

CAND. MERC. INTERNATIONAL MARKETING AND MANAGEMENT
MASTER'S THESIS

CSR COMMUNICATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

What happens when control over communication is lost?

*– A case study of McDonald's
and its CSR communication
strategies -*



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ABSTRACT

Social media has revolutionized the traditional media by empowering stakeholders and facilitating their access to information. In the current paper, the emphasis is placed on the importance of social media to organizations and its potential as a communication instrument with regard to corporate social responsibility (CSR) matters.

Based on a theoretical foundation consisting of identity and image, corporate social responsibility, and social media, the thesis is set in the context in which due to the rising demand from stakeholders, companies need not only to integrate sustainability activities in their operations but also communicate about such actions to their stakeholders. In addition, communication over social media implies certain drawbacks in terms of control, but also certain benefits regarding stakeholder engagement.

To address this challenge, by means of a discourse analysis, McDonald's was chosen as the foundation of the current research. The company has been under extensive criticism, ranging from serving unhealthy food to damaging the environment, and exploiting children and employees. Thus, it is important how such a condemned company chooses to communicate its CSR activities through social media and how effective these strategies are.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the topic

Over the last decades, stakeholders have increasingly expected from firms to implement sustainable activities into their daily operations (Etter, 2013a). It has been argued that it is thereby important that firms effectively communicate and share their corporate social responsibility (henceforth – CSR) efforts in order to achieve intended effects, such as reputation and legitimacy gains (Beckmann et al., 2006). Over the last years, companies have increasingly disclosed their CSR efforts through online media (Angeles and Capriotti, 2009). Even more recently, companies have been doing this through diverse social media platforms (Etter, 2013b). Social media, however, challenges organizations, since it allows previously silenced stakeholders to raise their voice and interact with organizations in a public sphere about delicate issues, such as CSR (O'Reilly, 2005).

The likelihood of interrupting the official communication of organizations has relevant consequences for organizations. However, so far, not much is known about these consequences. It is therefore critical to examine the advantages and challenges that companies encounter when they distribute information regarding their sustainable actions in social media. Particularly, these questions become interesting in terms of identity and image formation. Identity and image are constituted through communication (Cornelissen, 2001). Thus, the image of an organization evolves out of its communication. When this communication is distributed through the affordances of new communication technologies such as in social media, this has relevant consequences for the identity formation.

In this thesis, a contested organization – McDonald's – is investigated in order to deepen the understanding about the consequences of social media communication of CSR issues. I have chosen McDonald's as an interesting case, as it offers intriguing circumstances in terms of CSR communication – a worldwide based fast food restaurant, more likely to be renowned for its quick and low-priced food, production of waste, low salaries, and rumors surrounding food production, rather than for its concern for the environment.

1.2 Background and Research Problem

The problem area for the current thesis derived from the increasing concern regarding CSR communication. According to Matten and Moon (2004), the corporate environment is switching from implicit CSR to a more explicit one, characterized by a more visible approach towards CSR actions. Moreover, Beckmann et al. (2006) claim that explicit CSR requires the integration of CSR into operations and strategy.

In the past, corporations were responsible only to themselves and to their shareholders. Nowadays, corporations are also responsible to a vast array of stakeholders, such as: employees, customers, investors, suppliers, governments, political groups, trade associations, and communities. Media is another dominant stakeholder. Information is in a continuous and extensive flow and everything a company does is put under the public's attention almost immediately by the media – thus, corporate transparency is important. How corporations communicate differs and if they communicate, it does not inevitably secure the public's respect and trust. Thus, the communication strategies the company chooses in terms of CSR play a major role (Morsing and Schultz, 2006).

In general, CSR online communication has been used by companies through sustainability reports that are usually posted on the companies' websites and there is quite a vast literature that examines this type of communication. However, much less is known regarding the CSR communication through social media and its effect on the firm's identity and image. These aspects will be discussed throughout the thesis and based on the research problem area outlined, the following research question has been formulated:

What is the effect on the companies' CSR image and identity when control over communication is lost?

1.3. Rational behind the thesis

The fundamental purpose of this thesis is to investigate the increased importance of social media to businesses. It is argued that the emergence of social media that is observed nowadays has generated new opportunities but also challenges for CSR communication. This paper thus aims to explore how organizations can integrate the social media trend into their CSR communication strategies with relevant stakeholders.

The reason for choosing this topic is that it is highly relevant in today's corporate environment and there are rather few academic studies to date on the matter of CSR communication in social media; however, the emergence of this concern is high since the rapid development of social media platforms and since the growth in popularity of CSR communication. Thus, research on this topic is needed to understand what challenges companies encounter when communicating their CSR activities in social media and how such challenges affect or influence the identity and image of organizations.

The assumptions and claims in this thesis are built on existing theories of contemporary topics, such as CSR, social media, and image and identity. For the purpose of the analysis, an influential yet frequently criticized worldwide organization, McDonald's, will be examined by looking at three of some of its CSR communication strategies – sustainability reports, the #McDStories campaign, and the 'Our Food. Your Questions' campaign. By assessing these strategies and analyzing the campaigns in comparison, the differences between them can be revealed and can eventually show the effect they have on the company's identity and image.

1.4. Structure of the thesis

The current project is divided in six parts that provide an exhaustive understanding of the subjects under debate.

Chapter 1 aims to build a broad understanding of the field under research. The project begins with the outline of the topic and the research problem which leads to the research question. The specified research question shapes the framework of the entire thesis: narrowing down the literature, organizing the analysis and leading towards the final reflections and conclusion. This chapter sheds light over the topics of CSR, CSR communication, and social media.

Chapter 2 portrays the theoretical framework chosen in relation to the topic of the thesis. This chapter is divided into three parts. Firstly, the identity and image concepts are explained. Secondly, the concept of CSR is described along with CSR reporting. The foundation of CSR stakeholder engagement on social media is further discussed. In addition, key facts of the food and fast food industries are portrayed to provide the basis for the analysis of McDonald's and its campaigns. The last part of this chapter describes the social media trend and the power of social media.

Chapter 3 looks at the methodology and describes the research process applied. The methodology part will justify the theory used for the analysis and the analysis approach.

Chapter 4 comprises the analysis and empirical findings by looking at McDonald's and considering mainly its presence in social media and its relationship with stakeholders. In addition, discourse analysis is conducted based on the company's sustainability reports, the tweets posted in the #McDStories campaign and the content within the 'Our Food. Your Questions' campaign.

Chapter 5 includes the discussion based on key findings from the literature review and the lessons taken from McDonald's CSR communication efforts through social media.

Chapter 6 presents the conclusions of the project. Reflections on the findings as well as the limitations of the paper will be presented, while also providing recommendations for future research on the topic.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory described in this chapter will be the foundation of the analysis that will lead towards answering the research question. Even though the main theory of this project is linked to identity and image, CSR, and social media, other relevant sub-theories were also presented in order to enhance the comprehension of the topic under concern and develop a complete picture of the subject.

This theoretical background is divided into three parts. The first part describes the concepts of identity and image and their relation to CSR. The second part presents the notion of CSR and what CSR reporting implies. To provide an exhaustive understanding of the topic, this part also looks at the importance of stakeholder engagement when communicating CSR-related data on social media and main facts about the food and fast food industry. The third part examines social media and its potential followed by a summary which identifies the key facts derived from the literature review chapter.

2.1. Identity and image

Organizational identity and image are the central elements of organizations, the root of their relationship with stakeholders. Within the existing literature, there is a constant and an interchangeable use of the terms *identity* and *image*. However, there is a difference between the two terms.

In terms of identity, according to Cornelissen (2004, pp.70), corporate identity refers to the “*self-presentation and outward manifestation of an organization*” which is mainly based on the company’s philosophy, vision, values, culture, and strategy. In other words, corporate identity refers to how a company presents itself to the public and comprises not only the company’s general communication tools (such as advertising, sponsorship, events, promotions, and publicity/press), but also the products, services, and the behavior of the employees.

According to Hatch and Schultz (1997), organizational identity could be described as what the members of the organization think about it - their joint and common perception of the company's mission, traits, and values. The general point of departure for many discussions regarding organizational identity has been fostered around Albert and Whetten's (1985) outline of the fundamental elements of organizational identity:

- What the members of the organization perceive as *central* to the organization's work.
- What renders an organization *distinctive* in comparison to other organizations (in the members' perception).
- What members of the organization recognize as the *enduring* or lasting element that connects the past and the present (and presumably the future) of the organization.

This point of view demonstrates how identity can be assessed internally, by concentrating on the opinions of the members of the organization. From this viewpoint, the organizational identity is generally portrayed as what members "*perceive, feel and think about their organizations*" (Hatch and Schultz, 1997, pp.357).

There are various elements of identity, depending on how the concept is perceived. Balmer et al. (2007, pp.8) distinguish between:

- Actual – "*the current structural, organizational attributes of a corporation*"
- Communicated – "*what the company communicates to its shareholders*"
- Desired – "*what corporate management wants its image to be*"
- Ideal – "*what objective outside analysts see as the firm's optimal identity*"
- Conceived – comprises what the company perceives – "*its multi-attribute and overall corporate image and corporate reputation held by relevant stakeholders*"

The latter is essential in the stakeholder's view of CSR - as organizations have a responsibility towards its stakeholders, their perception of the organization is a fundamental facet of their efforts, and the way the organization communicates will influence the organization's corporate identity (Balmer et al. 2007, pp.10).

Gilpin (2010) considers that companies seek to control their reputation using various self-presentation activities in order to communicate the company's identity and to support and promote a specific image. The identity concept is a fundamental notion to stakeholder management as anything a company says and does influences the stakeholders' perceptions of the company. When consistently communicated, identity builds awareness, triggers recognition, and has the potential to instill confidence among the stakeholders, enabling them to have a clearer idea of what the company does.

Regarding the concept of image, Dutton and Dukerich (1991, pp.520) defined image as "*the way organization members believe others see their organization*". Thus, organizational image refers to a view that an individual or a specific group of people hold towards an organization. This view is mostly influenced by the level of communication between the company and the daily interactions between the company and its audience (such as the interaction between a doctor and a patient or between a sales clerk and a customer) (Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

One of the most significant concerns for an organization is the way it is perceived by its stakeholders – "*it is based on that image that those individuals will have good or bad will towards the organization, as a social entity*". According to Brown et al. (2006), *image* represents a combination of:

- *intended* image, and
- *construed* image

Intended image refers to how an organization communicates and distinguishes itself with respect to its stakeholders. Most studies that focus on organizational image derive from corporate communication, marketing and management literature (Boroş, 2009). According to Balmer (1995), within the marketing studies that focus on the concept of organizational image, there are two schools: the visual school and the strategic one. The visual school is generally concerned with the creation of a firm's name, color, logo, trademarks and other elements integrated in the visual identity program. The other school, the strategic one, concentrates on the main idea of organization, that comprises the mission, vision, and philosophy of the firm (van Riel, 1995).

On the other hand, the *construed image* represents how organizational members think stakeholders perceive the organization. Unlike the concept of intended image that is concerned with the outsiders' perception, the construed image focuses on the viewpoints of the employees with respect to the firm in which they work (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994).

The actual perceptions of the external stakeholders are generally referred to as *reputation* – thus, it is external to the organization. Even though reputation is to a certain extent still influenced by the image the organization wants to portray, it is also determined by external sources, such as industry analysts, competitors, the media, consumer activists, etc. (Brown et al., 2006). According to Walsh and Beatty (2007), a positive corporate reputation is linked to a variety of desirable business outcomes, such as trust, loyalty, customer satisfaction and positive word of mouth.

Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) argue that the most solid corporate reputations and images develop directly from transparent, visible, and constantly portrayed corporate identities. Thus, the role of communication is crucial in bridging the self-presentation of the firm (the corporate identity) and the firm representation or the cognitive image or perception held in memory by others (the corporate image or corporate reputation) (Reddy, 1979). There should be an appropriate alignment between the identity a company aspires to possess and the way it is further described to external stakeholders, while also taking into account the way the firm is perceived by relevant stakeholders – companies should avoid “*breach(es) between rhetoric and reality*” (Hatch and Schultz, 2001).

Corporate social responsibility can be a very important tool when managing corporate image and reputation (Tench & Yeomans, 2009). According to Pollach (2003, p.278), “*CSR has proven to be [an] effective tool to enhance corporate reputation or to proactively defend reputation against public criticism*”. Tench and Yeomans (2009) claim that a firm endeavors to influence the corporate image that its stakeholders hold through various advertising and PR approaches, such as CSR. In this case, CSR serves as a proactive approach helping to diminish the impact of potential unintended negative activities and influencing the stakeholders' perception regarding the firm. What the consumers believe is even more important than the reality – “[a]s long as the audience thinks the firm at fault, the image is at risk” (Benoit, 1997, pp.178).

2.2 Corporate Social Responsibility

This chapter looks at the development and increased significance of corporate social responsibility. The concept of CSR as well as facts regarding CSR reporting are described before looking at the foundation for CSR communication and stakeholder engagement in social media. Moreover, to support the analysis of McDonald's CSR communication strategies, this chapter concludes with an overview of the food and fast food industry in relation to CSR.

2.2.1 Defining Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Balmer et al. (2007, pp.9) describe that back in the 1950s, corporate social responsibility was expressed as a firm's "*sense of social obligation*". In 1979, modern CSR was further developed by Carroll, who formulated a more specific model on four different types of CSR. Carroll (1979) believes that the "*social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point of time*".

According to the European Commission (2013), corporate social responsibility is a concept whereby firms integrate environmental and social concerns in their business processes and also in their interactions with their stakeholders. CSR generally comprises community involvement, philanthropy, environmentally friendly and ethical activities and business practices regarding issues such as the environment, sustainability, human rights, human dignity, product safety, alleviating global poverty, eliminating pandemic diseases, and economic growth (Rindova et al., 2005).

ISO 26000 (2010) defines CSR as "*the responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that contributes to sustainable development, including health and welfare of society, takes into account expectations of stakeholders, is in compliance with applicable law and consistent with international norms of behaviour and is integrated throughout and practiced in an organization's relationships*". According to Verboven (2011), CSR has a broad meaning and stands as an umbrella term for sustainable development, corporate citizenship, corporate philanthropy, and compliance.

CSR has an extensive practice in several countries. Over the last decades, many companies have considered CSR initiatives as a way to enhance their reputations and as a reaction to the perceived shortcomings and limitations of government regulations following globalization, privatization and the welfare state's reforms. Media and the society demand companies to a greater extent to consider the environmental and social outcomes of their actions. Moreover, the society also expects more transparency and openness from the companies regarding their actions (Freeman et al., 2010). Thus, over the last decade, CSR has become one of the leading priorities for companies, becoming the top focus of managers within the global retail and consumer goods sector (The Consumer Goods Forum, 2011).

