

## AN EVALUATION OF THE STATE OF CSR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH FROM MARKETING COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** Over the last decade, the issue of CSR communication has gained considerable visibility in the field of CSR research. To date, however, scant attention has been given to the features of the contemporary CSR communication research. The aim of this paper is to synthesise current findings and provide a typology of CSR communication studies, the focus being on exploring their thematic orientation and evaluating it from a marketing communication perspective. By discussing the focal points of current CSR communication studies in relation to their use of marketing concepts and ideas, our purpose is to outline the value of their contributions for marketing communication theory and practice. The empirical results of our literature review are based on the qualitative content analysis of 90 papers on CSR communication. Based on the analysis of their thematic focus, papers on CSR communication are classified in three categories: disclosure-, process- and outcomes-oriented papers. On the basis of research findings, suggestions for further research in the field of CSR communication and implications for marketing communication practice are provided.

**Keywords:** CSR communication, thematic focus, marketing communication, literature review

### EVALVACIJA STANJA NA PODROČJU RAZISKOVANJA KOMUNICIRANJA DRUŽBENE ODGOVORNOSTI Z VIDIKA MARKETINŠKEGA KOMUNICIRANJA

**Razširjeni povzetek:** Naraščanje družbenih pričakovanj glede upoštevanja okoljskih in družbenih zahtev pri izvajanju poslovnih aktivnosti podjetja spodbuja k privzemanju družbeno odgovornih praks in pogosto tudi k povečanju obsega (marketinškega) komuniciranja o družbeni odgovornosti (DO). S trendom in z izzivi intenzivnejšega komuniciranja DO se je poleg

strokovnjakov iz prakse v zadnjem desetletju bolj izrazito ukvarjala tudi raziskovalna sfera. Tematika komuniciranja DO je postala ena izmed pomembnejših tem v okviru širšega raziskovalnega polja DO. Kljub temu je mogoče ugotoviti, da je v literaturi malo znanega o značilnostih preučevanja oz. o pristopih k preučevanju komuniciranja DO, osrednjih temah, ki jih raziskovalci v navezavi s tem konceptom preučujejo, in rezultatih dosedanjega raziskovanja. V skladu s tem je glavni namen prispevka identificirati in orisati stanje na področju raziskovanja komuniciranja DO, pri čemer smo se osredotočili na vprašanja o tem, kakšen je tematski fokus prispevkov in kako ga je mogoče ovrednotiti z vidika marketinškega komuniciranja. Upošteva, da podjetja sporočila o DO vse bolj vpenjajo v marketinško komuniciranje, nam takšen pristop omogoča identifikacijo presečnih interesnih polj med marketinškim komuniciranjem in komuniciranjem DO ter skupnih konceptov, s katerimi se obe raziskovalni polji ukvarjata. Cilj je ugotoviti, kako lahko spoznanja dozdajšnjih študij o komuniciranju DO prispevajo k uspešnejšemu vključevanju DO vsebin v aktivnosti na področju marketinškega komuniciranja podjetij. S tem namenom smo opravili pregled literature o komuniciranju DO. Empirični rezultati raziskave temeljijo na kvalitativni analizi vsebine študij o komuniciranju DO, objavljenih do vključno leta 2013 v znanstvenih revijah, do katerih je mogoče dostopati v okviru spletnih podatkovnih baz Proquest in EBSCO. V preučevani vzorec je bilo na podlagi iskanja v omenjenih bazah, in sicer na osnovi ključnih besed, vključenih 90 študij. Analiza prispevkov kaže, da obravnavajo enega izmed treh identificiranih tematskih sklopov, ki predstavljajo izhodišče za njihovo nadaljnjo kategorizacijo: *artikulacija DO*, *proces komuniciranja DO* in *učinki komuniciranja DO*. Prevladujoči del prispevkov se ukvarja s pristopom k artikulaciji DO. Ostali prispevki se osredotočajo na strateško vlogo komuniciranja DO in obravnavajo proces komuniciranja DO ter njegove ključne elemente ali pa v ospredje postavljajo posledice oz. učinke komuniciranja DO v povezavi z (nakupnim) vedenjem potrošnikov, njihovim odnosom do podjetja in kazalniki uspešnosti podjetja. Vsem trem kategorijam prispevkov je (vsaj deloma) skupna akcijska/operativna naravnost h komuniciranju DO, ki se izraža v dojemanju (komuniciranja) DO kot orodja za doseganje marketinških ciljev podjetja. Tovrstna usmeritev je posebno izrazita pri študijah, ki se ukvarjajo s pristopi k artikulaciji DO ali z učinki komuniciranja DO. Vse tipe prispevkov zaznamuje prisvajanje deležniškega pristopa h komuniciranju – fokus ostaja na potrošniku. Poleg splošne deležniške usmeritve sta podobno kot v okviru

