



5

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives: A Focus on COVID-19

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5.1 Introduction

The success of firms largely depends on their responsible behaviour to society (Bravo et al., 2012; Hammann et al., 2009). The responsibility of firms towards stakeholders made up of employees, customers, society, shareholders, investors, governments, etc., enhances societal well-being and firm social and financial performance. The responsibility towards various stakeholders can be achieved by engaging in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In today's socially conscious market environment, corporations across the world have placed corporate social responsibility very high on their agenda (Du et al., 2010). CSR is defined by the European Commission (2001) as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations

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and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis". Therefore, CSR enables firms to respond to a multiplicity of social and environmental concerns such as pandemics.

He and Harris (2020) assert that probably the COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most significant environmental changes in modern marketing history, which could potentially have a profound impact on CSR, consumer ethics, and basic marketing philosophy. The COVID 19 pandemic, in the view of He and Harris (2020), has led to the following:

- businesses are being put to the test to show their commitment to ethical business conduct and CSR. This is because the pandemic has led to financial strains, thus may lead to firms reducing long-term financial commitments and pushing for short-term financial gains even through fraud and misconduct.
- many firms have also been observed using CSR initiatives to provide support for society during the pandemic. One profound evidence of the assistance offered by firms is the turning of their manufacturing plants to produce ventilators, hand sanitisers, protective equipment, etc. In Ghana, for example, alcoholic companies such as Kasapreko and Adonko have produced hand sanitisers to support the fight against COVID-19.

In an editorial in the *Journal of Advertising*, Taylor (2020) posits that one area that needs attention during the COVID 19 pandemic is the use of effective CSR appeals. This is against the background that consumers expect firms to be involved in various appeals such as consumer safety, donations to charity, employee welfare, honouring first respondents, etc. To ensure the effectiveness of CSR during the COVID-19 pandemic, Taylor (2020) proposes that issues of concern must focus on company/message fit, trust in the advertiser, and authenticity. The effectiveness of CSR communications during the COVID-19 pandemic is, therefore, crucial. Lessons can be learned from the study of Du et al. (2010), who identified two main issues affecting the effectiveness of CSR communication are:

- the level of awareness of a company's CSR activities among its external stakeholders (e.g. consumers) or even among its internal stakeholder (e.g. employees) is typically low, hence constituting a key stumbling block in the company's quest to reap strategic benefits from its CSR activities. The phenomenon where CSR is hardly known by consumers, therefore, leading to a moderate effect of CSR on purchase decisions. However, consumers have a higher expectation for firms to involve in CSR.
- the next key challenge of CSR communication is how to minimise stakeholder scepticism. While stakeholders claim they want to know about the good deeds of the companies they buy from or invest in, they also quickly become concerned about the CSR motives when companies aggressively promote their CSR efforts.

Managing firms CSR communications in times of COVID-19 is very challenging. There is a need to base CSR decisions and actions on a sound strategy, which appreciates the adoption of a strategic CSR communication approach. A strategic CSR communication process includes designing the CSR message and deciding the CSR communication channel, and ensuring CSR communications achieve the expected outcomes by ensuring the attainment of contingency factors such as minimising CSR scepticism. To address these issues, a semi-systematic literature review, which reviews how scholars have applied different conceptualisations to understand a phenomenon (Snyder, 2019), was adopted. This chapter first explains CSR communications and CSR communication strategies. The chapter also provides some evidence of CSR communication during the COVID-19 pandemic by firms in emerging economies. The rest of the chapter focuses on how organisations can perform strategic CSR communication during the COVID-19 pandemic by explaining the development of an effective CSR message and CSR communication outcomes.

5.2 CSR Communication

CSR communication provides information about a firm's identity that are not only fundamental and enduring, and distinctive (Du et al., 2010). A firm can, therefore, distinguish itself through the information it provides to the target audience regarding its involvement in sponsorship of social causes. As a result, CSR communication is basically about communicating CSR (Golob et al., 2013). CSR communication, according to Golob et al. (2013, p. 178), the following views explain the concept of CSR communication: first it "is about using promotional techniques that are directed at informing about companies' CSR and actively supporting CSR-based brand identity and reputation" and second, it is "conceived as a means to influence stakeholders' perception of organisations in terms of the resources of information (specific contents, media, channels or rhetorical arsenals) they use to inform stakeholders about their CSR policies and activities".

There are two epistemological foundations providing the basis for CSR communications, which are the functionalistic approach and constitutive approach (see Table 5.1). The functionalistic approach leads to a view about CSR communication as a democratic communication, which may represent diverse and conflicting views of stakeholders. This form of communication does not expect to result in a consensus where stakeholders must suppress their views and expectations to arrive at an agreement. The approach used here does not aim to seek the consent of all stakeholders. The focus is on providing CSR activities to stakeholders.

Table 5.1 Two approaches to CSR communication: Functionalistic and constitutive approach

| Characteristics | Functionalistic approach to CSR communication | Constitutive approach to CSR communication |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Conceptualisation interaction | Messaging | Interaction |
| Objective | Transparency | Co-creation |
| Metaphor | Conduit | Connectness |
| Channel | Monological | Dialogical |
| Perspective | Sequential | Holistic |

Source Golob et al. (2013)

The constitutive approach emphasises viewing CSR communication as a holistic activity that takes into account the views and concerns of other stakeholders. CSR communication must reflect all the elements that constitute the organisation.