The main responsibility of a firm has always been to generate profit (Balmer et al., 2007, pp.9). However, a sense of balance of the economic and ethical side is rather difficult for companies to accomplish (Watson, 1994). Nowadays, when firms fail to meet the public's expectations regarding environmental responsibilities, they are often criticized or receive negative publicity from environmental organizations, governments, media, and also the general public.

According to Rolland and Bazzoni (2009), the online communication tools have had an incredible impact on the traditional concepts of CSR and on the relationship between businesses and the general public. Due to the increased accessibility of information, mostly through the development of technology and the Internet, stakeholders are now more empowered and informed and people can share information much easier.

However, with more information available, numerous scandals have been exposed publicly, constraining companies in integrating CSR actions as part of the corporate strategy. Research has shown that several stakeholders build their perception of a particular firm based on the information that those firms provide and share online; thus comprehensive and honest reporting is crucial for a company in ensuring a good corporate reputation (Gill, Dickinson & Scharl, 2008). People are now interested in companies that are being transparent (corporate *transparency*) and the ones that socially contribute towards the environment are increasingly valued (Gill, Dickinson & Scharl, 2008).

2.2.2 CSR Reporting

Reporting CSR activities is a fundamental part of the corporate external communication and essential when communicating the company's sustainable activities to stakeholders (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). Firms report their CSR efforts *"in order to be accountable to their constituents – their stakeholders, or those agencies that fall within the company's sphere of influence"* (Holland and Gibbon, 2001, pp.279). The CSR data and information shown in annual reports are important for investors as it provides a significant indicator of the organization's current performance, its value, and future potential.

Moreover, CSR reporting can also present how an organization values CSR. According to Lupu and Cojocaru (2010, pp.205), *"companies communicate and disclose their role in society and their contribution is presented in a globally accepted reporting format"*. Firms are increasingly using international standards in terms of CSR, especially within online reporting (Rolland and Bazzoni, 2009). Thus, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), a nonprofit Dutch organization, has created the Sustainability Reporting guidelines that are commonly used by firms as standard when publishing their financial, environmental and social sustainability goals and results (Etzion and Ferraro, 2010).

Based on a survey by KPMG, CSR reporting by G250 companies has globally increased, reaching 95% in 2011 (KPMG, 2011).

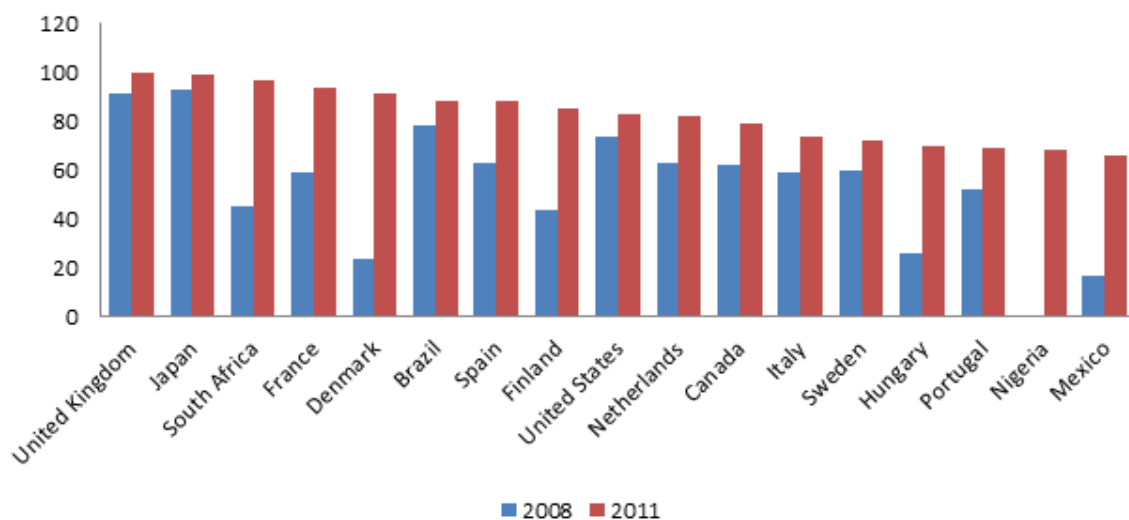


Figure 1. Percentage of countries reporting their corporate responsibility initiatives

(Source: KPMG, 2011)

The survey also presents that the larger the company, the more it reports regarding their sustainable actions (KPMG, 2011). Moreover, the larger the organization, the more focus it receives from stakeholders. However, in spite of the high popularity of CSR reporting, it is rather difficult to empirically establish whether the CSR performance facts are over or under reported by the companies. This is mainly due to the fact that a small number of companies have their CSR reports externally verified – only 46% of the G250 companies (KPMG, 2008).

However, reporting is only one of the elements needed for a complete approach to corporate responsibility management. Such a comprehensive approach comprises other critical elements, such as defining a strategy, developing and implementing procedures and policies, and eventually evaluating the performance. Even though reporting has increased rapidly among firms worldwide, a development of a complete corporate responsibility management system requires more time (KPMG, 2008).

In the case of McDonald's, the company produces a global CSR report and some independent countries have generated individual CSR reports. For example, the countries that have issued such individual reports include Canada, New Zealand, Australia, UK, Japan, Brazil (McDonald's, 2008). In 2002, McDonald's published its first social responsibility (SR) report where the CEO of McDonald's at that time, Jim Cantalupo, wrote: *"McDonald's has the honour of serving more customers around the world than anyone else. With this privilege comes a responsibility to be a good neighbour, employer, and steward of the environment and a unique opportunity to be a leader and catalyst for positive change. We recognize the challenges and obstacles but believe strongly in the importance of social responsibility"* (Kotler and Lee, 2005, pp.37).

2.2.3 The foundation for CSR communication and stakeholder engagement in social media

According to Lehtimäki et al. (2011), there is an increasing public demand for data concerning corporate responsibility actions. Numerous stakeholders are examining firms' operations and efforts linked to the environment and to the global society. When firms commit to CSR actions, they may not always engage in such actions on a voluntary basis. Due to the change in public expectations, firms are now 'forced' to consider more environmental friendly operations, implement various ecological and sustainable strategies, and take more responsibility towards the general public.

The existing literature on public relations is centered on the use of communication as an approach to manipulate people's behavior. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed the symmetrical model which moved the emphasis from manipulation towards the benefit concept achieved by both companies and stakeholders via a two-way, symmetrical communication. Moreover, the relational perspective highlights the relational consequences that influence both stakeholders and organizations through behavior and communication (Ferguson, 1984).

These two approaches have been intensely highlighted regarding CSR communication (Fieseler et al., 2010) – in order for organizations to achieve positive relationships with their stakeholders, they need to communicate their CSR efforts constructively in a two-way, symmetric communication approach (Morsing and Schultz, 2006). Morsing and Schultz (2006) identified three categories of stakeholder relations in relation to ways in which organizations engage in CSR communication with their stakeholders:

- **Stakeholder information strategy** – characterized by one-way communication, from the company towards its stakeholders. Within this model, communication is actually perceived as “*telling, not listening*”, distributing the information in order to inform the public regarding the company's activities (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, pp.23). The rationale for this strategy is to notify stakeholders regarding CSR activities without their implication in order to ensure that the CSR engagement of the organization is effectively communicated to its stakeholders (Morsing and Schultz, 2006, pp.326). Even though informing is an essential element of CSR communication, it does not necessarily lead to participation or discussion. Companies following the stakeholder information strategy hold complete control over the communication (Bivins, 2004, pp.3).

- **Stakeholder response strategy** – includes both the organization and the stakeholders in discussion, however, with the public relations outcomes in support of the organization, rather than the stakeholders (two-way asymmetric communication). The purpose of this strategy is to engage in discussion with stakeholders in order to evaluate whether stakeholders accept or agree with the company's CSR initiatives. Companies are mainly concerned with building a positive image by satisfying stakeholders' demands. This type of communication is, thus, sender-oriented and the discussions help the company assess whether they succeed in fulfilling their stakeholders' demands. Organizations following this strategy hold relative control – the feedback they receive from the stakeholders cannot be seen by the public, it is visible only to the organization. Thus, the company does not engage in genuine discussion with stakeholders as it only asks stakeholders to provide feedback to their CSR activities (Morsing and Schultz, 2006, pp.327).
- **Stakeholder involvement strategy** – involves a two-way communication between organization and stakeholders where the concepts of symmetric communication and relationship management are fulfilled, indicating favorable effects for both parties involved. Therefore, companies can proactively engage in discussion with stakeholders which allows the company to understand and comply with its stakeholders' changing expectations, and also influence each other through discussion and mutual participation and involvement (Morsing and Schultz, 2006, pp.328). Companies following the involvement strategy do not actually have control over the discussion since it consists of several participants.

According to Morsing and Schultz (2006, pp.336), organizations should employ all three strategies in order to succeed with their CSR communication. All three can be used at the same time as they are interdependent. The first two strategies are essential because an organization needs to inform its stakeholders about its activities while also encouraging their feedback. Moreover, organizations should also involve their stakeholders in the communication of CSR matters.

The need for greater interaction emerges from both corporate goodwill and from the shift in stakeholder demands, as stakeholders are becoming more informed and more critical, particularly in relation to environmental and social issues (Carroll, 2007). Moreover, CSR activities represent a significant tool for companies towards achieving public support and thus, improving a firm's image and reputation (Barone et al. 2000). However, linking sustainability issues to companies also carries the risk of public scrutiny and criticism (Fieseler et al. 2010).

When a firm faces external criticism or negative publicity, it tends to engage into CSR in an exaggerated manner by using inflated CSR campaigns to communicate to stakeholders. This type of public campaigns is often referred to as *blue-* or *green-washing* and their aim is to shift the focus of the firm's actions to more positive ones and expect the public to disregard the issue. Research shows that the effects of these campaigns have significantly weakened as society is more informed and it is increasingly difficult for companies to gain people's trust (Gourville and Rangan, 2004).

Nowadays, the concept of stakeholders is widely accepted in the business and management literature. According to Freeman (1984, pp.25), stakeholders represent "*any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives*". In other words, stakeholders stand for the organizations, governments, or individuals that have an interest or stake in a company, and are thus influenced by its decisions and actions. Freeman (1984) claimed that the 'stakeholder approach' is a way to encourage companies to be more proactive in their actions and considered that the increased importance of stakeholders is tightly linked to the notion of CSR.

Thus, the borders between the companies and the external environment are less visible nowadays and companies need to consider the diversity of the stakeholders' demands. Nevertheless, companies are becoming increasingly interested in implementing CSR activities into their daily operations while also maintaining their relational social capital by revealing their CSR efforts through various communication channels – thus, "*the effectiveness of CSR finally rests on communicating such activities to those stakeholders who help shape the firm's future*" (Kesavan et al., 2013, pp.60).

Until recently, corporate websites have been one of the communication tools most frequently used by companies for sharing their CSR efforts with their stakeholders in a rather unidirectional method (Insch, 2008). Public relations theory highlights the significance of communication between companies and stakeholders (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001; Kelleher, 2009); however, various studies indicate that these opportunities to communicate with stakeholders on CSR-related matters are rarely exploited by organizations through their websites (Insch, 2008; Ingenhoff & Kölling, 2009; Angeles & Capriotti, 2009).

Nowadays, numerous corporate websites are rather static and do not exploit the full potential of dialogue-based communication (Fieseler et al., 2010). With the advent of novel communication technologies, generally referred to as social media (concept that will be later explained), stakeholders are no longer passive receivers of information, but have now the opportunity to become active and engage in evaluating and creating content regarding CSR topics (Dellarocas, 2003).

The internet has turned into a fundamental weapon as companies struggle to become more socially responsible. The social media channels have the potential to facilitate social interaction via the participative empowerment of users. According to Etter and Fieseler (2010, pp.169), *“social media provides access to stakeholders who could not have been reached with the same intensity before and thus enables more dialogue and personalized interaction”*. In contrast, traditional corporate websites’ pages with their unidirectional method of communication have a rather “broad and discerning audience” (Coupland, 2005, pp.355).

One of the benefits of choosing online communication is that it allows two-way communication among an unlimited number of users (Kent and Taylor, 1998) and enables companies to create and maintain relationships with stakeholders (Wright, 1998). Social media provides novel opportunities in terms of symmetric communication and relationship management considering that social media tools *“have almost no gate-keeping mechanism, enabling conversation without formal hierarchies”* (Fieseler et al., 2010, pp.610). Having an online presence on the social networking platforms allows companies to be instantly aware of the existing conversations about the brand, thus understand the reputation they have among social media users. This also enables prompt reactions and feedback from customers.

When companies communicate with stakeholders on CSR topics, they seek to build social capital – *“a metaphor that explains the processes and outcomes of interactions in networks”* (Etter and Fieseler, 2010, pp.171). When looking at building social capital on the internet, Fieseler et al. (2010) claim that the interaction between companies and stakeholders through various social applications is a valuable method towards building and upholding networks comprising both formal and informal relationships. Companies should be honest and transparent in their dialogue with stakeholders in order to encourage trust. Transparency, and also the eagerness to be perceived as vulnerable are viewed as essential factors towards building and maintaining trusting stakeholder relationships (Etter and Fieseler, 2010).

Nowadays, companies no longer control the online communication regarding CSR - it is instead taken over by the stakeholders that are actively engaged in the social media dialogue. According to Etter and Fieseler (2010), knowledgeable users examine companies and their comments on the social media, particularly the ones that are related to CSR. It is assumed by stakeholders that once a company starts sharing information about its CSR efforts through the social networks, it also becomes reachable and honest. Stakeholders also expect companies to listen to the public opinion and be as proactive as possible in communicating in social media since being reactive can merely be seen as 'greenwashing' (Etter and Fieseler, 2010).

According to Scott (2009), *"jumping into social media for marketing and communications requires that organizations lose control of their messages. When anybody can comment about what you're up to, you no longer have power over the way you are portrayed."* Companies have focused on controlling their messages. They are generally used to one-way communication, mostly press releases and advertising, and to their messages being communicated to stakeholders by trained and authorized spokespeople such as the PR director or the CEO (Scott, 2009).

