

DISCUSSION ON THE APPROACHES TO CSR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract: Over the last decade corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication has been recognized as one of the important topics addressed in the literature on CSR. Still, the characteristics of this research field have not been largely discussed. The aim of the paper is to outline the state of CSR communication research with a particular interest in exploring its thematic and epistemological orientation. The empirical results are based on the content analysis of papers addressing CSR communication, which were published in journals included in Proquest and EBSCOhost online database. Data analysis reveals that papers on CSR communication are mainly theoretical in nature and in the majority of cases sub-categorized as exploratory. In addition, the predominant topic of papers on CSR communication can be characterized as disclosure- and not process- or outcomes-oriented, primarily dealing with the characteristics of various CSR communication tools. By addressing the current approaches to investigating the topic of CSR communication the paper is also informative in view of its implications for further research, especially regarding some of the gaps identifiable in the literature on CSR communication.

Keywords: CSR communication, epistemological orientation, key topics, a literature review.

RAZPRAVA O PRISTOPIH K RAZISKOVANJU KOMUNICIRANJA DRUŽBENE ODGOVORNOSTI: PREGLED LITERATURE

Povzetek: V zadnjem desetletju je bilo komuniciranje družbene odgovornosti prepoznano kot ena izmed pomembnih tem, ki jih naslavlja literatura o družbeni odgovornosti. Kljub temu značilnostim tega raziskovalnega polja ni bilo namenjenih veliko razprav. Namen prispevka je orisati stanje na področju študij, povezanih s komuniciranjem družbene odgovornosti, s posebnim poudarkom na proučevanju njihove tematske in epistemološke narave. Empirični rezultati raziskave temeljijo na analizi vsebine študij o komuniciranju družbene odgovornosti, objavljenih v znanstvenih revijah, vključenih v spletni podatkovni bazi Proquest in EBSCOhost. Analiza podatkov pokaže, da so prispevki večinoma teoretske narave in jih je mogoče večji del nadalje opredeliti kot prispevke z eksploratornim značajem. Prevladujoča tema tovrstnih prispevkov je usmerjena k samemu aktu artikulacije družbene odgovornosti in ne k procesu komuniciranja ali k posledicam slednjega, primarno pa je osredotočena na značilnosti raznolikih orodij komuniciranja družbene odgovornosti. Obravnava obstoječih pristopov k raziskovanju tematike komuniciranja družbene odgovornosti daje raziskavi tudi informativni značaj v smislu implikacij za nadaljnje raziskovanje, še posebej glede posameznih vrzeli, ki jih je mogoče prepoznati na področju raziskovanja komuniciranja družbene odgovornosti.

Ključne besede: komuniciranje družbene odgovornosti, epistemološka usmeritev, ključne teme, pregled literature.

1. Introduction

Along with the growing attention devoted to issues related to CSR communication amongst scholars, as well as corporate communication practitioners, it can be observed that the research on CSR communication presents a very important, however, up till now not quite as extensive part of literature on CSR (Ihlen et al., 2011a, p. 3). Nonetheless, the state-of-the-art CSR communication research seems to refer to a variety of issues, ranging from the characteristics of CSR content on corporate web sites (e.g., Moreno and Capriotti, 2009) or CSR articulations via other communication channels, to stakeholder involvement (e.g., Chen and Zhang, 2009), and the consequences of specific strategies used to communicate CSR (e.g., Kim, 2011). That is to say, using an explanation proposed by Ihlen et al. (2011a), that CSR communication research tackles “the ways that corporations communicate in and about” the process of implementing their CSR. Additionally, the value of CSR communication research lies in contributing to the understanding of the role different stakeholders, as well as organizations, play in the process of

communicating CSR and the understanding of the impact of CSR communication on the future development of CSR practices within the business environment and the society as a whole (Ihlen et al., 2011b, p. 566).

Observations concerning CSR communication gaining its place among the corporate communication activities, the gradual increase in the body of literature on CSR communication, and its diversity all seem to call for a systematic review of contemporary CSR communication research. This might be of a particular importance since such a review is expected to contribute to the identification of the main topics, current findings, and gaps within this research field.