The two epistemological approaches to CSR communication seem to form the basis for the various CSR communication strategies. The elements of the functionalistic approach are evident in the information CSR communication strategy, while the constitutive approach suits the deliberative (involving) CSR communication strategy. The discussion on CSR communication strategies by Morsing and Schultz (2006) and Etter (2014) below help to cement the assumption that CSR communication is based on these two epistemological approaches discussed earlier. Morsing and Schultz (2006) identified three CSR communication strategies that can be performed through a number of tasks.

5.2.1 Stakeholder Information Strategy

Organisations provide information about their CSR decisions and actions to stakeholders. To do this, a one-way public communication approach is adopted. This approach leads to stakeholders asking or looking for information about what organisations have done to respond to a social event. This approach may also create a situation where stakeholders such as employees, customers, shareholders, etc. may either support or oppose the CSR initiative due to the lack of collaboration. The communication strategy, therefore, will be to design appealing concept messages that will gain the acceptance of stakeholders.

5.2.2 Stakeholder Response Strategy

Organisation demonstrates to their stakeholders that their concerns are integrated into responsible behaviour. The CSR communication approach is directed towards soliciting actions by stakeholders in response to organisations decisions. These initiatives are to address the concerns that might arise from top management decisions. This approach in the COVID-19 era might be to resolve management actions

that might cause a negative impact on stakeholders. Organisations must provide timely communications to reassure stakeholders during difficult times. For instance, organisations can use various communication mediums to detect the response of their stakeholders to organisations actions during the pandemic. A stakeholder response CSR strategy will be to address important issues stakeholders would like organisations to focus on.

5.2.3 Stakeholder Involvement strategy

The organisation invites and establishes a dialogue with stakeholders, who, therefore, become involved in CSR messages. This seems to be similar to the deliberative CSR approach, as explained by Seele and Lock (2015). In the COVID-19 era, organisations are collaborating with their stakeholders to find solutions to the problems posed by the pandemic. Collaborations with international and government agencies, NGOs, customers, employees can lead to CSR activities that are created from negotiations. The CSR communication strategy, therefore, is a two-way approach to bring about mutual understanding through dialogue.

5.3 Etter's Three Strategies of CSR Communication on Twitter

The study of Etter (2014) on classifying the CSR communication strategies used by firms on Twitter also identified three main strategies. Based on the classification of Morsing and Schultz (2006), careful analysis of these CSR communication strategies proposed by Etter (2014), namely, broadcasting strategy, reactive strategy, and engagement strategy, lead to the conclusion that there are three main CSR communication strategies. The broadcasting strategy, which is an informational approach, seeks to disclose to a firm's diverse stakeholders its CSR initiatives. This is a one-way communication effort, which might seek to create awareness among the general public about a firm's CSR efforts. The second strategy is the reactive approach (responding to stakeholders' interests).

Table 5.2 Three CSR communication strategies on Twitter

| Twitter CSR communication | Description |
|---------------------------|---|
| Broadcasting strategy | This approach is basically a one-way communication, from the firm to target audience. The main aim is to provide information on CSR actions to target audience on Twitter |
| Reactive strategy | This approach entails responsive CSR communication behaviour. This CSR communication on Twitter is to respond to questions and remarks from stakeholders |
| Engagement strategy | This is a two-way communication. There is regular dialogue with stakeholders relating to CSR activities on Twitter. Apart from disseminating CSR information, corporate executives show interest in interacting with stakeholders |

Source Adapted from Etter (2014)

This CSR communication approach emanates from CSR decisions of firm managers to address the expectations, interests, and pressure. A third strategy is a deliberative approach where firm managers enter into dialogue with stakeholders to inform how CSR actions can be implemented. This is a two-way communication approach, which implies that stakeholders like employees, shareholders, NGOs, government agencies, etc., have the opportunity to be part of CSR activities and their communications (Table 5.2).

5.4 Reporting of CSR Activities During COVID-19 Pandemic

The use of CSR communications to inform stakeholders about firm's CSR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic is evident. The following online stories (see Table 5.3) report the contribution of firms in emerging markets towards the fight against COVID-19. These reports are mainly about firm donations. Some initiatives are also about cause promotions, providing education about COVID-19. There are also

