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# Editorial 28.6: Corporate social irresponsibility

Editorial

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Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become a buzzword in academic debates in the past few decades due to many scholarly studies tackling this issue (Levashova, 2014). The debate originally centred on the dichotomy of the stakeholder vs shareholder approach where the stakeholder approach, mainly associated with Freeman and his circle, argued that corporations need to go beyond satisfying just shareholders whilst the shareholder approach, mainly associated with Friedman, advocated that corporations need to only satisfy shareholders because this is their role and what corporations do (Freeman, 2010; Friedman, 1962). There are, however, works that called CSR policies as mirroring the zeitgeist arguing that corporations only have CSR policies for reputational reasons and that CSR is just greenwashing. The view on CSR largely depends on political views of authors so neoliberal views will see CSR as an attempt to impose public social preferences on private property (Krugman, 2007; Sheehy, 2014); centrist-left agenda sees CSR as an opportunity to deliver a more equal and just society with NGOs being the main promoters of this agenda (Sheehy, 2014) whilst the far-left agenda equates CSR to neoliberalism and as a smokescreen that prevents and limits societal changes (Fleming and Jones, 2013; Ireland and Pillay, 2009; Sheehy, 2014). In a study we conducted on food, soft drinks and packaging industries in the UK, it appeared that the food industry was most active in its CSR programme but this was largely linked to consumer and media activism whilst the packaging industry works under the guidance of the supermarkets where CSR managers admitted that this is influenced by consumers with a reference, also often being made on an influential BBC programme Blue Planet, thus prompting us to ask whether CSR is just another mirroring the zeitgeist policy where organisations do what it suits their reputation at each point in time (Topić *et al.*, 2021). In addition to that, I also argued that CSR is a smokescreen for capitalism and keeping the status quo intact by designing a wheel of neoliberalism where I labelled CSR as one of the cogs in the wheel along with environmental governance and technology, liberal media, degradation of the environment, patriarchy, capitalism and policies of the economic growth (Topić, 2021).

However, one research area of CSR that some researchers started to investigate is corporate social irresponsibility (CSI), which is interesting because this area can be used by authors from all political sides of the CSR spectrum to measure the irresponsibility of companies within their distinctive positions. Existing research argued that assessing companies on the CSR–CSI dichotomy would help in overcoming problems with CSR and its understanding because “CSI is a term better suited to describing the workings of the “old” shareholder business model (. . .) and that CSR is more applicable to the workings of the new and emerging stakeholder business model” (Jones *et al.*, 2009, p. 301). This model, thus, looks at scrutinising organisations based on their performance in all fields, thus not making it look as if organisations are generally irresponsible and not committed to CSR but scoring them, which opens an opportunity to recognise that some organisations have good policies in one field but not the other, e.g. they can have good diversity policies but weak environmental ones such as pollution (Jones *et al.*, 2009, p. 301). Equally, one could use this concept and argue that all organisations are irresponsible to this or another extent and develop an argumentation that further extends the mirroring of the zeitgeist position. What is more, some authors argued that whilst some studies find a positive correlation between CSR and financial



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performance, studies found none or a negative one, thus opening a question of whether CSR is done to hide irresponsibility (Kotchen and Moon, 2012). Kitchen and Moon (2012) argued that when companies do a lot of harm, they also do a lot of good with companies that face public scrutiny doing more CSR, which goes back to the zeitgeist argument (Topić *et al.*, 2021).

As argued in the editorial on equality, diversity and inclusion (Topić, 2022), CSR has always featured prominently in articles published in *Corporate Communications* and we have indeed been at the forefront of that scholarship (see figures 1 and 2 for scholarship published in 2021 and 2022 alone, however, the overall number in the journal is much higher) and in recent years we have also expanded our scholarship significantly to equality topics, including environmental equality and concerns (Topić, 2022). We continue in this spirit, for this issue, by further extending the debate on CSR and thus in this issue we tackle CSI in more detail including within the context of the environmental debate.