2. Defining the Focus of Contemporary CSR Communication Research

The issue of CSR communication is discussed across different academic disciplines including marketing, public relations, and management (Ihlen et al., 2011a, p. 4–5), which can be interpreted as one of the indicators of its increasing relevance in the context of a modern business environment. As noted by Podnar (2008, p. 77) in reference to CSR communication research in the marketing discipline, this type of research addresses a broad range of issues. However, the question remains how to categorize them so as to gain a relevant insight into what defines the key topics covered in the literature on CSR communication.

Among previous attempts applicable to the field of CSR communication research one can mention a classification proposal of CSR studies in the field of organizational communication developed by May (2011, 95–100). The author suggests each study could be categorized according to its general approach to the issue of CSR as normative, interpretative, critical, or dialogic, further arguing that within the literature on organizational communication a critical approach to CSR research prevails (May, 2011). Similarly, a few other authors have also recognized the need to present an overview of CSR studies. Lockett et al. (2006), for example, categorize them into four main groups depending on whether they deal with social issues, environmental issues, ethics, or stakeholders. They show the debate in CSR research revolves most commonly around environmental issues and ethics (Lockett et al., 2006, p. 115). Another meta-analysis of studies on CSR is introduced by Peloza and Shang (2011), who try to assess the state of accumulated knowledge on CSR activities in relation to their impact on different stakeholder responses. Based on their findings these studies often point towards positive effects of CSR activities, but seldom include empirical evidence to support such assumptions (Peloza and Shang, 2011, p. 127).

In much the same way as in the examples mentioned above the objective of CSR communication literature review is to try to define its focus (i.e., the prevailing thematic orientation), as well as its epistemological orientation (i.e., the type of knowledge studies generate (Lockett et al., 2006, p. 116)). According to some authors the latter can be defined as either theoretical or empirical (Lockett et al., 2006, p. 116). A somewhat different model for defining the epistemological nature of studies, however, is suggested by De Bakker et al. (2005, p. 294), who, striving to assess the evolution of CSR literature, distinguish between theoretical (i.e., conceptual, exploratory, and predictive), descriptive (i.e., instrumental and normative), and prescriptive studies. In other words, the goal of this particular classification, applied to the context of CSR communication, is to determine, whether the focus in CSR communication studies is on developing theoretical constructs on a conceptual level, developing or testing theoretical constructs on the basis of examining gathered empirical data, providing instrumental prescriptions or prescriptions concerning ethical/moral behaviour to practitioners, or simply on reporting facts/expressing opinions regarding the current issues in the field of CSR communication (De Bakker et al., 2005, p. 294).

3. Methodology

In order to evaluate the state of literature on CSR communication we searched for CSR communication related papers within the Proquest and EBSCOhost online database as two relevant sources of management journals using the following keywords: *communicating CSR*, *CSR communication*, *corporate responsibility communication*, *social responsibility communication*, *CSR advertising*, and *social responsibility advertising*. The review was not limited to a specific period of time. This resulted in a total of 90 papers (N=90) meeting the requirements for a further review.

Adopting a post-coding approach to content analysis, the papers, selected in our sample, were first categorized according to their epistemological orientation. For this purpose De Bakker et al.'s (2005) classification for identifying epistemological orientation of papers was chosen to be followed, meaning each paper was classified as theoretical, descriptive, or prescriptive. The theoretical papers were furthermore sub-divided into conceptual, exploratory, or predictive category. On the other hand, the papers making a prescriptive contribution were sub-categorized as either instrumental or normative (De Bakker et al., 2005, p. 294). Secondly, the review led to the identification of three general topics (i.e., disclosure, process, and outcomes) and their sub-topics covered in the analysed papers and thus to a development of a CSR communication literature classification model. The latter was in part inspired by Du et al.'s (2010) framework of CSR communication.

4. Results

4.1 The epistemological orientation of papers

The results of data analysis point to the prevailing theoretical nature of papers addressing CSR communication issues, as 78 (86.7%) of all papers belong to this category of epistemological orientation of papers. Descriptive and prescriptive category, however, account for 11.1% and 2.2% of the analysed papers respectively. All of the prescriptive papers are instrumental in nature, meaning the discussion in CSR communication literature could be described as largely non-normative in its orientation. Similar findings concerning for the most part a non-normative nature of CSR studies are underlined in the study of both Lockett et al. (2006) and May (2011).