Table 5.3 COVID-19 CSR reportage in emerging economies

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Nestle: https://www.nestle-cwa.com/en/media/pressreleases/allpressreleases/cocoa-chocolate-industry-donates-835000-help-farmers-fight-covid-19?</p> | <p>Cocoa, chocolate industry donates \$835,000 to help farmers fight COVID-19</p> |
| <p>Nestle—Cote d'Ivoire https://www.nestle.com/media/news/nestle-cote-ivoire-donates-ventilators-covid-19</p> | <p>Nestlé Côte d'Ivoire donates ventilators to assist critical COVID-19 patients</p> |
| <p>MTN Ghana https://mtn.com.gh/personal/covid-19/</p> | <p>Y'ello! As part of our efforts to support our customers during the COVID-19 Pandemic, we have zero-rated a number of educational sites to help students continue to study using online resources. Please note that these websites have a daily cap of 500 MB</p> |
| <p>Newmont https://www.newmont.com/operations-and-projects/health-and-safety/default.aspx#:</p> | <p>On April 9th, 2020, Newmont announced the establishment of a US\$20 million fund to help host communities, governments and employees combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The Newmont Global Community Support Fund (the Fund) builds upon other local contributions and efforts that the Company has implemented in March</p> |
| <p>Vodafone: https://www.vodafone.com/covid19/news/vodafone-ghana-foundation-helps-frontline-workers-against-covid-19</p> | <p>Vodafone Ghana Foundation helps support frontline workers in the fight against COVID-19</p> |
| <p>MTN https://www.mtn.com/blog/covid-19/ ABSA https://www.facebook.com/AbisaUganda/videos/covid-19-education-yaya-toure/661460744404193/</p> | <p>MTN Irancell sends awareness messages on COVID-19 via SMS ABSA Bank Uganda using Yaya Toure to provide public education on COVID-19</p> |
| <p>30 Different companies https://www.businessinsider.com/companies-donating-proceeds-coronavirus-relief-2020-3?IR=T</p> | <p>Companies donating percentage of their proceeds to COVID-19</p> |
| <p>Zhejiang https://www.ilo.org/empent/whatsnew/WCMS_740657/lang-en/index.htm</p> | <p>Zhejiang Communication Construction Ltd in China is using employees to disinfect work environment against COVID-19</p> |

(continued)

Table 5.3 (continued)

| | |
|---|--|
| ABSA https://www.facebook.com/AbsaGhana/videos/to-support-you-and-help-reduce-the-economic-impact-of-covid-19-we-are-offering-t/162410311599070/ | ABSA Bank Ghana provides banking support to customers, e.g. 2% reduction in lending rate on qualified personal and SME loans |
|---|--|

instances where organisations' employees volunteer to assist in fighting the pandemic.

5.5 Managing CSR Communications

There are a number of important activities that need to be performed to ensure CSR communication achieves its intended purpose. These activities are crucial in ensuring the attainment of effective CSR communication. Based on the study of Du et al. (2010), the following activities must be performed:

5.6 Designing CSR Communication Message Decisions

5.6.1 Message Content

The CSR message is involved with the actual social initiative a firm has been involved in or involving in. From the marketing communication process, the message represents the actual information and impressions that the sender (firm) wishes to communicate (Pickton & Broderick, 2005). This aspect of the communication process entails the ways in which the message is created, the various elements that make up the message, the interpretation of the message by recipients, and the possible issues that could lead to misinterpretation of the message (Fig. 5.1).

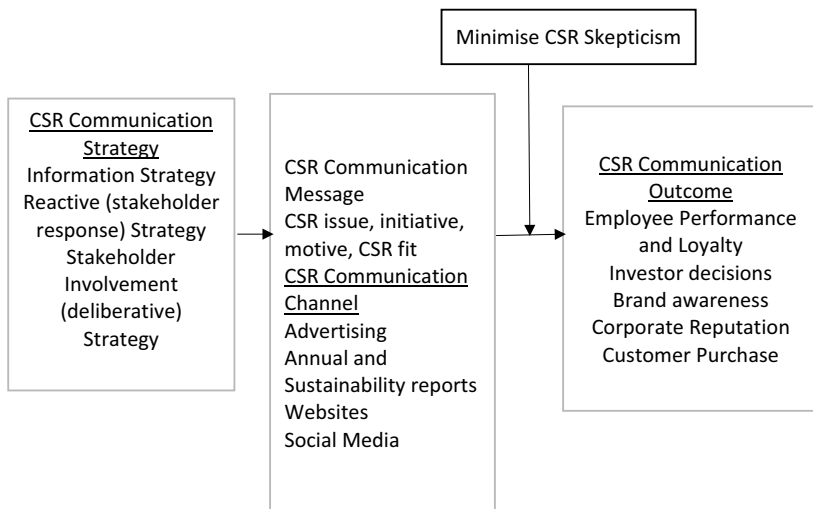


Fig. 5.1 Strategic CSR communication framework (Source Adapted from Du et al. [2010])

The communication of CSR initiatives must be intentional to ensure that the right response is elicited. Firms that seek to communicate their CSR activities must take note of the following:

Firms must reduce the concepts relating to CSR activity during the pandemic to a set of symbols that can be sent to the target audience. Symbols are artificial signs that are created for the purpose of providing meaning (e.g. words). The words used in communicating CSR activities must be understood and meaningful to everybody. It is important to consider the background of the target audience in communicating CSR initiatives. Various target audiences have different backgrounds and may understand CSR messages differently. For instance, on the website of the Ministry of Health, Ghana, the communication of the receipt of COVID-19 relief items from the Jack Ma Foundation touched on issues such as the commitment of the Chinese government to help countries fight the virus, and the measures put in place to ensure the medical equipment were of superior standard (see <https://www.moh.gov.gh/jack-ma-foundation-donates-again/>) (<http://gh.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxw/>

t1772386.htm). This CSR communication took the opportunity to address the perception of substandard medical equipment that has been supplied to other countries to fight COVID-19. Also, the communication of this CSR initiative was supported by a picture of the Chinese and the Ghanaian delegations at a ceremony at the airport. This makes the message very believable and also aids in easy understanding by the target audience.