raziskovalnega polja marketinškega komuniciranja v ospredje postavljena koncepta pričakovanih deležnikov in vpliva marketinških sporočil z DO vsebino na odnos deležnikov do podjetja. Rezultati raziskave nadalje pokažejo, da se analizirani prispevki osredotočajo na specifične elemente okvira komuniciranja DO (npr. kanali komuniciranja, pričakovanja deležnikov). Odsotnost holističnega pristopa k preučevanju komuniciranja DO se tako izraža v pomanjkanju zaključkov glede značilnosti medsebojnih povezav med omenjenimi elementi. Čeprav analizirani prispevki v večini sledijo transakcijskemu razumevanju marketinških aktivnosti, je nekaj pozornosti namenjene tudi 'alternativnim' pristopom h komuniciranju DO. Mednje je na primer mogoče uvrstiti idejo o potrebi po odmiku od (strogo) informativnih strategij, ki temeljijo na enosmernem ali dvosmernem asimetričnem odnosu med prejemnikom in virom sporočila, k strategijam vključevanja deležnikov v proces komuniciranja DO oz. vzpostavljanja dialoga z njimi. Na osnovi navedenih ugotovitev so v zaključnem delu prispevka predstavljene raziskovalne vrzeli in predlogi, ki lahko raziskovalcem služijo kot usmeritev in spodbuda za nadaljnje raziskovanje na področju komuniciranja DO ter ovrednotenje njihovih prispevkov. Rezultati raziskave so ovrednoteni tudi z vidika implikacije za strokovnjake, ki se z vključevanjem DO vsebin v programe marketinškega komuniciranja srečujejo v vsakodnevni praksi.

**Ključne besede:** komuniciranje DO, tematski fokus, marketinško komuniciranje, pregled literature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Marketing scholars and practitioners alike have long been concerned with the societal role of companies and other organisations. These concerns have recently resulted in its own stream of research with a focus on the umbrella term of corporate social responsibility (CSR). As a result of extensive efforts to address theory and practice gaps in this area, along with the social pressures and the popularisation of the concept, CSR has overcome its marginalised status and has been given the recognition for its strategic importance and the inherent role within marketing activities of business organisations. Namely, it has been widely accepted that both marketing and CSR act as a link between the corporate world and society at large (Hildebrand et al., 2011). This is why, despite many different conceptualisations of CSR, the core idea of CSR, especially from a stakeholder perspective, is that organisations represent an integral part of society and are as such expected to incorporate a wide range of social and environmental concerns into their everyday activities and relationships with different stakeholders (van Marrewijk, 2003).

As the field of CSR has evolved, scholars have written about it from several different perspectives, including the communication perspective; CSR communication has mainly been inspected within the field of corporate communication and its subfields of CSR management and marketing communication, in particular (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012). Following an upward trend in the amount of CSR-related practices and messages developed by the largest corporations worldwide, the state-of-the-art CSR communication literature tackles a variety of issues concerning “the ways that corporations communicate in and about” the process of implementing their CSR (Ihlen et al., 2011: 8).

To identify focal issues and current findings of the growing body of CSR communication research, we have performed a systematic review of this research field. The aim of our overview is to evaluate the thematic orientation of contemporary CSR communications studies from a marketing communication perspective, concentrating on what has thus far been included in, or omitted from, the discussion on the approaches to CSR communication, value for stakeholders, stakeholder dialogue and scepticism, stakeholder reactions and their assessment of corporate activities. One thing to note here, however, is that a connection between CSR communication and its role in marketing communication has rarely been addressed in a holistic way (Nielsen and

Thomsen, 2012). Little attention has also been given to findings on the communication aspect of CSR-marketing relationship in general. A systematic review of CSR communication research from a marketing communication perspective could provide researchers with an agenda for future research. Since marketing communication tools are increasingly used to convey a company's commitment to CSR and thereby construct a socially responsible image, often regardless of the importance given to CSR in a company's overall marketing strategy (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009), the findings of our study could also help marketing practitioners gain a better understanding of how to deliver CSR messages through marketing communications in a way that meets or exceeds stakeholders' expectations and reduces their lack of trust in CSR messages.