Nowadays, there is an increasing concern regarding sustainability and the fact that companies should engage in CSR is seen as crucial by many. Since McDonald's, as a fast-food restaurant, can be associated to health-related issues, it is relevant to investigate how the company handles such challenges by acting socially responsible and how it further communicates these actions to its stakeholders.

2.2.4 The food and fast-food industry – the product and CSR

According to the Food Standards Agency (2013), the food industry is a complex and global group of various businesses that provide most of the food energy which is consumed by the world's population. It comprises everything from farming, food production and distribution, to retail and catering. It handles food safety concerns at each stage of the chain while providing assistance and information in regards to legal requirements or best practices.

The notion of CSR is of high relevance for food-related companies taking into account that the food sector has a significant impact and strong reliance on the global economy, the society, and on the environment (Hartmann, 2011). There are 3 particular challenges that the food sector faces in the context of CSR:

- The food sector has a strong impact and is highly dependent on human, physical and natural resources (Genier et al., 2009)
- Since food covers basic human needs, people have solid viewpoints regarding what they eat, leading to a thorough set of conditions and constraints regarding the food sector in terms of the raw materials' production (animal welfare), the social (labour conditions) circumstances within the entire value chain, and environmental (water and energy use; waste), plus the healthiness, safety, and the quality of the products (Maloni and Brown, 2006).
- The food chain has a distinctive and fragmented structure – small and large companies differ regarding their views towards CSR, thus potential inconsistencies might occur in terms of CSR involvement within the food supply chain

According to KPMG (2011) below, the food and beverage industry has seen a slight increase in CSR reporting globally, moving from 47% in 2008 to 67% in 2011.

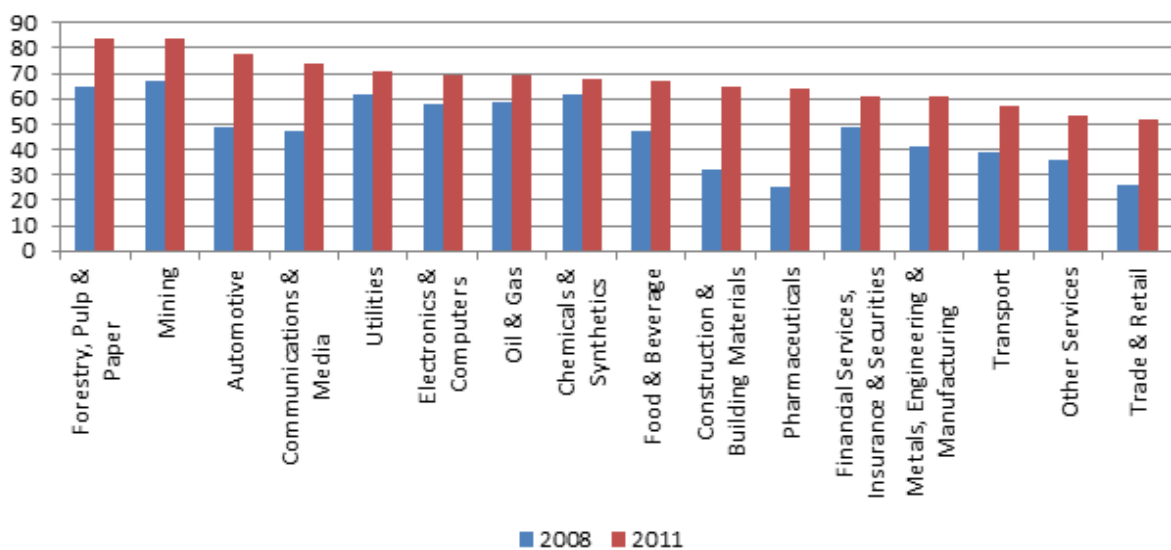


Figure 2. Percentage of industries reporting their corporate responsibility initiatives

Source: KPMG International Corporate Responsibility Reporting Survey, 2011

Each sector of the economy is influenced by the societal demand with regards to CSR. However, as each industry has distinct characteristics, the pressure exerted on firms to consider implementing CSR differs too (with respect to the social, economic, and environment impact). Even though there are sectors, for instance the mining one, which have a powerful impact on the environment, there is probably no other sector that depends so strongly on natural resources as the food sector. At the same time, the food sector also has significant and various impacts on the environment (Jones et al., 2005).

Moreover, the food sector is often linked to numerous public concerns. While some of those concerns are sector specific, such as animal welfare, other areas which are not directly linked to the food sector, still have a strong influence on it – for instance, labour rights. Besides, due to the risk of unfair practices or power abuse, ethical concerns regarding procurement processes have also been under public scrutiny. Since the bargaining power is held by the large processors and retailers, the suppliers who are partly located in developing countries are often constrained to accept any offer they receive (Jones et al., 2005).

Fast food represents the type of food that can be prepared and served quickly, usually served in restaurants or packed for takeaway. It is also often found at gas stations and convenience stores. This food is usually rather cheap but unhealthy at the same time. Common types of fast food comprise pizza, burgers, kebabs, and fries, which are often highly processed and produced on a large scale in order to cut costs. Regardless of the 2008 recession and the subsequent decline in consumers' trust, the average customer spending on fast-food has increased (The Economist, 2010).

During the past years, the fast food industry has been frequently criticized as people are becoming more aware of health issues and obesity levels. The increased health awareness and increased customer awareness towards healthy lifestyles had put pressure on various fast food players, constraining them while also allowing them to exploit this trend by providing healthier options within their menus – offering salads and low calorie food products while also transparently revealing nutritional content (Triggle, 2011).

2.3 Social media

This chapter looks at the evolution and importance of the internet and the power of social media. Moreover, general facts about Twitter are presented to create the basis for the analysis of the #McDStories campaign.

2.3.1 The World Wide Web

The World Wide Web (henceforth – Internet) originates since December, 1990 and became accessible to the public in August, 1991. Today, 22 years later, it has turned into a phenomenon providing a massive social impact. 34,3% (more than 2,4 billion people) of the world's population has Internet access today, showing a boost of 566,4% compared to the year 2000 (Internet World Stats, 2012).

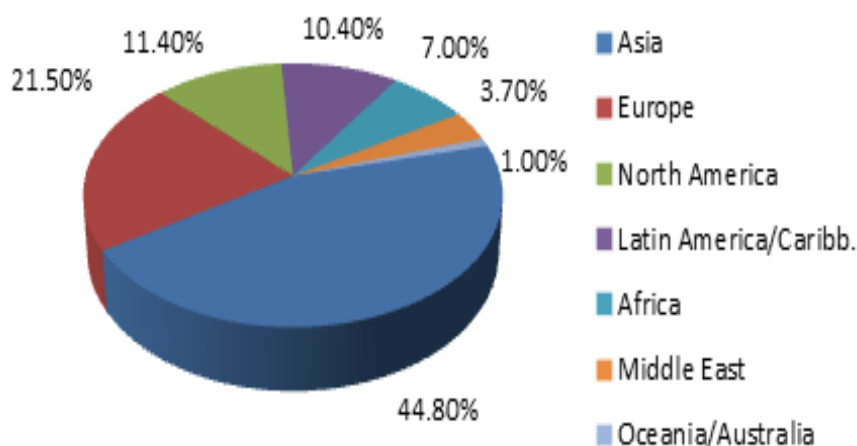


Figure 3. Internet users – distribution by world regions - 2012

Source: Internet World Stats, 2012

Web 2.0 is the second generation of Internet. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Web 2.0 could be described as an innovative way to be used by software developers and general consumers after the dot-com novelty at the beginning of the 21st century.

However, Web 2.0 is not only a technological development, but also a social one (Fieseler et al., 2010). What makes Web 2.0 interesting is the fact that the applications and content on this platform are no longer designed and distributed by certain individuals, but are instead constantly customized by all the users in a collaborative and participatory manner (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Thus, the Web 2.0 content is designed in order to appeal to the end-users and tailored according to their preferences, allowing them to freely contribute and edit the content of the websites. This concept is referred to as the user generated content (UGC) which describes the data and information on websites that is provided by the users (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

2.3.2 Social Media

“Social media isn’t a fad, it’s a fundamental shift in the way we communicate” (Qualman, 2010).

Ever since human species has existed, communication between individuals has been a basic human need and an essential factor of the society. Through time, communication has undertaken various forms and has improved and adapted to meet the needs of the public.

Media comprises all the communication channels through which data, news, education, promotional messages and entertainment are distributed. It describes every broadcasting and narrowcasting method such as TV, magazines, newspapers, radio, telephone, fax, billboards, direct mail, and internet (Business Dictionary, 2013). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) describe *social media* as “*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content*”.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Internet has enabled global and instant communication that has led towards today’s incredible expansion of social media platforms. Unlike the traditional media, the social media is built on a two-way interaction, allowing users to participate actively, network and share information and perspectives with each other. According to Foux (2006), social media is increasingly considered by users as being a more trustworthy source of data and knowledge than the traditional publicity such as advertising and TV.

The social media trend started with the launch of the Blogs.com phenomenon in 1999. This platform was free of charge and accessible to everyone, allowing users to design their own online journals. With blogs, users could communicate their thoughts and opinions, as well as provide details regarding events as they occurred. For example, during the World Trade Center terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, several people used their blogs to describe their experiences, regrets, and latest news for the rest of the online community (Løwe, 2011).

Social media has a broad meaning, thus, many of today's websites can be categorized as such. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) organized six different categories:

- a) *Collaborative projects* – allow several end-users to join and create content simultaneously. This content can appear as wikis (e.g. Wikipedia) or as social bookmarking application (e.g. Deli.cio.us).
- b) *Blogs* – represent the most basic form of social media. It is an online type of journal, most usually handled by one person. However, there is also the possibility of interaction between users through the comments and linking options. Several companies have chosen blogs as a method to update their stakeholders regarding corporate developments in a less formal style than in press releases or newsletters (Redish, 2007, pp.171) – due to the high degree of informality, blogs enable companies to develop a more human image (Kelleher and Miller, 2006, pp.398).
- c) *Social networking sites* – enable users to build their own profiles, add colleagues and friends, and then keep in touch with each other by sharing information, writing private messages, commenting on each other's posts or joining groups with common interests. The most popular examples of social networks are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn. However, Twitter is usually perceived as a microblog rather than a social networking platform, due to limited number of characters one can use for a post. In the next section, Twitter will be described in order to support the further analysis for McDonald's #McDStories campaign.
- d) *Content communities* – allow users to share media content (e.g. photos, videos, text, etc.) among each other. The most renowned content communities available nowadays are YouTube (the world's major video sharing website), Digg (used for news sharing) and Flickr and Instagram (used for photo sharing). Companies choose to use these communities constantly due to their notable popularity.

- e) *Virtual social worlds* and f) *Virtual games* – these types of social media sites are established on platforms that replicate a 3D environment, where users can create their own personalized avatar and network with each other as they would in real life. A relevant example of a virtual game nowadays would be ‘World of Warcraft’ and in terms of a social virtual world, an important example is ‘Second Life’.

The features that all these social media sites have in common include *conversation*, *community*, *connectedness*, *openness*, and *participation* (Mayfield, 2008). Thus, the concept of social media is not exclusively based on technology development and innovation, but it is also based on the interaction between individuals, which encourages people to join in order to find information, like-minded people, friends, colleagues faster than in the past. Nowadays, it might look as if everybody has embraced the social trend. Even companies opt for an online presence on social networks that would allow them to build highly-engaged communities of fans and customers and raise brand awareness.

2.3.3 Twitter

Twitter was founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and Biz Stone (Mashable, 2013). It is a social network with which users can connect to news, opinions, ideas, or latest stories about what they perceive as interesting. The most important part of Twitter is the *tweets*. They are 140 characters long, “*but don’t let the small size fool you – you can discover a lot in a little space*” (Twitter, 2013a).

Twitter uses ‘*hashtags*’ by adding the hashtag symbol ‘#’ before a specific keyword in order to classify the tweets (Twitter, 2013b). One can see conversations, videos, and photos directly in Tweets. Nowadays, Twitter is among the 10 most visited websites and has reached more than 550 million of active registered Twitter users who post 58 million tweets per day (Statistic Brain, 2013).

There is an increasing usage of social media among the companies within Fortune Global 100 and Twitter is among the most used social medium on every continent apart from Asia (Kesavan et al., 2013). Twitter has also established ‘Twitter for businesses’ in order to make it easier for businesses to connect with their customers by sharing information regarding their products or services, gather real-time feedback from customers while building relationships with them.

In terms of online communication, Twitter is among the most widespread Web 2.0 tools where firms are able to share CSR-related data, not only to the general public but also directly to the interested users, also known as ‘followers’, by answering their comments and queries online (Etter, 2013b). Previous research has shown that Twitter can provide two-way symmetric communication and is used by diverse stakeholders - such as consumers (Burton and Soboleva, 2011), journalists (Ahmad, 2010), activists (Christensen, 2011), politicians (Golbeck et al., 2010), NGOs (Segeber and Bennett, 2011) or investors (Arvidsson et al., 2012) – that have a significant concern regarding CSR activities.

According to Greenberg (2010), communication on Twitter generates positive consequences for organizations, allowing them to engage in dialogues where customers provide feedback, post questions raise concerns to which the members of the organization can respond. The consequences of such commitment towards the customers’ concerns on Twitter can result in favourable outcomes for companies, such as benevolence and reliability (Coyle et al., 2012). Moreover, according to Morsing et al., (2008), online CSR communication is prone to overcome any reluctance that might exist and raise awareness among stakeholders. However, despite the high potential of interaction on Twitter, the little amount of research about Twitter available indicates that one-way communication is the most prominent method applied by organizations (Burton and Soboleva, 2011).

2.3.4 The power of social media

Nowadays, the online media environment provides low-cost methods for an organization to reach its stakeholders. By using these methods, companies avoid using the mainstream media and thus, connect and discuss with their customers directly. In 2008, only 10% of firms had social media budgets, reaching up to almost 30% by 2010. Even though 50% of all the firms refused access to social media in 2010, the percentage is expected to decline to 30% by 2014 – companies are increasingly starting to recognize the amazing power and value of the social media when seeking to gain competitive advantage (Kesavan et al., 2013).

Nowadays, as customers have access to social media and other blogging platforms, they are more empowered than ever before. The customer service field has changed drastically due to the latest technological changes that enable customers to connect directly with company representatives and share their brand experiences with others. Due to the increased empowerment of consumers, they are now more likely to have higher expectations from the firms they interact with and since they also have more buying choices; companies need to be responsive and trustworthy.

