

DETERMINANTS OF INTERNET CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY COMMUNICATION: EVIDENCE FROM FRANCE

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ABSTRACT

This research identifies determiners of internet Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication of the 53 French enterprises which are members of "l'Observatoire sur la Responsabilité Sociétale des Entreprises (ORSE)". This study is completed in two phases. First, we use an analytical grid and develop a scoring technique. We classify the French companies in our sample according to the intensity of their responsible communication on the Internet. Then, we test a set of hypotheses to highlight the explanatory variables of the communication level on the Internet of the responsible enterprise. The results indicate the performance of firms is positively related to the level of CSR communication through the web.

JEL: C31, M14, M15, M31, O32

KEYWORDS: Communication, Internet, Websites, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Sustainable Development

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2000s, the financial crisis, problems of pollution and the increase of mass redundancies in Europe, reduced the legitimacy of current models of company governance (Franklin-Johnson & Richomme-Huet, 2012). Companies are increasingly conscious of the impact of their activities on their environment. They are sensitive to sustainable development of their activities (David et al., 2005). The company, "as societal actor, cannot worry about his only well-being, it has to be interested in the well-being of the society in general" (Gond & Mullenbach-Servayre, 2004). In line with this sustainable development, comes the concept of corporate social responsibility of companies (CSR). CSR makes reference to the "*process of improvement within the framework of which companies integrate in a voluntary, systematic and coherent way social, environmental and economic considerations of order into their management in dialogue with their stakeholders*" (CIDD, 2006). Companies thus want to legitimize at best these activities by the disclosure of CSR information to their stakeholders.

To promote dialogue and answer the new expectations of these stakeholders, companies inform on their sustainable practices (Quairel & Auberger, 2005). The Internet is one of the main channels of communication used by firms to disclose information about their responsible practices (Wanderley et al. 2008). The internet offers many advantages such as the disclosure of more information at a lower cost, in a more reduced time and to a larger public (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006; Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009). Some researches (Pollach, 2003; Welcomer et al, 2003; Branco and Rodrigues, 2006) focus on Internet CSR communications. But, few elements are known on the way companies use this communication tool, in particular with regard to European countries. This study tries to understand how French company members of the ORSE communicate their CSR practices through their Web site. This research aims at two main objectives: to propose a classification of companies to identify those which are the most active in term of

CSR communication and which use the most complete means. Second we identify the main determiners (explanatory variables) of CSR communication on the Internet.

We first present principles and challenges of CSR communication. We highlight the specificities of communication by internet. Next, we specify our methodological choices, describe our sample and present the results of our study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet as a Tool of Responsible Communication

Most companies are sensitive to sustainable development. This sustainable commitment is generally the object of responsible communication to the stakeholders. Birth et al. (2008) define CSR communication as communication designed and disclosed by the company to its stakeholders and is based on its investment regarding sustainable development. For Ven (2008), a company has to communicate on its implication regarding CSR to avoid differences between its sustainable investment in its activities and the perception of company stakeholders. Capriotti & Moreno (2007) argue that communication RSE is intrinsically connected to the sustainable action. Communication makes known the will of an organization to go beyond trade and economic priorities to strengthen its relations with the stakeholders and maintain a behaviour favouring transparency and ethics.

According Birth et al. (2008: 184), the themes covered by the CSR are wide. They can include *"the mission, the vision and the values of the company, the work atmosphere, the social dialog, the human rights, the implication in the society, the development of a local economy, the environment, the relations with the market and the ethics"*. Besides, CSR communication generates value to various considerations. Nevertheless, Ven (2008) recommends that companies limit their communication to the use of their web site and sustainable development annual reports. The internet allows disclosing more information, at a lower cost and at a reduced time. Furthermore, several targets can be reached and specific information can be sent to different target audiences (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006). The information can be updated, archived and is available at any time (Geerlings et al. 2003). According to Wanderley et al. (2008) the Internet has become one of the main communication channels used by companies to disclose information about their responsible practices. By concentrating on active companies on the French market, we analyze the way companies use their website to present their CSR strategy. What priority is given to CSR communication on the website? What are the covered themes? What tools are given? How is the information presented? We attempt to answer these questions.

