

Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility to Young Consumers: Focus, Values and Media

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Abstract

In Today's world, companies' way of communicating their corporate social responsibility (CSR) commitment plays a very important role in their organizational success and legitimacy accordingly this paper aims to investigate young consumer's perception and evaluation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication of companies using a survey highlighting the underlying values and attitudes of consumers aged between eighteen and thirty. This consumer group is the largest group (24,6%) in the Turkish context and this group is shaping the future consumption habits (www.tuik.gov.tr). The results showed that young consumers are following the CSR issues and they put much more emphasis than expected to these activities so they demand more explicit and relevant information on CSR projects. They are also looking for specific project based factual information that is locally and personally important as they are self-centered and don't mind about general society well-being projects. CSR communication is fundamental as it became one of the major tools for companies to leverage on their investments, manage reputation and create market opportunities through relevance, credibility and today's young consumers values and media preferences. These insights can help companies in their communication planning and execution by adopting a more direct and open approach based on companies' competence. CSR communication is very challenging hence this paper takes into consideration young consumers preferences and values in relation to CSR in Turkish context to help engage the consumers of the future.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; Young Consumers; Communication; Values

Introduction

In today's world, the expectations from companies, NGOs, state and society differ widely from the beginning of the 20th century when the only goal was to maximise the profit as the society now expect the companies to share responsibility with governments, to be more sensible to the social phenomena and to play an active role in these issues. Accordingly, Corporate Social

Responsibility (CSR) drawing fundamentally a company's role in, and impact upon, the economic, environmental and social framework is a participative social process that became one of the most widely accepted concepts in the academic and business world in the past decades (Liu, Wong, Rongwei, and Tseng, 2014, p.1026). Consequently, companies implement CSR but the implementation process and the communication of the related activities are challenging (Maon, Lindgreen, and Swaen, 2009, p. 80) as it can give rise to misunderstandings among stakeholders. Especially, today in the world of social media where many to many instant communication and accordingly information dissemination and manipulation are easy to realize (Zerfass, Vercic, Verhoeven, Moreno, and Tench, 2012, p.2). So, the communication of CSR commitment is crucial for companies' success as it confirms its' legitimacy, honesty and shows that stakeholders' views are taken into consideration (Melo & Garrido-Morgado, 2012, p.14). Equally, CSR communication receives significant attention in both practice and academia. During the last decade, CSR communication topics especially in the fields of management and communication had an important impact (e.g. Nielsen and Thomsen, 2009) and the CSR communication became mandatory in many countries. So, companies have to find more impressive ways of communicating their CSR activities in this new world of communications according to the focus, values and media habits of young consumers as they are the largest group, shaping the future consumption habits (24,6%) in the Turkish context. However, companies are very cautious communicating CSR as their message can easily be misunderstood due to the contextual and rhetorical challenges.

1. Literature

The challenging aspects of the CSR communication raise the companies' awareness level of the critical importance of such communication, accordingly, many researchers have contributed to the CSR field and have established many reasons why companies should be concerned with and should seek to demonstrate CSR. Many scholars have identified environmental and global trends that seem to facilitate broader adoption of CSR. Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley (2008, p.104) outlined drivers toward a "regenerative economy" which include: increasing industrialization and side effects; emerging technologies that challenge the status quo; as well as global problems. Today, companies are increasingly expected to be responsible from their environment especially due to increased consumer awareness and interest. So, many firms adopt socially responsible practices and green marketing strategies (Mobin and Rahman; 2015, p.202; Lauritsen and Perks, 2015, p.188) and desire to communicate the environmental and socially responsible progress they have made in order to receive the support of the stakeholders and to influence consumer behavior using an implicit and sometimes even endorsed way of communicating CSR to prevent scepticism and enhance persuasion (Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen, 2008, p. 102; Morsing and Schultz, 2006, p. 331).

Today, the consumers in addition to their awareness and interest are also powerful (Podnar, 2008, p. 77) and CSR is an important factor in forming an impression of a company among the young consumers so it is important to see what and how consumers want to hear about corporate social issues, their attitudes and opinions about CSR communication, its' content and style.

The CSR communication is really fragile as today's consumers ask for socially responsible companies that minimize their effect on the nature and follow citizenship projects and they sometimes find it very unpleasant when companies communicate their projects.