## 2. MAPPING THE FOCUS OF CONTEMPORARY CSR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

The growing attention devoted to communicating CSR by business organisations resulted in the increase in CSR communication studies. They seem to cover a wide variety of issues, ranging from the characteristics of CSR communication channels (e.g. Moreno and Capriotti, 2009) to stakeholder involvement (e.g. Chen and Zhang, 2009) and the outcomes of various CSR communication strategies (e.g. Kim, 2011). The growing number of these studies triggered the publication of reviews of contemporary CSR communication literature, albeit this research subfield does not hold a dominant place within the research field of CSR (Ihlen et al., 2011). A literature review of the CSR communication field was recently presented in an introduction to the journal issue devoted to CSR communication research (Golob et al., 2013), the main emphasis in the paper being on the epistemological nature of contributions. Alongside some other authors (e.g. Wehmeier and Schultz, 2011; Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013; Schultz et al., 2013) Golob et al. (2013) argue that the main epistemological divide of CSR communication research is based on either the functionalistic or constitutive approach to studying CSR communication. However, the former represents the bulk of the current CSR communication literature. Such contributions perceive CSR communication as a (marketing) tool or a strategy, designed to help companies to achieve or improve corporate performance by influencing stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes, and lack a dialogical, collaborative and holistic dimension (Golob et al., 2013).

Among other attempts, applicable to the field of CSR communication research, one can mention a classification proposal of CSR studies in the field of organisational communication, developed by May (2011). The author suggests that each study could be categorised according to its general approach to the issue of CSR as normative (i.e. functionalistic), interpretative, critical or dialogic, further arguing that within the literature on organisational communication a critical approach to CSR research prevails (May, 2011). Concentrating on communication disciplines rather than epistemological orientation of contributions, Nielsen and Thomsen (2012), on the other hand, present an overview of CSR communication research streams and themes in the field of management and marketing communication. They state that contributions in both fields primarily address the operational use of CSR communication (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012), which again speaks of the dominant status of the functionalistic approach. While these insights present an important step towards assessing the focus of different disciplines in terms of CSR communication issues, the need for a more elaborated (thematic) classification of CSR communication studies within management and marketing communication discipline still remains.

### 3. THE MARKETING COMMUNICATION VIEW ON CSR COMMUNICATION

From the viewpoint of marketing literature the investigation of commitment to CSR has predominantly been concerned with the (added) value of adopting CSR norms with the purpose of meeting stakeholders' demands and expectations regarding the impact of business activities on society (Maignan and Ferrell 2001). In practice, however, the integration of CSR into marketing processes could be presented on the continuum from action-oriented approaches to CSR, which see CSR as a marketing tool for achieving corporate reputation, to CSR being placed 'at the heart' of business practices and as the main principle guiding their implementation. In the first case, the approach to CSR is tied to a transactional understanding of marketing. In the second case, both CSR and marketing are understood as a social process, connecting business operations and society (Golob, 2004).

In their search of common areas of interests between CSR and marketing Vaaland et al. (2008) conducted an integrating overview of the present status of the CSR theory in the marketing context where they divided the papers between

theoretical and empirical contributions and further searched for concepts/themes that relate CSR to marketing on three different levels: intra-organisational and interrelational and network level. They found that areas, holding the interest of both CSR and marketing, deal with stakeholder orientation, ethical, environmental and social concerns (Vaaland et al., 2008). To be more precise, central concepts of CSR from the marketing perspective include stakeholder expectations regarding the business-society relationship, corporate benefits generation (e.g., corporate image and reputation, competitiveness, brand awareness and financial performance), stakeholder perceptions and attitudes and corporate reactions to stakeholder expectations in terms of CSR norms, values, strategies, policies, and communications (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004; Peloza and Shang, 2011).

