

Chapter 9

Corporate Social Responsibility Communication Research: State of the Art and Recent Advances

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a review of the current state of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication research and a theoretical framework on related topics. The analysis covers a period of twenty years (from 1997 to 2016) and statistically maps the streams of research advances on CSR communication, identifying top academic journals in the field. Moreover, the authors focus on the importance of CSR communication for businesses, the different approaches to communication, and review the literature dealing with both digital and traditional tools adopted for CSR communication. A discussion on how today's businesses are aware of the importance of communicating CSR to their stakeholders and are implementing both digital and traditional tools in a complementary way for their CSR communication strategy follows; research gaps, limitations, and further directions conclude the chapter. Finally, this chapter provides some inputs about the relevance of this topic for digital business transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a complex subject that evolved by long-existing concepts, and that consists of numerous and contrasting theories, as well as individual interpretations (Collins, 2010; Tomaselli et al., 2015; Venturelli et al., 2017). It can be summarized as the “responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” (European Commission, 2011, p. 6). These responsibilities should be directed towards the society and the environment in which they operate, as well as to their stakeholders (Carroll, 1999; Davis, 1992; Hart, 1997; Shamir, 2005).

The increasing interest towards the social and environmental side of business has recently attracted particular attention to the communication of CSR and to the tools adopted by businesses to communicate these activities to their stakeholders (Chaudhri & Wang, 2007). Over the last few years, businesses focused on the different ways of CSR communication and, in particular, on the use of technologies to communicate about their own CSR. In this regard, the web environment (including corporate websites, social media and mobile apps) is used by businesses to give more visibility to their CSR-related programs. While traditional communication tools (for example reports, codes of ethics, flyers, brochures and events) are still used by businesses for CSR communication (GRI, 2014, 2016), today’s main communication tools are web-based technologies (Antal et al., 2002; Chaundri & Wang, 2007; Kesavan, Bernacchi & Mascarenhas, 2013).

However, the topic of CSR communication has received scant attention in the literature (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009; Andreu, Casado-Diaz & Mattila, 2015), despite its significant impact on today’s global corporate environment. Indeed, most of the biggest companies in the US and Europe are constantly increasing their communication and reporting (both online and offline) of their CSR and sustainability activities. In the US, 36 out of 100 companies surveyed do report on CSR and environmental issues. In Europe, 87 out of 100 companies surveyed provide comprehensive information about responsible products or services (Lundquist, 2014). As the use of the web and social media for communicating about CSR is increasing, the most promoted channel on the various websites, in the European context, was Twitter, whereby 87% of companies linked to an account. YouTube was the channel with the most effective CSR communication, with 80% of accounts covering CSR topics to some degree, closely followed by Facebook with 79%. LinkedIn does not have a significant impact for businesses’ CSR communication, which is reflected in the fact that 43% of companies do not promote their LinkedIn account.

Against this background, the purpose of this work was to analyze existing literature on CSR communication through a systematic review approach and to provide a theoretical framework focusing on: the importance of CSR communication; the different approaches; the tools (both digital and traditional tools) that are adopted

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