Therefore, in this issue of *Corporate Communications*, four papers tackle the issue of CSI either directly or indirectly, i.e. some of the issues analysed could be linked to CSI even if this is not the focus of the paper. Cassandra L. C. Troy, Megan L.P. Norman, Nicholas Eng, Jason Freeman and Denise S. Bortree wrote for this issue, about the effects of climate corporate social advocacy (CSA) and CSR messaging, looking also at the role of green consumer identity and the effects of CSR and CSA messaging on public perceptions of companies and collective action intentions. The findings have shown that there were no main effects of message type on outcomes, but the green consumer identity moderated the relationship between the message type and green purchase intention as well as negative word-of-mouth (NWOM). Therefore, findings showed “that for participants with high green consumer identity, exposure to a CSA message resulted in lower NWOM intentions than those who saw a control message. Although CSA messages did not seem to move participants enough to impact PWOM intentions based on levels of green consumer identity, they were effective in reducing NWOM intentions for consumers who think of themselves as environmentally conscious consumers. It is possible that the prevalence of organizations speaking about their environmental initiatives has led to a scenario where publics do not necessarily award praise to organizational initiatives in this domain, but rather, are willing to suspend any need to speak negatively about their efforts. Meanwhile, participants with low green consumer identity reported higher NWOM intention in response to CSA and CSR messages compared to a control message”. This paper shows the extent of engagement of the publics about CSA, which can be linked to CSI because publics more passionate about societal affairs might also engage in NWOM because of their irresponsibility perception. Similarly, but from a different angle, Grzegorz Zasuwa and Magdalena Stefanska wrote about WOM from the perspective of CSI and CSR perceptions and how they affect WOM recommendations taking into consideration trust, distrust and moral norms. The findings of study one conducted for this paper showed that trust in a company partially mediates the effects of CSR on WOM recommendations, but study two showed that consumers who adhere to higher moral standards follow distinct paths to negative WOM. These consumers spread negative comments when they perceive irresponsible behaviour from the organisation but when they are unsure about future behaviour they are less likely to spread negative WOM. Authors argue that concepts of trust and distrust can help explain consumer responses, particularly negative ones and that moral norms serve as boundary conditions of this mechanism. In line with other studies (e.g. Golob *et al.*, 2008, Thwgersen, 1999) this paper reveals that consumers’ moral orientation is an essential part of ethical consumption and thus consumers who have higher self-transcendent values have greater expectations of CSR, however, this study extends these findings and argued that these consumers might be more careful in terms of punishing a corporate culprit. Similarly to the previous paper in this issue, this study also showed that distrust in communication can shape WOM communication but this also opens a question of irresponsibility and to what extent this negative perception influences WOM.

KyuJin Shim, Young Kim and ChihYao Chang also add to the debate on CSR and CSI by writing about ethical perception and moral outrage in activism, two concepts clearly linked to CSI because consumers often engage in organisational boycotts when outraged by a certain organisational action. The authors looked at the mediating role of emotional outrage between situational motivation and activism behaviours. The findings showed that people who perceive an ethical issue are likely to be motivated to participate in activism behaviours and the most significant situational perceptions (problem recognition, constraint recognition and involvement recognition) were also seen as most significant in affecting situational motivation in problem-solving. The more people felt outraged about an ethical issue, the more likely were they willing to engage in punitive behaviour thus showing also that a high level of emotional outrage has a mediating role between situational motivation and consequential ethical behaviours. Line Schmeltz and Matilde Nisbeth Brogger wrote about employee-related CSR initiatives looking specifically into health-related employee benefits as part of companies' CSR programmes. In that, the authors used two-strand research looking at CSR initiatives among Danish companies and CSR reports, thus looking both at what companies said they do via a qualitative questionnaire, as well as analysing their actual reports. The results showed that whilst most companies have employee health as part of their CSR policies, the communication about these policies is vague and authors also open a question of whether occupational health and safety policies, such as safety at work, etc. are becoming seen as CSR since these policies are often mentioned by companies as employee health-related CSR policies. In addition to that, the authors argue that companies have a different understanding of health, so some companies mention exercising, healthy eating, not smoking, health checks, mental health, brain challenges, sleep and personal development activities. The authors thus argue that when employee health is presented as CSR, this can signal an aspirational control or "when CSR works as a form of aspirational control that ties employees' aspirational identities and ethical conscience to the organization" (Costas and Karreman, 2013, p. 394). This furthermore means that "such a mechanism can lead to two types of control: technocratic, which are attempts to directly control workers' behavior, and socio-ideological control which are attempts to control workers' mindsets, for example, through managerial efforts to persuade people to adopt certain values, norms and ideas about what is good – e.g. changing your lifestyle. While technocratic control might give rise to a debate about the role and privileges of organizations, socio-ideological control, which could be indicated in our data, ought to stimulate discussion about the role and range of power held by corporations in society".

Another issue, which keeps appearing in the CSR debate is disclosure, which has an increased presence in published papers in the *Corporate Communications* journal and can also be linked to the CSI debate because companies are expected to report on their activities, which can serve as a monitoring mechanism for those concerned with the issue. In this issue, Natalia Lumby and Ojelanki Ngwenyama wrote about online sustainability claims focussing specifically on lessons from high-scoring B corporations in the Canadian food and beverage sector. In that, the authors looked at how certified companies communicate sustainability claims online and whether these practices differ from non-certified companies. The findings indicate that sustainability certifications alter external online sustainability communication as well as the areas of communication focus increasing communication about the socially oriented community engagement dimension, the latter often being underrepresented. Authors see completing a certification process like the B Lab Impact Assessment as a positive impression management tactic as this practice also helps consumers to ascertain trustworthy information, but certifications, according to the findings from this study, do not have an impact on how sustainability information is externally communicated beyond certification. In other words, "firms share the B Corp label to indicate successful certification, but how they translate these values across their brand is up to them". David Bodoff and Irish Hirsch wrote

about tone and credibility in voluntary disclosures looking specifically at attitudinal responses to the tone of a voluntary disclosure. The findings have shown that when bad financial results happen, a positive tone has a negative effect on credibility and this effect is fully mediated by perceived persuasive intent. On the other hand, in the case of good financial performance, credibility is higher when management adopts a positive tone despite, here too, subjects perceiving persuasive intent.