Due to the use of social media, communication is also changing and thus, the dynamics of human relationships are also affected – relationship marketing takes on a new perspective. Social media platforms enable customers to establish a community around a particular product or brand. Social media channels carry an amazing potential for businesses in terms of word of mouth referrals (O'Brien, 2011). According to Phelps et al. (2004), positive comments about an organization posted by customers in social media act as an 'internet word of mouth' which is more influential than advertising or other large-scale promotional efforts. However, companies that embrace social media within their corporate strategy need to be aware of the fact that they lose an element of control to the consumer.

According to Neff (2010), several businesses have their major web presence on the social media platforms, overtaking their corporate websites and e-mail programmes as an increasing number of consumers are moving towards social media. The traffic on official corporate websites has dropped since the emergence of the social networking sites that are rising at an exponential rate of three times faster than the total internet growth rate (Sinclair & Vogus, 2011).

The reason behind the increased traffic on social media sites in comparison to the official corporate websites is not necessarily due to the companies' poor communication approaches but rather due to people's general disbelief in multinational companies – nowadays, people have more trust in their friends' recommendations and in the products they explore on their own (Feng and Li, 2009).

Therefore, social media has modified how companies interact and connect with their customers as well as how they determine their customer relationship management (CRM) policies. What distinguishes social CRM from traditional CRM is the proactive contribution of the consumer (O'Brien, 2011) – thus, the customer has gained power and an essential goal for companies is to improve customers' experience (Morgan, 2010). In other words, customers are using social media platforms to facilitate the discussion between them and the corporation – customers are establishing their own engagement conditions to which companies need to adapt (Hutton and Fosdick, 2011).

According to Sinclair and Vogus (2011), the user-generated content on social media has enabled the balance of power to move from the brand towards the customer. As Chen (2012, pp.3) describes it, social media is an innovative phenomenon that builds a 'hybrid cultural space' that allows people worldwide to join in order to build online communities, share news, gather information and develop relationships across borders and cultures. This hybrid cultural space provides an innovative outreach tool towards a more comprehensive and developed marketing approach which has an important social value for customers and enables corporations to carry out viral and niche marketing (Santomier, 2008).

However, even though social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook generate unique opportunities for companies to promote their products and strengthen their reputation, these communication tools create tremendous vulnerability. The wide access that social media provides allows users to create and share any comments or accusations about a company. If such negative content goes viral, spreading over the internet, it can most likely trigger an organizational crisis (Veil et al., 2011).

In some of the cases, the accusations that go viral are false. Such false claims or hoaxes may not represent genuine threats for companies but can easily influence and weaken the public perception regarding the organization's activities and goals. Hoaxes refer to misleading alerts designed to destabilize the public's support and loyalty towards a company, service, product, or person (Veil et al., 2011).

Sellnow et al. (2009 pp.141-142) agree that “*well-designed hoaxes capitalize on uncertainty and perceptions of vulnerability*”. As a result, companies have the difficult task of simultaneously organizing and controlling a reaction plan whilst assessing the legitimacy of the threat. Thus, the growing number of innovative technology communication tools has revolutionized the way in which companies need to prepare for situations that threaten the organization’s reputation (Veil et al., 2011).

According to Heath and Millar (2004 pp. 2), the social media tools generate novel challenges for companies as rumours and hoaxes are most of the time “*even more provoking in cyberspace*”. The online media is capable of both propagating rumours and hoaxes while also creating them. For instance, Google bombing – the manipulation of search engines to associate certain terms with websites, usually used for satirical and comical purposes – was widely used in 2004, during the presidential election, when the search terms ‘miserable failure’ was linked to George W. Bush’s biography on the whitehouse.gov website (Cohen, 2007).

The social networking websites also provide the conduit for news and stories to go viral. The majority of the online content sites offer the ‘send to a friend’ feature on their pages. Some websites provide choices such as ‘share on Twitter’ or ‘share on Facebook’. Youtube has the ‘email this video’ option and also the possibility to link the video to Twitter, Facebook, Myspace, orkut, Buzz, tumblr, hi5, Bebo, StumbleUpon, and Blogger.

Such features encourage users to post messages and videos on their online pages by only using the video’s URL (Veil et al., 2011). Porter and Golan (2006) believe that a content of a message should be provocative enough to appeal to users and engage them to distribute the information on their social networking profiles, thus become viral. Golan and Zaidner (2008) argue that a humorous message also has a high potential to be virally shared online.

Thus, there is an emergent need for companies to constantly monitor social media in order to identify situations or comments that can potentially alter their image. According to Levisohn and Gibson (2009), companies must be active on social media and monitor their presence continuously. Moreover, companies need to take strategic actions when faced with a negative situation that has the potential to undermine their image and reputation – *“gone are the days of sticking your head in the sand and acting like you have control and no one is talking about you”* (Dietrich, 2010). According to Boyd (2000), when faced with negative circumstances, companies should go through the following 4 steps in order to re-establish or maintain the company’s image:

- 1) Acknowledge the problem
- 2) State intent to solve the problem
- 3) Take observable actions
- 4) Have an ongoing commitment to issue resolution

2.4 Summary

Based on the research question previously stated, the literature review chapter was divided into three sections, looking at identity and image, CSR, and the concept of social media. Based on the understanding gathered from the theoretical chapter, it can be argued that nowadays, companies need to join the social media trend as that is where the discussions take place among stakeholders. They expect companies not only to be present on social media, but also communicate their CSR efforts and engage in discussions with them.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The thesis started by examining the literature on specific subjects (identity and image, CSR engagement and social media). In this methodology chapter, the methods used in the paper are presented and discussed. The chapter is organised into three central sections. First, the chosen scientific direction of the research strategy is investigated. Secondly, the research process used in order to address the research design, data collection and data analysis are described. Finally, the limitations and assessment criteria are considered in terms of validity and reliability, providing the reader with a deeper understanding with regards to the practical approaches employed while carrying out the analysis.

3.2 Research strategy

The choice of the research strategy has a substantial impact on the validity of the study. In the process of developing a research design, the first step involves a comprehensive analysis of the existing research strategies and the selection of the most appropriate one for the specific research objective (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2011). The research design aims to articulate the approaches through which the empirical data is being collected and examined. It further links the research question to the data, allowing the research question to be tested (Punch, 2000).

3.2.1 Selection of research paradigm: positivism versus interpretivism

The research paradigm symbolizes the way the information is collected and used. The majority of researchers distinguish between two main philosophies – positivism and interpretivism (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2011). With the aim of developing a research design, a primary step is a comprehensive analysis based on existing research paradigms and the selection of the most relevant concepts that fit with the research objective.

The *positivistic paradigm* applies methods of the natural sciences in order to evaluate and explain human behaviour (Bulmer, 1977). The three fundamental principles of positivism are:

- 1) the social world exists externally and should be regarded objectively
- 2) research is value-free

- 3) the researcher is independent and objective (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2011)

The basic assertion of positivism is that general rules exist that can present the relationship between cause and effect within the social world. This also comprises the beliefs that anything within this world can be explained by facts that are objectively observable and that the social world consists of simple elements to which it can be reduced. Research based on this paradigm is most often conducted by creating hypotheses and investigate them on a large scale (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

Interpretivism is, in contrast to positivism, not seeking to create general rules on human behaviour, but to understand both motives and purposes for it. According to this philosophy, humans do not simply react to outer influences, but interpret a situation and give meaning to it, before they react appropriately to it (Bulmer, 1977). On the contrary, interpretivism does not grasp the world as a sum of elements but as an entity. The three fundamental principles of the interpretive paradigm are:

- 1) the social world is constructed and is given meaning subjectively by people
- 2) research is driven by interests
- 3) the researcher is part of what is observed

A research approach established on interpretivism provides an extensive explanation of the facts investigated and an interpretation of these findings. Studies are more likely to be designed on a smaller scale since generalization of the findings is not of major significance (Blumberg, Cooper & Schindler, 2011).

In accordance to the paper's research question: *'What is the effect on the companies' CSR image and identity when control over communication is lost?'* - the interpretive paradigm is found to be most suitable for the current research. This thesis seeks to reveal the advantages and challenges with respect to companies communicating their CSR efforts through social media networks. Social media is mainly driven and empowered by users with their feelings, thoughts, actions and rationales being the only guidelines. The interpretative approach implies that researchers should immerse themselves into the circumstances, and thus try to understand it by becoming part of the phenomenon under study (Hathaway, 1995).

3.2.2 Selection of research approach: deductive versus inductive

There are two broad approaches to reasoning that can lead to attainment of new knowledge, namely deductive and inductive reasoning. The main dissimilarity between the two is the role of theory opposed to the role of data (Hyde, 2000).

The *deductive approach* represents a theory testing process that derives from an established theory or generalization, and further searches to verify whether the theory pertains to certain examples (Hyde, 2000). The research that follows the deductive approach looks into the theory, develops logical conclusions established on this theory and presents them as hypotheses or propositions that are empirically tested and presented through broad conclusions based on the confirmation or falsification of the hypothesis and propositions initially generated (Arlbjørn and Halldórsson, 2002). Thus, since the deductive approach is appropriate for testing existing concepts and theories, it is not entirely suitable for the current research. The aim of the research in the current paper is to critically reflect on the effects of social media on the CSR identity and image of a company.

The *inductive approach* does not necessary imply any previous knowledge in connection with a general framework or specific literature. Instead, inductive reasoning is a theory building process, starting with the examination of certain instances and aiming to build generalizations with respect to the phenomenon under investigation (Hyde, 2000). Hence, an inductive approach is applied throughout the thesis. Sticking to an inductive approach, there are two fundamental steps that need to be followed:

- 1) Detective work, that includes seeking out for patterns and regularities of the phenomenon (Goetz and LeCompte, 1981).
- 2) The creative step – where the researcher separates himself from what is already known and describes something new. The new information can then be used to assess the accuracy of the other theories – thus, researchers, instead of data, create new theory. (Mintzberg, 1979)

According to Mintzberg (1979), the effectiveness of the theory derives from how well the detective work is done followed by creative steps in the preferred direction.

3.3 The research process

The research process of the paper comprises three stages:

- 1) the type of the research method
- 2) collecting the data, and
- 3) analysing the data (Mehmetoglu, 2004).

3.3.1 The research method

According to Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler (2011), research methods represent techniques and procedures needed to answer scientific questions. The majority of papers distinguish between two types of research methods: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research focuses on numbers (quantity) and distribution while qualitative research is concerned with achieving a profound understanding of a specific social fact and the underlying reasons behind it (Blumberg, Cooper and Schindler, 2011). This inclines that interpretation acts as an essential aspect of qualitative research.

The topic under investigation in the current thesis supports the use of qualitative over quantitative data. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), a qualitative analysis represents a method of observing and interpreting data in order to draw meaning and understanding, and foster empirical knowledge. Qualitative data describes while quantitative data defines – qualitative research implies meanings, definitions, symbols, concepts, characteristics, and description of things.

For this paper, a case-study analysis was chosen which represents an in-depth study of a specific situation or a small number of occurrences. Case studies can be applied in order to achieve various objectives, such as providing description, test theory, or generate theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Thus, the most suitable approach was a qualitative one.

According to Corbin and Strauss (1998), qualitative data can be conducted from videos, observations, interviews, newspapers, biographies, etc., whereas case studies typically combine some of these collection techniques, such as interviews, questionnaires, observations, and documentation (Eisenhardt, 1989). Since conducting interviews with the company would have been difficult mainly due to sensitivity of the topic, only documents and data available online was used.

3.3.2 Data collection

Whilst conducting the research, both primary and secondary data were used. The primary data comprises the company's own website, corporate blogs and postings on their official Twitter page along with postings and comments made by its most relevant stakeholders. In the current paper, secondary sources consist of data collected from academic books, research journals within related fields, scholarly articles, and blogs owned by recognised journalists and academics. Exploratory research was carried on from secondary data in order to analyse significant theoretical findings with respect to CSR and social media matters.

The basis of the current paper is built on theories described from acknowledged researchers within the relevant fields. For example, Cornelissen's – "*Corporate Communications – Theory and Practice*" (2011) has been one of the starting points for the discussion on identity and image in the literature review. This book is frequently used in various papers and articles that treat the identity and image topic. Gilpin's "*Organizational Image Construction in a Fragmented Online Media Environment*" (2010) was also often used, his paper focusing on organizational image within an online environment, one of the concerns covered in this thesis. The CSR topic within the social media environment was covered by Etter and Fiesler – "*On Relational Capital in Social Media*" (2010) and was often used to support the literature review covering these topics.

The '#McDStories' and the 'Our Food. Your Questions' were chosen since the campaigns have received a great deal of attention and been persistently followed by the media. Thus, in terms of information, it was available in abundance. Relevant data was also obtained from McDonald's official web page to provide background information regarding the firm and its values. Articles from databases of popular news media sources, such as Daily Mail, The New York Times, Harvard Business Review, Business Week, Forbes, Huffington Post, The Telegraph, etc. were also used. Blogs that treated the topics under concern in this thesis, the company's websites, the company's Twitter page, and the 'Our Food. Your Questions' page were also considered.

The sustainability reports were chosen to demonstrate the communication type used in the one-way communication approach. Only the past three years (2010, 2011, 2012) were taken into account when analysing the sustainability reports. 2010 was the last year when the McDonald's provided a lengthy sustainability report – the following years, the company used shorter versions that only summarised its progress and presented future goals. The 2011 and 2012 years were taken into account to identify potential changes in the sustainability reports when the company became more present on the social media.

In terms of the #McDStories campaign, due to the high number of tweets posted, the analysis did not look at all the tweets that were posted for the #McDStories campaign, but at a representative sample that described the general negative sentiment of the tweets and did not include recurring or similar ones. Regarding the 'Our Food. Your Questions' campaign, all questions and answers were gathered on June 30th, 2013 and classified into CSR- related categories based on their content.

The search engines of Google and Business Source Complete were used for the data search, the main search words being: "CSR" "social media", "building identity and image on social media", "#McDStories campaign", etc. With these searches, around the first 20 sources were examined and through these sources, there were links and references to other relevant sources, a method commonly referred to as 'snowball sampling' (Goodman, 1961). This theory implies that samples are gathered until the data collected is sufficient in order to build up valuable research.

3.3.3 Analysing the data

The aim of this paper is to analyse what is, in fact, being discussed between the firm and its stakeholders on the online channels; in other words, analysing the existent communication in the online media, and the potential effect it has on the company's identity and image. As mentioned before, an interpretive approach is considered as it utilizes "*the linguistic work of assigning meaning or value to communication texts; assumes that multiple meanings or truths are possible*" (Griffin, 2009, pp. 15). When using an interpretive approach, one endeavours to decipher a specific communication text within a particular context while using theory to interpret certain communication episodes (Griffin, 2009). The analysis of the current paper focuses on written words (words related to CSR). According to Griffin (2009, pp. 22), "*the aim of textual analysis is to describe and interpret the characteristics of a message*".