When thinking about a marketing communication approach to CSR and CSR communication, Nielsen and Thomsen propose that such a perspective is usually applied to CSR communication papers "with a clear consumer or customer focus" (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012: 53). Marketing communication, namely, acts as a mechanism for informing consumers and other stakeholders about a company's offer and activities and for encouraging them to start or maintain a mutually satisfying relationship with a company. It also refers to all of the integrated marketing communication tools which are used for targeting relevant stakeholders and include, for example, sales promotions, direct sales and advertising (Podnar, 2011). Main concerns about CSR marketing communication, thus, revolve around the use of different marketing communication tools for communicating CSR, consumer responses to CSR-related marketing messages and their influence on consumer (buying) behaviour. Special concern is also raised in relation to consumer scepticism towards CSR marketing communication (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012). To further map the topics of CSR communication research from the marketing communication perspective, a systematic categorisation of contributions in this research field is needed. With the exception of the general differentiation between operative and strategic papers discussing CSR marketing communication (Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012), there is a lack of typologies which could elucidate the current status of CSR communication in relation to the field of marketing communication.

### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to evaluate the contemporary literature on CSR communication and tease out the central



topics of CSR communication research, we have performed a systematic literature review. This allowed us to summarise features of the existing body of CSR communication literature by recognising research patterns in terms of concepts and themes (Meredith, 1993). Methodologically speaking, however, we have performed a qualitative content analysis (Seuring and Müller, 2008). First, we set up our research database, adopting the following criteria:

- Time frame: papers published up to (and including) 2013.
- Units of analysis: CSR communication related papers within the Proquest and EBSCO online database as two relevant sources of management and marketing journals (our findings show that the majority of studies was published in one of the following journals: *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *Corporate Social Responsibility and Environment Management*, *Journal of Marketing Communications*, *Business Ethics: A European Review*, *Corporate Reputation Review*, *Public Relations Review*, and *Social Responsibility Journal*).
- Structured keywords search: *communicating CSR*, *CSR communication*, *corporate responsibility communication*, *social responsibility communication*, *CSR advertising*, and *social responsibility advertising* (keywords which would specifically refer to marketing communication were not included because of a rather scarce research on CSR communication).
- Initial content check and the elimination of repetitive search results and papers that did not focus on CSR. The whole procedure resulted in a total of 90 papers that met the requirements for further inspection.

In the second stage we followed a Seuring's and Müller's (2008) guidelines for conducting content analysis, combining the elements of conventional and summative approach to qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). The analysis of collected material was conducted by two researchers. The papers, selected in our sample on the basis of initial keywords, were first categorised according to the main/general topics identified in the texts from our dataset and then quantified so as to determine the dominant topic of the current body of literature. The identification of three general topics (i.e. disclosure, process and outcomes) and their subtopics, covered in the analysed papers, then led to the design of classification/typology model of CSR communication research and its evaluation from the marketing communication perspective.

## 5. RESULTS: THE OVERVIEW OF CSR COMMUNICATION RESEARCH FROM MARKETING COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

### 5.1. DISCLOSURE-ORIENTED STUDIES

The largest cluster of the analysed CSR communication studies focuses on examining the elements, environments, features, influences, and approaches which characterise and influence a company's disclosure of CSR values and practices. They account for two thirds of the analysed papers and deal with one of the following subtopics: communication channels/tools (68.3 per cent), strategies (25 per cent) or stakeholder expectations (6.7 per cent). The first subcategory can be further divided into categories of papers examining web based CSR communication, CSR communication via annual reports, advertising as a channel for CSR communication and CSR communication via a combination of channels or other channels.

#### 5.1.1. CSR Communication Tools/Channels

Papers examining the role of marketing communication tools/channels and their characteristics in the process of articulating a company's CSR are highly operational in their nature. Accordingly, they all essentially strive to answer the question of 'how marketers use or should be using a particular marketing communication channel and its specifics to its full potential'. In line with this, a series of papers discusses the importance of the web based platforms for CSR marketing communication. This group of papers reflect on the characteristics of CSR content and their indicators, such as, for example, the key topics of CSR messages, the quantity of information and the stakeholders being addressed (Capriotti and Moreno, 2007; Moreno and Capriotti, 2009). Moreover, they deal with the organisation of CSR content, primarily examining the prominence of CSR messages within the corporate websites (Capriotti and Moreno, 2007), a number of pages designed for CSR and their hierarchical structure (Moreno and Capriotti, 2009; Dincer and Dincer, 2010). Capriotti and Moreno (2007), for instance, investigate the organisation of CSR information on corporate websites and indicate that CSR messages, especially messages addressing environmental and social issues, are usually found on prominent locations in the hierarchy of corporate websites.