Finally, other papers in this issue offer new insights into CSR research by either conceptualising the new research or taking a focus not commonly taken when studying CSR or CSI. Joshua M. Parcha wrote about conceptualising the relationship between corporate social advocacy and political polarisation looking specifically at theory building. The study “conceptualizes the relationship between CSA and political polarization to be symbiotic because both are bidirectional causes of each other. Engagement in CSA is also argued to be positively associated with perceptions that corporations contain particular political ideologies, i.e. more ‘liberal-leaning’ or ‘conservative-leaning.’ This study also predicts that – dependent on particular conditions – CSA will also lead to an increase in both boycotts and skepticism”. Hyun Ju Jeong and Deborah S. Chung wrote about CSR communication of stigmatised industries through news coverage. In that, the authors looked at CSR stories from 2019 to 2020 in the US newspapers and argued that the overall volume of CSR coverage of stigmatized industries has decreased which was not the case for non-stigmatized industries presented with philanthropic activities based on corporations’ social motives to help communities. In the same way, “economic and legal responsibilities reflected in the CSR pyramid were more prominently reported for stigmatized industries, and ethical and discretionary responsibilities appeared more frequently for non-stigmatized industries”. The authors correctly argue that the public is more likely to trust CSR content reported by the news media than the self-reported one (Einwiller and Carroll, 2020; Mermoud, 2013) and thus provide new knowledge in this field by focussing on stigmatized vs non-stigmatized industries arguing that this distinction helps in drawing a balanced view of CSR communication encompassing news coverage and publicity. What is more, the authors argue that the pandemic affected CSR coverage since the results “showed a significant decrease from 2019 to 2020 in CSR coverage for these industries (. . .) Some of the stigmatized industries, such as casino hotels and cruises under the umbrella of gambling organizations, automobile and oil industries, can be said to have been directly impacted by the pandemic considering mandatory stay-at-home orders (. . .) Amid this challenge, stigmatized industries may place less value on the merit of CSR by focusing on economic stability”. In addition to that, the “findings show the prominence of the lower levels of CSR responsibilities for stigmatized industries, appearing to fulfill economic responsibilities and basic legal requirements in performing CSR during recent years”. Finally, Joon Hye Han, Anthony Grimes and Gary Davies write for this issue about pretesting CSR advertising, thus looking at improving the effectiveness of CSR advertising. In that, the authors focus on feelings vs attitudes and use an experimental method of showing participants video ads, one with an informative appeal and one with an emotional appeal, concluding that despite ads promoting a similar evaluation of the company, the evaluations measured by evoking feelings differed. The information-based ad evoked more positive emotions and instigated a more positive attitude towards the ad. The authors thus argue that since research continues to make a causal link between CSR and financial performance (Bashir, 2022), and since advertising is perceived as one way to be responsible, it is relevant to study adverts because many companies do not create the effects expected of them because they do not often pre-test adverts (Hu *et al.*, 2009; King *et al.*, 1993; Turnbull and Wheeler, 2017). Whilst authors recognise that pre-testing is sometimes seen as controversial (Gwynn, 2017; Cramphorn, 2014), they also argue that it can guide decision-making when using video advertising, which is the main format globally applied for the industry. Authors argue that “the findings provide general support for the idea that exposure to corporate CSR video

advertising can establish a positive company image and engender positive attitudes towards the organization irrespective of whether an affect-based or information-based approach is adopted”.

In conclusion, this issue offers some new insights into CSR and CSI issues with a particular focus on WOM and the publics’ responses to CSR and CSI. These issues are relevant because there is no agreement on CSR, whether it should exist and if so, how it should work and since the concept of CSI is relatively new and unexplored, some of these studies can be used to further develop research. What is more, CSI is relevant from an organisational communication perspective because if an organisation is perceived as irresponsible, this presents reputational damage and a communication challenge that corporate communications departments need to address. Therefore, knowing the publics and how they respond to CSI, as well as what they perceive as CSI bears relevance to corporate communications and requires constant academic attention along with new conceptual and methodological frameworks, which this issue has provided. In addition to that, other research studies published in this issue, such as looking at the CSR coverage in the news media or offering CSR conceptualisations offer insights for new research agendas to increase our understanding of what motivates all stakeholders, and understanding all stakeholders is a key element in effective corporate communications.

**Martina Topic**

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