtures *any* firm stakeholder's responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, thus extending prior CEM, responsible marketing, and CSR research. Parallel to Harmeling et al.'s (2017) heralded role of customer engagement in CEM, we highlight the critical role of stakeholder engagement in RSEM (Gupta et al., 2020). We next introduce our stakeholder theory-informed RSEM antecedents (see Fig. 1).

3.1. RSEM antecedents

Using stakeholder theory, we identify internal and specific external stakeholders' need for the firm's social responsibility (hereafter, *need for firm responsibility*) as key RSEM antecedents (Cronin et al., 2011). *Need for firm responsibility* reflects specific stakeholders' socio-cultural desire or requirement for the firm to act responsibly (Timoshenko & Hauser, 2019; Choudhury, 1974). Particular stakeholders may request or demand the firm to act as a force *for good* (Bhattacharya, 2016). Firms that do not respond to this need may see stakeholders defect from, or inflict reputational damage on, the company, suggesting the pivotal strategic importance of recognizing and meeting these stakeholder needs.

3.1.1. Internal stakeholders' need for firm responsibility

Key internal stakeholders include managers, directors, and employees (Freeman, 1984; see Fig. 1: left side), whose need for firm responsibility can drive companies to stimulate their (other) stakeholders' responsible contributions. Internal stakeholders may desire the firm to implement RSEM by educating specific stakeholders to make more responsible contributions (e.g., by reducing their immoral conduct; Lin et al., 2018). For example, Apple staff united in the #AppleToo campaign to fight internal inequity, harassment, and discrimination, illustrating their desire for managers' more equitable, responsible contributions.

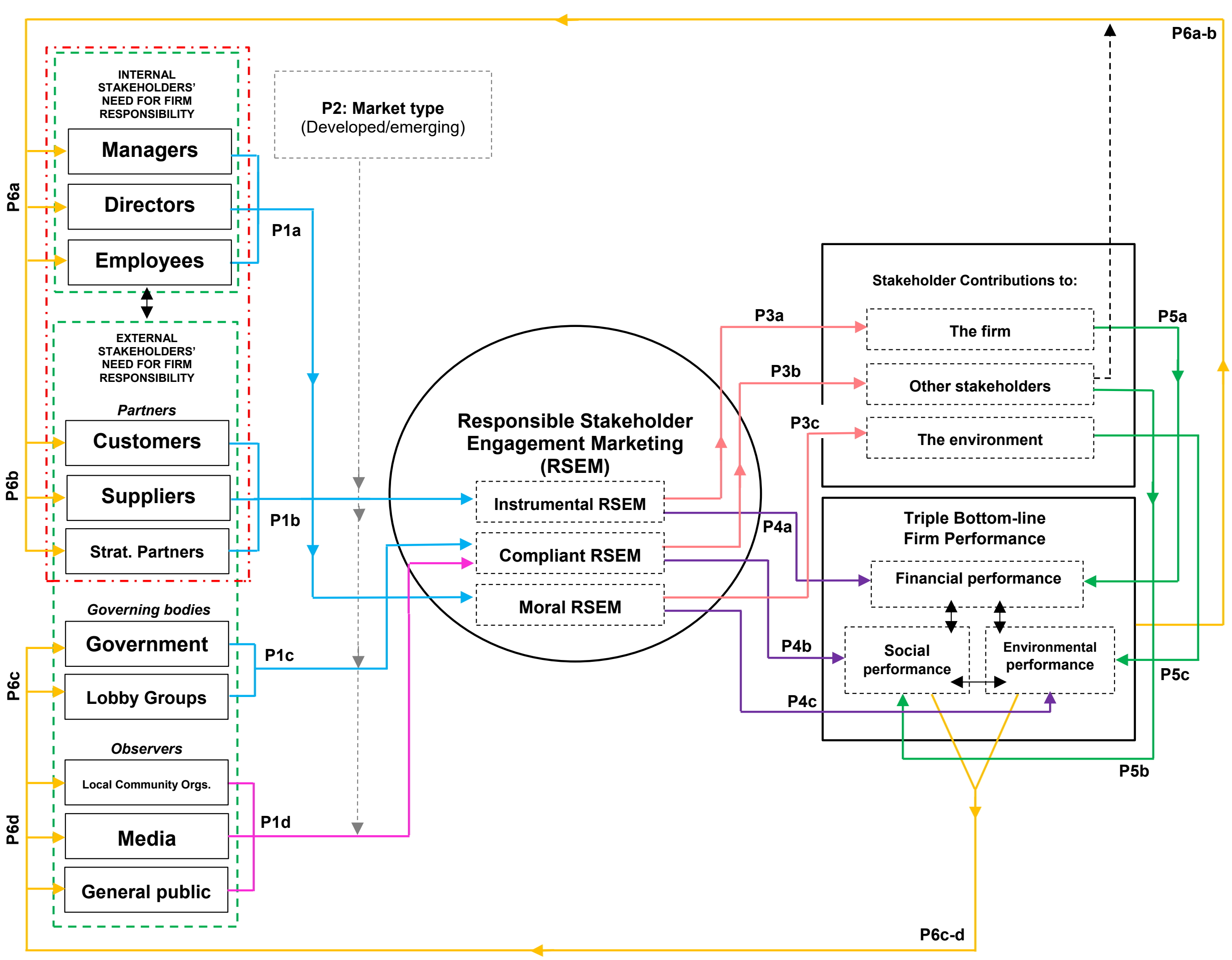

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework.

3.1.2. External stakeholders' need for firm responsibility

Fig. 1 also incorporates key external stakeholders that require firm responsibility, including customers, suppliers, strategic partners, the government, lobby groups, local community organizations, the media, and the public (Freeman, 1984). These external stakeholders are increasingly requesting the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions (Harmeling et al., 2018), warranting the inclusion of these stakeholders' need for firm responsibility as additional RSEM antecedents in the framework.

