

**“It’s nice, but....” – Student Jobseeker
Perceptions of Online CSR Communication**
Managing People, Knowledge and Change

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Abstract

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Key words	CSR, Perceptions, Online communication, Employee attraction, Image
Purpose	The purpose of this thesis is to provide an insight on how students as prospective employees perceive the communication of CSR by organisations on their corporate websites.
Methodology	This exploratory study is conducted from an interpretative, perspective, based on qualitative research methods.
Theoretical framework	This study is based on theories related to CSR, corporate social responsiveness and CSR communication.
Empirical foundation	The empirical basis for this research was the analysis of three corporate CSR websites and focus groups.
Conclusions	The students were found to be highly sceptical of the organisations’ online CSR communication. Three main factors: the actual CSR messages, previous knowledge about CSR and related issues, brand identity and pre-understandings of organisations play a significant role in shaping the student jobseekers’ perceptions of the online CSR communication.

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I would like to thank my parents, for their continuous, unconditional love, support and encouragement.

Fifi

List of Abbreviations

CSR Corporate Social Responsibility

CO2 Carbon dioxide

GRI Global Reporting Initiative

IFRS International Financial Reporting Standards

NGO Non-governmental organisation

WWF World Wildlife Fund

List of Figures

Figure 1: Dimensions of CSR Definitions	21
Figure 2: Pictures from McDonald’s Website	34
Figure 3: Pictures from Unilever Website	37
Figure 4: Pictures from Shell Website	38
Figure 5: Text Excerpt McDonald’s Website	40
Figure 6: Text Excerpt Unilever Website	43
Figure 7: Text Excerpt Shell Website	45
Figure 8: Text Excerpt McDonald’s Website	47
Figure 9: Text Excerpt Unilever Website	49
Figure 10: Text Excerpt Shell Website	50
Figure 11: Text Excerpt McDonald’s Website	53
Figure 12: Text Excerpt Unilever Website	54
Figure 13: Text Excerpt Shell Website	55
Figure 14: Text Excerpt McDonald’s Website	57
Figure 15: Text Excerpt Unilever Website	58
Figure 16: Text Excerpt Shell Website	60

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	3
List of Abbreviations	4
List of Figures	5
Chapter 1: Introduction	8
1.1 Background	8
1.2 Purpose and Problem Discussion	9
1.3 Thesis Outline	10
Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods	11
2.1 Methodology	11
2.2 Data Analysis	12
2.3 Research Process	13
2.3.1 Websites	13
2.3.2 Focus Groups	16
2.4 Limitations	19
Chapter 3: Literature Review	20
3.1 Corporate Social Responsibility	20
3.1.1 Corporate Social Responsiveness	22
3.2 CSR Communication	24
3.2.1 The Role of a CSR Image in Employee Attraction	26
3.3 CSR Communication Online	27
3.4 Techniques used in Online CSR Communication	29
3.4.1 Language	29
3.4.2 Pictures	31
3.4.3 Colours	32
Chapter 4: Analysis of Data	34
4.1 Pictures	34
4.1.1 Company 1: McDonald’s	34
4.1.2 Company 2: Unilever	36
4.1.3 Company 3: Shell	38
4.2 Environment	39
4.2.1 Company 1: McDonald’s	40
4.2.2 Company 2: Unilever	43
4.2.3 Company 3: Shell	44
4.3 Society	47
4.3.1 Company 1: McDonald’s	47
4.3.2 Company 2: Unilever	49
4.3.3 Company 3: Shell	50
4.4 Employment	52
4.4.1 Company 1: McDonald’s	52
4.4.2 Company 2: Unilever	53
4.4.3 Company 3: Shell	55

4.5 Achievements/Reporting	56
4.5.1 <i>Company 1: McDonald’s</i>	56
4.5.2 <i>Company 2: Unilever</i>	58
4.5.3 <i>Company 3: Shell</i>	59
4.6 Conclusion	60
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	63
5.1 Language	63
5.2 Pictures	64
5.4 CSR Messages	67
5.5 Individual Knowledge of CSR and Related Issues.....	68
5.6 Brand Identity and Pre-understandings of Organisations	69
Chapter 6: Conclusion	70
References	72

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

In recent years, we have increasingly witnessed organisations embracing and implementing corporate social responsibilities (CSR) policies and practices into their business models and operations (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Lee, 2008; Orlitzky, Schmidt and Rynes, 2003). As Du, Bhattacharya and Sen (2010: 8) point out, ‘more than ever, companies are devoting substantial resources to various social initiatives, ranging from community outreach and environmental protection, to socially responsible business practices.’ Additionally, this way of operating has revealed itself to be beneficial, not only financially and in terms of an added competitive advantage but also for employee attraction and recruitment processes (Bhattacharya, Sen and Korschun, 2008).

It is said that human capital is one of the most important and scarce resources of an organisation (Bartlett and Ghoshal: 2002). For example, a survey by Universum (2011) found that 80% of 632 global organisations find it difficult to attract the right employees. Correspondingly, although we are said to be currently in a ‘war for jobs’, the ‘war for talent’ is still on going and is possibly more relevant now than ever with the rate of unemployment, presently at a record high of 12% in the Eurozone (BBC News, 2013). With less positions to fill in a recessive economy, organisations look for the best and the brightest to fill the limited spots they have to offer. Online CSR communication is one of the methods that organisations are using to attract and keep the right talented workforce (Behrend, Baker and Thompson, 2009; Jones, Williness and Madey, 2010).

Attracting and retaining the right talented workforce is crucial to the success of an organisation and competition is fierce on employer side to attract these people (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2002). Thus they increasingly strive to portray themselves from their best side by communicating their ‘CSR-boosted’ image to show potential employees what they have to offer. Through online CSR communication, organisations can broadcast messages about their CSR values and activities but also create an image of being a CSR-conscious organisation—which may not reflect their actual CSR practices—targeted at potential employees. As a relatively inexpensive, easy to use and accessible method with an extremely wide reach, the Internet is considered an effective tool for this type of

communication (Behrend et al., 2009; Rolland and O’Keefe Bazzoni, 2009; Du et al., 2010: 13).

Thus we explore the ways that organisations apply online CSR communication on their corporate websites in order to find out how it is perceived by student jobseekers. Through our interpretative study, we also strive to gain in-depth insights on how brands and preconceptions of organisations influence the way jobseekers see employers’ CSR standing.

Our research is directed at academia and the public in general. As this is an exploratory study, we anticipate raising questions relevant for future research. As well we aim to provide new insights for academia by taking the students as a representative of perceptions of CSR communication in today’s society. Further, this thesis hopes to raise and encourage public debate on the issues of online CSR communication.

1.2 Purpose and Problem Discussion

As already established, empirical data shows that organisations can market themselves through their CSR values and practices and can thus gain substantial benefits, for example CSR can contribute to the creation of a competitive advantage (Bhattacharya et al., 2008). Increasingly, this marketing through CSR is being used in recruiting practices as well; by communicating their CSR performance and principles, organisations aim to appeal to potential employees. Therefore we focus our research on the evaluation of communication of CSR policies and practices on corporate websites from the perspective of students as prospective employees.

Scholars such as Maignan and Ferrell (2001) state that research literature on how CSR communication is perceived by external audiences is fairly rare. Admittedly the perceptions could be problematic to evaluate given that CSR in itself is complex and difficult to measure. Nevertheless, Behrend et al., (2009) researched the effects of pro-environmental recruiting messages and the role of organisational reputation on jobseekers. They simulated an organisation to demonstrate this to their interviewees, whereas we shall examine the CSR communication of real organisations.

As well, Jones et al., (2010) investigated why job seekers are attracted to socially responsible organisations by testing underlying mechanisms from a quantitative research point of view, while we take a qualitative and interpretative stance in order to gain more rich and in depth information.

Hence the purpose of this thesis is to provide an insight on how students as prospective employees perceive the communication of CSR by organisations on their corporate websites. We explore this by posing the following research question:

- How do student jobseekers evaluate an organisation’s CSR standing based on the content of its corporate website?

This central question can be broken down into the following sub questions:

- What type of language and pictures are used on the websites and how are these perceived?
- How do brand identity and pre-understandings of organisations influence the students’ opinions/evaluation of the organisation’s CSR practices and policies?

1.3 Thesis Outline

Firstly, methodological and methodical considerations on which our research is based will be elaborated in the next chapter. We outline the data collection and analysis methods that are in line with the interpretative nature of this study. In chapter three, an extensive literature review, highlights the prominent academic research of the focus areas of this thesis. Rather than defining CSR, we focus on the concept of corporate social responsiveness and the communication of CSR online, reviewing the techniques applied on CSR webpages. Subsequently, chapter four illustrates the gathered empirical material from focus groups. The analysis is structured into five main categories of pictures, environment, society, employment and achievements/reporting, the latter four being the main focus areas addressed on CSR websites. Chapter five will outline the essential findings of the research, which will be further discussed in line with theoretical underpinnings. The final chapter will conclude by taking into consideration the findings and the future research opportunities.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, we will shed light on the methodology and methods we used. Data was collected from three different corporate websites and from focus groups carried out with 22 participants in total. In line with our philosophical standing, we used qualitative data collection methods and took a hermeneutical approach to the analysis of our data.

2.1 Methodology

One of the first and essential steps in a research project is identifying the underlying research philosophy since this influences the methodology and methods applied in the project. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009: 106-107) portray the research process as an onion, the outer layers are the research philosophy, which when peeled away reveal the inside: the data collection and analysis methods. In this research project, the outer layers of our ‘research onion’—our ontological, epistemological and axiological views are respectively: constructionist, interpretive and values-bound.

To explain ontology, Mason suggests asking oneself the following question, “What is the nature of the phenomena, or entities, or social ‘reality’, that I wish to investigate?” (2002: 14). As constructionists, we hold the position that social actors constantly create social phenomena and their meanings (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 20) as opposed to objectivists, for example. According to the objectivist view, ‘social phenomena and the categories that we use in everyday discourse have an existence that is independent or separate from actors’ (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 19). In line with our perspective of reality, we view CSR from a constructionist standpoint. We see CSR as highly ambiguous and dependent on context. In itself, CSR is difficult to define and it is usually associated with different aspects depending on whom you are talking to, for example our research subjects. Therefore, we hold the view that CSR is socially constructed and means different things to different individuals and organisations. As a result, rather than defining the highly debated construct of CSR, we concentrate on the notion of corporate social responsiveness as a pragmatically oriented approach to CSR.

Epistemology concerns itself with what is regarded as knowledge or evidence of things in the social world (Mason, 2002: 16). Here, we take an interpretive position that ‘stresses the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants’ (Bryman, 2008: 366). Therefore, we view the perceptions of individuals as socially constructed rather than subjective. Since perceptions can be influenced by an individual’s and/or society’s history, reality, experiences, knowledge, learning, for example.

Concerning axiology, we see our research as being bound to values because we the researchers are part of the research process and cannot be separated from it, thus it will be subjective (Saunders et al. 2009: 119). Axiology is the study of values and in a research project such as this it refers to the role that values play during the research process (Saunders et al. 2009: 116).

2.2 Data Analysis

Corresponding with the philosophical considerations and the interpretive paradigm in which our research falls as well as the aim to understand ‘what is going on’, we took a hermeneutic approach to addressing the research problem at hand and understanding perceptions of students concerning the use of CSR communication on corporate websites. We applied this approach during the interpretation of the transcribed focus group discussions. A hermeneutic approach emphasises subjective interpretations. Therefore recognising themes and finding relationships in the data was important in order to gain salient information. We developed understanding from reading and re-reading the data whilst analysing the content in reference to the research questions.

Throughout the analysis, we drew from Kvale’s explanation ‘a hermeneutical approach involves an interpretive listening to the multiple horizons of meaning involved in the interviewees’ statements, with an attention to the possibilities of continual reinterpretations within the hermeneutical circle of the interview. Attention will also be paid to the influence of the presuppositions of the subjects’ answers as well as the presuppositions of the interviewer’s questions’ (1996: 135). In accordance with the hermeneutic circle, deepened understanding came about from a systematic approach to

interpretation. Systematic interpretation entails interpreting with the help of own pre-understandings of the phenomenon at hand, the interpretation of individual parts, which affects the interpretation of the phenomenon as a whole and further reviewing these interpretations (Von Zweck, Paterson and Pentland, 2008: 119).

We went through the students' responses with our own pre-understanding of the topics of CSR and its communication from which we theorised the main observation of the data. For example, in regard to analysis of the responses concerning how pictures are perceived in CSR communication, we could see that the main observation was that they were desirable. After going through this data initially, we went through it again, part by part (for example, pictures according to organisation), while keeping our main observation in mind so that we were able to get an idea of how the separate parts fit into the whole picture that is the data. During the process of interpreting the parts, the main observation changed often (e.g. pictures add to the message, pictures make the message more believable, pictures make the webpage look more inviting), but we took this new information and it helped to review the initial main theme until we could see a comprehensible and consistent picture of data. In the end we could see that pictures are desirable in CSR communication because they allow the audience to connect to the messages on an emotional level, therefore they find the messages more believable.