Determiners of Corporate Social Responsibility Communication

Several researches have examined the internet as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication tool (Pollach, 2003; Welcomer et al., 2003 ; Birth et al., 2009) but few focused on determiners of CSR communication (Hamid, 2004 ; Pozniak et al. 2011). Nevertheless, many authors have studied determiners of voluntary disclosure. Others studied the determiners of financial communication (Raffournier, 1995; Craven & Martson 1999; Debreceny et al. 2002; Ettredge et al 2002; Xiao et al. 2004; Laswad et al. 2005; Paturel et al. 2006; L. Pozniak, 2010), others studied corporate communication (Adams & Hossain, 1998; Larran & Giner, 2001) and others tried to identify determiners of research and development communication (Ding & Stolowy, 2003). All these researchers attempted to identify variables that explain disclosure level. In the field of CSR communication, we present our research hypothesis below.

Sector: Sector influence on the disclosure level is highlighted by several authors. Ding & Stolowy (2003) argue that the firms from the same sector evolve in the same environment and are under the same pressure which forces them to communicate. Bonson & Escobar (2002) reveal positive influences of the sector on the level of information revealed by the company. Companies from specific sectors must communicate on certain aspect in order to improve their image. For example, industrial companies communicate more environmental information than firms from other sectors. Quairel & Auberger (2005) talk about pressures on companies of the petroleum industry, the chemistry, the automobile and the transport on their suppliers. To show their technology mastery and to set the focus on their expertise, IT companies tend to communicate more through their website (Entwistle, 1999). It seems that belonging to the industrial sector positively influences CSR information disclosure, and belonging to the IT sector has a positive impact on Internet communication. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Membership in the IT sector or in the industrial sector has a positive effect on its internet CSR communication score. We measure sector using a binary variable which takes the value 1 for companies of the IT or industrial sector and zero for other companies. The industrial sector includes the codes NAF Rév.1 from 01 to 43 included. The IT sector includes the NAF Rév.1 of 58 in included 63

Performance: Many researches find a negative relation between the level of financial information disclosure and the company's profitability (Debreceeny et al. 2005; Paturel et al. 2006; Pozniak, 2010). This negative relationship is namely explained by the incurred competitive risk in case of positive information disclosure. Due to lack of significant results, Hamid (2004) has not been able to validate his hypothesis of negative impact of the profitability on CSR communication score. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Company performance has a negative effect on its internet CSR communication score. In this paper, performance is measured by Return on Equity (ROE) in a manner similar to Hamid (2004), Debreceeny et al. (2005) and Paturel and al. (2006). The Return on Assets (ROA) ratio could also have been a good indicator for profitability (Mc Nally and al, 1982) but its correlation with total assets would have distorted the results of our econometric model.

Size: Several studies highlight the positive influence of company size on disclosure levels (Adams & Hossain, 1998; Larran & Giner, 2001; Bonson & Escobar, 2002; Debreceeny et al. 2002; Ettredge et al 2002; Xiao et al. 2004). Almlia (2009) explain that bigger firms have more developed internal reporting systems and so producing information costs them less. Ding & Stolowy (2003) showed that size was a significant explanatory variable of research and development communication level. The positive impact of company size on the CSR internet communication level was revealed by Hamid (2004) and confirmed by Pozniak et al. (2011). This brings us to forward the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Company size has a positive effect on internet CSR communication scores. In this paper, as in many others (Mc Nally et al, 1982; Hamid, 2004), size is measured by total assets. We used the natural logarithm of total assets to mitigate skewness in the data set (Adams and Hossain, 1998).