3.1.3. Classifying external stakeholders

As different external stakeholders tend to exhibit unique motives and behavior toward RSEM-implementing firms (Freeman et al., 2010), we classify them as follows. First, partners include the firm's customers, suppliers, and strategic partners (see Fig. 1). These stakeholders, who have direct ties to the firm's core business (e.g., its production or sales activity; Doyle, 2000), typically support the company's success, which is also in their own interest (e.g., 3M customers value the firm's high-quality, responsible offerings).

Second, *governing bodies* comprise the firm's (e.g., Federal or local) government, including its elected, administrative, and judiciary stakeholders and lobby groups (Freeman, 1984; see Fig. 1). Governmental stakeholders may impose requirements or restrictions on, or grant specific benefits or breaks to, the firm (e.g., through carbon credits or quotas; Bovaird, 2005). Moreover, *lobby groups* are (political) action or interest groups that attempt to influence politicians, bureaucrats, or legislators to act in their favor, commonly by lobbying their cause.

Third, the firm's *observers*, including (a) local community organizations, typically not-for-profit groups that offer service to local communities (e.g., sports clubs or church groups; Edwards et al., 2001), (b) the media, and (c) the general public (see Fig. 1), are also likely to request the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions (e.g., to create more liveable neighborhoods; Freeman et al., 2010). Overall, by monitoring its conduct, observers offer the firm important checks and balances.

3.2. Propositions: RSEM antecedents →RSEM

We next theorize regarding the effect of internal and specific external stakeholders' need for the firm's responsibility on its instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy, which we propose to differ across the identified stakeholders (see Fig. 1: light blue arrows). While some stakeholders' (e.g., the government's) need for the firm's responsibility is predicted to exert an isolated *primary* (i.e., strongest) effect on one of the firm's RSEM facets (i.e., compliant RSEM), that of others is expected to exert mixed effects on *several* RSEM facets, as discussed below.

3.2.1. ***Internal stakeholders' & partners' need for firm responsibility →instrumental & moral RSEM***

We expect internal stakeholders' and partners' need for firm responsibility to chiefly shape the firm's *instrumental* and *moral* RSEM strategy (see light blue lines [P1a-b] in Fig. 1).

First, *instrumental RSEM* denotes a firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to further its own financial objectives and performance (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011; Windsor, 2006). When the firm *does well* financially, its internal stakeholders are able to enjoy specific benefits or privileges (e.g., enhanced job security or bonuses) that they are less likely to have when the firm is struggling (Bhattacharya, 2016; Haefner et al., 2023). Given their vested interest in the firm (Liu, 2013), internal stakeholders' need for firm responsibility is thus likely to exert a key effect on its instrumental RSEM strategy, given *their* expected benefit from it doing well. Likewise, partners' (e.g., customers') need for firm responsibility is expected to shape its instrumental RSEM strategy to an important extent, because if the firm performs well financially, its partners – *like* internal stakeholders – are able to continue extracting value from it (e.g., by having access to its innovative products; Cooper, 2024).

We also predict internal stakeholders' and partners' need for firm responsibility to drive its *moral RSEM* strategy, or the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to advance its own responsible contributions (Haenlein et al., 2022), as the light blue lines in Fig. 1 also show. Based on stakeholder theory, these stakeholders not only desire mixing with perceived *responsible* firms (e.g., for its reputational benefit *to them*; Lii & Lee, 2012), but the firm's elevated performance that is expected to ensue from such a strategy (Miller et al., 2020) will also be conducive to them (e.g., for customers: through the firm's provision of high-quality, ethical product offerings; for suppliers: through larger orders of responsibly sourced raw materials; Chang et al., 2022). We postulate:

> **P1: (a)** *Internal stakeholders' and* **(b)** *Partners' need for firm responsibility chiefly impact the firm's instrumental and moral RSEM strategy.*

3.2.2. Governing bodies' need for firm responsibility →compliant RSEM

Governing bodies' need for the firm's responsibility centers on these stakeholders' requirement for the company to conform to relevant rules (e.g., laws; Weaver et al., 1999). Therefore, these stakeholders' need for firm responsibility will predominantly impact the firm's compliant (vs. its instrumental or moral) RSEM strategy, or its stimulation or empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to foster or facilitate its own compliance with relevant rules (Kashyap & Murtha, 2017; see the dark blue line [P1c] in Fig. 1). As making and upholding regulations is among the key responsibilities of governing bodies (Amis et al., 2020), these stakeholders are predicted to shape the firm's compliant RSEM to an important extent. For example, by requiring its staff to attend occupational health and safety training, companies like Microsoft safeguard their compliance in this regard. We propose:

> **P1c:** *Governing bodies' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy.*

3.2.3. Observers' need for firm responsibility →compliant RSEM

Observers' need for firm responsibility is based on these stakeholders' watchdog role of the firm's actions (Besiou et al., 2013), including the extent to which it nurtures its stakeholders' responsible contributions. We expect observers' need for firm responsibility to primarily drive the firm's compliant RSEM strategy, or its stimulation or empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to foster or facilitate its own compliance with relevant rules (Kashyap & Murtha, 2017; see the pink lines [P1d] in Fig. 1). For example, by scrutinizing the firm's actions or by (publicly) commenting on these, observers can influence the firm's reputation (Ioannou et al., 2023), potentially motivating it to adopt compliant RSEM. It is, however, critical that the firm's compliance is viewed as genuine, as perceived blue- or green-washing is likely to backfire (e.g., by tainting its reputation). We postulate:

> **P1d:** *Observers' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy.*

3.3. Key contingency factor: Market type

We next introduce market type as a key contingency factor that we predict will impact the association of internal and external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility and the firm's RSEM strategy, as shown by the downward-facing, dashed grey arrow in Fig. 1.