2.3 Research Process

In order to investigate the perception of potential employees regarding the presentation of CSR messages, we had to consider the CSR messages broadcasted by organisations and the way potential employees evaluated it. Therefore this study relied on data collected from two main sources, namely websites and focus groups.

2.3.1 Websites

Firstly, data was collected from corporate webpages, which are commonly used by organisations as a platform to communicate things such as job openings, financial projections and even CSR activities. This idea is supported by a study conducted by Maignan and Ralston (2002), in which they concluded that organisations use their websites to present their CSR views. Also this medium can be used to create and convey

an image of being a CSR-oriented organisation, which may not reflect actual CSR actions. We chose three different corporate websites and paid particular attention to the CSR messages such as the practices and principles. We explored the techniques used for portraying their values and ‘good’ side to attract job applicants that fit into their concept. Of particular interest here were the words, phrases, stories and visuals used.

The three corporate websites belonged to the organisations: Royal Dutch Shell, Unilever and McDonald’s. We chose these three organisations because they are multinational organisations that invest a lot of their resources into their CSR communication. They all engage in very elaborate and detailed CSR communication on their webpages. Additionally, as we are looking at CSR from an interpretative perspective, concentrating on the notion of corporate social responsiveness and how organisations communicate an image of being socially responsible, these organisations are particularly interesting as they have previously been involved in some CSR scandals and have been able to replenish their image through extensive CSR work. Through elaborate CSR campaigns and activities, they actively addressed and responded to these scandals, which can be seen as corporate social responsiveness (Crane and Matten, 2010: 59).

Shell has had a number of scandals concerning the extraction practices and oil spills. Most notably, they have been criticised for exploiting the people and environment of Nigeria in their mission to drill for oil. Consequently this has led to sabotage and hijacking of oilrigs by locals as well as oil spills, leakages and fires. This has had a huge impact on the environment in the Niger Delta and it has affected the locals and especially the fishing industry there (Gaughran: 2013). Also, recently Shell has been involved in some controversial discussions and regarding their offshore drilling in Alaska, (Birger, 2012). Particularly after their competitor, BP’s 2010 oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, public and NGO opposition against oil companies is especially high. Among other things, McDonald’s is often criticised for supplying and marketing their unhealthy products especially to children (Crane and Matten, 2010: 39). Unilever, one of the world’s largest consumer goods corporations, has been accused of buying palm oil from controversial firms that destroy rainforests in order to make way for palm oil plantations (Koswanage, 2010). Yet all of these organisations have managed to remain in operation. Through extensive and strategic CSR efforts—that are generally considered to be successful—they have managed to respond to negative issues and now seemingly act in a proactive

manner when it comes to CSR issues, thus enforcing and upholding relatively positive images.

We divided the website content that we showed the students during the focus groups into five categories in order to better structure the discussions and these were:

- Pictures,
- Environment,
- Society,
- Employment and
- Achievements/Reporting.

We selected the four latter categories after analysing a number of corporate websites. We saw that at least three categories were the most prominent issues addressed by organisations in their CSR communication efforts. These were environment, society and achievement/reporting (this included CSR reporting, awards, recognition for CSR). All of the three websites we analysed and used in our focus groups (www.shell.com/global/environment-society; www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/sustainability; www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/) explicitly addressed these issues, they were easy to find as they usually had their own links on the first webpage menu. The categories, ‘society, environment and achievements’ are collective names we used to categorise what fit into them. On the actual websites, they were termed differently. For example, Unilever used the term ‘better livelihoods’ which we categorised as ‘society, while McDonalds used ‘communities’. However, employment was not as easy to find as the others. We found content concerning employment after exploring the websites further. This issue was usually under some other main category such as ‘society’ or for example, ‘respecting human rights’ on Shell’s website.

The pictures we showed the students in the focus groups were collected from different pages of the organisations’ CSR websites. We had one PowerPoint slide with pictures for each company and the participants were not told which companies the pictures belonged to. The selection process of the pictures involved identifying pictures on the CSR websites related to the categories of environment, society and employment. The main objective here was for the respondents to get a look and feel on how the images were presented on the websites, which colours were used and what this meant to them.

The five categories also allowed us to identify themes during analysis in a more systematic manner. Primarily we approached the data analysis by identifying the salient opinions and statements that were similar across the five focus groups. The use of themes in this process such as repetitions, metaphors, similarities and differences as well as linguistic connectors was vital (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

2.3.2 Focus Groups

Secondly, focus groups were used in order to be able to gain insight into the student jobseekers’ perception of CSR on corporate webpages. We selected focus groups because they concentrate on the participants’ perceptions, opinions, reactions and attitudes towards a specific topic.

Interaction and discussions among participants play a major role in focus groups and should thus be fostered (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 368). Linville, Lambert-Shute, Fruhauf and Piercy, (2003: 211) point out that through interaction, participants “can also build upon each other’s answers and evaluators can gather a lot of information in a short time”. Moreover through such discussions, researchers may come across unanticipated salient issues relevant for further exploration, as we experienced in our own focus groups. Albrecht, Johnson and Walther (1993: 54) state, ‘opinions about a variety of issues are generally determined not by individual information gathering and deliberation but through communication with others’. As a result, the interaction during the focus groups allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the topic through the discussions, recollections, stories and debates that arose.

For example, we were able to observe how the participants would argue and challenge each other’s responses; this made them really think about what they were saying so that we were able to gather some realistic stories of their thoughts. One example occurred when discussing Shell’s environmental page, some students expressed positive opinions to the fact that Shell was involved in the production and research of biofuel, which they saw as a good alternative to fossil fuel. A business student then explained to his peers that biofuels were not sustainable at all because for instance, rain forests were destroyed in order to produce biofuel. With this revelation the other students reconsidered their prior statements.

We showed our participants excerpts from the corporate websites. These included visual and text extracts as previously explained. We asked them a variety of questions after every excerpt in order to get their opinions, feelings and interpretations. We also paid attention to their reactions. Initially, we did not reveal which organisations we were dealing with, and only gave them this information at the end of the discussion. We did this in order to gain insights that were not influenced by the name or reputation of the organisation and the students’ associations to it. This gave us very interesting results, as will be seen in the later analysis chapter.

As we are looking at CSR communication as an employee attraction tool and how the potential employees perceive this, we selected participants that were all students seeking employment now or in the near future. They were all of similar age and most of them were master students. By selecting participants with these similar characteristics, we anticipated being able to identify trends and patterns during the analysis of the data (Franz, 2011; Saunders et al., 2009: 347). At the same time, we carried out our research with a mixture of 16 business and six development students. This was in order to examine if there were any differences in perceptions and reactions to CSR communication between the two types of students, as we assumed that development students are more conscious of ethical and social issues given their field of study. The programme of development studies encompasses all sorts of societal issues such a poverty, economic development, thus these students are more likely to be knowledgeable about such issues than business students who do not conventionally learn this in their courses. In total, five focus groups, each with four to five participants and with a length of between 60 to 75 minutes, were conducted. Two out of five groups consisted only of business students while the others were mixed.

Due to time constraints, we were only able to secure six development students for the focus groups. As mentioned earlier, we wanted to explore whether there would be a difference in perceptions between the two student groups. However, as it turned out, there was not much of a difference as will be explained in the analysis chapter. We mixed the development students with the business students in three of the focus groups in order to stimulate a more ‘heated’ discussion.

All discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed, during the discussions notes were taken as well. During the focus groups, we had to act as facilitators and moderators to ensure a smooth and effective discussion. Sometimes it was necessary to directly address participants and encourage them to speak. Also we had to be aware of participants straying from the questions we asked, even though sometimes these were interesting and entertaining discussions, we had to moderate and guide them back to the questions in order to get through all of them in the limited time frame. Overall during this research process, we learnt that it was important to be attentive observers and listeners during the discussions so as to recognise significant themes and information.

Another issue was that it was sometimes difficult for the participants to really grasp the full picture behind some of the texts and visuals shown to them. For instance, as we could not show the whole website, sometimes some information was missing from the excerpts we showed and we had to clarify that there was a link or further information that we could not include and explain what it was about. Throughout this project, as qualitative researchers, we realised that we were not detached from the generation of knowledge but rather we were an active part of it. Our thoughts, actions and decisions shaped the research process, so that during the process we saw when we had to make some modifications.

For example, initially, we placed the slides with the webpage content in random order so that certain patterns would not influence the respondents’ opinions. However, as we went along with the focus groups, we realised that this was confusing for the students. The confusion was due to the students not being able to compare the slides to one another and thereby many of them said it was difficult for them to judge a slide that was not put into a context. We changed this by categorising the organisations in numerical order, for example all slides from McDonalds had # 1 placed on them in every category, by doing so the students could compare the companies with one another providing a more in depth discussion. Also when the names of the organisations were revealed, the numbered slides helped them to remember the content of the slides and to connect them to the organisations.

2.4 Limitations

Focus groups are often criticised for their lack of generalisability because the results are not considered to be able to reliably reflect the reactions of the wider population (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 370). We acknowledge that our research sample may have been too small to make a valid representation of all students’ perceptions of CSR communication. Nevertheless as this is an exploratory study, our aim is to gain insight to what is happening with the anticipation that our research may open up other questions for further studies.

Furthermore, our research does not account for the cultural or social backgrounds of the respondents. Yet in one of the focus groups, we experienced the effect of the participants’ cultural backgrounds on their opinions. With one website excerpt, we found that some of the responses we received were influenced by the different cultural upbringings. An example of this could be seen during one focus group: the interpretation of a picture led to totally different responses between Swedish students and a Chinese student. Basically, we could observe how the gender-equal culture of Sweden led Swedes to be more sensitive to sexism compared to the Chinese culture where women are not as empowered. This could be the topic for further research in itself or this can be accounted for in another study in order to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics between culture and opinions of CSR and its communication.

Another possible limitation that needs to be clarified is that our research design does not account for the subconscious associations the students may have to elements of websites such as colours or words. As we actively asked the students to consciously examine the webpage extracts, the responses they gave to our questions may actually be different from their initial subconscious reactions. It has been said that elements such as colours and images evoke certain emotions or reactions on a subconscious level and therefore marketers are known to use this knowledge to influence consumer opinions about brands, for instance (Wang, 2011). However as this goes beyond the scope of our research design, we acknowledge it as a possible limitation and point out that this perspective could be taken up in further research.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Rather than focusing on what CSR is, we concern ourselves more with the question of how organisations engage in CSR from the notion of corporate social responsiveness, as it is a pragmatic approach to CSR. As we are exploring how potential employees evaluate the CSR standing of an organisation based on the CSR messages online, we look at these CSR messages as possibly arising from the actual CSR activities but also from the image of being a CSR driven organisation. Communication plays a role here as it not only gets the word out of what organisations are doing for CSR but can also aid in the creation of an image of a socially responsible organisation. Thus, we take on the topic of CSR communication and how it is used to communicate the image of a socially driven organisation to attract jobseekers. As online communication is the focus here, we review the literature on one such medium: the corporate website and also pay attention to some of the techniques used in web design for effective communication.

3.1 Corporate Social Responsibility

Although the field of CSR has been highly researched through the years, CSR still remains a rather ambiguous concept with various definitions (Crane and Matten, 2010: 51; Jamali, 2008: 213). Maignan and Ferrell (2004: 4) point out that there are numerous viewpoints and no single conceptualisation of CSR stands out in the literature. Frankental, (2001: 20) has gone so far as to describe CSR as, “a vague and intangible term which can mean anything to anybody, and therefore is effectively without meaning.” Corresponding with Frankental’s statement, we acknowledge that CSR’s ambiguity and complexity means that there are diverse possibilities of interpreting and studying this topic. Consequently we see CSR as being a socially constructed concept. This means that it is understood differently from person to person and this understanding can be highly dependent on such aspects as the person’s (or organisation’s) reality, pre-understanding, knowledge, history or culture.

While this thesis does not strive to provide a distinct definition of CSR, we draw on the research of Dahlsrud, to show what is generally associated with CSR. In his study (2008), he analysed 37 various definitions used to explain CSR and found that generally, five dimensions can be used to categorise the definitions. The following table illustrates these five dimensions, what they refer to and example phrases.