Listing status: Research conducted in Malaysia by Theoh & Thong (1984) reveals that listed companies communicate more CSR information than unlisted companies. They explain that listed companies can take advantage of information disclosure regarding their social activities. In their research on Portuguese banks, Branco & Rodrigues (2006) discover that listed banks place higher importance on internet CSR communication. They justify this through the fact that the more famous a company is, higher the need for justifying their existence through CSR communication. Actually, listed companies are more notorious than not listed companies. Hamid (2004) finds a positive relation between the listing status of a company and its level of CSR information disclosure. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: The listing status of the company has a positive effect on its internet CSR communication score. Listing status is measured by a binary variable which takes the value 1 for listed companies and 0 for unlisted firms.

Age: Company age seems to be linked to its reputation and its involvement in CSR activities (Choi, 1999 cited by Hamid, 2004). A positive relation between company age and its level of CSR information disclosure is discovered by Hamid (2004) and Branco & Rodrigues (2006). This leads us to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Company age has a positive effect on its internet CSR communication score. In our research, company age is measured by the number of years since the company was created. The variables and their expected effect on the CSR communication score are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Explanatory Variables

Variables	Measure	Expected Effect on CSR Communication Score
Sector	IT or Industrial sector = 1 and others = 0	Positive
Performance	Return On Equities (ROE) ratio	Negative
Size	Log total assets	Positive
Listing status	Listed firms = 1 and Unlisted firms = 0	Positive
Age	Number of years since the creation of the firm	Positive

This table shows how the explanatory variables are measured and the expected effect on the CSR communication score. The variables sector, size, listing status and age are expected to have a positive effect on the dependent variable. The effect of variable performance is expected to be negative on the level of CSR communication score.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section has two parts. In the first part, we present information about our sample. In the second part, we present our methodology. Our study concerns 53 French companies' which were members of « l'Observatoire sur la Responsabilité Sociétale des Entreprises (ORSE) » in April 2011. This association was created in June 2000 and offers members support on various questions related to sustainable development, responsible investment and CSR. The aim of our research is to analyse implemented strategies and tools in the frame of CSR communication. It seems relevant to base our sample on companies' inclined to communicate on these aspects. Member companies of ORSE are registered as active or initiative in CSR. We suppose they communicate in this direction through their Web site. Indeed, according to Chaudhri & Wang (2007) active behavior of companies regarding CSR would lead them naturally to communicate on these aspects, in particular through their Web site.

The best way to evaluate the level of CSR information disclosure on the internet is to analyse the contents of company websites (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006; Patten, 2002). Content analysis of websites is done using an analysis grid allowing us to highlight the presence or absence of certain elements of information. Our analysis grid was built in two phases. First, elements highlighted by the literature were listed (Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009; Patten & Crampton, 2004). Then, the preliminary grid was pre-tested on several sites of our sample. Elements discovered according to the study of websites allowed us to improve our grid. This iterative approach is inspired by Grounded Theory. Observation of the ground allows the identification of items to investigate (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The items of the analysis grid are split into seven categories as shown in Table 2.

Using our analysis grid, we examined the websites of companies and assigned them one point for each item on the site. All items are assigned equal importance. This technique of scoring is a current practice in the study of voluntary information (Larran & Giner, 2001; Arnone et al, 2010; Pozniak, 2010; Pozniak et al,

2011). The quantity of disclosed items is a reasonable measure of the trend of the company to information disclosure (Branco & Rodrigues, 2006). A score is thereby obtained for every company. Using this score we were able to estimate the level of website information disclosure of the 53 companies in this study. Then, using the Stata 10.1 software, this score is analysed using the ordinary least squares (OLS) method according to explanatory variables which the hypotheses of this research concern. We do this in a manner similar to other authors (Debreceeny & Rahman, 2005; Paturel & al., 2006; Ben Rhouma & Cormier, 2007; Jouini, 2007; Pozniak, 2013).