Widespread recognition exists of the differences in strategic firm decision-making across developed (vs. emerging) markets (Kumar et al., 2013). For example, while firms headquartered in developed markets (e.g., the U.S. or Western Europe) tend to select their strategic partners for local resource and market (knowledge) access purposes, those from emerging markets (e.g., India) are more likely to choose their partners for their financial assets and technical capabilities (Hitt et al., 2000). Therefore, the association of stakeholders' need for firm responsibility and RSEM is expected to differ across developed (vs. emerging) markets (Burgess & Steenkamp, 2013).

In developed markets, internal and external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility will tend to be more strongly driven by moral grounds, as individuals in these markets are more likely to have evolved to the principled sense of needing to look after particular (e.g., vulnerable) others and the environment (Baskentli et al., 2019). However, in emerging (e.g., bottom-of-the-pyramid) markets, internal stakeholders, particularly at small or micro-enterprises that make up a significant portion of local and national economies (Ferdous et al., 2024), tend to lack the financial means to produce responsible offerings that exceed minimum cost (Azmat et al., 2021). Therefore, to the extent that internal stakeholders in these markets are able to adopt RSEM, it will be chiefly driven by instrumental (i.e., to raise the firm's financial returns) or compliant motives (e.g., to minimize litigation or penalties).

We likewise expect external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility in emerging markets to primarily shape the firm's instrumental and/or compliant RSEM strategy. For example, as customers are becoming more demanding (e.g., through the rise of the middle class in many emerging markets; Anantharaman, 2017), suppliers are increasingly seeking to do business with perceived ethical (vs. unethical) firms, reflecting their functional or instrumental motive and chiefly impacting the firm's instrumental or compliant RSEM strategy. We posit:

P2: *In developed (emerging) markets, internal and external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility will be more morally (functionally) driven, exerting a primary effect on the firm's moral (instrumental or compliant) RSEM strategy.*

3.4. RSEM consequences

We next introduce RSEM's predicted impact on its key consequences of (a) stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, and (b) the firm's triple bottom-line performance (Chabowski & Mena, 2011). Specifically, we posit that a firm's instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy exert differential *primary* (i.e., strongest) effects on these respective consequences (see the red and purple arrows in Fig. 1), as detailed below.

4. RSEM's impact on stakeholders' responsible contributions

Extending Harmeling et al.'s (2017) CEM, we posit that RSEM advances stakeholders' responsible contribution to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, as discussed further below.

Instrumental RSEM's primary effect on stakeholders' contributions to the firm. We posit that a firm's *instrumental* RSEM strategy, or its stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to further its own financial objectives and performance (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011; Windsor, 2006), will predominantly affect its stakeholders' contributions *to the firm* (vs. to other stakeholders or to the environment; see the top red arrow in Fig. 1). Specifically, because instrumental RSEM seeks to boost the company's own returns, it will chiefly drive stakeholders' contributions *to the firm*. For example, Unilever's instrumental RSEM strategy comprises employee training to more efficiently use the firm's resources and minimize waste (Bhattacharya, 2016), generating cost savings and boosting the firm's financial performance. We posit:

P3a: The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the firm.

Compliant RSEM's primary effect on stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders. We predict that compliant RSEM, the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to foster or facilitate its own compliance with relevant rules (Kashyap & Murtha, 2017), primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions *to other stakeholders* (see Fig. 1: middle red arrow). When the firm motivates its stakeholders to comply with specific rules, it is expected to make a primary social contribution. For example, by motivating its employees to adhere to relevant (e.g., workplace safety or product quality) guidelines, Mercedes-Benz primarily fosters its employees' responsible contributions *to others* (i.e., their colleagues/customers), *rather than* to the firm or the environment. We theorize:

P3b: The firm's compliant RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders.

Moral RSEM's primary effect on stakeholders' contributions to the environment. We envisage that moral RSEM, the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to advance its own responsible contributions (Haenlein et al., 2022), principally drives its stakeholders' contributions *to the environment* (see Fig. 1: bottom red arrow). Given moral RSEM's long-term aim to *serve a higher purpose* (Trumpp et al., 2015; see Table 2), it aspires to achieve a sustainable beneficial impact through its responsible actions that extend beyond individual stakeholders (e.g., by preserving the planet for future generations; Salnikova et al., 2022). As such, moral RSEM is predicted to primarily stimulate stakeholders' responsible contributions *to the environment* (vs. to the firm or to others). For example, LEGO concluded its 50-year partnership with Shell owing to their plans to drill in the Arctic (Durbin, 2022), setting an environmental protection example for its stakeholders (e.g., by encouraging them to only do business with responsible firms like LEGO, in turn likely boosting its own responsible contributions). We postulate:

P3c: The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the environment.

4.1. RSEM's effect on triple bottom-line firm performance

We envisage that a firm's instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy exert differential primary effects on its triple bottom-line (i.e., financial, social, and environmental) performance (Mish & Scammon, 2010; see Fig. 1: purple arrows). Therefore, though RSEM's components *may* also affect other firm performance aspects, we predict their *primary* (i.e., strongest) effect will transpire, as suggested below.

4.1.1. Instrumental RSEM's primary effect on the firm's financial performance

Financial performance refers to a company's earnings, profit, and net income (Altman & Berman, 2011), exposing its monetary focus. To boost their bottom-line performance, firms may increase their revenue and/or cut their costs, which some companies may implement in an unethical manner.

Instrumental RSEM cultivates stakeholders' responsible contributions to the company, other stakeholders, and the environment to boost the firm's financial objectives and performance (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011). We expect that instrumental RSEM will chiefly impact the firm's *financial* (vs. its social or environmental) performance, given its explicit aim to do so (Chammas & Hernandez, 2019). For example, by teaching their staff, strategic partners, or customers to conserve firm resources and reduce their carbon footprint, firms like Safeway boost their financial performance *through* their responsible behavior (Miller et al., 2020). Therefore, while RSEM incurs an upfront (e.g., higher training or raw materials) cost, its returns – when suitably implemented – are expected to exceed that cost over time. We propose (see Fig. 1: top purple arrow):

P4a: The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily boosts its financial performance.