Some authors further broaden their research by exploring factors that might have an effect on the characteristics of web based CSR communication. For example, Tang and Li (2009) are broad-

ening research by studying the impact of industry and the country of origin on CSR communication in China. They discover that the nature of industry/sector, to which a company belongs (B2B or B2C), has a bigger influence on a company's CSR communication in comparison with its country of origin. Others, on the other hand, examine a range of particular characteristics of web based CSR communication to gain some insight in its overall character. This type of approach is used in the paper by Guimarães-Costa and Pina e Cunha (2008), who try to define CSR communication within the online environment using a concept of "atrium effect". They compare web based CSR communication channels with 'Roman atria' as they make possible for organisations to enhance the positive image of themselves and encourage them to adopt the bifocal messages, which in consequence encourages organisations to be responsive to external events as well as to align their CSR communication with their CSR practices.

The value of the studies presented above lies in their contribution to the development of a pool of relevant indicators for exploring web based CSR communication. Another mutual characteristic of these studies is a tendency to examine only those web based CSR messages which appear on corporate websites, paying little to no attention to the importance of other online platforms (e.g. social network sites, corporate blogs). These additional online channels should be considered when conveying CSR marketing messages in an online environment, because they are in many ways better at reaching consumers or other target audiences than traditional media channels (Pollach, 2005). What is more, the studies do not provide us with an insight into issues of credibility of online CSR messages, tactics of encouraging consumer involvement or the use of appeals in web based messages, which are, according to Pollach (2005), of high importance for understanding a company's performance within an online environment.

The second and largest group of authors analysing the characteristics of CSR communication investigate advertising as a tool for CSR communication. In contrast to the papers on web based CSR communication, these studies are for the most part less concerned with the characteristics of advertising as a CSR communication channel and more interested in social responsibility of using advertising as a marketing tool for disseminating CSR messages (van de Pol and de Bakker, 2010; Chitakornkijasil, 2012). This thematic focus is closely related to the issue of consumer scepticism towards CSR marketing

communication. Studies try to assess the value of CSR advertising and discuss the components of CSR advertising claims which could possibly reduce the scepticism towards an organisation's CSR. According to Pomering and Johnson (2009) companies can avoid the stakeholders' scepticism towards CSR advertising messages if the latter include (1) a sufficient amount of information on the social topic being addressed, (2) the information on an organisation's commitment to CSR and (3) the explanation of the impact of a particular CSR practice on the social environment. CSR advertising has also been shown to be more effective in relation to organisations with an established reputation of providing high quality products rather than organisations with less familiar products (Obermiller et al. 2009).

A limited attention is also given to exploring the quantity as well as the content of CSR advertising. In their longitudinal study of print advertisements published in German weekly magazines Mögele and Tropp (2010), for example, point to the increase in the CSR advertisements and talk about CSR becoming a relevant advertising topic. A similar conclusion is highlighted by Peterson and Hermans (2004) in their longitudinal study of television advertisements promoting the US banks. Among the themes addressed in this type of advertisements both studies point out the relevance of environmental/ecological and social issues (Peterson and Hermans, 2004; Mögele and Tropp, 2010).

Less commonly explored are the characteristics of conveying CSR messages in annual reports (e.g. Tewari, 2011), the use of CSR-related messages in press releases (Lehtimäki et al., 2011), the value of communicating CSR via other communication tools, such as mission slogans (Verboven, 2011), or a combination of communication tools (Sciencia do Prado et al., 2010). However, this type of papers call attention to the fact that marketing communication tools are not restricted only to advertising or activities taking place in an online environment.

### 5.1.2. CSR Communication Strategies

If the first subcategory of disclosure-oriented studies is defined by emphasising the role of CSR content and communication channels, the second appears to take a greater interest in more general strategies and approaches an organisation can make use of when communicating about CSR. Within the CSR communication literature the debate on CSR communication strategies seems to be gaining on significance, which is evident from various conceptualisations

of CSR communication strategies. Tixier (2003), for example, talks about hard and soft (discrete) approach to communicating CSR, adopting a perspective of the influence of the intensity of CSR communication. Thinking about harmful effects of over-communicating CSR (e.g. stakeholder scepticism) has encouraged authors to reconsider the role of a provider of CSR information. Morsing et al. (2008) suggest that organisations should redirect themselves to endorsed CSR communication, expert CSR communication, and above all, to the inside-out approach to communicating CSR which underlines the role of employees in CSR communication.