According to Phillips and Hardy (2002), a discourse is conveyed in various textual forms. These textual forms comprise spoken words, speech, dialogues, conversations, organizational stories and narratives, along with social practices over the Internet such as chat, e-mails, and the social networking service (SNS). With the latest advances in communications and information technology, textual forms also include press releases, public-relations bulletins, company websites and CSR reports that are published by firms (Ushimaru and Yotsumoto, 2013).

Therefore, a *discourse analysis* would be appropriate in order to both make comparisons between texts and explore their structure. Phillips et al. (2004) claim that a *discourse* represents an interconnected collection of texts and the related methods of production, dissemination, and reception that bring an object into existence – more concise, a structured set of meaningful text. A discourse analysis implies examining written or spoken language, for instance, a conversation or an article in a newspaper. Such analysis aims to distinguish certain themes, ideas, categories, etc. that would allow the researcher to determine hidden facts behind the actual text. According to Phillips et al. (2004), discourses cannot be directly examined – they can only be investigated by studying the text that comprises them. Thus, in this paper, discourse analysis is used by identifying the main themes of issues in CSR and how they are discussed in each of the different campaigns and by whom.

4.0 ANALYSIS

4.1 McDonald's – Company profile and image struggle

McDonald's is the world's largest chain of fast food restaurants since 1955 serving around 69 million people in 118 countries daily. It is easily recognised worldwide for its burgers and Golden Arches logo. There are more than 34,000 restaurants worldwide with 1.8 million employees. Around 80% of McDonald's restaurants are franchised (McDonald's, 2013a). Royle and Towers (2002) claim that McDonald's is the best known brand worldwide and Interbrand rated McDonald's among the first ten brands in the world (Interbrand, 2013).

In recent years, the company's performance has not been reached by any of McDonald's traditional burger-chain competitors. In addition, McDonald's annual advertising budget was predicted to surpass \$2 billion - this amount being "*unmatched in the industry*", as stated by BMO Capital Markets (O'Brien, 2012). The company's brand mission is to be the customers' preferred place to eat and drink. McDonald's global operations use a global strategy, the Plan to Win, which focuses on providing an excellent customer experience. The company's goal is quality, service, cleanliness and value for each customer at each interaction (McDonald's, 2013b). Neil Golden, the chief marketing officer for the American restaurants, believes that one way to ensure the company maintains its leading position is to improve the food and change how people think about it (O'Brien, 2012).

Critics have extensively scrutinized McDonald's, "*questioning its practices in an increasingly health-conscious time*" (O'Brien, 2012). In 1986, the London Greenpeace published a leaflet called '*What's Wrong with McDonald's?*' in order to promote the International Day of Action Against McDonald's and the leaflet was distributed worldwide (Hong, 2008). McDonald's filed a libel suit against London Greenpeace in 1990. The judges found that numerous charges in the leaflet were true, such as '*cruelty to animals*', '*low wages to workers*', '*exploiting children with its advertising*', and '*false nutritional claims for food*' (Hong, 2008, pp. 78).

‘SuperSize Me’, Morgan Spurlock’s 2004 Oscar-nominated documentary is one of the most renowned ‘attack’ towards the firm’s reputation and image. The movie implied that “*a month of eating only McDonald’s meals might hasten your death*” (O’Brien, 2012). Unfortunately, this was not the only negative situation the firm had to endure. Lately, there has been a great controversy around the presence of ‘pink slime’ in McDonald’s hamburgers. ‘Pink slime’ refers to “*beef scraps turned into a paste and treated with an ammonia solution*” (O’Brien, 2012). However, in January, 2012, McDonald’s informed that it stopped using ‘pink slime’ since the summer of 2011.

4.2 McDonald’s and CSR

The success and progress of McDonald’s does not exempt the firm from pursuing social responsible actions. Rather, it is more likely that due to the global span, higher expectations are set and the company is under even more scrutiny. Therefore, like many other companies nowadays, McDonald’s is integrating the notion of CSR within its daily operations. The company strives to focus on the following five areas (McDonald’s, 2013c):

- The **Nutrition and Well-Being** area strives to make customers aware of the vegetable, fruit, fat free dairy and low-fat food options available in McDonald’s restaurants
- The **Sustainable Supply Chain** area tries to obtain the food and packaging from the most sustainable sources
- The **Environmental Responsibility** area looks at efficiency while embracing energy-efficient activities and implementing modern equipment in order to improve and support efficiency
- The **Employee Experience** area strives to provide the best place to work for the company’s employees while also valuing the employees for their competencies
- The **Community** area looks at the enduring support of Ronald McDonald House Charities (RMHC) towards the aim of creating a lasting impact within the communities the company operates in

The fast food industry has often been linked to the imperative concern regarding obesity and health. In spite of being among the most iconic brands or maybe because of it, McDonald’s has also faced constant criticism regarding the ingredients used. Operating in a society that is increasingly concerned with health-related issues, the firm has been often accused of the fact that their food products have the potential to influence child obesity (Reuters, 2012).

McDonald's has made few changes over the years including more healthy options in their menu, without withdrawing its main products – burgers and fries. It acknowledged the public concern in relation to the well-being of their customers and they have also incorporated nutritional information and education to respond to the public pressure and social concern regarding health and obesity – McDonald's claimed that it takes this concern seriously and that they are committed to engage towards finding a solution (McDonald's, 2013d).

Moreover, McDonald's has also been accused of unsustainable activities and unethical practices towards employees. For instance, Greenpeace claimed that McDonald's was encouraging the destruction of the Amazon rainforest by using soybeans cultivated in the region as food for the chickens that are further served in the McDonald's European restaurants (Fox News, 2006). In response, McDonald's joined the Greenpeace organisation to develop a zero deforestation strategy applied among all its products (Business Ethics, 2013).

In spite of the accusations, McDonald's has also had various collaborations with NGOs - such as World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Green Peace, Nutritionist Steering Group Europe, and Global Advisory Council for Balanced Active Lifestyles - in order to inform its stakeholders regarding nutritional information and encourage them towards a more active and balanced lifestyle (McDonald's, 2013e). Moreover, McDonald's has a blog that is fully dedicated to the company's CSR policy - this blog is written by McDonald's Vice President of CSR, Bob Langert, and is committed to updating stakeholders regarding the five main issues that are relevant for McDonald's: people, the environment, the community, responsible purchasing, and balanced active lifestyles (Fieseler et al., 2010).

The question resides in whether McDonald's CSR efforts are sufficient to outshine the health-related negative perceptions and whether acting as a good citizen is relevant when the core products offered are connected to obesity and other health issues. Gao (2009, pp.279) claims that if firms “[...] *conduct a CSR activity while leaving aside the problems (negative social impact) they cause, their motivation is to be questioned*” – “[...] *CSR activity might be evaluated negatively* [...]”.

4.3 McDonald's Sustainability Reports

The last lengthy sustainability report published by McDonald's was in 2010 – the Worldwide Corporate Social Responsibility report. In 2011, the company created the 'global sustainability scorecard' that portrays in fewer pages how the company has progressed, what it concentrates on, the values it sticks to, and what the objectives are for the following year. In 2012, the sustainability report does no longer contain 'scorecard' in its name, but 'highlights', McDonald's releasing the 'global sustainability highlights'. These highlights also include the company's development but do not address the goals for the subsequent year. The common subject of the three reports is McDonald's five sustainability focus sections mentioned earlier:

- Nutrition and Well-Being
- Sustainable Supply Chain
- Environmental Responsibility
- Employee Experience
- Community

In this section, the analysis part will attempt to answer the research question by reviewing specific sections and main themes of the Worldwide Corporate Social Responsibility (henceforth - WCSR) 2010 Report, Global Sustainability 2011 Scorecard, and Global Sustainability 2012 Highlights.

4.3.1 McDonald's Worldwide Corporate Social Responsibility 2010 Report

The McDonald's *Worldwide Corporate Social Responsibility 2010 Report* (WCSR) is a 40-pages document that reports the firm's diverse CSR actions. The introduction of the report is followed by a page that summarises the company's governance and ethics, and a message from McDonald's CEO at that time, Jim Skinner. After the CEO's message, there are five pages that present the firm's 'Progress to Date', with one page dedicated to each of the sustainability sections mentioned above.

After the ‘Progress’ section, a feature article emphasizes various production techniques with regard to the company’s food (such as potatoes, lettuce, beef, and tomatoes) sourcing. Great importance is placed on the firm’s sustainable activities within each sourcing area, having constant and repetitive subsections concerning ‘production’, ‘restaurant’, and ‘farm’. Following this featured article, there are five particular sections, each of them embracing a facet of the firm’s sustainability areas covering from nutrition to community.

Based on Dietsch’s (2006) concept of various aspects of formal and informal English writing, the level of formality in the WCSR 2010 report is low. The great level of informality within this text derives from the utilisation of the second person singular personal pronoun (when the reader is concerned) and the first person plural pronoun (when the firm talks about itself) – “*what we’re made of*” (pp. 1), “*what we’ve accomplished*” (pp.25, 29, 32, 34, 36). Moreover, the entire text involves the use of a colloquial vocabulary (such as “*Did you know?*” – pp.13, 15, 18, 19, 22, 23; “*what others say*” – pp.13, 14, 17, 22; “*we’re keeping it green*” – pp.20) that encourages the accessibility of the text, and also highlights its rather personal and casual tone. Such informal manner generates the impression that McDonald’s is a community-oriented, friendly firm (McDonald’s, 2013f).

The discourse within the WCSR 2010 Report will be further analysed in terms of CSR. A typical CSR discourse comprises elements related to the environment, community, goodwill, and social actions. Quite prominent aspects of a CSR discourse are the title, “Worldwide Corporate Social Responsibility 2010 Report” (which is constantly mentioned on each page’s footer), the header where the reader is notified regarding the content on that specific page, and the most important sections that are contextually embedded within the CSR discourse: *Corporate Governance and Ethics, Progress to Date, Nutrition and Well-Being, Sustainable Supply Chain, Environmental Responsibility, Employee Experience, Community, and Where We Are Going From Here* (pp.2). Moreover, there is the ‘Key Performance Indicator Summary’ that provides factual and financial data regarding McDonald’s performance in terms of CSR. The factual data comprises graphs that demonstrate the evolution the firm has made to this point – “*Progress to Date*” (pp.6-10) (McDonald’s, 2013f).

According to Signitzer and Prexl (2008), the key features of CSR are **ethics**, **environment**, and **community** which are all present throughout the report (McDonald’s, 2013f).

- **Ethics** - “Ethics”, “ethical” (pp.4); “Doing well” (pp.5);
- **Environment** – “animal welfare” , “fair share of resources” (pp.5); “global forestry policy” (pp.7); “global energy strategy” (pp.8), “commitment to environmental responsibility”, “biogas”, “wastewater treatment”, “green electricity”, “biogas usage”, “clean renewable energy” (pp.18); “quantity of rainwater, irrigation and polluted water in crop” (pp.21).
- **Community** - “partnering with others”, “the challenges our society and planet are facing” (pp.5), “social and environmental performance” (pp.6), “Family, Friends, Future, and Flexibility” (pp.9).

Within the ‘Sustainable Supply Chain’ section, McDonald’s three E’s – *Ethical, Environmental, Economic* scheme is presented (McDonald’s, 2013f, pp.28). This scheme directly relates to the main elements of Carroll’s three Ps system as the scheme is concerned with the firm’s responsibility in terms of finance, environment, and the community. Within the “How we measure up” section, these three aspects (finance, environment, community) are reflected via the “Environmental Scorecard”, “Sustainable Fisheries”, “Animal Welfare”, and “Supplier Workplace Accountability” (pp.30-31). Additional sections that also relate to Carroll’s system are the ‘Governance and Ethics’ section which reports with regard to the integration of sustainable supply efforts within the general corporate responsibility activities; and other sections, such as “Growing Potatoes Sustainably” (pp.17), and “McDonald’s Journey To Sustainable Supply” (pp.22) (McDonald’s, 2013f, pp.28).

As specified in the report, McDonald’s aspires to operate their daily activities in an “ethical and sustainable manner”, and “seeks to make progress” whilst being “guided by the company’s values”. The reasons why McDonald’s aspires to that is because it wants to “to be better tomorrow than we are today”, “to achieve tangible progress”, and also “to make progress” (pp.3). To support the alignment between McDonald’s and sustainability, the sub-headline of the report emphasizes what the company strives to follow: “continuous improvement...growth opportunity...commitment to doing the right thing for our customers, our communities and the planet...these are some of the ingredients McDonald’s as a company is made of.” (pp.3) – showing that McDonald’s has built these elements of ethics and sustainability as fundamental aspects of their identity (McDonald’s, 2013f).

The sustained progress and growth of McDonald's is illustrated by the qualitative adjectives used, such as "*engaging experience for our customers and employees*", "*productive partnerships*", "*effective communication*" and "*shared commitment*" (pp.3) – casting a positive light upon the company's goals and actions. Also, there is a constant use of "right" and "better" words – "we always strive to be better tomorrow than we are today", "make the world a better place", "it's simply the right thing to do for our business, our customers and the planet" (pp.3) – to highlight the upbeat actions of the firm. The use of the 'What we're made of' sentence on most of the pages suggests what the company stands for, its self-perception and its desired identity (McDonald's, 2013f).

Main discourse themes identified in the WCSR 2010 Report

Food and ingredients

In this report, in terms of ingredients, McDonald's claims to use "*100% pure beef...crisp lettuce...fresh eggs*" (pp.3). This report has a number of pages dedicated to describing the main food products they use and what they contain, the report's name being 'What we're made of'. They argue that they have improved their menu options by including "*salad and grilled chicken platforms, wraps, fresh fruit, smoothies and more*" (pp.5) in order to "*increase awareness of fruit*" and "*positively influence kids' perceptions of eating fruit*" (pp.6) (McDonald's, 2013f).

The firm claims beef is its main priority and its beef patties are "*minimally processed and contain no fillers, extenders or preservatives*" while also "*minimizing environmental impacts and continuously improving the social and animal welfare aspects of beef production*" (pp.12). McDonald's beef suppliers follow animal welfare standards with animals being "*free from cruelty, abuse and neglect*" (pp.14). In addition, the potatoes are cultivated following "*standards for good agricultural practices that contribute to quality, safety and sustainability*" – "*agricultural practices that are environmentally sound, economically positive and ethically valuable*" (pp.17). The lettuce and tomatoes available at McDonald's are fresh, "*with no preservatives added*" (pp.20) (McDonald's, 2013f).

