Communicating CSR through Social Media; A New Lens

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Abstract

In today’s business world, corporate social responsibility (CSR) has become an important communication factor that serves companies to differentiate themselves by showing their approaches in every aspect of their activities. Social media help companies communicate these differences to their audiences in a timely and cost-effective manner. Many studies have explored the role of social media in communicating CSR activities. However, there is a limited number of works focusing on the social cues and visual elements in these posts. Through a content analysis of social media posts of the top 50 well-reputed companies according to the Turkish Reputation Index, the study investigated the ways in which these organizations communicate their CSR activities analyzing their messages and image posts on social media platforms. The companies’ efforts to differentiate themselves and their brands are also considered. In addition to their common strategies in their posts, social media trends are also displayed.

The results of this research provide useful implications for companies seeking to increase their reputation and effectively communicate their CSR strategy on-line, and for researchers seeking to investigate the effectiveness of these practices. The study also expands CSR literature to include suggestions for more subtle elements used in the on-line communication.
1. Introduction

In today’s world, companies are especially concerned with corporate social responsibility (CSR) and communicating CSR to their consumers (Kent, 2010) as it plays an important role in organizational success due to increasing demands for social involvement from stakeholders (Curley & Noormohamed, 2014) and in distinguishing themselves in the competitive markets.

Researches show that eighty percent of Twitter user mention a brand in their Tweets at least once during a five month period (Midha, 2014). Accordingly, many companies are willing to be present online and to be popular in the world of social media. Moreover, the marketing potential of social media attracts the companies and companies permanently try to create a strong online presence and share information to transmit their messages. Social media made the corporate communication very easy and created a network of communication with the customers, consumers and all stakeholders by enabling timely, cost-effective and rich communication using social media sites (Gupta, 2011). Social media platforms facilitated responsible companies CSR communication and gave them the opportunity to connect with their stakeholders around a common cause. There are several studies on how companies’ CSR messages are supported by social media platforms (Curley & Noormohamed, 2014; Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010; Smith & Alexander, 2013), however, few studies focused on the textual and visual elements used in these platforms. The visual elements have so much potential as they can influence audiences on a level that words cannot (Pettersson, 2007). The visual elements, with their communicative function form one of the best communication tools to engage consumers, differentiate the company and the brand (Freling, Crosno, & Henard, 2011).

Through a content analysis and a consumer survey of social media posts of the top 50 well-reputed companies according to the Turkish Reputation Index, this study investigated the ways in which these organizations communicate their CSR activities analyzing their messages and image posts on social media platforms (Instagram and Twitter) during a week (7 days in February-March 2016). Moreover, the study compares organizations’ use of social media, type of messages (text/text with image) and contributes to extant literature on CSR by showing trends in the social media CSR strategies of these companies.

2. Literature Review

There are various opportunities offered by social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram, including the costs, the real-time interaction, and the ease of use (Kent, 2010). Companies’ social media usage is also increasing every day and affects the corporate communications so it has to be deeply investigated (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012). Khang et al. (2012) worked on the trends in social media research over the past 14 years and showed that social media altered the dynamics of many relationships, especially the public relations.
Organizations use these new platforms to improve their network visibility, encourage users to reach them, and have deeper relationships with online publics (Men & Tsai, 2012).

Companies use online media to make disclosure, disseminate information, and interactively reach online publics. They inform about their products, promotion, and corporate activities (Men & Tsai, 2012). Clearly, companies’ social media sites primarily serve as a tool for dissemination of corporate information. Accordingly Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) revealed three main functions; information dissemination, community engagement, and getting followers to take action for the organization. Similarly, McNely (2012) investigated the shared images and made the distinction of orienting, displaying products, showing material locations; showcasing, and broad solicitation of audience feedback/participation goals followed by companies to shape their online image. However, McNely (2012) also recognized a need for further research into Instagram’s role in online image.