Figure 1: Dimensions of CSR Definitions

Dimensions	The definition is coded to the dimension if it refers to	Example phrases
The environmental dimension	The natural environment	'a cleaner environment' 'environmental stewardship' 'environmental concerns in business operations'
The social dimension	The relationship between business and society	'contribute to a better society' 'integrate social concerns in their business operations' 'consider the full scope of their impact on communities'
The economic dimension	Socio-economic or financial aspects, including describing CSR in terms of a business operation	'contribute to economic development' 'preserving the profitability' 'business operations'
The stakeholder dimension	Stakeholders or stakeholder groups	'interaction with their stakeholders' 'how organizations interact with their employees, suppliers, customers and communities' 'treating the stakeholders of the firm'
The voluntariness dimension	Actions not prescribed by law	'based on ethical values' 'beyond legal obligations' 'voluntary'

Source: Dahlsrud (2008)

As can be seen from the table, the term ‘corporate social responsibility’ seems to involve many different aspects. Even with the ‘social’ in the term, it is associated with different corporate obligations such as environment or economy. The nature of these obligations has been a source of controversy through the years. While some scholars correspond with Carroll’s well-known model (1979, 1991) and argue that organisations have four main obligations to society: economic, legal, ethical and philanthropic. Others side with one of the most prominent objectors of CSR, Milton Friedman who argued that an organisation’s only social responsibility is to its increase profits (Friedman, 1970).

However, no matter the debates or individual standings on CSR, today it is “fairly widely accepted that businesses do indeed have responsibilities beyond simply making a profit” (Crane and Matten, 2010: 51; Lee, 2008: 53). Most organisations today have accepted this notion and carry out their responsibilities in a number of ways and according to a number of approaches. One such approach is corporate social responsiveness. Corporate social responsiveness emerged as a pragmatic approach to dealing with CSR in organisations during the 1970s. Carroll (1991: 40) points out that the shift of focus from

CSR to corporate social responsiveness was a much-needed reorientation as CSR concentrated entirely on the notion of business obligation and motivation while action was being neglected.

3.1.1 Corporate Social Responsiveness

We rely on a definition by Frederick (1994), who describes corporate social responsiveness as, ‘the capacity of a corporation to respond to social pressures.’ This perspective takes a more managerial and practical approach towards CSR: whereas CSR is concerned with the questions of why organisations should engage in CSR, corporate social responsiveness focuses on questions of how. Frederick also points out that the emphasis of corporate social responsiveness is on the management of an organisation’s relations to society and is characterised by a process or systems orientation to social pressures, along with an anticipatory scanning procedure to detect emerging problems (1994: 155-156).

According to Carroll (1979)—drawing on Wilson (1974), an organisation can take four different approaches to responding to social pressure. He calls this the four philosophies of social responsiveness:

1. Reaction (‘Fight all the way’): With this type of approach to social responsiveness, the organisation does not accept any responsibility for social issues by denying complaints against any of its illegal or unethical actions, for example.
2. Defence (‘Do only what is required’): An organisation adopting this response philosophy only observes the least legal requirements so as to protect the business and to satisfy its social expectations.
3. Accommodation (‘Be progressive’): The organisation accepts its social responsibilities and strives to comply with the economic, legal and ethical requirements. The organisation does what is demanded and observes social norms, values and relevant perspectives of social groups.
4. Pro-action (‘Lead the industry’): Here the organisation strives go beyond what is expected by being a leader of social initiatives, striving to prevent the social negative impact of its activities and anticipating social problems and solutions.

However it can be argued that what is not acknowledged in Carroll’s four philosophies is the possibility of organisations only portraying an image of being socially responsive. For example an organisation with an image of being proactive may not actually correspond with its real actions. Rather it could be a case of an organisation appearing to be proactive because of its targeted behaviour to have the image of being proactive.

Although, the concept of social corporate responsiveness emerged in the 1970s, it is still relevant today and we have been witness to how this concept has been manifested through some organisations. Considering one of our research organisations, McDonald’s, we can see how corporate social responsiveness has evolved within its operations.

As a market leader in its industry that is functional in a large number of countries worldwide, McDonald’s operations are constantly under scrutiny. Major criticism of McDonald’s in Europe began around the 1980s, led by environmentalists and social justice campaigners. An example is the now legendary McLibel case of the mid 1980s, where McDonald’s sued two activists for publishing a leaflet with damaging allegations about the organisation such as claims of promoting unhealthy food, animal cruelty, anti-union activity, bad working conditions and contributing to starvation in the developing world (BBC News, 2005; Kuszewski, 2010). This can be seen as a defence philosophy of social responsiveness. Besides that, the organisation encountered major criticism because of its products from nutritionists, activists, governments and the general public, spurred by the success of the documentary, ‘Supersize Me’ in the 2000s. As concern over the products’ unhealthy effects and the increasing rates of obesity increased, loss of market share loomed and the organisation was forced to respond to the demands of society for more nutritiously conscious action (The Economist, 2005; Crane and Matten, 2010: 39-42).

This saw the withdrawal of super size options and the introduction of more healthy meals in McDonald’s restaurants. Salads, fruit and leaner alternatives to hamburgers appeared on the menu. Also, the organisations began to disclose the contents and nutritional value of its products openly, something it had refused to do in the past (accommodation strategy). Through extensive advertising campaigns and sponsorships of sports events such as the Olympic games, the organisation responded to pressures by promoting healthier lifestyles (The Economist, 2005; Crane and Matten, 2010: 39-42). McDonald’s

seemingly managed to turn a crisis into their favour. Larry Light, former Chief Marketing Officer of McDonald’s is quoted as saying, “If we behave responsibly, we will be perceived one day not as the problem, but part of the solution” (The Economist, 2004). This can be seen as a pro-action strategy. Nowadays it seems that the organisation has taken that quote to heart and is largely seen an active organisation when it comes to CSR. It has managed to remain profitable and a market leader in the fast food industry despite the turmoil of the past.

CSR communication has played an important role in McDonald’s image shift to a proactive CSR company. They managed this by communicating their responses to social pressures through extensive marketing and CSR campaigns, cooperation with NGOS, activists groups and society at large. Thus, it can be said that CSR communication can be an effective tool or medium for organisations to counter the negative effects of crisis and to respond to social pressures (Vanhamme and Grobбен, 2009). Kim and Reber (2008: 341) state that CSR communication presents ‘a substantial opportunity to build mutually beneficial relationships with publics’ and that it is a ‘central relationship-building activity within organizations.’

3.2 CSR Communication

CSR communication is defined as ‘the process of communicating the social and environmental effects of organisations’ economic actions to particular interest groups within society and to society at large’ (Gray, Owens and Adams, 1996: 3). Isenmann (2006: 249) lists the following benefits regarding the underlying purposes of communication, ‘improving efficiency and controlling resources, disclosing performance, enhancing reputation, learning issues and concerns of interested parties, initiating dialogue with external stakeholders, improving image, and engaging employees.’

CSR communication is a part of overall corporate communication and is concerned with building corporate reputation and creating value for organisational stakeholders (Hooghiemstra, 2000) as well as influencing stakeholders’ and society’s image of the organisation (Vanhamme and Grobбен, 2009). As organisations and their operations are nowadays increasingly under public scrutiny, they engage in CSR communication in

order to maintain transparency and credibility (Mark-Herbert and von Schantz, 2007). However at the same time, transparency and credibility are prerequisites for effective CSR communication. Credible CSR communication is said to be driven by intrinsic motives, this means that an organisation acts in line with its vision and values, whilst extrinsic motives are seen as an organisation attempting to increase its profits through CSR (Du et al., 2010: 9). Du and Vieira Jr. (2012: 415) maintain that, ‘a company’s CSR actions are credible to the degree that its stakeholders perceive intrinsic motives and believe that the CSR actions reflect the company’s underlying character of being responsible and trustworthy.’ Thus we can say credibility entails not only ‘talking the walk’ but ‘walking the walk’ as well, whilst transparency is defined as ‘the degree to which corporate decisions, policies, activities and impacts are acknowledged and made visible to relevant stakeholders’ (Crane and Matten, 2010: 71).

Conversely, other scholars such as Ellen, Webb and Mohr (2006) argue that stakeholders are not as influenced by the organisation’s intrinsic or extrinsic motives as previously suggested. Their study found that when the CSR communication was conveyed by both extrinsic and intrinsic motives, stakeholders were more positively engaged. Showing that stakeholders are tolerant of extrinsic motives, as long as organisations are also involved in intrinsic activities. Forehand and Grier (2003) also suggest that stakeholders are not negatively influenced by extrinsic motives as such but rather it is negative marketing strategies that are perceived as manipulative or deceptive. Bhattacharya and Sen (2004) as well as Ellen et al. (2006) maintain that stakeholders such as consumers appreciate that organisations today communicate their CSR activities as they benefit from it in terms of reputation and image, simultaneously they increasingly believe that organisations are able to serve both their business needs as well as society.

Therefore organisations can increase their stakeholders’ perceiving their CSR messages as credible by acknowledging both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and admitting the business interest in their CSR activities. CSR communication linked to perceived credible efforts has been said to lead to long-term benefits in terms of a positive reputation and image, brand loyalty and consequently a competitive advantage (Porter and Kramer, 2006; Kurucz, Colbert and Wheeler, 2008). It has even been argued that financial benefits can be expected (Prakash, 2002; Orlitzky, Schmidt and Rynes, 2003) however this is still a rather contested notion (Margolis and Walsh, 2003).

When stakeholders recognise any discrepancies between their perceived motives and those publicly stated by an organisation, scepticism and feelings of deceit are triggered, leading to negative reactions to the organisation’s CSR activities (Du et al., 2010: 10). Without a healthy degree of transparency and credibility, organisations risk having their CSR communication efforts being labelled as green-washing. Green-washing is defined by Walker and Wan (2012: 227) as ‘a strategy companies adopt to engage in symbolic communications of environmental issues without substantially addressing them in actions.’ Green-washing can have a number of negative impacts on organisations such as the loss of trust from consumers as well as investors and employees, negative financial performance and legal consequences (Delmas and Burbano, 2011: 65; Walker and Wan, 2012: 238).

The term ‘image’ is of particular interest when talking about CSR communication and employee recruitment. A survey found that 76% of employers rate their reputation and image to be the main criteria for their success in attracting the right talent (Universum, 2011). An image can be described as ‘a set of meanings by which an object is known and through which people describe, remember and relate to it. That is the result of the interaction of a person’s beliefs, ideas, feelings and impressions about an object’ (Van Riel, 1995: 23). The object in this case, is an organisation; therefore the creation and communication of a positive image is a significant recruiting activity for organisations. Since CSR can take many forms, it often functions as an authentic point of differentiation, thus contributing to the image of an organisation. In the following section, some ways in which a positive image influences potential employees are explained.

3.2.1 The Role of a CSR Image in Employee Attraction

Aiman-Smith, Bauer and Cable (2001), argue that positive attitudes towards the image of an employer are influential to the organisation’s ability to gain the right skills for its operations. Studies have shown that people seeking employment are attracted to companies which are renowned for well developed CSR policies because they hold the perception that it signalises virtues such as trustworthiness and security: these organisations are seen as organisations that not only take care of the community around them but their employees as well (Jones et al., 2010: 6; Aguilera, Rupp, Williams and Ganapathi, 2007: 842). Bhattacharya et al. (2008: 37) point out that, ‘CSR humanizes the company in ways that other facets of the job cannot; it depicts the company as a

contributor to society rather than as an entity concerned solely with maximizing profits.’ It provides prospective employees with a measure of the concern that management has for issues such as justice, fairness and social equality (Aguilera et al., 2007: 842).

A good CSR image also contributes to the feeling of pride and prestige among employees, which enhances the feelings of self-worth and identification with the organisation. According to Jones et al. (2010: 5), CSR attracts prospective employees, as they perceive it as being a practice of a prestigious organisation. Rodrigo and Arenas (2008: 271) found that, ‘if employees feel that the organisation is being a good citizen, they feel proud to be a part of it.’ A strong identification with the organisation inspires loyalty and commitment among employees to the organisation (Aguilera et al., 2007: 842; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

Berry and Parasuraman (1992: 27) argue that, ‘a paycheck may keep a person on the job physically, but it alone will not keep a person on the job emotionally.’ Emotional factors like values, which are represented through CSR practices, play a major role in employee attraction as well as retention (Bhattacharya et al., 2008: 37). The perception of a value fit between employees and organisations is of great importance for some individuals in the job search (Jones et al, 2010: 5) because the organisation they work for can become an essential part of their self-concept and social identity (Dutton et al., 1994, Rodrigo and Arenas, 2008: 271). Additionally, employees can satisfy their wishes to contribute to society through their organisations as they feel that the organisation’s actions will have a greater impact than their own actions, as Rodrigo and Arenas found in their study (2008: 271). An organisation with a positive CSR standing will surely appeal to employees seeking to ‘make a difference’ in society.

3.3 CSR Communication Online

The technological evolution has impacted the way organisations communicate and the Internet has become one of the most significant channels of communication (Capriotti and Moreno, 2007). The range of technologies introduced over the last decade and the increased accessibility to it has led to information being communicated and shared faster than ever before (Miller, 2006). Online communication is a broad term and in regards to

CSR it can be done in various ways and through numerous channels. For example, in recent years have seen the rise of corporate communication through social media; including social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn. Furthermore, video sites such as Youtube, and photo sharing sites such as Instagram, Flickr and Pintrest are a few of the most popular social media that are used in todays CSR online communication (Kesavan, Bernacchi and Mascarenhas, 2013: Colleoni, 2013).