Pickton and Broderick (2005), citing McGuire's information processing model (1976), explain that the process an individual goes through to convert communication messages into useful knowledge. Table 5.4 presents the stages of the information process from the exposure stage to knowledge retention. The understanding of how CSR communications influence target audience knowledge based on the McGuire information processing model is presented below.

Table 5.4 Stages of information processing

| Stage | Activity | Implications for CSR communication |
|---------------|--|--|
| Exposure | Target audience must have proximity to the message | CSR communications must be exposed to target audience |
| Attention | The target audience must be aware of the message and make effort to process it | CSR communications must have the ability to attract target audience |
| Comprehension | The target audience must be able to understand the message | CSR communications must be very clear and unambiguous |
| Acceptance | The target audience must absorb the message into their existing belief and knowledge leading to persuasion | CSR communication must will lead to target audience accepting the message leading to new set of belief and knowledge |
| Retention | The target audience store messages in their long term memory | CSR communication messages must be easily recalled |

Source Adapted from Pickton and Broderick (2005)

The implication of the creation of content (message) in CSR communication during pandemics is that the effectiveness of marketing communications depends on the effectiveness of the message and not the number of media the communication is placed. Pickton and Broderick (2005) propose that at this stage of the communication process, much emphasis must be given to high-impact communications.

5.7 The CSR Initiative

To ensure CSR communications provide the needed results, organisations must emphasise some important issues in their CSR messages. Du et al. (2010) propose that issues relating to commitment to a cause, the level of impact of the firm's CSR initiatives on the cause, the motive for engaging in a particular cause, and the fit (the congruity between the cause and the company).

5.7.1 The CSR Commitment

In relation to the proposition by Du et al. (2010), the commitment to fighting COVID-19 can be demonstrated through a number of CSR initiatives. Kotler and Lee (2005) propose the following:

- **Corporate Philanthropy**—making direct contributions to a charity or cause, usually in the form of grants or donations. In relation to COVID-19, this social initiative appears to be the dominant one since there is an urgency to provide health equipment, PPEs, etc. Organisations in emerging economies have been reported donating to support the fight against COVID-19 (see Table 5.3). In emerging economies, corporate donations are seen as reactive support to respond to an emergency. The infrastructure challenges and inadequate logistics make this CSR initiative very impactful. A report by Hinson and Newman (2020) indicates that donations are the most common form of CSR initiatives in the fight against COVID-19.

- **Cause Promotions**—supporting social causes through paid sponsorships of promotional efforts. Cause promotion initiatives by organisations during the COVID-19 will be to sponsor awareness campaigns on preventive measures. In Table 5.3, MTN, a telecommunication company, uses their SMS infrastructure to create awareness on COVID-19 by sending messages to customers. It is expected that organisations that have easy communication access to the general public, such as television and radio stations, telecommunication companies, and technology companies, may take advantage of their resources to educate people about COVID-19. In the era of new media, organisations can use their social media platforms, which have many followers, to educate them on COVID-19. An example is ABSA Bank Uganda using their Facebook account to educate people on COVID-19 (see Table 5.3).
- **Corporate social marketing**—supporting behaviour change campaigns. This form of CSR involves initiatives that cause a change in behaviour. The fight against COVID-19 involves people performing new behaviours such as washing hands, using sanitisers, wearing a mask, etc. Organisations can promote certain behaviours among the general public and their employees. Many firms are communicating about “working from home”.
- **Cause-related marketing**—donating a percentage of revenues to a specific cause based on product sales during an announced period of time. Organisations have reported the allocation of a certain percentage of their proceeds to support COVID-19. This, however, is tied to the sales revenue the organisation makes during the announcement of the initiative. This initiative has, however, not been implemented by firms. A reason could be that the pandemic is a form of an emergency that firms have to respond to. Also, basing COVID-19 support on sales of firm products may also raise issues of ethical business practices since firms may not want to be seen as taking advantage of the situation.
- **Community volunteering**—providing volunteer services in the community. Organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic have organised their employees to involve themselves in initiatives. An example is Zhejiang Communication Construction Ltd, which

trained their employees to disinfect their work environment against COVID-19. Also, Renault, an automobile company, provided support for its employees to manufacture health equipment (<https://www.thisistherealspain.com/en/latest-news/corporate-volunteering-corporate-talent-takes-on-covid-19/>).

To ensure a strategic benefit from CSR communications, the extent of commitment to the CSR cause will play a crucial role. The selection of initiatives to be involved must be innovative. Just as in commercial marketing, where marketing communication effectiveness may be determined by the product quality, CSR communication efforts may yield the desired results based on the kind of CSR commitments. It has been argued that each CSR initiatives have some corresponding strategic benefits. For instance, the involvement in community volunteering affects employee job satisfaction, the attraction of qualified workforce and improves the corporate image. On the other hand, corporate philanthropy increases brand awareness and reputation among customers.