Ramasamy and Yeung (2008, p. 125) affirmed that consumers are aware of the CSR issues and expect companies to engage in this kind of activities. However, Morsing et al. (2008, p. 104) point out that the communication of these activities do not persuade the consumers and cause a negative impact on the companies credibility. Consequently, it is clear that companies take into account the first affirmation and continue to communicate their CSR efforts and increase their use of CSR content in marketing campaigns (Blombäck and Scandelius, 2013; p. 370; Vogel, 2006, p. 97). This is not surprising because especially today's young consumers have high expectations from the companies and for themselves as the company's efforts will affect the future but they also ask for an honest, persuasive communication and an ethical way of doing things. It is clear that the new young generations have their own point of view and values on CSR and CSR communication accordingly this research, based on their personal interest on this issue, value systems, attitudes towards CSR communication and communication style will investigate the approaches to CSR communication to the new generation in the Turkish context.

2. Communicating CSR and Young Consumers

Consumers are very important and powerful in today's market and the young consumers are the largest group (24,6%) in the Turkish markets and this group is shaping the future consumption habits (www.tuik.gov.tr 13/06/2015). Although they are the most complex group of consumers their purchasing power will exceed those of the former generations and they will be much more influential in the near future. They grew up in a world full of possibilities and choices and they have high expectations for the future in terms of both jobs and life style (Browne and Nuttal, 2013; p. 8). So, it can be suggested that they also have high expectations from companies to do for society. In addition to their expectations, young consumers have new communication patterns and habits. The use of Internet and social media platforms made the communication very fast and transparent, they fully integrated the Internet into their way of life and they are always in touch with their friends from all over the world and they can use different kinds of media and expect others to do the same (Browne and Nuttal, 2013; p. 9). So, they can ask companies to do the same; to be always in touch, transparent and reach them via different media in terms of CSR communication.

Consumers were expecting companies to conduct business ethically in the 1990's (Creyer and Ross, 1997, p. 427) then in the 2000's they were more interested with the CSR but this caused a scepticism about the benefits provided by companies to the society or the environment (Dawkins and Lewis, 2003, p. 190). Bhattacharya and Sen (2003, p. 81) added that corporations, if supported by management, can create strong relationships with their consumers using corporate social initiatives. Since then, consumer expectations have been continuously increasing as the importance of the consumer as a stakeholder in terms of CSR (Muruganatham, 2010, p. 4).

Concerning the relationship between CSR and consumer attitudes, Beckmann (2007, p. 35) also suggested that consumers are interested in CSR in a skeptical and cynical way underlining the importance of a strategic fit between company and cause and the high level of sensitivity of the consumers to negative CSR information explaining companies reluctance to communicate proactively about CSR.

The researches on the relationship between CSR communication and changes in buying behaviour have established the view that positive CSR beliefs are associated with greater purchase intention (e.g., Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen, 2007, p. 233; Bhattacharya, Korschun, and Sen, 2008, p. 265). Additionally, this positive relationship also supports brand loyalty and strong relationships (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen, 2010, p.14; Bhattacharya et al., 2008, p. 267).

The researches on the relationship with the stakeholders argued that better corporate relationships with consumers were possible by a two way symmetrical communication (Grunig and Hunt; 1984, p. 76). Morsing and Schultz (2006, p. 337) added the need to inform, engage and involve the stakeholder using a sophisticated two-way communication process. So, these works show the importance of the communication style to be considered and applied first to engage young people actively in their CSR communication and make them part of these CSR efforts and in the meantime using a factual, objective language to overcome credibility issues (Berens and van Rekom, 2008, p. 112).

Furthermore, the fit concept defined as the logical link between the company's core business and its CSR efforts plays an important role in credibility as high degree of fit increases credibility (Becker-Olsen et al. 2006, p. 46). Consequently, companies have to choose CSR activities according to their core business and communicate this in a very attentive way through traditional, credible media such as annual reports. However, is it right when communicating with young consumers who consider CSR as a natural part of doing business, use different media, share ideas constantly and have very high expectations from companies. Therefore, to understand these factors and the young consumers' attitude towards CSR communication, their focus and values should be investigated.

3. Method

The data used in this study are quantitative and collected by a consumer survey using an online questionnaire based on the dimensions according to the previous studies related to consumer attitudes, values and CSR communication. The survey was a self-completion questionnaire form accessed via the Internet to reduce the interviewer and social desirability biases (de Vaus, 2002, p. 84).