4.1.2. Compliant RSEM's primary effect on the firm's social performance

By doing good by their stakeholders, companies enhance their social performance, or the results of a firm's "principles of social responsibility, processes of social responsiveness, and policies [and] programs…[that] relate to [its] societal relationships" (Wood, 1991, p. 693). We argue that a company's social performance is primarily driven by its compliant RSEM strategy, or its stimulation or empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to foster or facilitate its own compliance with relevant rules (Kashyap & Murtha, 2017).

Compliant RSEM sees the firm adopt social compliance structures and audits that protect and monitor the safety, health, and rights of its stakeholders (e.g., by obeying relevant [e.g., labor] laws), while also fostering their intrinsic motivation to comply with formal rules. For example, by adhering to relevant regulations, stakeholders will receive positive feedback, raising the likelihood of their future compliance. Compliant RSEM thus promotes a responsible compliance culture both in- and outside the company (e.g., in the community), in turn chiefly impacting the firm's *social* performance (see Fig. 1: middle purple arrow).

While moral RSEM may *also* boost the firm's social performance, it takes the broadest ethical perspective (vs. instrumental or compliant RSEM; see Table 2), rendering its *particular* relevance to far-reaching environmental or planetary issues (see P4c). P4b thus asserts compliant RSEM's primary effect on the firm's *social* performance. Moreover, though compliant RSEM may *also* affect the firm's environmental performance (e.g., through reduced greenhouse gas emissions), these environmental effects would only be realized *after* or *through* the alignment achieved by stakeholders' collective compliance (e.g., by collaborating to reduce their carbon footprint; Kassinis & Vafeas, 2006), revealing compliant RSEM's principal effect on the firm's social (vs. environmental) performance. We posit:

P4b: *The* **firm's** *compliant RSEM strategy primarily boosts its social performance.*

4.1.3. Moral RSEM's primary effect on the firm's environmental performance

We predict a firm's moral RSEM, or its stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to advance its own responsible contributions (Haenlein et al., 2022), to predominantly impact its environmental performance, or "the results of a [company's] management of its environmental aspects" (Trumpp et al., 2015, p. 200). Moral RSEM-implementing firms aim to make lasting, virtuous contributions that extend beyond individual stakeholders (e.g., by preserving the planet), thus primarily benefiting the environment (see Fig. 1: bottom purple arrow). While moral RSEM may also impact the firm's social performance (e.g., by boosting social cohesion), this beneficial effect would only transpire after or through its effect on the firm's environmental performance, revealing the latter's primary effect. We theorize:

P4c: *The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily boosts its environmental performance.*

4.2. Effect of stakeholders' responsible contributions on triple bottom-line firm performance

We next suggest that stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment exert differential primary effects on the firm's triple bottom-line (i.e., financial, social, and environmental) performance (Chabowski & Mena, 2011; see Fig. 1: green arrows). Thus, while stakeholders' responsible contributions *may* also affect other elements of the firm's performance, we predict their *primary* (i.e., strongest) effects to be as discussed below.

4.2.1. Primary effect of stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm on its financial performance

When stakeholders make responsible contributions to an RSEM-adopting firm, these are expected to chiefly enhance its financial performance (see Fig. 1: green arrow labeled P5a). For example, Zara customers, who return their used garments for recycling, provide the firm with raw materials for its future production at low cost (Vadakkepatt et al., 2021), generating potential savings and boosting its financial performance. We thus anticipate stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm to chiefly impact its bottom-line (financial) performance (e.g., by unlocking efficiencies or cost savings). We posit:

P5a: *Stakeholders' contributions to the firm primarily boost the firm's financial performance.*

4.2.2. Primary effect of stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders on the firm's social performance

We expect stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders to predominantly affect RSEM-implementing firms' social performance (see Fig. 1: green arrow marked P5b). For example, to stimulate their stakeholders' social contributions, companies like Dr Bronner's fund their staff and strategic partners to give back (e.g., by creating fair-trade projects or by matching their employees' donations to good causes; Durbin, 2022), lifting their social performance (Chiu & Sharfman, 2011).

However, as these stakeholder contributions explicitly seek to benefit focal *others* (Mish & Scammon, 2010), their primary focus lies in this area (vs. stimulating *the firm's* performance). Consequently, the impact of these stakeholder contributions on the firm *can be* relatively minor. Notwithstanding this observation, to the extent that these stakeholder contributions affect the firm's performance, we expect them to principally shape its *social* performance (e.g., by boosting its reputation; Miller et al., 2020). We postulate:

P5b: *Stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders primarily boost the firm's social performance.*

4.2.3. Primary effect of stakeholders' contributions to the environment on the firm's environmental performance

We argue that stakeholders' environmental contributions chiefly affect the firm's environmental performance (Trumpp et al., 2015; see Fig. 1: green arrow labeled P5c), given the shared environmental focus of these concepts. For example, by encouraging their employees, customers, or suppliers to substitute their disposable items with reusable ones, retailers like JCPenney boost their stakeholders' environmental performance. However, these stakeholder contributions center on benefiting the environment (vs. the firm; Chabowski & Mena, 2011), yielding their potentially minor effect on firm performance. However, to the extent that these stakeholder contributions impact corporate performance, we predict they will principally shape the firm's environmental (vs. its financial or social) performance (e.g., by reducing its carbon footprint; Chiu & Sharfman, 2011). We theorize:

P5c: *Stakeholders' contributions to the environment primarily boost the firm's environmental performance.*

4.3. Effect of triple bottom-line firm performance on firm stakeholders

A firm's RSEM strategy aims to *do good* for its stakeholders, revealing its iterative, systemic nature. Correspondingly, the backward-looping yellow arrows (Fig. 1) suggest that an RSEM-implementing firm's triple bottom-line performance will differentially affect its stakeholders and their respective need for firm responsibility (Freeman et al., 2010), as detailed below.