Some of the remaining views on disclosure strategies of CSR expose the importance of stakeholders' involvement and the social context for CSR communication. Morsing and Schultz (2006), analysing the level of stakeholders' involvement in CSR communication process, differentiate between informing, responding and involving CSR communication strategies. Their categorisation signifies the transition from the focus on asymmetric towards symmetric CSR communication strategies and from merely informative and persuasive role of CSR marketing messages towards a cocreation and dialogue with consumers and other stakeholders. Decision on adopting a particular CSR communication strategy, however, does not only depend on organisational factors. Social context, together with its unique cultural characteristics, also shapes an organisation's approach to communicating CSR. Birth et al. (2008), for example, point out the differences between Latin and Anglo-Saxon approach to communicating CSR. The latter is active and prone to explicit disclosure of CSR-related information and the former is supportive of a soft communication style (Tixier, 2003). Such a variety of approaches to analysing CSR communication strategies offers a useful base for further research, especially as certain areas, such as (1) the outcomes of employing different communication strategies and (2) the influence of organisational characteristics and institutional context on using a particular CSR communication strategy, at present, remain largely unknown.

A significant contribution of the studies above is made in relation to their stakeholder orientation and an attempt to answer the question how a company can achieve better response to its CSR (marketing) communication by following a certain approach or a strategy. CSR communication is for the most part still understood as a one-directional or (at best) a two-directional asymmetric tool for achieving business goals, with

the exception of Morsing and Schultz's (2006) emphasis of the importance of stakeholder involvement in the creation of CSR messages. If evaluated from the standpoint of marketing communication, the insights of these studies could be described as more operational than strategic in their nature (see Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012). The same could be argued when describing disclosure-oriented cluster as a whole.

### 5.1.3. Stakeholder Expectations

The general purpose of the third subcategory of disclosure-oriented papers is to examine the role of stakeholder expectations and beliefs about or attitudes towards an organisation's CSR communication. Our study shows that the research on this topic is quite scarce. Some authors study attitudes towards CSR communication of a particular stakeholder group, usually consumers (e.g. Schmeltz, 2012). Dawkins (2004), on the other hand, acknowledges the importance of examining the expectations of various stakeholders about communicating CSR and defines them as conflicting.

The subject of stakeholder scepticism (e.g. Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2011; Schmeltz 2012) is also mentioned when thinking about stakeholder expectations about CSR communication. Although it is generally argued that stakeholders react relatively sceptically towards the more explicit forms of CSR communication (Tixier, 2003), a recent study by Schmeltz, based on a survey among young Danish consumers, shows that consumers might actually expect more explicit CSR-related communication from organisations (Schmeltz, 2012: 29). From a marketing communication perspective such contributions are highly relevant since meeting stakeholder expectations is believed to be of vital importance for stakeholder acceptance of and positive reactions to a company's CSR marketing communication (Maignan and Ferrell, 2004). However, the studies still keep their focus mainly on consumers and give little thought to other stakeholder groups. A similar trend can be noticed in relation to the stakeholder approach to CSR in the CSR research field in general (Vaaland et al., 2008).

### 5.2. PROCESS-ORIENTED STUDIES

Studies that try to develop a model or a framework for CSR communication in order to include it more strategically into the marketing processes of an organisation and those, which turn their attention to the strategic value of approaching CSR communication from a stakeholder perspective, can be characterised as process-ori-



ented. According to Nielsen and Thomsen (2012: 58), such studies refer to CSR marketing communication “as a strategic issue”. In our sample they represent 17.8 per cent of total studies and can be divided into two thematic subcategories.

The first subcategory emphasises the strategic role of stakeholder management as a particularly important element in the process of CSR communication. Davis and MacDonald (2010), for instance, present the framework for understanding the effects of stakeholder perceptions on a company’s decisions regarding their CSR activities. They suggest that companies should follow three basic guidelines to add to the success of their CSR initiatives, their emphasis being on stakeholder management. The guidelines include the recommendation for developing an instrument for measuring the impact of CSR practices for each stakeholder group, generation of CSR messages which are in line with specific stakeholder concerns/interests and a detailed explanation of how an organisation addresses the concerns of a variety of its stakeholders (Davis and MacDonald, 2010: 77). Some other studies focus on questioning how an organisation should adapt its CSR communication when confronted with stakeholder activism (Evuleocha, 2005) or the challenge of communicating CSR to a particular stakeholder group, such as investors (Hockerts and Moir, 2004). This confirms that the importance of stakeholder orientation is not increasing only in relation to CSR practices (Vaaland et al., 2008), but CSR marketing communication as well.