Table 2: Categories of Our Analysis Grid

Accessibility	The "accessibility" category is interested in the fact that there is a tab dedicated to the CSR on the homepage of the Web site. It can be a tab called « sustainable development », a link to the annual CSR report, a text, a video or pictures dedicated to CSR on the first page. We also look after a search engine and different language version of the website.
Commitment of the company	The commitment of the company is measured by the presence of a slogan of the company referring to its responsible commitment and by a speech of the manager or a stakeholder illustrating the sustainable actions of the company.
Illustration of the CSR speech	This category analyses the illustration. For example, the commitment of the director, the internal actor to the company, the CSR report, can be presented in the form of video; texts relative to the CSR can be illustrated with images, with plans, with animations flash; a gallery of image can contain photos relative to CSR.
Strategy	This category look at the contents concerning the sustainable actions of the company: its strategy, its objectives, its commitments, its results. A distinction is made between elements for environmental, social and societal action.
Results 'objectivity	Nonfinancial communication is still the object of a lack of reliability. To remedy it, several elements can be advanced by communicating on the web site of the company: external social audit, certification, labelling, code of ethics conduct and ethical awards.
Interactivity	This category is interested in the presence of FAQ, podcast, newsletter or a forum related to CSR; the possibility of sharing CSR information on social networks, the RSS feed.
Communication on sustainable action	We observe if the company communicates on its website to promote the sustainable development, to defend causes, to give responsibilities the consumer and to inform the public.

This table shows the categories of our analysis grid of web site. This grid was used to analyze 53 websites of our sample. For each item of the grid we gave one point. So we get a CSR communication score for each firm.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section includes two parts. In the first part, the results of our web contents analysis are presented and the CSR communication score are established. In the second part, the results of our regression are shown.

CSR Communication Scores

The analysis grid lets us examine the websites of all companies in our sample. A point was given for every item of the analysis grid on the website. The scores so obtained appear in Table 3.

Some 29 firms (out of 53 companies in the sample) obtained a score equal or above to the average of the sample scores (19) for their responsible communication. Based on Table 3, we notice that the Sanofi Company distances itself from other companies of the sample. Indeed, of 57 items in our analysis grid, this firm counts 40 items. This first place classification is justified by an important internet communication of its implications and sustainable activities. This company dedicates its homepage to sustainable development and offers a direct link to the CSR annual report (presented on a website completely dedicated to its societal commitment). The company also distinguishes itself by the presence of a search engine, a speech of the managing director and internal actors of the company and through the use of images, videos and animations flash. Sanofi develops sustainable objectives and strategies and disclosed them on its website. The social side is put forward by a code of ethics and a social charter while societal aspects are widely presented in the section "Sanofi hope foundation" aiming at reducing disparities in the field of health. At the environmental level, the company is committed in the reduction of its CO2 emissions and in the conservation of the biodiversity.

Table 3: CSR Communication Scores

Classification of Companies								
1	Sanofi	40	19	EDF	25	37	Thales	14
2	Alcatel	36	20	Areva	25	38	La Française Des Jeux	12
3	Carrefour	34	21	Sodexo	24	39	ArmorLux	12
4	PSA Peugeot Citroen	34	22	Rhodia	24	40	Accenture	11
5	Lafarge	31	23	Bic	24	41	Adecco France	10
6	Accor	30	24	Suez Environment	24	42	SAP	8
7	France Telecom-Orange	30	25	Vinci	23	43	Starbucks Coffee	8
8	Veolia Environnement	30	26	RATP	21	44	SFR SA	8
9	GDF Suez	29	27	La Poste	19	45	Fives	7
10	Schneider Electric	29	28	L'Oréal	19	46	France Télévisions	6
11	Mobivia Groupe	28	29	Vallourec	19	47	Legrand	6
12	Aéroports De Paris	28	30	SNCF	18	48	Renault	6
13	Lagardère	27	31	Air France	18	49	Essilor International	2
14	PPR	26	32	Spie Batignolles	17	50	Oxylane	2
15	Nexans France	26	33	Danone	17	51	Total	2
16	Rexel	26	34	DCNS	16	52	Casino	1
17	Vivendi	26	35	Havas	14	53	Bonduelle	1
18	Alstom	26	36	LVMH	14			

This table shows the CSR communication score for every firm of our sample. The average score is 19 points (up to 57 items in the analysis grid). As we can see, more than half of the sample (29 firms up to 53) have a score higher than this average.