Social media is often argued to be more credible than regular online communication for example on corporate websites. This is due the fact that social media is more interactive and dialogue is created, whereas on corporate websites, the organisations control the information broadcasted and the audience is passive (Kesavan et al. 2013, Du et al., 2010: 13).

This thesis focuses on one of the cornerstones of online communication, the corporate website. Current research in corporate communication has seen an increase of organisations using the corporate website as a tool of reporting CSR activities, especially organisations that are responding to global and societal expectations (Isenmann, 2006). A corporate website is a principal tool that can be used when organisations want to communicate, portray and maintain a desired image. Through the corporate website, the corporate image and identity are communicated (Chun and Davies, 2001; Rolland and O’Keefe Bazzoni, 2009).

The corporate webpage is a means of communication that has many advantages to offer. Many organisations use their corporate webpages as a prime communication channel because it is relatively inexpensive, easy to use, has an incredibly wide reach and they can control the information published (Du et al., 2010: 13). It has become increasingly popular as corporations can create and share stories that will directly be associated with the brand and thus what the organisation stands for. Creating engagement through information that is appealing and easy to connect with is the most common goal of the communication on webpages, as this creates loyalty (Doug and Krishnamurthy, 2007).

A disadvantage of webpage communication is that it can raise questions of credibility in the eyes of the stakeholders. It has been suggested that individuals are more critical of information from sources that are seen as biased or self-interested (Wiener, LaForge and

Goolsby, 1990) therefore CSR messages from corporate sources such as websites will most likely be seen as less credible and with more scepticism as compared to non-corporate sources (Du et al., 2010: 13). Because of the wide reach of the corporate website, it is important to realise that the information that is posted on the website is placed there with a purpose which is constructed by the organisation itself.

3.4 Techniques used in Online CSR Communication

Strategies for the use of webpage as a communication tool are developed in the form of individualised solutions specific to the organisation. These may include; online reports, press releases, newsletters, audio/visual presentations, interactive/informative video clips, all dispatched online (Isenmann, 2006). We have decided to focus on three main areas in this research, which we paid extra attention to during the collection of empirical material in the focus groups: language, pictures and colours.

3.4.1 Language

Organisations today have gone from telling and selling towards a knowledge sharing and more transparent way of communicating (O’Malley and Prothero Beyond, 2004). Yet, organisations are continuously finding new ways to manage and differentiate their communication like through their websites. Coupland (2005) suggests that, ‘websites, as examples of corporate text, function as manipulative, or conscious, examples of talk and text.’ He further explains that the success of the websites ‘lies in their persuasiveness in the light of available, alternative, versions of company behaviour’ (p. 357).

Specific language styles are used to try and create an emotional reaction to the reader through seducing and capturing words. For example the use of so-called ‘relational language’, which are words such as ‘mutuality, cooperation, and trust’ are often used to build a relationship with the reader of the text (O’Malley and Prothero Beyond, 2004: 1292). According to Jahdi and Acikdilli (2009) the importance of CSR communication includes consistency in use of words and language integrated in the message that is communicated. All communication should be consistent and represent how the organisation positions itself.

When organisations are designing the context of the text on their websites, they most commonly use storytelling as a way to engage and have an impact on the readers’ feelings; this makes the message more tangible (Holmberg and Svensson, 1995; Heijbel, 2011). According to Love (2008), communication using stories can increase the audience’s remembrance and evoke feelings in relation to the company that has delivered a good story by 60% compared to other traditional communication tools. Previous research has in various fields found that stories are mainly generated within the following five fields: myths, company values, norms, the company experience and the product experience (Fog, Budtz and Yakaboylu, 2005). Thus storytelling is used as a marketing tool to communicate corporate values.

Within the constructivist perspective, corporate stories are not seen as instruments solely used for promotion purposes but rather as part of the ‘narrative construction of the social reality’ (Øyvind, Bartlett and May, 2011: 472). Rhodes and Brown (2005: 174) argue that, ‘in organisations, storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders.’ This thesis will follow in the lines of the constructivist perspective on storytelling. As, we embrace a social constructionist view that CSR holds various meanings; it can be expressed through storytelling. These stories can help in creating and communicating an image of a socially responsible organisation and are considered an effective tool in CSR communication to attract employees. CSR stories in particular, aid to shape the perception of what is morally legitimate; usually a story on the CSR actions has been created so that stakeholders will support the actions and the undertakings, which the organisation is involved in (Gabriel, 2000). Thereby the legitimacy is highly influenced by what the external perceptions of the organisation are.

However, a story—in the sense of the word’s definition, can be fictional as well—therefore it can be argued that storytelling can also be applied to ‘tell a story’ about what an organisation strives to be and this may not necessarily be consistent with the organisation’s actions. It could be used to present an image of being socially responsible.

3.4.2 Pictures

Virtually any text tells a story. However, the story will just be a story until the visuals add depth so that the reader can connect with it (Gabriel, 2000). Visual information has a high ability to generate a picture that connects to the emotions of the observer because it is easier to connect to a picture rather than words (Gerard and Goldstein, 2005). Therefore we consider this when we pose the question of how the students perceive pictures presented on the CSR section of corporate websites, to get a better understanding of what kind of reactions the pictures induce in eyes of the audience.

Pictures feature extensively in CSR communication. Pictures are important features to consider in the CSR website presence as they can be used to reflect the corporate culture and the values a corporation stands for. Pictures can also be used in the creation and communication of a desirable image of being socially responsible, since pictures bring about certain associations in the viewer, particularly when combined with certain text. Rämö (2011: 372) points out that pictures are used to reinforce values such as fairness, goodness and sustainability, which CSR communication is seen to embrace. This is usually done by combining all visual elements to create stories of text combined with pictures that are easy to understand and relate to on an emotional level. The pictures used in CSR communication such as webpages ‘express certain visions and prospects for the future, which otherwise should have been missed without the use of imagery’ (Rämö, 2011: 373). Some examples of commonly used pictures are given in the following paragraphs.

According to Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez (2010: 120), images associated with or showing nature are commonly used in communication to evoke positive emotions. They further explain that, ‘most people instinctively find clear, flowing water more beautiful than stagnant water, grassy landscapes with scattered trees and lakes more attractive than arid, treeless landscapes, and mountains or hills in the distance more attractive than flat terrain.’ Also people are said to have positive associations with pictures displaying sources of water, flowers, fruits and beach landscapes. (Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez, 2010: 120).

In a study carried out by Rämö (2011: 377) in which 1,493 photographs used in CSR reports were analysed, it was found that the most frequently occurring visuals were: ‘humans - in an ethically diverse surrounding and a gathering of people; products and services - pictures of smiling employees providing a service or producing a product; environment - landscape and scenery.’ Rämö (2011: 379) also claims that,

‘Visual presentation influences how we experience the world. Repetitive presentations ‘show us what we already know’, reinforce acceptance through the use of important virtuous symbolic configurations such as green fields, ethnical diversity, and children in accounts of CSR.’

Drawing on this, it can be comprehended that organisations need to carefully consider the design and composition of what pictures they are using to display their corporate values on corporate websites.

3.4.3 Colours

The choice of colour is important, as it is a way for an individual or an organisation to portray a certain image. The use of logos and colours signals something and is done deliberately to attract people with similar taste or to show what the organisation or individual stands for or to simply make a statement. An example of this is that red is usually what people associate with Santa Claus, if he would be portrayed in yellow instead, that would be inconsistent with the people’s perceptions (Alslam, 2006). Organisations can use this to their benefit, to grab the attention of the audience or to change their image.

Colour is an element in the corporate website design that possesses the potential to produce emotions, trigger behaviour, emotional reactions or psychological subconscious reactions (Valdez and Mehrabian, 1994: Cyr, Head and Larios, 2009). Every colour represents a certain feeling, this can be different for different people, but research has shown that generally and subconscious psychological effects are found in colour preferences. The effect that colours have on our mood is evident, as they are found to make us happy, calm, nervous, etc. This is not a recent phenomenon and colours have been used as a tool in various marketing campaigns and when used effectively can improve the marketing-communication process (Lee and Barnes, 1990).

The colours blue and green are generally found to be connected to rigour and professionalism and less aggressive than yellow or red (Cyr et al, 2009; Guimarães-Costa and Pina e Cunha, 2006). Green is associated with trees, plants and grass and therefore with nature. Blue is commonly associated with components such as trustworthiness, wealth and security (Lichtle, 2007). Blue is also linked to the colour of the sky and water and is seen therefore as having positive attributes (Saad and Gill, 2000). In advertising, black and white colours have been found to be less attractive than bright colours, although in some cases they have fostered differentiation of the advertisement (Honeycutt and Clarke, 2000).

We acknowledge that colours can be perceived and associated with different feelings and emotions for different people. Colour associations and arousal of feelings in this sense can be seen as socially constructed depending on for instance, the cultural, historical background of a person as well as their preconceptions or learning. Drawing on this it can be concluded that it is important for organisations to be as appealing as possible in terms of creating a good feeling, then the reader will also be more prone to revisit the website and perceive it more positively.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Data

In the following chapter we present our research findings. As already discussed in the methods chapter, we divided the content (pictures and text extracts) shown during the focus groups into five main categories, namely: pictures, environment, society, employment and achievements/reporting. We now use these categories to present the findings in a clearly laid-out structure. For every category, we will also present the corresponding pictures and/or text that we showed in the focus groups.

4.1 Pictures

In the first part of the focus groups, the participants were shown a collection of pictures from each of the three organisations’ webpages. Each PowerPoint slide showed different pictures from one company and the participants were not told which company the pictures belonged to. The main objective here was for them to get a look and feel on how the images were presented, which colours were used and what this meant to them. We also wanted to find out from them what business or industry they thought the organisations were in from looking at the pictures.

4.1.1 Company 1: McDonald’s

Judging from the pictures (figure 2), the overall sentiment was that the organisation had something to do with food: restaurant, agriculture, business-to-business healthy food producer or supplier. According to the participants this was because of the pictures with the apples, the chef, green field of crops and the one stating ‘beef, poultry, coffee, palm oil, packaging’. The picture with the cheering people was seen to symbolise diversity, also the bright colours of the people’s clothing were perceived as cheerful and representing different cultures and ethnicities. A business student said, “they try to show diversity, I think: all people from different ethnicities working together in the same organisation.”

Figure 2: Pictures from McDonald’s Website



Source: <http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/sustainability.html>

The colour green really stood out and was positively associated to nature, a healthy environment and sustainability. This gave the impression that the organisation was concerned with environmental issues. The picture of the green footprint was described by a business student as “*metaphor for a step in the right direction to going green.*” A development student commented that it symbolised the “*opposite of the carbon footprint*”, symbolising that it is good for the environment.

The apples were perceived as a representation of a healthy lifestyle. All participants saw the yellow smile in the picture. The colours yellow and red were said to be eye-catching and to induce a happy feeling. A business student pointed out how it was interesting that everyone saw a smile when in actual fact it was just three lines of yellow apples surrounded by red apples. The picture of the chef preparing food was seen to imply that the company placed emphasis on creating awareness of healthy living and nutrition.

The picture with the listed products was met with mixed feelings because beef, palm oil and coffee were seen as dirty or controversial products that have negative effects on the environment and society. For example, palm oil farming has been criticised for the destruction of the rain forests (Koswanage, 2010), beef production is cited as environmentally unsustainable (World watch magazine, 2004) and coffee is often

associated with unfair trade practices and exploitation of coffee farmers (Crane and Matten, 2010: 242). The fact that this organisation deals with such products did not give a good impression of their business. This point was raised in different groups by both development and business students. A development student said, *“they want to convey a message that they are responsible although they are affiliated with these bad products.”*

In summary, it can be said that the overall impression of McDonald’s CSR pictures was positive. However, the participants were still sceptical about how positive these pictures were in reality. The pictures were described by a business student as *“pretty and colourful but at the same time vague as anyone could put up pictures like that.”* Another comment by a development student was:

“I feel that they are trying to hide something by showing such positive, bright and cheerful pictures. It’s like they are saying look at all the good things we do!” but not telling us the real story”.

4.1.2 Company 2: Unilever

The business of this organisation was not easy to place. Answers ranged from food processing, pharmaceutical company and tobacco processing to fertiliser manufacturer but in general the students thought it had something to do with production. Due to the different ethnicities pictured (figure 3), this was described as a large multinational organisation. Also the different portrayals of work environments: the field of crops, the man picking tea, the windmills and cows, the office setting, recycling, the factory settings and the lecture picture, all suggested that this organisation was into a range of various facets of business.