The second type of process-oriented papers, on the other hand, is primarily focused on developing a framework or a model of CSR communication which would present the relevant elements connected which make up the CSR communication process. Arguably the most informative, at least from the viewpoint of further operational use, is Du’s et al. (2010: 8) attempt of designing a conceptual framework of CSR communication. Its value lies in defining various aspects of CSR communication process, such as (1) message content and communication channels, (2) stakeholder- and organisation-specific characteristics which have an effect on CSR communication process and (3) the outcomes of CSR communication.

### 5.3. OUTCOME-ORIENTED STUDIES

The third group of analysed papers covers either the topic of consumer- (Swaen and Vanhamme, 2005; Becker-Olsen, 2011; Kim, 2011) or business-related (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009; Hsu, 2012) outcomes of CSR marketing communica-

tion. Together they account for 15.6 per cent of all analysed studies. Their common characteristic is a very operational/functionalistic approach to CSR communication in the context of marketing communication, since the studies perceive CSR communication primarily as a tool for influencing consumer perceptions and behaviour and as a tool for enhancing business performance. From a stakeholder perspective, the studies do not challenge the tendency of consumer-centric marketing approaches to CSR (Vaaland et al., 2008).

Among the consumer-related studies focus is on investigating the impact of different elements/ characteristics of CSR communication process on consumer attitudes and brand-related associations as well as on the influence of various characteristics of CSR advertising on consumer responses to this type of CSR marketing communication. Swaen and Vanhamme (2005), as the representatives of the first stream of the above mentioned studies, examine the influence of source credibility on consumers’ attitudes. The authors expose that the source of CSR communication has a higher influence on consumer attitudes related to product perceptions, purchase intentions and consumer trust, in comparison with the arguments being used to support CSR-related statements. The effect is lessened if negative information regarding an organisation’s CSR follows an initial positive information. Moreover, they define the credible sources of CSR information as those that are not perceived by stakeholders “as controlled by the company” (Swaen and Vanhamme, 2005). Another attempt at exploring the effects of specific characteristics of CSR communication is offered by Becker-Olsen (2011). The author investigates consumer preference of localised and global CSR communication approaches and shows that emphasising global CSR initiatives results in more positive consumer perceptions. On the other hand, the second stream of consumer-related studies mostly deals with the influence of CSR disclosure in advertisements on consumer attitudes towards CSR practices and their behavioural intentions (e.g. Wang, 2011). In relation to consumers’ perceptions towards CSR advertising, Wang (2011), for example, concludes that consumers, who are exposed to visually primed CSR advertisements, perceive a company’s practices as more socially responsible.

In comparison with consumer-related studies, the research on business-related outcomes of communicating CSR is quite limited. The main contribution of these studies lies in their attempt at exposing the need for an extended research regarding the effects of CSR communication on



business performance (Sjöberg 2003) and the impact of CSR communication on brand image, corporate image and reputation (Jahdi and Acikdilli 2009; Hsu 2012). This calls for the examination of CSR (marketing) communication from a more holistic perspective of corporate communication and corporate marketing. A similar approach has already been adopted in the broader CSR research field (Podnar and Golob; 2007; Hildebrand et al., 2011).

## 6. DISCUSSION ON IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Inspired by the thematic diversity of the pertinent literature on CSR communication, our review has summarised current approaches to studying CSR communication, the focus being on the thematic orientation of studies, and evaluated their contributions in relation to the field of marketing communication. The review resulted in the categorisation of CSR communication studies on the basis of their thematic focus. Although the study is based on a relatively small sample of papers, its unique contribution lies in systematic analysis of the ideas and concepts of marketing communication that are embedded in CSR communication literature, concentrating on the overlapping areas of interest between CSR communication and marketing communication, such as the stakeholder approach to communication, stakeholder expectations and attitudes and the outcomes of stakeholder exposure to CSR messages.

According to our data analysis, the research on CSR communication concentrates on the characteristics of CSR communication, the ways and styles of approaching the disclosure of CSR practices, the importance of stakeholder expectations and stakeholder management in general, the ways of incorporating CSR communication into corporate activities on a more strategic level, the added value of CSR communication in terms of consumer behaviours towards a company, and the impact of CSR communication on a company's performance, brand image and reputation. The dominant topic of papers on CSR communication, however, is concerned with the approach to disclosure of CSR practices, mainly focusing on investigating the characteristics of CSR communication channels. To be more specific, disclosure-oriented papers provide us with the analysis of the emerging importance of online environments for communicating CSR, stakeholder scepticism towards CSR advertising and CSR communication in general, hard and soft communication approaches to CSR communication, the role of employees in rela-

tion to the inside-out communication approach, and the need for transition from informative to involvement strategies and establishing dialogue with stakeholders. Remaining papers are either process-oriented or outcomes-oriented.