4.3.1. Effect of the firm's financial, social, and environmental performance on its internal stakeholders and partners

We expect internal stakeholders to potentially benefit from their RSEM-implementing firm's financial, social, and/or environmental performance (Tate & Bals, 2018). For example, employees may receive bonuses (i.e., a benefit accruing from the firm's financial performance) and equitable treatment from their RSEM-adopting firm (i.e., a benefit from its social performance), while also reaping rewards from its reduced pollution levels (i.e., a benefit from its environmental performance; Mish & Scammon, 2010). These benefits may in turn influence these stakeholders' need for firm responsibility (e.g., by raising their standard of acceptable behavior; see Fig. 1).

Likewise, partners can *also* benefit from their RSEM-implementing firm's financial, social, and/or environmental performance (Chabowski & Mena, 2011; Tate & Bals, 2018). For example, Patagonia may use its elevated financial performance to fund its R&D program, enabling it to produce more innovative or higher-quality responsible products (Peterson & Jeong, 2010), in turn benefiting its stakeholders (e.g., its suppliers, customers, and retailers). We theorize:

P6a/b: (a) *Internal stakeholders and* **(b)** *partners may benefit from the firm's financial, social, and/or environmental performance.*

4.3.2. Effect of the firm's social and environmental performance on its governing bodies and observers

The firm's governing bodies and observers are bystanders to its operations (Freeman et al., 2010), revealing these stakeholders' more indirect link to it. We thus expect that these stakeholders will predominantly benefit from the firm's broader social and/or environmental (vs. its financial) performance (Tate & Bals, 2018). For example, local community organizations (i.e., part of the external stakeholder sub-group of observers) benefit from Walmart's social sponsorship of local sports or arts events (Walmart, 2024), raising its social performance. We also expect the firm's environmental performance to exert a primary effect on its observers (Trumpp et al., 2015), given their ability to directly benefit from its contributions in this regard (e.g., by having cleaner living spaces; Darnall et al., 2010).

We also posit that the firm's social and/or environmental (vs. its financial) performance will exert a primary impact on its governing bodies (Mish & Scammon, 2010), given their broad public focus (Freeman et al., 2010). For example, firms that exceed their minimum social requirements (e.g., by *going the extra mile* to look after their employees) not only benefit these specific stakeholders but also others (e.g., the customers who interact with these staff members), illustrating the key impact of the firm's social performance on its governing bodies (e.g., by them forming a favorable assessment of it).

Finally, the firm's environmental performance is also envisaged to have a primary effect on its governing bodies (Hillebrand et al., 2015; see Fig. 1). For example, by gifting a pair of shoes to children in need for each pair sold, the elevated social performance of TOMS sets an example to its governing bodies, in turn influencing them (e.g., by influencing their social agenda-setting). However, these stakeholders' benefit derived from the firm's financial performance remains indirect (vs. direct), given their respective *onlooker* role vis-à-vis (vs. active involvement with) the company. We propose:

P6c/d: (c) *Governing bodies and* **(d)** *observers will primarily benefit from the firm's social and/or environmental performance.*

5. Implications and limitations

5.1. Theoretical implications

We extended Harmeling et al.'s (2017) CEM to RSEM, yielding the following theoretical implications. First, by broadening CEM's *customer* scope to a stakeholder theory-informed *omni*-stakeholder ambit, we recognize the importance of nurturing not only customers' responsible contributions to the firm, but also of stimulating *other* stakeholders' ethical contributions to the company, other stakeholders, and the environment (Harrison & Wicks, 2021), thus offering a much-needed, more holistic responsible engagement marketing perspective. RSEM reflects that theoretical sub-set of the firm's CSR strategy that centers on its cultivation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment.

The proposed shift from the firm's CEM to an RSEM strategy is paramount, as it highlights the expected positive impact of *any* stakeholder's responsible contributions. For example, by training its employees to act ethically, 3M encourages its staff to *do well by doing good* (Bhattacharya, 2016), in turn fostering the firm's improved stakeholder relationships. Our observations raise key issues for further theory development, including:

- Which tactics or approaches optimize RSEM-implementing firms' stimulation and empowerment of their stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment?
- As different stakeholders' (un)ethical engagement may rub off on one another, to what extent is stakeholders' engagement only as responsible as that of the company they keep?
- Under clashing stakeholder interests, how do RSEM-implementing firms balance their different stakeholders' needs in good faith?

Second, we explored RSEM in its broader stakeholder theory-informed nomological network (P1-P6.) We first identified a differential effect of internal (vs. specific external) stakeholders' need for firm responsibility on the firm's RSEM strategy (P1a-d), followed by the role of market type (i.e., developed/emerging) in affecting the association of the identified RSEM antecedents and the firm's RSEM strategy (P2). We next discussed the differential effects of the firm's instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy on stakeholders' contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment (P3a-c) and on its triple bottom-line performance (P4a-c). We also envisaged stakeholders' responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment to differentially impact the firm's financial, social, and environmental performance (P5a-c). Finally, we recognized the key influence of RSEM-implementing firms' triple bottom-line performance on their internal and specific external stakeholders (P6a-d), exposing RSEM's iterative nature. Overall, by mapping RSEM in its nomological network, our analyses foster enhanced acumen of its theoretical associations, warranting its *raison d'être* (MacInnis, 2011). Our analyses open up vital areas for further inquiry, including:

- How does an RSEM-implementing firm's consideration of *particular* stakeholders' need for firm responsibility affect (a) these stakeholders' contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, and (b) the firm's triple bottom-line performance?
- How can RSEM-adopting firms ethically minimize any backlash to (or unintended consequences of) their RSEM activities?
- How does a firm's relative focus on its instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy impact its triple bottom-line performance?

Further sample questions, organized by the propositions, are presented in Table 3. For example, P1a-b assess the predicted chief effects of internal stakeholders' and partners' need for firm responsibility on the firm's instrumental and moral RSEM strategy, raising pertinent issues for further theory development. For example, how should RSEM-

Table 3
Sample research questions.