The different ethnicities were met with some scepticism, as this was perceived to be staged. It was said to be a thought-through action to give the impression of diversity. A business student commented, *“usually companies put so many different kinds of people: black, Asian, in their photos and in reality you only see white people working there.”* Another business student said that, *“nowadays we are all diversity brain-fucked”*, implying that we take diversity in organisations for granted. Another thing that was perceived as staged and fake was *“the happy worker”* picking tea. A development explained,

“I wouldn’t suspect that he is going around smiling doing his work. We only see part of that plantation but I’m guessing it is bigger than that. I think it is hard work and that he is smiling for the camera.”

Figure 3: Pictures from Unilever Website



Source: <http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/>

The perceived absence of green in these pictures was said to make the company appear less environmentally conscious even though the picture with the windmills was seen as a symbol of energy efficiency. Although it was also mentioned that windmills did not belong in the nature with the cows. A business student described the organisation as being, “70’s sustainable, it’s like ‘we don’t do anything... but we recycle!’”

From the pictures, the general association of Unilever’s CSR not so positive compared to McDonald’s (figure 2). This was due to the mixed pictures that did not give a clear picture of their activities, the lack of green and pictures that did not seem ‘alive’ or ‘authentic’. However there was also an impression that its CSR was more focused on people and providing employees a good working environment. This was due to the majority of the pictures having people in them.

4.1.3 Company 3: Shell

Figure 4: Pictures from Shell Website



Source: <http://www.shell.com/global/environment-society.html>

After some discussions, the groups concluded that this was an energy or oil company because of the picture of the oil platform. The students thought that the pictures gave a broad perspective of the business and a big contrast between pristine nature and the city lights. On one hand this was perceived as a superficial company trying too hard to appear ethical whilst concealing something bad. On the other hand, this was seen as “a really big multinational company due to the skyscraper picture like London and then like a rainforest picture”. Also the oil platform and harvester pictures were seen as signals of an innovative energy company trying to produce alternative energy such as biofuel.

In almost all the groups, the picture of the world in form of clouds was somewhat ridiculed. It was called ‘cheesy’ and such a ‘typical CSR prop’ to represent environmental friendliness, particularly with the very blue sky and perfectly green grass. The whale tail was also seen as a symbol for environmental credibility as well as operations faraway ‘like Alaska or the Arctic’. The picture of the girls produced some interesting discussions. One of them was that it represented how the organisation did not interfere with the local culture and respected indigenous people. Also words and phrases like diversity, care of all people and business operations in far off places were used. One different

interpretation by a business student was that the picture made him think of Alaska because of the controversy with oil drilling there. A development student commented that, *“the girls look so happy, it’s as if they are saying we are ok with what they (the company) is doing here and you should be too.”*

Shell’s pictures brought about an interesting conversation at the end of one focus group. It was mentioned that the organisation seemed really good at portraying themselves as green:

“It’s like yeah, we don’t pollute oceans. It is not necessarily green-washing but they are trying to show a positive side of their business while concealing their other negative things.” (Business student)

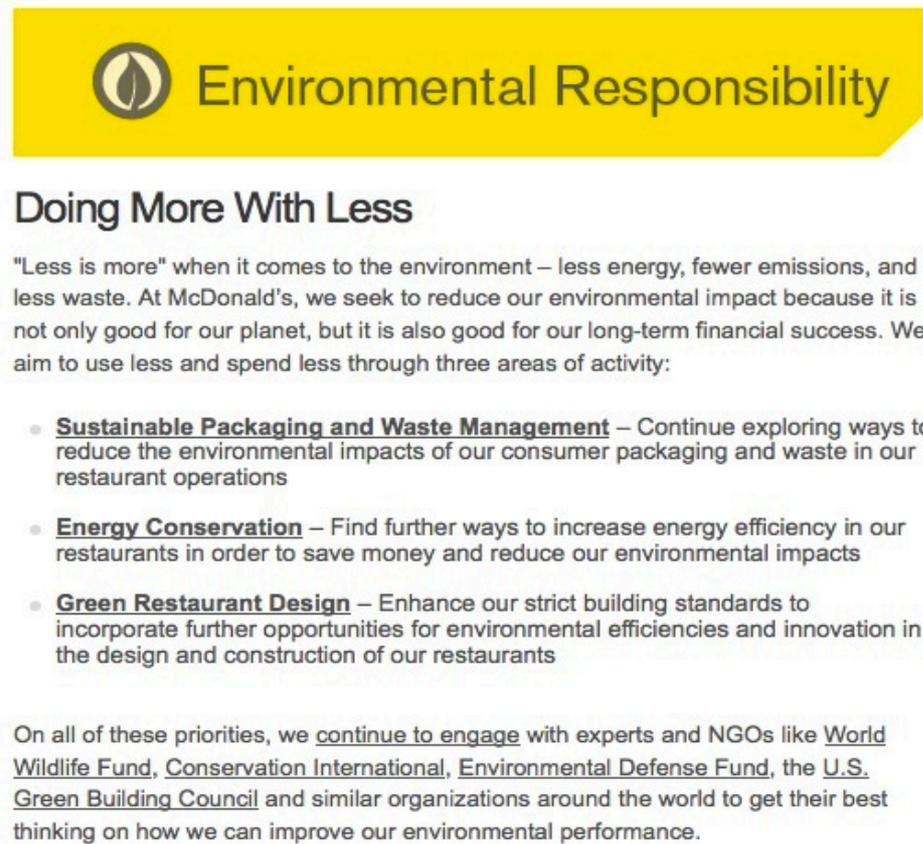
This brought up the question about if it was morally right for organisations to not portray the negative reality of their business and only highlight the positive aspects. In the end the response to this was: *“it’s modern to be green right now and if you don’t want to be criticised you either have to be green or you pretend to be to keep everyone off your back.”*

4.2 Environment

In this part of the focus group, the students were shown text extracts (figures 5,6,7) on environmental issues from the three corporate websites. Again, they were not told which organisations they were dealing with. We selected the text excerpts that we thought best summed up the primary targets of the organisations in terms of environmental responsibility. The students were asked questions about their initial thoughts and reactions to the text, what kind of differences they perceived among the organisations and also what feelings the text, layout and sometimes pictures evoked in them. We directed them to look at this more from a potential employee point of view: that is, what would they pay attention to as a job seeker. Please note that the names of the companies were blacked out in the focus group presentations.

4.2.1 Company 1: McDonald’s

Figure 5: Text Excerpt McDonald’s Website



Source: http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/sustainability/our_focus_areas/environmental_responsibility.html

It was seen as positive that the organisation acknowledged that their business had an environmental impact and that they were seeking ways to reduce it. However, in all groups, there was a *‘need to have more measurable goals and numbers in the text’*, as a development student put it. The phrases such as *‘seeking to find further way’* or *‘explore more ways’*, these were described as *‘vague’*, *‘superficial’*, *‘empty words’*, *‘not concrete’* and demonstrated to the students that the organisation was not doing much currently to meet their future goals. It was suggested that it sounded more like a vision statement and examples were desired. A business student asked the other participants the following question concerning the lack of concrete goals in the text, *“all companies are like this, what else should they write if not like this?”* She continued to say that organisations were expected to say something about CSR and the environment these days.

In the second sentence of the text extract, the words ‘long-term financial success’ are stated. Overall this was perceived as positive and honest. Everyone seemed to agree that no organisation ‘*did good for nothing*’: “*They are not just saying they are doing it for the planet because honestly some guys in the boardroom don’t really care about that*” (business student). This was seen as the reality and the students were actually glad that the organisation acknowledged this. The following statement by a development student sums up the discussion.

“If it’s about the greenness of the company in the end I don’t know if you should think about the motives behind it. If you do that you will end up at financial reasons in 99% of all cases because they have to be responsible to the shareholders and the stakeholders first and the environmental responsibility is just a small part. I think you cant make a sustainability plan without thinking of financial benefits because then in the end you would be an NGO and not a for profit organisation.”

Being connected to renowned non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was a positive aspect as this was seen to make the organisation’s claims more believable. The same was said about the other mentioned organisations/initiatives: Conservation International, Environmental Defense Fund, U.S. Green Building Council, although no one knew what they were or what exactly they did. The participants also liked that one could click on the links on the webpage to find out what actions the organisation had taken and how they worked with WWF. However, some comments such as this by a development student did arise,

“I also don’t know the standards for these NGO’s, what criteria have to be met for them to put their stamp on something. It doesn’t say anything to me that WWF is supporting this company, what are they actually doing? It’s like the Fair-trade thing. No one knows what it means or what the requirements are to be in that thing, but everyone is like yay that’s good but actually they don’t know what its about.”

Concerning the layout of the webpage extract, one business student asked if the website had more pictures. Because she thought that if it had some pictures to go with the shown text, it would make it more convincing. This view was raised in other groups as well, as

the students felt that without any pictures, the text was weak and did not seem credible. A business student used the analogy; “*a picture is worth a thousand words*”. Additionally, some students commented on how the colour green was missing. They associated green with ‘*environment and sustainability*’ and yellow did not fit into that concept. Another business student commented that the colour yellow and the black font made her think of the hazard sign for poison or toxic material. Another interesting observation by a business student was that the symbol used in the heading could look like a leaf or a flame. This was seen a bad choice to place it next to the heading stating ‘environmental responsibility’.

When asked how the excerpt spoke to them as potential employees, all the students were quite sceptical. Overall, it was agreed that one could not take such claims made by organisations at face value. The text sounded good but it did not mean that the organisation was actually doing what it said. A participant commented that it was useful to read such information but she would always ask more questions about it in the job interview. A business student gave the following explanation when asked how relevant CSR was when looking for a job.

“Honestly, nowadays? Give me a job! This stuff is pretty secondary when I am looking for a job and that’s just being really honest about it. Later if I had some experience and I could choose (where to work) then it would make a difference but at the moment not so much”.

This opinion seemed to be common among other business students in all focus groups. However development students disagreed with this and held that not considering CSR or ethical issues during the job search would be like, as one of them put it, ‘*selling my soul to the devil*’. One development student said that given the choice between a company with CSR communication and one without, he would go for the one with the CSR communication because he appreciated that the organisation addressed such issues since there were others that did not talk about CSR at all.

4.2.2 Company 2: Unilever

Figure 6: Text Excerpt Unilever Website



Source: http://www.unilever.com/images/UnileverSustainableLivingPlan_tcm13-284876.pdf

The layout and colours of this website extract were instantly noticed. The structured text with the visual connections was liked very much as this made it easier to read the text. Also the text appeared to be less than in the previous slide from McDonald’s (figure 5), which was a positive thing to the majority. On the other hand, a few people thought that the text was too little to be taken seriously. The different shades of green also corresponded with the students perception of environment, thus the text seemed more credible to them. Overall, this text extract was seen as *‘pleasant to the eye’*, the colours and pictures gave some students a feeling of being *‘emotionally attached’* to the information, in particular because the people in the pictures *‘looked happy’*.

The text itself was met with mixed feelings. Initially, the stated goals with numbers and target dates, were perceived as positive because they were *‘trustworthy, tangible and measurable’* compared the last text from McDonald’s (figure 5). This gave the impression that the organisation was already working on achieving these goals. However, after reading the whole text and some discussion, the sentiment was that the goals were

very ambitious and more information on how exactly they would reach these goals was needed. In one group, a business student commented that the goals sounded utopian and too good to be realistic:

“...Enhancing livelihood...by 2020... we will enhance...its like why, how, what? How can you do that for hundreds of thousands of people? And if you look further down it’s about the small-scale farmers. OK but will that help them? Because if it’s a large company the farmers can also be put in a bad position where they can’t bargain and they will not get an improved life. Just because they are part of their supply chain, might not make their lives better.”

At the end of discussion, however, the group seemed to agree that even if the goals were very ambitious and somewhat unrealistic, it was better to have goals than none at all.

Looking at the text from a job seeker perspective, the responses were similar to the last ones about McDonald’s (figure 5). Students seemed to be sceptical about believing what organisations said about themselves.

“Looking at the webpage from an employer branding perspective, it all depends on how you identify with the company. Of course I care if the company has some kind of good vision on how to save the world, but that’s not the main thing that I look at. I don’t check CSR so I think it depends whom they want to reach and what kind of feelings they want to evoke. Such information is not relevant for everyone.”
(Business student)

4.2.3 Company 3: Shell

The first impression here was that it was too much text and it looked very boring to read (figure 7). The webpage seemed ‘*too crowded and serious*’, the font was ‘*too small and all text was in a straight line*’, which made it look like a ‘*boring newspaper*’. This gave the impression that the organisation was technical, old-fashioned and bureaucratic. Even though it was unattractive, this webpage was perceived to be trustworthier than the last two (figures 5, 6). In particular the YouTube link to a video of a ‘Dr. Fatih Birol, IEA Chief Economist’ commenting on the ‘Energy and Climate Change Challenge’ added to the credibility of the page. Even though the participants did not know what kind of

organisation IEA was, it sounded important and “*therefore it can be trusted*”, as one development student put it. The fact that the man in the video had a doctor title and ‘*was wearing a nice suit and tie*’ also made him seem trustworthy even though the students had no idea what he had to say about climate change, as the video was not shown.