Our review confirms the predominant functionalistic approach to CSR communication (Golob et al., 2013), since the nature of both disclosure-oriented and outcomes-oriented papers is highly operative. Accordingly, CSR is perceived as a marketing communication tool that can help companies to respond to the variety of stakeholder demands and improve their business performance. CSR communication is thereby reduced to its function of strengthening the overall marketing communication activities. A moderate shift towards a more strategic approach can be noted in relation to the category of process-oriented papers. Research focus, as previously pointed out in a review of CSR communication literature presented by Nielsen and Thomsen (2012), nevertheless, remains on operative and not strategic role of CSR marketing communication (see Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012). Thus, a shift towards more constitutive approaches to CSR communication with the focus on the idea of CSR communication as a (social) process as well as on the dialogical and collaborative marketing approaches to CSR in general continues to present a challenge for the future research in the field of CSR communication (Shoeneborn and Trittin, 2013).

Another opportunity for future research springs from presently scarce research on inter-dependent relations between the three main categories of issues concerning CSR communication. For example, only a small number of papers examine the relation between specific characteristics of different elements of CSR communication process and their outcomes (e.g. Kim, 2011). The same can be argued in relation to the research on the influence of stakeholder responses to CSR communication on the potential changes in CSR communication practices of an organisation as well as the influence of institutional context on the elements of CSR communication process and its consequences. Hence, the challenge for future CSR communication research lies in a holistic approach to examining different elements that form the framework of CSR communication (see Du et al, 2010).

Future research could also broaden the dominant consumer orientation in the current CSR communication literature by looking into the responses to CSR messages of some other stakeholders as well. Additional types of stakeholder responses,

such as consumer loyalty or employee commitment and work satisfaction, could also be integrated in this area of research. Moreover, by recognising the significance of integrating the concept of CSR communication in the field of corporate marketing and corporate communication (Hildebrand et al., 2011; Nielsen and Thomsen, 2012), future studies could also fill the existing gap on the level of theoretical conceptualisations and empirical findings regarding the impact of CSR communication in relation to corporate branding, identification, corporate image and reputation.

From the viewpoint of practice-related implications, however, our review provides an insight into rather diverse aspects, which should be taken into consideration before including CSR into marketing communication activities. The evaluation of CSR communication literature from the marketing perspective suggests that CSR communication can, for instance, have a positive influence on consumer responses, such as purchase intentions and consumer trust, and the level of a perceived social responsibility of a company (Swaen and Vanhamme, 2005; Wang 2011). To achieve this type of results a company should first think about the challenges of CSR communication in a marketing context. One of these major challenges deals with consumer or stakeholder scepticism towards CSR communication. It often arises from a CSR practice-communication gap and from (mis)using CSR communication as a marketing tool in terms of downgrading the relationship between CSR and marketing to a state which could be labelled as a "marriage of convenience" (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009). Our review points out the findings which suggest that consumer scepticism and backlash can be avoided or at least minimised, provided that a company is willing to reveal background data about a company's CSR practices, which support CSR advertising claims or other types of CSR messages, as well as turn to sources that increase the credibility of CSR claims, such as employees, and take on the strategy of CSR endorsement. To achieve a favourable stakeholder response, a company should also pay attention to the extent of CSR marketing communication and finding the balance between explicit and implicit ways of communicating CSR.

Further, our review is also informative in relation to the characteristics of communicating CSR via different channels. Growing attention in relation to this aspect of communication is given to the features of the new media, including their participatory character. These type of research trends, identified in our study, should caution marketing

experts to think not only about 'informative' attributes of web based CSR communication (e.g., volume and topics of CSR messages), but also about how to upgrade their way of communicating so as to use the potential of new media channels for establishing dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders, treating them as partners in communication instead of passive receivers. This idea of shifting from informative to involvement strategies could serve as a guideline for involving consumers and other stakeholders throughout the entire process of developing and implementing CSR-related marketing (communication) activities. Our analysis also demonstrates that the process of aligning the ways of conveying CSR messages with stakeholder expectations is in general one of the priority tasks of marketing practitioners when planning marketing communication activities.

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