The nature of more than half (56.4%) of theoretical papers is shown to be exploratory. Conceptual and predictive type, on the other hand, each present approximately one fifth of the theoretical papers (20.5% and 23.1% respectively). Moreover, more than two thirds of the analysed papers could be described as studies with some degree of empirical contribution. Most of them deal with developing (theoretical) propositions on the basis of examining empirical data, mainly in relation to the characteristics of CSR communication tools (e.g., Capriotti and Moreno, 2007; Waller and Lanis, 2009; Dincer and Dincer, 2010; O'Connor and Shumate, 2010). The predictive type, however, is more common for studies investigating the outcomes of CSR communication in which the authors strive to test the hypotheses regarding relations between CSR communication and stakeholder responses (e.g., Swaen and Vanhamme, 2005; Kim, 2011). This indicates the results are consistent with the observations made by De Bakker et al. (2005), who point to the increase of empirical studies in the field of CSR research since the 1990s.

4.1 The thematic orientation of papers

4.1.1 Disclosure-oriented studies

The idea of a relatively broad category of disclosure-oriented papers on CSR communication derives from the observation of a variety of issues the authors are interested in, when tackling the 'micro' level question of how a modern organization approaches the challenge of 'putting its CSR into words'. One can observe, however, that these issues typically refer to the usage of CSR communication tools, strategies of communicating CSR, or the question of stakeholders' expectations regarding how an organization ought to communicate about its CSR. The results of data analysis highlight that two thirds (66.7%) of all analysed papers are disclosure-oriented. Among these studies more than two thirds deal with the characteristics of CSR communication channel/tool (68.3%); the remaining sub-topics – strategies and stakeholders' expectations/beliefs – are identified in 25% and 6.7% of disclosure-oriented papers respectively.

As shown by our study, slightly less than a half of all analysed papers (45.6%) focus on examining the features of CSR communication via different communication tools. Most of this papers specifically explore the characteristics of advertising as CSR communication channel (36.6%), being followed by those concentrated on the characteristics of web-based CSR communication (24.4%), CSR communication via a combination of channels or other channels (22.0%), and CSR communication in annual reports (17.1%). Drawing from Du et al.'s (2010) framework of CSR communication, they could be described as concentrated on exploring the content and other characteristics of CSR messages in relation to a specific tool/channel used to disseminate them. The first sub-group of these studies seems to call attention to the importance of the Internet for corporate communications. Hence, they reflect on the characteristics of CSR content and their indicators, such as, for example, key topics of CSR messages, the quantity of information and the stakeholders being addressed (e.g., Capriotti and Moreno, 2007; Moreno and Capriotti, 2009), as well as the organization of CSR content, primarily examining the prominence of CSR messages within the corporate web sites (Chaudhri and Wang, 2007), the number of pages designed for CSR, and their hierarchical structure (e.g., Moreno and Capriotti, 2009; Dincer and Dincer, 2010). Concerning the web-based CSR communication some thought is also given to the format of presenting CSR messages and the level of feedback encouraged (e.g., Chaudhri and Wang, 2007; Moreno and Capriotti, 2009; Dincer and Dincer, 2010). The value of the above mentioned studies lies in contributing to the development of a pool of relevant indicators for exploring this particular issue, which could gradually lead to its more systematic research. Other mutual characteristics of such studies include: (1) the prevalent use of content analysis for investigating the nature of web-based CSR communication and (2) the tendency to examine only those web-based CSR messages that appear on corporate web sites, paying little to no attention to the importance of other online platforms (e.g., social network sites, corporate blogs) as potential and increasingly used channels for this type of communication. Some authors, nevertheless, broaden their research by exploring factors that might have an effect on the characteristics of web-based CSR communication. For example, Tang and Li (2009), who discuss the impact of industry and the country of origin on

CSR communication in China, discover that the nature of industry/sector, which an organization is a part of, has a bigger influence on their CSR communication in comparison with its country of origin.