Another important theme that revolves around the WCSR 2010 is McDonald's 'Sustainable Land Management Commitment' (SLMC) – an important progress in the company's aim to ensure the food served in its restaurants originates from certified sustainable sources – suppliers are required to utilize only well-managed renewable raw materials and agricultural raw goods from sustainably-management land.

The initial areas of concern of the SLMC are beef, poultry, coffee, palm oil, and packaging – recognized as having the most significant impact in terms of sustainability. The firm's aim is to *"conserve biodiversity, maintain rare and critical ecosystems and landscapes, and meet the economic and cultural needs of local communities, all while ensuring safe, high quality and affordable supply for McDonald's restaurants around the world"* (pp.29). They have also partnered with the 'Global Energy Leadership Board' (GELB) to implement energy efficient solutions in key areas: operations, equipment, technology and building (McDonald's, 2013f).

Operations and sustainable actions towards the environment

According to the WCSR 2010 report, McDonald's widely known potatoes are *"washed, peeled, washed again and inspected for blemishes"*. They are then *"cut into shoestring-style strips that are inspected, then blanched in hot water to preserve texture"*. After they dry, *"the potato strips are partially fried, then frozen and packaged for transport to McDonald's Distribution Centers"* (pp.18). In terms of nutrition, McDonald's restaurants have *"substantially reduced the trans-fatty acids (TFAs) in [their] cooking oils"* (pp.19). Moreover, McDonald's developed sustainable (*"low oil volume"* – LOV) fryers that use *"about 40% less cooking oil and 4% less energy"*. In terms of packaging, *"each carton is made of virgin fiber, with 74% coming from certified well-managed forests"* (pp.15) (McDonald's, 2013f).

Employees and Community

McDonald's supports its employees by providing 'modern benefits' to them beyond wages, such as savings and medical plans. In addition, "giving back to the community is an essential part of McDonald's heritage and values" (pp.36). In terms of helping the community, the firm is highly involved in charity actions and disaster relief, engaging in local, regional, and global sponsorships and partnerships (FIFA World Cup in South Africa, 2010 Olympic Winter Games, etc.) and providing support through the Ronald McDonald's House Charities – to "make a difference for kids and communities around the world" (pp.37) (McDonald's, 2013f).

4.3.2 McDonald's 2011 Global Sustainability Scorecard

The 2011 Global Sustainability Scorecard of McDonald's is a 13-pages report that emphasizes the firm's progress within its five priority areas: sustainable supply chain, community, environmental responsibility, nutrition and well-being, and employee experience. This report also comprises important improvements in terms of sustainable sourcing (such as fish brought from sustainable fisheries) and 'menu evolution' (such as fruit, vegetables and low-fat dairy side options in order to reduce the levels of fat and calories within the Happy Meal) (Marketwire, 2011). The picture below summarizes the progress McDonald's has made.



Figure 4. Key facts from the 2011 Sustainability Scorecard

Source: Brady, 2012

According to the CEO of McDonald's, Jim Skinner, McDonald's *"will continue to use [its] size, scope, and talent to make a positive difference for children, families and communities around the world"* (McDonald's, 2013g). The scorecard begins with "About This Report: Less is More" headline (referring to the significantly reduced size of the report), followed by a message from the CEO. Alongside with a 'GRI-based index', the scorecard presents a glimpse of the company's performance and broad information with respect to the firm's approach towards sustainability.

The sustainability scorecard is extremely succinct when compared to the Worldwide CSR 2010 Report. It *"moved to a shorter, more focused 'scorecard' format that focuses on progress achieved in 2010-11"* (pp.1). Moreover, unlike the WCSR 2010 Report, the sustainability scorecard includes information regarding development supported by managers and external stakeholders through quotes that provide their personal views regarding McDonald's CSR efforts.

Each page consists of few fragments of data (background on global operations related to the theme) about each priority area and a goal. 'Key performance indicators' for each goal are presented chronologically, from 2006 to 2010 – *"the data selected for presentation offer a narrowly circumscribed view of the company's performance"* (Rebernak, 2012). Moreover, this scorecard follows the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standards (McDonald's, 2013g).

The CEO's message (pp.1) in the beginning of the sustainability scorecard is quite similar to the one in the WCSR 2010 Report. Jim Skinner mentions again the five priority areas, future goals, and other important facts (such as promoting the use of sustainable sourcing) in the first person plural pronoun (when the firm talks about itself) – *"we work at the restaurant level, from reducing the use of energy and other resources to supporting the local community"*, *"we continue to listen to our customers and other stakeholders"*, or *"we hold ourselves to high standards of honesty, fairness and integrity"*. Moreover, verbs that have a strong impact are used abundantly throughout the report to stress the strong concern the firm has for the environment and for its customers: *"we are committed"*, *"we give back"*, *"we grow"*, *"we strive continually"*, *"we take seriously"* (pp.12) (McDonald's, 2013g).

Main discourse themes identified in the 2011 Global Sustainability Scorecard

Food and ingredients

In this scorecard, McDonald's continues to increase the awareness and encourage the consumption of vegetables, fruit and low-fat or fat-free dairy options available on their menus. Apart from this, there is no other information available regarding the ingredients used in their food products. The scorecard continues to highlight its commitment to sustainable sources of food and packaging, *“with an initial focus on beef, poultry, coffee, palm oil, fish and fiber”* (pp.4) (McDonald's, 2013g).

Operations and sustainable actions towards the environment

In 2011, McDonald's has implemented 'energy bundles' – *“packages of recommended restaurant improvements that combine simple changes like energy-efficient lighting with newer tools such as occupancy sensors”* (pp. 6) (McDonald's, 2013g).

Employees and Community

Through Ronald McDonald House Charities, the firm supports events (2012 Olympics, etc.) and projects that reach the community in need. In 2011, McDonald's has also helped Japanese regions affected by the earthquake and tsunami by distributing food and water to the communities (McDonald's, 2013g).

4.3.3 McDonald's 2012 Global Sustainability Highlights

McDonald's 2012 Global Sustainability Highlights is a 8-page report that evaluates the progress the firm has made. In the beginning of the report, there is no introductory message from the CEO (as in the reports from 2010 and 2011), but from J.C. Gonzalez – Mendez, the senior vice president who focuses on global corporate social responsibility, sustainability and philanthropy.

2012 HIGHLIGHTS Global Sustainability

Food

In France, McDonald's is the #1 restaurant where children eat fruit.



100 MILLION

In the U.S., we anticipate introducing 100 million cups of fruit into children's diets through the Happy Meal®.

95%

of McDonald's restaurants offer Happy Meals with a fruit, vegetable or low-fat or fat free dairy option.

Sourcing

100%

of our coffee served in Europe, Australia and New Zealand comes from Rainforest Alliance Certified* or UTZ Certified farms.



We are founding board members of the **GLOBAL ROUNDTABLE FOR SUSTAINABLE BEEF** and also participate in sustainable beef initiatives in Australia, Brazil and the U.K.

100% of our suppliers have signed our Code of Conduct.



We are enabling improved control of heating and cooling systems, lighting and signage through **ENERGY MANAGEMENT** systems.

5.1%

decrease in energy used per guest count (estimated restaurant average kWh/GC).

Community

In 2011, our local economic impacts totaled

\$2.1 BILLION

40% Increase in **LOCAL ECONOMIC INVESTMENTS** in eight of our top nine markets.

People

We strengthened alignment around the important role of our **EMPLOYEE VALUE PROPOSITION**, which emphasizes friends and family, flexibility and future.



86%

of our managers feel the person they report to supports their professional development.

% Increase in number of worldwide top management team who are women.

This document includes information from 2012 Sustainability Highlights, and unless otherwise noted in the Highlights, figures represent our top nine markets. Percent changes reflect progress from 2010-2011.

Figure 5. Key facts from the 2012 Global Sustainability Highlights

Source: McDonald's, 2013h

Main discourse themes identified in the 2012 Global Sustainability Highlights

Food and ingredients

McDonald's continued to provide healthy options in their menu – with products “*ranging from cherry tomatoes to pineapple, melon slices and kiwi*”, “*increasing both awareness and access*” (pp.4). All the coffee used in the restaurant is bought from Rainforest Alliance Certified or UTZ Certified farms (McDonald's, 2013h).

Operations and sustainable actions towards the environment

McDonald's invested in sustainable agricultural programs “*focused on stabilizing long-term supply and driving positive change in coffee farming and trading practices*” (pp.5). They have also managed to involve all its palm oil suppliers as members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). In 2012, McDonald's has created a cross-functional, global team focusing on ‘Animal Health and Welfare’, consisting of “*internal and external experts on beef, pork, poultry and egg-laying hens*” (pp.5). Moreover, the firm provided help to suppliers to improve the assessment of water-related threats and develop water stewardship, while also focusing on reducing energy usage by considering equipment replacement and renewable energy (McDonald's, 2013h).

Employees and Community

The restaurant chain continues to constantly involve its employees towards becoming brand ambassadors through “*a new Brand Ambassador e-training and certification tool*” (pp.7). In addition, employees are included in volunteer programs to boost the positive impact aimed at the communities (McDonald’s, 2013h).

Through these sustainability reports, McDonald’s builds its CSR identity as a provider of positive progress in terms of food and sustainable operations. It attempts to convey the image of a sustainability-conscious firm whose activities and efforts encompass ethical conduct while also listening to its consumers’ and stakeholders’ opinions and taking into consideration their welfare. McDonald’s strives to align itself with the sustainability concept.

Even though there are certain rumours about McDonald’s that question its food and operations, it is evident that the firm does not respond to them transparently in these three sustainability reports. Rather, it goes beyond them and conveys only positive statements about the company that do not necessarily put these rumours to rest – there may be a disconnection between what is presented in the reports and what actually occurs within the restaurants. Even though the information presented in the sustainability reports may not provide answers to all the criticisms, it can be perceived as “*a promotional genre, designed to construct and convey a corporate image*” to the readers (Hyland, 1998, pp.224).

For instance, the firm has tried to spin the actual circumstances in their favour. Without describing the vast criticism it experienced in the past regarding its contribution to the deforestation in the Amazon (in the end of the 90s and the beginning of 00s), caused by one of its key supplier, Cargill, McDonald’s mentions in the reports its involvement towards protecting the rainforest in the Amazon since 1989.

According to Rolland and Bazzoni (2009), stakeholders tend to imply that CSR activities are simply reactive actions made by the firm to a post-crisis situation that would reflect badly on the company’s identity. Moreover, overlooking certain shortcomings can also negatively affect the firm’s identity. Being less vague and more transparent in its reports, McDonald’s would be able to fulfil “*an essential condition for ensuring that a company’s shareholders and stakeholders are able to evaluate and relate to the company*” (Parum, 2006, pp.561).

McDonald's needs to attain a balance between its desired image and actual image in order to shape the stakeholders' perceptions. Based on Clarkson's (1995) *Reactive – Defensive – Accommodative – Proactive* (RDAP) scale that rates corporate attitude toward social responsiveness (pp. 109), McDonald's has communicated through its reports through an "accommodative" attitude. The accommodative profile's performance means "doing all that is required" while its strategy is to "accept responsibility" which can be seen in McDonald's commitment to 'doing the right thing' as well as claiming to have a responsibility that they treat seriously. Corporate identity does not consider only the ideal, desired, or actual elements of the identity, but also the communicated and perceived identity (Balmer et al., 2007). Thus, McDonald's communication efforts through the sustainability reports and its stakeholders' perceptions are also essential and can influence the corporate identity.

Based on Morsing and Schultz's (2006) stakeholder relations model, the communication type found in the sustainability reports follows a *stakeholder information strategy* – there is only a one-way communication where McDonald's informs stakeholders regarding the organization's progress without interacting with them whatsoever. This somewhat happens to any sustainability report belonging to any company – it is merely a place where companies highlight their activities and present them to the stakeholders.

4.4 #McDStories - the Twitter campaign

When examining a firm's communication effectiveness and strategies, only one report or one piece of material is not able to reveal the entire story. One needs to also take into account other sources that have the potential to strengthen or weaken the initial assumptions.

Initially, McDonald's purchased a promoted tweet campaign, launching on January 18th, 2012, the '#MeetTheFarmers' campaign – an attempt to link McDonald's to the individual farmers that supply the fresh products for the restaurant. On the same day, the social media director of McDonald's, Rick Wion, shifted the conversation to #McDStories hoping to encourage the customers to share their positive experiences with the restaurant via the "quick-fire messaging site" (Bradshaw and Rappeport, 2012). McDonald's had also paid in order to have their hashtag advertised on their Twitter homepage (Hill, 2012).



"When u make something w/pride, people can taste it," - McD
potato supplier #McDStories <http://t.co/HaPM5G9F>

January 18, 2012 5:09 pm via web Reply Retweet Favorite

Figure 6. #McDStories initial tweet

Source: Roberts, 2012a

However, the broad ‘#McDStories’ hashtag was rapidly hijacked by less satisfied diners who used it to claim low standards of employee and animal welfare and food-poisoning incidents within the restaurant, more than half of the tweets being negative. “*Opponents accused the burger franchise of making customers vomit, serving pig meat from gestation crates and dishing up a burger containing a finger nail*” (Roberts, 2012a). Thus, they used the tweets to point out their negative experiences with the restaurant or simply to ridicule the ‘Golden Arches’. Moreover, animal rights activists also joined in with negative comments – the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) used the hashtag to claim that the restaurant used mechanically separated chicken for its McNuggets (Nelson, 2012) – McDonald’s actually replied to their tweet dismissing the claim as untrue (Feldman, 2012).



.@peta That posting is absolutely FALSE
McNuggets are NOT made from mechanically
separated chicken. Only USDA inspected white
meat.

Figure 7. McDonald’s response to PETA’s claim

Source: Nelson, 2012

Rick Wion, McDonald's social media director, admitted that they did not expect such an outcome – he claimed that within an hour, they realised it wasn't going as expected and decided to act (Roberts, 2012b) - this situation forced McDonald's to pull the ad campaign within two hours and draw the attention towards the quality of the ingredients used for their products (The Telegraph, 2012). According to Paddy Herridge, chief operating officer of Social 360 – a social media monitoring firm, *“social audiences aren't going to respond in the ways you might hope to what is transparently a marketing ploy. Brands with an established set of negative issues are always going to have those issues thrown in their face if they try and encourage positive interaction on an open forum like Twitter.”* (Bradshaw and Rappeport, 2012).

