Exploring CSR Communication on Twitter

Terry Damron, damront@apsu.edu
Lindsey Batts, lbatts1@apsu.edu

ABSTRACT

As interest in and pursuit of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has risen, so too has corporate communication concerning CSR. Worldwide, more than 2,700 companies have chosen to evidence their commitment to social responsibility through successful completion of B Lab's independent certification process, becoming Certified B Corporations (A Global Community of Leaders, 2019). A significant amount of research in recent years has focused on the way socially responsible firms communicate about CSR (Burchell & Cook, 2006; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Etter, 2013; Abitol & Lee, 2017; Illia, Romenti, Rodriquez-Canovas, Murtarelli, & Carroll, 2017; Wang & Huang, 2018). The purpose of this exploratory study is to further understanding concerning how – and how much – Certified B Corporations and non-certified firms with CSR programs promote their CSR activities via Twitter and the resulting degrees of consumer engagement.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Consumers demand that companies engage in ethical behavior toward all stakeholders and employ production processes that are less harmful to communities and the environment (Luu, 2012; Tate et al, 2010). Firms meet this demand by going beyond concern for economic interests and government requirements and engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR), those deliberate efforts intended to produce a positive impact (or limit negative impact) in the environment, society, and the community (Sim, 2003; Turker, 2012; Bhardwaj, 2014; Taghian et al, 2015). Although CSR is often seen as vital to business success, some stakeholders experience a sense of skepticism concerning the company's involvement in CSR. Consumers expect firms to be transparent and accountable in their adherence to a triple bottom line orientation (Lomonaco, 2018), an approach through which businesses create value not only through financial performance but also through activities designed to benefit society and the environment. Firms can combat skepticism and earn consumer trust by maintaining and growing CSR activities over time (Zhou and Ki, 2017) and frequently communicating a commitment to CSR to stakeholders (Du et al, 2010).

Benefits of B Corp Certification

Through consistent, comprehensive attention to and external reporting of their operations and business model via B Lab assessments, Certified B Corporations gain credibility with savvy consumers and businesses who seek objective assurance concerning a firm's actions and impact. As of May 2019, 2,788 companies in 150 industries across 64 countries had

obtained/maintained Certified B Corporation status through nonprofit B Lab's certification process (A Global Community of Leaders, 2019). Potential benefits of gaining status as a Certified B Corporation include brand building that aides in attraction of investors, employees, and customers, as well as (somewhat) debatable legal protections to insure sustained commitment to the triple bottom line orientation regardless of company ownership or shareholder desires (Nicholas & Sacco, 2016; Schiller, 2017). These benefits are particularly important given the ever-increasing buying power of Millennial consumers who are concerned with working for and shopping with firms committed to CSR (Fry, 2018; Deloitte, 2014), however firms considering benefits of pursuing Certified B Corp status should carefully consider the significant gap between consumers' self-reported behavior (SRB) and actual behavior, as survey responses to questions concerning a consumer's behavior tend to differ from the way s/he behaves (Moser, 2016).

CSR Communication and Dialogue via Social Media

CSR communication is central to satisfying skeptics and gaining the support of socially- and environmentally-conscious consumers. The CSR communication literature consistently points to a need for collaborative dialogue between organizations and their stakeholders (Johnson-Cramer et al., 2003; Burchell & Cook, 2006; Du et al., 2010). Many firms choose to communicate their CSR activities through social media. Abitol and Lee (2017) found consumer engagement with a firm's CSR posts on Facebook increased with company-cause fit (congruence between nature of business and cause supported) and use of specific dialogic strategies (use of multimedia formats and interactive messages containing a call to take action on social media). Stakeholder perceptions of CSR and behavioral intention toward a firm vary according to message source used and type of CSR promoted via post, as stakeholder perceptions are most positively impacted through internal CSR and personal life stories shared from CEO social networking site accounts and both internal and external CSR posts from organization social networking site accounts (Wang and Huang, 2018). Firms should talk about both actions they have taken and about their aspirations, including ideals and intentions (Christiansen & Cheney, 2011; Christiansen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2013).

Consumer Engagement via Social Media

On social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, a user's response to brand posts – a like, a favorite, a retweet, or a share – is easily observed by those within his social network. Consumer engagement in activities concerning brand-related content on social media platforms is known as a consumer online brand-related activity (COBRA), and COBRAs exist on a continuum of three usage types driven by varying motivations: consuming (minimal activity such as reading a tweet), contributing (moderate activity like clicking "favorite" on a tweet), and creating (high-level activity such as uploading user-generated brand-centric content) (Muntinga et al, 2011).

As a deliberative space designed for two-way communication, social media offers an opportune channel through which organizations can engage in the conversations, negotiations, and

information exchanges central to CSR. In earning Certified B Lab status, Certified B Corporations have demonstrated a degree of transparency and CSR-commitment that should be reflected in social media posts. In doing so, firms can calm skepticism as they demonstrate commitment to triple-bottom line ideals *and* increase engagement with likeminded consumers who seek to work for, buy from, and invest in conscientious businesses.