Figure 7: Text Excerpt Shell Website

Source: <http://www.shell.com/global/environment-society/environment/climate-change.html>

The text was seen as directed at business clients rather than consumers or prospective employees. The text was perceived as realistic because the organisation, a development student put it, “*does not try to pretend that we do not need oil or gas as energy sources and that we can all use alternative energy already. They are communicating facts.*”

At the same time though, a discussion on how ethical CSR practises are on business side arose. Some students pointed out that the organisation did not seem to put any effort into cleaner alternative energy such as hydro, solar or wind energy and this was wrong

because they had the resources to do so but instead only chose to develop those traditional energy sources and biofuel, which is not considered to be entirely sustainable. This discussion demonstrated the scepticism connected to CSR that we observed through the focus groups.

It was also interesting to see how much prior knowledge the students had on issues such as alternative energy and CO₂ emissions and how this knowledge led them to be sceptical and question what they read in the text. For example, one development student commented on how the term ‘international framework’ in the fifth sentence was positive to her. However she did not take that information for granted and rather questioned it further and brought up a discussion.

“International Framework stands out. Because they are talking about how they want to implement some kind of legal systems to regulate and also to promote more green energy production and usage. This appeals to me although that also depends on how far they would go with it. I mean because there are already the emission rights in practice and that doesn’t work at all.”

Another interesting comment that drew from a business student’s previous experiences:

“I have worked with such emission rights standards and have done the calculations as well and I know buying rights doesn’t give you permission to increase your own footprint. But I think this is a company that would publish data about their CO₂ footprint according to international standards and if they really do that then I would buy what they are saying on the website.” (Business student)

Finally, on this webpage, the students noticed that there were links to social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. This was positive because it allowed one to find out more about the organisation’s environmental engagement in an interactive way. A business student explained,

“I think it brings up a discussion that you can take part in. For example, on Facebook or Twitter, you can see what everyone else says about it—normal people like yourself. I think job seekers that are very interested in environmental issues would use this to find out more about the company.”

4.3 Society

In the following category, text extracts were shown in which the organisations describe their contribution to a better society or to the local communities in which they are operating. The focus group participants were asked to evaluate the text overall as well as the words used by the companies in terms of the feelings they evoked and credibility.

4.3.1 Company 1: McDonald's

Figure 8: Text Excerpt McDonald's Website



Source: http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/sustainability/our_focus_areas/community.html

A comment made by the students in regard to this text, was that it was “*typical marketing language*”. Words such as ‘heritage’ and ‘values’ were seen as typical words used to evoke emotionality in the audience. Also the use of the phrase: ‘part of our DNA’ was perceived as very strong words that were very difficult to live up to. There was a feeling

that the use of such buzzwords made the text less credible and less concrete. Therefore, the students were rather doubtful as to how accurate the statements were.

“It would have a very strong impact if some of their activities were seen as not fitting into that DNA, the business would crash. I can’t believe it and I’m not convinced by such a statement”. (Business student)

The text states ‘we are committed to using our scope, people and profits to create lasting impact in the communities in which we live and work’. This phrase created a discussion in a couple of the focus groups. A development student said, *“it shows that it is a serious organisation because they honestly talk about profits and they have a long-term view on giving back to the communities.”* A business student responded:

“It does not seem like a serious organisation at all to me, they talk about heritage and values and DNA really try to make an impression. It sounds good, but it is not feasible and it doesn’t really touch me.”

Overall the impression was that this organisation is trying to make itself look better by having connections to local community projects and other causes that are seen as good. In the last part of the text, the reader can click on a link to apply for sponsorships. The possibility to apply for sponsorship of a local program was seen as positive as it meant that the organisation was willing to cooperate with others for the good of society. Collaboration with third parties as well as the mentioned charity were seen to add some credibility although the students once again established that further information was needed to make a final decision on the credibility. On the other hand, a few students mentioned that there is no guarantee for being sponsored and there are no examples of previous sponsorships to be seen.

4.3.2 Company 2: Unilever

Figure 9: Text Excerpt Unilever Website

The image shows a screenshot of a Unilever website page. On the left, there is a text excerpt with the heading "Responding to stakeholder concerns" in large blue font. Below the heading, the text reads: "Our Code of Business Principles commits us to running our operations with honesty, integrity and openness. Our approach is always to understand and respond to issues of concern." Underneath, there is a sub-heading "Our approach" followed by a small blue icon of a person and the text: "Our consumers sometimes have specific questions about our products while other stakeholders ask about the way we run our business. Here we address some of these questions." To the right of the text is a photograph of a woman in a yellow top and white bag talking to a group of men in white shirts in a grocery store aisle. The entire screenshot is framed with a blue border at the bottom.

Source: <https://www.unilever.com/sustainability/consumer/index.aspx>

The picture shown in the webpage excerpt led to some interesting cultural comparisons. On one hand, we could observe the difference in how European students and non-European students interpreted this picture. The Europeans saw this as a sexist portrayal as the woman is seen shopping while the men in suits stand around her and explain something to her. This is one reaction from a European business student: *“why are there only men—all in suits and business-like? They are talking to a little woman doing the family grocery shopping and explaining something to her.”* The European students saw this as very negative. A non-European business student, however, saw nothing sexist or out of place in the picture and thought that it seemed like a normal interaction. The other type of interpretation was more positive as this was seen as a sign of dedication and customer care. A development student said,

*“They want to say that ‘we are willing to put a lot of effort into helping one person’.
So I think they are trying to show that we are helpful even if it takes a lot of effort.”*

Overall the students thought that this layout was more appealing since it did not display too much text to read and there was a picture and it was colourful.

The words that all groups commented on were ‘honesty, integrity and openness’. On one hand, the words were seen as ‘empty’ as the students could not see in which context they were being used. One comment by a business student, *“I would like them to define the words. If they would say we do this in this way or that way, otherwise it seems very impersonal.”* Also, it was mentioned that these were the type of buzzwords very organisation tried to fit in somewhere on their webpage or mission statement. An example by business student, *“I worked at a bank and they had these words in their mission as well and come on, none of them applied.”* Another aspect that was brought up by a development student is that the message was written in a way that made the company look reactive instead of proactive:

“I think this picture and text means that they take the responding seriously, but more as responding to something that happened. It’s not necessarily negative because I trust that if you have a problem they are trying to solve it”.

4.3.3 Company 3: Shell

Figure 10: Text Excerpt Shell Website

Investing in communities

Sharing the benefits of our operations means we also invest in community programmes in which our expertise can provide a positive and lasting impact. We focus on three global themes: enterprise development, road safety, and safe and reliable access to energy for the communities around us. We also have locally tailored programmes in areas such as community development, education, and biodiversity and conservation.

Source: <http://reports.shell.com/sustainabilityreport/2012/ourapproach/communities/investingincommunities.html>

The first impression of this text was that there was too much text that was crammed into a little space. As for the content of the excerpt, the students thought that this company sounded less honest and credible since they are using a lot of ‘empty’ words. As with the other examples, they all agreed that more concrete examples on what they plan to do and whom it would benefit were needed in order for the text to be perceived as credible. Some examples of the ‘empty’ words are portrayed below. A business student stated the following:

“What does ‘communities’ even mean? It sounds nice but it’s difficult to understand what they mean, if you really think about it. It is the fisherman next to their oil platform in Alaska who can’t fish anymore because the river is full of oil? Or is it the people who live around their fancy headquarters in New York?”

From such comments, we could observe the cynicism that the students had towards the business operations and the organisation’s CSR claims. It is immediately assumed that the organisation pollutes the environment with its operations and as a result endangers the lives and livelihoods of those around it. Noted by a development student was:

“They are not really saying why they are doing this though. Sharing their benefit of their operation, why would they do that? It doesn’t make sense. Either they are investing and making more money out of something or they are trying cover something up. Like, oh we ruined your lake, but here is a road. This really seems like a bad company.”

Another example is the use of the term ‘enterprise development’. As with the use of the inadequately defined term, ‘community’, feelings of distrust were evoked. Such questions arose by a business student, *“does enterprise development mean they help local entrepreneurs start business or they develop their own entrepreneurships or those connected to their business?”* The use of such words and terms, gave the students the impression that the organisation did not have a genuine approach to its societal responsibilities. The students also mentioned that the text did not give them the feeling that the organisation was actually cooperating with the communities; rather *“they just came in and compensated for their evil acts with a new road, for instance.”*

Furthermore, a discussion arose regarding the term ‘road safety’. The European students once again found this strange, as it should be taken for granted. The non-European students thought that it along with ‘safe and reliable access to energy’; it was a good initiative from the company but at the same time, the asserted that they did not buy this claim until they had a concrete example. Overall the impression of this text was negative in terms of content and appearance.

4.4 Employment

In this section the students were shown text and picture extracts related to the organisations’ take on employment issues. The first company displays a piece of text extracted from the corporate website. The last two also have additional pictures relating to the text. This was done on purpose to give the students variation in what is presented to them and to see if there was a difference in perception of credibility between the variations of only text and text with pictures. Furthermore, the purpose of these slides was to see if the wording, the text design and layout and the visuals used by the companies has an impact on the perceived credibility. We wanted to investigate the jobseekers’ thoughts and opinions of the selected images. By asking in-depth questions, our purpose was to get the participants to pinpoint their feelings towards the presented material and to evaluate these three organisations as potential future employers.

4.4.1 Company 1: McDonald’s

To fully grasp this text extract (figure 11), it is necessary to understand the context. The following was explained to the students during the focus groups. The three pillars stated in the text, ‘Family and Friends, Flexibility and Future’ are a result of a survey among their employees from 55 countries that McDonald’s conducted in order to identify its employee value proposition. The three pillars are a summary of what the employees value most about working at McDonald’s.

A theme identified in this section is the use of ‘buzzwords’ in the text, as a development student explained, *“I like the atmosphere they describe but they are using a lot of currently fashionable words such as grow, energising, challenging, flexibility, opportunity and progress.”* The other students shared this opinion too and also mentioned that the text was quite ‘empty’ and most organisations used the same style of writing. This meant that the text could mean almost anything and nothing at the same time. The students expressed that they felt any company could use the same words and that it does not allow the organisation to differentiate itself even though that was probably the aim of the text.

The students also mentioned that the text seemed to be directed at all types of people rather than specific ones that would fit into the organisation. The following quote by a development student explains, *“it is hard to disagree that any person would not like to*

work with this. So they are picking themes that no one would disagree with thus not attracting any special candidates.”

When the respondents were asked if they would like to work there, all of them said yes if what the text claims is true. However, they were sceptical towards some statements such as ‘everyone feels part of the team’. This was because they thought such a claim couldn’t be true as there no such ‘*perfect workplace*’. There was also scepticism towards the part about the future because they did not think that the statement is applicable for all functions in an organisation. A business student also said, “*a lifetime, I do not want to work for the same company all my life*”.

The layout of the webpage extract was described as ‘*boring and somewhat lifeless*’. The absence of colours and other visual effects was criticised. A business student compared it to “*a boring word document*”.

Figure 11: Text Excerpt McDonald’s Website

These themes were simplified into three pillars: “Family & Friends,” “Flexibility,” and “Future.” Each pillar has its own employee-based definition:

- Family & Friends – “I work in an enjoyable, energizing atmosphere where everyone feels part of the team.”
- Flexibility – “I have a challenging, varied job that has the flexibility to fit into my lifestyle.”
- Future – “I have an opportunity to grow and progress by learning personal and work skills that will last me a lifetime, whatever I choose to do.”

Source: http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/sustainability/library/best_practices/employee_experience/employee_value_proposition.html

4.4.2 Company 2: Unilever

The reactions to this excerpt (figure 12) were mixed as both negative and positive aspects were raised. For example, a comment over one interpreted negative aspect of the text by a business student:

“They bring up negatives issues such as reducing work place injuries and accidents, it make me not want to work there because it sounds dangerous. Also about the nutrition, why do they care about nutrition? Of course they want people to be healthy but it sounds like they don’t want fat people!”

A positive aspect was that the organisation was seen as honest in explaining that looking after its employees was good for the overall business. This was interpreted from the use of words such as ‘...to support out long-term growth’ and ‘to ensure our long-term prosperity...’

“Reducing the injuries is also something they do for themselves because if I get injured I can’t work for sometime thus they lose out on labour. But if they take care of the employees, it is win-win for all.” (Development student)

Also the use of the headings: ‘Investing in our people’ and ‘Winning with people’ gave the impression that the organisation recognised that its employees were its most important asset.

Figure 12: Text Excerpt Unilever Website

Investing in our people



Making sure our people and organisation are ready for growth.