The results are clear and accompanied with an external audit and with responsible indicators. The weak point of its CSR communication concerns the interactivity of the site (3 items up to 10). The second place classification is attributed to Alcatel which obtains 36 points. Its responsible commitment is highlighted on the homepage on one hand by a quotation of the managing director, and on the other hand by the "faster, more intelligent, more eco-effective" slogan. It is also possible to view a video of the managing director presenting the implication responsible for the company as well as a video synthesizing all the initiatives in favor of the sustainable development.

Carrefour and PSA Peugeot Citroën share the third place classification with 34 points. Both companies distinguish themselves by a link on their homepage which lead to a second website completely dedicated to sustainable development and to the empowerment of the company. Carrefour also set up a web tool "autodiagnosis sustainable development" which represents a guide of best practice intended to help the suppliers to act in a more responsible way. Among other companies of the top 10, we highlight in terms of responsible communication by internet, the presence of a code of conduct "Lafarge Wag" on the site of Lafarge imposed on all associates of the company. The development of good interactivity on the site of Accor is based on a FAQ, a newsletter, a link to specific CSR contact, a detailed description of its strategy and its CSR objectives for France Telecom Orange. The presence of a thread of news dedicated to sustainable development on the homepage of Veolia Environnement. The presence of the slogan "Be useful for the men" on the homepage of GDF-SUEZ and a sustainable speech with images for Schneider Electric.

Determiners of CSR Communication Score

The following regression equation was estimated to identify the determiners of CSR communication score:

$$Score = \alpha + \beta_1 (sector) + \beta_2 (performance) + \beta_3 (size) + \beta_4 (listing\ status) + \beta_5 (age)$$

This model was tested using the 2007 version of the Software STATA. The explanatory variables arise from the database DIANE published by the Office Van Dijk. For each of these variables, we considered the last year of availability of the accounts. Descriptive statistics of the explanatory variables are presented in Table 4 and the correlation between those variables in Table 5. Because listing status and sector are binary variables, they don't need to appear in Table 4.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Std.Dev	Min	Max
Score	19.113	10.205	1	40
Performance	7.128	30.502	-100.24	105.30
Size	14.984	4.573	0	24.112
Age	45.207	36.478	8	179

This table shows the descriptive statistics of the explanatory variables. We get those statistics using STATA 10.1.

Table 6 shows the regression estimates of the equation:

$$\text{Score} = \alpha + \beta_1 (\text{sector}) + \beta_2 (\text{performance}) + \beta_3 (\text{size}) + \beta_4 (\text{listing status}) + \beta_5 (\text{age}).$$

With regard to Table 6, only the coefficient of the variable performance is statistically significant at the 5% level. The negative sign of this coefficient confirms Hypothesis 2: Performance has a negative impact on the Internet CSR communication score. From then on, companies presenting a less good performance would more likely tend to use internet as vector of CSR communication. Other hypotheses are not verified. Indeed, the variables of size, sector, listing status and age are not statistically significant. This study, dedicated to French companies doesn't show the same results as Pozniak and al. in 2011. The previous study focused on 41 member companies of the Association Business and Society Belgium and was also interested in determiners of Internet CSR communication. Their results (Pozniak and al, 2011) highlighted the positive impact of the size and the listing status. The results of the present paper studying French companies thus diverge from conclusions of the Belgian sample studied in 2011.

Table 5: Correlation between Variables

	Score	Sector	Performance	Size	Listing Status	Age
Score	1.000					
Sector	-0.0319	1.000				
Performance	-0.2170	0.0500	1.000			
Size	0.0699	-0.0077	-0.0673	1.000		
Listing status	0.0711	-0.1664	0.0123	0.4726	1.000	
Age	-0.0769	-0.1381	0.0138	0.0214	0.4779	1.000

This table shows the correlation between the explanatory variables. As we can see there is no problem of correlation between those variables.