5.7.2 CSR Motives

The motive of organisations' involvement in specific CSR initiatives is a challenge due to stakeholder scepticism (Du et al., 2010). Therefore, the question of whether firms in their CSR communications must emphasise altruistic motives, intrinsic motives or clearly indicate their business motive (Du et al., 2010).

Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013) propose the following relationship between CSR motives and CSR scepticism:

- Egoistic-driven motive—consumers are likely to question and doubt CSR efforts when they attribute the retailer's social involvement to blatant self-centred reasons. Thus, egoistic-driven motives relate positively to CSR scepticism.
- Value-driven motive—this forms CSR engagements based on pure ethical, moral, and societal standards leading to customers believing the firm is acting on genuine concern to help society. Value-driven motives relate negatively to CSR scepticism.

- Strategy-driven motive—this epitomises the business case for CSR. Firms engage in CSR in order to attain goals underlined by their survival and promoting the initiatives to create a win–win situation. Customers, therefore, may understand it as legitimate since businesses need to achieve economic objectives, but on the other hand, customers may also perceive firm actions as driven by profit. Strategy-driven motives relate positively to CSR scepticism.
- Stakeholder-driven motive—these are formed from pressure from stakeholders such as employees, stockholder, and society for firms to respond to the demands. This creates a negative image of firms since stakeholders view their involvement in CSR as a means to avoid punishment. Stakeholder-driven motives relate positively to CSR scepticism.

In another study by Rim and Kim (2016), the reasons that account for consumer scepticism of CSR are disbelief of CSR messages and CSR activities, distrust of management and CSR outcomes, CSR motivation, and cynicism towards business. To enable businesses and researchers to measure the level of CSR scepticism, some measurement scales have been proposed by Rim and Kim (2016).

Disbelief of CSR messages and CSR activities—Sceptics of firm's CSR messages doubt whether the messages and activities are truthful and believable. The disbelief may be caused by the lack of alignment between firm's CSR activities and core business. Also, conspicuous CSR advertising that seems to hype the CSR initiative.

Distrust of management and CSR outcomes—the perception of distrust of a firm manager's ability to introduce successful social changes will lead to scepticism towards the firm's CSR. This perception emanates from the notion that the “business of business is business” and, therefore, firms lack the ability to bring about improvements in society. Also, CSR scepticism arises from the inability of firms to show tangible outcomes of some CSR activities.

CSR motivation—The motive for engaging in CSR determines whether stakeholders will believe the initiative or will be sceptical. Intrinsic (altruistic) motivation, which is related to firm's sincere objective to engage in a social cause, while extrinsic (egoistic) motivation

relates to a firm's motive to support a social cause because it seeks to improve reputation and performance. The scepticism is formed when there is a discrepancy between the CSR activity and the profit-maximising objective of the business (extrinsic motivation).

Cynicism towards Business—Consumer cynicism, which is a personal trait developed through continuous distrust for business in a market system, can create scepticism towards CSR. Cynics have a higher likelihood to doubt a firm's CSR activities, thus leading to scepticism.

5.7.3 Reducing CSR Scepticism

From a strategic CSR communication point of view, firms must emphasise the specific motive that informs their involvement in a particular CSR in order to reduce the impact of scepticism. The indication of CSR motives relating to egoistic and value-driven motives will lead to a more positive impact of a firm's legitimacy. On the other hand, a CSR communication that stresses a strategic and a stakeholder-driven CSR motive is likely to reduce the level of scepticism. In the view of Du et al. (2010), the motive underlying a particular CSR initiative must be made clear in communications. CSR communication must emphasise both the social and strategic benefits of CSR to stakeholders. This will go a long way to enhance the credibility of the business. Lee (2020) cites an experimental stimuli study by Forehand and Grier (2003) experimental stimuli, "It is hoped that this program will help alleviate a major problem in our society and simultaneously expand the market for the company's software products" (p. 352).

Apologies and responsibility acceptance attract less negative reactions than denials, excuses, and justifications (Lee, 2020). Taking responsibility for firm actions that impact negatively on the environment and society through CSR communication is a first step to indicate the willingness to help. The acceptance of criticisms and working towards using CSR actions to resolve them go a long way to gain acceptance and legitimacy. Firms must practice responsible behaviour they communicate with their target audience.

Also, the use of some specific sources of communication has been found to reduce scepticism. Lee (2020) recommends the use of public sources. Public sources of CSR information such as confessions, journalistic endeavours by neutral individuals, etc., can be a way to reduce scepticisms. The CSR activities during the COVID-19 pandemic that are communicated by independent individuals, other than firm managers will be believable as the message is coming from an independent source. Organisations can involve public media organisations to verify CSR claims relating to what the firm has been able to do. Public media and confessions can be a major source to verify the CSR claim, hence reducing CSR scepticism.

A study by Newman and Trump (2019) proposes that the CSR scepticism can be reduced when CSR messages are promoted by the gender and gender-related characteristics of the company's CSR spokesperson. Firms must consider the role of gender, as gender-related characteristics influence the interpretation of CSR information. For instance, females may view CSR claims promoted by a male spokesperson as assertive (an agentic characteristic associated with men), leading to a negative reaction. On the other hand, males will react favourably to this same message. The implication for firms is that CSR target audience that is female might be targeted with CSR messages presented by a female spokesperson.