The second and largest group of authors analyzing the characteristics of CSR communication is focused on advertising as a tool for CSR communication. In contrast to the papers on web-based CSR communication these studies are for the most part less concerned with the characteristics of CSR-based advertising and more interested in social responsibility of using advertising as a communication tool (e. g., Nwachukwu et al., 1997). Nonetheless, a limited attention is given to exploring the quantity, as well as the content of CSR advertising. In their longitudinal study of print advertisements published in German weekly magazines Mögele and Tropp (2010), for example, point to the increase in the CSR advertisements and talk about CSR becoming a relevant advertising topic. A similar conclusion is highlighted by Peterson and Hermans (2004) in their longitudinal study of television advertisements of the US banks. Among the themes addressed in this type of advertisements both studies point out the relevance of environmental/ecological and social issues (Peterson and Hermans, 2004; Mögele and Tropp, 2010). Simultaneously with the ever more evident use of CSR related topics in advertising, another group of authors is questioning the value of CSR advertising, as it may lead to stakeholders' scepticism. Furthermore, they discuss the potential elements of CSR advertising claims, such as the inclusion of a sufficient amount of information on social topic addressed, the information on an organization's commitment to CSR, and the explanation what kind of impact a particular CSR practice is going to have on the social environment, which could possibly reduce the scepticism towards an organization's CSR (e.g., Pomeroy and Johnson, 2009). In relation to the effectiveness of CSR advertising Obermiller et al. (2009) further argue, that it is more beneficial for those organizations which already have an established reputation of providing high quality products in comparison to those less familiar to consumers. The critical approach to CSR advertising, on the other hand, is concerned with the ethical stance of specific advertising strategies (Nwachukwu, et al. 1997).

The next sub-category of papers consists of those concentrating on CSR communication in annual reports. Similarly to the research on web-based CSR communication, the authors are mostly interested in defining the features of CSR content and its organization via specific CSR communication tool. Examining the sections designed for CSR disclosure they often focus on defining dominant issues of CSR messages and key stakeholders they tend to address (e.g., Hartman et al., 2007). Features concerning the language and style of CSR content are so far not as commonly discussed. However, one example of such orientation is offered by Bakar and Ameer (2011), who measure the readability of CSR related content in annual reports. They argue that companies with poor performance purposely communicate about their CSR in a way more difficult for stakeholders to understand, whereas those with good performance use language which makes the content of the message much easier to comprehend. The papers covering the topic of characteristics of CSR communication via other communication tools, such as PR messages, codes of ethics, and mission slogans, or a combination of communication tools (e.g., Scienzia do Prado et al., 2010) are in our study, however, proposed to form their own group. The reason for this lies in the observation that they all tend to take notice of additional forms through which CSR messages can be materialized, are under-researched, and point at gaps in current micro level CSR communication research (one of them, for example, being the notable lack of cross-channel comparison of the characteristics of CSR communication).

If the first sub-category of disclosure-oriented studies is defined by emphasizing the role of CSR content and communication channel, the second one appears to take a greater interest in more general strategies organizations can employ when communicating about CSR. That is to say, the discussion progresses towards the 'organizational' factors which to a certain degree define the specific characteristics of CSR communication via different channels. The results show that one quarter of all disclosure-oriented studies deal with CSR communication strategies (hence, the latter being the second largest group of the analysed disclosure-oriented papers). Furthermore, authors approach the issue of CSR communication strategy from many different perspectives. Tixier (2003), for example, talks about hard and soft approach in communicating CSR, adopting a perspective of the effects of the intensity of CSR communication. Similarly, Ligeti and Oravecz (2009) discuss quiet and loud CSR communication strategies. The harmful effects of an organization's too extensive communication about CSR (e.g., stakeholder scepticism) encourage the authors to start thinking about alternative approaches to enhance the desirable CSR reputation (e.g., Morsing et al., 2008) – a perspective of the importance of provider of CSR information. Morsing et al. (2008) suggest organizations should opt for endorsed CSR communication, expert CSR communication, and above all the inside-out approach to communicating CSR (i.e., the approach underlining the role of employees in CSR communication). Some of the remaining views on disclosure of CSR covered in the analysed papers expose the importance of: stakeholders' involvement in CSR communication (Morsing and Schultz, 2006), auto-communication (Morsing, 2006; Hagen 2008), and the cultural context for CSR communication (Birth et al., 2008). This variety of approaches to analyzing CSR communication strategies offers a useful base for further research, especially as certain areas, such as the outcomes of employing a specific communication strategy, the impact of a particular communication strategy on the characteristic of CSR communication via different channels, and the

influence of organizational characteristics (as a micro level factor) and institutional context (as a macro level factor) on employing a particular CSR communication strategy, at present remain largely unknown.