Social media is also used by companies and stakeholders to get involved in charitable or community causes (Gupta, 2011). Companies use most frequently to endorse causes and nearly two thirds consumers to engage with companies around CSR. This also gives the consumers the chance to let companies know which issues are most relevant to them or companies can monitor the actions on these sites and figure out the most attracting causes (Kerwin, 2010). That confirms the power shift from companies to consumers in CSR area too as Gupta (2011) asserts, that social media has shifted control of the corporate message away from the organization and towards consumers and other stakeholders.

Companies feel much more pressure to contribute to the society but they have to spread their messages to a large audience in a timely manner (Curley & Noormohamed, 2014). Social media platforms are a good solution to overcome this challenge, as these platforms have the capacity to connect permanently consumers, companies and causes. Moreover, Fieseler, Fleck, and Meckel (2010) affirm that socially responsible companies have better relations with their audiences, minimizing the possible effects of regulations or interventions. So, the way to incorporate social media into corporate strategy and the communication of CSR remains very important since the new generation of stakeholders expect the companies they interact with to practice CSR. Social media easily shows the stakeholders the impact of a company’s involvement in a cause. However, the social media account must be always supervised and companies should practice two way communication. Moreover, as mentioned before, visual elements of social media have the power to communicate unique cues about CSR. Visual elements are critical for assessing perceptions of a company’s online presence and companies take this into account while creating and maintaining their online communication strategies (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999).

Visual content drives more traffic to company’s social media sites and increases the engagement of customers resulting in more subscriptions and consumers (Moritz, 2015).
Visual elements in a post increase sharing numbers (Redsicker, 2014) and they become the focal point for social media strategy.

Online CSR communication presents many challenges fortunately the possibility to use imagery and visual elements may help companies, as images facilitate the communication of CSR practices and policies in a way words cannot (Hollerer, Jancsary, Meyer, & Vettori, 2013). Accordingly, Hoellerer et al. (2013) indicate a need for further exploration into the role of imagery in communicating a concept as complex as CSR especially using the new platforms of social media. So, in this exploratory research, the prevalent CSR related terms in Twitter and Instagram posts and their relations with posts in the social media (text only, text with images) and their differences will be investigated.

3. Methodology

A content analysis of posts on Instagram and Twitter during a week over two months period from the top 50 well-reputed companies according to the Turkish Reputation Index was conducted to determine how organizations use social media sites to communicate their CSR activity.

The social media sites Instagram and Twitter are chosen to ensure that the sample included substantial amounts of posts with images and text and posts with text alone. Instagram ensured the presence of visuals/images in posts (McNely, 2012), and Twitter, texts and large audience (Busch & Shepherd, 2014). Top 50 companies, all had both Instagram and Twitter accounts. Some companies had multiple accounts on the same social media site, so in these cases only the official company account was taken in consideration not the account of a new product/promotional activity.

The posts from seven randomly selected different days of the week between 1 February 2016 and 31 March 2016 are used to avoid any unusual social media activity. As the sample is drawn to represent general content of posts from well-reputed companies, the final sample included a total of 1445 tweets and 522 Instagram posts.

In order to investigate used CSR terms Lee and Carroll’s (2011) dimensions of CSR are coded as separate variables according to their contents: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibility. In addition to these four dimensions of CSR, Smith and Alexander’s (2013) common CSR headings are also coded as separate variables: Community, Corporate Responsibility, Diversity, Environment, Citizenship, Employee compensation, Health, Green, Sustainability, and Ethics.

Concerning the visual elements/images, McNely’s (2012) visual elements schema for image strategies is used to see how companies use social media to shape their image. These elements include orienting, place-making, showcasing, and, crowd sourcing.
Concerning the coding process and the reliability, all posts are coded using the posts’ URLs and were separately coded by two coders using the same codebook. Then the sample is checked and coded by the authors. Each post is coded for items pertaining to the aforementioned CSR terms and visual elements. To measure the intercoder reliability Holsti’s (1969) coefficient measure was used to assess reliability and the average agreement was 89.50% across variables, with individual variables’ reliability scores ranging from 79% to 100%.