The survey was in the form of a web page based survey. The respondents participating in the survey were between 18-30 years old and from Turkish nationality. A total of 1.248 respondents answers were complete and useful for the analysis out of 2.997 (41,6%) ensuring a good response rate. Both male (58%, 724) and female (42%, 524) respondents were part of the survey, and diversity in the level and type of education was ensured. Hence, the survey includes students from high schools (337, 27%) and universities (533, 42,7%) from 57 cities out of 81 in Turkey and it also includes young workers (378, 30,3%) to better represent young consumers.

4. Survey

Earlier studies in the field of CSR and consumers (e.g. Ramasamy and Yeung, 2008) have inspired the construction of this survey. Consumer evaluations of companies' different responsibilities and the values guiding their perceptions of CSR were measured using items covering different responsibilities, and the ranking of these items. Based on previous studies, we developed a structured questionnaire to collect demographic variables and attitudinal data. The survey included meaningful, sensitive, precise, and salient questions written in a plain style free. The questions were short, unambiguous, and neutral and the response categories were closed, and employed the use of Likert, semantic differential scales, checklist response formats and rankings (de Vaus, 2002, p. 88).

We have used in our questionnaire multi-item scales with necessary modifications to fit the Turkish context. After the double translation process our questionnaire was pre-tested on a sample of 64 consumers and ambiguous items were dropped. The final questionnaire consisted of 32 items with two dichotomous questions concerning the awareness and an open-ended question on media preference..

As the survey was a self-completion questionnaire accessed via the Internet, the survey and the items after the traduction were shortened to make the internet user answer all questions. The questionnaire scale reliability coefficients for all dimensions were all higher than 0,82, for the entire scale the Cronbach's alpha was at 0.87. The scale showed satisfactory dimensionality and homogeneity qualities: factor loading for each item was above 0.4 so we continued with the same scales.

The questions in the survey were grouped into dimensions based on themes such as awareness, importance, relevance, credibility and rhetorical approaches as suggested by the literature. The response categories used 5 point Likert scales (completely disagree/completely agree, very bad/very good, really don't like/really like and a percentage groups of 20%) and a dichotomous (yes/no) question. The responses are analyzed using descriptive statistics. As the consumers perception of CSR Communication is under-explored, the data gathered in a self completion survey can provide a foundation for researching audience perceptions. The main dimensions and items are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 <i>Survey dimensions and items</i>	
<p><u>Perceived Importance</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Companies' CSR activities are important . Companies care about CSR . How many large and medium sized companies are really active in CSR? (%) <p><u>Awareness</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Can you remember a responsible company? . Can you remember a CSR Communication? <p><u>Importance of CSR activities</u></p> <p>It's important if it is about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Environment . Employees . Local community . Global issues . People in other countries in difficulty . You personally <p><u>Relevance</u></p> <p>Companies have CSR projects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . To improve company image . To have a competitive advantage . To be more profitable . To avoid crises . To motivate employees . To be morally correct 	<p><u>Credibility</u></p> <p>A project is credible:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . When a company is not benefiting or try to benefit from it . When a company supports a project, it's enough for me . When it's not for company image . When a company supports the projects for longer time . When it's not communicated as an advertisement <p><u>Communication Style</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Our efforts reduced our carbon footprint by 10% and will be less 50% in 2023 . Our efforts to minimise our carbon footprint continue perpetually <p><u>Company Evaluation</u></p> <p>A company is very bad/very good if it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> . Assumes CSR . Cares about environment . Has a high quality product/service . Treats employees well . Has a high level customer service . Has a competent management . Communicates well and openly its product/service . Generates profit

The survey designed to see young people's evaluations, expectations, and attitudes towards CSR and to determine the related dimensions. The survey also aimed to seek different points that impress young consumers' perception of CSR communication.

5. Results

The survey shed light to the consumers perspective and gave indication of a self-contradictory consumer perception of companies' CSR engagement and communication. Although the majority

of the respondents (74.1 per cent) think that it is important for companies to implement CSR in their businesses, the respondents do not follow the companies and don't know if they actually have CSR projects. Almost 50 per cent (49,8) of the respondents think that only 18 per cent of all large and medium-sized companies have an actual CSR campaign. Seventy per cent of the respondents consider CSR as an important tool of corporate image, but less than 46 per cent remember a company that they consider as responsible and engaged in CSR and only 23 per cent can remember a CSR communication from a company. So, it is shown that respondents consider CSR important and want to have more CSR information however they are not actively seeking this information and do not notice it in their daily routine.