Winning with people



It is vital we have people with the right talent, skills and creativity to support our growth ambitions. To ensure our long-term prosperity, we want everyone to be healthy, motivated and committed. As part of our Sustainable Living Plan, we have set ourselves new targets for creating a better workplace. These include reducing workplace injuries and accidents and improving employee health and nutrition.



Source: <https://www.unilever.com/sustainability/employees/index.aspx>

The text was said to be more directed at a specific type of people as opposed to the McDonald’s one (figure 11). This was because of the sentence ‘it is vital that we have people with the right talent, skills and creativity to support our growth ambitions’—as they

specifically express that talent, skills and creativity are an important criteria in the recruitment process.

4.4.3 Company 3: Shell

Figure 13: Text Excerpt Shell Website

A positive workplace



New recruits on the Shell graduate training programme

We respect the human rights of our employees by providing them with good and safe working conditions. We offer competitive terms and conditions of employment and promote the development and best use of individual talents. Our approach also aims to create an inclusive work environment, in which every employee has an equal opportunity to develop his or her skills and talents.

We work to make sure that we take decisions based on relevant qualifications, merit, performance and other job-related factors. Unlawful discrimination relating to employment is not tolerated.

We encourage the involvement of employees in the planning and direction of their work. In the event of

any harassment or any action, conduct or behavior which is humiliating, intimidating or hostile we offer staff the opportunity to officially report any concerns, for example through the [Shell Global Helpline](#).

Source: <http://www.shell.com/global/environment-society/society/human-rights/international-initiatives.html>

The instant reaction to this picture was that its too much text and hard to read. The picture implied diversity in the organisation due to the Asian women depicted. In regards to the content of the text in general they felt that it was too negative and boring. Both development and business students mentioned that the text seemed very top-down directed. The issues brought up in the text such as human rights, discrimination and harassment, made the students suspicious of the organisation and its activities.

For example, in regard to the mentioning of human rights, all groups felt like this was unnecessary as this was supposed to be a given in any employment relationship. The students agreed that it did not seem like a good place to work. A development student said:

“It gives me the feeling that they have employees at many different levels, like some in sweatshops and some in offices. Maybe that’s why they talk about human rights, because some employees like those in the sweatshops may not enjoy such rights.”

“Why do they bring up all these negatives? Is that because it happened before? They even have a helpline. It seems like a reactive text and they are guilty of something.” (Business student)

In general, all agreed that it was very bizarre that the headline: ‘A positive workplace’ was followed by such strong topics as human rights, harassment and the helpline. They also thought it was strange that the picture shows ‘new graduates on the graduate training programme’, but it is not mentioned later on in the text. When asked, none of the students said that they found this company to be an attractive place to work. They all perceived it as having a negative atmosphere—they did not relate to it or would have liked to work there.

4.5 Achievements/Reporting

This part was chosen with the intention of understanding the reactions towards various methods used by the organisations to report their achievements. Again the students were not told which organisations they were dealing with. All three extracts are different in terms of layout and content. The aim was to explore what effect these types of reporting methods have on the credibility of the webpage content.

4.5.1 Company 1: McDonald’s

Firstly, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) had to be introduced to the students, as the majority had not heard of it before. The GRI is a non-profit organisation that provides companies with a sustainability-reporting framework. Although the GRI is used by a large number of organisations worldwide, it still is a voluntary reporting system (www.globalreporting.org). In the webpage excerpt (figure 14), one can see the standards required by the GRI for CSR reports on the left-hand side while the right-hand side of the page lists the links where the information corresponding to the GRI standards is found.

Overall, the idea of the GRI was seen as positive and added to the credibility of the CSR communication overall. The students, however, also brought up the issue of how difficult it is to evaluate and report CSR. They expressed concern over how reporting standards such the CRI were developed and used because they felt that CSR could not be standardised due to the difference in organisations, business operations and the

complexity of CSR issues. However, there were two accounting students in two separate groups who strongly believed that the GRI was the best way to increase the credibility of CSR reporting. They saw convincing similarities to the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), which in international accounting is a credible way of comparing companies. One of them explained:

“With the GRI, there is still someone who confirms what you are doing. You still always need to read and go through it to make your own opinion, but at least here they have a third party who confirms what they do.”

The students seemed to like the way the content of the webpage was structured. The possibility to look up information that one was actually interested in rather than “having it all shoved in the face” was regarded favourably. A few of the student jobseekers said that they might click on some of the links to find out more about the achievements of the organisation. However, they also expressed that it was too much information and only really interested people would look it all.

Figure 14: Text Excerpt McDonald’s Website

Global Reporting Initiative

The [Global Reporting Initiative \(GRI\)](#) is an internationally acknowledged comprehensive framework for reporting on sustainability. We have cataloged our entire sustainability site, including the content in this report, using the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) framework. To learn more about the GRI or the [G3 guidelines](#) check out the [Global Reporting Initiative](#).

1.1	Statement from Global Corporate Social Responsibility, Sustainability & Philanthropy SVP	Message from J.C. Gonzalez-Mendez
1.2	Description of key impacts, risks, and opportunities	Introduction Nutrition and Well-Being Progress Sustainable Supply Chain Progress Environmental Responsibility Progress Employee Experience Progress Community Progress Nutrition and Well-Being Sustainable Supply Chain Environmental Responsibility Employee Experience Community Farm to Front Counter: Beef Farm to Front Counter: Potatoes Farm to Front Counter: Lettuce
2.1-2.9	Organizational Profile	McDonald's Annual Reports
2.10	Awards recieved during the reporting period	Employee Experience Energy Management Innovations Environmental Responsibility: Proper Disposal Green Building Green Teams

Source: http://www.aboutmcdonalds.com/mcd/sustainability/sustainability_highlights/gri_index.html

4.5.2 Company 2: Unilever

The fact that this organisation could show that it had affiliations with NGOs and had been awarded for its CSR work (figure 15), was generally positive. Here, all students recognised the WWF logo and this was described as a ‘stamp of approval’ and ‘some sort of proof that the organisation was doing something right’. But at the same time, questions of how trustworthy this was were also raised. Firstly, because except for the WWF, the other awards that the company displays on the webpage were not recognised by the students. Secondly, some students pointed out that some awards could be sponsored by the organisations so it was like the organisations had bought their awards.

Figure 15: Text Excerpt Unilever Website

- Unilever retains Platinum Plus status in Business in the Community's 10th Corporate Responsibility Index, published in March 2012. 
- In 2011, we scored eight out of nine points in the second WWF Palm Oil Buyers' Scorecard which assesses the palm oil buying practices of 132 European, Australian and Japanese companies. We were also top of the 2010 Australian Palm Oil Buyers' scorecard. 
- In 2011 Unilever was announced as the overall Grand Prix winner across 20 categories for our work on behaviour change. We were also the Gold winner in the Best Green International Large Business category which recognises organisations that have demonstrated true innovation, thought leadership and a commitment to sustainability. 
- We scored the top Aaa grade in the Two Tomorrow's Value Rating 2011 assessment of corporate sustainability practices. 

Source: <http://www.unilever.com/sustainable-living/ourapproach/awards/index.aspx>

A business student said:

“I like this, because they put effort into make it easy and readable for potential employees. If you think about it, they are really not saying anything different compared to the others. In this case they maybe are trying to make it a part of their image and in this situation I think that more is more: use both the GRI and many NGOs. Although I think the first company (McDonald’s: figure 14) is the best

because you can click further to see what they have done and it also gives the standards but I would never click on all of them.”

Overall, it can be said that although endorsements from NGOs are seen as a sign of credibility, there is also some uncertainty as to how the NGOs and the nature of their award systems and cooperation with organisations. It was quite clear to observe how the students did not take any information for granted.

4.5.3 Company 3: Shell

Since many of the students had not heard of the GRI before it was difficult for them to assess the credibility of the certificate (figure 16). Nonetheless, as with McDonald’s (figure 13), the general concept of the GRI was positively evaluated and added somewhat to the credibility of the organisation’s CSR communication. But, also as with the other organisations before, there were misgivings. A development student explained,

”You need to know what standards the GRI has to be able to judge it. It looks formal and important but I think it’s a little misleading because I don’t know what exactly having a GRI certificate entails.”

Another business student contended,

”I like the certificate I guess they have to have done something really good if the GRI gives them a certificate. They must be doing good things. It looks nice and believable.”

Figure 16: Text Excerpt Shell Website



Source: <http://s05.static-shell.com/content/dam/shell-new/local/corporate/corporate/downloads/pdf/Shellaplus-english-statement.pdf>

4.6 Conclusion

At the end of the focus group, the students were finally told which organisations' webpages they had been looking at. The reactions to the revelation of the organisation were interesting. For the most part, the students were not surprised when they found out what the organisations were and they stuck to their initial opinion of the CSR communication. However a few students changed their opinions after matching the organisations to their websites. Overall we can draw the following conclusions about the organisations.

With McDonald’s, we could observe how the previous knowledge of the organisation influenced the opinions of the CSR messages. Before the students knew that they had been looking at McDonald’s webpages, the general perception of the webpages was rather positive. The students had largely evaluated the layout, text and content-credibility positively, nevertheless after revealing that it had been McDonald’s, some opinions changed. The students’ perception of the CSR communication changed negatively due to the negative associations with the organisations. This influenced the students to dismiss the CSR messages as unrealistic and unbelievable. McDonald’s perceived negative reputation was attributed to serving unhealthy products and exploitation of its employees. In particular, the excerpt with McDonald’s employee value proposition (figure 11) seemed comical given the students’ perception of the organisation being a bad employer.

Generally Unilever’s CSR webpages were perceived as positive. A few students who had negative associations with the organisation gave positive feedback of the CSR communication in the end. They were positively surprised to learn about the organisation’s communicated CSR messages as they had previously thought Unilever to be inactive in that field. For example, a development student explained that he thought Unilever did not do a lot of CSR work because of how large, international and diverse the organisation was, he felt that it was difficult to run sustainable business operations across such a large multitude of countries, but he was happy to learn that they did address a lot for CSR issues, according to their website. However, this is not to say that Unilever’s communication of CSR was perceived as credible. The students still questioned the integrity of the content and concluded that more third-party information would be needed in order for them to make conclusions on the credibility of Unilever and the other organisations.

With Shell, the CSR communication fit the perception of its reputation. Shell was seen as having a negative reputation given the environmental issues they have been involved in. Also, the overall distrust of energy/oil companies added to Shell’s perceived negative reputation by the students. Interestingly, other oil companies’ scandals such as BP’s 2010 oil leak off the Gulf Coast were also associated to Shell. The students generally saw a discrepancy between the communication and the actions of organisation and its counterparts in the industry, which led to an overall feeling of unbelievable CSR communication. As one student put it, *“you can’t make an oil platform look sustainable.”*

The differences between the development and business students were very minimal. Both groups had a good knowledge about business and CSR issues. This could clearly be seen during discussions, where both types of students brought up interesting information about discrepancies between business practices of organisations and their CSR communication. For example, Unilever and palm oil farming or CO2 emission rights. The relevance of CSR during job search showed one significant difference between the students of the two study disciplines. Whereas business students revealed that CSR was not their major concern during the job search, development students contended. For the development students, not considering the CSR standing of an organisation when choosing an employer was like selling out on their personal values and principles. The overall opinion of the business students was that working for a company with a good reputation in terms of CSR practices was preferred, but if they were offered a job at a multinational organisation—‘good’ or ‘bad’—they would take it. This opinion was attributed to the current economic situation and high youth employment in Europe—the students were more concerned with securing a job. It was more of a bonus if an employer took CSR seriously and not the main deciding factor.

A majority of the development students on the other hand were not willing to compromise on the CSR standing of their future employer. One reason stated for this was that as development students, an important ambition for them was to ‘make a change in society’ and they could not compromise this by working for an organisation that did not care about CSR and such issues. For them it was important to look for an organisation that fit their values and where they felt they could do ‘good’ for society. However, if they had to work for an employer, which did not put much effort into CSR, they would but only if they felt they could impact the way the company dealt with CSR related issues.

All in all, it can be concluded that an overwhelming majority of the students were sceptical towards the CSR communication of the organisations. The information of the websites was not taken for granted, there was a lot of questioning and discussion concerning how trustworthy such data was. In the end, the students agreed that more research was needed to get a good idea of what an organisation really did CSR-wise. In their eyes, the most reliable information came from third-party sources such as Internet blogs, newspapers and magazines as well as from people who worked or had previously worked in the organisations.

Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, we proceed to answer the research questions with the collected and analysed empirical data as well as the theoretical considerations. We begin the discussion by considering the findings regarding the types of language and pictures used on the CSR webpages. Subsequently we shift to the discussion concerning the students’ overall perception of the organisations’ CSR standing based on their online communication.