5.7.4 The CSR Fit

To ensure CSR communication has a strategic impact, Du et al. (2010) propose that there must be a CSR fit, which is the perceived congruence between an organisation and its CSR activities (Du et al., 2010). de Jong and van der Meer (2017) explain that a high CSR fit exists when there is a clear relationship between an organisations core business and its CSR activities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the urgent need for firms to respond, most of the CSR initiatives are embarked on are in line with the firm's core businesses. In the telecommunication sector in Ghana, firms providing mobile money services (banks, telecommunication firms) with

the Bank of Ghana decided not to charge customers for mobile money transactions of a certain amount (graphic.com.gh). Also, telecommunication firms like MTN and Vodafone provided free internet data for university students. Vodafone Ghana is providing free E—learning access to students in many educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://vodafone.com.gh/explore-vodafone/free-e-learning/>).

The communication of these CSR initiatives, which are aligned to firm's businesses, will have a better communication impact since the target audience will perceive the initiatives as believable. The target audience can readily associate the CSR initiative with a firm's core business, therefore, indicating reducing scepticism. In communication CSR, a clearer natural fit between a firm's business and CSR activity will enable stakeholders to react positively to an organisation's CSR activities.

5.8 Communication Channel Decision

The second big question to address in CSR strategic communication is the kind of communication channel to use. CSR activities can be communicated using web-based communications, advertising, annual reports, and a combination of the various media options (Golob et al., 2013). In the view of El-Bassiouny et al. (2018), the common contemporary CSR communication tools in emerging economies include corporate annual reports, websites, and social media. Other online sources from news agencies also provide CSR information (Twum et al., 2020). However, advertising is still an important form of CSR communication. The channels for communicating CSR are discussed below.

5.8.1 CSR Advertising

Advertising remains a way of creating conscious associations in the minds of consumers regarding a firm's responsible behaviours. Despite the preference of non-traditional media in CSR reporting, Freire and Loussaief (2018) still recommend the use of advertising (television broadcast, newspaper articles) since it remains an important channel

in the consumers' mind. Information and results relating to CSR are mainly made known through annual and environmental reports. Corporate annual reports and environmental reports serve stakeholders such as employees, shareholders, NGOs, etc. and are not focused on providing CSR information to consumers. However, firms need to communicate their CSR to consumers.

CSR advertising is the use of advertising channels such as television, print media (newspaper, magazine) and outdoor advertising (billboards). A good example of CSR advertising on television broadcasts is short documentaries on their social initiatives to protect the environment and promote community welfare. In developing economies, companies in extractive industries use television documentaries to showcase their operations. An example is the use of print advertising to acknowledge and thank employees for their efforts to make the bank succeed (Pomering & Dolnicar, 2009).

5.8.2 Corporate Annual and Sustainability Reports

Organisations' annual reports are communication tools used to voluntarily disclose non-financial information for various stakeholders. Firm's annual reports have become a source for identifying CSR activities since non-financial disclosures are now becoming a major part of annual reports. In annual reports, CSR disclosures are usually reported in the sustainability section, which involves issues such as health, safety, and the environment. A study by Abugre and Nyuur (2015) found that annual reports are an important channel for reporting CSR among Ghanaian firms. COVID-19 activities will form a major part of firm's sustainability report.

5.8.3 Corporate Websites

Corporate websites are the common channel to disclose CSR information. Firms can do this by either having a separate website for their CSR activities or communicate CSR on their existing corporate websites. The first option is very simple to do when organisations already have

separate entities registered to manage their CSR. An example is the MTN Ghana Foundation, a registered organisation responsible for the CSR initiatives of MTN in Ghana. A study by Nyarku and Hinson (2017) found that from 2010 to 2014, commercial banks in Ghana reported CSR activities on their websites, which leads to a conclusion that CSR reporting is a common practice by firms in Ghana. Similarly, in the telecommunication sector, Abukari and Abdul-Hamid (2018) found that company websites are fast becoming a medium for CSR communications. COVID-19 CSR activities have been widely reported on company websites. Some evidence of these reports on company websites is presented in Table 5.3.

5.8.4 Social Media

Communication CSR using social media is the key to attaining strategy objectives. The changing communication landscape due to the emergence of new forms of media demands that CSR communications must also be done through these new channels. The advent of the internet has led to a shift from mass media communications to a more direct form of communication with stakeholders. Social media platforms including Facebook, Google+ , Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and YouTube are common means of CSR communications. New media communication such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc., enables the target audience to be updated on organisations CSR activities on a regular basis. Unlike mass media, where firms periodically pay to communicate CSR messages, social media communications can present an opportunity for firms to send out CSR messages on a daily basis, as and when the firm embarks on such initiatives.

5.9 Typology of CSR Communication Tools

Seele and Lock (2015) identified two main typologies of CSR communication tools. These are instrumental CSR and deliberative CSR.