The problem with the '#McDStories' hashtag was that it was not as neutral as the '#MeetTheFarmers' one – it was “ripe for exploitation” enabling users to also share their negative stories or simply write negative comments. As soon as the negative exploitation commenced, McDonald's discontinued the tweet and remained silent on this matter – it *“should have confronted the situation not by diversion but by head-on alternatives”* (Thomases, 2012).

Rick Wion claimed that the situation of the #McDStories campaign received too much attention within the traditional and online media – *“it wasn't even in the top 10 things that were talked about that day for our brand”*, the discussion about the Egg McMuffin campaign receiving *“four to five times as much”* attention from customers (O'Brien, 2012). However, the negative attention that the #McDStories campaign received was not really unforeseen – it rather indicated *“a larger and longstanding problem”* that the firm was confronting with (O'Brien, 2012).

For several years, McDonald's has portrayed itself as a restaurant where families gather and where employees start their careers (Holmes, 2012). Even though that can be true to some extent, there is also the perception that McDonald's does not treat its employees ethically or that the food is highly processed and contains unhealthy ingredients. Thus, when the company introduced the #McDStories hashtag, it also enabled ironical, cynical and insulting tweets to arise. Enabling freedom of speech on Twitter brings a certain risk to the company (Lee, 2013) - *“while the family-growing-together vibe might work in television spots, it doesn't work so well on Twitter, where McDonald's can't control the message”* (Holmes, 2012).

Within the #McDStories tweets, one of the themes widely covered refers to food – not only the ingredients used – *‘What Chicken McNuggets are made from?’*, but also regarding potential food additives used – *‘I just read that McDonald’s chicken nuggets have a foaming agent in them, similar to products used for building materials’*, *‘McDonald’s drops pink goo [slime], but no word on other additives or the high-fat foods themselves’* or *‘No more ammonia hydroxide in your Big Macs’*; bizarre items found in the food products – *‘I once got an actual metal bolt in my Big Mac’* or *‘[...] one time I found a long black hair in my burger’*, and concerns regarding the reason why the food does not decompose long periods of time – *‘Take a McDonald’s fry, let it sit for 6 months. It will not deteriorate or spoil like a normal potato. It will remain how it was’*.

Clearly, the truthfulness of the tweets or the information they consist of cannot be assessed. However, taking into account the high number of negative tweets, one can assume that a large part of customers are dissatisfied with the restaurant’s food products.

With this Twitter campaign, McDonald’s attempted to emphasize positive facts about the restaurant through the voice of their customers. The company aimed to build its image as a quality-food provider along with its customers support and commitment. McDonald’s expected that its customers will use the hashtag to help it build the company’s story by also virtually inviting them to meet the hard-working employees committed to this goal – *“Meet some of the hard-working people dedicated to providing McDs with quality food every day”* (Nelson, 2012). However, it did not go as expected. One inherent risks of communicating on Twitter is that it is rather difficult to maintain control over the content and, inevitably, both *“fans and detractors will chime in”* (Roberts, 2012b) – once a social media campaign starts running on Twitter, the company can no longer be in charge of the message (Hedgpeth, 2012).

Even though the campaign was organized on Twitter, a suitable place for two-way communication, there was no interaction between McDonald’s and the public. McDonald’s only replied to a negative comment posted by the animal activist, PETA. Thus, it can be perceived as the company did not use Twitter for interactive reasons – it just hoped that other Twitter users will make positive comments that will improve the restaurant’s reputation.

Rather than pulling down the tweet, pretend like nothing happened, and disregard the negativity of the comments, McDonald's could have embraced the situation and acknowledge the shortcomings of the campaign – *“To stand up and admit your mistakes makes you trustworthy and it makes the audience believe that you also in the future will fix your mistakes”* (Jarvis, 2009, pp.111).

Domino's experienced a similar negative situation which the company embraced and admitted their faults. Moreover, it used these drawbacks to promote a marketing campaign, named 'The Pizza Turnaround'. This caused a reinvention for which Domino changed the recipe and also identified the critics, expecting them to try the #newpizza and perhaps review their initial judgment. According to Patrick Doyle, Domino's president, *“you can either use negative comments to get you down or use them to excite you and energize your process of making a better pizza. We did the latter”* (Thomas, 2013).

The communication type found in the #McDStories campaign cannot, in fact, be associated to any of the three stakeholder relations strategies identified by Morsing and Schultz (2006). Thus, the level of interaction is influenced by the extent to which the organization engages in dialogue. McDonald's posted a tweet and did not engage in any other dialogue with the other users that commented. Even though the campaign takes place on Twitter, there was no interaction between the organization and the stakeholders – merely one-way communication from stakeholders without the company admitting or denying their comments.

4.5 'Our Food. Your Questions' campaign

After the fail of the McDStories campaign, McDonald's received a positive buzz from “Our Food. Your questions” campaign in Canada. The campaign was produced in June 5th, 2012, by McDonald's Canada in association with digital ad agency Tribal DDB Canada. The main idea of the campaign is that everyone in Canada (the site does not recognise non-Canadian IP addresses) can post any food-related question and McDonald's will reply to it and post it back on the same page (Hood, 2012).

The campaign reveals “a well-articulated engagement process to combat problematic topics that threaten to have a deep and lasting impact on customer relations if left to fester” (Williams, 2012). The campaign’s scope is mainly focused on food topics; however, if there are other non-food questions asked by customers, they are directed to other sources where the required information can be found. Customers can easily ask questions via Facebook, Twitter or directly on the campaign’s page and receive personalised replies from McDonald’s Canada – the page promotes extreme transparency by using the same platforms that disseminated negative comments regarding the quality of McDonald’s food (Shaughnessy, 2013). The questions and answers can then also be posted by users on their Twitter, Google+ and Facebook pages.

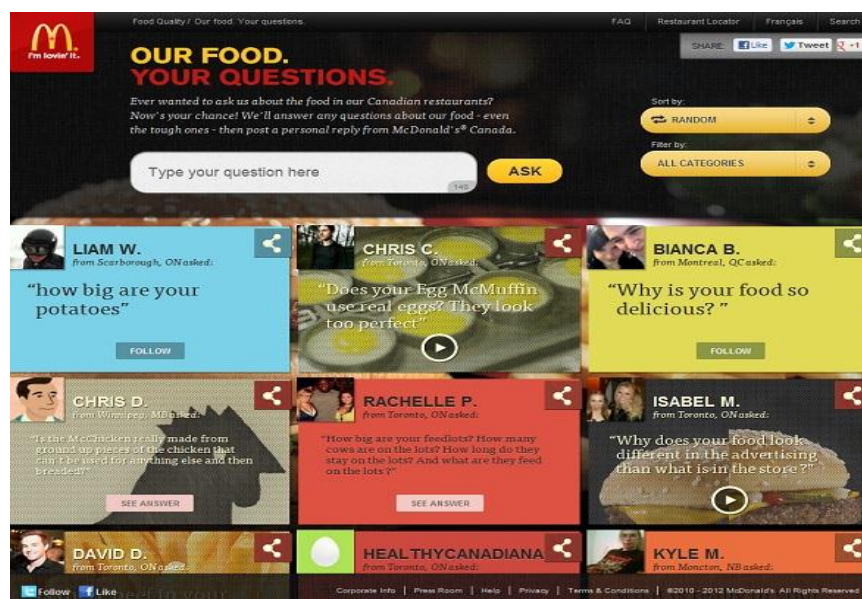


Figure 8. The ‘Our Food. Your Questions’ campaign page

Source: Custom Content Council, 2012

The aim of this campaign was to put to rest certain myths and misconception regarding the company’s packaging processes, product launches, the quality of the food and how it is prepared by being open and transparent – as there was no clear answer to these concerns at first, there were several assumptions and guesses within the social media space. Thus, through this campaign, apart from conveying transparency, it also seeks to build responsive and relevant content (Gavronski, 2013).

According to Yashinsky, the chief marketing officer at McDonald's Canada, *"those [questions] were out in the digital world before we started this. We didn't start this to answer just the softball questions. It's some of the other rumors that we wanted to address. We wanted to provide information and have a conversation that resonates with people"* (Bernstein, 2012) – aiming to be not only the subject of discussion, but also part of it (Krashinsky, 2012).

Hope Bagozzi, the creative and national marketing director at McDonald's Canada put herself along with a team of devoted people and experts in the middle of a campaign that could have easily diverged since it involved answering serious questions from customers (Lam, 2012). They have promised to reply to any question, regardless of how straightforward it may be – they have already encountered a number of hot issues, including animal welfare, fair trade, and food sourcing topics - according to Alex Sévigny, *"it was a courageous and savvy move that recognizes the importance of creating a kinship with consumers"* (Laird, 2013).

Moreover, few selected questions from the campaign are supported by videos that are also posted on YouTube – John Betts himself, president/CEO of McDonald's appeared in the video that replied to the 'Why is the food at McDonald's so cheap?' question. Hope Bagozzi also took part in the one that replied to the 'Why does your food look different in the advertising than what is in the store?' question (Custom Content Council, 2012). The way the videos are shot and presented is very sincere; however, the comments feature was disabled on the YouTube channel for these videos.

Answering customers' questions is part of the company's branding and customer service strategies - *"With this new social-media platform, McDonald's Canada is taking this transparency and openness even further by directly answering customers' food questions online"* (Brandau, 2012). The page comprises several qualities that are appreciated by today's customer, such as great customer service, transparency, engagement – *and does so on a platform that makes sense in today's social age"* (McCrea, 2013).

The topics on the page cover questions about ingredients, calorie counts, production and procession of food, and questions on rumours of false advertising. McDonald's also answered important CSR issues, such as fair-trade products, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and animal cruelty. For the purpose of the analysis, all questions available on the campaign page on June 30th, 2012 (377 questions) were organized in nine CSR-related groups and one group not related to CSR in order to identify the main themes that customers are concerned about regarding McDonald's.

Food sourcing (20 questions)

Several customers are concerned with where their food is coming from and whether it is brought from sustainable sources or not. On the campaign page, there can be seen questions, such as ‘*Where does your meat come from?*’ or ‘*Is your coffee fair trade? If not, why not?*’

Animal welfare (3 questions)

In terms of animal welfare, customers are concerned with what standards and policies the company’s suppliers are following. One question regarding this concern is ‘[...] *animals are breed to reach a maximum weight in the shortest time. At what age is your livestock put to slaughter?*’. Moreover, customers are interested whether the animals are fed with hormones and if so, what type: ‘*What kind of hormones do you give to your animals?*’.

Ingredients (136 questions)

Most of the questions available on the campaign’s page are focused on the ingredients of the food products served by McDonald’s. Customers are concerned whether the ingredients used by McDonald’s are natural – asking questions, for instance: ‘*Are the milkshakes made with real milk?*’ or ‘*What is in the chicken nuggets?*’.

Operations – Food processing (43 questions)

As fast-food is generally linked to highly processed ingredients, customers are also concerned with how the food is cooked and processed before it is served to them. The questions they ask are, for example: ‘*Why do you microwave so much of your food?*’, ‘*Is it true that the beef you use is washed in ammonia?*’ or ‘*How do you cook your eggs in your big breakfast meal?*’.

Operations – Food storage (4 questions)

Where the food is placed and stored is important in order to maintain the freshness, quality, and safety of the food products. Thus, customers ask questions such as ‘*Why aren’t your pickles stored in a cool place, instead they are stored in the storage room where napkins and other sauces are placed?*’ or ‘*How long does your food wait in a heating tray before you use it or discard it?*’.

Health issues (7 questions)

Fast-food is often linked to health issues, such as obesity, making customers increasingly concerned with how or whether the food served by McDonald's restaurants can affect their health. Thus, on the campaign page, customers ask questions, such as: *'Has anyone caught E.Coli from eating a McDonald's hamburger?'* or *'What tool is used to ensure a safe dose of salt is distributed on the fries?'*.

Nutrition (41 questions)

Also in relation with health issues, the nutritional facts are important to customers that are concerned with their health. They are worried about the number of calories or the amount of fat in the food products served in the restaurant – *'How many calories are in your milkshakes?'* or *'Why don't you have a low fat hamburger?'*, *'Can you completely get rid of trans fat?'* or *'How much sodium and fat is found in your hamburger meat?'*. Other questions customers ask regarding nutrition refer to certain allergies – *'Why don't you have allergen free fryers?'* or *'Which of your products are gluten free?'*

Food additives (30 questions)

There has been a lot of rumour around McDonald's food products regarding food additives and genetically modified organisms (henceforth - GMO). Customers are worried that the food being served in the restaurant is not healthy and might contain harmful additives, with questions like: *'Why should I eat anything that has ingredients like 'dimethylpolysiloxane' embedded into it?'*, *'Why do you put Monosodium Glutamate in your foods, which is a substance that is extremely addictive and adds artificial flavour?'*, *'Are you using ammonium hydroxide to process parts of the beef into Pink Slime like the other McDonald's franchises in the US?'* or *'How many of your products contain GMOs?'*.

Recycling / Packaging materials (2 questions)

Few questions are concerned with McDonald's recycling strategies or the materials used for packaging – *'What do you do with your used oil? Do you participate in bio diesel programs?'* or *'What plastics make up your coffee cup lids?'*.

Non-CSR (91 questions)

The ‘Non-CSR’ section includes humorous and also encouraging questions, such as – ‘*Can you teleport a burger into my hand?*’ or ‘*Why are your fruit smoothies so good?*’, as well as sarcastic and straight questions – ‘*Do you keep food that fell on the floor?*’ or ‘*If your ‘food’ is really food, would you feed it to your family?*’. Other questions refer to menu offerings – ‘*Why don't you have vegetarian options for your burgers?*’ and ‘*What happened to McGriddle? It was awesome*’, or other topics not related to CSR – ‘*How come the Happy Meal fries are so small now?*’.