The third sub-category of papers classified as disclosure-oriented tackles the question of how to approach the CSR communication by investigating the stakeholders' expectations and beliefs about or attitudes towards an organization's CSR communication. As this study shows, the research on this topic is quite scarce. Some authors study attitudes towards CSR communication of a particular stakeholder group, like consumers (e.g., Schmeltz, 2012), others, for example, Dawkins (2004) examine the expectations of various stakeholders about communicating CSR and describe them as conflicting. The subject of stakeholder scepticism (e.g., Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2011; Schmeltz, 2012) is also mentioned, when thinking about stakeholder expectations regarding CSR communication. Although it is generally argued that stakeholders react relatively sceptically towards the more explicit forms of CSR communication, the recent study by Schmeltz, based on a survey among young Danish consumers, shows that consumers actually expect more explicit CSR related communication from organizations (Schmeltz, 2012, p. 29). In relation to this, further research could strive to analyse the expectations of a multitude of stakeholders in relation to a broader range of CSR activities and communication strategies/techniques.

4.1.2 Process-oriented studies

Studies which do not give their attention to exploring specific characteristics of CSR disclosure, but are instead concerned with the understanding of CSR communication model, its elements, and institutional factors that might have an effect on communicating CSR on a more conceptual level, can be characterised as process-oriented. Our analysis shows that 17.8% of papers in our sample correspond to such a description. The findings also reveal that it is possible to distinguish between two types of this category of papers. The first emphasizes the role of stakeholder management in the process of CSR communication. Davis and MacDonald (2010), for instance, present the framework for understanding the effects of stakeholder perceptions on organization's decision regarding CSR actions and suggest three basic guidelines organizations should follow to add to the success of their CSR initiatives. They are concerned with developing an instrument for measuring the impact of CSR practices for each stakeholder group, creating CSR messages which address specific stakeholder concerns, and explaining to key stakeholders how other stakeholders' concerns are being addressed by an organization (Davis and MacDonald, 2010, p. 77). Some other authors focus on questioning how an organization should adapt its CSR communication, when confronted with stakeholder activism (Evuleocha, 2005) or the challenge of communicating CSR to a particular stakeholder group enhanced by the shift towards a more interactive CSR communication process (Hockerts and Moir, 2004).

The second type of process-oriented papers, on the other hand, is primarily focused on developing a framework or a model of CSR communication (e.g., Chen and Zhang, 2009; Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010), which would plainly present the relevant factors/elements connected with the CSR communication process. An example is Du et al.'s (2010, p. 8) attempt to present a "conceptual framework of CSR communication". Its value lies in defining various aspects of CSR communication process, such as (1) message content and communication channels, (2) stakeholder- and organization- specific characteristics that have an effect on CSR communication process and its effectiveness, as well as (3) the outcomes of CSR communication. Also referring to the process of CSR communication Chen and Zhang (2009, p. 445–446) propose a two-way model of communicating CSR (includes informing, listening to, and interacting with stakeholders). Simcic Brønn (2012), however, suggests that a PZB service quality model should be applied to the context of CSR communication, with the purpose of identifying the gaps that occur in the process of communicating CSR. Another line of studies starts to examine CSR communication within the institutional context and tries to understand the process of its institutionalization along with its effects on CSR communication strategies (e.g., Schultz and Wehmeier, 2010). Some research is also directed to examining CSR communication in relation to the process of framing of CSR issues communicated to stakeholders (e.g., Dobers and Springett, 2010). This sets a foundation for further research, which could concentrate more on investigating the contextual factors influencing CSR communication. However, additional research on different accepts of the proposed framework of CSR communication could also be made, since the process-oriented studies included in our analysis seem to concentrate primarily on stakeholder-specific characteristics influencing an organization's CSR communication.