In the meantime, the respondents consider personal relevance and proximity very important for them, they emphasize what is close to them physically or personally as they care about the local environment and community. Although this consumer group is more global than any other generation, they are surprisingly more preoccupied with their personal needs, and own future. Furthermore, they rank high product quality followed by customer service and the respect for the environment. This again shows that young consumers value proximity and personal relevance indicating that companies engaging in CSR have to clearly explain the relevance of their specific CSR activities, and they have to use communication channels other than traditional annual reports.

These results showing that the young consumers prefer factual, clear and explicit statements (70,5 per cent) also support Berens and van Rekom (2008, p. 107). Another communication issue is the media preferences; respondents value CSR communication on TV, packagings, web sites and social platforms in contrast with actually recommended implicit CSR communication.

The data also displays that consumers consider CSR campaigns as lucrative campaigns (66.7 per cent), helping to strengthen corporate image (98,8 per cent) and competitiveness (74.3 per cent). Unfortunately, only 34.5 per cent of the respondents believe that these campaigns are realised for moral reasons. However, in contrast to earlier studies (Morsing et al., 2008, p.110) the data shows that the respondents are not sceptical towards explicit CSR communication, they express that explicit and continuous CSR communication is credible (only 17 per cent are sceptical believing that these companies follow financial goals with their communication). This again, shows that the CSR communication should be clear, factual stopping misunderstandings or accusations of greenwashing.

Young consumers prefer personal, self-centred values, comfortable life, pleasure and happiness. They respect CSR in relation to issues affecting their own future, and their local community. Accordingly, for their own future, they also mind the global aspects as expected so there is a gap between their understanding and common social perception of CSR.

Given the fact that young consumers have seen the age of globalization closely, it is very interesting to see that they do not show a much more developed global approach than what is demonstrated in their preference for localism. Moreover, the consumers are only interested in the outcomes of CSR projects. So, the CSR communication process is more a matter of corporate ability.

6. Conclusion

The findings indicate that companies need to change their CSR communication habits and the media they use in order to activate and engage the young consumers. A more direct, open and clear approach has to be chosen instead of the current indirect communication methods. This is realized by the way that consumers evaluate companies' CSR efforts and values they attach to CSR which are competency based and self oriented values. This is linked with the fact that this generation highlights its own needs and goals. However, they have a developed social conscience too, they search their needs goals without excluding the sense of community and contribution to their own society (Ellis, 2010, p. 47). So, while their selfish approach is important to consider in this context, it should be emphasized that responsibility is also an important issue in order to engage this group of young consumers. When the equilibrium is obtained between personal and social goals, young consumers are not only one dimensional, selfish individuals as suggested by the preliminary findings (Green and Peloza, 2011, p.55).

The difficulty of the respondents approach explains why so many companies struggle in communicating about CSR issues. The results show that CSR activities and communication must emphasize the realizations instead of moral values and that the personal goals blended with local community profits should be considered by companies willing to engage the young consumers.

It should also be emphasized that the dissemination and communication of different types of CSR initiatives should consider the social media channels to better reach this young consumer group as suggested by Browne and Nuttal (2013; p. 9). With the tremendous advantages that social media has for CSR communication, companies should use these platforms to foster the whole CSR scenario, and not only a few CSR areas. The shift is to plug in social media sites for CSR communication and be creative. The inclusion of CSR or Sustainability apps for smartphones could create opportunities to show a true commitment regarding CSR to engage new audiences.

7. Further Research

This work could be followed by an in-depth quantitative study or a qualitative study using focus groups in order to explore consumer CSR values in line with corporate CSR values, and another research could focus on digital media as it can facilitate CSR communication between corporations and young consumers who are almost always online. In this line of research, it could be interesting to investigate older generations perception of CSR communication and the patterns of preference for corporate actions as more research in this particular area can help companies gain a deeper understanding of all consumers.

Further studies can also consider comparisons between different types of organizations (nonprofit, for-profit and government sectors) CSR Communication and consumer responses.

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