In order to gain an understanding of how Certified B Corporations approach – and how consumers respond to – CSR-related Twitter posts, the study authors developed a set of five research questions answered through a deductive, quantitative content analysis of 700 original Twitter posts issued by Certified B Corporations and non-certified firms with CSR programs:

RQ1:   How frequently do firms post about CSR issues on Twitter?
RQ2:   What CSR topic is the focus of CSR-related posts?
RQ3:   What type of discourse is used in in CSR-related posts?
RQ4:   How do levels of consumer contribution vary by CSR post topic?
RQ5:   How do levels of consumer contribution vary by discourse type employed in a CSR posts?

References

A Global Community of Leaders. (2019, May 27). Retrieved from https://bcorporation.net/

Abitbol, A. and Lee, S.Y. (2017). Messages on CSR-dedicated Facebook pages: What works and what doesn't. *Public Relations Review, 43*(4), 796-808.

Bhardwaj, L. (2014). Corporate social responsibility and customer satisfaction with respect to hospitality industry. *International Journal of Applied Services Marketing Perspectives,3*(4), 1390-1398.

Burchell, J. and Cook, J. (2006). It's good to talk? Examining attitudes towards corporate social responsibility dialogue and engagement processes. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, *15*(2), 154–170.

Christiansen, L.T. & Cheney, G. (2011). Interrogating the communicative dimension of corporate social responsibility. In Ihlen, Ø., Bartlett, J., & May, S. (Eds.), *The Handbook of Communication and Corporate Responsibility* (pp. 491-504). Oxford: Wiley.

Christensen, L.T., Morsing, M., & Thyssen, O. (2013). CSR as aspirational talk. *Organization, 29*(1), 372-393.

Deloitte. (2014, January). Big demands and high expectations: The Deloitte Millennial survey.

Retrieved from https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/global/Documents/About-Deloitte/gx-dttl-2014-millennial-survey-report.pdf

Du, S., Bhattacharya, C.B., and Sen, S. (2010). Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility (CSR): The role of CSR communication. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *12*(1), 8-19.

Etter, M. (2013). Reasons for low levels of interactivity (non-) interactive CSR communication in Twitter. Public Relations Review, 39, 606-608. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.06.003

Fry, R. (2018, March 1). Millennials projected to overtake Baby Boomers as America's largest generation. *Pew Research Center.* Retrieved from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/01/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/

Illia, L., Romenti, S., Rodriquez-Canovas, B., Murtarelli, G., and Carroll, C.E. (2017). Exploring corporations' dialogue about CSR in the digital era. *Journal of Business Ethics, 146*(1), 39-58.

Johnson-Cramer, M. E., Berman, S. L., and Post, J. E. (2003). Re-examining the concept of "stakeholder management.". In S. Andriof, B. Husted, & S. S. Rahman (Eds.), Unfolding stakeholder thinking: Relationships, communication, reporting, and performance (pp. 145–161). Sheffield, England: Greenleaf.

Lomonaco, D. (2018, January 22). Be nice or leave: The pragmatic case for B-Corps. *Forbes.* Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2018/01/22/be-nice-or-leave-the-pragmatic-case-for-b-corps/#4da317e64621

Luu, T. T. (2012). Corporate social responsibility, ethics, and corporate governance. *Social Responsibility Journal, 8*(4), 547-560.

Moser, A.K. (2016). Consumers' purchasing decisions regarding environmentally friendly products: An empirical analysis of German consumers. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 31,* 389-397.

Muntinga, D.G., Moorman, M., and Smith, E.G. (2011). Introducing COBRAs: Exploring motivations for brand-related social media use. *International Journal of Advertising*, *30*(1), 13-46.

Nicholas, A.J. and Sacco, S. (2016). People, planet, and profit: Benefit and B Certified Corporations – Comprehension and Outlook of Business Students. *Academy of Business Research Journal, 3*, 18-31.

Schiller, B. (2017, March 27). Should your company become a benefit corporation, a B Corp, or what? *Fast Company.* Retrieved from https://www.fastcompany.com/3069192/should-my-company-be-a-benefit-corporation-a-b-corp-or-what

Sim, R. (2003). Ethics and corporate social responsibility: Why giants fail. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Taghian, M., D'Souza, C., and Polonsky, M. (2015). A stakeholder approach to corporate social responsibility, reputation and business performance. *Social Responsibility Journal, 11*(2), 340-363.

Tate, W.L., Ellram, L.M., and Kirchoff, J. F. (2010). Corporate social responsibility reports: A thematic analysis related to supply chain management. *Journal of Supply Chain Management, 46*(1), 19-44.

Turker, D. (2012). Measuring corporate social responsibility: A scale development study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *85*(4), 411-27.

Wang, R. and Huang, Y. (2018). Communicating corporate social responsibility (CSR) on social media: How do message source and types of CSR message influence stakeholders' perceptions? *Corporate Communications: An International Journal, 23*(3), 326-341.

Zhou, Z. and Ki, E. (2017). Exploring the role of CSR fit and the length of CSR involvement in routine business and corporate crises settings. *Public Relations Review, 44*, 75-83. Doi.org/10.1016.j.pubrev.2017.11.004

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This study will allow for a deeper understanding of the ways firms communicate about CSR activities, how consumers respond to specific types of CSR posts on Twitter, and the relationship between firm type, CSR activity promoted, and consumer online brand-related activities (COBRAs).

Keywords: Social Media, Consumer Behavior, Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Communication

Author Information:
Terry Damron, Austin Peay State University, damront@apsu.edu

Lindsey Batts, Austin Peay State University, lbatts1@apsu.edu

Track: Social Media Marketing

ID#: 1446