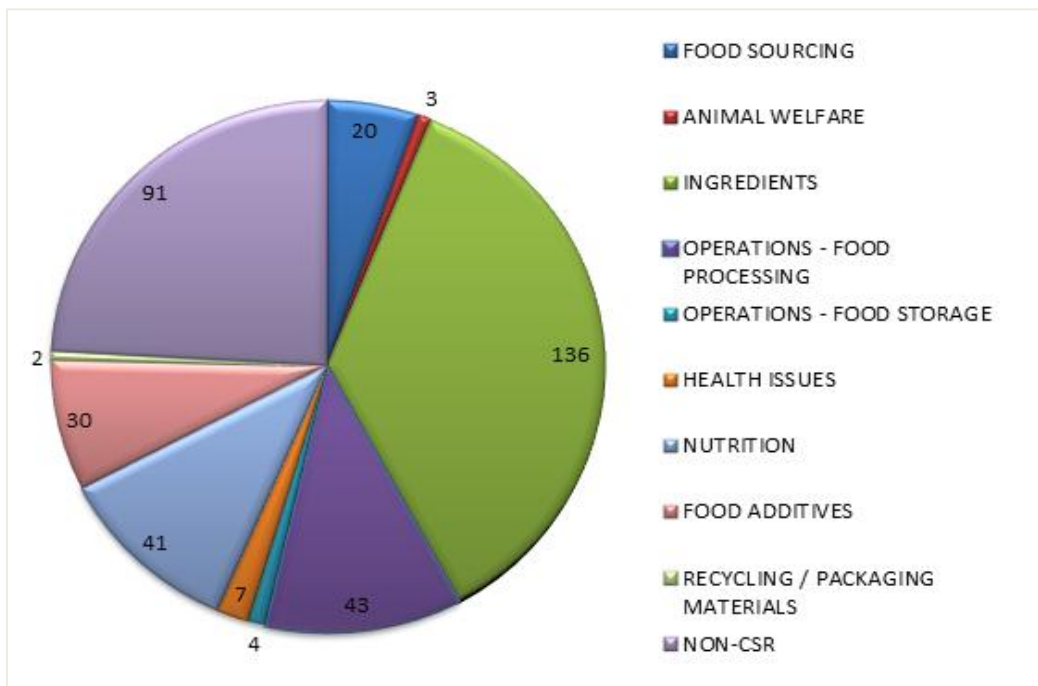


Figure 9. Topic distribution (by the number of questions) on the ‘Our Food. Your Questions’ campaign page

Source: own contribution
(based on the questions from
<http://yourquestions.mcdonalds.ca/> at June 30th, 2013)

The campaign was created in order to promote a transparent image of the company by addressing the questions asked by customers on the page, regardless of how insulting some of them might be – trying to change the customers’ perceptions regarding the company’s products and services by effectively using the social media platforms. This campaign page is transparent and informative, and includes the engagement of both McDonald’s and its customers – “*communication flows both to and from the publics*” (Grunig and Hunt, 1984, pp. 23) - unlike the #McDStories campaign where people were expressing their disgust regarding the food and services without any responses from the company.

The “Our Food. Your Questions” page is successful as it does not actually give users many opportunities to compromise it. The company cannot control what questions users ask but it can control its answers. However, users were not allowed by McDonald’s Canada to comment on the Youtube pages, which “*implies dubious intentions*” (Gavronski, 2013) - the company chose to be honest on the page with the questions but inhibited any type of communication on the Youtube pages – “*it’s smart to be transparent yet cautious*” (Hoots, 2012).

Nevertheless, Zaikovskis (2013) identified three main characteristics that make the questions page worthy:

- **Authenticity** – the most noticeable feature of the page is the authenticity of the questions and answers. It can be clearly seen that the questions emerge from the social profiles of each user and the company takes time in replying to each of them by providing quite lengthy answers. In addition, the tone of each answer varies ranging from amusing and sarcastic to honest and considerate – “*in a nutshell, the customer is left feeling that they are being taken seriously*” (Zaikovskis, 2013).
- **Usability** – the page is rather easy to use and navigation is quite straight-forward, allowing customers to select questions based on their topic of interest. McDonald’s Canada facilitates the way customers use the page – they can choose to watch only the videos or see only the photos available on the page – “*extending customer time on site and the potential of positive advocacy*” (Zaikovskis, 2013).
- **Shareability** – the content on the page can be easily shared – each question has a share option to Twitter, Facebook, and Google+, extending the reach of the campaign and its potential to go viral.

However, the interaction on the page implies only a question and an answer, as customers cannot reply back to the answer the company provides. Moreover, even though it is shown on the page the author of the question (the user’s social profile), in terms of the answer, there is no such description (no identity of the person actually answering the question) – “*the responses still feel corporately anonymous and faceless, and such a tone may backfire for a business seemingly concerned with building trust around its product offering*” (Zaikovskis, 2013).

Taking into account the Morsing and Schultz's (2006) stakeholder relations strategies, the communication type found in the questions campaign can be associated with the *stakeholder response strategy*, as there is a two-way communication between the organization and its customers.. McDonald's replies reactively to questions posted by customers but does not proactively start conversations with other followers or customers. Moreover, customers cannot reply back to the answer provided so it is not a fully interactive page on the whole that benefits both the company and the customers equally.

5.0 DISCUSSION

According to Lewis (2003), despite the fact that several companies engage in various CSR activities, they often fail to actively communicate and effectively interact with their stakeholders – communicating responsible actions to stakeholders is essential for corporations in achieving trust and legitimacy (Capriotti and Moreno, 2007). Nevertheless, linking sustainability matters to organizations often involves the risk of public scrutiny and criticism.

The most evident difference among the three CSR communication strategies of McDonald's described above (sustainability reports, #McDStories campaign, and the questions page) is the level of control the company has over the content. Du et al. (2010, pp.13) argues that *“the less controllable the communicator is, the more credible it is, and vice versa”*.

In the case of sustainability reports, companies typically have full control over their content and are fully responsible of information provided in them. Since stakeholders are increasingly interested in engaging in dialogues with the company, the sustainability reports, which most often contain merely positive information, do not provide opportunities for discussion and can thus be of rather little interest to the stakeholders.

Regarding the sustainability reports analysed, McDonald's decided to shorten their sustainability reports regarding their page number since 2011, choosing to create sustainability scorecards and highlights in the following years - it did so, perhaps, because it became more present in social media in the same years (e.g. the #McDStories and the 'Our Food. Your Questions' in 2012).

The tweets on the #McDStories campaign, on the other hand, were mostly handled by the customers, enabling them to post negative comments in regards to the company. When the situation went out of control and the tweets did not stop, McDonald's pulled down the campaign – it feared the situation would become worse and once it happened, it could not manipulate the audience and change the subject of the discussion. Moreover, the company should have exploited the interactive potential of Twitter and engage in discussion, regardless of the negative comments.

“The best way to own a story is to get ahead of it; the best way to control messages is to be the one telling the story” (Finlayson, 2012). In the ‘Our Food. Your Questions’ campaign, the company did not have control over the questions asked by customers but it controlled the answers it provided by sending rather manipulative responses to them - no matter how critical the question was, the company managed to provide a positive answer, most often using a mild humorous tone. Attempting to be honest and transparent is a bold move for a company that is frequently accused of the opposite and which has experienced the failure of the #McDStories.

Through the ‘Our Food. Your Questions’ campaign, McDonald’s Canada aimed to create an image of corporate transparency and engagement among its customers since they increasingly demand more information and are more interested in what they consume. One interesting element of the campaign is that even though the answers provided by McDonald’s were manipulative and the control over the page was in favour of the company, the page was successful and it was appreciated by the public – McDonald’s Canada managed to achieve more than 12 million views, allowing the company’s digital presence to increase rapidly (Haynes, 2013).

Thus, despite the fact that McDonald’s framed the campaign as ‘transparent’, it was actually not entirely transparent providing only polite and humorous answers without any surprising details (designed in McDonald’s benefit). Even so, customers perceived their answers as daring and open which increased their trust in the company, enabling McDonald’s to improve their reputation and gain competitive advantage - according to Joel Yashinsky, chief marketing officer at McDonald’s Canada, *“We are showing a bit of vulnerability and opening ourselves up for every question that people have about our food. We’re not shying away from any question and that’s resonating with customers”* (Horn, 2012). It appears that while attempting to promote a transparent corporate image and improve reputation, McDonald’s aimed to also to increase its trustworthiness among its customers.

McDonald's benefited from the 'Our Food. Your Questions' campaign – firstly, the company created an opportunity to distribute their message in the attempt to dissipate the existent rumours and rectify any misinformation. Secondly, this campaign is most likely to be an effective method for McDonald's towards reputation management and establishing a genuine relationship with its customers. Thirdly, this campaign might not convince everybody but it has a significant potential in maintaining or even strengthening the relationship with existing customers, allowing McDonald's to improve their overall corporate image.

One of the key challenges for any company – particularly B2C companies – is to control the message (Woodrooffe, 2013). Definitely, social media enables customers to be more powerful and since the number of social media users is increasing worldwide, it is important for companies to find effective ways to manage their social media presence to benefit both organizations and customers – *“Monitoring is not inherently bad, but companies need to remember why they do it”*. Social media is rather used to understand how stakeholders perceive the company, *“not just to monitor what they say”* (Dan, 2013) – to explore whether the conceived identity is comparable to the actual one (Balmer et al., 2007).

In the past, companies were able to control the information shared with stakeholders mainly through press releases and with the support of a public relations manager. Nowadays, the role of companies in online communication is less inclusive – companies do not possess the ultimate power to control what is being discussed in the online environment (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Thus, the power balance has shifted towards the stakeholders, enabling them to communicate their opinions and ideas openly. In McDonald's '#McDStories' campaign, they did not know how to handle the loss of control.

The discussion based on McDonald's communication strategies cannot necessarily be generalised to other companies, but it can be observed that the effects of social media tend to become similar. What could once be achieved through a traditional website or sustainability report, nowadays needs to be accompanied by a solid and reactive use of what the social media engagement tools provide. CSR issues became more relevant to the public which started using social media platforms to engage in discussions with companies. Fostering transparent communication and creating a sense of online community regarding CSR initiatives is most likely to lead to high level of stakeholder engagement and participation. Moreover, involving into discussion enables companies to identify risks and prevent false rumours.

As stated before, comments, both positive and negative, about an organization posted by customers in social media act as an 'internet word of mouth' which is more influential than advertising or other large-scale promotional efforts Phelps et al. (2004). Thus, it is important to create the circumstances where positive word of mouth can develop which has the potential to influence the company's image (Sundaram, Mitra, & Webster, 1998).

Thus, organizations can no longer withhold their online presence – they need to react, interact and build trust by engaging with their social communities in two-way symmetric communication, striving to be where and when the discussion occurs. Another example of a company that failed to be responsive was British Petroleum during the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. When the Deepwater Horizon oil spill incident occurred, BP was not prepared for a crisis of that extent and did not react immediately. The company's first note on Facebook appeared one week after the incident and it has not used the social media platforms too actively, encouraging stakeholders' scepticism.

Companies need to reduce stakeholders' scepticism because discrepancies between the company's CSR identity and stakeholder's perceptions can lead to negative reactions towards its CSR activities, as in the case of the #McDStories campaign (Forehand and Grier, 2002). Webb and Mohr (1998) claim that customers that have a high level of scepticism are less likely to react positively to a firm's CSR involvement, and vice versa.

In the BP case (and also applicable to the #McDStories campaign), the lack of communication made the company appear as incompetent, affecting its credibility among its stakeholders and the public. Coombs (2007) argues that silence is a passive response which can be perceived as a sign of uncertainty and lack of control. Thus, companies must react promptly, regardless of the situation they are facing, ensuring they are visible and responsive to the public.

Stakeholders value a company that engages in social and responsible actions and communicates its sustainable efforts through CSR-related discussion (Bruchell and Cook, 2006) – these aspects have the potential to influence and improve the company's reputation and image (Pérez, Alcañiz and Herrera, 2009). Walker and Kent (2009) also argue that image can be a key aspect through which companies can evaluate the effectiveness of their CSR engagement.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The research question was:

What is the effect on the companies' CSR image and identity when control over communication is lost?

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the significance of social media to organizations. The central argument behind that is based on the emergence of social media in the recent years which has brought along novel opportunities, but also challenges for the communication of CSR over social media. The current research aimed to assess how social media affects these companies that choose to communicate their CSR activities via social media platforms, and how this decline in terms of control of the organizations influence the organizations' CSR image and identity.

The research project showed that as long as organizations hold at least some control on the communication strategy chosen, the risk of it failing is lower as the engagement of stakeholder is monitored. Thus, taking the McDonald's case into consideration, it could be said that control and risk of failure are inversely related, meaning that the more control an organization invests into its communication strategies, the more likely is for that strategy to have positive results and work as expected.

McDonald's has often been linked to CSR issues. It is, thus, understandable for stakeholders to be somewhat sceptical when a 'criticised' company, such as McDonald's, decides to be transparent and is willing to interact with its stakeholders. However, it also depends on the company and on the company's reputation. If an organization that has a good reputation among its stakeholders, for instance Novo Nordisk, engages in similar communication strategies as McDonald's, the risk of them failing might be lower. This is mainly due to the reason that Novo Nordisk is one of the top performers globally in terms of healthcare and is among the most sustainable companies in the world while also being generally appreciated by its stakeholders.

From the main findings, it can be inferred that companies that use social media without engaging in dialogues with stakeholders or without monitoring the information flow, are more likely to face negative reactions from the public. However, it also depends on how appreciated the company is and its reputation.

Customers use social media to connect with organisations, to discuss, and find out news about them, thus companies need to be on social media and ready to interact with their customers. Engaging in two-way communication is the most appropriate way for companies to monitor what is being discussed about them straight from the public – this is important in maintaining a good reputation and image among stakeholders.

6.1 Limitations and Implications for Further Research

This thesis aimed at examining some of the CSR communication strategies of McDonald's. More specifically, it looks at the potential of CSR communication on social media and its impact on the firm's identity and image. The research is limited to this topic, thus the firm's identity and image are only discussed from the CSR communication perspective.

However, to conduct a thorough analysis on how McDonald's communicates its CSR efforts on social media, it would be interesting for further research to take into account all the communication channels that the company utilizes – Facebook, McDonald's blog, etc. – and contrast or compare how the different channels are used and assess their effectiveness.

This is a single case study of a contested organization of a particular industry. The generalizability of the results is therefore limited. For a more broad understanding of how social media impact organization image and identity, the investigation of multiple cases might provide fruitful insights. Additionally, further studies can focus on drawing comparisons between different types of organizations across different industries to identify how the effectiveness of communicating CSR through social media varies according to these.

With the purpose of increasing the trustworthiness of this study, the stakeholders' viewpoints regarding the effectiveness of the online media campaigns in maintaining the desired organizational identity would have increased the value of the research. Further research might therefore explore the insight of various stakeholders in order to understand how they relate to these campaigns as each stakeholder has different expectations from a company.

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