4. Results

Firstly the frequencies of determined variables in posts were examined to explore the used CSR related terms and image strategies in social media posts. Then, chi-square tests were performed to compare variables usage in posts with text and images and posts with text only, posts from Twitter and Instagram.

The usage of CSR terms by sampled companies’ Twitter and Instagram posts showed that; “Corporate Responsibility” was the most mentioned term, appearing in 44% of the posts. The other terms and their usage level are summarized in the Table 1. According to the difference between posts with images and text and posts with text only in terms of used CSR terms. Ethical responsibility, philanthropic responsibility, community, and corporate responsibility posts with text only were significantly more likely to include their references. Concerning the prevalence of CSR terms in posts on Twitter vs. Instagram; the image strategies differs between posts from Twitter and posts from Instagram as in Table 1 where ethical responsibility, philanthropic responsibility, community, citizenship, and corporate responsibility, posts from Twitter were significantly more likely to include references to corporate responsibility than posts from Instagram. The differences not shown on the table were not significant for any other coded CSR dimensions or terms.

Table 1: Usage level CSR Terms and Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Text Only</th>
<th>Text and Image</th>
<th>X2</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>X2</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic Resp.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Resp.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philanthropic Resp.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Resp.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Resp.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>865</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee Compensation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Concerning the image strategies in the Twitter and Instagram posts, results showed that orienting was the most common strategy, appearing in 40% of the posts, all the strategies in this category were significantly more incorporated in posts with text and image. The difference in terms of used social media platform for these strategies highlights the use of Instagram except for crowd sourcing strategy showing no significant difference between two social media platforms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Image Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orienting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showcase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placemaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowdsourcing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Discussion

This study points out that CSR is not the central occupation for these well reputed companies’ social media but they still inform and disclose information on these issues. CSR based posts highlight philanthropic responsibility, community, citizenship, and ethical responsibility. They are among the more frequently used subjects of the CSR activities. The corporate responsibility is the most frequently used term as it encompasses many activities as suggested by Smith and Alexander (2013) defining it as the equivalent of corporate social responsibility. Moreover, CSR is still important to include in posts, as publics want to engage with companies around CSR initiatives.

Finding also showed that CSR activities are more explained by text as they appear more on Twitter than Instagram. The companies prefer text only messages as they want to be as clear as possible in their activities with no place to interpretation (Messaris, 1994) and CSR is a concept that represents many ideas, and can be hard to explain (Busque, 2013). Accordingly, Twitter may be a more appropriate platform than Instagram which is more image based.

However, the image strategies occur most often on Instagram because the companies use this platform when they like to familiarize users with the company and its products or the development stage of an ongoing CSR campaign. Moreover, posts with text and image are preferred as visuals explain more when the issue is already known by users.

The research provided useful implications for organizations seeking to effectively communicate their CSR strategy, at least in terms of mirroring most reputed companies, as well as for researchers seeking to investigate the effectiveness of these practices.
Theoretically, the study explores the use of CSR related terms and visual elements in these two platforms. Many researchers suggested the use of latent cues to be more effective in describing CSR initiatives (Hollerer et al., 2013). This study was exploratory in nature, but it still paves the way for the effective communication of CSR activities using social media platforms.

Many social platforms have similar functions and features, but companies have to determine the unique qualities of every platform to use it at its best whenever needed. Moreover, companies can use images as tools for orienting new users with the company, the services, products, and reach the experienced users using text messages to give them more detailed information.

Future studies can take in consideration the size, sector and profitability of the companies and investigate their usage of these two and other social platforms. Business experts list sites such as Tumblr and Pinterest, as useful tools for organizations as well (DeMers, 2014; Helmrich, 2015). Future studies could also add to this research the impact of the CSR communication with the impact of brands or compare this impact according to the brands reputation on CSR issues.

6. Conclusion

Although many studies have focused on the application of the CSR concept, this study attempted to contribute to the existing body of research by exploring the application of CSR through social media. While this study was descriptive in nature, future research in related areas can expand its results to other samples across time, company types, and media platforms.

References