CONCLUSION

Our research aimed at understanding how companies use the internet as communication channel of their responsible activities and identifying the determinants of this CSR communication level. We focus on the 53 French companies which are members of the ORSE, in April 2011. We analysed the intensity with which the companies of our sample use internet as vector of CSR communication, by means of a scoring. This approach used an analysis grid of websites. This analysis grid has seven categories (accessibility to the information, the commitment of the company, illustration of the speech, strategy, results' objectivity, the interactivity and communication on sustainable action) and allowed us to establish a classification of the companies of our sample. Thanks we were able to identify the most active companies in term of CSR communication and highlight the strategic elements which companies emphasize in their CSR communication.

We noticed that the majority of companies communicate their CSR commitment on their web site. They describe and distinguish generally their strategy on the social, environmental and societal plan. We find objectives clear and calculated on the site of numerous companies (more than half of them), with a trend to put forward more information regarding environmental objectives. We also noticed the weak presence of

labels and ethical awards on the web sites of companies. We find that more than half of analysed sites include responsible codes of conduct. More than half of companies facilitate access to CSR information by the presence of a search engine, tabs from the homepage relating to a CSR page and/or to an annual CSR report. Nevertheless, few companies of the sample communicate on their socially responsible investments and propose tools of interactivity. Finally, concerning the general classification of companies, we cannot establish a significant link between the level of responsible communication and the business sector of companies.

Table 6: Results of the Regression by OLS

	Coefficient	Robust Std.Error	Sign
Sector	-0.3826	3.284	0.908
Performance	-0.0725	0.0335	0.036**
Size	-0.0233	0.3755	0.951
Listing status	3.004	4.557	0.513
Age	-0.0407	0.0528	0.445
Cons	20.737	6.199	0.002
Number of obs.		53	
F stat		1.66	
Prob > F		0.1637	
R-squared adjusted		0.0683	

*This table shows the regression estimates of the equation: $Score = \alpha + \beta_1 (sector) + \beta_2 (performance) + \beta_3 (size) + \beta_4 (listing\ status) + \beta_5 (age)$. ***, ** and * indicate the significance at the 1, 5 and 10 percent levels respectively. We can see that the only statistically significant variable is the performance. It means that it has an impact on the CSR communication score.*

We observe that most companies of the "energy" sector (6 on 9) are a part of the most active companies regarding CSR communication. Indeed, these 6 companies appear in 20 first companies classified. It could be explained by sensibility of the sector to the environmental problem. Among the present 7 companies in the sector of "communication and telecommunication", 4 also appear among the first 20 companies of our classification. Furthermore, we notice positions relatively set for both groups of the retail industry. Carrefour is indeed in the 3rd position of the classification while Casino represents only in last place. Secondly, we tried to identify the determiners of this CSR communication score using the ordinary least squares method. Our econometric analysis allowed putting forward the positive impact of performance on the level of CSR internet disclosure. Our Hypothesis 2 was thus confirmed by the empirical results. This exploratory analysis also tried to enrich the research on the CSR internet communication which until this day had only been examined on a limited basis.

We moderate our conclusions because the approach used in this research is exploratory. We concentrated our analysis on the Internet tool and did not examine voluntarily disclosures using other media. If we integrated other media, our classification could may have turn out different. In a communications strategy, the media act in synergy to strengthen the message. In the future, we think it would be interesting to study determiners of CSR communication via all the information channels and not exclusively by Web (press, television, meetings). Responsible communication would then be considered "as all the communications activities, whatever is the support, delivering a message about the environmental, social or societal commitments of a company" (Benoit-Moreau et al., 2010). The integration of the other media in our analysis could modify our classification. It would also allow the consideration of existing synergies between the media that strengthen the message.

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