5.1 Language

In terms of language, there are words that stand out in the various texts. Words such as ‘responsibility’, ‘honesty’, ‘integrity’, ‘openness’, ‘values’ and ‘heritage’ were really eye-catching and common on all three websites. There was a distinct use of these types of buzzwords that are strong, ‘noble’ and virtuous words. We argue that organisations use such virtues in their communication, as these are desirable traits, meaning that people—supposedly—admire and desire such traits in each other and organisations as well. However, it could be assumed that once organisations use such words, the audience would be convinced of the organisation’s messages but as our study showed, students were sceptical of the CSR messages particularly due to the use of such words. This is because they had previously observed that this type of language is commonly used by most organisations and therefore the claims no longer hold much value and thus become ‘empty words’.

To illustrate the how often such words are used; we draw on a Google search of the text from the Unilever webpage extract for the category of society (figure 9), that we carried out. The following sentences were searched online:

‘Responding to stakeholder concerns. Our code of business principles commits us to running our operations with honesty, integrity and openness. Our approach is always to understand and respond to issues of concern.’

From the search results, it could be seen that these virtuous words showed up on a good number of other organisations’ websites and were used in similar context. This is in line

with our observation of students, who were largely of the opinion that ‘organisations use the same kind of language on their CSR webpages’. What this implies is that these words are used to make the messages sound good but the words in themselves do not add to the credibility of the text. This belief made the students sceptical of the CSR communication we showed them. However, Jahdi and Acikdilli (2009) argue that it is difficult for global organisations to adopt a segmented approach to CSR, claiming that a differentiated approach with mixed messages can confuse the consumers.

An example of storytelling can be seen from the McDonald’s excerpt (figure 11). McDonald’s uses a special event to convey its employee value proposition. From a survey of employee opinions, the organisation derived its three pillars of what the employees value the most about their jobs: ‘Family and Friends’, ‘Flexibility’ and ‘Future’. These can be seen as a representation of the organisation’s values, which were summed up into a story that outsiders can empathise with. Through the story of how these pillars came to be—an experience of the organisation, the reader can understand it, remember it easily and connect with it emotionally (Fog et al., 2005). As the student respondents put it, ‘the words are difficult to disagree with because everyone is looking for something like that’. We could observe how this story attracted the students and was perceived as positive description of a future employer. Although, once again it was not seen as credible information.

5.2 Pictures

From analysis of the three websites, it can be said that there is a specific type of pictures that is used in CSR communication. Predominantly pictures with specific colour schemes and leitmotifs are chosen. In the category of environment, pictures are used that are associated to this theme. So for example, there are a lot of pictures that depict nature scenes and landscapes that are usually pristine, clean and serene. The principle colours used are green and blue in pictures of healthy, leafy trees, forests, fields, rivers, lakes, etc. (Saad and Gill, 2000) It can be concluded that there is a clear association of the colours, green and blue to environmental issues and CSR. This is confirmed in previous research conducted by Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez (2010). Other colours used in pictures and graphics were usually the corporate colours of the organisation.

For example, Shell and McDonald’s use a lot of red and yellow, which are the colours of their corporate design.

As previously mentioned, Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez (2010) rationalise that pictures showing nature related motives evoke positive emotions. In the focus groups, we could observe how these types of pictures with ‘nature’ colours such as green and blue made the students feel positive that the organisations were concerned with environmental issues and ‘doing something good’ (Saad and Gill, 2000). In a sense, these pictures induced emotional connections, which added to the perception of sincerity: the messages were more meaningful and believable if there were pictures to go with them. The pictures could also be seen as metaphors and symbols, as we realised during the focus groups. For example, the ‘green footprint’ depicted in figure two on a McDonald’s page, was interpreted as a symbol of taking a step into the right direction of going green’. A majority of the focus groups respondents saw the picture of the footprint as a symbol of the company being concerned about the environment.

Another recurring theme with the pictures on the CSR webpages was people. Mostly the people depicted were of different ethnicities, sometimes in groups of individually. The people always had a smile on their faces or a ‘friendly look’ and this made the students feel ‘good and connect more to the message’. Rämö (2011) confirms that pictures of smiling people are commonly used in CSR reports. This theme was also noticeable in the category of employment. Here also, different ethnicities were common, usually seen in a working environment. The students suggested these pictures were a symbol of the organisation emphasising a diverse workforce. The working environments pictured were clean and bright: if indoors, there was light and outdoors there was sunshine and greenery.

Although these were not deciding factors when it came to evaluating an organisation’s CSR standing, it must be mentioned that things such as text and page layout emerged as relatively prominent factors in the students’ initial attraction to the CSR webpages. Overall the texts, which had larger fonts that were easy to read and eye-catching at a glance, were the most appealing to the students. The layout of the text is a visual tool that helps to create a connection between the reader and the text (Holmberg and Svensson, 1995). It was discernable that readability played an important role in the initial perception (Humar, Gradisar and Turk, 2008). When presented with a text designed with a small

line spacing, looking time consuming to read, the first impressions where most commonly that the text was boring. This is related to the phenomenon of ‘banner blindness’ described by Hsieh and Chen (2011), which occurs when online readers get too familiar with eye-catching texts and can easily tune out unwanted information. This could easily be seen with for examples from Shell, which were generally unpopular due to the layout of the texts. Unilever, on the other hand, which used much shorter, to-the-point sentences, was largely seen as more appealing.

Concerning language and pictures, it seems that the students had a relatively good idea of what they expected from organisations in terms of online CSR communication. Nevertheless, when they saw website excerpts that somewhat met their requirements for example, had pictures, numbers, less text or were colourful, etc., they were still sceptical of the broadcast messages. Thus, the predominant revelation of our research project was that the student jobseekers evaluated the CSR standing of the three organisations with much scepticism. Throughout the focus groups and the analysis of these, it was clearly visible how much uncertainty there was surrounding the organisations’ communication of CSR. Mostly questions arose concerning the credibility of the CSR messages. Interestingly, both the development students and the business student showed similar amounts of scepticism. Although we had anticipated the development students to being more conscious about CSR/ethical issues, we found that business students were equally conscious about these issues.

Three major factors were influential in shaping the student’s perception into scepticism. It can be concluded that the sceptic perception of the online CSR communication arose from the CSR messages, the individual student’s previous knowledge and opinions about CSR and related issues as well as the brand identity and pre-understandings of the organisations.

5.4 CSR Messages

As previously discussed, distrust of CSR also resulted from the students’ view of CSR messages being ‘the same in all organisations’. According to the students, organisations today

are expected to practice some sort of CSR and communicate it to their stakeholders, thus it ends up looking all the same. A predominant comment was that the messages were ‘just empty words that could be claimed by anyone’.

Interestingly, the students were more susceptible to CSR statements on the webpages in which the organisations stated the reason for their commitment to CSR. These were for example, McDonalds (figure 5): ‘At McDonald’s, we seek to reduce our environmental impact because it is not only good for our planet, but it is also good for our long-term financial success.’ Another example, Unilever (figure12): ‘It is vital that we have people with the right talent, skills and creativity to support our growth ambitions. To ensure our long-term prosperity, we want everyone to be healthy, motivated and committed.’

These statements were perceived as honest and credible as the organisations stated that there were financial benefits to their actions. The students saw this as positive because it was seen as realistic that an organisation thinks of the financial benefits, as their foremost goal is to gain profits. This view is in direct contradiction with the notion of CSR being perceived as credible when it is motivated intrinsically (Du et al., 2010). Rather it is more in line with Van de Ven, who has argued that organisations acknowledging the profit-driven motivation of their CSR actions does not necessarily reduce the stakeholders’ perception of credibility (2008). With their wide-ranging knowledge about CSR and business, the students were able to rationalise how complex the interplay of these two issues are. Therefore they seem to understand that organisations practising CSR is no panacea to society’s problems and they cannot be expected to practice it without gain anything from it.

5.5 Individual Knowledge of CSR and Related Issues

We could observe that the students had a good deal of knowledge about all types of CSR topics. These ranged from information about energy, carbon emissions, CSR reporting, labour issues to human rights, etc. Additionally the students were also reasonably knowledgeable about business issues, controversies and scandals as well as organisational activities. Throughout the focus group discussions, they could draw from all sorts of examples, stories, facts and previous experiences. With all this awareness, we could see that they were not willing to take the organisations’ claims at face value.

This previous knowledge on the students’ part could be attributed to information being readily available nowadays. In the age of globalisation and internationalisation, with the world become increasingly smaller, it is much easier to share information such that, whatever happens anywhere in the world cannot easily be kept secret any longer. Media coverage of organisational scandals and controversy is wide spread, nowadays. Not only does the media play a major role in informing the public, it helps them interpret it as well (Prakash, 2002: 292). It could be observed how the students could draw from examples of previous company scandals such as the BP leak of 2010. Besides that, activist groups increasingly engage the public in their efforts to pressure organisations to meeting social demands. Therefore information about organisations and their CSR efforts or slip-ups are heavily communicated. Such information is also largely spread through social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, making it easily accessible and shareable among the masses. Easier access to information is leading to a change in society’s behaviour as the public becomes more knowledgeable about how organisations run their businesses and concerned about the effects they have on the environment and society in general.

Conversely, the students’ ‘question everything-approach’ towards organisation’s CSR communication, was directed at the NGOs as well. There was much questioning of NGO’s activities and standards when it came to their collaborations with organisations. Interestingly, NGO’s are no longer seen as ‘the good guys’ but as organisations that also make mistakes and whose actions are sometimes contradictory. We put this down to complex dynamics of societal issues in particular in connection with business in general—such issues are usually neither ‘black nor white’.

5.6 Brand Identity and Pre-understandings of Organisations

The scepticism of the CSR communication remained even after the organisations’ names were revealed. This indicates that the brand identity and previous understandings of an organisation reputation influenced the way the job seekers saw the company’s CSR communication efforts. The company’s overall image and name is realised to have a higher importance than the actual CSR communication in itself. Meaning that the efforts that the company put into making their CSR communication credible are disregarded when the company’s name and reputation is negatively associated. If an organisation was seen as having a bad image, it’s communication efforts were deemed as not credible. This could be clearly seen with the examples of Shell and McDonald’s.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

CSR is a major part of organisational communication today, with organisations now displaying elaborate messages on their websites targeted at audiences such as potential employees. Our findings suggest that the effect of CSR communication in attracting potential employees could be less successful than expected due to the student jobseekers’ negative perception and scepticism towards online CSR communication.

Scepticism arose from the messages on the websites themselves. Since global organisations such as McDonalds, Unilever and Shell were found to display a similar selection of information on their corporate websites. This did not necessarily speak to the jobseeker audience positively. Another major reason for the scepticism was the students’ awareness of CSR and related issues. The amount of own knowledge about CSR and related issues was influential in shaping the student jobseekers’ opinions towards the broadcast CSR messages. Finally, the brand identity and pre-understandings of the organisations play a crucial part in the perception of CSR communication. For example, negative associations with the brand identity and pre-understandings of the organisations lead to negative perceptions. Seemingly, these three aspects—CSR messages, prior knowledge of CSR and related issues and brand identity and pre-understandings of organisations—come together in a dynamic interplay to influence the jobseekers’ overall perception of the online CSR communication.

Intriguingly, a contradiction in mentality could be observed. On one hand there is an expectation of organisations to actively contribute to society through CSR. On the other hand, when organisations communicate that they are doing this, the audience becomes suspicious and sceptic of it, which leads to reluctance to accept and believe organisational messages about CSR practices. We see this as an illustration of the ambiguity that surrounds the notion of CSR. Ideally, a clear definition would be needed in order to elucidate the role and expectations of organisations in society. However as this debate has been going on for a number of years without much success, it seems that it is up to society and organisations to decide what their roles and expectations of each other are. Society needs to be clearer about its demands and expectations so that the scepticism on its part may be dispelled through CSR that they deem as ‘authentic’ and credible, rather than dismiss it because ‘it all sounds the same’ as our students did.

Correspondingly, in order to capture the audience’s attention, organisations may have to rethink their CSR and communication strategies. There is need for a more ‘realistic’ CSR rather than the ‘holier than thou’ approach, as society seems to understand and accept that organisations today do gain benefits from CSR. This way they could convey the differentiated messages that the students so evidently missed.

Although this paper was carried out with a small research sample and a limited scope, we believe nonetheless, that it has produced a valuable contribution to academia. The research has shown that the topic of CSR communication could be taken up from various perspectives in future. A possibility could be research on a larger scale from each perspective of what we found to be the three main influential factors in the shaping of the overall perceptions: the CSR messages (perhaps in terms of discourse analysis), the individual’s knowledge of CSR and related issues or the brand identity and pre-understandings of an organisation. Further, it could be valuable to examine how cultural aspects of individuals influence their perceptions of CSR communication. These possible future studies would be useful for academia in general and for public understanding and debate, particularly since it has been established in this study that the public is aware about CSR and related issues and willing to question organisational claims concerning these issues. As well, further research would be relevant for organisations when forming strategies on how to best practice and approach CSR communication.

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