Proposition	Sample Research Questions
P1: (a) Internal stakeholders' and **(b)** Partners' need for firm responsibility chiefly impact the firm's instrumental and moral RSEM strategy.	• To what extent do a firm's specific internal stakeholders (partners) drive its instrumental and moral RSEM strategy, respectively? • What is the relative contribution of a firm's specific internal stakeholders (partners) on its instrumental and moral (vs. compliant) RSEM strategy? • How do RSEM-implementing firms best cater to their internal stakeholders' (partners') need for its responsible conduct?
P1c: Governing bodies' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy.	• To what degree do a firm's governing bodies impact its compliant (vs. instrumental or moral) RSEM strategy? • How might a firm's governing bodies' potentially diverging interests drive its compliant RSEM strategy? • What is the relative contribution of the government (vs. lobby groups) surrounding the firm in the development of its compliant RSEM strategy?
P1d: Observers' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy.	• To what extent do a firm's observers impact its compliant (vs. instrumental or moral) RSEM strategy? • How might a firm's different observers drive its compliant RSEM strategy?
P2: In developed (emerging) markets, internal and external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility will be more morally (functionally) driven, exerting a primary effect on the firm's moral (instrumental or compliant) RSEM strategy.	• What is the relative importance of instrumental (vs. compliant) RSEM strategy for firms that operate in emerging markets? • What can RSEM-adopting firms in emerging markets do to catch up to those in developed markets? • (How) might the proposed associations change, as specific emerging markets continue to develop? • To what extent will an RSEM-adopting firm's triple bottom-line performance differ across its developed (vs. emerging) markets? • Will firms in developed (vs. emerging) markets benefit more from adopting RSEM strategy?
P3a: The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the firm.	• To what extent does instrumental RSEM impact stakeholders' contribution to the firm (vs. to others or the environment)? • How should firms design their instrumental RSEM strategy to optimize its specific stakeholders' contributions to the firm?
P3b: The firm's compliant RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders.	• To what degree and how does a firm's compliant RSEM strategy affect stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders (vs. to the firm or to the environment)? • Under what conditions may compliant RSEM strategy facilitate (vs. impede) stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders?
P3c: The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the environment.	• To what extent and how does a firm's moral RSEM strategy impact its stakeholders' contributions to the environment? • Which factors strengthen the impact of a firm's moral RSEM strategy on its stakeholders' contributions to the environment?
P4a: The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily boosts its financial performance.	• To what extent does a firm's instrumental RSEM strategy affect its financial performance? • How does different stakeholders' integrity affect the firm's instrumental RSEM strategy and financial performance? • How do RSEM-adopting firms ensure the attainment of consistently elevated levels of stakeholder-perceived justice and financial performance?
P4b: The firm's compliant RSEM strategy primarily boosts its social performance.	• To what degree does a firm's compliant RSEM strategy impact its social performance? • What benchmark(s) should RSEM-implementing firms use to gauge the impact of their compliant RSEM strategy on their social performance? • To what extent should a firm's financial performance be used to fund its social initiatives?
P4c: The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily boosts its environmental performance.	• To what extent does a firm's moral RSEM strategy affect its environmental performance? • How should a firm's moral RSEM strategy be designed to optimize its environmental performance?
P5a: Stakeholders' contributions to the firm primarily boost the firm's financial performance.	• What is the correlation between stakeholders' contribution to the firm and the firm's (changed/improved) financial performance? • What can firms do to optimize stakeholders' contributions to it?
P5b: Stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders primarily boost the firm's social performance.	• How do stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders impact the firm's social performance? • What factors are conducive to stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders, and how do these affect the firm's social performance?
P5c: Stakeholders' contributions to the environment primarily boost the firm's environmental performance.	• How do stakeholders' contributions to the environment affect the firm's environmental performance? • What factors strengthen stakeholders' contributions to the environment, and what is their subsequent effect on the firm's environmental performance?
P6a/b: (a) Internal stakeholders and **(b)** partners may benefit from the firm's financial-, social-, and/or environmental performance.	• To what extent will the firm's internal stakeholders (partners) benefit from its financial, social, and environmental performance? • Under what conditions, if any, may the firm's financial, social, and environmental performance affect its internal stakeholders' (partners') wellbeing, whether positively or negatively?
P6c/d: (c) Governing bodies and **(d)** observers will primarily benefit from the firm's social- and/or environmental performance.	• To what extent will the firm's governing bodies and observers benefit from its social and environmental performance, respectively? • How will the firm's governing bodies and observers benefit from its social and environmental performance? • (How) does the firm's triple bottom-line performance affect its governing bodies' and observers' (future) need for firm responsibility?

implementing firms responsibly cater to their different internal stakeholders' or partners' need for firm responsibility? How are any tensions in this regard best managed to meet the firm's triple bottom-line or ESG objectives? Moreover, P3a-c address the primary effects of the firm's instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy on its stakeholders' contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, respectively. These propositions also raise important theoretical implications, including: What is the relative importance of the proposed effects? How do firms optimize the proposed primary effects? Furthermore, P4a-c outline the predicted primary impact of the firm's instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy on its financial, social, and environmental performance, respectively, also yielding interesting implications for further theory development. For example, how do firms concurrently improve or optimize the effects of their instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM strategy on their triple bottom-line performance? What (if any) trade-offs might be required in this regard?

5.2. Managerial implications

This research also raises pertinent managerial implications, as discussed further below (please also refer Table 4). First, P1 reads: "**(a)** *Internal stakeholders' and* **(b)** *Partners' need for firm responsibility chiefly impact the firm's instrumental and moral RSEM strategy*." To satisfy

Table 4
Managerial implications.