Table 5.5 CSR communication tools typology

| | Instrumental (corporate) | Deliberative |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Published communication | <i>CSR website</i> <i>CSR Report</i> <i>CSR brochure</i> | <i>Social Media</i> |
| Unpublished communication | <i>CSR strategy paper</i> <i>Internal compliance handbook</i> <i>Code of conduct</i> | <i>Stakeholder roundtable</i> <i>Stakeholder dialogue</i> <i>Internal—employees</i> <i>External: NGOs, advocacy groups, special interest groups</i> |

Source Seele and Lock (2015)

5.9.1 Instrumental CSR

CSR-related obligations must create opportunities for the attainment of strategic objectives such as attracting new customers and markets, increase sales, positive brand image. Instrumental CSR is meant to achieve strategic objectives and is usually published on company websites, CSR report, and brochures, advertisements, etc. On the other hand, unpublished communications that are strategy-based (see Table 5.5) may include CSR strategy paper, internal compliance handbook, code of conduct. The COVID-19 CSR initiatives will best be classified under instrumental CSR.

5.9.2 Deliberative CSR

These CSR obligations are dedicated to meet the expectations of all stakeholders. This approach is more related to political CSR, which uses participation, discourse, transparency, and accountability with interested parties. To address the needs and expectations of stakeholders, firms adopt communication options such as roundtable discussions and dialogue, NGO engagement, etc. Most of these engagements are not published.

5.10 CSR Communication Outcomes

CSR communication must translate into the attainment of firm outcomes. The CSR communication outcome determines whether firm communication efforts are effective. These outcomes are explained below.

5.10.1 Brand Awareness

CSR has the ability to affect brand awareness through CSR reporting (Mattera et al., 2012). A consensus among researchers and practitioners is that for CSR initiatives to translate into brand awareness; there is the need to embark on communicating these initiatives to stakeholders. Andreu et al. (2015) argue that CSR awareness is very important since consumers must first have knowledge of the CSR initiatives of an organisation. Subsequently, the awareness of organisations CSR will translate into an awareness of the organisations brand, which becomes the first step in building brand equity. The CSR communications during the COVID-19 pandemic will first and foremost provide publicity, making the general public and consumers to be aware of their brands.

5.10.2 Corporate Reputation

Corporate reputation is the integrated perspective of corporate identity, corporate image, and corporate reputation (Barnett et al., 2006). The reputation of an organisation is formed through the identity (the perception of employees and managers of the firm) and image (perception of external stakeholders about a firm). Gotsi and Wilson (2001) define corporate reputation as a “stakeholder’s overall evaluation of a company over time. This evaluation is based on the stakeholder’s direct experiences with the company, any other form of communication and symbolism that provides information about the firm’s actions and/or a comparison with the actions of other leading rivals”. This definition emphasising on the effect of *any form of communication* that provides information on firm’s actions that make CSR communication an important factor

affecting corporate reputation. Fombrum (2005) explains that firms take up CSR initiatives by following the guidelines of various standards in an attempt to strengthen their reputation.

The objective of firms to enhance their reputation informs the involvement in CSR. The perception of how ethical a firm is can be formed through CSR actions, thus leading to improved firm reputation relating to their ethical behaviour. The involvement of firms in helping their stakeholders during the COVID-19 pandemic, apart from creating awareness about the company, will also create a perception of an ethical company. The reputation of firms that have been involved in COVID-19 CSR initiatives is likely to be positive among employees, customers, and the general public.

5.10.3 Consumer Purchase

The effect of CSR on consumers' purchase behaviour has formed a central part of the debate on the business case for firms to involve in CSR actions. The question is, therefore, about whether firms investing their resources in CSR will gain benefits in terms of the likelihood of a purchase from consumers. A critical question one can also ask is that, will consumers avoid buying from firms that have been reported to engage in unethical practices?

Öberseder et al. (2011) explain that CSR may not be on top of the list of factors (i.e. price, quality, brand, country of origin, or service) that determine consumer purchase decisions but found that there are some peripheral factors that have an impact of the likelihood of considering CSR as a purchase criterion. These factors are:

- ***Consumer's Perception of the Credibility of CSR***—A general knowledge of the credibility of firm's CSR can be achieved when there is a fit between a company's CSR and its core business. In the same vein, customers will view COVID-19 CSR initiatives that are aligned to the company's core business a credible. A good example is the initiatives including additional data, free access to online earning resources, free access to health and government information, waiving overcharge

fees, etc., rolled out by telecommunication companies (ITU, 2020). Telecommunication firms that communicate these kinds of CSR initiatives are likely to generate purchase responses from consumers.

- ***The Image of the company***—The image of an organisation can be formed through CSR activities. A positive perception of the image of a firm evokes the association that the organisation is socially responsible. The notion is that consumers will have a favourable reaction to CSR when the image they have for the organisation is positive. The implication of CSR COVID-19 communication on consumer purchases can be influenced by the image consumers have about the organisation.
- **Influence of peer groups**—The social influence from friends, colleagues, and family to buy from socially responsible organisations is a way that can affect the effectiveness of CSR. Based on the CSR perception of people classified as “important others” or “referent group”, consumers can be persuaded to purchase from socially responsible firms. Therefore, the effect of COVID-19 CSR communication on consumer purchase decisions can be through other individuals. Positive word-of-mouth, that is, communication emanating from other individuals apart from firm managers, could be valuable.