4.1.3 Outcomes-oriented studies

The third main group of analysed papers approaches the topic of CSR communication by studying its consumer- (e.g., Swaen and Vanhamme, 2005; Becker-Olsen, 2011; Kim, 2011) or business-related (e.g., Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009; Hsu, 2012) outcomes. Altogether, these studies account for less than one fifth (15.6%) of our sample. More than two thirds of these papers (71.4%) can be further classified as consumer-related. Among the latter focus is on

investigating the impact of different elements/characteristics of CSR communication process on consumer attitudes and brand-related associations, as well as on the influence of various characteristics of CSR advertising (and to a less significant extent web-based CSR communication) on consumer responses to this type of CSR communication. Swaen and Vanhamme (2005) as the representatives of the first stream of the above mentioned studies examine the influence of source credibility on consumers' attitudes. The authors state that the source of CSR communication (along with its credibility) has a bigger influence on consumer attitudes related to product perceptions, purchase intentions and consumer trust in comparison with the CSR arguments used. Moreover, they define the credible sources of CSR information as those which are not perceived by stakeholders "as controlled by the company" (Swaen and Vanhamme, 2005). Another illustration for orientation towards exploring the effects of specific characteristics of CSR communication is offered in a study presented by Becker-Olsen (2011). It discusses consumer preference of localized and global CSR communication approaches and shows that emphasizing global CSR initiatives results in more positive consumer perceptions. Similarly, Kim (2011) strives to present the effects of different CSR communication strategies on consumer responses. On the other hand, the second stream of consumer-related studies to some extent deals with web-based CSR communication and its effects on consumers' perceptions of CSR and consumers' trust (e.g., Hong and Rim, 2010), but mostly with the influence of CSR disclosures in advertisements on consumer attitudes towards CSR practices and their behavioural intentions (e.g., Wang, 2009). Since all of these papers predominantly examine the outcomes of CSR communication of only one stakeholder group – i.e. consumers –, the future studies could be interested in looking into the responses of some other stakeholders (like employees, investors, or local community), as well. One of the first studies which approach to studying the outcomes of communicating CSR more systematically is presented by Wang and Anderson (2011), who introduce a model of consumer responses to CSR communication consisting of pre-processing, attribution, and response stage. However, new types of responses, such as consumer loyalty or employee commitment, could also be integrated in this area of research.

Compared to consumer-related the research on business-related outcomes of communicating CSR is even less extensive. Our analysis shows this topic is discussed in less than one third of outcomes-oriented papers (i.e. in only 4.4% of all analysed papers). The contribution of some of these studies lies in expressing the need for an extended research regarding the effects of CSR communication on business performance (e.g., Sjöberg, 2003), again in others in investigating the impact of CSR communication as an integral part of corporate communications on brand image and corporate reputation (e.g., Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009; Hsu, 2012). Since all of the issues mentioned above are up to date insufficiently researched, they could be described as promising areas for future research.

5. Implications for Further Research

According to our data analysis the dominant topic of papers on CSR communication is concerned with the approach to disclosure of CSR practices, mainly focusing on investigating the characteristics of CSR communication channels. Furthermore, the results show the remainder of papers are either process-oriented or consequences-oriented. Although the authors try to further broaden the focus of CSR communication research by addressing various aspects of sub-topics related to disclosure, process, and outcomes of communicating CSR, one cannot but notice presently scarce research on inter-dependant relations between these three main categories of issues concerning CSR communication. For example, only a small number of papers examine the relation between specific characteristics of different elements of CSR communication process and their outcomes (e.g., Kim, 2011). The same can be argued for the research on the influence of stakeholder responses to CSR communication on the potential changes in CSR communication practices of an organization, as well as the influence of institutional context on the elements of CSR communication process and its consequences. Thus, in addition to filling the gaps identified in connection with each of the category of papers on CSR communication, the challenge of CSR communication research lies in overcoming its tendency to investigate the key issues concerning CSR communication separately one from another without the intention of examining the potential relations between them (i.e., between different elements of the framework of CSR communication).

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