Proposition	Managerial Implications
P1: (a) Internal stakeholders' and **(b)** Partners' need for firm responsibility chiefly impact the firm's instrumental and moral RSEM strategy.	• We recommend firms to design their instrumental and moral RSEM strategy in line with the needs, interests, and expectations of its internal stakeholders and partners. • We also suggest RSEM-implementing firms to conduct (e.g., due diligence) training with their internal stakeholders and partners (e.g., by discussing how to balance their need for the firm's responsible behavior with the firm's available resources).
P1c: Governing bodies' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy.	• We advise RSEM-adopting firms to comply with governing bodies' requirements or demands (e.g., elected representatives, administrators, and/or the judiciary), as needed. • We also recommend these firms to implement ethical leadership to foster a firm-wide commitment to RSEM.
P1d: Observers' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy.	• We suggest RSEM-implementing firms to understand and respond to its observers' need for firm responsibility (e.g., through public impression management, public relations, the absence of scandals, etc.).
P2: In developed (emerging) markets, internal and external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility will be more morally (functionally) driven, exerting a primary effect on the firm's moral (instrumental or compliant) RSEM strategy.	• We recommend multinational RSEM-implementing firms to regularly review their home (vs. host) market activity, with a focus on first cultivating their RSEM in developed markets, followed by its development in their emerging markets. • The firm's learning in its developed markets can then be applied to (or adjusted in) specific emerging markets (e.g., through regular market research that assesses specific stakeholders' RSEM readiness and key motivations).
P3a: The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the firm.	• We advise managers to design their instrumental RSEM strategy to optimize stakeholders' contribution to the firm (e.g., by offering them incentives or rewards for their contributions).
P3b: The firm's compliant RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders.	• We recommend practitioners to design their compliant RSEM strategy to raise stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders (e.g., by nurturing or recompensing their altruistic behavior).
P3c: The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the environment.	• We suggest firms to design their moral RSEM strategy to optimize their stakeholders' contributions to the environment (e.g., by offering them opportunities to clean the environment or to reduce their pollution).
P4a: The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily boosts its financial performance.	• We advise practitioners to design the firm's instrumental RSEM strategy to raise its (e.g., longer-term) financial performance (e.g., by growing sales), after recovering its set-up cost. These financial gains can then be used to fund the firm's compliant and/or moral RSEM strategy.
P4b: The firm's compliant RSEM strategy primarily boosts its social performance.	• We recommend managers to design the firm's compliant RSEM strategy to boost its social performance (e.g., by educating stakeholders how to best adhere to relevant rules/institutions and how to benefit other stakeholders in this process).
P4c: The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily boosts its environmental performance.	• We suggest managers to design the firm's moral RSEM strategy to lift its environmental performance (e.g., by instilling morality and integrity into their value systems), followed by its careful implementation and monitoring (e.g., through regular market research).
P5a: Stakeholders' contributions to the firm primarily boost the firm's financial performance.	• To boost the firm's financial performance, we suggest managers to nurture stakeholders' (e.g., monetary, cognitive, or behavioral) contributions to the firm (e.g., by charging them premium prices, cultivating their waste-reducing or recycling behavior).
P5b: Stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders primarily boost the firm's social performance.	• To lift the firm's social performance, we recommend managers to nurture stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders (e.g., through social or communal initiatives or events).
P5c: Stakeholders' contributions to the environment primarily boost the firm's environmental performance.	• To boost the firm's environmental performance, we recommend managers to cultivate stakeholders' contributions to the environment (e.g., by encouraging them to donate to, or volunteer for, environmental causes or charities).
P6a/b: (a) Internal stakeholders and **(b)** partners may benefit from the firm's financial-, social-, and/or environmental performance.	• By benefiting their internal stakeholders and partners, RSEM-implementing firms' elevated financial, social, and/or environmental performance is expected to see higher rates of stakeholder (e.g., staff) retention, reducing their (e.g., staffing) cost. We thus recommend RSEM-implementing firms to offer financial, social, *and* environmental benefits to their internal stakeholders and partners, where possible.
P6c/d: (c) Governing bodies and **(d)** observers will primarily benefit from the firm's social- and/or environmental performance.	• By providing genuine social/environmental benefit to their governing bodies and observers, we anticipate RSEM-implementing firms to raise their public profile in the eyes of these stakeholders, boosting their trust in the firm and lifting its reputation. • We recommend RSEM-adopting firms to build trust with their governing bodies/observers, and to transparently communicate their responsible actions to these stakeholders (e.g., with a view to minimizing sanctions, receiving favorable press coverage).

internal stakeholders' need for firm responsibility, we recommend RSEM-implementing firms to empower them to make responsible contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, while minimizing their undesirable behavior (Sheng et al., 2018). For example, Amazon's code of conduct outlines basic principles for staff comportment (e.g., regarding legal compliance, non-discrimination, and non-bribery; Amazon, 2023), guiding their responsible contributions. Moreover, internal stakeholders' and partners' education is pivotal to reinforcing RSEM in their value systems (Hollebeek et al., 2023).

P1c states: "*Governing bodies' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy*," while P1d postulates: "*Observers' need for firm responsibility primarily drives the firm's compliant RSEM strategy*." We advise firms to offer and transparently communicate responsible initiatives in line with their governing bodies' and observers' need for firm responsibility, building their trust. For example, Levi's offer convenient product repair services that encourage buyers to have their damaged products mended for reuse, which may see some customers delay their purchase of a new pair of jeans. The company thus forgoes optimizing its short-term financial performance to benefit its customers and the environment, thereby also forging its buyers' more responsible contributions and signaling its compliance and trustworthiness to its governing bodies and observers (e.g., by exceeding its legal environmental or social requirements; Lii & Lee, 2012).

P2 identifies the market type (i.e., developed/emerging) as a key contingency factor that we expect to affect the association of RSEM's antecedents and the firm's RSEM strategy. It states: "*In developed (emerging) markets, internal and external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility will be more morally (functionally) driven, exerting a primary effect on the firm's moral (instrumental or compliant) RSEM strategy*." This proposition suggests that while developed markets may see stakeholders' greater moral RSEM readiness, emerging markets lag behind in this respect to date. However, the latter are catching up (e.g., social and environmental reporting requirements are high in emerging markets like India and Malaysia). To test specific stakeholders' evolving moral RSEM readiness and motivations, we recommend undertaking regular market research.