5.10.4 Customer Loyalty

Corporate social responsibility influences customer loyalty through the improvement of trust and satisfaction (Martínez & del Bosque, 2013). The benevolent trust in the view of Martínez and del Bosque (2013) is formed through the perception that a firm cares, concerning, and is honest. The link between CSR and the formation of benevolent trust is that customers will perceive that the firm has consumer’s well-being and interest at heart based on the analysis of their socially responsible activities. Customer satisfaction with the product and actions of a firm can lead to a commitment to a firm. The firms that make their customers satisfied through their social interventions are likely to make these customers committed to the firm, leading to their continuous use of products and recommendations.

5.10.5 Employee Productivity and Loyalty

The influence of CSR on employee loyalty though having little empirical support, is possible when the CSR initiatives are of interest to the employees. CSR initiatives which are employee-centred initiatives such as paying social securities for employees, paying wages that enhances the welfare of employees, transparent internal relationship, improving the working environment, ineffective safety measures, etc., must be the focus on firms attempting to enhance employee affective commitment (Zhu et al., 2014). It is worth noting that money-related changes are not very effective in enhancing affective commitment, while personal relation initiatives seem to be more effective (Zhu et al., 2014). Du et al. (2015) also acknowledge that CSR initiatives that are demanded by employees address their developmental job needs. Similarly, Sánchez and Benito-Hernández (2015) explain that CSR initiatives that have the potential of contributing to productivity are those that address internal issues affecting employees.

The implication of this in designing CSR initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic is that employees can be targeted with some innovative initiatives. Interventions such as changes in wages, flexible working schedules, health insurance, etc., are crucial in times of pandemic to ensure they stay committed. These CSR initiatives are usually communicated internally. Employees are likely to improve their performance with the existence of initiatives that promote their welfare and work needs.

5.10.6 Investor Decisions

One question that demands an answer is whether CSR disclosures are relevant to investors. To address this, Verbeeten et al. (2016) took a look at how the type of CSR disclosure (social and environmental) influences investors. The influence of social CSR disclosures occurs due to it has been used as an indication of the human capital of a firm, which has the potential of improving firm performance (Verbeeten et al., 2016). The implication for CSR communication is that investors are interested in

specific CSR activities, and the ability to disclose to them such initiatives will affect their investment decisions positively. On the other hand, tailor-specific CSR disclosures to satisfy a particular investor group may come as an expense to another group, hence, the need to work out a trade-off (Verbeeten et al., 2016). The implication of this to COVID-19 CSR communications is that disclosures must target investor stakeholders. CSR initiatives that are communicated must be explained in terms of how they affect share price and firm performance. This demands that CSR disclosures relating to COVID-19 must also be directed at investors.

5.11 Conclusion

The CSR communication strategy adopted by firms determines how the other aspects of the CSR communication activities are conducted. For firms seeking to provide information about their CSR activities, an informational approach is appropriate. This approach is a one-way communication format that seeks to maximise the use of mass media and other new media channels to reach out to as many target audiences as to create awareness of CSR activities. A reactive CSR communication strategy demands that firms must understand through surveys and intelligence gathering, the interests, and expectations of stakeholders and must come up with CSR communications that satisfy these expectations. A deliberative CSR communication strategy is a two-way communication approach with firms and their stakeholders involved in CSR communication efforts.

Firms in communicating their CSR activities during pandemics such as COVID-19 must ensure their communication efforts, follow the strategic CSR approach that incorporates a creative CSR message. Also, the effectiveness of CSR messages is determined by the kind of CSR initiative. Organisations can decide to initiative corporate philanthropy, corporate social marketing, cause promotions, community volunteerism, and cause-related marketing. Any of these CSR initiatives have unique strategic importance. However, to ensure effective CSR communication

during a pandemic, firms must ensure there is a fit between the initiative and their core business. The scepticism of stakeholders about a firm's CSR communications can affect the expected effect of CSR negatively. CSR scepticism can be minimised by communicating CSR motives, ensuring there is a fit between firm business and CSR actions, communicating exactly CSR practices that have been implemented, using public sources of information, and taking into gender-related characteristics of the target audience.

The effectiveness of CSR communications can also be enhanced through the careful use of communication channels. This study suggests that CSR communication is more effective by using organisational websites, annual and sustainability reports, and social media. However, CSR advertising still remains a common option for organisations since consumers still rely on television and print media for information. For effective CSR communications, multiple communication channels can be used to reach out to target audience with different needs. The efficacy of each communication channel can add up to how CSR actions influence consumers.

Firms in emerging economies embarking on CSR can achieve strategic objectives through positive consumer's responses, employee satisfaction, and investor acceptance. CSR communications can improve brand awareness, corporate reputation, customer purchase intentions and advocacy, employee performance, investor investment decisions, etc. This has implications for CSR communications during COVID-19. Firms that are able to follow an effective communication approach in communicating their response to the pandemic are likely to achieve expected outcomes.

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