Addressing RSEM's consequences, P3a states: "*The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the firm*," while P3b posits: "*The firm's compliant RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders*." Relatedly, P3c theorizes: "*The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily drives its stakeholders' contributions to the environment*" (see Fig. 1). By proposing that RSEM's components exert differing effects on stakeholders' contributions to the firm, other stakeholders, and the environment, these propositions suggest that managers should consider *which* of these stakeholder contributions are most critical to the firm (i.e., *which* they wish to strategically prioritize).

P4a reads: "*The firm's instrumental RSEM strategy primarily boosts its financial performance*," while P4b notes: "*The firm's compliant RSEM strategy primarily boosts its social performance*." P4c states: "*The firm's moral RSEM strategy primarily boosts its environmental performance*." Acknowledging RSEM's objective of considering and balancing the social and environmental impact of the firm's stimulation and empowerment of its stakeholders' responsible contributions against considerations of financial gain (Bhattacharya, 2016), these propositions suggest that RSEM's components differentially impact firm performance. We thus advise managers to design their RSEM strategy based on the firm's *primary* objective(s). For example, revenue-constrained firms may focus on their *instrumental* RSEM strategy, offering the most direct path to financial performance. We advise managers to systematically leverage the firm's core resources, capabilities, and processes to optimize RSEM's financial returns (Doyle, 2000), which can then be used to fund its social or environmental initiatives (see Fig. 1: bidirectional black arrows connecting the firm's financial, social, and environmental performance).

P5a-c address the interrelated nature of the identified RSEM consequences. P5a states: "*Stakeholders' contributions to the firm primarily boost the firm's financial performance*," while P5b posits: "*Stakeholders' contributions to other stakeholders primarily boost the firm's social performance*." P5c reads: "*Stakeholders' contributions to the environment primarily boost the firm's environmental performance*" (see Fig. 1). Managers are advised to determine *which* of the firm's triple bottom-line performance metrics is critical, and design its RSEM strategy accordingly. For example, instrumental RSEM-emphasizing firms may chiefly stimulate stakeholder contributions *to the firm* (P3a; e.g., by soliciting customers' NPD assistance), in turn mainly advancing their financial performance (P5a). However, companies emphasizing moral RSEM are particularly well-positioned to nurture their stakeholders' environmental contributions (P3c), in turn chiefly impacting the firm's environmental performance (P5c).

P6a-b state: "**(a)** *Internal stakeholders and* **(b)** *partners may benefit from the firm's financial, social, and/or environmental performance*," revealing a broad range of potential RSEM benefits accruing to these stakeholders. For example, they may benefit from the firm's (a) *financial performance* (e.g., strategic partners: by collaborating with the firm on joint R&D projects), (b) *social performance* (e.g., by receiving equitable, inclusive treatment from the firm; Laczniak & Shultz, 2021), and (c) *environmental performance* (e.g., by having more clean air to breathe owing to the firm's responsible production; Hussain et al., 2018). However, P6c-d state: "**(c)** *Governing bodies and* **(d)** *observers will primarily benefit from the firm's social and/or environmental performance*" (see Fig. 1). We thus advise managers to design the firm's social and environmental initiatives to meet its governing bodies' and observers' need for firm responsibility (e.g., by exceeding minimum governmental requirements), raising their trust in and relationship with the firm and, in turn, boosting its performance.

6. Limitations and future research

Despite its contribution, this study also incurs limitations, from which we derive additional research avenues. First, the propositions require empirical testing, raising additional research questions, including:

- How should instrumental, compliant, and moral RSEM be measured, and to what extent do the proposed *primary* effects (as suggested in the propositions) hold?
- Do stakeholders that possess more clout (e.g., managers) more strongly drive the firm's RSEM strategy, and how are their needs best counterbalanced with those of other stakeholders?
- What is the relative importance of different stakeholders' need for firm responsibility, and how might these (co–)influence the firm's RSEM strategy?
- To what extent may cross-stakeholder differences be observed *within* the proposed stakeholder (sub)groups (e.g., internal stakeholders or partners), and how might these (e.g., differentially) impact the firm's RSEM strategy?
- Which additional contingency or moderating factors (e.g., firm type [e.g., B2C vs. B2B], firm size, stakeholders' cultural background, generational cohort, or their proclivity to display socially responsible behavior; e.g., Darnall et al., 2010) may influence the association of specific internal or external stakeholders' need for firm responsibility and the firm's RSEM strategy?
- How does the firm's RSEM strategy shape stakeholders' quality-of-life (Hollebeek & Belk, 2021)?

Second, though we deployed stakeholder theory, other perspectives may also be adopted (e.g., actor-network theory, structuration theory, or social exchange theory). For example, while actor-network theory may facilitate assessments of changing stakeholder interactions and their effect on the firm's RSEM strategy, social exchange theory may advance understanding of stakeholders' perceived RSEM-related costs/benefits and reciprocity (e.g., to the firm).

Third, RSEM implies the firm's cultivation of its stakeholders' responsible contributions to the company, other stakeholders, and the environment (P3a-c). Though we underscore the role of these stakeholder contributions, stakeholders may lack the motivation to make such contributions. For example, customers purchasing a Rolex watch may prefer the company to manage their responsible engagement *for them* (e.g., by helping them care for the product). Therefore, to what extent is it ethical to solicit specific stakeholders' responsible contributions? When might they feel overburdened? Generally, stakeholders may feel content to make responsible contributions *up to a point*, but not necessarily beyond, warranting further investigation.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

V. Kumar: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Linda D. Hollebeek:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Amalesh Sharma:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Bharath Rajan:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Rajendra K Srivastava:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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